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A Few Words on a Confusing Notion¹

By M. Isidine (Marie Goldsmith)

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In the innumerable discussions that the Russian revolution has given rise to in socialist and revolutionary circles, the idea of a “transitional period” following victorious revolution constantly recurs; it is perhaps the most abused idea for trying to either justify or deny indefensible actions. It is generally believed that even the most advanced countries are not ready for completely realized socialism (and, *a fortiori*, of anarchist socialism). On this basis, some advocate half-socialist, half-radical measures, or even a “workers’ government” which, as far as socialism is concerned, will only realize the minimum elements of the program; others aim at a dictatorship which will give the revolutionaries absolute power which they will then use to serve the interests of the working class, above all by terrorizing the bourgeoisie. The Bolsheviks, in particular (and the anarchists who have allowed themselves to be led by them), say to us: “Do you really believe in the possibility of making anarchist communism reign from now on? The masses are not prepared for it and socialism still has too many enemies; as long as they remain, the State will remain necessary. You must resign yourself to a transitional period of dictatorship.”

As long as we are willing to discuss the matter on this basis and to make our opinion dependent on our assessment — optimistic or pessimistic — of the degree to which the workers are prepared, it will be impossible for us to give a clear solution to the question in accordance with our principles. And this is understandable: the question must be posited in a different way. Whether or not our ideal is attainable “right away” — this can in no way influence our actions. We know that only the historian, through consideration and once the results have been acquired, will one day establish which advances our time was ripe to realize; and as for our contemporaries, they are always mistaken in this respect, each one in relation with their own personal opinions. We do not believe in the existence of predetermined phases of evolution, identical for all peoples. We know that the general stride of humanity leads forward to a better use of the forces of nature and to a better assurance of the liberation of not only the individual, but also of social solidarity. On this path, there may be stops, even setbacks, but never a definitive movement in the opposite direction. And the more that the communion between different peoples solidifies, the more rapidly those who are further along this path will inspire the laggards. And as for the rest — the speed of the movement, its peaceful or violent course, the conquests achieved at this or that moment — all this

¹ Ed: Isidine, M. “Quelques mots sur une notion confuse [A few words on a confusing notion].” *Plus Loin* [Further], September 15, 1925.

depends on a number of factors that cannot be predicted. Among these factors, one of the most powerful has always been and will always be the action of individuals and their groups. The ideas that inspire the most energetic action will have the greatest chance of triumphing; life will follow the result of the forces applied. Consequently, the more we employ our efforts in view of our ideal in all its intransigence, the closer to it we will get.

In discussions where one speaks about a “period of transition,” we are often confused and misunderstand each other, because it is a question of two very different notions. On the one hand, every epoch is a transitional period to a higher stage, because as certain aspirations are accomplished, others arise. But there always exists certain dominant problems, which preoccupy all people capable of thinking, and other problems, such as those of the future, which are thought of only by an advanced minority. Thus, the socialist problem: the abolition of capitalist exploitation and the organization of an economic society based on equality is in our time on the verge of immediate realization; but to base this new society on freedom and to assure the genuine development of its people remains the ideal of only a few: the anarchists. At which moment will this ideal finally take its place as our primary objective, and become essential for the majority? Only the future will tell; however, it is certain that before it is realized as we conceive it, we will go through a series of transitional stages.

But we must also consider other elements under the name of transitional period: it is the moment which immediately follows a revolution, when the old forms are not entirely deconstructed — the enemies, partisans of the past, are still to be feared — and the new order of things is born in the midst of the struggle and in the most dire of difficulties. And then, if one considers uniquely only this moment, apart from the past and especially the future, one arrives at the conclusion, like the Bolsheviks, to justify all means, even the most dangerous ones, generally borrowed from the old world, and which places the necessity of a dictatorship at the forefront.² Or one can propose, as Kautsky and the other social democrats do, a temporary regime where the socialists will be in power, but will postpone the realization of their socialist program to some indeterminate moment in the future.

Whether it is one or the other of these directions, our way of seeing things is completely different: we refuse to be hypnotized by this idea of transition. That successive progress and partial advancement must precede the total realization of our ideal is quite possible and even probable, but for these successive stages to be acceptable and desirable to us, they must lead us toward this ideal and not toward something diametrically opposed. The way toward a society free of all State coercion and founded upon the free association of individuals can only be achieved through social forms where free initiative increases and authority decreases. But if, under the guise of a period of transition toward a free community, we are offered a complete annihilation of all freedom, we reply that this is not a transition, but a step backward. We have not been raised in the tradition of the Hegelian dialectic, which considers as a natural phenomenon the transformation of a thing into its opposite; our thinking is penetrated rather by the principle of evolution, which tells us that each stage of development is not only not opposed to the previous one, but proceeds from it.³ The anarchist society will never result from a dictatorship; it will only

² Ed: Articulating this point, Vladimir Lenin argued in *State and Revolution* (1918) that, “The proletariat needs state power, a centralized organization of force, an organization of violence, both to crush the resistance of the exploiters and to lead the enormous mass of the population — the peasants, the petty bourgeoisie, and semi-proletarians — in the work of organizing a socialist economy” (Lenin, “State and Revolution,” 409).

³ Ed: As an evolutionary biologist, Goldsmith uses the term evolution advisedly. In this case, she uses it to reject the notion of dialectical analysis in favor of a forward-marching view of humanity’s progress.

be born from the elements of freedom that have subsisted and flourished in spite of all State-inspired constraints. For a social form to be considered a step forward toward an ideal, it must contain more elements of this ideal and never less; otherwise, it is a retreat and not progress.⁴

The Paris Commune, for example, did not set out to create an anarchist society, but anarchists everywhere regarded it highly for its broad federalism. Similarly, during the Russian revolution, anarchists warmly welcomed the institution of the free soviets, as long as they emerged from popular initiative, and not from the official organs, which today offer only a caricature of them; they saw in them a form of political organization preferable to classical parliamentarianism, which in their minds increased the development of initiative and collective action among the people.

A sympathetic attitude toward everything that brings us closer to our ideal is a self-evident thing; the notion of a “transitional period” can add nothing to it. It only serves to obscure the discussion and to give a pretext to certain groups to “revise” our ideas, which means, essentially, to abandon them in their very essence. In reality, the revolutionary moment is the one which lends itself the least to prudence, to the fear of utopia, of the “unattainable”; on the contrary, it extends the limits of all hopes. Let us not therefore be intimidated by these false historical narratives, to which the whole experience of history gives a firm denial.

Bibliography

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⁴ Ed: Goldsmith outlines one of the core principles of anarchist thought: the unity of means and ends. This describes the idea that the tools of liberation must be in harmony with the desired liberated future. For instance, one cannot use top-down authoritarianism to achieve self-determination. This concept is not unique to anarchism; more recently, prison industrial complex (PIC) abolitionists have articulated the perspective that abolition cannot be achieved by enacting reforms which reinforce the legitimacy, funding, and strength of the PIC (Kaba, “Police ‘Reforms’ You Should Always Oppose”).