

Contribution to international conference, "1984: authoritarian tendencies and libertarian tensions in contemporary society". Venice 26-30 Sept 1984

Colin Ward : Anarchism and the Crisis of Socialism

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Whenever anarchists from different parts of the world meet it is inevitable that they should discuss the failure of anarchism, as a political movement, to win the support of more than almost invisible minorities in most of the populations of the world. The assumption has usually been that one day, somewhere, this situation will change, not in our lifetimes perhaps, but in that of our children or grandchildren. Maybe, with their dying breath they will be able to say, "Comrades, I can see on the horizon, the light of the dawn of the social revolution!" Why not? Revolution is not impossible. We have seen dozens, all through this century, but each has been followed by counter-revolution, with the anarchists among the victims.

The belief in a lutte finale, a final struggle, is of course an inheritance from the nineteenth century and was common to socialist movements of all kinds, whether Marxist, Christian, democratic, syndicalist or anarchist. They all looked for that revolutionary dawn, and of course, in the event, it was not their particular revolutionary dawn. The most disappointed of all must be the Marxists - those scientific socialists who knew that history was on their side - for by now the greater part of the earth's surface is ruled by governments which declare themselves to be Marxists, and we all know exactly what Marxism is like as a ruling ideology. Even the most credulous believer must see that the ruling elite in the Soviet Union has much more in common with the ruling elite of the United States, than it has with its own poor citizens. We are all familiar with the old Polish joke that under capitalism man exploits man, while under socialism it's the other way round.

So while we admit the failure of anarchism, considered as a political

movement, how much more remarkable has been the failure of the world's socialist movements to achieve socialist aims, whether we are considering the Dictatorship of the Proletariat in the East, or the constitutional electoral versions in the West, or the various parodies of both in the Third World. And if ours has been the century of disappointed ideological hopes, it has also been the century of prophecies fulfilled, so far as the 19th century anarchists are concerned. Proudhon and Bakunin were alone among their contemporaries, with the exception of their mutual friend Alexander Herzen, in forecasting the nature of the twentieth-century total state.

There is a famous passage from Bakunin in which he describes with uncanny accuracy the destination of totalitarianism in our own century, both in what he styled its Bismarckian form which reached its apotheosis in Nazi Germany, and in what he styled as Marx's People's State (Volksstaat) which led, inevitably, to Stalin's Russia. Marxist theologians draw a distinction between the two because they have a mechanical interpretation of fascism as the response of capitalism to its terminal crisis. They ignore the fact that the Nazi party was the National Socialist German Workers' Party, with, as the rest of Europe learned to its cost, huge popular support.

There is an equally famous passage from Proudhon in which he catalogued the evils of government. How interesting that in his list from 1848 of the horrors of being ruled, Proudhon did not include the use of systematic torture by governments. Nearly a century and a half later, there is not a government in the world which does not sanction the torture of political suspects by its zealous servants.

We have come to accept this as normal, throughout the world. State security is the paramount concern of the modern self-preserving state. But we know too that the state relies on the existence of a "latent external crisis", as Martin Buber called it, in order to retain its ascendancy over its own subjects, and to serve as its ultimate weapon against its own population.

I have always been impressed by the aphorism used by Randolph Bourne during the first world war, that "War is the health of the State", and by the conclusion reached in the 1930s by Simone Weil in her "Reflections on War". She declared that "The great error of nearly all studies of war, an error into which all socialists have fallen, has been to consider war as an episode in foreign politics, when it is especially an act of interior politics, and the most atrocious act of all." The war of one State against another State, she concluded, "resolves itself into a war of the State and the military apparatus against its own people."

We have all seen very recently how the Malvinas/Falklands war served as the ideal external crisis for both Colonel Galtieri and for Mrs Thatcher, and how today the Iran-Irak war has precisely the same function for both regimes. A major part of the economic activity of the great powers is not only in supplying their own demand for weapons, but in exporting weapons to the minor ones, so that throughout the poor half of the world, governments of military bandits with starving populations, are equipped with incredibly sophisticated and lethal weapons, together with the necessary advisers from the USA or the USSR . If anything should convince anyone of the truths of the anarchist critique of government, it is the slightest observation of the actual behaviour of the governments of the world.

I am always amazed that now that we have a whole academic industry analysing the history of anarchism and explaining the errors of the anarchists of the past, the scholars somehow fail to notice that alone among the ideologists of the last century, the anarchists were right about the nature of the modern state.

Recently the editor of an American newsletter, Peacework asked several hundred people their answers to the question "What will it take to prevent nuclear war?" The truest answer, for me, came from Karl Hess. (He is an American advocate of decentralised politics and community technology).

To the question "What will it take?" he replied:

"A sharp diminution of the power of those who have the power to divert resources to weapons and to order a nuclear strike.

"This is an unfortunate, sad, rather gloomy but nonetheless practical answer, it seems to me.

"Nuclear weapons are the result of state power. They are the very affirmation of such power in this century. Even the most impoverished state drives relentlessly toward possessing them. It is to the state what a big car is to the status-seeking person. No modern state claims power on any other basis than the possession of such great weapons. None claim to be respected. None boast of the happiness of the people. All boast of their weapons or complain of their lack of them. Exceptions might be Costa Rica, the Maldive Islands, and Tanzania. But, beyond even medium size, weapons are the thing.

"Thus, I believe, nuclear war is simply another function of state power. The two are intimately related.

"To use state power to curb such weapons would be to ask the state to surrender its own power. What state would do that? Norway, maybe. Switzerland assuredly. But not the great ones. Nor would the new pretenders to state power, the major terrorist groups, want to step down their power by renouncing the Big Bang. Hardly. They probably lust after it.

"Nuclear war will be avoided if, and only if, state power itself diminishes...." \*

It is precisely because the socialist movements of the world have committed themselves to the enlargement of state power, rather than to its diminution, that socialism is in crisis. But why do I address myself to the crisis of socialism, rather than to that of anarchism? Because the anarchist movement is not in crisis. It remains just what it always was: a tiny network of propagandists around the world, whose bitterest disputes are internal, but whose general conclusions are far more relevant today than they were first formulated in the last century.

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\* Pat Farren (ed): What Will it Take to Prevent Nuclear War? (Schenkman, 331 Broadway, Cambridge, Mass 02138, USA, 1984 \$6.95)

state. The socialists claimed that it was necessary to take control of that power. By 1984, as we have seen, the whole world feels threatened by nuclear weapons which are the ultimate expression of state power. States, whether capitalist or socialist have achieved what every megalomaniac dictator in history has vainly sought: the power to destroy every citizen of every state. The anarchists claimed that for the liberation of work, it was necessary for industrial production to be in the hands of the producers. The socialists claimed that it should be in the hands of the state. The result is, as we can all see, looking around the world today, that the more the control of industry is concentrated in the hands of the state, the more powerless are the industrial workers. Compare the situation of the industrial worker in the Soviet Union, 67 years after the Bolshevik revolution, with that of the industrial worker in the capitalist West. (This is not to praise capitalism, but to acknowledge that its power has been curbed in ways that were not envisaged by either Marxists or anarchists). The common factor that links the struggle of Solidarity in Poland with that of the coal-miners in Britain is not that they are confrontations with capitalism, but that they are confrontations with the state. (In Britain the mining industry has been owned by the state for 38 years and controlled by it for 45 years).

How long are the socialists prepared to wait for socialism? In the last century the anarchist faction was pushed out of history by the believers in state socialism, whether by Marxism in the First International or by Fabianism in Britain. Ordinary citizens outside were, of course, unaffected, but when large-scale socialist movements emerged as contenders for political power, it was state-socialism which represented the socialist ideology to the ordinary non-political population. In both East and West it has utterly discredited itself, because in the East it implies the continuance of a police state and the growth of a new class structure with the workers at the bottom of the pyramid, just as they always were, and in the West

it implies a similar, if rather more flexible, managerial hierarchy with a new sub-proletariat of superfluous people for whom modern high-technology industries have no function, not even as Marx's "reserve army of labour." The cost of maintaining the system of welfare capitalism explains why grotesque political figures like Reagan in America or Thatcher in Britain are actually popular among the electorate. (I need hardly emphasise that their belief in "small government" does not extend to the key instruments of the state: the armed services, the law and the police.)

I take no pleasure in the crisis of socialism. I do not believe that disillusionment necessarily leads people to anarchism. The socialist movement arose from generous social impulses which are a valuable asset in any society. I think in fact that our habit of describing human societies as capitalist or socialist is a misleading legacy from Marxist economic determinism. The character of a society is not determined by its dominant economic system. Every human society is in fact a plural society in which large areas of activity are not in conformity with the officially imposed or declared values. Just as there are many aspects of capitalist societies which are not operated on capitalist principles so many aspects of societies alleged to be socialist are not dominated by socialist economics.

The ordinary citizen has every reason to be glad of this pluralism as the one thing that makes life tolerable in either kind of society. If socialist movements recover their impetus and their popular support it seems to me that it will be through their becoming more pluralist, more tolerant of divergence and dissent. If they become less so it will imply regimes like that of Pol Pot in Kampuchea or like that of the Cultural Revolution period in China which all Chinese now look back upon as a national disaster.

Anarchism has always been the unheeded conscience of the political left. If socialist movements recover their integrity through a new libertarian impulse, what will the function of the anarchists be? I believe it will be what it always was. There is a well-known passage in Kropotkin's Modern Science and

Anarchism where he declares that, "Throughout the history of our civilisation, two traditions, two opposed tendencies, have been in conflict: the Roman tradition and the popular tradition, the imperial tradition and the federalist tradition, the authoritarian tradition and the libertarian tradition. Between these two currents, always alive, struggling in humanity - the current of the people and the current of the authorities which thirst for political and religious domination - our choice is made."

Commenting on this remark twenty-three years ago in the journal Anarchy, an Australian anarchist, George Molnar, reminded us that this is a different conception of freedom and of the role of anarchism, from that which postpones all solutions until the advent of a hypothetical "free society". It is a conception of freedom as "one thing along with other causes that can be supported or opposed", while the coming or not coming of the social revolution recedes in importance, since freedom and authority are always struggling. Along this line of thought, he remarks, "we can take freedom as a characteristic not of societies as a whole but of certain groups, institutions and people's ways of life within any society, and even then not as their exclusive character." Molnar concludes that "the conflict between freedom and authority is the permanent order of the day. Doing politics, advancing freedom as a programme for the entire human race, cannot change this; it can only foster illusions about the way society runs."

In this continual struggle between the authoritarian tradition and the libertarian tradition, the task of the anarchists for the rest of this century could be that of rescuing socialism from its disastrous liason with the state.