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Non-Governmental Society

Edward Carpenter

1917

Most people agree nowadays in the view that the growth of bureaucracy and officialism in the modern State is a serious evil, and that the extension of Government interference and the multiplication of Laws are a great danger. We all know that the institution of the Law and the Courts actually creates and gives rise to huge masses of evil – bribery, blackmail, perjury, spying and lying, wrongful accusation, useless and deliberate suffering and cruelty; that it publicly sanctions and organises violence, even in extreme forms; that it quite directly and deliberately supports vast and obvious wrongs in Society – as for instance land-monopoly; that it is absurd and self-contradictory in much of its theory and practice; that (as Herbert Spencer so frequently insists) it paralyses the folk that submit or trust to it; and finally that it is to-day for the most part so antiquated and out of date that (even if this were thought desirable) it might well seem impracticable to patch it up for real human use.

Yet in these cases – though we admit that the things are evil – our defence usually is that they carry some compensations with them, and that anyhow they are *necessary* evils, which we cannot

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dispense with, and without which disorder, violence and social disruption would ensue.

It may be worth while to consider this defence more closely; for curiously enough the history of nations and peoples is, on the whole, to contrary effect. Not only have all the early tribes of the world got on and cohered together in order and social amity without any rigid and ponderous system of laws; but even among the peasant peoples of to-day — like the Irish or the Swedes or the Swiss or the Chinese — where they are still living in moderately primitive conditions, we find the same thing. Governmental law and its operations and institutions occupy but a very small part in their lives. It is true that Custom is strong among all primitive folk, no doubt as a very necessary backbone or framework to their society; but Custom is a very different thing from Law. It is law in its inception — when it is yet in a tentative, rudimentary condition; and however harsh, rigid, or senseless the customs of many savage tribes may be, they are yet easier to alter than when they have become ossified into written forms, with their huge weight of age and ceremony, and the authority of armed men to enforce them.¹

That human societies can subsist without a considerable amount of Custom we may well doubt; but that they can subsist and maintain themselves in good order and vitality without written law and its institutions there is no reason at all to doubt. And when Custom, among a reasonable and moderately advanced people, leaving behind the barbarities of the savage age, takes on a gentler form, and while exercising considerable pressure on individuals is itself fairly plastic and adaptable to the general movements of society — we seem to see in such pressure a force as far superior to Law as life itself is superior to mere mechanism. A vast amount of our social

¹ See below, p. go Spencer and Gillen, in their late book *The Northern Tribes of Australia*, say that there are no chiefs even or headmen among these people; but the old men constitute an informal council, which punishes “crime”, and the breaking of marriage rules, organises the ceremonies, and from time to time inaugurates reforms.

life to-day in all departments of its activity is ruled by Custom, and some of these customs, like those of “society” and fashion, have a very powerful sway. There is no law, for instance, for the recovery of betting debts, yet their non-payment is extremely rare.

Of course, accustomed as we are to “call the policeman” on every emergency, we find it hard to imagine life without this institution; and our life being largely founded on it, it is so far necessary, and its removal would cause dislocation. That is, since without the police the present spoliation of the poor would not be possible, and the enormous existing inequalities of wealth and poverty could never have been heaped up — without them the society founded on these artificial inequalities could not well be maintained.² But to say that because a certain institution is necessary to build up and retain society in a certain abnormal and unnatural form, therefore society cannot exist without that institution, is the same as to say that because to a Chinese woman of rank foot-bandages are necessary, therefore women generally cannot exist without foot-bandages. We have to realise that our present social forms are as ugly and inhuman as a club foot; and then we shall begin to realise how little necessary are these institutions, like law and police, whose chief concern and office is to retain and defend these forms.

The chief difficulty, then, which arises in people’s minds at the thought of a free nongovernmental society does not concern its desirability — they are agreed as a rule that it would be desirable — but concerns its practicability. And much of this difficulty is derived from the society of the present. People see, in fact, that an internecine competition for subsistence is the ruling force of life to-day, and the chief incentive to production, and they infer that without government society would dissolve into a mere chaos of

² Though, as all more primitive society shows us, small inequalities and such as arise from natural differences of human industry and capacity will always be welcome.

plunder on the one hand and of laziness on the other.³ It is this difficulty which has first to be removed.

Though it seems a hard thing to say, the outer life of society to-day is animated first and foremost by Fear. From the wretched wage-slave who rises before the break of day, hurries through squalid streets to the dismal sound of the “hummer,” engages for nine, ten, or twelve hours, and for a pittance wage, in monotonous work which affords him no interest, no pleasure; who returns home to find his children gone to bed, has his supper, and, worn out and weary, soon retires himself, only to rise again in the morning and pursue the same deadly round; and who leads a life thus monotonous, inhuman, and devoid of all dignity and reality, simply because he is hounded to it by the dread of starvation; — to the big commercial man, who, knowing that his wealth has come to him through speculation and the turns and twists of the market, fears that it may at any moment take to itself wings by the same means; who feels that the more wealth he has, the more ways there are in which he may lose it, the more cares and anxieties belonging to it; and who to continually make his position secure is, or thinks himself, forced to stoop to all sorts of mean and dirty tricks; — over the great mass of people the same demon spreads its dusky wings. Feverish anxiety is the keynote of their lives. There is no room for natural gladness or buoyancy of spirits. You may walk the streets of our great cities, but you will hear no one singing — except for coppers; hardly a plowboy to-day whistles in the furrow, and in almost every factory (this is a fact) if a workman sang at his work he would be “sacked.” We are like shipwrecked folk clambering up a cliff. The waves are raging below. Each one clings by handhold or foothold where he may, and in the panic if

³ Though it must, to be strictly impartial, be pointed out that this difficulty is chiefly felt by those classes who themselves live on interest and in ornamental idleness.

Some system too of National Guilds will quite probably be worked out, which, while rendering the worker-groups self-determining will award to them their fair share and their fair share only of the National income. Then, though the Cash-nexus I may and no doubt will linger on for a long time in various forms of Wages, Purchase, Sale, and so forth, it must inevitably with the changing sentiment and conditions of life lose its cast-iron stringent character, and gradually be converted into the elastic cord, which while it may indicate a line of social custom will yield to pressure when the need arises. Private Property will thus lose its present virulent character, and; subside into a matter of mere use or convenience; monetary reckonings and transfers, as time goes on, will seem little more than formalities — as to-day between friends.

Finally, Custom alone will remain. The subsidence of the Property feeling will mean the subsidence of brute-force Law, for whose existence Property is mainly responsible. The peoples accustomed to the varied activities of a complex industrial organism, will still — though not suffering from the compulsion either of hunger or of brute authority — continue through custom to carry on those activities, their Reason in the main approving.

Custom will remain — slowly changing. And the form of the Societies of the future will be more vital and organic, and far more truly human, than they have been or could be under the rigid domination of Law.

he push his neighbor from a point of vantage, it is to be regretted certainly, but it cannot be helped.

But such a state of affairs is not normal. Mowing that the struggle for existence in some degree or form is unavoidable, history still, except at rare crises, presents us with no such spectacle of widespread anxiety; the study of native races whom we might consider in a state of destitution — reveals no such dominion of dread. I want the reader to imagine for a moment this burden of fear lifted off the hearts of a whole people, and the result.

Let us imagine for a moment that some good fairy — some transcendental Chancellor of the Exchequer — with a stroke of his wand, has assured to us all not only an old age pension, but a decent provision for all our days of the actual necessities of life (to go no further than that); so that for the future no man could feel any serious or grinding anxiety for his own material safety, or that of his family. What would be the result on our actions?

Perhaps, as many would maintain, nine-tenths of the population would say, “I’m blessed if I’ll ever do another stroke of work.” Like the organ-grinder who came into a little fortune, and who forthwith picked up an axe and fell upon his organ, shouting as he hacked it to pieces, “You shall neffer play dat tam Alabama Coon any more,” we should feel so sick of our present jobs that we should want to turn our backs on them for ever. Very likely, I should say — and rightly enough too; for “work” in the present day is done under such degrading and miserable conditions by the vast majority of the population that the very best and most manly thing would be to refuse to continue doing it.

But let us suppose, since a bare living has been assured to us, and we are in no danger of actual starvation, that we all take a good long holiday, and abstain religiously from doing anything. Suppose that we simply twirl our thumbs in idleness for two, three, four, or six months. Still, is it not obvious that at the end of that time nine-tenths of the population would find sheer idleness appallingly dreary, and that they would set themselves to work at some thing

or other to produce comforts or conveniences rising above the level of sheer necessity — objects of use or beauty, either for themselves, or for their families and neighbors, or even conceivably for society at large; that, in fact, a spontaneous and free production of goods would spring up, followed of course by a spontaneous and free exchange — a self-supporting society, based not on individual dread and anxiety, but on the common fullness of life and energy?

That people relieved from care do spontaneously set themselves to work is sufficiently shown by the case of the well-to-do classes today. For these people, though having everything provided for them, and not merely the bare necessities which we have supposed, exhibit the most extraordinary and feverish energy in seeking employment. A few decades of years have been quite sufficient to make them feel the utter failure of picnics as an object in life; and now we are flooded with philanthropic and benevolent societies, leagues, charity organisations, art missions to the poor, vigilance crusades, and other activities, which are simply the expression of the natural energies of the human being seeking an outlet in social usefulness. It is, of course, to be regretted that owing to the very imperfect education of this class their ideas and their capacities of social usefulness should be so limited. However, this is a defect which will no doubt be remedied in the future. All that concerns us here is to see that since the rich, though in many ways ill-adapted by training and tradition, do spontaneously take up a life of this kind, there is nothing extravagant in supposing that the average man, surrounded by so many unfulfilled needs, might do the same.

And if any one still doubts let him consider the thousands in our large towns to-day who would give their ears to be able to get out and work on the land — not so much from any prospect of making a fortune that way, as from mere love of the life; or who in their spare time cultivate gardens or plots or allotments as a hobby; or the thousands who when the regular day's work is over start some fresh little occupation of their own — some cabinet-making, woodturning, ornamental iron-work or whatnot;

with its endless Sisyphus labors, its searchings for markets, its displacement and destruction of its rivals, its travelers, its advertisements, its armies of clerks, its banking and broking, its accounts and checking of accounts — will fade and lessen in importance; till some day perchance it will collapse, and roll off like a great burden to the ground! Freed from the great strain and waste which all this system creates, the body politic will recover like a man from a disease, and spring to unexpected powers of health.

Meanwhile in the great industrial associations, voluntary and other, folk will have been learning the sentiment of the Common Life — the habit of acting together for common ends, the habit of feeling together for common interests — and once this has been learnt, the rest will follow of its own accord.

In the course of these changes, moving always towards a non-governmental and perfectly voluntary society in the end, it is probable that some Property-founded institutions, like the payment of labor by wages, though not exactly ideal in their character, will continue for a long period. It may perhaps be said that in some ways a generous wage-payment convention (as for instance sketched in the last chapter of Carruthers' *Commercial and Commercial Economy*) on a thoroughly democratic basis, gives more freedom than a formless Anarchism in which each one takes "according to his needs," simply because under the first system A could work two hours a day and live on the wage of two, and B could work eight and live on the wage of eight, each with perfect moral freedom — whereas if there was no wage system, A (however much he might wish to loaf) would feel that he was cheating the community — and the community would think so too — unless he gave his eight hours like everybody else.⁶

⁶ It is difficult also to see how things like railways and the immense modern industries (if these survive) could be carried on without some such system of wage-payment and the definite engagement to fulfill certain work which it carries with it.

cialism is built), yet as we have seen, the necessity of this organisation has reached such a point that it can no longer be denied. And as it comes in more and more, it will more and more react on the conditions of the employed, causing them also to be improved. Besides, we are fain to hope that something else of which we see growing signs on every hand, will also come in — namely a new sense of social responsibility, a new reading of religion, a healthier public opinion — which will help on and give genuine life to the changes of which we speak. If so, it might not be so very long before the spread of employment, and the growing security of decent wages, combined with the continual improvement of productive processes and conditions, would bring about a kind of general affluence — or at least absence of poverty. The unworthy fear which haunts the hearts of nine-tenths of the population, the anxiety for the beggarly elements of subsistence, would pass away or fade in the background, and with it the mad nightmarish competition and bitter struggle of men with each other. Even the sense of Property itself would be alleviated. Today the institution of Property is like a cast-iron railing against which a human being may be crushed, but which still is retained because it saves us from falling into the gulf. But tomorrow, when the gulf of poverty is practically gone, the indicating line between one person and another need run no harsher than an elastic band.⁵ People will wake up with surprise, and rub their eyes to find that they are under no necessity of being other than human.

Simultaneously (i.e. with the lessening of the power of money as an engine of interest and profit-grinding) the huge nightmare which weighs on us to-day, the monstrous incubus of “business” —

⁵ This alleviation indeed is already in some curious ways visible. Forty years ago the few dressed in broadcloth, the masses in fustian; but now that silk is made out of wood-pulp, and everybody can dress and does dress in the latest fashion, it is no distinction to have fine clothes. Similarly with books, travel, and a hundred other things. What is the good of being a millionaire when the man with three pounds a week can make almost as good a show as you?

the scores of thousands, in fact, that there are of natural gardeners, cabinet-makers, iron-workers, and so forth; and then think how if they were free these folk would sort themselves spontaneously to the work they delighted in.

Thus it appears to be at least conceivable that a people not hounded on by compulsion nor kept in subjection by sheer authority, would set itself spontaneously to produce the things which it prized. It does not, of course, at once follow that the result should be perfect order and harmony. But there are a few considerations in the positive direction which I may introduce here.

In the first place, each person would be guided in the selection of his occupation by his own taste and skill, or at any rate would be guided by these to a greater extent than he is to-day; and on the whole would be more likely to find the work for which he was fitted than he is now. The increase in effective output and vitality from this cause alone would be great. While the immense variety of taste and skill in human beings would lead to a corresponding variety of spontaneous products.

In the second place, the work done would be useful. It is certain that no man would freely set himself to dig a hole, only to fill it up again — though it is equally certain that a vast amount of the work done to-day is no more useful than that. If a man were a cabinet-maker and made a chest of drawers, either for himself or a neighbor, he would make it so that the drawers would open and shut; but nine-tenths of the chests made on commercial principles are such that the drawers will neither open nor shut. They are not meant to be useful; they are meant to have the semblance of being useful; but they are really made to sell. To sell, and by selling yield a profit. And for that purpose they are better adapted if, appearing useful, they turn out really useless, for then the buyer must come again, and so yield another profit to the manufacturer and the merchant. The waste to the community to-day arising from causes of this kind is enormous; but it is of no moment as long as there is profit to a certain class.

Work in a free society would be done because it was useful. It is curious, when you come to think of it, that there is no other conceivable reason why work should be done. And of course I here include what is beautiful under the term useful, — as there is no reason why one should separate what satisfies one human need, like the need of beauty, from another human need, like the need of food. I say the idea of work implies that it is undertaken because the product itself satisfies some human need. But strangely enough in Commerce that is not so. The work is undertaken in order that the product may sell, and so yield a profit; that is all. It is of no moment what the product is, or whether bad or good, as long as it fulfils this one condition. And so the whole spirit of life and industry in the other society would be so utterly different from that of the present, that it is really difficult for us to compare the results. But it is not difficult to see that if on the principles of freedom there was not so much produced in mere quantity, and folk did not (as may indeed be hoped) work so many hours a day as now, still, the goods turned out being sincere and genuine, there would really be far more value shown in a year than on the strictly commercial system.

In the third place, it follows — as William Morris so constantly maintained — that “work” in the new sense would be a pleasure — one of the greatest pleasures undoubtedly of life; and this one fact would transform its whole character. We cannot say that now. How many are there who take real pleasure and satisfaction in their daily labor? Are they, in each township, to be counted on the fingers? But what is the good of life if its chief element, and that which must always be its chief element, is odious? No, the only true economy is to arrange so that your daily labor shall be itself a joy. Then, and then only, are you on the safe side of life. And, your work being such, its product is sure to become beautiful; that painful distinction between the beautiful and the useful dies out, and everything made is an artistic product. Art becomes conterminous with life.

Thus it will be observed that whereas the present society is founded on a law-enforced system of Private Property, in which,

the modern nations have — each man fighting for his own hand — must take some time to unlearn it. The sentiment of the common life, so long nipped and blighted, must have leisure to grow and expand again; and we acknowledge that — in order to foster new ideas and new habits — an intermediate stage of definite industrial organization may be quite necessary.

When one looks sometimes at the awful residue and dregs which were being left as a legacy to the future by our present commercial system — the hopeless, helpless, drunken, incapable men and women who drift through London and the country districts from workhouse to workhouse, or the equally incapable and more futile idlers in high places, one feels that possibly only a rather stringent industrial organisation (such as the War has brought upon us) could have enabled society to cope with these burdens. The hand of the nation has already been forced to the development of Farm-colonies, Land-reclamations, Afforestation, Canal-restoration, and other big industrial schemes, and these are leading to a considerable socialisation of land and machinery. At the same time the rolling up of companies into huge and huger trusts is, as we plainly see, making the transference of industries to public control and to public uses, daily more easy to effect.

On the other hand, the Trade Unions and Cooperative Societies by the development of productive as well as distributive industries, and by the interchange of goods with each other on an ever-growing scale, are bringing about a similar result. They are creating a society in which enormous wealth is produced and handled not for the profit of the few, but for the use of the many — a voluntary collectivism working within and parallel with the official collectivism of the State.

As this double collectivism grows and spreads, profit-grinding will more and more cease to be a lucrative profession. Though no doubt great efforts will be made in the commercial world to discountenance the public organisation of the unemployed (because this will cut away the ground of cheap labor on which commer-

backwoods and outlying farm populations. And we may fairly ask, not whether such social habits are possible, but whether they are not in the end the only possible form; for surely it is useless and absurd to call these modern hordes of people, struggling with each other for the means of subsistence, and jammed down by violent and barbaric penal codes into conditions which enforce the struggle, societies; as it would be absurd to call the wretched folk in the Black Hole of Calcutta a society. If any one will only think for a minute of his own inner nature he will see that the only society which would ever really satisfy him would be one in which he was perfectly free, and yet bound by ties of deepest trust to the other members; and if he will think for another minute he will see that the only conditions on which he could be perfectly free (to do as he liked) would be that he should trust and care for his neighbor as well as himself. The conditions are perfectly simple; and since they have been more or less realized by countless primitive tribes of animals and men, it is surely not impossible for civilized man to realise them. If it be argued (which is perfectly true) that modern societies are so much more complex than the primitive ones, we may reply that if modern man, with his science and his school-boards, and his brain cultivated through all these centuries, is not competent to solve a more complex problem than the savage, he had better return to savagery.

But it is getting time to be practical.

Of the possibility of a free communal society there can really, I take it, be no doubt. The question that more definitely presses on us now is one of transition — by what steps shall we, or can we pass to that land of freedom?

We have supposed a whole people started on its journey by the lifting off of a burden of fear and anxiety; but in the long, slow ascent of evolution sudden miraculous changes are not to be expected; and for this reason alone it is obvious that we can look for no very swift transformation to the communal form. Peoples that have learnt the lesson of “trade” and competition so thoroughly as

almost necessarily, the covetous hard type of man becomes the large proprietor, and (supported by law and government) is enabled to prey upon the small one; and whereas the result of this arrangement is a bitter and continuous struggle for possession, in which the motive to activity is mainly Fear; we, on the contrary, are disentangling a conception of a society in which Private Property is supported by no apparatus of armed authority, but as far as it exists is a perfectly spontaneous arrangement, in which the main motives to activity are neither Fear nor greed of Gain, but rather Community of life and Interest in life — in which, in fact, you undertake work because you like the work because you feel that you can do it, and because you know that the product will be useful, either to yourself or some one else!

How Utopian it all sounds! How absurdly simple and simple-minded — to work because you like the work and desire the product. How delightful if it could be realised, but, of course, how “unpractical” and impossible.

Yet is it really impossible? From Solomon to Dr. Watts we have been advised to go to the Ant and the Bee for instruction, and lo! they are unpractical and Utopian too. Can anything be more foolish than the conduct of these little creatures, any one of whom will at any moment face death in defence of his tribe while the Bee is absolutely so ignorant and senseless, that instead of storing up the honey that it has gathered in a little cell of its own, with a nice lock and key, it positively puts it in the common cells, and cannot distinguish it from the stores of the others. Foolish little Bee, the day will surely come when you will bitterly rue your “unthrifty” conduct, and you will find yourself starving while your fellow-tribesmen are consuming the fruits of your labor.

And the human body itself, that marvelous epitome and mirror of the universe, how about that? Is it not Utopian too? It is composed of a myriad cells, members, organs, compacted into a living unity. A healthy body is the most perfect society conceivable. What does the hand say when a piece of work is demanded of it? Does

it bargain first for what reward it is to receive, and refuse to move until it has secured satisfactory terms, or the foot decline to take us on a journey till it knows what special gain is to accrue to it thereby? Mot so; but each limb and cell does the work which is before it to do, and (such is the Utopian law) the fact of its doing the work causes the circulation to flow to it, and it is nourished and fed in proportion to its service. And we have to ask whether the same may not be the law of a healthy human society? Whether the fact of a member doing service (however humble) to the community would not be quite sufficient to ensure his provision by the rest with all that he might need? Whether the community would think of allowing such an one to starve any more than a man would think of allowing his least finger to pine away and die? Whether it is not possible that men would cease to feel any anxiety about the “reward of their labor”; that they would think first of their work and the pleasure they had in doing it, and would not doubt that the reward would follow?

For indeed the instinct to do anything which is obviously before you to do, which is wanted, and which you can do, is very strong in human nature. Even children, those rudimentary savages, are often extremely proud to be “useful,” and it is conceivable that we might be sensible enough, instead of urging them as we do now to “get on,” to make money, to beat their fellows in the race of life, and by climbing on other folk’s heads to ultimately reach a position where they would have to work no longer, — that we might teach them how when they grew up they would find themselves members of a self-respecting society which, while it provided them gratis with all they might need, would naturally expect them in honor to render some service in return. Even small children could understand that. Is it quite inconceivable that a society of grown men and women might act up to it?

But it is really absurd to argue about the possibility of these things in human society, when we have so many actual examples of them before our eyes. Herman Melville, in that charming book

Typee, describes the Marquesas Islanders of the Pacific, among whom he lived for some time during the year 1846. He says: “During the time I lived among the Typees no one was ever put upon his trial for any offence against the public. To all appearances there were no courts of law or equity. There was no municipal police for the purposes of apprehending vagrants or disorderly characters. In short, there were no legal provisions whatever for the well-being and conservation of society, the enlightened end of civilised legislation.” Nevertheless, the whole book is a eulogy of the social arrangements he met with, and with almost a fervor of romance in its tone; and yet, like all his description of the natives of the Pacific Islands, undoubtedly accurate, and well corroborated by the travelers of the period. An easy communism prevailed. When a good haul of fish was made, those who took part in it did not keep the booty to themselves, but parceled it out, and sent it throughout the tribe, retaining only their proportionate share. When one family required a new cabin, the others would come and help to build it. He describes such an occasion, when, “at least a hundred of the natives were bringing materials to the ground, some carrying in their hands one or two of the canes which were to form the sides, others slender rods of hibiscus, strung with palmetto leaves, for the roof. Every one contributed something to the work; and by the united but easy labors of all the entire work was completed before sunset.”

Similar communistic habits prevail, of course, through a vast number of savage tribes, and indeed almost anywhere that the distinctively commercial civilisation has not set its mark. They may be found close at home, as in the little primitive island of St. Kilda, in the Hebrides, where exactly the same customs of sharing the hauls of fish or the labors of housebuilding exist to-day,⁴ which Melville describes in *Typee*; and they may be found all along the edges of our: civilization in the harvesting and house-warming “bees” of the

⁴ See Chapter XI of *Poverty and the State*, by H. V. Mills.