

With regard to nihilism

Noël Demeure — Albert Libertad

Although more than a century old, this exchange of letters between a reader and the better known editor of the weekly l'anarchie has not lost its significance. Of course, today's proponents of nihilism aren't interested in taking back up the old (and furthermore, populist) Russian tradition. And yet it seems to us that there is still a persisting confusion between a negation of the existent as an end in itself, which ends up in a desolate emotional and ideal desert, and a negation of the existent as a prelude to an absolutely other whole to imagine and experiment with. As you will see, Albert Libertad already insisted on the difference between "nothing" and the "creative nothing".

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To Libertad

In your last article *La Terreur Blanche*, in no. 120 of

l'anarchie, I was surprised to read this phrase: "Anarchists get pointed at, get evoked, only as destroyers, lovers of death, nihilists."

Bah! I thought, it's only a slip of the pen, a bad word choice... But here it is, in your article *Terrorisme* in no 148 of *l'anarchie*, I again read: "As to the second point of the legend, we say that anarchists are not nihilists."

This time there were no more doubts, it is clear that you have the same prejudices about nihilists as the crowd has about anarchists.

And yet, you must have read Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, from which I take the following lines:

"Only a vigorous social movement, which would attack the very roots of the evil, could reform the habits and customs of everyday life; and in Russia this movement—this revolt of the individual—took a far more powerful character, and became far more sweeping in its criticisms, than anywhere in Western Europe or America. 'Nihilism' was the name that Turgenev gave it in his epoch-making novel, *Fathers and Sons*.

"The movement is misunderstood in Western Europe. In the press, for example, nihilism is continually confused with terrorism ... This is, however, a mistake. To confuse nihilism with terrorism is as wrong as to confuse a philosophical movement like stoicism or positivism with a political movement such as, for example, republicanism."

Interesting pages about nihilism follow, from which it turns out that their ideal, their life was identical to ours ... as individualist-communists. This is so true that the word nihilist tends to disappear. So it is no longer given to our Russian comrades by the bourgeois press that calls

them simply, and with reason, anarchists.
Now I, and even Kropotkin, could be mistaken. Perhaps
Libertad could show us that the Russian nihilists were
“lovers of death”?

Noël Demeure

[*l'anarchie* #149, February 13, 1908]

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To Noël Demeure,
I did not consider it useless to answer you, but I forgot to.
Excuse me.

When I concluded the phrase that you cite from my article
La Terreur Blanche with the word *nihilist*, it was not a
slip of the pen, nor a badly chosen word. And I didn't
use it in the article *Terrorisme* from a prejudice about
nihilists.

That the word nihilist has been badly applied in Russia
and is used to refer to anarchist, I am led to believe,
considering the lines that you quote from Kropotkin. But
the misuse of a term in a more generalized way, can not
take away its true value, at least until men decide that the
word no longer has the same meaning. Libertarianism in
words seems to me to lead to confusion.

Nihilism derives from *nihil* (nothing). The Petit Larousse
dictionary defines it like this: “Nothingness. Suppression
of everything. Negation of every belief.” The Larive et

Fleury dictionary: “Absence of every belief”.

The La Châtre dictionary, the latest edition, on which some anarchists collaborated, says: “Nothingness. Absence of every belief. Opinion of exaggerated skepticism that denies the existence of everything.”

All three record that a Russian political system is defined as such, but La Châtre adds: “A Russian revolutionary sect that is often wrongly confused with anarchists”.

The Larive et Fleury adds: “Syn. Anarchy” because for its authors the suppression of Authority is nothingness. This isn’t my view. Anarchists are different from nihilists. They are not for *nothing*. They are for *everything*, and it is because they are impeded in manifesting their desire for life that they rebel, at time a bit roughly.

You account for my error by arguing that the word *nihilism* tends to disappear. You are a bit hasty. It disappears because it no longer has anyone to refer to, since it was badly attributed to anarchists. The misuse has hindered its being given a new life.

Now, I don’t want to confuse those who the bourgeoisie labels as *nihilists* with those who brag about being so. The former interest me, the latter, not at all.

And not even you, Noël, are in favor of the skeptics, the disenchanted, the paritisans of the nothing – you are too much an anarchist.

Albert Libertad

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