The Struggle against the State

Max Nettlau

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What follows is not a translation, but a free and somewhat expanded summary of an article ["Are there New Fields for Anarchist Activity?"] that I wrote for the revue *Mother Earth* of New-York (December 1907, pp. 433–444), and as I have been led to make some new digressions, the comrades who publish that revue are completely absolved of any literary responsibility for the present writing.

I

I have often asked myself why anarchist ideas, which appears so clear to us and add so much to the joy of living in those who embrace them, are accepted in the end by so few people, even where long years of propaganda has encountered the fewest of obstacles. As long as I had faith in the mechanical (so to speak) possibility of an unlimited propagation of ideas though the pedagogical means of education and agitation, such limited success seemed mysterious and disgusting to me. Since then, I have arrived at the following explanation:

What is, in fact, the essence of anarchism? We observe three tendencies in every organism: that of appropriating and assimilating as much as possible of the surrounding matter most useful for its material well-being; that of extending its own sphere of action by an expansion that overcomes, as much as possible, all obstacles; and that of differentiating itself, of creating for itself an individuality it relation with heredity, the environment, etc. In humanity, these are the desire for material well-being, the love of liberty and the development of individuals, who little by little separate themselves from the more homogenous, more gregarious mass of times past. The end of this evolution is obviously a state of things in which the greatest liberty and well-being are accessible to each individual, in the form that best corresponds to their individuality and allows them to approach the greatest possible perfection—and that state of things of Anarchy.

Anarchy is this the state of the greatest happiness of which each individual is capable. It is obvious that this true Anarchy will not be established on the basis of a single economic and social system, but that there would be as many ways of managing things as there are individuals. We must also consider that, during the long period of time demanded for the conversion to anarchy of the most recalcitrant, the first anarchists will not stand still, but will march forward on their own part. So there will never be a future state of development (economic, moral, etc.) that is *equal* for all, any more than that equality exists in our time or has ever existed.

It cannot exist, for the simple reason that individuals differ from one another, and they are—with the exception of those whose development is still almost entirely crushed by the cruel oppression of the past and present—on the path to further differentiation. All desire well-being and liberty, but each desires it in a different degree and proportion. If certain causes—the common social position, persuasion, propaganda, suggestion, the enthusiasm of these great moments—diminish these differences, others—like heredity, environment, age and some many accidents of everyday life—have the opposite effect, and it is a deadly illusion to believe that it is enough to sway the masses in the manner of our rulers, which only occurs because they have played on the strings of all the prejudices, all the malice accumulated for so many centuries; too often only a feeble echo responds to us, who only count on what is noble and generous.

Each of us contributes to the success of our ideas in a different way, according to the proportion of the desire for liberty and for material well-being that is in them. One is driven by the love of liberty to the greatest sacrifice; the other lives peacefully and will be capable of an

extraordinary effort for liberty only some moments of general enthusiasm. Propaganda and the struggle against authority demand a combative temperament that is not given to all, and many people, who are only disposed to put themselves forward through acts that cause the least stir, do nothing, since no occasion in this way seems to present itself for them. We must create a field of action accessible to them as well.

As for the working masses in general, they think above all of improving their material position and relegate liberty to the second rank. That is the effect of the commercial age and of the longstanding statist oppression. I fear that the desire of the working masses is above all revenge against capitalist society and that they only want to be masters in their turn, in order to perpetuate the domination of one class and the authority of a new worker state, just as the bourgeois of the Revolution, after defeating feudalism, no longer wanted liberty, but only the exclusive domination of their class. Those tendencies will perhaps prevail over those of the old good-faith socialists who still survive; and what could the anarchists do against that action of enormous masses that slip from the control of those who which neither to direct nor to dominate them, but to see them go by themselves down the road of liberty? The anarchists could only continue the task of our times, that of awakening the latent forces that tend towards liberty and to struggle, then and always, against authority.

These real tendencies of the masses have already led to the breakdown of socialism, which has realized that it is impossible to bring them together for anything but peaceful electoral struggles or syndical organizations that only pull away from all real socialism. From the other side the State, discredited though it is, tends to regain the confidence of the masses through all sorts of labor laws, retirement retreats, protection foreign workers, etc. I am far from forgetting the deeds in various countries accomplished by a revolutionary syndicalism, that general strikes of trade associations or localities, or even more extended strikes, can break out at any moment; but in this case as well, it always happens that this simple, logical step, the decisive step that leads from general strike to revolution, is not taken; it was not even taken in Russia, in October 1905, and that led to all the defeats and all the disasters of the Russian movement that we now see. Why do the most enthusiastic strikes always end with a lull and the peaceful return to work? It is because the masses do not really want to go any farther, and the few who do want it are powerless.

The initiative of the minorities and the action of the militants have their limits. A new idea, a new experiment sees the light of day first where favorable circumstances permit it; in this sense all progress is naturally due at first to minorities, to the isolated. But to impose that new idea on the majority, by force, is an act of authority, identical to the oppression exercised by the majority over minorities. This is a point that interests the anarchist above all; for if a tyrannical minority has a thousand means to impose its will on a majority, who could we who desire liberty give it to those who are not concerned enough about it to take it for themselves?

Look at science and ignorance: science does not reason with ignorance; it marches in advance, shows its results and little by little makes the less ignorant follow it. Now look at free though and religion: if some liberate themselves from religious absurdities, enormous masses still remain attached to them. In these two cases we end by finding a *modus vivendi* through a sort of *mutual tolerance*. Let us compare the infamous brutality of the ignorant bigotry of past centuries, directed against free thought, to the state of *relative* indifferent in our own time. I know well that what is there is only an armed peace and that the reaction only watches for a suitable moment to regain the lost ground, but the position is still infinitely different from that of the past; science and free

thought, previously outlawed, today have a position, still small, but solid and unconquerable. Let us do the same for anarchy!

What has led to the *relative* cessation of these persecutions? Ignorance and bigotry, wishing to perpetuate their domination, thought that they could exterminate science and free thought by fire and blood: they have not succeed, for you cannot destroy an idea. Science and free thought, on their side, have equally seen that they run up against the firm prejudices of the large masses and have had to advance from their side, limiting themselves to welcoming with open arms those who feel closest to them and come to them. Free thought wishes to destroy all the religions as much as anarchy would love to destroy all authority, but that would be immediately possible only by the material destruction of ninety-nine percent of humanity; and even were that done, the persecutors would, by that work of persecution, have become authoritarians infinitely worse than their victims. So we have seen from both sides of bringing an end to a war of pure attack, of at least softening the forms of the struggle, and those who really wish to leave the field of prejudices and ignorance know how to find, and more easily every day, the path towards science and free thought. Tomorrow they will find, and with an equal ease, the road to anarchy.

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We are not, I think very used to this sort of reasoning. Out of habit, we only contemplate the revolutionary path. So let us suppose the present capitalist regime destroyed. Some energetic minorities are extremely important at the moment of action; let us suppose then that the anarchists had contributed their best to that victory, that the prestige of anarchy was enormously increased, that in many places the old prejudices were forgotten and people had begun to live in anarchy. For that to occur, obviously, there would be no leaders, nor any single set of rules; so things would be very different in different places. Some would reject all organization; others would accept it in differing degrees. There would be groups and communes that would each attempt to practice liberty in their fashion, in or more less different ways. That is all excellent, and it is precisely what must occur; for only experiment will gradually show what is most appropriate and we will proceed in that way from the imperfect to the most perfect. But in the meantime, all these organisms would exist side by side in peace, and the attempts to impose this or that system other than by example would evoke only general scorn and sad memories of the persecutions of past times. If, consequently, in a new society, everyone wanted to practice anarchy, we would see a thousand shades of it, from the most moderate anarchy to the most advanced, without anyone finding fault.

But you will admit that this is to suppose the most favorable outcome. It very well could be that capitalism should be defeated under conditions where the organized workers, which is to say their leaders, would come to power; that would perhaps be the abolition of the *salariat*, but it would not necessarily be liberty or socialism; they would form a new bureaucracy that would go from an administrative role to a directing, governing role. The anarchists would be viewed as unfavorably by those people as the worker politicians of all labels are today. It would be necessary to make a new struggle against that society, without obvious exploitation but also without liberty, and no one can say if that struggle would be easier (and everyone, rid of economic worries, would make their way towards liberty), or more difficult (due to the indifference of the satisfied), than present struggles. It is likely that certain localities would be more advanced than the others and that at first anarchy would be established more easily in some places since the land and the instruments would be more accessible, while elsewhere difficulties would loom up as a

result of the existence of an authoritarian organization that has always monopolized everything and denied the right of secession.

The conditions in which anarchy will perhaps be realized some day, will thus be more or less different in many places and it may be necessary, even then, to live alongside people who do not understand our ideal or who still only approach it gropingly. I ask myself consequently if it is not best to consider that situation future in the present and to act in such a way as to give anarchy the greatest possible chances of being practiced, tested, and respected in that future society?

What we must do, it seems to me, is to accustom ourselves to the idea of a future *co-existence*, temporary and steadily less noticeable, but a *co-existence* all the same of anarchist and non-anarchist institutions; in other words, we must accustom ourselves to the idea of a *mutual tolerance*. This is how it is, inevitably, every day for each of us, with the exception of those who feel themselves pushed toward direct revolt. What I mean is not at all submission to the present order, whether political or social. I think, on the contrary, that the anarchists should completely disregard the laws that hinder their personal liberty and obtain the recognition of the right to act in this way by those who, for reasons that are their own affair for the moment, believe or pretend to believe in the necessity of these laws for themselves and those who will follow them.

I know that these words demand some explanation; I regret that I must defer them until the next article.

II

The idea expressed in my first article—that the anarchists, recognizing the necessity of a temporary *co-existence* with less advanced persons and their institutions, and, consequently, of mutual *tolerance*, can put it into practice by refusing to submit to the laws on their own account, while leaving others complete liberty to prostrate themselves before them—that idea would appear utopian and unrealizable at first, but, sooner or later, whether to day or in a worker regime without capitalism, it must happen if we finally want to realize anarchy in the only manner possible, by beginning at the beginning. Economic independence, so desirable above all for that struggle, can be obtained, either through cooperation or after the fall of capitalism, taking the earth and tools as they find them. Tolerance, although it is the simplest of things, will not appear all by itself; we must know how to achieve it. There are some struggle that lead only to an increase of mortal hatred, to an absolute intolerance; there are others that, if they do not lead to mutual *respect,* which is a higher degree, end at least in mutual tolerance; so we must struggle *in such a manner* that it is tolerance and not intolerance that we find in the end—*that* is the heart of the matter for me.

What I would propose on the anti-statist terrain is already practiced by the anarchists on the economic terrain. There, not just since the emergence of syndicalism, but at all times they are united in solidarity with all the workers who feel that they are exploited, even without having any conscious desire for a complete economic change. An analogous solidarity must be established between all those who are in some way enemies of the State, without having clearly come to desire anarchy, nor to having the same economic ideas as us—just as we do not ask the workers unionized against capital to have the same political ideas as us. There is a vast field of labor there almost entirely unexplored and uncleared. The hatred for the State, scorn for the law and for the personnel who live under the laws, the unquenched thirst for liberty; that immense indignation

that accumulates in almost everyone at each step, when we see that, despite all the so-called advanced institutions, we do not enjoy the least bit of real liberty, that we encounter the thousand obstacles and nuisances of Statism at each step—from all that, it would be necessary to create, in the manner of the syndicates, but on the freer and broader basis of groups that gather all those who, without being anarchists, begin to move closer to us, through their opposition to some particularly odious form of State influence. All the present methods of syndicalist struggle, and new ones too, which we will doubtless find, would be applied to that struggle against the State, the laws ad authority. There would result from this an *anti-statist* current that would, on the day of the economic victory, prevent a fall back into the errors of authority and all anarchy, if not a full or partial realization, which could still be impossible, at least a freer experimentation.

If this was an entirely new method, I would not speak of it; for it is impossible to create something of which the seeds do not already exist. But we see that at every moment, in real life, the majority of the laws remain completely ignored; and life would be impossible otherwise. The most brutal laws are one day trampled under foot, made impossible by a whole nation—the history of Ireland, of the abolitionist enemies of slavery in America, at base, the history of all political movements shows it to be so. If statistics were kept of the laws that were obeyed and those that were disobeyed, the absurdity of all legislation would be palpable; for society can only develop by trampling them underfoot, by sweeping away, at each step, the obstacles called rules and regulations.

There even exist some feeble attempts to recognize this state of affairs and to manage things accordingly. In England, it has been enough, for several years, to declare that one has a *conscientious objection* against vaccination, in order to be exempted from that law making vaccination mandatory for all; quite recently the formalities that exist in that regard have been reduced to a simple declaration. It is the result of long struggles directed against that special law; the adversaries of the law have not convinced its defenders to the point of revoking it for all, but they have managed to be left alone and all have been given the possibility of imitating them by a simple declaration. That would appear without great importance, but if, on other points, efforts had been made, we would already have won exemption from other laws, or at least that work would be well on its way; but in the past it has always been all or nothing—and with the principle of exemption, based on the natural right of secession, that each goes their own way and acts after their own fashion has never been a question. The Englishman Auberon Herbert advocates *voluntarism* with regard to taxes—tax paid by those who are interested in the object for which the money would be used and not payable for other. That has the air of a utopia, but the tax-strike is something rather serious and would be more popular than the act of outdoing one another to invent a new tax, as the statists do, the socialists included. The various projects for *proportional representation* show that the anarchists are not alone in not being indifferent to the crushing of minorities by traditional democracy. We also see the little nationalities that rise up against the large States, which must renounce forever the hope of leveling them and making them disappear in the vast mass of the cattle of the taxpayers and cannon-fodder. I do not speak of those whom religious fanaticism has always won a situation outside the law, of soldiers who refuse to touch a rifle from religious conviction, etc., but all that seems to me to demonstrate that true, determined efforts have always led to some solution, insufficient perhaps, but which all the same counters the principle of the equal crushing of all by the law. I recognize that these are still only feeble beginnings; so many other movements, in fact, tend to reinforce statism, that tendency that is so accommodating to the indolent and indifferent who are unconcerned about their liberty. There is

also a living proof of it, these millions of socialist electors of all countries, and we would be badly fooled believing that syndicalism could ever do that anti-statist work that we demand, even if it calls itself anti-political or anti-parliamentary.

For, finally, let us cease to be hypnotized by syndicalism. The collective resistance of the workers against capital is an absolute struggle for them; that struggle must be made according to the demands of the hour and thus has nothing to do with the struggle against existing society of socialism and anarchy. With the disappearance of capitalism, syndicalism will necessarily come to an end and if some syndicalist theories appear according to which the raw materials and instruments of labor should enter afterwards into the possession of the corporations of the individual trades, that would be a new appropriation, a new monopoly that would contradict the first principle of socialism, which says that everything will belong to everyone. So syndicalism, which is excellent for the moment, has no future; it is a military dictatorship that the war against an equally concentrated enemy can justify for the moment, from a strictly technical point of view, but the continuation of which would be desired by no one after the battle. Now we know that it is in the nature of all authority to wish to perpetuate itself; an authoritarian syndicalist regime is thus as possible as the dictatorships of the two Napoleons have been. Plebiscites, direct government of the people by the people (the chimera of 1851 and of Considérant, Ledru-Rollin and Rittinghausen) and direct action (not the ideal, but the reality), are displacements of authority, which passes from parliament into the hands of a larger mass, so-called improvements of democracy, an incorrigible thing. I feel more than I can express in words that there between all that and our beloved "do what you will" there is an abyss. Besides, syndicalism is powerful enough and makes its way, asking nothing better than to be left alone by the anarchists and socialists who do not interest it; it gets along on its own. It is young in France and has still not yet entirely swallowed up and assimilated the libertarians who were so useful to it when it was still weak. You must go see it in England and America where it dates from the last century, devoid of all the idealism that some socialists also added to it there in its beginning; it is collective selfishness succeeding individual selfishness, the "labor trust," as it has been called in America. The young become old and the old do not grow young again—as long as we do not demolish this natural fact no one will convince me that the trades-unions will become revolutionary syndicalists and that French revolutionary syndicalism will always remain young.

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It appears to me that a great breath of authority still issues from every collective movement and more than ever I see the necessity of a broad anti-statist propaganda, alongside a deeper propaganda of the ideas of anarchy in their entirety. Here, what we must deeply regret is that the anarchist idea has been, from its debut, so to speak, yoked to economic *hypotheses*[1] that have gradually passed to the state of doctrines and theories. In order to prove the practical possibility of anarchy, we erect economic utopias and anarchy is divided into schools: communist, collectivist, individualist, etc. It is very sad; for on the one hand we raise the veil of the future and we show the pleasure of the enjoyment of the greatest liberty and on the other we chain ourselves to some economic doctrine, the merit of which I do not contest, but which can only be an unverified hypothesis. We lack experience and it is absurd to believe that we can surmise what will

[1] Which, moreover, have never been given except as hypotheses and are not at all the shackles that comrade Nettlau sees them as.—Editor's note.

be appropriate in a society that is still unknown or even that we could have a single doctrine instead of experimentation, on the largest scale, with all the economic possibilities compatible with the needs of liberty. When a newcomer comes to anarchy, they truly find no group, no book, no newspaper that has not long since rallied to one of the other of the economic schools and their doubts meet with little sympathy among the believers in found systems and solutions. So let us leave that all aside; the work of anti-statist and anarchist action and propaganda is so immense that it will require assembling all those who love liberty without immediately wishing to indoctrinate them and unify them of the economic terrain. Each will make their own utopia and group together, if it suits them, which those who come closest to it.

I know well that the altruistic sentiment is so well developed in the majority of anarchists that for some time they will still give all their support to syndicalism; others will act as rebels or as propagandists of the ideas in their ensemble. But those who do not find a complete satisfaction in all that, who want to escape the relative isolation of pure propaganda and at the same time not be swallowed up by syndicalism, those will perhaps find a new terrain for action in the anti-statist agitation, which will put them in contact as many people as syndicalism and allowed them more pronounced libertarian actions. Anti-militarism is an excellent precedent; it remains to carry similar sentiments into still larger milieus and, by attacking the State, the laws and authority in all its forms, to create a current of anti-statist opinion and anarchist sympathy that will one day facilitate the creation of a true anarchist milieu. Besides, everywhere, on the terrain of the struggle against the prejudices of the old morality, for liberty of thought and art,—there are vague aspirations that, through the propaganda and action of libertarians, can become more conscious, directed against the source of the evil: authority.

I believe that you will understand my point of view more easily if you consider once more what I have said about the inevitability of the co-existence of institutions of various characters. For example, it appeared impossible in the past that there could be two religions in the same State, and from that followed centuries of religious wars; today, free thought and all the religions exist side by side. It will be the same for social systems. The new and the old always live side by side. The old wants to stifle the new with persecutions, and the new wants to crush the old with proud attacks. A great deal of evil is done, but no party triumphs because there always remain men attached by all their inclinations, either to the old or to the new and because, moreover, the two camps are connected by countless intermediate shades. One day, the anarchists will be left to go their own way and lose interest in the State to such a degree that the State will lose interest in them, in the same way that today free thought and the churches are clearly separated. It remains to establish the economic basis of that independence—it will be cooperation or an expropriated portion of social capital. It will always be the case that anarchy will exist at first only for anarchists and the others will come around as at the speed and in the numbers that they wish—just as there will be fewer serious obstacles for anyone to accept free thought or free union—we will leave the State as today we leave the church or the moral systems of our grandfathers. That evolution—which is, in my opinion desirable—will be assisted, accelerated, and perhaps only made possible by the existence of widespread anti-statist sympathies, which will be equally indispensable for preventing any new authoritarian socialist or syndicalist regime. So it is a question of creating these sympathies and I have striven to demonstrate how, by supporting with all our strength, with an extreme patience and tolerance, all the anti-statist and anti-authoritarian tendencies that appear—and they will be more numerous than we believe.

They we will give some serious basis to a true political libertarian and create the true support necessary for a final economic emancipation.

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