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On the Ravachol Meetings

Max Nettlau

July 20, 1892

Comrade,

Having been present at the two meetings held with the object to discuss Ravachol's acts, I should like to make a few remarks on the two currents dividing at the present time the anarchist movement. I have not read everything publishing on both sides as I am too old to crave for knowing what opinion this, that or the other authority expresses on the subject, but as I understand the three languages used at the meetings I could fairly follow the several strings of arguments, used, and here, then, are my impressions.

I wonder at the amount of misunderstanding and misrepresentation still prevailing among those usually held to be free from bigotry and prejudices. What shall I say when I hear a speaker repudiate all organization and adducing as an example of the evils of organization nobody else but that person who was constantly declaiming against organization, the late "anarchist" Coulon?! This individual was the very type of what the so called "moralist" anarchists are objecting to, and now we hear him proclaimed as an advocate of organization and, in the eyes of an outsider, if there was any one present at all at that meeting, he illustrates the type of the "organizing" anarchist, and the next time perhaps he will be declared to be a

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“moralist” too! Such things are simply ridiculous as well as mean... The same enemy of organization next advocated small groups—as if the evils of organization could not manifest themselves as well in the smallest group as in the larger organization; had not Ravachol’s group its Chaumartin?

Another fact called forward much righteous indignation against the “moralists,” namely that they did not fully admit at once the comradeship of Ravachol, but rather doubted it for a certain time. I maintain, that, when they had sufficient proofs of it, they fully admitted his sincerity, and that is all required. If the “anti-moralists,” as soon as an explosion comes off anywhere, at once hail the persons supposed to be connected with it as friends and have implicit faith in them, they are acting rather as enthusiasts than as serious men to cooperate with them.

At the bottom of the question about certain acts lies this primary opinion: who steals, etc., remains either honest and sincere, as Ravachol did, or not, he gets sooner or later demoralized (I apologize to the “antimoralists” for the use of this word; they need not distort its meaning but take it in the ordinary sense it has in colloquial English. Everyone understands what I mean by it.) The latter ones, business-anarchists, a worthy match to the business-socialists (members of parliament, trade societies officials, etc.) were even considered to be useful by one speaker at the last meeting, who said, they had become bourgeois and it was a good thing of the bourgeois rob and destroy each other. That may be so, but the fact is, that many and even good comrades are lost to the movement in this way, and the movement loses all neat and definite outlines. Solidarity is declamated against too, anyone may consider at his choice his comrade either as a friend or as an object to be robbed, and still pretend to be his comrade; it becomes more and more difficult to say which is which. This does not strengthen our party but weaken it, and so those who are called “moralists” consider it not wise to emphasize the stealing doctrine in view of such consequences. That is all.

Do those who every day admit that authority spoils the best men, not realize the fact that getting wealth, be it by theft, corrupts also? Very few are like Ravachol whom wealth did not corrupt.

Further on, the example of Ravachol ought to be examined more closely. He himself preferred to expose himself to a much greater danger by placing the bombs when haunted by the whole force at the disposal of a centralized government, to going to kill another old man or woman. He did not cause any noise to be made about his coining, or grave-plundering [-sacking] or murders. He did not advertise these acts as anarchist deeds, but was content with using the money thus won for anarchist propaganda of a more serious kind, and in his defense he accused society of having driven him to commit such acts.

Here he differs from some “antimoralists” who, if consequence of thought and logics were authorities they admitted, which some do evidently not, rather ought to declare himself, Ravachol, as a “moralist” too. For some did not throw the blame for these deeds upon society as Ravachol did, but they actually declared the acts of grave-sacking and killing the old hermit for extremely wise, sensible and practical things. Why should the jewels be useless lying round the corpse in the grave? Was not killing a man of 88 years simply an act of social hygiene, and an eminently practical measure?

The persons who indulge in such talk are the silliest hero-worshippers and flunkeys on record. I am sure, if next week somebody connected with the anarchist movement was going to kill his mother and eat her, then some persons would come on the platform and enhance the great practical value and usefulness, nay, necessity of so doing. It is needless to say that there is no spark of anarchist feelings in these men who rank side to side with the worshipers of Gladstone or Burns who will also swallow everything that these supreme beings may do.

The best that can be said by sincere friends of Ravachol, is, that he undertook to do these things for the cause, overcoming for the

cause their repulsive features, and that by these acts he was not corrupted but remained able to carry on his splendid campaign of explosions. In the eyes of the masses his memory is associated with explosions to avenge his comrades and in the opinion of many of the people the other deeds were heaped upon him by the lying government and press in order to revile his memory.

Some of the "antimoralists" would love to make it a standard test for an anarchist whether he relishes in grave-plundering and the killing of old aged persons of both sexes, or not, and they excommunicate and sneer at those who do not. The next week, as I said, may see cannibalism established as the test case, and what next? They are nicely independent antiauthoritarian thinkers, indeed, who are beforehand solidary with the deed of all future anarchists, born or unborn! The atavistic submissiveness to authority haunts their poor brains, and the anarchistic hero took the place of the priest or the politician in their mind.

Their bullying tolerance is indifferent to me but it must drive all intelligent newcomers away who, being interested in anarchism by Ravachol's real propaganda, might care to know his principles but are now told disgusting things about graves and corpses.

I may add that in the preceding remarks I dealt with the "anti-moralist" arguments as used by all the speakers, not only by those using the English tongue.

What a difference between these hairsplitting debates about the details of such acts on which Ravachol himself hardly said anything in his defence, and the English anarchist meetings of some years ago. Then we spoke to the people and our ranks widened; but now in the best season of the year we remain indoors, hurling abuse at each other, and after much talk remain exactly the same as before. The summer is half over; should not the remaining two months be used for some good old propaganda as before? Those who share this opinion should at once set to work and not care for the sneers of the rest.

I, personally, have not much hope, at present, for a revival of the propaganda, knowing the power of the most tenacious thing in existence, [] phrases. Still, sooner or later, a revival will come and we shall have an opportunity to see who the real and who the melodramatic revolutionists are.

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