

Anarchy

Elisée Reclus

1895

YOU know that we, the Anarchists, are considered as a set of most desperate and wicked men; and recently, perusing by mere chance an English review which had already published some of my scientific papers, I found, to my surprise, that I was spoken of by name as belonging to a “gang of ruffians.” Now, this is indeed a very bad introduction to you; still I hope you will not condemn me at once. If you have read and heard the attacks, you are bound by fair play to hear also the defense, and even a counter-attack.

Our name explains perfectly what our aim is — at least our negative aim. We wish to do away with government because every organization from the outside prevents the free working of spontaneous organization. Government, under all its various shapes, is but another name for a body of people having got the power to enforce their will, which they call and make *Law*; and this will, this Law, represents not the society’s interest, but their own. If mankind’s ideal is the happiness of all, government cannot and will not ever fulfil it, because its first concern is for its own members. Subjects come always after the ruler; and even were they sensuously pleased as a herd of well-fed swine, they will never enjoy that true happiness which exists between friends and equals. A drudging servant never enjoys life nobly and manfully side by side with his master, never a slave with a free man; never a poor fellow picking up in the mud his morsel of bread with the rich, who does not care for bread, because dainties are better for him.

Our ideal of society is quite different from the actual state of things, quite different from the imagined Utopias of most ancient and modern writers. High people, who have enjoyed the privileges of birth, wealth, and education are always prone to believe themselves to be a chosen tribe; and even when they feel kindly towards the lowborn poor, they want them to be led by strings, like children, and taught good morals by their betters. And who are their betters? The aristocracy, of course — those who enjoy already the advantages of a pleasant life, and who by their very position are induced to maintain inequality in their own favor.

The society we imagine, and whose evolution we are studying in the present chaotic crowd of conflicting units, is a society in which work is going on, not by the behest of a whole hierarchy of chiefs and sub-chiefs, but by the comprehension of common interests and the natural working of mutual aid and sympathy; in which order is kept, not by the strong arm of law, by prisons, cat-o’-nine-tails, hanging-ropes, guillotines, and wholesale blowings-up, but by universal education, by respect of everyone for himself and for others; in which happiness will be ensured, not by

intermittent and disdainful charities, but by real and substantial welfare, and by the common enjoyment of riches due to the common work.

In fact, the change we propose in society is precisely the change which is going on in the family itself, where the old idea of a ruling master, having the right, and even the duty, to chastise with the rod wife and children, is gradually abandoned, and where love, mutual respect, and permanent kindness are considered the only natural ties between all. And everywhere the same evolution is going on in social morals. People feel that a new departure must be taken in the methods of social activity. Even in workshops and great manufactories, the best way of going on smoothly for employers and employed is to have, in spite of the difference in wages, a link of mutual respect. You all remember the saying of the chief engineer of the Forth Bridge at the opening of that most stupendous work of the age: "If all we fellow-workers had not labored together in the glorious undertaking with the same mind and the same heart, it never would have been achieved. Every nail is necessary to the whole; everyone of us has been necessary to this splendid end!" Such were the words of the illustrious constructor; he felt that enthusiasm for the achievement of a great work had been throughout the chief motor, although, generally and quite naturally, hatred and envy are bred by the difference of social standing and salaries. That enthusiasm for high aims is to take the place of continual compulsion.

Of course, we know that the change in society brought about by the substitution of inner natural organization for the outer artificial organization of caprice, force, and law, will be a change of capital importance, and, in consequence, accompanied by numerous and formidable events. Every general evolution brings in its wake corresponding revolutions. It must be so, and we cannot alter the course of history; but this we know, that howsoever great may be the dangers following the change from governance to spontaneous grouping, these dangers can never compare with the actual evils which result from the exercise of personal authority and the extortions of law...

There is a proverbial phrase which is very commonly uttered, even by the most conservative people: "The best government is that which governs the least!" This is also our opinion, and we follow it logically by adding that government, when reduced to a mere cypher, leaves society free to attain its final perfection. But everywhere, the so-called "civilized" nations groan under the pressure of a more or less strong government, and certainly I can show you in no part of the world any large community which lives entirely free, without the intervention of people who consider themselves as rulers, givers of work and superintendents of the whole political and social machinery.

All Anarchical existing groups (and there are many of them) are only small tribes, enjoying their entire freedom from general or local governments in forests and in open plains. There are, also, some groups of agriculturists who have still the good luck in mountain fastnesses to escape conquest, and the laws of monarchies or republics. We must add a few consciously Anarchical and Communist societies that have arisen during this century in Western Europe and America. I must especially mention the old Icarians, who began some fifty years ago as authoritarians and law-abiders, who had a chief or rather a pope, but who, by a long series of vicissitudes lost, so to say, their first skin and, changing their constitution from time to time, finished by abolishing it altogether, and now live happily and simply without any other rule of life than self and mutual respect and love.

But if I can show you only comparatively small Anarchical communities, history exemplifies to us in a splendid way how among nations progress is always in exact proportion to the increase of freedom, to the decrease of strength in government and power in laws.

Look first at Greece, the land to which we trace our spiritual birth. Certainly it had governments, even many of them, aristocracies and democracies and oligarchies and so on, but with the single exception of barbarous Sparta, entirely composed of warriors, who were forbidden to think, to speak, even to read, all the Greek republics were in a state of constant evolution and revolution; governments built on the sand were continually shaken; they had no time to take hold of the public mind, to become a kind of religion, correlative with the belief in a heavenly god, and the strife of thought went on between parties and parties, between men and men. The spirit of freedom was not crushed among them as it had been in Babylon, in Persia, in Egypt, and that is why knowledge increased immensely in all directions. Art attained a perfect beauty which was considered for two thousand years as a definite standard; all sciences began or developed themselves, and the outlines of every course of study which we are now trying to complete were distinctly marked; history made its appearance in literary master-pieces; the theories of evolution, which most people falsely think a new conquest, grow splendidly in Epicurus out of the treasury of facts; and, lastly, morals progressed at the same pace as science, as is shown by the admirable, and I say eternal, books of the Stoics, so well sustained by their noble life. That period of time is always the pride and glory of mankind.

And now let us turn to another period, when the long night of the middle-ages gave way to the first light of the dawn. For more than one thousand years triumphant barbarian chiefs and Christian monks had utterly prevented any freedom of speech and thought; but under those ashes gleamed still some fire, and flames rose again. The history of communes, that history which has not yet been written, but which, I hope, will be taken up by some of our thinkers, began in all parts of Europe and even of Mussulman Africa. There was everywhere, as in ancient Greece, a clashing of states against states, of barons against cities, of peasantry against knights: innumerable conflicts and revolutions shook the old state of things, and people were born to new thoughts. Again that happy struggle, which weakened the idea of strong government, allowed human intellect to free itself and a new period of science, literature, art, discovery, morals, developed itself throughout Europe. Some of the most splendid pages that have been written belong to that time, which culminates with the Renaissance, that is with the new birth of mankind, when old Greece was discovered again.

The names of the Spanish comuneros, of the French communes, of the English yeomen, of the free cities in Germany, of the Republic of Novgorod and of the marvelous communities of Italy must be, with us Anarchists, household words: never was civilized humanity nearer to real Anarchy than it was in certain phases of the communal history of Florence and Nürnberg.

Great monarchies prevailed over these many free republics and the gloom of subjection seemed to darken our Western Europe; but it was difficult to eradicate entirely free speech and free thought. In spite of the great kings, in spite of Philip of Spain and Louis XIV of France, the little common wealth of Netherlands had writers and printers to keep tyranny in check. Afterwards the struggle went on also in France, in England, in America, minds emancipated themselves and gave rise to those revolutions, which were the beginning of our modern world. Without those revolutions society would have been at a stand-still in industry, in science, art, social philosophy; and we Anarchists, instead of speaking to you on the destruction of capitalist society, would have certainly no opportunity of grouping ourselves all over the world in new communities.

And now do you not think it is too late for government to put a gag in our mouth, to let silence reign again over a subject people? We have behind us the impulse of all former acquisitions in science and in morals and these drive us forward with an irresistible force.

Certainly, we seem to be weak in numbers, in material strength, and we are very poor in money; meanwhile governments have on their side armies, ammunition, millions and millions of pounds, the reasonings of the political economists and the blessing of the priests. But there is one thing which is wanting to them and which we have. This will be the reason for our final and decided victory. They know already that they are wrong; they don't believe in their own morals. We, on the contrary, know that we are right and that our idea is just; for we are working and fighting for the equality of men, for the happiness of all human beings.

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