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The Unrighteousness of Government

As Viewed by a Philosophical Anarchist

Charles Clark Rodolf

1895

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Whoever applies to himself the term anarchist should add a definition, if he does not wish to be misjudged, for no word in the English language is more misused and misunderstood. Some of this misuse is viciously intentional, but most of it is the result of pure ignorance. It is less than half a dozen years since the public began to learn that anarchist, nihilist, and socialist are not synonymous; and even now the three words are more or less confounded in popular usage, though they agree in but one thing, namely, disapproval of present-day social institutions.

Few people have an accurate understanding of any of these words; and the ignorance of the public is scarcely more profound than that of many who include themselves in one or another of these classes. Many who call themselves anarchists are not anarchists at all. Some of them are really socialists, others nihilists; while numerous malcontents, who seem to have no definite purpose or plan, and who lack the brute courage of nihilists, the patient hopefulness of socialists, and the discriminating intelli-

gence of anarchists, think they belong to any or all classes. Such mistakes, however, are not confined to anarchists, nihilists, and socialists, and do not change nor determine the meaning of the words. In the United States thousands of autocrats, aristocrats, and plutocrats call themselves democrats; but this does not make them such, and does not change the meaning of the word democrat.

Nihilist and socialist are diametrically opposite in meaning, and both are distinct from anarchist. The nihilist is the gloomiest sort of pessimist. He thinks present conditions very bad. He does not think they will become better through evolution. He is not at all sure they will become better under any circumstances. He has little faith in humanity. He is firmly convinced that present institutions are a bar to progress, and that society has all to gain and nothing to lose by wiping them out completely and building from the foundation, regardless of what has been. He wishes, therefore, to annihilate the existing government, and cares little what measures are employed so long as they are prompt and effective. The nihilist is always destructive.

The socialist, on the contrary, is an optimist. He wishes to improve, not to destroy, the present social organization. He believes that human institutions are a reflex of human thought, and can be changed only by changing the individuals who make up society. His plan, therefore, is to reform present institutions by judicious pruning and cultivation. The socialist is always constructive.

The anarchist is distinct from both nihilist and socialist, though he may be either or neither; just as he may be a Jew or a gentile, a Christian or an infidel. Anarchist is derived from the Greek word *anarchia*, which in turn is made from *arche* with the negative prefix *an* (equivalent to English un). The following definitions are taken from Liddell and Scott's Greek lexicon:

Anarchia—

1. Lack of a leader.

2. The state of a people without lawful government; lawlessness; anarchy.

Arche—

1. Beginning; origin; first cause.
2. The first place or power; sovereignty; dominion.

It is easy to infer how the second meaning of arche grew out of the first. The earliest human rulers, all of whom were usurpers, sought to justify their usurpation by claiming that their authority was of divine origin, themselves the earthly deputies of the arche of the universe, their words the expression of his will. Just as among ignorant and superstitious people idols are always looked upon as the gods they are intended to represent, so the word arche came to be applied to the unscrupulous usurpers, and the original meaning was lost sight of.

This blasphemous assumption of divine authority, usually referred to as the “divine right of kings,” has been vigorously asserted right down to the present time; and for thousands of years a reverence for human government has been so carefully impressed on the minds of people by those who think they profit from its continuance, that, while many reject the literal meaning of “divine right of kings,” the spirit is retained, and the impression is almost universal that the Creator did so imperfect and incomplete a job when He made and peopled the earth that, if mortal man had not come to the rescue with his profound wisdom, God’s creation would have proved a dismal failure —“Utopian,” “wouldn’t work,” because of the “imperfections of human nature”; while those who approve God’s work and think His laws sufficient without any supplementary man-made contrivances, are called anarchists (a word whose derivation would suggest haters of God rather than lovers), and are looked upon as dangerous people who need constant watching. All of which is but another way of saying that a portion of

God's imperfectly constructed creatures know more than He does, and should either show Him how to manage the remainder of humanity or manage them for Him; and that any who dare question the superior wisdom of these advisers and administrators of Deity should be sharply disciplined till they learn to be "content with the lot wherein it has pleased Almighty God to place them."

The true anarchist, who may be styled the philosophical anarchist, believes that all human government is usurpation, tyranny, essentially wrong, an unjustifiable interference with individual liberty; that in the ideal society every person may freely do whatsoever he will, right or wrong, his own conscience and his desire for the love of others being the only restraining influences. A man's opinions, not his acts, are the basis of his title to the name anarchist. The methods he advocates and employs to promote his ideal neither weaken nor strengthen his title. He may believe in popular education, and -may favor and practise agitation through speaking and writing. He may advocate the immediate forcible overthrow of existing government, and may join the nihilists in a dynamite campaign. He may feel that time only can accomplish the work, and all effort on his part would avail little, and he may do nothing to bring about what he considers the ideal state of society. Any of the foregoing he may do and remain a true anarchist. The test of the philosophical anarchist is a belief that all human government is adverse to the peace and happiness of mankind, utterly incompatible with a high degree of individual and social development, an assumption of authority for which there is no basis of right.

Philosophical anarchists are the only persons justly entitled to the name anarchist; but popular usage extends the term to a very different class of individuals. Most people are deeply in love with the superstition called government; very sure that God did not finish His work, and that the human monstrosities blasphemously called laws are indispensable supplements and supports to the divine code; serenely confident that the same sinful human beings who (they charge) will not be and do good if they can help it, will

than an equal share. Hence, all are engaged in a grand scramble for what there is, and energy which should be applied to production is wasted in the fierce warfare of competition.

Those who desire the beautiful anarchy of Christianity, who wish to see God's will done on earth as it is in heaven, can in no better way show their sincerity than by helping to gain for everyone free access to the bounties of nature, and by promoting the establishment of an industrial brotherhood among men. When the present commercial cannibalism is replaced by a system of co-operative production and distribution, it will be possible, without great effort on the part of anyone, to fill the world with an abundance that shall laugh at want. When no one suffers from lack of means to supply his material wants, no one will care for laws to assist him to rob his neighbor or to prevent his neighbor from robbing him. Then none will be cursed by their own avarice, and frugality will not be esteemed a virtue. When there is no temptation to lay up treasures on earth, it will be easy to teach men to seek to lay up treasures in heaven.

All hail, the anarchy of Christianity! the government of Truth and Love!

Let no one suppose that philosophical anarchists advocate disorder and strife. No more peaceable, order-loving people can be found than the true philosophical anarchists of the United States. They have no respect for the authority of rulers, but the profoundest respect for the wishes of others. It is because of this respect for others that they are anarchists. No one who loves his fellow-man and believes in divine justice will wish to see any one deprived of liberty in the name of law.

Most philosophical anarchists are tireless agitators, and are trying to show that government is unnecessary. Few of them wish the government destroyed while public opinion is so generally in favor of it. They know that a high degree of intelligence and morality is essential to the existence of true anarchy, and that governments will exist so long as men think them necessary. Men will think them necessary so long as the accumulation of private property is the chief business of life. The accumulation of private property will be the chief business of life so long as the total production of wealth is insufficient to supply abundantly all the real and imaginary needs of everyone and still leave a surplus so great as to remove every fear of material want.

In the most bombastic manner we call this the “richest nation on earth,” and boast of our “untold millions of surplus products”; while in fact we are always within a few months of starvation and nakedness. We consume each year nearly as much as we produce, accumulating only the beggarly pittance of less than one-twentieth of our annual product. And even this is possible only because a great majority of our people are without the means to supply many of their proper wants. Fully five-sixths of the inhabitants of the United States would eat better food, wear better clothes, live in larger and better houses, fill them with more and better furniture, adorn them with more and better pictures, read more and better books, and enjoy many other proper comforts and luxuries, if they could. But there is not enough for all, and no one can liberally supply the wants of himself and family unless he succeeds in getting more

nevertheless display intense zeal in providing laws to compel themselves to be and do good. Indeed, they seem to consider human government the cause of all the progress the race has made, and indispensable to prevent a relapse into barbarism. Hence, popular opinion holds anarchy synonymous with confusion and strife, and the word anarchist is made to include all persons who, in contempt of existing laws, promote contention and disorder. With these persons, who may not inaptly be styled criminal anarchists, philosophical anarchists deem it no honor to be counted.

A man's acts determine whether or not he is entitled to be ranked with criminal anarchists. His opinions are of no consequence. A criminal anarchist is a person who boldly, openly, and flagrantly sets at defiance existing laws or encourages others to do so. It is immaterial whether the law is good or bad. Law is law; and whoever persistently sets at defiance a law promulgated by the supreme power of a state or municipality is a criminal anarchist. This by no means implies that every murderer and thief is a criminal anarchist. It is not enough that the act is unlawful and persistent. There must be an autocratic display of contempt and disregard for authority and public opinion calculated to promote in others a like contempt and disregard and to result, if continued, in a chaotic state of society. A few examples may serve to make the distinction clearer than any amount of explanation: The man who sells whiskey in a prohibition state, and the lawyer who aids him to escape the legal penalty provided for the offence; the banker or money-loaner who takes more than legal interest; the railroad manager who ignores the interstate commerce law; the mob which lynches a murderer; the president of the United States and the secretary of the treasury, when they ignored the law requiring the purchase of 4,500,000 ounces of silver bullion per month; the managers of the great trusts, and the attorney-general when he failed to prosecute them as commanded by the law he had sworn to uphold— all these are examples of criminal anarchists.

It will thus be seen that the criminal anarchist is the logical opposite of the philosophical anarchist. For while ready to trample under foot every law which might prevent the accomplishment of his personal ends, the criminal anarchist is the first man to resort to law when it will serve his purpose. His contempt is not for law, but for his fellowmen; and he does not mean that law or public opinion shall defeat his selfish schemes. This is in striking contrast with the declaration of the philosophical anarchist that all law, good or bad, is equally an unrighteous interference with personal liberty.

A prevalent error nowadays is to apply the word anarchist indiscriminately as a term of reproach to anyone who is considered bad. This is a radical wrong against which even the whiskey-sellers and lawyers have good reason to protest. The test is legal, not moral. The man who upholds vicious laws with all his might may be a villain, but he is not an anarchist. The man who steals in strict conformity with a law framed for his special use may be a consummate scoundrel, but he is not an anarchist. He who boldly defies and resists bad laws may be a criminal anarchist, though brave, noble, and patriotic. John Hancock, Patrick Henry, Thomas Paine, George Washington, Samuel Adams, and all those illustrious heroes of revolutionary days may have been anarchists. If they were, the American people are not likely on that account to disown them.

Some months ago the press was regaling us almost daily with accounts of deeds of violence committed in the leading cities of Europe by men who both by themselves and others were styled anarchists. The accounts, however, showed that, while they may have been nihilists, they certainly were not philosophical anarchists. They seemed to be a lot of desperadoes bent upon doing all the harm they could, their hearts filled with hatred for everyone whose position gave the slightest ground for supposing that he was in part responsible for the real or fancied wrongs from which these wretches thought they were suffering. There was nothing in their actions to suggest that they were opposed to governments in general. The only reform they seemed to desire was that they

ing can by any possibility have a right to prevent us from doing as we will.

None but an anarchist can appreciate true Christianity, and no true anarchist can long deny the teachings of the meek and lowly Anarchist of Palestine. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself." That is, thou shalt, with all thy powers, seek to know God's law and obey it; for love is active as well as passive. Be guided not by the laws of man, but by the laws of God. "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." And in the doing of these good works, "fear not them which kill the body;" even though clothed with all the dignity of man-made laws, for they "are not able to kill the soul." "Judge not, that ye be not judged." "Resist not evil." "Give to him that asketh thee." "Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you." Grant to everyone the liberty you claim for yourself.

Oh, what an inspiration! We are free, and we could not help it, if we would! We owe no allegiance to any lord, prince, or potentate, except the Supreme Arche of the universe. Life and liberty are inalienable.

True philosophical anarchists are rare. It is one thing to criticize the government, quite another to deny utterly its right to exist. Nearly every individual in the United States who has reached years of discretion can point out defects in our government, and tell just how they should be remedied—by law. But these same persons are quite sure that a bad government is better than none. Most self-styled philosophical anarchists think wrong should be prohibited. So do czar, sultan, and emperor. No despot ever attempted to prevent anything but wrong, as he saw it; and monarchs have as much right to their opinions as have anarchists. Human prohibition of wrong calls for a human standard of right, and a human judgment to compare the act with the standard. This opens the door to every abuse.

ernment to control that individual may be accurately expressed by the following equation:

0 X 69,999,999 = The right of the majority to rule the minority.

But it is possible to conceive of unanimous consent in the choice of rulers and the enactment of law, or unanimous consent to abide by the will of the majority; and this brings us to the real question, namely, the right of government to exist by consent, the right of men to consent to be governed. For one hundred and nineteen years that immortal document, the Declaration of Independence, has stood before the world, hated and feared by tyrants, admired by philosophers, and adored by the American people; but its sublime grandeur seems not to have been appreciated or even seen. Men boast of their inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and with the boast still on their lips begin disputing over which of two sets of men shall take charge of those rights for them.

An attempt to prove that the right to life and liberty is inalienable would be superfluous. For more than a century that truth has been declared self-evident, and the words have echoed from every rostrum and platform and pulpit in America. In all that time no one has arisen to dispute it. The simple statement, then, is enough: Life and liberty are inalienable. Glorious thought! Not only have we a right to life and a right to perfect liberty in the pursuit of happiness, but we cannot by our own act dispose of these rights, even for temporary purposes. He alone who gave them can take them from us. We can never shirk the responsibility of ourselves. We have ourselves always on our hands. In premeditating upon a course of action, we should feel and feel keenly that we alone are responsible for our acts. It should be our pleasure, as it is our right and duty, to burst away from every fetter, and never permit the opinions of others, even though bearing the imprint of legal authority, to swerve us from our manifest duty or excuse us for sins of omission or commission. We can never have a right to do wrong; but, except it be granted him by the Almighty, no other human be-

should become the oppressors; or possibly they hoped, by intimidating those in authority, to secure certain desired legislation. Some, however, seemed to be impelled by even baser motives than those just given. Santo, the murderer of President Carnot, was no more an anarchist than Guiteau, who shot President Garfield. Personal hatred, revenge, and disappointed ambition were the forces which impelled these two murderers.

Having thus at some length stated what anarchists are and what they are not, it is now in order to show the grounds for the assertion that human governments have no right to exist. It would be proper first to reply to the arguments of the other side; but if any such arguments have ever been presented, they have certainly escaped my attention. The fact is that men find government in force when they come into the world, accept it as a matter of course, and most of them are content to dismiss the subject with, "Governments always have been and always will be." To be sure, countless efforts have been made to show the superiority of certain forms of government; but all these discussions assume the propriety and necessity of human government of some sort. So there are no arguments to answer. My task would be easier if there were; there is nothing so hard to contend against as blind, unreasoning belief.

It would be superfluous to deny -that kings have a divine right to rule. In this land of boasted freedom, no one believes in the "divine right of kings," and few (if any) would claim a divine source for the authority of presidents, congresses, legislatures, and courts. Americans have been too well drilled in the Declaration of Independence to forget that "Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed." They will not undertake to defend the tyrants of the old world, but will say that in our glorious republic the rulers are chosen by the people and derive their authority directly from them.

What a beautiful thought! what a grand thought! That is, it would be but for one defect: it is not true. Our rulers are not chosen by the people, though some of our rulers are chosen by

some of the people. The president, United States senators, federal judges, and a host of other officers go into office by appointment, a process quite distinct from our elections. Nor are our elected officers chosen by the people, not even by a majority of the people. In the first place, a majority of the people are minors; then, of the adults, a majority are women; further, of the men, quite a considerable number are disqualified or sick or busy or away from home or deliberately stay away from the polls; and, finally, there are often so many candidates that no one receives a majority of the votes cast. So, to summarize, the best we can say of our grand popular government is that a portion of the rulers are chosen by a plurality of a majority of a minority of a minority—the successful candidates usually receiving the votes of from one-tenth to one-twentieth of their constituents.

It may be urged that the above criticisms are aimed at the methods rather than the principles of government; that it would be folly to allow a voice in the government to those who have not reached years of discretion; that we are extending the suffrage to women in many places and will ere long wipe out that relic of barbarism which denies them equal rights with men; that persons of unsound mind could not vote intelligently; that it would be possible to so revise the method of casting and collecting the ballots as to permit every sick and busy man to vote; that certain safeguards are indispensable to a pure ballot; that those who deliberately stay away from the polls give tacit consent and approval; that a government by the majority we already have in theory and soon shall have in fact.

Let us briefly consider some of the foregoing points: If children, from lack of discretion, are not entitled to a voice in the selection of those who are to enact and enforce the laws, by what sort of logic are they held legally or morally responsible for the violation of those laws? and how do we harmonize the punishment of minors for violating laws in the making of which they had no voice *nth* the principle that “Governments derive their just pow-

ers from the consent of the governed”? In our treatment of insane and feeble-minded persons we are logical. We do not hold them responsible for their acts, and never punish them. Our sole thought is to protect them from harm through the acts of themselves or others. When our government shall deal as kindly and liberally with the dear children as it now does with persons of unsound mind, it will have an excuse for depriving them of a voice in the making of laws. The careless voter deserves more censure than sympathy; but it requires a large stretch of imagination to say that all who wilfully refuse to vote thereby approve or consent to the wrongs of successful candidates. Silence is often the only available means of expressing disapproval of the actions of packed conventions.

But, to get nearer to the heart of the question, why should the majority control the minority? Whence comes their right to dictate? Are they less liable to err? Is it not a matter of history that questions remain in controversy only so long as the majority are wrong? and that when a majority are right the question is quickly settled and the controversy ended? Is not human progress simply the correction of the errors of the majority? There are times when both majority and minority are wrong. In such case the question, after a wearisome wrangle, often long drawn out, unable longer to attract popular attention, is dropped. *Vide* tariff. But does not experience justify the assumption that in nearly all controversies the majority are wrong, and rule by might instead of right?

However, suppose the majority are right. It is a basic principle with us that all are equal and free; and this is universally construed to mean that no individual, as an individual, has a right to dictate to another. Surely, no person can give to another that which he does not possess. Society is an aggregation of individuals, and its rights and powers cannot possibly exceed the sum total of the rights and powers of its individual members. Assuming that we have a population of seventy millions and a government that truly represents the sentiments of all but one lone individual, the right of the gov-