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Anarchy

Elisée Reclus

1894

Anarchy is not a new theory. The word itself taken in its meaning “absence of government”, of “society without leaders”, is of ancient origin and was used well before Proudhon.

Besides, what do the words matter? There were “acrates” before the anarchists, and the acrates had not yet imagined the name of their learned formation that countless generations would succeed. In all ages there have been free men, those contemptuous of the law, men living without any master and in accordance with the primordial law of their own existence and their own thought. Even in the earliest ages we find everywhere tribes made up of men managing their own affairs as they wish, without any externally imposed law, having no rule of behaviour other than “their own volition and free will,” as Rabelais expresses it [in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Book 1, Chapter 57]. But if anarchy is as old as humanity, those who represent it nevertheless bring something new to the world. They have a keen awareness of the goal to be attained, and from all corners of the earth they join together to pursue their ideal of the eradication of every form of government. The dream of worldwide freedom is no longer a purely philosophical or literary utopia. It has become a practical goal that is actively pur-

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sued by masses of people united in their resolute quest for the birth of a society in which there are no more masters, no more official custodians of public morals, no more jailers, torturers and executioners, no more rich or poor. Instead there will be only brothers who have their share of daily bread, who have equal rights, and who coexist in peace and heartfelt unity that comes not out of obedience to law, which is always accompanied by dreadful threats, but rather from mutual respect for the interest of all, and from the scientific study of natural laws .

No doubt, this ideal seems chimerical to many of you, but I am sure that it seems desirable to most and that you can see in the distance the ethereal image of a peaceful society where the men now reconciled will melt their swords, reshape their cannons and disarm their ships. Besides, are not you one of those who, for a long time, for thousands of years, you say, are working to build the temple of equality? You are “masons”, at the end of masonry is a building of perfect proportions, where only free men enter as equals and brothers, working unceasingly to their perfection and reborn by the force of their love of this new life of justice and kindness. That’s right, isn’t it? You’re not alone. You do not claim the monopoly of a spirit of progress and renewal. You do not even commit the injustice of forgetting your adversaries, those who curse and excommunicate you, the ardent Catholics who condemn the enemies of the Holy Church to hell, but who nevertheless prophesy the coming of an age of final peace. Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila, and many others among those of different faiths, certainly loved humanity with the most sincere love, and we owe them to count them among those who lived for an ideal of universal happiness. And now, millions and millions of socialists, at whatever school they belong, are also fighting for a future where the power of capital will be broken and men will finally be able to say “equals” without irony.

The aim of the anarchists is therefore common to them with many generous men belonging to religions, sects, and the most

diverse parties, but they are clearly distinguished by means, as their name indicates in the least doubtful manner. The conquest of power has almost always been the great preoccupation of revolutionaries, including the best intentioned of them. The prevailing system of education does not allow them to imagine a free society operating without a conventional government, and as soon as they have overthrown their hated masters, they hasten to replace them with new ones who are destined, according to the ancient maxim, to “make the people happy.” Generally, no one has dared to prepare for a change of princes or dynasties without having paid homage or pledged obedience to some future sovereign. “The king is dead! Long live the king!” cried the eternally loyal subjects — even as they revolted. For many centuries this has been the unvarying course of history. “How could one possibly live without masters?” said the slaves, the spouses, the children, and the workers of the cities and countryside, as they quite deliberately placed their shoulders under the yoke, like the ox that pulls the plow. The insurgents of 1830 proclaiming “the best of the republics” in the place of a new king are well remembered, as are the Republicans of 1848, who quietly withdrew into their slums after putting in “three months of misery in the service of the provisional government”. At the same time, a revolution broke out in Germany, and a popular parliament met in Frankfurt: “the old authority is a corpse” claimed one of the representatives. “Yes,” replied the president, “but we are going to resurrect him, we will call new men who will regain power by the power of the nation itself.”

Is not this the case for repeating the verses of Victor Hugo: “An old human instinct leads to turpitude?”

In contrast to this instinct, anarchy truly represents a new spirit. One can in no way reproach the libertarians for seeking to get rid of a government only to put themselves in its place. “Get out of the way to make room for me!” are words that they would be appalled to speak. They would condemn to shame and contempt, or at least to pity, anyone who, stung by

the tarantula of power, aspired to an office under the pretext of “making his fellow citizens happy.” Anarchists contend that the state and all that it implies are not any kind of pure essence, much less a philosophical abstraction, but rather a collection of individuals placed in a specific milieu and subjected to its influence. Those individuals are raised up above their fellow citizens in dignity, power, and preferential treatment, and are consequently compelled to think themselves superior to the common people. Yet in reality the multitude of temptations besetting them almost inevitably leads them to fall below the general level.

This is what we constantly repeat to our brothers-including all our fraternal enemies, like the state socialists- “Watch out for your leaders and representatives!” Like you they are surely motivated by the best of intentions. They fervently desire the abolition of private property and of the tyrannical state. But new relationships and conditions change them little by little. Their morality changes along with their self-interest, and, thinking themselves eternally loyal to the cause and to their constituents, they inevitably become disloyal. As repositories of power they will also make use of the instruments of power: the army, moralizers, judges, police, and informers. More than three thousand years ago the Hindu poet of the Mahabharata expressed the wisdom of the centuries on this subject: “He who rides in a chariot will never be the friend of the one who goes on foot!” Thus the anarchists have the firmest principles in this area. In their view, the conquest of power can only serve to prolong the duration of the enslavement that accompanies it. So it is not without reason that even though the term “anarchist” ultimately has only a negative connotation, it remains the one by which we are universally known. One might label us “libertarians,” as many among us willingly call themselves, or even “harmonists,” since we see agreement based on free will as the constituting element of the future society. But these designations fail to distinguish us

fends itself, however, by arguments which are not reasons, but by the schlague, the dungeon and the scaffold.

On the other hand, those who attack him can do so in all the serenity of their conscience. No doubt the movement of transformation will bring about violence and revolution, but is this world anything other than a world of continuous violence and permanent revolution? And in the alternatives to the social war, which men will be responsible? Those who proclaim an era of justice and equality for all, without distinction of classes or individuals, or those who want to maintain separations and therefore caste hatred, those who add repressive laws to repressive laws, and who do not know how to solve questions except by infantry, cavalry and artillery! History allows us to affirm with certainty that a politics of hate always breeds hatred, fatally aggravating the general situation, or even leading to permanent ruin. How many nations perished, oppressors as well as oppressed! Will we perish in our turn?

I hope not, thanks to the anarchist thought that is emerging more and more, renewing the human initiative. Are you not, if not anarchists, at least highly nuanced anarchists? Who of you, in his soul and conscience, will say to himself the superior of his neighbor, and will not recognize in him his brother and his equal? The morality so often proclaimed here in more or less symbolic words will certainly become a reality. For we, anarchists, know that this morality of perfect justice, of liberty and equality, is indeed the true one, and we live it wholeheartedly, while our adversaries are uncertain. They are not sure of being right; Basically, they are even convinced that they are wrong, and in advance they deliver the world to us.

adequately from the socialists. It is in fact our struggle against all official power that distinguishes us most essentially. Each individuality seems to us to be the center of the universe and each has the same right to its integral development, without interference from any power that supervises, reprimands or castigates it.

You know our ideal. Now the first question that arises is this: "Is this ideal really noble and deserving the sacrifice of devoted men, along with the terrible risks that all revolutions entail after it?" Is anarchist morality pure? And in libertarian society, if it is constituted, will man be better than in a society based on the fear of power and laws? I answer with confidence and I hope that soon you will answer with me "Yes, anarchist morality is the one that best fits the modern conception of justice and goodness."

The foundation of the old morality, as you know, was nothing but dread, "trembling," as the Bible says, and as many precepts taught you in your youth. "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom" was once the starting point of all education: society as a whole was based on terror. Men were not citizens, but subjects or flocks; the wives were servants, the children were the slaves, over whom the parents held a relic of the old right of life and death. We find everywhere, in all social relations, positions of superiority and subordination; finally, even today, the guiding principle of the state itself and of all the particular states that make it up, is hierarchy, by which is meant "holy" archy or "sacred" authority, for that is the true meaning of the word. And this sacrosanct system domination encompasses a long succession of superimposed classes in which the highest have the right to command and the lowest have the duty to obey. The official morality consists in bowing humbly to one's superiors and in proudly holding up one's head before one's subordinates. Each person must have, like Janus, two faces, with two smiles: one flattering, solicitous, and even servile, and the other haughty and nobly condescending.

The principle of authority (which is the proper name for this phenomenon) demands that the superior should never give the impression of being wrong, and that in every verbal exchange he should have the last word. But above all, his orders must be carried out. That simplifies everything: there is no more need for quibbling, explanations, hesitations, discussions, or misgivings. Things move along all by themselves, for better or worse. And if a master isn't around to command in person, one has ready-made formulas-orders, decrees, or laws handed down from absolute masters and legislators at various levels. These formulas substitute for direct orders and one can follow them without having to consider whether they are in accord with the inner voice of one's conscience.

Between equals, the task is more difficult, but also more exalted. We must search fiercely for the truth, discover our own personal duty, learn to know ourselves, engage continually in our own education, and act in ways that respect the rights and interests of our comrades. Only then can one become a truly moral being and awaken to a feeling of responsibility. Morality is not a command to which one submits, a word that one repeats, something purely external to the individual. It must become a part of one's being, the very product of one's life. This is the way that we anarchists understand morality. Are we not justified in comparing this conception favourably with the one bequeathed to us by our ancestors?

Perhaps you will give me reason? But again here, many of you will pronounce the word "chimera". Happy already, that you see at least a noble chimera, I go further, and I affirm that our ideal, our conception of morality is entirely in the logic of history, brought naturally by the evolution of humanity.

Pursued formerly by the terror of the unknown as well as by the feeling of their helplessness in the search for causes, men had created by the intensity of their desire, one or more helpful deities who represented at once their formless ideal and the fulcrum of all this mysterious world visible, and invisible, of the

repeated, but it is already showing itself in a thousand forms; blind is the man who does not know how to observe it. On the other hand, if there is a chimeric society, it is the pandemonium in which we live. You will do me justice that I have not avoided criticism, so easy with regard to the world today, as constituted by the so-called principle of authority and the fierce struggle for existence. But finally, if it is true that, according to the definition itself, a society is a group of individuals who come together and consult one another for the common good, it can not be said without ambiguity that the chaotic mass constitutes a society. According to her lawyers, — for any bad cause has hers — she would aim at perfect order by the satisfaction of the interests of all. But isn't it a laughing stock to see an orderly society in this world of European civilization, with the following continuation of tragedies inside, murders and suicides, violence and shootings, diebacks and famines, robberies, tricks and deceptions of all kinds, bankruptcies, collapses and ruins.

Who of us, coming out of this place, will see the ghosts of vice and hunger rise beside him? In our Europe, there are five million men waiting for a sign to kill other men, to burn houses and crops; another ten million men in reserve outside the barracks are bound in the thought of having to accomplish the same work of destruction; at least five million unfortunates' lives languish in prisons, sentenced to various penalties, ten million die per year of anticipated deaths, and out of 370 million men, 350, if not all, quiver in the justified anxiety of the morrow: in spite of the immensity of the social riches, who of us can affirm that a sudden reversal of fate will not take his away from him? These are facts which no one can dispute, and which should, it seems to me, inspire us all to resolutely change this state of affairs, which is full of incessant revolutions.

I once had the opportunity to talk to a senior official, drawn by the routine of life in the world of those who enact laws and sentences: "Defend your society!" — I told him. "How do you want me to defend it," he replied, "it is not defensible!" It de-

mine. No doubt, I'm supposed to guide the ship, but do not you think that's just a fiction, the maps are there, and it's not me who drew them up. I was not me who dug for us the channel of the port from which we come and from the port in which we will enter. And this superb ship, barely complaining in its frames under the pressure of the waves, swaying majestically in the swell, stroking powerfully under the steam, it was not me who built it. What am I here in the presence of the great dead, inventors and scholars, our predecessors, who taught us to cross the seas? We are all comrades, the sailors are my comrades, and you also the passengers are my comrades, because it is for you that we ride these waves, and in case of peril, we count on you to help us fraternally. Our work is common, and we are in solidarity with each other!" All were silent and I gathered preciously in the treasure of my memory the words of this captain, as we did not see much.

Thus this ship, this floating world where, moreover, the punishments are unknown, carries a model republic across the ocean in spite of hierarchical chinoiserie. And this is not an isolated example. Each of you knows at least hearsay, schools where the teacher, despite the severity of the rules, still unapplied, took all students for friends and happy collaborators. Everything is planned by the competent authority to put down the little scoundrels, but their great friend does not need all this paraphernalia; he treats children as men and constantly appeals to their good will, their understanding of things, their sense of justice and all respond with joy. A tiny anarchic society, truly human, is thus constituted, although everything seems to be leagued in the surrounding world to prevent its outbreak: laws, regulations, bad examples, public immorality.

Anarchist groups thus arise incessantly, in spite of the old prejudices and the dead weight of the old manners. Our new world is all around us, as a new flora would sprout under the detritus of the ages. Not only is it not chimerical, as it is constantly

surrounding things. These ghosts of the imagination, clothed with omnipotence, also became in the eyes of men the principle of all justice and all authority: masters of heaven, they naturally had their interpreters on earth, magicians, advisers, warlords before whom they learned to prostrate themselves as before the representatives from above. It was logical, but the man lasts longer than his works, and these gods he created have constantly changed as shadows projected on the infinite. Visible first, animated by human passions, violent and formidable, they retreated little by little in an immense distance; they ended by becoming abstractions, sublime ideas, which even gave no name, and then they became confounded with the natural laws of the world; they returned to that universe they were supposed to have brought out of nothingness, and now the man finds himself alone on the earth, above which he has drawn up the colossal image of God.

The whole conception of things changes at the same time. If God dies, those who draw obedience from their titles also see their shine tarnished: they too must gradually return to the ranks, accommodate their best to the state of things. No one would find Tamerlane nowadays who would order his forty courtiers to throw themselves off a tower, sure that, in the twinkling of an eye, he would see the forty bloody and broken corpses. The freedom to think of all men as anarchists without knowing it. Who does not reserve a little corner of the brain now to think? Now, this is precisely the crime of crimes, sin par excellence, symbolized by the fruit of the tree which revealed to men the knowledge of good and evil. Hence the hatred of science which the Church always professed. Hence the fury that Napoleon, a modern Tamerlane, always had for the "ideologues".

But the ideologues have come. They blew on the illusions of yesteryear as on a mist, starting all the scientific work again by observation and experience. One of them, a nihilist before our time, an anarchist at least in words, began by making a "clean

slate” of all he had learned. There is now hardly any scholar, no literary man, who professes to be himself his own master and model, the original thinker of his thought, the moralist of his morals. “If you want to be enlightened, enlighten yourself!” Goethe said. And do not artists seek to make nature as they see it, as they feel it and understand it? It is usually there, it is true, what could be called an “aristocratic anarchy,” claiming liberty only for the chosen people of the Musantes, rather than for the engravers of Parnassus. Each of them wants to think freely, to seek at will his ideal in the infinite while saying that “a religion for the people!” is necessary, he wants to live as an independent man but insists “obedience is made for women”; he wants to create original works, but “the mob from below” must remain enslaved as a machine to the ignoble functioning by the division of labor! However, these aristocrats of taste and thought no longer have the strength to close the great lock through which the current flows. If science, literature and art have become anarchists, if all progress, all new forms of beauty are due to the flourishing of free thought, this thought is also working in the depths of society and now it is no longer possible to contain it. It’s too late to stop the flood.

Is the diminution of respect not the phenomenon par excellence of contemporary society? I once saw in England crowds rushing by the thousands to beg from the empty plate of a great lord. I will not see him now. In India, the pariahs devoutly stopped at the hundred and fifteen regulations that separated them from the proud Brahmin: since the rushes in the stations, there is nothing between them but the closing wall of a waiting room. Examples of baseness and vile reptilation are not lacking in the world, but there is progress in the direction of equality. Before showing respect, one sometimes wonders if the man or the institution are really respectable. We study the value of individuals, the importance of works. Faith in greatness has disappeared; now, where faith no longer exists, institutions dis-

morality and practice are the rule even in bourgeois gatherings where they might seem to be entirely absent. Imagine a party in the countryside at which some participant, whether the host or one of the guests, would put on airs of superiority, order people around, or impose his whims rudely on everyone! Wouldn’t this completely destroy all the pleasure and joy of the occasion? True geniality can only exist between those who are free and equal, between those who can enjoy themselves in whatever way suits them best, in separate groups if they wish, or drawing closer to one another and intermingling as they please, for the hours spent in this way are the most agreeable ones.

Here I would allow myself to tell you a personal memory. We were sailing on one of these modern boats that splits the waves superbly with the speed of fifteen to twenty knots per hour, and which draws a straight line from continent to continent despite wind and tide. The air was calm, the evening was mild and the stars were lighting up one by one in the black sky. They were talking at the quarterdeck, and what could be talked about except this eternal social question which grips us, which seizes us by the throat like Oedipus’s sphinge. The reactionary of the group was pressed by his interlocutors, all more or less socialists. He suddenly turned towards the captain, the chief, the master, hoping to find in him a born defender of the good principles: “You keep order here! Is not your power sacred, what would become of the ship, directed by your constant will, if you do not?” — “Naïve man that you are,” answered the captain, “between us, I can tell you that ordinarily I am absolutely useless. The man at the helm keeps the ship in its straight line, in a few minutes another pilot will succeed him, then others will follow regularly, without my intervention, the usual way. Lower drivers and mechanics work without my help, without my opinion, and better than if I interfere to give them advice. And all these sailors, these sailors also know what work they have to do, and, on occasion, I have only to reconcile my small share of work with theirs, more painful though less paid than

Gaileo, while locked away in the prisons of the Inquisition, could only murmur secretly, "Still, it moves!" But thanks to the revolutions and the fury of free thought, we can today cry from the housetops and in the public squares, "The world moves, and it will continue to move!"

In addition to this great movement that gradually transforms all of society in the direction of free thought, free morality and freedom of action, in short, toward the essentials of anarchy, there has also existed a history of direct social experimentation that has manifested itself in the founding of libertarian and communitarian colonies: these are all small attempts that can be compared to the laboratory experiments of chemists and engineers. These efforts to create model communities all have the major failing of being created outside the normal conditions of life, that is to say, far from the cities where people intermingle, where ideas spring up, and where intellects are reinvigorated. And yet we can cite many of these companies that have succeeded, among others that of the "Young Icaria" transformation of the colony of Cabet, founded half a century ago on the principles of an authoritarian communism: With more migration, the group of communaries became purely anarchist, now living a modest existence in the state of Iowa, near the Des Moines River.

But where anarchist practice really triumphs is in the course of everyday life among common people who would not be able to endure their dreadful struggle for existence if they did not engage in spontaneous mutual aid, putting aside differences and conflicts of interest. When one of them falls ill, other poor people take in his children, feeding them, sharing the meager sustenance of the week, seeking to make ends meet by doubling their hours of work. A sort of communism is instituted among neighbours through lending, in which there is a constant coming and going of household implements and provisions. Poverty unites the unfortunate in a fraternal league. Together they are hungry; together they are satisfied. Anarchist

appear in their turn. The suppression of the state is naturally implied in the extinction of respect.

This rebellious criticism to which the state is subjected is also exercised against all social institutions. The people no longer believe in the holy origin of private property, produced, economists told us — we dare not repeat it now — by the personal work of the proprietors; he is not unaware that his individual labor never creates millions upon millions, and that this monstrous enrichment is always the consequence of a false social state, attributing to one the product of the labor of thousands of others; he will always respect the bread that the worker has won hard, the hut he has built with his own hands, the garden he has planted, but he will certainly lose respect for the thousand fictional properties represented by the papers of all kinds contained in the banks. The day will come, I do not doubt, where it will quietly regain possession of all the products of common labor, mines and estates, factories and castles, railways, ships and cargoes. When the masses, this "vile" mass by its own ignorance and cowardice will suffer the fatal consequence, ceasing to deserve the qualifier by which they were insulted, when they know in all certainty that the hoarding of this immense asset rests only on a chirographic fiction, on faith in blue paperwork, the current social state will be well threatened! In the presence of these profound, irresistible evolutions, which are made in all human brains, how stupid, how meaningless will these furious clamours that we launch against the capitalists appear to our descendants! What will matter of the foul words dumped by a press forced to pay its subsidies in good prose, what would matter even of the insults honestly uttered against us by these "holy but simple" devotees who carried wood to the pyre of Jan Huss! The movement that carries us away is not the act of mere fanatics, or poor dreamers, it is the movement of society as a whole. It is necessitated by the march of thought, now fatal, inescapable, like the rolling of the Earth and the Heavens.

Some doubt may remain in your minds whether anarchy has ever been any more than a mere ideal, an intellectual exercise, or subject of dialectic. You may wonder whether it has ever been realized concretely, or whether any spontaneous organization has ever sprung forth, putting into practice the power of comrades working together freely, without the command of any master. But such doubts can easily be laid to rest. Yes, libertarian organizations have always existed. Yes, they constantly arise once again, each year in greater numbers, as a result of advances in individual initiative. To begin with, I could cite diverse tribal peoples called “savages,” who even in our own day live in perfect social harmony, needing neither rulers nor laws, prisons nor police. But I will not stress such examples, despite their significance. I fear that some might object that these primitive societies lack complexity in comparison to the infinitely complicated organism of our modern world, organisms with infinite complication. So let us leave aside these primitive tribes and focus entirely on fully constituted nations that possess developed political and social systems.

No doubt, I could not show you any of them in the course of history which was constituted in a purely anarchic sense, for all were then in their period of struggle between various elements not yet associated; it is because each of these partial societies, though not fused into a harmonic whole, was all the more prosperous, the more creative the more it was freer, than the personal value of the individual was best recognized. Since the point at which human society emerged from prehistory, awakened to the arts, sciences, and industry, and was able to hand down its experience to us through written records, the greatest periods in the lives of nations have always been those in which men, shaken by revolution, have suffered least under the long-lasting and heavy burden of a duly-constituted government. Judged by the progress in discovery, the towering of thought, and the beauty of their art, the two greatest epochs for humanity were both tumultuous epochs, ages of “imperiled

liberty.” Order reigned over the immense empires of the Medes and the Persians, but nothing great came out of it. On the other hand, while republican Greece was in a constant state of unrest, shaken by continual upheavals, it gave birth to the founders of all that we think exalted and noble in modern civilization. It is impossible for us to engage in thought or to produce any work of art without recalling those free Hellenes who were our precursors and who remain our models. Two thousand years later, after an age of darkness and tyranny that seemed incapable of ever coming to an end, Italy, Flanders and the Europe of the Free Cities reawakened. Countless revolutions shook the world. [Giuseppe] Ferrari brought no less than seven thousand local shocks to Italy alone; in addition, the fire of free thought burst forth and humanity began once again to flourish. In the works of Raphael, de Vinci and Michelangelo it felt the vigor of youth once more.

Then came the great century of the encyclopedia with the ensuing world revolutions and the proclamation of Human Rights. Now, try if you can, to enumerate all the great progress that has been accomplished since this great shock of humanity. One wonders if during this last century did not concentrate more than half of history. The number of men has increased by more than half a billion; trade has increased more than tenfold, industry has become transfigured, and the art of modifying natural products has been magnificently enriched; new sciences have appeared, and, whatever may be said of them, a third period of art has begun; conscious and global socialism is born in its magnitude. At least one feels to live in the century of great problems and great struggles. Substitute for thought the hundred years of eighteenth-century philosophy, replace them with a period of no history in which four hundred million peaceful Chinese people lived under the tutelage of a “father of the people”, courting rites and mandarins with their diplomas. Far from living with momentum as we did, we would have gradually come closer to inertia and death.