

Revolutionary Government

Pëtr Kropotkin

1892

Contents

I	3
II	6
III	8

I

That the Governments at present existing ought to be abolished, so that Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity should no longer be empty words but become living realities, and that all forms of government as yet tried have only been so many forms of oppression, and ought to be replaced by a new form of grouping, so far all who have a brain and temperament ever so little revolutionary unanimously agree. In truth one does not need to be much of an innovator in order to arrive at this conclusion; the vices of the governments of today, and the impossibility of reforming them, are too evident to be hidden from the eyes of any reasonable observer. And as regards overturning governments, it is well-known that at certain epochs that can be done without much difficulty; there are times when governments crumble to pieces almost of themselves, like houses of cards, before the breath of the people in revolt. That has been seen clearly in 1848 and in 1870; and will soon be seen again.

To overturn a government — this for a revolutionary middle-class man is everything, for us it is only the beginning of the Social Revolution. The machine of the State once out of gear, the hierarchy of functionaries disorganized and not knowing in what direction to take a step, the soldiers having lost confidence in their officers — in a word the whole army of the defenders of capital once routed — then it is that the grand work of destruction of all the institutions which serve to perpetuate economic and political slavery will become ours. The possibility of living freely being attained, what will revolutionists do next?

To this question the Anarchists alone give the proper answer, “No Government, Anarchy!” All the others say “A Revolutionary Government!” and they only differ as to the form to be given to that government. Some decide for a government elected by universal suffrage in the State or in the Commune; others decide on a Revolutionary Dictator.

A Revolutionary Government! These are two words which sounds very strange in the ears of those who really understand what the Social Revolution means, and what a government means. The words contradict each other, destroy each other. We have seen of course many despotic governments — it is the essence of all government to take the side of the reaction against the Revolution, and to have a tendency toward despotism — but such a thing as a revolutionary government has never been seen, and the reason is that the Revolution — synonym of “disorder” of upsetting and overthrowing of venerated institutions in a few days, meaning the demolition by violence of the established forms of property, the destruction of castes, the rapid transformation of received ideas about morality, or rather about the hypocrisy which takes the place of it, individual liberty and freedom of action — is precisely the opposite, the very negation, of government, this being the synonym of “established order,” of conservatism, of the maintenance of existing institutions, the negation of free initiative and individual action. And yet we continually hear this white blackbird spoken of, as if a “revolutionary government” were the simplest thing in the world, as common and as well-known to all as Royalty, the Empire and the Papacy!

That the so-called revolutionists of the middle-class should preach this idea is nothing strange. We know well what they understand by Revolution. They understand by it a bolstering up of their republic, the taking possession by the so-called republicans of the lucrative employments reserved today for the Bonapartists or Royalists. It means at the most the divorce of Church and

State, replaced by the concubinage of the two, and above all for that of the future administrators of these goods; perhaps it may mean the *referendum*, or some other political machinery of the same kind. But that revolutionary socialists should make themselves the apostles of such an idea — we can only explain by supposing one of two things. Either they are imbued with prejudices which they have imbibed without knowing it from literature and above all from history, written to suit middle-class ideas; and still possessed with the spirit of servility, product of ages of slavery, they cannot even imagine themselves free. Or else they do not really desire this Revolution which they have always on their lips, they would be content with a simple plastering up of present institutions, provided that they would secure power for themselves, leaving to the future to decide what they should do to satisfy “the beast” called the People. They only go against the Governors of the present time in order to take their places. With these people we care not to argue. We will then only speak to those who honestly deceive themselves.

Let us begin with the first of the two forms of “Revolutionary Government” which is advocated — the elected government.

The power of Royalty or some other we will suppose has just been overturned, the army of the defenders of capital is routed; everywhere there is fermentation, discussion of public affairs, everywhere a desire to march onward — new ideas arise, the necessity of important changes is perceived — it is necessary to act, it is necessary to begin without pity the work of demolition, in order to prepare the ground for the new life. But what do they propose to us to go? To convoke the people to elections, to elect at once a government and confide to it the work which we all of us, and each of us, should undertake of our own initiative.

This is what Paris did after the 18th of March 1871. “I will never forget,” said a friend to us, “these delightful moments of deliverance. I came down from my upper chamber in the Latin Quarter to join that immense open-air club which filled the Boulevards from one end of Paris to the other. Everyone talked about public affairs; all mere personal preoccupations were forgotten; no more was thought of buying or selling; all felt ready body and soul to advance toward the future. Men of the middle-class even, carried away by the general enthusiasm saw with joy a new world opened up. ‘If it is necessary to make a social revolution,’ they said, ‘make it then. Put all things in common; we are ready for it.’ All the elements of the revolution were there, it was only necessary to set them to work. When I returned to my lodging at night I said to myself “How fine is humanity after all, but no one knew it; it has always been calumniated;’ Then came the elections, the members of the Commune were named — and then little by little the ardor of devotion, and the desire for action were extinguished. Everyone returned to his usual task saying to himself “Now we have an honest government, let it act for us” — what followed everyone knows.

Instead of acting for themselves, instead of marching forwards, instead of advancing in the direction of a new order of things, the people, confiding in their governors, entrusted to them the charge of taking the initiative — this was the first consequence of the inevitable result of elections. Let us see now what these governors did who were invested with the confidence of all.

Never were elections more free than those of March, 1871. The opponents of the Commune admit it themselves. Never was the great mass of electors more influenced with the desire to place in power the best men, men for the future, true revolutionists. And so they did. All well-known Revolutionists were elected by immense majorities; Jacobins, Blanquists, Internationals, all the three revolutionary divisions were represented in the Council of the Commune. No election could give a better government.

But what was the result of it? Shut up in the City Mansion, charged to proceed after the forms established by preceding governments, these ardent revolutionists, these reformers found themselves smitten with incapacity and sterility. With all their good will and their courage they did not even know how to organize the defense of Paris. Of course people now blame the men, the individuals for this; but it was not the men who were the cause of this failure — it was the system carried out.

In fact universal suffrage, when it is quite free, can only produce, at best, an assembly which represents the average of the opinions which at the time are held by the mass of the people; and this average at the outbreak of the Revolution, has only a vague idea of the work to be accomplished, without understanding at all how they ought to undertake it. Ah, if the bulk of the nation, of the Commune, could only understand *before* the movement what was necessary to be done as soon as the government should be overturned! If this dream of the utopians of the chair could be realized we never would have had bloody revolutions; the will of the bulk of the nation once expressed the rest would submit to it with a good grace. But this is not how things are done. The Revolution bursts out long before a general understanding has been come to, and those who have a clear idea of what should be done the next day are only a very small minority. The great mass of the people have as yet only a general idea of the end which they wish realized, without knowing much how to advance toward that end, nor much confidence in the direction to follow. The practical solution will not be found, will not be made clear until the change will have already begun; it will be the product of the Revolution itself, of the people in action — or else it will be nothing, the brain of a few individuals being absolutely incapable of finding solutions which can only spring from the life of the people.

This is the situation which is reflected in the body elected by universal suffrage, even if it had not all the vices inherent in representative governments in general. The few men who represent the revolutionary idea of the epoch find themselves swamped among the representatives of the revolutionary schools of the past, and of the existing order of things. These men who would be so necessary among the people, particularly in the days of the Revolution, to sow and broadcast their ideas, to put the mass in movement, to demolish the institutions of the past — find themselves shut up in a Hall, vainly discussing how to wrest concessions from the moderated, and how to convert their enemies, while there is really only one way of inducing them to accept the new idea — namely to put it in execution. The government becomes a parliament with all the vices of a middle-class parliament. Far from being a “revolutionary” government it becomes the greatest obstacle to the Revolution, and at last the people finds itself compelled to put it out of the way, to dismiss those that but yesterday it acclaimed as its chosen. But it is not so easy to do so. The new government which has hastened to organize a new administration in order to extend its domination and make itself to be obeyed, does not understand giving up so easily. Jealous of maintaining its power, it clings to it with all the energy of an institution which has not yet had time to fall into senile decay. It decides to oppose force with force, and there is only one means

then to dislodge it, namely, to take up arms, to make another revolution in order to dismiss those in whom the people had placed all their hopes.

There you see the Revolution divided against itself! After losing precious time in delays, it now loses its strength in intestine divisions between the friends of the new government, and those who see the necessity of dissolving it. And all this happens because it has not been understood that a new life requires new forms; that it is not by clinging to ancient forms that a revolution can be carried out! All this for not having understood the incompatibility of revolution and government, for not having seen that the one is, under whatever form it presents itself, the *negation* of the other, and that outside of Anarchy there is no such thing as revolution.

It is just the same with regard to that other form of “revolutionary government” so often extolled — a Revolutionary Dictatorship.

II

The dangers to which the Revolution is exposed when it allows itself to be controlled by an elected government, are so evident that a whole school of Revolutionists renounce entirely the idea of it. They understand that it is impossible for a people in insurrection to give themselves, by means of elections, any government but one that represents the past, and which must be like leaden shoes on the feet of the people, above all when it is necessary to accomplish that immense regeneration, economic, political and moral which we understand by the Social Revolution. They renounce then the idea of “legal” government at least during that period which is a revolt against legality, and they advocate a “revolutionary dictator.”

“The party,” they say, “which will have overturned the government will take the place of it of course. It will seize upon power and proceed in a revolutionary manner. It will take the measures necessary to secure the success of the insurrection; it will demolish the old institutions; it will organize the defense of the country. As for those who will not recognize its authority, why the guillotine will settle them, whether they belong to the people or the middle-class, if they refuse to obey the orders necessary for the advance of the Revolution — The guillotine still in action! See how these budding Robespierres argue, who know nothing of the grand epic of the century but its period of decline, men who have never learned anything about it except from speeches of the hangers-on of the republic.

For us Anarchists the dictator of an individual or of a party (at bottom the very same thing) has been finally condemned. We know that Revolution and Government are incompatible; one must destroy the other, no matter what name is given to government, whether dictator, royalty, or parliament. We know that what makes the strength and the truth of our party is contained in this fundamental formula — “Nothing good or durable can be done except by the free initiative of the people, and every government tends to destroy it;” and so the very best among us, if their ideas had not to pass through the crucible of the popular mind, before being put into execution, and if they should become masters of that formidable machine — the government — and could thus act as they chose, would become in a week fit only for the gallows. We know whither every dictator leads, even the best intentioned, — namely to the death of all revolutionary movement. We know also in fine, that this idea of dictator is never anything more than a sickly product of

governmental fetish-worship, which like religious fetish worship has always served to perpetuate slavery.

But we do not now address ourselves to Anarchists. We speak to those governmental Revolutionists, who, led astray by the prejudices of their education, honestly deceive themselves, and ask nothing better than to discuss the question. We therefore speak to them from their own point of view.

And to being with one general observation; those who preach dictator do not in general perceive that in sustaining this prejudice they only prepare the way for those who later on will cut their throats. There is however one word of Robespierre's which his admirers would do well to remember. *He* did not deny the dictator in principle; but "have good care about it" he answered abruptly to Mandar when he spoke to him of it, "[*Jacques Pierre*] *Brissot would be the Dictator!*" Yes, Brissot, the crafty girondin, deadly enemy of the leveling tendencies of the people, furious defender of property (though he once called it theft) Brissot, who would coolly have consigned to the Abbaye Prison Hebert, Marat, and all the moderate Jacobins!

Now this was said in 1792! And this time France had already been three years in Revolution! In fact Royalty no longer existed, it only awaited its death stroke; the feudal regime was actually abolished. And yet even at this time, when the Revolution rolled its waves untrammelled, it was still the counter-revolutionist Brissot who had the best chance to be made dictator! And who would it have been previously, in 1789? [Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, comte de] Mirabeau is the man would have been acknowledged as the head of the government! The man who made a bargain with the king to sell to him his eloquence — this is the man who would have been thrust into power at this time, if the insurgent people had not imposed its sovereignty sustained by its pikes, and if it had not proceeded by *the accomplished facts* of the Jacquerie, in making illusory every government constituted at Paris or in the departments.

But governmental prejudice blinds so thoroughly those who speak of dictator, that they prefer the dictator of a new Brissot or a Napoleon to abandoning the idea of giving another master to men who are breaking the chains of their slavery!

The secret societies of the time of the Restoration and of Louis-Philippe contributed powerfully to maintain this prejudice of dictator. The middle-class Republicans of the time aided by the workers made a long series of conspiracies, with the object of overturning Royalty and proclaiming the Republic. Not understanding the profound change that would have to be effected in France before even a republican regime could be established, they imagined that by means of a vast conspiracy, they would some day overturn Royalty, take possession of power and proclaim the Republic. For more than thirty years these secret societies never ceased to work with a devotion unlimited, and a heroic courage and perseverance. If the Republic resulted from the insurrection of 1848, it was thanks to these societies, and thanks to the propaganda by deed made by them for thirty years.

Without their noble efforts the Republic would, up the present, have been impossible.

The end they had in view was to get possession of power themselves and to install a republican dictator. But of course they never succeeded. As ever, from the very nature of things, a conspiracy could not overturn Royalty. The conspirators had indeed prepared the way for its fall. They had spread widely the republican idea; their martyrs had made it the ideal of the people. But the final effort which definitely overturned the king of the bourgeoisie was much greater and stronger than any that could come from a secret society; it came from the mass of the people.

The result is known. The party which had prepared the way for the fall of royalty found itself thrust aside from the steps of the Government House. Others, too prudent to run the risks of conspiracy, but better known, more moderate also, lying in wait for the opportunity of grasping power, took the place which the conspirators hoped to conquer at the point of the bayonet. Journalists, lawyers, good talkers who worked hard to make a name for themselves while the true republicans forged weapons or expired in jail, took permission of power. Some of them already well-known were acclaimed by the people; others pushed themselves forward and were accepted because their name represented nothing more than a program of agreement with everybody.

It is useless to tell us that this happened because of a want of practical spirit in the party action, and that other will be able to do better in future — No, a thousand times no! It is a law as immutable as that which governs the movement of the stars, that the party of action must be thrown aside, and the intriguers and talkers seize upon power. They are always better known to the great mass that makes the final effort. They get more votes, because with or without voting papers, by acclamation or by the ballot-box, at the bottom it is always a kind of tacit election which is made in such cases by acclamation. They are acclaimed by everybody and above all by the enemies of the Revolution, who prefer to put forward nobodies, and thus by acclamation those men are accepted as rulers who are really either enemies of the movement or indifferent toward it.

The man who more than any other was the incarnation of this system of conspiracy, the man who by a life spent in prison for his devotion to this system, on the eve of his death uttered these words, which of themselves make an entire program — “Neither God nor Master!”

III

To imagine that a government can be overturned by a secret society, and that the secret society can take its place, is an error into which have fallen all the revolutionary organizations which sprang to life in the bosom of the republican middle-class since 1820. And yet facts abound which prove what an error it is. What devotion, what abnegation, what perseverance was not displayed by the republican secret societies of the Young Italy Party! And yet all this immense work, all these sacrifices made by the youth of Italy, before which even those of the Russian Revolutionary youth pale, all the corpses piled up in the casemated of Austrian fortresses, and under the knife and bullets of the executioner — all this only brought into power the crafty, robbing middle-class and royalty!

It was the same in Russia. It is difficult to find in history a secret organization which has obtained, with such limited means, results so immense as those attained by the Russian youth, or which has shown such energy or such powerful activity as their executive committee. It has shaken a colossus which appeared invulnerable — Czarism; and it has rendered autocratic government henceforth impossible in Russia. And still it is only simple fools who imagine that the

Executive Committee will get into power when the crown of Alexander III is dragged in the more. Other men — the prudent ones, who strove to make a name for themselves while the revolutionists laid and spring mine or perished in Siberia, these others — the intriguers, the talkers, the lawyers, the journalists who now and again shed a few tears very soon dried up, on the tomb of the heroes, and make believe they are friends of the people — these are the men who will come and take the place left vacant by the Government, and will shout “stand back” to those “unknown persons” who will have prepared they way for the Revolution.

It is inevitable, it cannot be otherwise. For it is not secret societies nor even Revolutionary organizations that can give finishing blow to governments. Their functions, their historic mission is to prepare men’s minds for the Revolution and then when men’s minds are prepared and external circumstances are favorable, the final rush is made, not by the group that initiated the movement, but by the mass of the people altogether outside of the society. On the 31st of August Paris was deaf to the appeals of Blanqui. Four day later he proclaimed the fall of the government; but then the Blanquists were no longer the initiators of the movement; it was the people, the millions who dethrone the man of December, and proclaimed the humbugs whose names for two hears had resounded in their ears. When a Revolution is ready to burst out, when the movement is felt in the air, when its success is already *certain*, then a thousand new men, on whom the organization has never exercised any direct influence, come and join the movement, like birds of prey coming to the field of battle to feed on the victims. These help to make the final effort, but it is not in the ranks of the sincere and irreconcilable conspirators, it is among the men on the fence that they look for their leaders. The conspirators who still are possessed with the prejudice of a dictator work then unconsciously to put into power their own enemies.

But if all this that we have just said is true with regard to political revolutions or rather outbreaks, it is much more true with regard to the Revolution we desire — the Social Revolution. To allow any government to be established, a strong and recognized power, it is to paralyze the work of the Revolution at once. The good that this government could do is nil, and the evil immense.

For what is it we have on hand? What do we understand by Revolution? It is not a simple change of governors. It is the taking possession by the people of all social wealth. It is the abolition of all the forces which have so long hampered the development of Humanity. But is it by decrees emanating from a government that this immense economic revolution can be accomplished? We have seen in the past century the Polish revolutionary dictator Kosciusko decree the abolition of personal servitude, yet the servitude continued to exist for eighty years after this decree. We have the Convention, the omnipotent Convention, the terrible Convention as its admirers call it, decree the equal division *per head* of all he Communal lands taken back from the nobles. Like so many other this decree remained a dead letter because in order to carry it out it was necessary that the proletarians of the rural districts should make an entirely new Revolution, and Revolutions are not made by the force of decrees. In order that the taking possession of social wealth should become an accomplished fact it is necessary that the people should have their hands free, that they would shake off the slavery to which they are too much habituated, that they act according

to their own will, and march forward without waiting for orders from anyone. And it is this very thing which a dictator would prevent however well integrated it might be, while it would be incapable of advancing in the slightest degree the march of the Revolution.

But if government, were it even an ideal Revolutionary government, creates no new force and is of no use whatever in the work of demolition which we have to accomplish, still less can we count on it for the work of reorganization which must follow that of demolition. The economic change which will result from the Social Revolution will be so immense and so profound, it must so change all the relations based today on property and exchange, that it is impossible for one or any individual to elaborate the different social forms, which must spring up in the society of the future. This elaboration of new social forms can only be made by the collective work of the masses. To satisfy the immense variety of conditions and needs which will spring up as soon as private property shall be abolished, it is necessary to have the collective suppleness of mind of the whole people. Any authority external to it will only be an obstacle, only a trammel on the organic labor which must be accomplished, and beside that a source of discord and hatred.

But it is full time to give up this illusion so often proved false and soften dearly paid for, of a *Revolutionary Government*. It is time to admit, once and for all, this political axiom that a *government cannot be revolutionary*. People talk of the convention, but let us not forget that the few measures taken by the Convention, little revolutionary though they were, were only the sanction of action accomplished by the people who at the time trampled under foot all governments. As Victor Hugo has said, Danton pushed forward Robespierre, Marat watched and pushed on Danton, and Marat himself was pushed on by Cimourdain — this personification of the clubs of wild enthusiasts and rebels. Like all the governments that preceded it and followed it, the Convention was only a drag on the action of the people

The facts which history teach us are so conclusive in this respect, the impossibility of a Revolutionary Government and the injurious effect of that which is called by the name are so evident, that it would seem difficult to explain the determination with which a certain school calling itself Socialist maintains the idea of a government. But the explanation is very simple. It is that Socialists though they say they are the followers of this school, have an entirely different conception from ours of the Revolution which we have to accomplish. For them, as for them idle-class Radicals, the Social Revolution is rather an affair of the future about which we have not to think much at present. What they dream of in their inmost thoughts, though they don't dare to confess it, is something entirely different. It is the installation of a government like that of Switzerland or the United States, making some attempts at appropriation in favor of the State of what they call "public services." It is something after the ideal of Bismark. It is a compromise made in advance between the Socialistic aspirations of the masses and the series of the middle class. They would indeed wish the appropriation to be complete, but they have not courage to attempt it; so they put it off to the next century, and before the battle they enter into negotiation with the enemy.

For us who understand that the moment is near for giving a mortal blow to the middle-class, that the time is not far off when the people will be able to lay their hands on all social wealth

and reduce the class of exploiters to a state of impotence, for us I say there can be no hesitation in the matter. We fling ourselves body and soul into the *Social* Revolution, and as on the road we follow, a government, whatever may be its device, is an obstacle, we will sweep from our path all ambitious men, however they shall come to thrust themselves upon us as governors of our destinies.

Away with Governments; make room for the People, and Anarchy!

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Pëtr Kropotkin
Revolutionary Government
1892

Retrieved on March 1st, 2009 from dwardmac.pitzer.edu
From Freedom, A Journal of Anarchist Communism, Translated from “La Revolte” and reprinted
from “The Commonweal,” proofread version retrieved on January 2, 2020, from RevoltLib.com.

theanarchistlibrary.org