

James P. Cannon On Anarchism

The following letter to Myra Tanner Weiss from James P. Cannon has never been previously published.

Los Angeles, Calif.

July 29, 1955

Dear Myra:

I received your letter of June 9. Sending you my IWW pamphlet was really a bit of sly calculation on my part. I knew my IWW pamphlet would stir up the old Wobbly in you.

Murry may be partly right in interpreting my sending the pamphlet to you as a recognition that you are an "anarchist." But he is dead wrong to deprecate the term as such. Anarchism is all right when it is under the control of organization. This may seem a contradiction in terms, but if it were not for the anarchism in us as individuals we wouldn't need the discipline of organization. The revolutionary party represents a dialectical unity of opposites. In one sense it is, in effect, the fusion of the rebel instincts of individuals with the intellectual recognition that their rebellion can be effective only when they are combined and united into a single striking force which only a disciplined organization can supply.

In my young days I was very friendly to the anarchists, and was an anarchist myself by nature. I dearly loved that word "freedom," which was the biggest word in the anarchist vocabulary. But my impulse to go all the way with them was blocked by recognition that the re-organization of society, which alone can make real freedom possible, cannot be achieved without organization, and that organization signifies discipline and the subordination of the individual to the majority. I wanted to have my cake and eat it too—in fact, I still have the same idea—but I have never yet been able to figure out exactly how it could be done.

People who have grown up since the Russian Revolution and the First World War don't know and can't have a real feel of what the anarchist movement was before that time, before its theoretical assumptions had been put to the decisive test. Anarchism was then regarded as the most extreme form of radicalism. The anarchists had some wonderful people; they claimed the heritage of the

Haymarket martyrs, and they were greatly respected in all radical circles. When Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman came to Kansas City on lecture tours, we Wobblies used to pitch in and promote their meetings as a matter of course.

Goldman was a great orator, one of the best I every heard, and Berkman was a heroic figure of pure nobility. It was he who organized the first defense committee and movement for the defense of Tom Mooney, after he had been convicted and was on the way to the gallows, when everybody else was cowed and afraid to raise a voice. I remember his coming to Kansas City on a nation-wide tour to arrange the first net-work of Mooney Defense Committees, and I recall fondly and proudly the fact that I was an active member of this first committee organized by Berkman. (Me and Browder!)

The impulses of the original anarchists were wonderful, but their theory was faulty, and it could not survive the test of war and revolution. It is shameful to recall that the Spanish anarchists became ministers in a bourgeois cabinet in the time of the Spanish Revolution; and that old-time American anarchists in New York, or rather what was left of them, became social patriots in the Second World War. Nothing is so fatal as a false theory.

If I get wound up some day I will write something about the anarchist movement in America, as it was in the days before the First World War.

So you're really living it up these days as a full-time party functionary and housewife. You had better not let Murry read my chapter in "America's Road to Socialism" about the coming jail-break of the housewives from their kitchens. He might get so scared at the prospect as to turn against socialism, and we don't want to risk that.

The weather's cool and crisp here today, as usual in this time of the year. How are things on the weather front in New York? The L.A. papers have been printing a lot of scare stories about the devastating heat in all parts of the country outside California. What's bad weather really like? I can't remember.

Fraternally,
J.P. Cannon