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Anarchism: What it Is and What it Is Not

Victor Yarros

1893

IT was an observation of John Stuart Mill's that to know a thing it is necessary to realize, not only what it is, but also what it is not. Applying this definition or test to that passage of Mr. Thomas B. Preston's paper on "Are We Socialists?" (ARENA, December) in which he states and criticises the principles of anarchism, we find ourselves entitled to affirm that Mr. Preston scarcely possesses such familiarity with, and comprehension of, the essential doctrines of anarchism as would justify confident criticism of that school.

What is anarchism, and who are the anarchists? Loosely speaking, there are two schools of anarchism, two species of anarchists. There is the school of communist anarchism. This school rigorously adheres to the economic and 'political teachings of Michael Bakounin. It insists on the "expropriation of the expropriators"—capitalists and men who live on rent, interest, or profit—and the total abolition of private property in capital, or the means and instruments of production. It favors the use of physical force, and is 'openly revolutionary. In short, most of Mr. Preston's statements concerning

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anarchists certainly may be accepted as~ tolerably exact with reference to this school. The school to which Mr. Preston's predications do not apply is that of individualist anarchism. Strictly speaking, this school is the only one in the field which possesses the right to the term "anarchist," since, as will presently be established, it is the only school which logically and consistently follows out the principle of non-interference with personal liberty. Whether it carries out the principle specified "to an exaggerated absurdity," is, of course, a matter of opinion; but before delivering any judgment, let us ascertain the precise significance of the principle of "personal liberty" espoused by the individualist anarchists.

Few are aware that the anarchistic principle of "personal liberty" is absolutely coincident with the famous Spencerian "first principle of human happiness,"—the principle of "equal freedom,"—to which precise expression is given in the following formula: Every man is free to do that which he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man. This principle of equal freedom the individualist anarchists accept without reservation or qualification, recognizing no exceptions to scientific ethical laws, any more than to physical laws. By accepting the principle is naturally meant the acceptance of all its corollaries or logical deductions; and these corollaries are: the right to physical integrity, which negatives murder, assault, and minor trespasses; the rights to free motion and locomotion, which imply the freedom to move from place to place without hindrance; the right to the uses of natural media — land, light, air; the right to property, in products as well as in means of production, which negatives any species of robbery and any system of compulsory "nationalism" or communism; the rights of gift and bequests; the rights of free exchange and free contract; the right of free industry; the rights of free belief and worship; and the rights of free speech and publication. These rights are natural social rights, and no society can be stable and harmonious which tolerates their infringement. The test of social

progress is observance and respect of these personal rights, and not any form of government. "Crime" can mean nothing else than the violation of one or more of these positive rights; no individual who refrains from aggression or invasion of rights can possibly be criminal. Now, from this point of view let us examine the ethical character of our present political practices. It is admitted without hesitation that no individual can rationally or justly claim the right to trench upon the freedom of any one of his fellows; but it is generally assumed that a government that is, a body representing a majority of the individuals -is entitled to traverse and violate many of the rights of the individual. If the government should attempt to murder a citizen against whom no crime was alleged, it would certainly cause a revolution, it being universally felt that murder does not cease to be a crime when committed by public authorities. Yet when government breaks the law of equal freedom by taxing men against their consent, and thus denying the right to property; or when it imposes a "duty" on imports, and prohibits men from exchanging

freely with people of other lands, and thereby tramples upon the right of free exchange; or when it passes laws in restriction of banking and the issuing of circulating notes, in distinct contradiction of the rights to free industry, free exchange, and free contract; or when it compels the observance of religious holidays in spite of the right to free belief; or when it monopolizes the letter-carrying industry regardless of the prohibition of such actions by the rightful freedom of industry, the great majority of men do not dream of interposing any objection or raising the question of the ethical propriety of such conduct. In other words, the great majority of people act upon the tacit or avowed belief that there are two ethical standards, not one, and that governments are not to be judged in the same manner as individuals. That which is a crime, a punishable act, when committed by a private citizen, may be a legitimate and even

praiseworthy act when done in the name of the government. Is this belief rational?

No, answers the individualist anarchist. That which the ethical law interdicts is a crime when proceeding from the government no less than when proceeding from the private citizen. This answer clearly implies more than is embraced in the position of Spencerian individualists. According to these, it is wrong for the government to assume any function save that of protecting the rights of individuals, of enforcing the corollaries of the law of equal freedom. But it is claimed that there is an ethical warrant for compelling men to support a government organized for such a purpose ; that there is an ethical warrant for compulsory taxation and for government not based on individual consent. On the other hand, the individualist anarchists maintain that a government not based on the actual consent of the governed is pure tyranny, and that compulsory taxation is robbery. To interfere with a man who acts within the limits of equal freedom, who invades no one's proper sphere, is a crime, and hence all governments resting on compulsory taxation are unethical. It is undoubtedly true that men are confronted with the necessity of providing for systematic and organized protection of their rights or freedoms; still, he who declines to accept the protection of government and to contribute toward its support, can only be said to be guilty of folly, and of folly which by no means necessarily involves the injury of his fellows; therefore there is no warrant for any interference with him.

In view of these elucidations, is it correct to assert that individualist anarchists contemplate the utter abolition of "all law and government"? The answer is, yes and no. It is important to distinguish and to bear in mind the anarchistic definitions of the terms used. If by "government" be understood voluntary co-operation for purposes of defence against aggression, then the anarchists are emphatically in favor of it. As long as anti-social feelings and tendencies exist, co-operation against invaders is a necessity. If by "law" be understood ethical law, the law of

to ignore the defensive organizations, while aggressors are to be punished and coerced, the charge of exaggerated absurdity falls to the ground.

But perhaps Mr. Preston holds that it is absurd to favor voluntary taxation, "government by actual consent," and that the attempt to carry out the law of equal freedom would be fatal to society. If so, I can only say that anarchists differ with him.

pying ownership—and free credit, the demand for labor would exceed the supply, and wages would rise. Still, the individualist anarchists believe, with Mill and Cairnes, that association is to be the watchword of the future, and that future industrial relations will be prevailingly based on the co-operative principle. The talk about “communities” and “similarity of tastes,” however, is as irrelevant to the industrial ideal of the individualists as it is to that of the economists named. “Theoretical anarchy may thus be defined as a state of society in which every one does as he pleases without doing wrong.” No; theoretical anarchy is to be defined as a state of society in which every one is allowed to do as he pleases so long as he does not please to break the law of equal freedom. “As long as men are subject to the physical necessities of the body, ... there will be a clash of material interests which requires regulation; and such regulation requires government.” Defining “government” as the coercion of now invasive, “such regulation” does not require government in the opinion of the anarchists. To assert that it does, is to beg the very question at issue. Institutions to protect rights and restrain aggression are not to be confounded with government. If the institutions are formed on the voluntary principle, they are not “government.” Is a fire insurance company “government”? That which is based on actual consent is not government. “The trouble with many anarchists is that they wish to bring about their system by violence,” etc. This is true of the so-called communistic anarchists, who are not really entitled to the name they usurp, since they believe in compulsory communism and violate the law of equal freedom; but it is not true of the real anarchists,—the individualist anarchists, who abjure violent methods. “In theory they simply carry out to an exaggerated absurdity the doctrine of non-interference with personal liberty.” It is manifest that this was written on the assumption that anarchists would not resist crime and would not undertake to enforce the law of justice or equal freedom. Since, however, as has been explained, only the inoffensive are to be allowed

social life, then the anarchists strenuously insist on its faithful observance. But if by government he meant the coercion of the non-aggressive individual, then anarchism wages eternal war upon it; if by law be meant the statutes enacted by men both ignorant and reckless of the essential conditions of social happiness, then anarchism posits “no law.” Those who imagine that “the abolition of all law and government” is equivalent, in intention and fact, to the deliberate abandonment of all attempts to enforce justice and punish aggression, are betrayed into error by their definitions of the terms “law” and “government.” In proclaiming the sovereignty of the individual, the anarchist demands for him the full enjoyment of every liberty except the liberty to trespass. In other words, the anarchist contends for equal liberty, and wants every individual to count for one and no more than one. Invasion of rights he would punish, and he would co-operate voluntarily with his fellows for this as for numerous other purposes. But he would not coerce non-invasive citizens into co-operation of any kind. While, if left free, men’s self-interest, as well as their love of fair play, will prompt them to co-operate in the organization of protection against crime, there is no ethical warrant for compelling men to belong to any defensive or insurance associations. The anarchist thus upholds the right of the non—aggressive individual to “ignore the state.”

Two considerations have to be emphasized before proceeding to review and meet Mr. Preston’s criticisms seriatim. In the first place, the anarchists do not expect to obtain golden conduct out of leaden instincts, and to realize the perfect political system under conditions so unfavorable as those of to-day. The fundamental question of voluntary taxation is not with them at present a question of practical politics, but one of scientific politics, or rather of ethical and social science. They believe, with Spencer, that “an ideal, far in advance of practicability though it may be, is always needful for right guidance.” They are not impatient, and are satisfied with slow and gradual progress; but

they insist on moving towards the ideal, not away from it. Anarchists gladly work with other reformers whenever the demand is really for an enlargement of liberty and opportunity, and for a restriction of governmental activity, but they do not mistake one plank for the entire platform, a part for the whole. Free trade is a step in advance, and the anarchists would aid in securing it. Free banking and free credit they deem one of the most vital of economic reforms, and they are ready to devote themselves to its furtherance. Land reform they regard as of great importance, and any movement tending to make occupation and use the title to land will command their warm approval. And so on. But they never permit themselves to forget that the goal, the ideal, is the abolition of all forms of compulsory co-operation, and that the progress of society has been from the principle of militarism to that of industrialism, from status to contract, "from a condition in which agreement results from authority (to use the words of G. H. Lewes) to a condition where authority results from agreement."

The second fact requiring explicit and emphatic asseveration is that the individualist anarchists are not revolutionists, and do not rely on physical force. They do, however, favor passive resistance to despotism and governmental invasion.

A refusal of the Irish tenants to pay rent would be applauded by them, as would also an attempt to disregard any law not sanctioned by equity and reason. Disregard of tariff laws or banking laws or Sunday laws meets with their indorsement, but the methods of the so-called "anarchist communists" they reject as suicidal. As far as possible they would go with Carlyle in endeavoring "to do justice justly." Dissemination of true conceptions of economic and political justice is their chief task and method.

And now descending to the specific and particular, let us deal with Mr. Preston. Anarchism, he avers, "would abolish all government, and leave individuals subject only to natural laws." This is true, though not in the sense intended. Anarchism

would insist on obedience to all natural social laws, and would abolish all laws and all government not in harmony with the real laws of social life. "In a perfect state of society, the anarchists claim, men would do right without any laws. Education and self-control would rule the individual," etc. Yes, anarchists do claim all this, but their claim is not original. Philosophical Christians and evolutionists are in accord with them in this matter. But an anarchist society may be far from perfect, and hence stand in need of penal institutions and defensive organizations; and these are wholly compatible with anarchist principles. Anarchism does "not tolerate crime; it merely insists on the right of the non-criminal to ignore the defensive bodies, as we are allowed to-day to ignore insurance companies. Crime would be punished by anarchism, since courts and juries and prisons would remain. "Communities would be formed of individuals attracted to each other by a similarity of tastes and desires. If a member of one of these groups became dissatisfied, he would leave it, and join some other group, more congenial to his tastes." Communist anarchists will recognize in these descriptions a more or less faithful outline of their system; but to individualist anarchists they have a queer, unfamiliar, and unpleasant sound. Individualist anarchists scout the notion that to work for wages is degrading, and that the wage system necessarily involves exploitation of labor. Under a system of equality of opportunity, the laborer would receive the full product of his labor in the form of wages, and the capitalist would receive nothing but proper compensation for his services as organizer and captain of industry. Really free competition (which does not exist to-day) would bring about this condition of things. The trouble with us is not that workmen are forced to work for others for wages, but that monopoly and law-created privilege place capital in a position to dictate terms to the laborer. The supply of labor exceeds the demand for it, and therefore wages are below their natural level — the total product of the laborer. Under a system of free land—or occu-