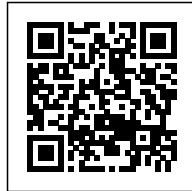


CLASS AND MAN

Posted on January 1, 2022 by Nikolai Berdyaev



We are extremely pleased to present a new translation of this very pertinent essay by Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), the well-know Russian philosopher. It was published on January 8, 1918, in the journal, Народно Правительство (The People's Government).

I

The struggle of classes fills the history of mankind. It is not an invention of the 19th and 20th centuries, although in these centuries it took new and aggravated forms. This struggle was also going on in the ancient world and even back then showed varied manifestations. Much instructive reading on this subject can be found in Pöhlmann's book, *История античного коммунизма и социализма (Geschichte des antiken Kommunismus und Sozialismus—The History of Ancient Communism and Socialism)*. Some pages in it are reminiscent of the chronicle of our own times.

The social revolt of the masses has always, and everywhere, been the same in its psychological context. Too much is repeated in social life, and it is difficult to come up with entirely new combinations and permutations in this area. There have been many class-communist movements in the past, and they have often taken on religious overtones. Such communist movements were particularly characteristic of the Reformation era. The spontaneous communism of the lower classes of society is one of the very oldest tendencies that occasionally rises up and tries to overturn the individualistic and hierarchical tendencies. Communism is as old as the world; it was at the cradle of human civilization.

Many times in history, the grassroots have risen up and tried to sweep away all the hierarchical and qualitative differences in society and establish a mechanical equality and intermingling. This leveling equation and simplification of society has always been at odds with progressive historical tasks and the state of culture. Periodically in history there have been tides of chaotic darkness that have sought to overturn the social cosmos and its law of development. Such movements have, time and again, been utterly reactionary and have backfired on people. Socialist Lassalle did not consider the peasant wars of the Reformation era as progressive; he considered them reactionary; that is, contrary to the main historical objectives of the time. And in the element of the Russian revolution the same old, reactionary forces are at work: the ancient chaos that lay beneath the thin layers of Russian civilization is stirring within it.

The class struggle, this original sin of human societies, deepened and changed its character in the nineteenth century. In this advanced age, human society has become very materialized, has lost its spiritual center, and man's bestial self-interest, under a civilized guise, has reached extreme tension and expression. The moral character of the bourgeois-capitalist age makes the struggle of the classes for their interests more shameless than in former ages. And this is not because of the fact of industrial development, which in itself is a good thing, but to the spiritual condition of European society. The spiritual poison in this society has gone from the top down, from the ruling classes to the oppressed classes.

The materialist socialism of Marx and others, which concentrated in itself all the poison of bourgeois godlessness, was not limited to a more acute knowledge of the fact of the class struggle—it sanctified this fact and finally subordinated man to class. The means of struggle finally overshadowed the higher purposes of life. Materialist socialism, enslaved by the economism of capitalist societies, denies man and human nature; it recognizes only class-man, only class-collectives. A very special sense of life is born—one perceives only the masses and completely ceases to perceive the individual man. Class is quantity. But the individual is quality. Class struggle, elevated to an "idea," has shut out the qualitative image of man.

In our harsh times, which are tearing away all veils, old-fashioned idealism, which turns its back on the ugly fact of class struggle, on class antagonisms and class stratifications that distort the nature of man, is impossible and naively ridiculous. Class antagonisms and class distortions of the human image play an enormous, though not honorable, role in social life. But our moral judgments and our ideas about the spiritual image of man should not depend on this natural fact.

Human nature may be distorted by man's class status; the shell of man may be defined by class self-interest and class limitations—but the spiritual core of man, the individual human image, is never determined by class, nor does it depend on social environment. And he who denies this, denies man: he commits spiritual manslaughter. It is ungodly and immoral to see the collective substance of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat instead of man with his good and bad qualities. This is how the idea of class kills the idea of man. This murder is theorized in Marxism. In the realm of the Russian revolution, it is committed practically on a scale never before seen in history. The "bourgeois" man and the "socialist" man cease to be human beings for each other, brothers in the One Father of the human race. In this revolutionary element there can be no liberation of man; for man is denied in his original essence. Class liberation, as it were, binds and enslaves man.

II

Ever since the world became Christian and was baptized, it has recognized in its religious consciousness that men are brothers, that we have one Father in heaven. In the Christian world, the master and the slave, in their social shells, cannot recognize each other as wolves; they can in their sin, but they cannot in their faith. In their lucid moments, in their spiritual depths, they recognized each other as brothers in Christ. The Christian world remained a sinful world. It fell, betrayed its God, did evil. In it, people hated one another, and instead of the law of love they executed the law of hatred. But the sin of hatred, malice, and violence was recognized by all Christians as a sin, not as a virtue, not as a way to a higher life. Faith in man as the image and likeness of God remained the faith of Christendom. Man was bad, but his faith was good; the spiritual foundation laid by Christ and His Church was good. But there was a severe crisis in Christian humanity.

The soul of the people and the soul of the nations became sick. Faith became bad; they stopped believing in man as the image and likeness of God, because they stopped believing in God. The very spiritual foundations of life have changed. Socialism is not to blame for this spiritual fall; it happened earlier. Socialism has only slavishly embraced this unbelief in man and in God; and it brings it to an end and gives it universal expression. Disbelief in man has led to the deification of man. The struggle of classes is no longer a socio-economic fact; it has become a spiritual fact; it has spread to the totality of human nature and human life. There is not a corner of the human soul, of human experience and of human creativity to which the struggle of classes has not invaded with its exorbitant pretensions.

The theory of economic materialism prefaced, and corresponded to, a new human reality: an economism that spilled over into the whole field of human life. On such ground, the single law of the good was lost in human society. The "bourgeois good" and the "socialist good" want nothing in common with one another, and there is no higher, unified good above them. And so, there is no longer a direct relation of man to man; there is only a relation of class to class. Revolutionary socialism, as it has now revealed itself in Russia, finally kills the possibility of human brotherhood in principle, in the new faith itself, in the idea. According to this new faith, there is no longer a man, but only a bearer and exponent of an impersonal class substance.

Not only are the "proletarian" and the "bourgeois" not brothers for each other but wolves. The proletarian and the proletarian are not brothers but "comrades," comrades in interest, in misfortune, in the community of material desires. In the socialist faith, the comrade replaced the brother of the

Christian faith. Brothers were united to one another as children of the One Father, by love, by community of spirit. Comrades are united to one another by a community of interests, by hatred of the "bourgeoisie," by the same material basis of life. The comrade in the comrade honors the class, not the individual. Such comradeship kills fundamentally the brotherhood of men, not only the supreme unity of Christian humanity, but also the average unity of civilized humanity.

The French Revolution abused the slogan "liberty, equality and fraternity." But it did not and did not try to realize fraternity. The socialist revolution imagines that it can and must realize fraternity. But it can only realize fraternity, which brings unprecedented division to mankind. Equality is not brotherhood. Fraternity is possible only in Christ, only for Christian humanity—it is the revelation of the religion of love. The idea of brotherhood is stolen from Christianity and is impossible outside of it. The pathos of equality is the pathos of envy, not love.

Movements born of an equalizing passion breathe revenge—they do not want to sacrifice, but to take away. Brotherhood is organic; equality is mechanical. In fraternity all human personality is affirmed, but in the equality of "comrades" all personality disappears in quantitative mass. In the brother the individual triumphs. In the comrade the class triumphs. The comrade substitutes for the man. Brother is a religious category. Citizen is a political, state-legal category. Comrade is a pseudo-religious category. "Citizen" and "brother" have justification. "Comrade" has no justification. Through the idea of comrade, the class kills man. Man to man is not a "comrade;" man to man can only be a citizen or a brother—a citizen in the state, in secular communion, or a brother in the church, in religious communion. Citizenship is connected with right; brotherhood is connected with love. A comrade denies right and denies love; he recognizes only common or opposing interests. In this rapprochement or disunion of interests, man perishes. Man needs either a civil attitude toward him, a recognition of his rights, or a fraternal attitude toward him, an attitude of unbounded love.

III

Russian people need to go through the school of citizenship. In this school they should develop respect for the individual and his rights, and they should realize the dignity of the human being as a creature living in society and the state. Every person and every nation must pass through this stage; it cannot be skipped over. When rebellious slaves claim that the civil state is unnecessary and insufficient for them, that they can go immediately to a higher state, they usually fall into an animal state.

The school of brotherhood develops a love of man for man, a consciousness of spiritual fellowship. It is a religious plan that should not be confused with a political plan. It is absurd and ungodly to transfer the wonders of religious life to political and social life, making the relative absolute. Forced brotherhood is impossible. Brotherhood is the fruit of unconditional love. Brotherly love is the color of spiritual life. Everyone is obliged to be a citizen. Everyone can demand respect for his rights, recognition as a human being, even if there is no love.

Socialist comradeship, in its idea, is a compulsion to virtue, a compulsion to fellowship greater than that which one voluntarily desires. "Comrade" is an unacceptable confusion of "citizen" and "brother," a confusion of state and church society, a substitution of one plan for the other, not this and not that. During these months in Russia, the word "comrade" has acquired a ridiculous and almost shameful meaning. It is associated with the extermination of citizenship and the final denial of the brotherhood of love.

Class in the person of the "comrade" has not only revolted against class, class has revolted against man. The human being is forgotten in the rage of class hatred. But man is a genuine, enduring reality. Man inherits eternity, not class. All class is a temporary, transient phenomenon; it never was and never will be. Man is concrete. Class, on the other hand, is an abstraction. This abstraction unites similar social interests and similar social psyches. But these abstract associations can never form an authentic reality, a real value. The "proletariat" of the socialists is an abstract "idea," not reality. Only heterogeneous groups of workers, often differing both in their interests and in their mental dispositions, exist in reality. The workers themselves are forced to submit to the abstract idea of the proletariat. And to this bloodless abstraction, human sacrifices are offered as an idol.

Nor does class possess the reality that a nation, a state possesses. Class is a very relative entity; it can occupy only the most subordinate position. All "class" refers to the rinds of life, not to the core. The attempt to base the destiny of society on the idea of class, and the fact of class, is a demonic attempt; it seeks to destroy man, nation, state, church, all authentic realities. The class to which supremacy is attributed degrades all values and distorts all evaluations of life. The working class, believing that it is the only chosen class, leaves no place of life; demolishes and cripples everything. There will be no free citizenship in Russia as long as Russians live under the rule of the demonic idea of class. And the same dark class idea will destroy the remnants of brotherhood in the Russian people, as a people of Christianity.

Hypnosis of the class idea distorts socialism itself and gives it a destructive and suicidal character. If socialism is possible and admissible, it must be based on man, not class. A crusade must be preached against class absolutism. In the backwards Russian people, obsessed with a false idea, deceived and raped—a human being, a human image and human dignity must be awakened.

The arrogance and impudence of class is not the dignity of man; it is in them that man perishes. Not only does man not awaken in the masses of workers and peasants, but he is finally forgotten and drowns in the element of dark instincts. Bolshevik collectivism is the consequence of Russia's failure to discover the human element, the human personality and the human image. Proletarian class communism on Russian soil is an experience of pre-human, primordial communism. The revolution unleashed this communist darkness, but did nothing to develop free citizenship in the mass of the people. A new and better life will begin in Russia when the luminous spirit of man overcomes the dark demon of class.

Featured image: "Hungry times in Petrograd," by Ivan Alekseevich Vladimirov, painted in 1919.

