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THE ANARCHISTS

Cultural images from the end of the 19th century

By

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With a preface by R. Rocker

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PREFACE

The first edition of Mackay's work "The Anarchists" was published in 1891, at about the same time that the German Anarchists made their first attempt to develop a public propaganda. Before this time, Anarchism was little known in Germany, and the few conspiratorial groups that existed in the Rhine Region, Berlin, and other larger cities were much too weak to exert any influence on the population or specifically on the working class. The entire activity of these small groups was generally limited to the secret distribution of Anarchist newspapers, pamphlets and manifestos which were printed abroad and smuggled in over the border. This underground activity involved immense sacrifices, and many of the first Anarchist pioneers in Germany were buried alive in the dungeons of the reactionary German authorities for five, eight, ten or fifteen years, because they belonged to conspiratorial organizations and distributed forbidden literature. And these men did not find the slightest sympathy anywhere, not even in the working class, as Social-Democratic leaders did not miss an opportunity to ridicule Anarchism and to represent Anarchists as paid agents of the police. At the Social-Democratic Congress in St. Gallen (1887), Wilhelm Liebknecht gave a lecture on "Anarchism and Socialism"; on that occasion he divided the Anarchists into three categories: 1) police agents; 2) madmen; 3) criminals. No wonder, then, that under these circumstances, Anarchism did not find many followers or sympathizers, especially at the time of the "Socialist Law"—that dark period when the Reaction cut down any free expression and when the political police filled the whole country with paid spies and provocateurs.

Only after the abolition of that shameful law and with the foundation of the "Independent Socialist" movement (1891) began a new era for the Anarchist movement in Germany. Although the police soon suppressed the first effort by the Anarchists to create an independent publication in Germany itself, they could not prevent the movement from finding its way to the public.

Among the various branches of Anarchism, only Revolutionary Communist Anarchism was known in Germany at the beginning, and at first, even the members of this branch

were quite unclear in their ideas and aspirations. The bulk of Anarchist literature was limited to various pamphlets by Johann Most, [Peter] Kropotkin, [Élisée] Reclus and some others. In fact, no great theoretical work existed in this period, and the history of the movement in other countries was largely unknown.

It was at that time that “The Anarchists” appeared; with this work, the German Anarchists heard for the first time of a new branch, Individualist Anarchism. The book gave rise to violent discussions in the Anarchist camp, but one cannot say that it found many supporters. It was a popular book, because the author had chosen the form of a novel for the development of his ideas; but only a few were attracted by the ideas and goals which the author proposed as the essential and sole teachings of Anarchism.

And later, when the Anarchist movement in Germany developed further, and when the defenders of Anarchism broadened and deepened their ideas and theories, even then the effect of Mackay’s book remained the same. It was appreciated as a work of art, as the work of genius by an important writer, but as far as theory was concerned, he was not considered very important.

In reality, Mackay did not enrich Individual Anarchism with new ideas or original theoretical concepts. We cannot find in him the philosophical and theoretical depth of an [Anselme] Bellegarrigue, a [Josiah] Warren or a [Stephen Pearl] Andrews, and certainly not the brilliant expressive powers of a [Benjamin R.] Tucker. Also, [as] his attempt at contradicting the ideas and concepts of Communist Anarchism was surely not successful, he was unable to convince people with deeper convictions and independent opinions.

Some assertions in Mackay’s work are even historically incorrect. For instance, his entire description of [Mikhail] Bakunin’s personality is unclear and one-sided. Moreover, it is generally known today that the so-called “Revolutionary Catechism” about the “Duties of the Revolutionary toward himself and toward his Revolutionary Comrades” is not Bakunin’s work, but was written by [Sergei] Nechayev.

Originally, the book was meant to have quite a different character. Mackay had only in 1887 begun to feel closer to the Socialist and Anarchist movement, and in that year he decided to write his work. The great events of that year—the demonstrations of the unemployed in London, the bloody battles between people and police in Trafalgar Square, and most of all, the terrible tragedy in Chicago—gave the artist and poet enough material for his opus; but his own intellectual development prevented him from carrying on with his plan at that time. The book did not appear until four years later, under the name “The Anarchists,” and its character was very different from what the author’s intention had been in the first place.

In 1889, Mackay discovered Max Stirner’s brilliant work, “The Unique One and His Property,” which was first published in 1845. But this remarkable book, perhaps the most original work of world literature, had been completely forgotten, just like its brilliant author. Only through Mackay has this work surfaced for the second time, and we also have to thank him for preserving the scant biographical material on Max Stirner.

Stirner’s book had a decisive influence on Mackay’s intellectual development. In Auban’s philosophical reflections we can hear distinctly the echo of Stirner’s ideas, and the style itself reminds us often quite strongly of the “Unique One ...”.

But just that is the weak part of Mackay’s work, because the influence of Stirner’s brilliant destructive philosophy, which covers all religious, political, and social concepts down to the smallest details, limits the writer almost exclusively to negations and critical remarks. The discussions between Auban and Trupp really should explain the differences between Individualism and Communism and should prove that Communists are not Anarchists at all, but they actually only touch on a few quite external parts of the question and lack any deeper content. Also, some assertions which Auban-Mackay puts in the mouth of his opponent Trupp are not only a little one-sided, but absolutely untrue—for instance: when Trupp presents the Communist Jacobin [François Noël, called Gracchus] Babeuf as a pioneer of Communist Anarchism. This is simply absurd, and equally absurd is the assertion that correct Communism requires that every man should satisfy his sexual

needs with any woman and vice versa.* Such baseless allegations are even more unpleasant when we remember that Trupp is not a creature of the author's imagination but represents one of the typical members of the conspiratorial Anarchist movement of the day (Otto Rinke, who died in America). One has to admit that the Communist Anarchism of this period was in many respects primitive and somehow undeveloped. (The most important theoretical works about this branch had not even yet been published.) However, the reader feels instinctively that Trupp could have defended his position with better arguments and that Auban-Mackay has made the task a little too easy for himself.

But these theoretical weaknesses cannot impair the artistic value of "The Anarchists." The wonderful and impressive descriptions of London's hellish areas, the sad voyage through "the empire of hunger," the fine representation of the great events that took place in the English capital in those days, and finally, the vivid description of the horrible tragedy in Chicago—all that endears the book to the reader and makes it valuable not only to the present, but also to future generations. The familiar personalities from the camp of revolutionary emigrants in London are for the most part well-drawn, and anyone who is acquainted with the older London movement will soon recognize them.

In all these descriptions, the real artist emerges, we feel the warm breath of the events which the writer presents to us, and we re-live, each one of us, everything that he has experienced.

R. Rucker

* It should be noted that in *The Anarchists* this idea is not stated by Trupp, but by Auban in speaking to Trupp: "What else can you understand by [free love], if you are consistent enough to apply the principle of brotherhood — as you represent it in the devotion to and renunciation of labor — also to that field than: That it is the duty of every woman to yield to the desire of every man, and that no man has the right to withdraw himself from the desire of any woman; that the children resulting from those unions belong to human society, and that this society has the duty of educating them; that the separate family, like the individual, must disappear in the great family of humanity: is it not so?" But Auban continues and does not allow Trupp to answer this. HK.