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On the Subject of the Anarchist Synthesis

Max Nettlau

1929

We publish the following letter, sent by the comrade Nettlau to the Groupe A. C. F., the translation of which has been addressed to our comrade Sébastien Faure:

Dear comrades,

You have sent me *The Anarchist Synthesis*, by Sébastien Faure, dated February 20, 1928, and I am sure that you will republish this remarkable document or at least that you will make its contents known to your readers. On that conditions, allow me to put forward some remarks on this subject, which is certainly of a capital interest for the anarchist movement in all nations.

I arrived, a little more than thirty years ago, at similar conclusions, namely that we cannot foresee the situation, economic or otherwise, from the beginning, and still in the later stages, of a *free society*; we cannot foresee the individual dispositions of men in those future times; nor we can we acquire, through experimentation, sufficiently clear knowledge of the practical functioning of the methods of production and distribution.

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All of that demands of us the necessity of considering the economic side, as well as the other practical sides of anarchism as something about which we should not be capable of putting forward *positive affirmations*. We can only be *agnostics* with regard to all these practical considerations. We may have a sentimental preference for one or another of the various possibilities, and we also have the write to say that if the occasion for achieving the anarchist project presented itself, would have the right to work in the manner that we ourselves choose and not by those that might be imposed on us by some majority (all of that, naturally, *within reasonable limits*, which is to say if we are moved by serious motifs and not by a simple caprice which could become detrimental to others.) Consequently, what was said by the first anarchist-collectivists, what was said by Kropotkin and the anarchist-communists, Proudhon, Tucker and the anarchist-individualists in favor of their economic solutions, forms a literature of great value, but cannot judge the issue in advance. The situation resembles the starting point of a race, when human intelligence and foresight — strain as they might — can only produce conjectures as to the winner, and the result remains unknown, as the most favored contestants may always be beaten by a simple *outsider*.

Reading the old newspapers had shown me that this question had also been discussed in Spain, toward the end of the 1880s, when the most intelligent of the anarchist-collectivists, exhausted by the anarchist-communists who represented, in their own view, a younger and more perfect doctrine, had proposed the adoption of the name of *anarchist tout court*, *anarchist* without adjective, leaving to each the choice between the economic arrangements, collectivist or communist. Then, Tarida del Marmol and Ricardo Mella had the broadest minds of the times, and Mella had proposed that idea internationally in a report that he had written for the International Anarchist Congress in Paris, in September 1900, which, furthermore, could not be held openly; but the report was published

that there is no war among them. In these communities, from village to metropolis, social “con-vivance” (coexistence) sociale is achieved to a degree nonexistent among states and nations— where its existence becomes less and less possible. Such milieus are the models that the anarchists, rid of the swaddling clothes of exclusivism and fanaticism, should imitate, and they will find there a constant labor: progress, great or small, cooperation of all sorts, emulation in order to attain a higher degree of efficiency and other similar factors of true progress. But they will find no premature synthesis (or will only find it, here and there, as an obstacle to progress), but only “con-vivance,” mutual benevolence, friendly emulation and all sorts of efforts, thanks which the collectivity attains, in an independent manner, higher degrees of efficiency and perfection.

For these reasons, I plead, dear comrades, against a synthesis from the beginning, when there will result from it only a new immobilization, and in favor of friendly feelings toward all those who, not being exclusivists, prove that they can act like libertarians. The exclusivists will, sooner or later, reabsorbed by the authoritarians, with whom they belong by virtue of their whole mentality. It is high time that anarchism takes this little step in the direction of progress; it is hardly a step; it only manages, for the moment, to pull anarchism from the trap of narrow-minded fanaticism into which it has long since stepped, thanks to inexperience, to overconfidence and feverish impulse, and where it has vegetated for years in stagnation and isolation.

March 26, 1928.

M. NETTLAU.

of members working in two or more milieus, if they desire it and to a degree chosen by themselves. Whether all of that would lead, one day, to new, more or less stable combinations, to *syntheses*, remains to be seen, but we should neither influence nor force such developments.

We simply want to replace exclusivism with camaraderie, blind faith and proud self-assurance with a critical attitude, and we do not want, for the anarchists, borders with vigilant customs officers — guardians of the purity of doctrines — just as those who are truly internationalists do not want borders between territories and between states that, inevitably, are hostiles to one another, just as the doctrines are. The doctrines unsocial as the states, and many of our daily actions, even among the anarchists, are made unconsciously along authoritarian and statist line. National and state exclusivism, guardians of doctrines, wars between nations or states, socialist, syndicalist and anarchist polemics (with words, with writing or with rifles and prisons, as in Russia today), organization in governments, worker organizations, even anarchist federations or groups, and many other phenomena of the same order — all of that, even if employed by anarchists, belongs to the authoritarian type and *cannot* simply just be assimilated by the libertarian spirit and must, sooner or later, bring down the most devoted comrades.

There exist, however, many milieus where the libertarian spirit can prosper unconsciously, and all the more consciously. They are products of the truly *social* life; the workshops in all the spheres of useful labor, where material competence leads to an effective labor and demands the close cooperation of all; the sphere of science and the arts, where all labor with enthusiasm toward aims that interest everyone: the city, the town, the village, where people of all opinions and all nationalities, of all professions and occupations live side by side as residents and have, at the least, this in common: that they desire, generally, to lead a peaceful life, with the least interference, and

in its entirety. In 1901, Voltairine de Cleyre had professed, in a conference on anarchisme held at Philadelphia and published by *Free Society*, the same respect with regard to the four economic varieties of anarchism: each of which had its historical and local basis and its fervent adherents, but none of which had any right of superiority over the others, all four having to show what they can do when experimental mentation and realization becomes possible: we will then have a little more, and so on.

I can also say that Bakunin had always limited himself to sketching out just the very first steep, the initial cornerstone of the free society, declaring that it was up to the people of the corresponding period to continue the construction of that new, sure and properly libertarian basis. James Guillaume, in his sketch of a free society (1874–76), had foreseen a gradual development from collectivist arrangements to the communist arrangements that depended on the increase of abundance (indispensable basis of communism) and even Kropotkin, in his preface of December 5, 1919 to the Russian edition of *Words of a Rebel*, was aware that the initial situation after a revolution could be such that the immediate realization of complete communism would be impossible.

But in the years 1898–1902 to which my memories take me back, those like Tarrida, Mella, Voltairine de Cleyre and myself were all alone, or nearly so, against those who were profoundly convinced that their own variety of anarchism was absolutely just and that the dissenting varieties were irrevocably false. I knew that fanatical exclusivism, because I was myself a victim of it for long years; nearly all the comrades were, and still are. I attempted to discuss the question with Kropotkin in conversation and in a letter, which had the lamentable result that you can see in his letter to me of March 5, 1902 and in my commentary in the margins of that letter (« *Plus loin* », 1927). The London *Freedom* had on several occasions given me the opportunity to express my opinions on this subject, — for the

last time in February, 1914 — in an article [“Anarchism: Communist or Individualist? — Both”] that was reprinted a dozen years later in the *Road to Freedom* of New-York, without advance knowledge on my part (I would have been able, in that case, to develop it [as he did in the *Anarchist Encyclopedia* article “Individualisme (ou Communisme ?)”), and which passed from there to the Italian anarchist newspapers, where it was discussed. If I compare the negative attitude of all, in 1914, to the opinions expressed in 1926, I note a marked progress toward greater broadness of mind and a decline in exclusivism; but both are still insufficient to the task of establishing truly amicable camaraderie where pride, fanaticism and blind faith have reigned for so long.

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May the present initiative of the French comrades have a better fate! Given the spectacle of absolute Bolshevik intolerance that sows the ruin and the physical destruction of socialists of all shades, and the spectacle of the invasion of a ruthless fanaticism in the hearts of the Russian and French movement through the “platform” and through a certain recent congress — the rebellion became inevitable, the cup was full; the momentum towards a sphere of amicable camaraderie must be sustained today with a great force of initial propulsion. Let us allow that impulse develop and the work done on a large scale; let the fanatics rejoin the fanatics; but to the comrades of social sentiments extend a hand. The fruits of fanaticism have been before us since 1917, in Bolshevism and fascism, and just as, with time, all the fanatics in the world will rally to these two great magnetic poles of authority and anti-humanity, let us hope that our pole of free camaraderie, mutual tolerance and benevolence will attract the libertarian and social elements of humanity — those who believe in liberty, mutual generosity and solidarity — whether or not they are conscious today of being anarchists. For too long, humanity has seen an anarchism with two faces — professing the greatest love and re-

spect for liberty, and professing one unique remedy as the economic solution, settled in advance... an obvious contradiction that I am absolutely convinced has considerably weakened anarchism’s power of attraction for those who reason, and has made it, above all, a question of faith and belief, of personal preference and sentiment.

I will permit myself to say that *the Anarchist Synthesis* does not express, in my opinion, what could have or what should have been done. We reject this distilled, isolated, artificially constructed anarchism, which refuses to combine with an anarchism of our own shade — I try to hold to the chemical comparison of S. Faure — we reject the isolated product, the unique product. Very well. But why leap from there to the *synthesis*, why join the various constituent parts? Such an evolution, after experimentation; it is a result that might be achieved — something that we could foresee and prepare for in advance as well as the functioning of one of the isolated economic hypotheses. Moreover if, for example, ten groups were composed of 1 to 10 of each of the three varieties of anarchism, one would obtain 10 different syntheses and these would change if the proportion of the members should become different; none of these syntheses would necessarily be certain of being able to correspond to the practical necessities of the local situations or of the given moment. And those who desire to remain free, refusing all interference, would not want to be “put together” or combined synthetically or thrown in the same crucible in order to be amalgamated.

It seems to me that *synthesis* should have been replaced by *symbiosis*, “con-vivance,” co-habitation, which is to say *amicable camaraderie without interference* among all shades of opinion, and their march and activity, on a terrain of reciprocal friendship, toward a common aim, each by their own means. They would unite their forces for specific practical goals — if that seems desirable, but not needlessly or regularly. In addition, they would maintain relations through the intermediary