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Act For Yourselves

Pëtr Kropotkin

January 1887

A question which we are often asked is: “How will you organise the future society on Anarchist principles?” If the question were put to Herr Bismarck, or to somebody who fancies that a group of men is able to organise society as they like, it would seem very natural. But in the ears of an Anarchist it sounds very strangely, and the only answer we can give to it is: “We cannot organise you. It will depend upon *you* what sort of organisation you will choose.” If the masses continue to cherish the idea that a government can do everything, and reorganise economical relations — the growth of centuries — by a few laws, then we may well wait whole centuries until the rule of Capital is abolished. But if there is among the working classes a strong minority of men who understand that no government — however dictatorial its powers — is able to expropriate the owners of capital, and this minority acquires sufficient influence to induce the workmen to avail themselves of the first opportunity of taking possession of land and mines, of railways and factories — without paying much heed to the talking at Westminster — then we may expect that some new kind of organisation will arise for the benefit of the commonwealth.

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That is precisely the task we impose upon ourselves. To bring workmen and workmen's friends to the conviction that they must rely on themselves to get rid of the oppression of Capital, without expecting that the same thing can be done for them by anybody else. The emancipation of the workmen must be the act of the workmen themselves.

The very words Anarchist-Communism show in what direction society, in our opinion, is already going, and on what lines it can get rid of the oppressive powers of Capital and Government, and it would be an easy task for us to draw a sketch of society in accordance with these principles.¹ But what would be the use of such a scheme, if those who listen to it have never doubted the possibility of reorganising everything by homeopathic prescriptions from Westminster, if they have never imagined that they themselves are more powerful than their representatives, and if they are persuaded that everything can and must be settled by a government, most men having only to obey and never to act for themselves?

One of the first delusions to get rid of, therefore, is the delusion that a few laws can modify the present economical system as by enchantment. The first conviction to acquire is that nothing short of expropriation on a vast scale, carried out by the workmen themselves, can be the first step towards a reorganisation of our production on Socialist principles.

In fact, if we analyse the immense complexity of economical relations existing in a civilised nation, if we take into account the relatively small amount of real workmen in this country and the enormous number of parasites who live on their shoulders and are interested in the maintenance of parasitic conditions, we cannot but recognise that no government will be able ever to undertake

¹ Our Parisian brother-in-arms *Le Révolté* is now publishing a series of articles showing how a commune, inspired with Anarchist ideas, might organise itself as a communist society without government. [Many of these articles were later revised and included in Kropotkin's book *The Conquest of Bread*, published in 1892. (Editor)]

for orders from above before taking possession of land and capital. They will take them first, and *then* — already in possession of land and capital — they will organise their work. They will not consider these things as private property — it would be impossible in the present complicated, interwoven, and interdependent state of our production. They will nationalise them.

the reorganisation of industry, unless the People begin themselves to do it by taking possession of the mines and factories, of the land and the houses, — in short, of all those riches which are the produce of their own labour. It is only when the masses of the people are ready to begin expropriating that we may expect that any government will move in the same direction.

Surely, it will not be the present Parliament which will ever take the initiative in dispossessing the owners of land and capital. Even if the workmen assume a really menacing attitude, our present middle-class rulers will not become Socialists. They will try, first, to crush the movement, to disorganise it, and if they are unable to do so, they will do what all governments have done on like occasions. They will try to gain time, until the masses, reduced to still more dreadful misery by the increased depression of industry, will be ready to accept any concessions, however delusive, rather than starve in the streets.

To expect that Socialist workmen will have a majority in Parliament is, again, to cherish a naive and vain delusion. We shall have long to wait before a Socialist majority is created in this country. But the thousands reduced to starvation by the enormities of the present social system cannot wait, and even if they could, events will be precipitated by partial conflicts. Last winter we saw the whole of one of the mining basins in Belgium in open rebellion against Capital.² A few months ago we were very near to a general outbreak of workmen in some parts of the United States.³ And although the treachery of a Powderly — the chief of the Knights of Labor — may have paralysed the outbreak everybody in the United States — even the most stubborn politician — well understands that another time a Powderly may be powerless, especially in presence of the provocative attitude of the middle classes, who never

² A reference to the Walloon *jacquerie* of 1886 (see glossary). (Editor)

³ A reference to the Eight Hour Day movement and its strikes on 1st May 1886. The events at the Haymarket and subsequent framing of eight Chicago anarchists is the best known expression of this strike wave (see glossary). (Editor)

fail on such occasions to increase the ranks of the discontented and to intensify the discontent.

The Social Question will be put to Europe, in all its immensity, long before the Socialists have conquered a few seats in Parliament, and thus the solution of the question will be actually in the hands of the workmen themselves. They will have no choice: either try must resolve it themselves, or be reduced to a worse slavery than before.

Under the influence of government worship, they may try to nominate a new government, instead of the old one which will be sent away, and they may entrust it with the solution of all difficulties. It is so simple, so easy, to throw a vote into the ballot-box, and to return home! So gratifying to know that there is somebody who will arrange your own affairs for the best, while you are quietly smoking your pipe and waiting for orders which you will have only to execute, not to reason about. An admirable way, indeed, to have your affairs left as they were before, even if you are not cheated by your trustees!

History is full of such examples. The revolted people of Paris in 1871 also nominated a government, and hoped that this government — which consisted, in fact, of the most devoted revolutionists belonging to all sections of the revolutionary world, all men ready to die for the emancipation of the people — would settle everything for the best.

They did the same thing at Paris in 1848, when they chose a Provisional Government by acclamation, and expected that this Government — which also consisted of honest men — would resolve the social question.

But we know how dreadful was the awakening of the Paris proletarians, and we know by what hecatombs of slaughtered men, women, and children they paid for their confidence.

There was, however, another epoch, when these same Frenchmen acted in another way. The peasants were serfs before 1789 — in fact, if not by law. The land of their communes had been enclosed

by landlords, and they had to pay these lords every possible kind of tax, survivals of, or redemption for, feudal servitude.

These peasants also voted in 1789, and nominated a government. But as they saw that this government did not respond to their expectations, they revolted; in fact, they did so even before they saw their government at work. They went to the landlords and compelled them to abdicate their rights. They burned the charters where these rights were written down; they burned some of the castles of the most hated nobles. And, on the night of the 4th of August, the nobility of France, moved by high patriotic feelings (so the historians say), which feelings were excited by the spectacle of burning castles, abdicated their rights for ever.

True that, four days later, they re-established the very same rights by imposing a redemption fee. But the peasants revolted again. They even took no notice at all of what the Chamber had voted. They took possession of the enclosed lands and began to till them. They paid no redemption taxes. And when the authorities intervened — in the name of the sacred law — they revolted against the authorities. They revolted — M. Taine says — six times in the course of four years, and their revolts were so successful that by the end of the fourth year the Convention — the great Convention, the ideal of all modern Jacobins — moved again by highest patriotic feelings (the middle classes' historians say so), finally abolished all feudal rights, in 1793, and ordered all papers relating to the feudal epoch to be burnt.

But what the historians forget to say is that the rights *were* already abolished by the peasants, and that most papers dealing with feudal rights *were* already burned.

The terrible revolutionary body thus sanctioned only the accomplished fact. Feudalism was actually no longer in existence; the Convention did nothing but pronounce its funeral oration.

The workmen of the nineteenth century probably will *not* burn the factories, but we fancy that their modes of action will bear a great likeness to those of the French peasants. They will not wait