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A Critic of Anarchism

Sydney Olivier

October 1, 1887

(BY A NON-ANARCHIST CORRESPONDENT.)

"When Anarchism was first heard of in the Socialist movement in England, it was welcomed & a protest against the insane disregard of the lessons of political experience a& to personal liberty apparent in some Collectivist ideals. But it ha& since developed into a doctrine of unmitigated individualism, having for it& economic basis an invincible ignorance of the late of Rent. As such it i& no longer welcome, or even tolerable, to Socialists."

The above appears as a note to an article by G. Bernard Shaw in the September number of To-Day. The fact that the article in question "A Word for War," is written for the furtherance of the policy which Mr. Shaw has for some time past been urging on that section of the Socialist party with which he is most in sympathy,, of cutting loose from and repudiating the Anarchist section, perhaps accounts for though it hardly excuses, the gratuitously misleading attack. Anarchists and Collectivists have their differences., which have not yet estranged them. But it takes two to make a quarrel, and an unexpected stinger on the sm---- nose, in what was understood to be a friendly engagement, has before now been found of service in promoting the alienation of an acquaintance whose comradeship has ceased

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to be desired. Whether the Right and Left of the Socialist party should adopt the policy of mutual disavowal and denunciation, I do not desire here to discuss. Nor is it for me, who do not claim to be an Anarchist, to pretend to put forward the Anarchist criticism of the general purport of Mr. Shaw's article. But as the observations in his note are just the sort of language which we constantly hear from common-sensible people who are not Socialists, and other folk who know no better, it seems to me, as a Socialist, a pity that they should be allowed to pass as expressing what Socialists think of Anarchism.

Mr. Shaw knows quite well that "ignorance of the law of Rent" is no distinction of the Anarchist. It is a general characteristic of men and women whose education in economics has been neglected. His reproach against the Anarchist is just what Mr. Mallock's is against him, as the typical Socialist. And when Mr. Shaw points out to Mr. Mallock that, whatever the ignorance of the rank and file, he is one of those superior persons who know all about rent, and are Socialists because of that knowledge, he might just as well remember that there are Anarchists among his own acquaintance who, if not quite so handy with the text-books, could at any rate pass muster as to the principles. The assertion that the ignorance of their companions is invincible while that of his own associates is transient, does but bear witness equally to Mr. Shaw's modesty and to the educational influence of his society. If there is any essential distinction between Anarchists and other Socialists in their views as to rent, it is not as to the existence or the nature of the advantages which may be classed under that name but rather as to the effective means for their equitable distribution. And, whatever Mr. Shaw may mean by "unmitigated individualism" as a characteristic of Anarchists, it is certainly true that they have not the least confidence that such equitable distribution will be secured by the system of mitigated Individualism-selfishness tempered by repression-which some people preach under the name of Socialism. They are not at all of the opinion,

to which we have heard Mr. Shaw himself give encouragement, that when the workers have appropriated the existing sources of rent and interest, and it has been made penal for any man to let his property for hire or usury, the work of Socialism will be accomplished, and that the products of the labor of the community will then be distributed in the best and fairest way possible by giving free play and encouragement to the predatory and competitive impulses of the individual. If Mr. Shaw frankly extols the instinct of predatory individualism, as I admit that any one on Darwinian grounds may show considerable reason for doing, and believes that it is only the co existence in modern society of the capitalist system of exploitation that causes its effects to be evil, then Socialism means for him Individualism mitigated by the making of such exploitation penal,, or at least restraining it in some manner by executive pressure. As regards the rent and interest, which the abolition of the exploiting class would restore for the benefit of the community, the Collectivist scheme proposes that they should be pooled in a national or municipal treasury and redistributed in the form of remission of taxation or works of public utility. Not only is the Anarchist extremely skeptical as to the likelihood of the majority of the people getting any share of the rents at all under such an arrangement, but he points out, with the commonplace bourgeois critic, that assuming the competitive predatory spirit to be developed in the government lessees, it is not at all probable that the full rent will ever get itself pooled. These doubts he is entitled to harbor without exposing himself to the charge of invincible ignorance in economics.

But it is of more importance to him to invite a consideration of what would be the result to society of the establishment of this system of merely mitigated individualism, assuming the retention of the legal guarantee of private property, other than capital, and the persistence of competitive individualism. The result would be that each worker would obtain as private property the competitive exchange value of his own contribution

to production. It is admitted--at least I have heard Mr. Shaw admit--that the man of exceptional and indispensable, or much prized, ability would make a large income, and that the feeble person would starve or live a pauper, the annual product being distributed as wages in amounts graduated between these extremes. The dynasty of the armed man and the dynasty of capital having passed away, their place in the exploitation of humanity would be taken by the man of superior efficiency.

In such a prospect the Anarchists see no blessedness. If I do not misinterpret them, they hold that the abolition of the laws and legal machinery by which the "rights" of property are protected and enforced is a simpler method of extinguishing its abuses than the creation of new laws and machinery for the repression of capitalist exploitation which is just one of those abuses, while the absence of all property law would abate that inequality of distribution which would be left unaffected by the extinction of that exploitation. But that this implies a doctrine of unmitigated individualism, in the sense in which the word has been used above--the bad sense in which Mr. Shaw employed it in his note--no Socialist can seriously pretend. On the contrary, it is because of this insistence on, and confidence in, what is an indispensable part of true Socialist teaching--the doctrine of the social nature and propensities of man--that they urge the suppression of that machinery of law and order which the Socialist Right only desire to modify. They believe that the selfish and predatory Individualism is born only of fear and distrust, of which the most fruitful source is the power of man over man. They believe--and surely every Socialist believes with them--that under favorable and fitting conditions man's impulse is to cooperation, and that were it not so no readjustment of material conditions would be worth fighting for. I hold, as convincingly as any Anarchist-Socialist can, that the ultimate advantage of any readjustment that should not be accompanied by an abatement of egoistic competition would be nil. The "individualism" of the Anarchists is the unfolding

of the true nature of the individual, and if I and other Socialists are not quite in agreement with them as to the safest conditions for such evolution, we at any rate welcome the reminder, which we get far more often from the Anarchists than from Mr. Shaw, that the ultimate aim of Socialism is the making of Man, and that we have reason to think that there is enough of noble and lovely in his nature to warrant him worth the making.

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