

Communality as revolution: Gustav Landauer's notion of instant socialism

1.

In Bertolt Brecht's rendition of the poet being shown around in the underworld, he is addressed by one of his late colleagues in a frightening way: "...aus der dunkelsten Ecke / Kam ein Ruf
»Du, wissen sie auch / Deine Verse auswendig? Und die sie
wissen / Werden sie der Verfolgung entrinnen?«" ("...from the
darkest corner / Came a cry: »Hey you, do they actually know /
Your verses by heart? And those who do know them / Will they
escape the persecution?«") The tour guide through Hades, Dante himself, puts this desperate cry in context: „Das / Sind
die Vergessenen«, sagte Dante leise / »Ihnen wurden nicht nur
die Körper, auch die Werke vernichtet.«" (»Those / Are the
forgotten ones,« Dante said quietly. / »In their case, not only
their bodies, their works too were destroyed.« / The laughter
broke off. No one dared look over. The newcomer / Had turned
pale. ")

The work of Gustav Landauer could plausibly be located somewhere near “that corner”. No doubt his body was destroyed, in the all too familiar proto-fashist fashion by the free corps soldiers, who ended the short lived Munich council republic in May 1919. Landauer had played a prominent role in the preceding revolution and the anarchist administration itself, despite the fact that he was highly sceptic of its prospects and timeliness. His early death at the age of 50 ended his career as a writer, journalist, editor, translator, literary critic, philosopher and activist. It also, in a strange way, overshadowed the content of his rich theoretical writings. The very dim reception of Landauer consists mainly of high toned hagiographic descriptions of the man and the martyr, which often go as far as to assimilate the Jewish intellectual in a peculiar way to the figure of Christ and distracts even those, who do come across Landauer, from engaging with his theoretical position.

Landauer's writings, albeit not literally destroyed, were highly incongruous with the main lines of reception and canonisation. As a libertarian leftist account, decidedly anti-Marxist, his theory was inopportune in both camps of cold war



German publishing culture.¹ Furthermore, Landauer, like his contemporaries Franz Rosenzweig and Margarete Susman, drew on motives and metaphors embedded in a tradition of jewish philosophy in the German-speaking diaspora, which isn't easily translated and whose readers, too, mostly didn't escape persecution.

Landauer lived exactly the span of the German Empire, from 1871 to 1919, and his main productivity is contemporaneous with Wilhelmism. He wrote two novels and a few short stories, a treatise on Friedrich Mauthners sceptical philosophy of language, an infinite amount of talks and pamphlets, a two-volume work on Shakespeare and two book-length essays, one entitled "Aufruf zum Sozialismus" ("Call to Socialism"), which mostly consists of a furious critique of Marx, or rather the "vulgar Marxism" of his environment. The other, called "The Revolution" is a less polemical, bird's-eye

1 Bezeichnenderweise liest man in der Einleitung eines vereinzelten Landauer-Auswahlbändchens, das in der DDR erschien, von seinem bedeutenswerten, romantisch-bourgeoisen Schwärmergeist, der ihm die Umsicht in die marxistische Wissenschaft verhinderte, während es im Klappdeckel einer ESSAY-SAMMUNG MIT INTELLIGENTEM GUTWÜLFCHEN, die in der Bundesrepublik erschien, lapidar heißt: „Nicht aufgenommen wurden indessen Aufsätze, die in erster Linie Tagesereignissen bzw. politischen Organisationstragern und Positionsbestimmungen innerhalb der Arbeiterbewegung verhaftet sind und allein noch sozialgeschichtliches Interesse beanspruchen.“

account of a possible revolutionary philosophy of history. As editor and main author of the leading anarchist journal of the time, entitled "Der Sozialist", Landauer furthermore proved to be an excellent observer of his time – predicting, for example as early as 1911 not only the impending First World War, but also the behaviour of the SPD who succumbed to nationalism by declaring a truce in class struggle ("Burgfriedenspolitik").

At the outset of the Russian October revolution, while his communist comrades celebrated being in tune AH:? with world history, he held he would rather live under Napoleon than the dictatorship of the proletariat. And during WW I he claimed insistently that only the creation of a European union with supranational control of armaments could secure peace.

The most fascinating feature of his thought, though (if you ask me), is his theory of revolution. Landauer is diametrically opposed to any idea of historical progress. His theory does not only encompass the conditions for a possible successful revolution, but also those for its failure or indefinite deferral.

2.

So while I am quite obviously promoting that one should read Landauer in general and in all his facets, I want to focus on the

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place of new forms of sociality within his theory in the following.

Notably, Landauer actually shared a very strong version of the perspective this conference attempts to question, the narrative of modernity as a process of individualistic isolation.

The loss of social bonds depicted against the background of idealized Middle Ages (following Kropotkin, whose "Mutual Aid" Landauer translated into German), takes a different shape for Landauer, though it is not the loss of national belonging, or the dissolution of the family (if only...), that mark isolation in his view, but the fact that fixed organisational structures, abstract markets and sovereign states provide the "glue" for social coexistence, whereas the free and fluid associations, corporations, ordains, guilds, parishes which created the multilayered web of belonging and direct personal relations that are supposed to have structured medieval society have disappeared or lost all meaning. He calls those modern forces "means of coercion", contrasting them with his key notion of "spirit" (Geist). Spirit is the normative principle that integrates a decentral, non-national, not formally organised, vivid society along the lines of mutual aid and free association.

He construes his version of the doom of mutualism against him

Even when leaving aside the historical pin-pointing, "spirit" in Landauers theory might at first glance seem like the placeholder of exactly that desideratum that in fact no libertarian or anarchist theory can supply. What, in the absence of regulation and governing institutions, will guarantee society's cohesion? What prevents chaos and war of all against all? You can't just say "Oh, spirit will do the trick" – it might as well not.



Because: also the
society...

And in some sense this is exactly Landauer's point, and the very insight, that leads him to bet on new forms of sociality as the only chance for radical social transformation. His basic claim is that the only way to radically change social reality is via the transformation of individual life forms in little collectives or affinity groups. And while he is so ostentatively ~~more~~ skeptical regarding the prospects of success ^{fully} of realising his utopias, he comes to the striking conclusion that socialism is possible, anytime, anywhere, where some people, who seriously want it, get together.

⑥ I am going to lay this out in something like two and a half steps. First I want to go back to Landauer's skepticism concerning the ~~promise~~ ^{prospect} of revolution. I keep this part ~~quite~~ ^{very} short, because you will find his diagnosis strangely

I think

Left: 'most of your life
or heard about
or consider
Commune genre'

contemporary to our present day's "left melancholia" (W. Brown). But it's worth bearing in mind that it was formulated ~~not~~ on the basis of disappointing and paralysing experiences ^{20th century} but in a fierce (and sometimes crude) anarchist opposition to the (admittedly also more often than not crudely) optimistic marxist ideology of his days – before Russian and November Revolution.

Then

Via a side-glance on Landauer's passion for the poetical and philosophical criticism of language of his time, I'll move on to a more palpable definition of the concept of spirit which, according to Landauer, is required for any desirable revolution. With this conceptual background I get to the actually fascinating bit, Landauer's programmatic suggestions for socialist strategy, which all revolve around the creation of utopian forms of sociality.

3. So. Pessimism about revolution:

- anti-progress

If there was any belief that all members of the Wilhelmian society shared, it was the one in progress. However they imagined the growth or the betterment, no one denied its possibility. Landauer, on the contrary, held a very different

philosophy of history, assuming fluctuations and variations over very broad lengths of time: even if all his ideas about a free anarchistic society worked out, he would only regard them as one of the peaks or rather plateaus in world history and not ~~as~~ its climactic end. And "world history" is aptly used here, because Landauer formulated a strongly anti-imperialistic and anti-colonial perspective, constantly marginalising and decentering northwestern "achievements" while at the same time deconstructing the idea of strictly separate cultures – or even races.

– Anti-necessity

As a corollary to this, the narrower notion of a necessary course of historical development, as in the theory of historical materialism, seemed obnoxious to Landauer. Not only did he consider the idea of a dialectical progress in class struggle simply wrong – he maintained that the workers, whom he anyway didn't see as a separate unified class, would easily be pacified by a capitalist economy which would compensate for higher wages by rise in cost – moreover, he thought that this deterministic view of history – "Die Wissenschaft von der in der Vergangenheit wohlgebetteten Zukunft" ("the science of future being safely tucked up in the past") – would suffocate all

(as he put it)

Landauer spells
this out as follows
in quote

"The miracle in which the superstition ^{the miracle} of whichever denomination believes, which materialism and mechanism assume, that the great will come without effort and that fully grown socialism will

arise from the big miscarriage of capitalism rather than the emerging childhood of socialism itself. —

revolutionary initiative towards social transformation and project hopes to the external event of a dramatic change.

„Das Wunder, an das der Aberglaube, wie er sich auch nenne, glaubt, das Wunder, das Materialismus und Mechanismus annehmen, dass das große ohne große Anstrengung komme und dass der ausgewachsene Sozialismus nicht aus den Kindheitsanfängen des Sozialismus, sondern aus der Riesenmissgeburt des Kapitalismus erwachse, dieses Wunder kommt nicht, und bald werden jetzt die Menschen den Glauben daran nicht mehr kennen.“²

This miracle will not happen, and soon may the people von 'even know the believe in it anymore.'

unqual

Or, in another of his sharp, imaginative formulations: It's not enough to press one's ear against the telephone of time, in and constant anticipation to finally hear a voice say „Revolution here, to whom am I speaking?“³

— anti-event

The deepest divide between Landauer and the radical mainstream concerned the notion and nature of revolution itself. Landauer did not think that one should see revolution as a singular event, or at all as an event. He had only scorn for the idea of a sudden and dramatic change of political scenerie:

„...dann [...] kommt die große Revolution, das furchtbare Chaos, und wenn sich die Wolken verzogen haben, wird der Sozialismus da sein. Ganz wie auf der Wagnerbühne, wo

2 Landauer, Beginnen, S.87f

3 Gustav Landauer, Vortragszyklus zur Geschichte der deutschen Literatur, S. 64-68 in: Landauer, Z&G, S. 65

...then, the great revolution will appear, the tremendous chaos, and when the clouds have moved, socialism will be in place, just like on the Wagner's stage.

*His polemics are not informed
Sects!*

*zwischen zwei total verschiedenen Szenenbildern sich
schleierhaftes Gewölk herabsenkt.“⁴*

He did strongly disapprove of heroism and to some extent also of violence, but his main concern, which he mostly derived from his extensive studies of the French Revolution (he edited a collection of letters from ordinary people during the French Revolution, a volume that became a standard reference for historical research and also made its way to the bookshelf of Franz Kafka), was with the futility of such uprisings. Sudden insurrections in his view, were unable to establish new forms of life which sustained freedom. And he saw this not only – like Hannah Arendt – as the neglect of revolutionaries to build and uphold the right institutions, but as an insufficiency inherent to drastic, momentous changes which cannot rely on preceding structures, experiences and practices. A world unfamiliar with freedom simply lacks the resources to establish it. Landauer therefore resolves revolution in a steady, patient and attentive process: „Die Umwandlung der Gesellschaft kann nur in Liebe, in Arbeit, in Stille kommen.“⁵ („The transformation of society can only arrive in love, in labour, in quiet.“) In Landauer's rich

4 Landauer, Beginnen, S.144f

5 Gustav Landauer, Wir brauchen keine Parteiherrschaft, S. 257-263 in: Wiesel, Wand, S. 259

and detailed description of his contemporaneous society, one looks almost in vain for traces of revolutionary footholds, which accounts for his deep scepticism in that matter: „Hier die Erklärung, warum ich an keinerlei Kommen von irgendeinem Sozialismus im entferntesten glaube, ehe nicht ein neuer, gewaltiger, umgestaltender Geist über die Menschen gekommen ist.“⁶

„So there's the explanation why

I do not in the least believe in

any coming of whichever socialism

before a new, overruled
and was forming

spirit has it
come over the
people.

4. *So there we are again with the "spirit" as the ominous chiffre for what keeps us from achieving change. To clarify Landauer's characteristic take on this phenomena, a mini-excursion ^{into} via his theory of language proves helpful. In collaboration with the philosopher of language Fritz Mauthner, Landauer had developed a critical analysis of language, which radically questions its ability to represent reality, because concepts "freeze" and "gloss over" the processuality and relationality of most phenomena (this is an idea very much in the air at the time, obviously there is a connection to Nietzsche and his "illusions of grammar", more closely related is Hofmannsthal's famous letter which combines the deep mistrust in language's*

6 Landauer, Beginnen, S.162

adequacy to its epistemic and expressive tasks with the longing for other, mystical modes of communication). Interested in the practical uses of this view, Landauer developed a routine of deconstructing most political concepts, questioning their taken-for-grantedness and opening them to contingency. This particular version of liquefaction, too, consists in reducing concepts to their underlying relations, in this case most prominently not the commodity to the relations of production but the state to relations of power and recognition. (according to L.) What the reified terms cover up is the fact that all formations of power depend on acts of conformity (la Boetie). Landauers conclusion is thus that the conditions are always only our conduct – die „Verhältnisse sind, wie wir uns zueinander verhalten.“ Applied to the state: „The state is a condition, a relation between people. It is a way in which people relate to and treat each other; and one destroys it by forming other relations, by treating each other differently.“ It is this „other“ way of relating to each other that Landauer refers to with his concept of spirit. Spirit, again, is a particular configuration of relations between people, namely relations that have not crystallized into alienating institutions which exercise external coercion, but which are guided by practices, associations and

And this force of the spirit will take the place
of the brutal whip. This is what the word,
which I use so rarely - and only when I can be sure
that its positive content doesn't get misrecognised
means to me: **Anarchy.**"

relations that are freely chosen and upheld. It is the force of
this particular relationality upon which Landauer sets his
hopes:

„Und diese Gewalt des Geistes wird an die Stelle der
brutalen Fuchtel treten. Das eben bedeutet mir das Wort, das
ich so selten, aber doch manchmal anwende, wo ich nur
sicher bin, dass man seinen positiven Gehalt nicht verkennt:
Anarchie.“⁷

Now, we're getting to the point in the notes

5.

Now of course the pressing question is: How does one enter
this mode? How does one create different conditions?

Landauer's answer is striking: "Stupid: just like that."

The only way to socialism, in Landauer's view, consists in
socialism, if on another level. According to him the
revolutionary imperative consists in using the whole range of
possibilities at any given point, and in his judgment hardly any
of the "radicals" or "revolutionaries" made the slightest
attempts at this kind of realisation of their goals. Socialism as a
form of life, according to Landauer, presupposes nothing more
than the association with a few like-minded spirits.

Dadurch, dass Landauer die Gesellschaftsordnung auf ihre

Having reduced society to its basic components -

⁷ Landauer, Beginnen, S.178 the relations between and the

conduct of people - 13

Landauer has singled out those microstructures as the
ones, from which any alternative would

have to start.

He claims:

To achieve

"~~For~~ decency in the relations of economy, of social life, but the genders and of education, you don't need the masses at first but, because change won't begin any other way, just comrades, collectives,

collectives/

→ So it's not the individual, but small affinity groups (Bezugsgruppen) which sum out to be the subject of revolution.

kleinsten Einheiten zurückgeführt hat – die Beziehungen

zwischen den Menschen -, sind es nun auch solche ~~comrades~~ (Socialist federation)

Mikrokosmen, in denen eine Alternative ansetzen muss.

(1911)

Bund

(Socialist federation)

comrades, not confession

cond. of participation:

„Für Anstand in den Beziehungen der Wirtschaft, des Gemeinlebens, der Geschlechter und der Erziehung brauchst du, da ein Anfang anders nicht kommt, vorerst nicht die breiten Massen, sondern nur Gefährten.“⁸

communes / Siedlungen

Even our enemies, Landauer holds, had "holy respect" for us, if

only we used the freedom that we already have.

Alle Agitation und alle Appelle Landauers zielen darauf ab von

eben jenem „Maß an Freiheit“ das bereits gegeben ist,

Gebrauch zu machen. Nur in dieser schrittweisen, im Hier und already given.

Jetzt beginnenden Verwirklichung des Sozialismus sieht er

einen möglichen Weg zum gesellschaftlichen Wandel.

To give credit to his critique of revolution, Landauer hat somit das Verhältnis von Revolution und Sozialismus umgekehrt, um zur Verwirklichung zu kommen

socialism. As he puts it in one of his pamphlets

und seiner eigenen Revolutionskritik Rechnung zu tragen. In

einem seiner Flugblätter propagiert er dies folgendermaßen:

„Wir sagen: umgekehrt wird ein Schuh daraus! Wir warten nicht auf die Revolution, damit dann der Sozialismus beginne; sondern wir fangen an, den Sozialismus zur Wirklichkeit zu machen, damit

8 Landauer, Beginnen, S.88

We are not waiting for the revolution for socialism¹⁴ to happen, but we start to realise socialism in order to bring about the great change.

dadurch der große Umschwung komme.“ B92

One of the greatest obstacles to revolution, according to

Landauer, consists in the “magical demarcation” that we draw between present and future, thereby projecting our desires for change as something “yet-to-come”. But, his reasoning goes, the path will never precede the going, and freedom can never be created, it can only be practiced.

As such laboratories for freedom Landauer envisaged small cells of people who decide to live in collective solidarity, striving for self-sufficiency and association with other such groups – paradigmatically in land communes, but other formations are imaginable too. He sought to connect those cells in his “Bund” – “socialist union”.⁹

- 9 Im Frühsommer 1908 hatte Landauer vor der „Agitationskommission“ der „Anarchisten Berlins und Umgebung“ einen programmatischen Vortrag gehalten und zur Diskussion in den „Zwölf Artikeln des Sozialistischen Bundes“ zusammengefasst. Das vom Bund angestrebte Ziel war eine „Ordnung durch Bünde der Freiwilligkeit“, zu denen sich alle arbeitenden Menschen nach Belieben zusammenschließen sollten. Solange „Grund und Boden nicht durch andere Mittel als den Kauf in die Hände der Sozialisten“ käme, beständen die Aufgaben der Mitglieder der einzelnen Gruppen in Propaganda, Sammlung und der Pionierarbeit in Siedlungen auf dem Land, auf denen exemplarisch „Gerechtigkeit“ und „freudige Arbeit“ vorgelebt werden sollten.

Was wir Sozialismus nennen, ist freudiges Leben in gerechter Wirtschaft. Die Menschen wissen heute nicht, erleben es nicht mit dem wahrhaften Wissen des Dabeiseins und Erfassens, mit dem Wissen, das Neid und Lust und Nachahmung mit sich führt, was das ist: freudiges, schönes

15

** the only way to create a different future is making a difference in the present. The right spirit thus has very robust material conditions, it is an effect of sustaining different relations. Freedom is not a metaphysical precondition of change, but rather its resonance or self-enforcing sedimentation.*

It of course remains open, whether the exemplarily

Nicht durch ein Bekenntnis qualifiziert man sich zur Mitgliedschaft, sondern durch einen praktischen Zusammenschluß. „>Wie wird man Mitglied des Sozialistischen Bundes?<< Man suche sich in seinem weiten Kreise die Gleichgearteten und schließe sich mit ihnen zur Gruppe zusammen.“ Landauer ist denn auch der Überzeugung, daß sich eine Gemeinschaft nicht über eine geteilte philosophische oder weltanschauliche Übereinstimmung

Leben. Wir müssen es ihnen zeigen. Wir wollen nach Möglichkeit aus dem Kapitalismus austreten; wir wollen sozialistische Gehöfte, sozialistische Dörfer gründen; wir wollen Land- und Industriearbeit vereinigen; wir wollen, so weit es geht, und es wird immer besser gehen wenn wir nur erst beginnen, alle unsere Bedürfnisse selbst herstellen und bald auf unserem neuen, dem sozialen Markte tauschen und den kapitalistischen vermeiden. Wir wollen Vorausgehende sein, wir wollen uns in Bewegung setzen und durch unsere Bewegung wollen wir die Massen bewegen.“

Direkt im Anschluss an die Sitzung meldeten sich die ersten AnwärterInnen auf Mitgliedschaft und in den nächsten Jahren bilden sich ungefähr 20 Lokalgruppen, darunter auch zwei, von Landauers Geliebten Margarete Faas-Hardegger angeregte, in der Schweiz sowie eine notorisch skandalträchtige um Erich Mühsam in München. Zu seinen besten Zeiten zählte der Bund ungefähr 1000 Mitglieder. Unter den Berliner Gruppen ragte als intellektuelles Zentrum die um Martin Buber, Gustav Landauer und Erich Gutkind heraus. Der neu herausgegebene >Sozialist<, den Margarete Faas-Hardegger unter dem Pseudonym „Mark Harda“ in Bern redaktionell betreute, wurde zum Sprachrohr und zur Diskussionsplattform des Bundes. Ab der Marokkokrise 1911 richtet sich die Aktivität des Bundes auch gegen den drohenden Krieg, eine Haltung, die die Organisation mit jahrelangen Rechtsstreitigkeiten, Bespitzelung und Ohnmacht zu öffentlichem Wirken bezahlen muss.

expand
will to the
extent of
transforming
the whole
society, but
what Landauer
does assume
is that they
will hand over
the right
spirit, the
bundle of
norms, the
practical
knowledge,
which form
the necessary
condition
for a "good"
revolution.

To return to my slightly overdramatized beginning:
Revolution is precarious. It needs to be
learned by heart in everyday life, and it is most
likely to survive in those actual experiments with
new forms of life.