

Problems of the Revolution : the City and the Country

Emile Pouget wrote in 1906 (Almanac of the Revolution), "There are no possible or effective revolutions except when workers and peasants participate in the movement. If on the contrary only one of these categories is on the move whether it is the peasants or the workers the movement will miscarry."

More than in any other circumstance, this necessity of the union of the peasant and the worker has been emphasised by syndicalist propaganda. Up to now, the development of the Spanish Social Revolution has shown a remarkable synchronism between collectivist action in the towns and the country, and the opposition which existed in the Russian and Hungarian Revolutions have not presented themselves. That does not mean to say however that they will not appear tomorrow, and the Spanish comrades must of necessity continue, as up to now, their effort to maintain an intelligent balance between the city and the country.

The first antagonism that looms up between the city and the country during the revolution comes from the urgency of the problem of providing provisions. Spain has had a great advantage for itself: namely a certain autonomy in relation to foreign countries. However Spain is beginning to run into difficulties in resolving the problem of provisioning the towns. And this problem could become more and more difficult.

Two tendencies appear in the midst of the masses of working people in the towns: firstly forced requisitioning, then a more pacific and rational solution.

Forced requisitioning is a great mistake. All history of revolutions shows this. The French revolutionary government of 1793 tried to use the 'strong' method, and the results were disastrous: 11th April 1794 the Committee of Public Safety ordered the requisition of one pig in eight. The owner was to work on it until it had attained the maximum weight. A great show of circulars and measures to inspect, pay, conserve, centralise etc. was made. Several months later when the commissar presented himself to take the animal, he only found a skeleton or a pig more dead than alive.

The Russian Revolution offers a more recent example of the disastrous effects of a policy of forced requisition. It fully confirms Kropotkin's predictions in 'The Conquest Of Bread': "When the Revolution breaks out, the Russian peasants will keep their bread for themselves and their families." The Bolsheviks themselves recognised the error of forced requisition at the Provincial Congress of the Soviets which took place in Moscow in 1919. The results of the expeditions of provisioning parties were disastrous: disorder, plots, peasant revolts (Lunivsk, Paulovsk, Mokoovsk, Bielieh, Ponikolsk etc), violent suppression, bad economic results. The frightened peasants sowed less. The livestock similarly diminished greatly. Rich areas, Tambov, suffered scarcity.

The policy of requisition completely checked the revolutionary momentum of the countryside. Emma Goldman recounts an anecdote which clearly illustrates the miserable condition of the peasants: A group of peasants presented themselves before Lenin one day to discuss their lot.

"May God protect you," said the oldest of the peasants.

"Are you not happy, my friend? You have lands, cows, chickens, what more do you want?" replied Lenin.

"Praise be to God, we have land, but you take all the corn; chickens, but you take away the eggs, cows, but our children have no milk. That, my friend, is why we are asking you to help us."

The abandonment of requisition, which was again demanded by the Kronstadt sailors on 1st March 1921, was not announced until the 12th by Lenin at the opening of the Tenth Communist Party Congress when Trotsky was putting down Kronstadt.

It is left to us to examine the acquisition of agricultural products. In this too, the French Revolution offers significant examples of the danger of using money refused by the peasants and excessively low prices.

If in 1793 the countryside caused famine in the large cities, this was not due to a fall in cereal production, but because the peasants refused promissory notes without any security in gold. It would be wrong to believe that only the rich peasants refused to sell their products, the small farmers were equally opposed to exchanging the fruit of their sweat for these promissory notes, on which Kropotkin comments as follows in 'The Great Revolution':

"As long as they offer the peasants a worthless scrap of paper, the situation did not develop. The foodstuffs remained in the countryside, even if they had recourse to the guillotine."

The policy of imposed prices had no better effects: the foodstuffs became scarce. The Assembly lowered retail prices by decree (29th September 1793), anticipating that wholesale prices would follow. Wholesale dealing stopped, and commerce also.

The Russian Revolution offers other examples. Seeing that violence did not produce results, the Bolshevik government began to buy agricultural products, but it made a new mistake. The price was too low. As in the case of corn the price of which was slightly higher than before the Revolution when the prices of industrial products had increased by thirty to forty times.

We have seen that neither forced requisition nor promissory notes have given good results. There only remains the exchange of manufactured goods for agricultural products.

Kropotkin, in 'The Conquest of Bread' presented this solution as being very effective, although a contributor to Malatesta's magazine (Carlo Molasehi in 'Pensiero e Volonta' Rome 1st January 1925) considers it to be an 'unknown quantity'. In this connection, I wrote in Fabbri's 'Lotte Umana' (Paris, March 1928): "When Kropotkin was writing, he was thinking of the torch that was going to replace the paraffin light, of the spade that would replace the plough etc." Today the peasant's need for agricultural machines is relative, and in certain areas and for certain forms of cultivation they are unusable. He possesses many articles of convenience and no longer needs everything. Few peasants would exchange their corn for a vegetable cleaner. Before the needs of the peasants increase and industry abandons the production of luxury articles a certain time will pass. "Consequently, the peasants will be paid in money, cash of a recognised weight and value."

Luigi Fabbri added a note in which he observed,

"If the mentality of the peasant is so backward that he demands money, it will be a good idea to examine how this demand can be satisfied. It is a hypothesis which for good reasons wounds the anarchists who must do all they can, by propaganda and by researching other means, to avoid such a choice. However, it is advisable to bear it in mind that, from an anarchist, revolutionary, humane and also practical point of view, this choice is preferable to the system of coercion and of authoritarian requisition."

As one can see, Fabbri was excluding requisition and was not rejecting money, but he was not tackling the problem. In my article 'The anarchists and agrarian smallholding' (La Revista Blanca, 15th November 1932), after declaring myself in favour of the use of money in trading between the towns and the countryside, I wrote,

"Naturally a system for the exchange of goods, of work, of means of transport is always possible as an integral part of the system of buying and selling." If the local councils or the trade unions, or both at the same time, were the intermediary organisations between the rural smallholders and the farming co-operatives and between the latter and the industrial workers, they would be able to facilitate this exchange without money.

For example, a local council that has organised the production of bread wants to be provided with corn. It applies to the peasants, offering them in exchange for their corn work provided by the building co-operative, to which the local council will give the necessary materials. One could find infinite examples.

At the time I had omitted a fundamental aspect of the problem: agreement between the prices of the factories and the peasants' ability and desire to buy. The exchange of commodities between the city and the country is an ideal form which is not always attainable. It is one of the weak points of Socialist economics. In the Russian Revolution this was one of the principal factors in the transition from the SEP (Socialist Economic Policy) to the NEP (New Political Economy).

Co-ordination between the urban and agrarian economies is much more difficult than is generally supposed among Socialists. The Catalan peasants refusal of the proposals for exchange put to them by the Barcelona Wood Syndicate is a typical example of this. The peasants generally have need of seeds, chemical fertilisers, agricultural machinery and only later do economic improvement and spiritual development give them the need for conveniences, aesthetic and luxury items.

The urban society must therefore respond to these possibilities and to the peasants' preferences if one wants to avoid antagonisms looming up between the towns and the countryside. As in the USSR where agricultural and industrial prices are so widely different that they constitute and perpetuate divergent interests, the central point of all the variations in Bolshevik economic policy, and which explains almost all aspects of internal political struggles.

To recap, I should say that anarchists in towns should refuse to take part in expeditions for forceful requisition and even prevent them, demanding that the problem of provisioning the towns and the militias be resolved by a common agreement between the peasants and the workers on the purchase of agricultural products, whether with a stable currency or by exchange and credit certificates.

As for the anarchists who live in the country, they must at one and the same time, repel requisition and fight all attempts at buying up and sabotage, and carry out an intense campaign of persuasion on the subject of the towns' problems, like provisioning, in order to facilitate agreement between the workers in the country and the workers and technicians in the towns, in order to encourage federation between the urban and rural co-operatives, in order to promote and support all spontaneous experience which would tend to reduce the money supply. Harmony between the towns and the countryside is only possible by avoiding the USSR's mistakes: forced requisition, destruction of consumer cooperativism, centralisation of distribution, increase of factory prices, transition from suppression to tolerance of speculators, monetary inflation etc.

I am not a prophet. I have therefore been able to air some points of view that are completely superficial, as much to the present as for the future. However, I consider that it is not useless to suggest plans for relations between the towns and the countryside, given that this problem draws our attention and demands deep and meticulous study and elaboration. I leave that task to those who are more competent, for I am no economist.

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