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Anarchist Communism

Johann Most

1889

Anarchism is a world view, a philosophy of society; indeed the philosophy of society, for whoever considers the world and human life in their profoundest senses and their complete development, and then decides on the societal form of greatest desirability, cannot but decide for anarchism. Every other form is a half-measure and a patchwork.

Is anarchism desirable? Well, who does not seek freedom? What man, unless willing to declare himself in bondage, would care to call any control agreeable? Think about it!

Is anarchism possible? The failure of attempts to attain freedom does not mean the cause is lost. The facts that the struggle for freedom is clearer and stronger than ever before, that today there are different preconditions to achieving the goal, and that we therefore stand nearer anarchy than had been hoped — prove a development of the desire to wash from the face of the earth what is authoritarian.

Anarchists are socialists because they want the improvement of society, and they are communists because they are convinced that such a transformation of society can only result from the establishment of a commonwealth of property.

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The aims of anarchists and true communists are identical. Why, then, are anarchists not satisfied to call themselves socialists or communists? Because they do not want to be confused with people who misappropriate these words, as many people do nowadays, and because they believe communism would be an incomplete, less-than-desirable system if not infused with the spirit of anarchism.

Communists and anarchists also agree on tactics. He who negates present society, and seeks social conditions based on the sharing of property, is a revolutionary whether he calls himself an anarchist or a communist. But anarchists are not bloodhounds who speak with levity of revolution by murder and arson. They make revolutionary propaganda because they know the privileged class can never be overturned peacefully.

The anarchists, on behalf of the proletariat, therefore consider it necessary to show the proletariat that it will have to win a gigantic battle before it realizes its goals. The anarchists prepare for social revolution and use every means — speech, writing, or deed, whichever is more to the point — to accelerate revolutionary development.

Can anyone, who honestly supports the proletariat, blame them for that? The fact that, as a consequence, capitalists, police, press, clergy, and other hypocrites and philistines hate us with all their hearts, all their minds, all their souls, and all their strength all the time — we can readily understand.

But it seems unnatural that at every step we meet fanatical hostility inside the labor movement, accompanied by bull-headed stupidity. The greatest stumbling block to anarchism among the non-anarchist socialists, which causes much of the discord, is the “free contract.” Yet one need not put oneself into a different world — neither Mars nor in Utopia — to see how the free contract would work. Take, for example, the International Postal Union. The national postal organizations join of their own free will and can withdraw in the same way. These contracting parties agree to what they will provide one another, in

order to achieve service of the highest practicality and greatest efficiency. International law lacks precedent for compelling a violator be taken to court.

Nevertheless, “free contract” works — because, since every breach of promise carries with it damage to the breacher, it behooves every contracting party not to violate the contract. If irregularities arise, conferences agree on adjustments. This institution, a model for free association, is not an isolated example. People who have little else in common form groups, trusts, and pools — organizations musical, gymnastic, commercial, protective, educational, and political; and associations for the advancement of arts and science — in all countries, despite contradictory natures of the parties, and despite the fact that the parties cannot be forced to fulfill the agreements. Everything done in these agreements is done because of advantage to each member.

Absurd the claim that these organizations could not work without control by a higher power! Indeed, whenever and wherever government has interfered, it has disturbed and obstructed the organizations. Moreover, where this kind of intervention is happening, the organizations agitate with supreme energy for its abolition.

In a society of the free and equal there can be nothing but the free contract; cooperation by force violates freedom and equality. The gist of the matter is whether, in a society of the future, the various organizations (created and operating according to free contracts) are to be centralized or of a federal nature. We are for federalism as necessary and right, because experience has taught us that centralization must end in monstrous total-power accumulation in a few hands; centralization causes abuse of power, dominating by a few, and loss of freedom by many. In addition, we see nothing useful or necessary in centralization. If we hope and even assume that the social question will be answered through communism, and not in this or that country but in the world, any thought of centralization

must be a monstrosity. Think of a bakers' central commission, meeting in Washington, prescribing the bakers of Peking and Melbourne the size and amount of the rolls they are to bake.

Since the people of the future will not be old-fashioned fools, they will not fall into such nonsense. They will regulate their affairs as practice and experience teach. The short-sighted object. Freedom is now enjoyed in economic affairs, they say, and since government does not interfere, freedom has caused abuses. We accept this argument of our enemies and with it teach them something better. That is, economic freedom abused by private property has created the social question. Private property, guarded by the state, increasingly exploits the poor; and the poor less and less use what they produce. If the government did not wholeheartedly maintain this swindle, the masses would not suffer it.

Yes, the state is the organized power of property. Therefore the unpropertied must destroy the state, eliminate private property, and establish ownership in common.

Communism, contrary to the liberal-bourgeois tradition, needs no state to achieve its freedom and equality. Communism finds the force of the state disturbing and restrictive.

Now we come to the main objection to communism, that in it the individual gives himself up to the whole and leads no existence of his own — a thought fit to frighten away the original characters and throw a scare even into common philistines with no individuality to lose. We need do no more than repeat: only under communism does the individual become himself and lead his own life. Conversely, does anarchism isolate people and dissolve society? No. Our discussions show: the individual develops fullest in the system of ownership-in-common. Anarchism also does not prohibit the cooperation of some, many, or all — whichever is desirable — for the achievement of common goals.

Above all, what socialist, without flushing with shame, maintains he is not a revolutionary? We say: none!.

And the revolutionary favors constant propagation of principles. While we have entertained the contention that a deed may make more propaganda than hundreds of speeches, thousands of articles, and tens of thousands of pamphlets, we have held that an arbitrary act of violence will not necessarily have such an effect.

In short, propaganda-by-the-deed has not become our hobbyhorse, which we ride to the neglect of other propaganda. If on the one side we do not harbor the illusion that the entire proletariat must be enlightened before it can be called into battle, so on the other we do not doubt that as much enlightenment as possible must be produced with oral and printed agitation.

Fortunately, no country was ever more suited for anarchist agitation than present-day America. Here nobody wants to experiment further with the people's state. It has been more than a century; it has experienced the profoundest fiasco [the civil war]; and future state-makers had better learn the lesson. Whoever looks at America will see: the ship is powered by stupidity, corruption, or prejudice. Long has the government disgusted noble and intelligent natures; they avoid voting; and they are, even if they don't know it, anarchists.

The sharp-minded observer, the upright character, and the independent thinker see in the people's state a crude superstition and are ready to listen to the anarchists. Finally, whatever else may be said, this much is for sure: the welfare of humanity, which the future can and will bring, lies in communism. It excludes in logical ways all authority and servitude, and therefore equals anarchy. The way to the goal is the social revolution. By energetic, relentless, international action, it will destroy class rule and establish a free society based on cooperative organization of production. Long Live the Social Revolution!