Marie Louise Berneri (1918-1949): 'Prophecying Utopia'

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When recounting the death of Peter Kropotkin in his influential biography *The Anarchist Prince* (1950), George Woodcock drew on the reflections of Kropotkin's son-in-law, Boris Lebedev. As Woodcock noted, Lebedev's account introduced a numinous note into a sombre narrative; a narrative that otherwise offered a dusk to darkness retelling of Kropotkin's declining mental powers that also presaged the corruption of the Russian Revolution swirling around his isolated house in Dmitrov. Retreating to the veranda in Kropotkin's final moments, Lebedev gazed skyward, and 'on the dark vault of the sky I saw an immense meteor with a long tail and a dazzling green light which lit up the sky […] It seemed to us that there was a mysterious relationship between the falling star and the dying revolutionary.'[1]

Such comments are obviously less important for their veracity than what they suggest about the people whose essence they intend to capture. Just as Woodcock's framing of Kropotkin's demise hints, to anarchist eyes, at the sadness of the missed opportunity offered by the Russian Revolution, Lebedev wanted to present Kropotkin as a force of nature, the Carlylean hero, the divine presence in a debased world. The asterisk introducing this digression in Woodcock's biography highlights, however, that its inclusion was something of an afterthought. Indeed, its insertion may have been influenced by his own preternatural experience, occurring just before the book's publication. Berthed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1949, on the way to a new life in Western Canada and an escape from the drabness of austerity London, he had a dream,

> that night a male voice said to me, as I lay in an empty room, 'Marie Louise is dead.' I dismissed it laughingly next morning. It took us five days to traverse

> Canada by train […] A cable awaited us there. Marie Louise was dead, from heart failure.[2]

In Woodcock's telling, so deep was the shock of Marie Louise Berneri's death that it had a nearly thirty-year impact on his poetic voice. 'My sudden inability to write lyric or elegiac poetry coincided with her death, and I was convinced that the emotional shock was the cause of this block'.[3]

Mature reflection would suggest to him that this literary aphony and Berneri's death were, indeed, coincidences, but Woodcock's comments point, like Lebedev's, to the importance of the individual they strove to encapsulate. In itself this highlights the unjustly marginal position that Berneri has tended to occupy in histories of anarchism, but this is a position that was the product of her premature death, from an infection following childbirth, at the age of thirty-one. It was a tragedy that rippled through the British anarchist movement in both intellectual and personal ways. Berneri was, as Nicholas Walter and Heiner Becker commented, 'the emotional and intellectual centre of the group' that oversaw the re-emergence of anarchism in Britain through the newspapers *Spain and the World* and its successor *War Commentary*, as well as being an 'effective public speaker, paper-seller, and meeting organiser'.[4]

Yet, as Walter and Becker were aware, Berneri was more than an efficient organiser. She was, as David Goodway notes, possessed of an 'intellectual adventurousness' that made her not simply a powerful propagandist, but a thinker open to contemporary intellectual innovations.[5] A case in point is her treatment of the work of Wilhelm Reich in Woodcock's ephemeral periodical *Now*, where she bemoaned the fact that while revolutionaries were happy to discourse on 'Kropotkin's sociological theories', the 'problem of sexuality' remained unexplored. This was an issue, she argued, that could not be left to the palliative

efforts of the welfare state – to the tweakings of 'family allowances, maternity benefits or old age pensions' – or postponed, as millenarianist anarchists were prone to do, 'to resolve it in terms of insurrection, of overthrow of the ruling class and the power of the State.' Discussing the work of Freud and the pioneering anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, Berneri followed Reich in tracing a direct line between a sexual repression sanctioned by the controlling forces of the state and moral convention, and the 'outbursts of public sadism' that had made the twentieth-century's history particularly brutal. To Berneri's mind, embellishing Reich's proposals, all of this reinforced the necessity of meaningful social liberation that also emancipated desire and sexual expression. Where Reich alighted upon 'labour management committees' in the United States as crucibles of this freedom, Berneri looked instead to collective-building in the Spanish Revolution, insisting that only complete liberation from capitalism would make this independence resilient in the face of inevitable statist challenges. 'Man is only anti-social, submissive, cruel or masochistic', she concluded, 'because he lacked the freedom to develop his natural instincts'. Anarchism promised a different experience.[6]Enthusiasm for eccentric thinkers such as Reich – Diva Agostinelli once observed that the first time she met Paul Goodman he was on the floor attempting to demonstrate a Reichian orgasm[7] – may seem today like faddishness, but it highlights both an intellectual boldness in anarchist politics in these quiet years, and Berneri's pioneering commitment to this project. As Goodman and Alex Comfort stole the limelight for stressing how essential questions of sexuality were to human liberation, Berneri, it tends to be forgotten, was there too, in a dimly lit upstage that has only got darker as she has receded into history. At the same time, while intellectuals like Goodman and Comfort tended to have their eyes fixed on the empyrean questions of art and culture, Berneri devoted considerable energy to offering an anarchist critique of contemporary political developments. The articles comprising *Neither East Nor West: Selected Writings 1939-1948* (1988), all originally

appearing in *War Commentary* and *Freedom*, highlight an effort to adapt to the rapidly changing geopolitical climate of the 1940s, while challenging both British and American imperialism *and* the barbarities of fascism and Soviet communism that constituted the 'accumulated lunacy of the whole world'.[8] Forgotten also are her efforts to expose the realities of life in the Soviet Union, when many on the left remained captivated by the alternative it offered. It was far from a socialist utopia, she objected, in the Freedom pamphlet *Workers in Stalin's Russia* (1944), adding that if we understand 'socialist to mean a country where inequality has been abolished and where there is economic and political freedom one can say […] that Russia is usurping its title and usurping the reputation attached to its name'.[9]

Berneri was well placed to argue that the USSR was no utopia, not only because of her firm conviction of what socialism should truly look like, but also because of her knowledge of utopianism. In *Journey through Utopia*, appearing posthumously in 1950, Berneri was the guide on a comprehensive tour of the history of utopian thinking from Plato to Huxley. Arguing that, in an era defined by the 'compromises' of modern democracy and the ascendancy of the 'practical men' of technocratic politics, reacquaintance with the radicalism of utopianism was a tonic, she nevertheless discerned a dual current in the history of utopias. On one side there was the unedifying 'authoritarian approach', where 'builders of utopias claimed to give freedom to the people', but failed to recognise that their procrustean thinking denied the liberty it promised in forcing the individual to 'follow a code of laws of moral of behaviour artificially created' or where peaceful uniformity was 'maintained by a strong national State'. More useful, but less common, were those utopias that did not become a 'lifeless machine applied to living matter'. Where, in contrast, the focus was on the liberation of thought, in sketching 'daring, unorthodox ideas', and where its imaginary denizens could 'live, because we have not been catalogued and directed, but left to arrange

our lives as we think fit'. Writing these words as fascism entered its paroxysmal death throes in Germany, and as the Soviet Union reached the apogee of its power, Berneri must have thought this renewed contact with the utopian tradition a crucial dissent against the forces of dystopia clouding the world stage. It would be her final protest.[10]

As the decades passed and the shock of Berneri's death became less immediate, Woodcock found himself drawn again to her memory and example. His creative voice had returned too. Memorialising her in verse, he reflected that where time had tyrannised his body, 'now […] old,/false-toothed and almost bald/and ruby-nosed from drink', Berneri would always remain fixed, 'those thirty years of beauty/and incandescent spirit' immune from the corrosions of age. He reflected too on the importance of her work as a catalyst for the British anarchist movement in its lean years, and the clarity and conviction of her intellectual labour for the cause. 'Prophecying Utopia', and 'filling the hearts of/those who watch you with/rage and sweetness', he lamented that for all her efforts, while the material bounty of utopian fantasy 'has arrived', the freedom that they had imagined, had not. But, like any good utopian, Woodcock concluded that:

We are still
hoping for liberation
but do not expect it.[11]

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[1] George Woodcock, *The Anarchist Prince: A Biographical Study of Peter Kropotkin* (New York, 1971), 433.

[2] George Woodcock, *Letter to the Past: An Autobiography* (Don Mills, ON, 1982), 322.

[3] George Woodcock, *Beyond the Blue Mountains: An Autobiography* (Markham, ON, 1987), 270.

[4] Nicholas Walter & Heiner Becker, 'Marie Louise Berneri, 1918-1949' in *Freedom: A Hundred Years* (London, 1986), 25.

[5] David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow: Left-Libertarian Thought and British Writers from Willian Morris to Colin War* (Liverpool, 2006), 127.

[6] M.L. Berneri, 'Sexuality and Freedom' in *NOW 5* (No date [1945]), 54-60 (54, 60).

[7] Andrew Cornell, *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the 20th Century* (Oakland, 2016), 188.

[8] Marie-Louise Berneri, *Neither East Nor West: Selected Writings 1939-1948* (London, 1988), 110.

[9] M.L. Berneri, *Workers in Stalin's Russia* (London, 1944), 71.

[10] Marie Louise Berneri, *Journey through Utopia* (London, 1982), 1, 3, 6, 255.

[11] George Woodcock, *Collected Poems* (Victoria, BC, 1983), 146, 147, 148.