

Ervin Batthyány

Count Ervin Batthyány (1877-1945) was well-known in the upper circles of Hungarian society. Following his school years in Budapest, he studied at London and Cambridge universities. He was influenced in this direction by reading such authors as Edward Carpenter, William Morris, Lev Tolstoy and Piotr Kropotkin. He was most sensitive to Kropotkin's communist anarchism, besides Morris's „ideal free communism”.

In 1904, he set out the anarchist viewpoint at one of the debates of the Social Science Society concerning the direction of social development. According to his definition, „By anarchism - freedom from rule - we must understand a social order based purely upon the free, fraternal cooperation of the people, with no external power or violence. In place of the system of rule based upon violence, which wins expression in the coercive institutions of property, law and the state, the forms of anarchist society come into existence through the solidarity concealed in human nature and through the freedom, equality and voluntary cooperation that flow from it”.¹

Batthyány's key concepts were equality, fraternity, solidarity and natural needs. He confronted anarchism, which he saw as the source of social harmony in individuals, with theocracy. According to the new moral worldview, Batthyány explained, social harmony could not arise through regulation by higher authorities, but only from the nature of the people themselves, from the people's unboundedly free manifestations of life, from their ever changing adaptations to their needs. Batthyány's goal was the development of the individual, for he saw the genuine nature of man as being concealed in solidarity - which is limited by power systems based on violence and by theocratic prejudices. For him anarchism became not a historical, but universal phenomenon, and ruling forms were transitional.

Batthyány considered anarchism's most effective weapon to be the withdrawal *en masse* of solidarity-based communities from the influence of the state and capitalism. Consciousness of solidarity and the role of the new moral worldview were crucial, for any movement not based on changing the consciousness of the people would only recreate the theocratic relations of the old society. On the basis of the ethos of solidarity, Batthyány rejected the "efforts of authoritarian socialism", seeing a contradiction between its community aims and statist means. At the same time, he stated that the world of anarchy cannot be prescribed in advance or hardened into dogma, for this goes against the essence of anarchism. To fix the details would increase the danger of their realization through violence; in a society without rule, associations based upon common inclinations, interests or occupation, or upon territory come into being by their own means, without a prior plan. Batthyány argued that anyone who doubts this doubts human nature itself.

Batthyány tried to implement his ideas in social practice. In 1905, he succeeded in founding a reformist school on his estate in Western Hungary. He had in mind the popular enlightenment movement of the Russian university students during the 1870s - the idea of „going among the people”: he wanted to establish clubrooms, people's libraries and schools from which the focal points of class war and revolution can develop.

In Batthyány's school, not only the education, but also the textbooks and the clothes were provided free of charge. The teaching sought to develop independent thinking, practical knowledge and moral sense, and alongside the theoretical topics study trips were introduced with a view to deepening the pupils' knowledge of nature. Batthyány laboured on expanding the school, on developing a system for giving medical, legal and economic advice, and on establishing a press.

¹ Társadalomtudományi Társaság [Social Science Society]: *A társadalmi fejlődés iránya* [The Direction of Social Development] Budapest, 1904, p. 23.

For Batthyány, anarchism was the demand for the cessation of rule. It was the demand that everyone arrange his life according to his own wishes, his own individual needs and judgement; and that harmony and balance arising from the solidarity, voluntary agreement and association of free individuals replace the rule of law and violence. He argued that socialism without anarchism would mean „hopeless slavery, the divine right of officialdom to rule”. He saw the embryonic form of this in independent interest organizations based on free agreement among the workers. Though the final goal is served indirectly by the economic strengthening, the education and the political struggle of the working class, as means, a way of preparing for social revolution.

Batthyány hoped that anarchist ideology would thus be workable among the mass of the workers. The count's activities peaked around the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century: he wrote articles for the paper *Világszabadság* (World Freedom), and for the journal *A Jövő* (The Future), and he also supported both of these papers financially. His next initiative - the founding, with his money and under his direction, of *Testvériség* (Fraternity) - proved more serious but equally short-lived. Though he expected the creation of anarchy to come from the workers - we must not forget the motto, repeated as a refrain: „The liberation of the working class can be the work only of the workers themselves” -, he never urged only trade-based organization of the workers, but rather spoke in the name of natural law and human justice.

Batthyány established his second paper, *Társadalmi Forradalom* (Social Revolution) in 1907. This paper became the longest lasting and, alongside *Állam Nélkül* (Without State) the most significant organ of anarchism in Hungary. The paper's goal, among others, was to proclaim the need for direct economic and social action, for strikes and boycotts, for the general strike and for anti-militarist propaganda.

In the spring of 1907, Batthyány travelled to London for a lengthy period, and later he passed the editorship of *Társadalmi Forradalom* to the Budapest Group of Revolutionary Socialists, which was formed for the purpose. With this, Count Ervin Batthyány essentially backed out of the movement in Hungary. But at bottom he became disillusioned. He was not satisfied with the relatively moderate line taken by *Társadalmi Forradalom*, but he maintained his financial support for the paper until the end of 1908, thus guaranteeing its fortnightly publication. From 1910 onwards, he settled finally in England. During the First World War he was a pacifist and he maintained links with the anarchists in London, but later he withdrew from politics. During the final years of his life he lived in Lyme Regis, enjoying the sea view and the nearby oak forests, and in Stroud, where he found solitude and seclusion. He died from heart failure in Stroud on 9th June 1945.

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