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From Politics to Social Revolution

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From Politics to Social Revolution

It is now nearly a decade since the end of the war, and nothing in this breathing-space — let us be plain — gives even modest hope or satisfaction to people who desire peace, economic justice, freedom. Our social condition calls for a radical step, the exercise of our highest powers, uncalculated risks — to know this requires only a look at our world of permanent war, of clashing empire States, of Government and Business bureaucracy, of the current inquisition. History, the blind momentum of a blind past, is not rescuing us; even on the rare occasions when one can take a sensible action in relation to the big National Questions, it can hardly be with illusions that the best outcome will bring us sensibly nearer a good society; the Labor Movement is not resurgent, and the people give no ear to appeals to rise up and change it all. It is necessary to invent something else to do, and taken as a whole radicals have not been too inventive.

Now to invent “something else to do” is not at all easy — especially one does not tell someone else what to invent! It is possible, however, to give a rough description of what is needed. It is the more necessary to do so, since it is widely believed that we need “new directions.” It happens that the right directions are really quite old, and almost obvious, and so thoroughly ignored! So one cannot go amiss to speak of them.

Militant Pacifism

The one striking innovation on the American radical scene is the campaign of civil disobedience waged by the militant pacifists, inspired directly by Gandhi and derivatively by Thoreau. I want to discuss this movement a little — to give it the praise that is due it, and to use its limitations to show crucial neglected directions in the thinking of American radicals.

Today being March 15 the mail carries news that 43 individuals have refused to pay income-tax this year. Over the last few years a certain number have been imprisoned for draft resistance; until silenced by the Government’s post-office regulations, the paper *Alternative* carried on vigorous agitation along these lines, as for a time did the *Catholic Worker*. Recently many of the same people, most of them associated with the Peacemakers movement, have issued a declaration of non-cooperation with Congressional inquisition and affirmation of intention to exercise free speech.

For reasons we come to later, anarchists have criticized this program, no doubt unduly harshly. Of all radical movements pacifism is the weakest theoretically,

it is a sitting duck. But the fact remains that these persons, at sacrifice or at least risk, have made a symbolic gesture of protest. Not everyone else has done something and theirs is an admirable “propaganda of the deed,” deserving honor.

But Militant Pacifism is *not* a general method of social action, and its chief error is precisely in not seeing this. It is a technique. It is what some people have to do, as a matter of integrity. It is a practical weapon of some importance. But as a matter of demonstrable fact, it is not a method of changing society.

The history of civil disobedience illustrates our point. Thoreau was protesting against a particular law, the Fugitive Slave Law, a law that widespread disobedience could have put out of commission without more ado. More generally he saw civil disobedience as a way for citizens to exercise a continuing vigilance and personal responsibility toward law and government. But suppose the government is not fundamentally a sensible one, suppose it has been built up by a patchwork remedying of evils by lesser evils — what sort of way of life will this be, with the conscientious citizens spending most of their time in jail? (It is a nice thing to say, that in certain societies a free man “belongs” in prison; but except as a revolutionary slogan it is a mighty unpleasant suggestion). Or suppose the evils — in our case, the wars and armies and the rest — are not a foolish excrescence on a healthy body social, but part of the very fabric of society — how can the government retract and remedy it?

This is why a social revolution is needed, and why energies should not go to influencing the government, but to changing the total system.

The scope of the problem to which civil disobedience was applied in India was also very narrow, a fact obscured by the size of the nation. The single point in question was, would the government of India be British or Indian? Economic, communal and other relations remained the same, the British rulers had only to get enough of harassing and shaming and finally to devise a reasonably graceful way to get out. (Incidentally, it was probably the failure of Gandhism that it dissociated the independence and social questions).

Our problem in America, to repeat, is the different one of social revolution. “Wars will cease when men refuse to fight” — *only if they re-order the society so as to eliminate the drives to war, the necessity for war.*

Now there are two ways, just two, of conceiving a social revolution, of solving the problem that pacifism attempts to ignore. The one is by means of government: socialist; and the other is outside of government, and abolishing it: anarchist. Or to put it perhaps more meaningfully: in the socialist case the revolutionists obtain political power, and manage and coordinate social changes from the heights of power. In the anarchist case government is treated as by nature obstructive and oppressive and non-creative, the revolution is carried out by economic expropriation and re-organization, by the formation of independent communal organizations,

by creating a new way of life in education, criminology and the rest; the State does not “wither away,” nor is it even “overthrown;” it dies on the spot.

In either case civil disobedience may play some role, and in the anarchist case it is civil disobedience — or to describe it more accurately, total ignoring — that abolishes government. But what is done about, and in relation to, government *does not matter* except for its effect on the total society.

A moment’s reflection will show that the problem is not futuristic. If the socialist method of governmentalism is followed — as we hope not — then a forthright preparation, ideologically and tactically, should begin now. If the anarchist method, then the social revolution should begin now (how, we will speak of later). A movement which repudiates these questions can be a very valuable “troublemaker” — there is need for troublemakers — but not a “peacemaker.”

One may make a very interesting parallel with “pure” syndicalism, which too attempted to be a thing sufficient in itself, neither socialist nor anarchist, and became a deadend except as it became an appendage of socialist parties or a rather confused associate of anarchism. There is another analogy which is even more striking, however. In the 19th century, gradually dying out since, there was in some quarters, including some anarchist ones, a retrospectively very naive faith in violence-in-itself — the magic of sporadic acts of violence culminating in barricades. (There was even a philosopher of permanent violence, Sorel.) Our “non-violent” friends have really turned this myth inside out — as though the shedding of blood was its unique miscalculation. If things were only so simple and violence alone to blame! But a revolution is a positive thing, it is vastly more than either violence or non-violence. Civil disobedience can be a powerful propaganda of the deed, and a powerful specific weapon, but that is all it is.

Third Camp and Democratic Illusion

The inadequacy of civil disobedience is not remedied — quite the contrary — by resuscitating the ancient radical illusion of the defensive united front. In this case the united front — of the Third Camp — marches right up to the problem of social revolution, comes out four-square for a good society, and proceeds to establish its compromise character as a defensive, opposing, protesting movement. But these institutions and these wars do not vanish under a good loud protest.

Except as the political elements gain the upper hand, or as the pacifists draw anarchist conclusions, the Third Camp remains in the pacifist dilemma — which it has managed to make worse. What is valuable in Militant Pacifism, its emphasis on individual action, individual responsibility and initiative, emerges from compromise as the viewpoint of a faction, not to characterize the movement. Interest

and energy is necessarily shifted then to a hypothetical mass movement — which has the misfortune not to exist, nor is the ground prepared for it, nor steps to prepare the ground taken.

But the hypothetical nature of the mass movement does not save the united front from the consequences of mass movements. In the day-by-day of a liberation movement also there is a socialist way and an anarchist way — the way of Democracy and the way of Freedom. *Ipsa facto* the creation of a unified third pressure force makes the choice of Democracy and ignores a century of history.

A century of history! Of labor unions that became bureaucracies and dictatorships, of revolutionary political parties that became exactly the same thing on a more terrible scale. In America we have had a century and a half of experience in democracy, in every type of organization from government down to local union, lodge and party. Still the illusion persists that the membership can control the centrally-directed activities of the organization by voting, going to meetings, etc. Almost any of these organizations, if it is more than a few months old, may be taken as a model of the devolution of democracy. It is a lesson each person can verify from his own experiences, and the first lesson for a 20th century radical to learn: that the coloration of every organization is determined ultimately by *who makes the decisions*, and very little by who votes for the decision-makers, or who votes to ratify their decisions in pre-fabricated conventions.

Unfortunately the anarchist appreciation of the problem of organization is not understood, and widely caricatured. Organization in itself is not evil: the evil is power, and the remedy for the evil of power is, not the half-step of Democracy, but the whole step of Freedom. “The cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy” is *almost* true: but the constitutional safeguards are circumvented, the otiose membership slumbers on, and nothing changes. To define the abstract word in the context, freedom means individual responsibility and initiative, group discussion and decisions, and delegation only of specific, especially mechanical, functions which cannot be done by individuals and face-to-face groups. The corollary of this principle is that an objective achievable only by a freedom-defeating centralizing organization should be abandoned until a new way is found.

As responsibility and initiative and strong primary groups become more common, more elaborate organization becomes possible: finally a free society. But we do not have such people to work with, we are not such people.

Who is to unify the pressure force of the unit front? Who is to make the decisions? write the programs? coin the slogans? if not the leadership cadres who have handed down the line at every political conference and in every political movement of past and present — the anarchist, where anarchists have tried it, as much as any other. So that the choice is between making our revolutionary politics an activity of individuals and face to face groups, joining together more

widely for *specific purposes*; or the mobilization of a mass movement which will take on, even if *unsuccessful*, the organizational tone of the society-at-large.

In the second case the sincere radicals may find themselves, rather too late, in libertarian revolution against the government of the microcosmic society which was to be the instrument of liberation.

To follow the anarchist way means to give up a lot of romantic images of the masses and general strikes and revolutions. But it also means to create something that actually tends to achieve the same good ultimate goals, a non-romantic revolution. Anyone can see that people who become sheep when they have a shepherd are, without one, more likely to act like lost sheep than like inventive men. It is, however, in the movement of liberation, if anywhere, that the ethics and dynamics of the future society are given birth, and men and women can begin to realize their powers.

The Social Revolution

Standing on an extreme peak of idealism anarchists have all the tools for tearing everybody to pieces. And this is rightly irking, if the anarchists cannot go on or refuse to go on.

We can proceed with two statements: (1) The individual is powerful. (2) The future society does not yet exist, nor can it be imposed by force.

To take the second first. Anarchists and revolutionary socialists in the 19th century agreed that the future society already existed: that there was merely a class of rulers, owners and priests to clear out and disperse, the government to nullify — even Marxism theorized this — and the revolution was made. Revolutionists sought to stir people to resist and rise up, they strove to release the underlying, suppressed — but not in the psychological sense *repressed* — solidarity.

Now, the case is, the masses are fragmented, desolidarized; government intervention, political and economic bureaucracy are deeply implicated in every-day life, they make the wars and the animating economic policies; primary community, the old underlying health, is gone, the instincts of cooperation are barely visible. The future society does not yet exist — and how this new fact is met is crucial.

The revolutionary socialists attempt to meet the new situation by *imposing* the future society through manipulative vanguardist movements. Whatever their theorizing about party dictatorship, they create variations on the single theme of the Bolshevik Revolution, not the Paris Commune or 1848. (We are not referring to those conservative socialists who simply want to extend the “socializing” tendencies of capitalism, by Laborism.)

But if 19th century socialism, by insisting on retaining the State for a certain time, thereby automatically hindered revolutionary creativity, the modern revolution-by-the-State, while full of “criticisms” of 1917, threatens to multiply the power and menace of the State. The existing Society is no longer the friend of the revolution, it is the body upon which the revolutionary State is to perform its surgery.

State-violence, however rationalized, cannot cure the disease of the society; a timid governmentalism cannot change the society, and a bold one is the equivalent of Bolshevism. The revolution — this is the negative lesson — absolutely must be able to abolish government, the institution can be regarded with no tolerance, the institution has too dangerous a role to permit equivocation.

But if the future society does not exist — and if government cannot legislate it — the social revolution must begin now, we must begin creating the conditions of liberty. This social revolution consists in present acts of liberation, present release and revival of vitality, which can begin — today we can barely begin! — to prepare our society for revolution.

It is fortunate that the individual is powerful!

The social revolution must begin now. Hardly a phrase is more facile, an idea harder to express concretely, an idea harder to implement, or an area of action more essential to a revolutionary program.

Let us spell out areas for action (the instances are not meant to be exhaustive):

Economics. The creation of direct solidarity in the working-place — which means recognition that the present labor movement is exactly *not* sociality-in-action; it means the practice of mutual aid and equality. The creation of workers’ cooperatives. The rejection of debasing work — and of its products. The revival of the instinct of workmanship, of craftsmanship and quality.

Politics. The association of libertarians in close face-to-face groups, warm communities of free men, who demonstrate freedom and are strengthened by it.

Community. The creation of small communities — particularly of communities which do not isolate themselves from the world and draw the surrounding area into some part of their way of life.

Education. The creation of small schools and colleges which educate for individuality, thought, creative activity. Or the vital activity of a single teacher who puts into the conventional school what was not intended to be there. Or even more radical experiments within a libertarian community.

Family. The practice of freedom and responsibility between man and woman, the exclusion of law and conventional morality from the private relations of people; and the affording to children of the right and possibility of individuality and a creative relationship to their environment.

Arts and Sciences. The revival of sincerity in art, and the abandonment of standards of commercialism and success. The refusal of scientists to work within the framework of government and corporation sponsorship — not to mention the war-contributing projects! — and the search for new ways to carry on their work.

Within this same framework we can begin to imagine both the character of a general social transformation, and the vital areas we can work in today. The truth is that very few people are doing so. But it is also the truth that very few radicals and revolutionists have understood the anarchist idea of social change, and still we watch the energy poured into politicalizing movements.

Underlying what precedes is the assumption, the individual is powerful. We are comparing him with the mass. We must state what we mean, since any fool can see that the individual is weak and powerless.

The individual is powerful when he is free, and more powerful when he is *not alone*; but he is weak when he is in a mass.

Without the idea of the free man, the anarchist idea falls to the ground: because the future society cannot exist, or its beginnings be nurtured, without him. This is the man who thinks, who acts for himself, who is responsible for his actions, who initiates and invents. He alone has the potential of cooperation, of community. He is not “created” by a demagogic propaganda, he does not act by immediate “interest.” He lives today as if he were in a sensible society — as far as one can — and in acting for the social good he does not fail to act to realize himself.

Without the idea of the free man, the anarchist idea fails. But also it is an idea peculiar to anarchism: for man is not viewed as a unit in an army wheeled to action against the ramparts of capitalism. Nor is he viewed as a man who spends his time disobeying and resisting the State. Where does this leave the work of “opposing the war” and “opposing the repression”? the acts of civil disobedience? Is it to be supposed that these men cannot get together to stage a public protest? If they cannot, maybe there is something wrong with the particular action? Is it to be supposed that such a man will sign a loyalty oath? Or that he will be an informer? (though he may choose to keep his address to himself, though he may choose to resist the war in his own way, though he may imagine that there is a time for “staying out from under the wheels,” and another for not budging in his tracks, all on his own terms).

In times as reactionary as ours, a program of action, and especially goals for action, are in a fantastic disproportion to the doings of busy History, when it is raining a terrible fire on the Pacific Ocean, and a small stupidity in Washington or Moscow or Tehran might conceivably leave our earth in ruins. It is necessary to notice this disproportion, but neither to be reduced by it to apathy, or seduced by it into the “crackpot realism.” It is necessary to go quietly ahead.

David Wieck, April 1954

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