

# Preface to The Conquest of Bread

A Translation of the Preface to the Original French Edition

Elisée Reclus

1892

Pyotr Kropotkin asked me to write some words at the beginning of his work, and I give myself to his desire, all in a certain difficulty in trying to do so. Not being able to add anything to the bundle of arguments that he presents in his work, I risk weakening the strength of his words. However, friendship excuses me. While the French “Republicans” supreme taste is to bow low beneath the feet of the tsar, I like to bring myself closer to the free men who he will beat with rods, who he will seal away in the oubliettes of a citadel or hang in an obscure dooryard. With these friends, I forget for an instant the abjection of the renegades who make themselves hoarse in their youth by crying “Liberty! Liberty!” and who now apply themselves to marry the two tunes of the Marseillaise and the Bozhe Tsarya Khrani.

Kropotkin’s *The Words of a Rebel* gives itself above all to an ardent critique of bourgeois society, at a time so fierce and so corrupt, and it makes an appeal to the revolutionary energies against the State and the capitalist regime. The present work, made as a sequel to *The Words*, is of a more peaceful bearing. It is aimed at men of good pleasure who honestly desire to collaborate on social transformation, and exhibit to them, following the grand features, the phases of imminent history that we will allow to build up the human family on the ruins of the banks and the States.

The title of the book, *The Conquest of Bread*, must be taken in the largest sense, because “Man shall not live by bread alone”. At a time where the generous and valiant try to transform their ideal of social justice into living reality, it is not the conquering of bread, even with wine and salt, that limits our ambition. It is necessary to conquer all that is necessary, or simply useful, to the comfort of life; it is necessary that we can assure everyone of the full satisfaction of their needs and pleasures. As long as we have not made this first “conquest”, as long as “there will always be poor people with us”, it is a bitter mockery to give the name of “society” to this group of human beings who hate each other and destroy each other, like ferocious animals sealed into an arena.

From the first chapter of his work, the author lists the immense riches that humanity already possesses and the prodigious mechanical equipment that it has acquired for itself through collective labor. The products obtained each year amply suffice to provide bread to all men, if the enormous capital of cities, factories, modes of transportation, and schools became communal property in place of private property, well-being becomes easy to conquer: the forces at our service will be applied, not to useless or contradictory work, but to the production of all that is necessary to humanity for food, housing, clothing, comfort, scientific studies, and artistic culture.

Nevertheless, the recapture of human possessions, expropriation, in one word, cannot accomplish itself through anarcho-communism: it must destroy the government, tear up its laws, repudiate its morals, ignore its agents, and putting itself to the following of its own initiative and grouping itself according to its affinities, its interests, its ideals, and the nature of secondary works. This question of expropriation, the most important in the book, is one of those the author has treated with the most details, plainly and without violent words, with the calmness and clearness of vision which demands the study of an upcoming revolution, henceforth inevitable. It's after this overthrow of the State that the groups of liberated workers, no longer having to toil in the service of the monopolizers and the parasites, may deliver themselves to attractive occupations of freely chosen labor, proceeding scientifically to the cultivation of the ground and to industrial production, intermixed with breaks given for study or for pleasure. The pages of the book which discuss agrarian work offer a crucial benefit, because they tell of facts that the application has already been controlled and that it is easy to apply everywhere in large, to the profit of all and not of the enrichment of a few.

Some pleasant people speak of the "end of the century" to scoff at the vices and failings of the elegant youth; but now it is a matter of something other than the end of a century; we arrive at the end of an age, of a historical era. It is the whole of ancient civilization that we see end. The right of strength and the whim of authority, the harsh Jewish tradition and the cruel Roman jurisprudence are no longer imposed upon us; we profess a new faith, and from this faith, which is at the same time a science, will become one of those which searches for the truth, it will take a body in the world of realizations, because the first of the historical laws is that society models itself on its ideals. How could the defenders of the outdated order of things maintain it? They no longer believe; having no longer a guide or a flag, they fight aimlessly, against the innovators. They have laws and guns, police officers with bludgeons and artillery parks, but all of that cannot be equalled out by one thought, and all of the old system of good pleasure and of compression is destined to soon lose itself in a sort of prehistory.

Indeed, the imminent revolution, so important that it may be in the development of humanity, will not differ from previous revolutions in accomplishing an abrupt jump; nature does not do such a thing. But one may say that, by a thousand phenomena, by a thousand profound modifications, anarchist society has for a long time already been in full growth. It comes up everywhere that free thought frees itself from the letter of dogma, everywhere that the genius of the researcher ignores old formulas, where human will manifests itself in independent actions, everywhere that honest men rebel against all imposed discipline, fully and willingly coming together to mutually educate themselves and reconquer together, without master, their share of life and of the integral satisfaction of their needs. All of that is anarchy, even when it ignores itself, more and more it comes to understand itself. How has it not triumphed? It has its ideals and the audacity of its will, while the crowd of its adversaries, from now on without faith, give themselves away to destiny, crying "End of century! End of century!"

The revolution looks to be fulfilled so, and our friend Kropotkin acts in his duty as a historian to position himself already at the day of the revolution in order to display his ideas on the resumption of possession of collective assets due to the work of all, and by making a call to the timid, who perfectly realize the prevailing oppressions, yet they do not dare begin to openly revolt against society in which a thousand personal connections and traditions they depend upon. They know that the law is iniquitous and a liar, that the magistrates are the courtiers of the strong and the oppressors of the weak, that the regular behavior of life and sustained integrity of labor

are not always rewarded by the certainty of having a piece of bread, and that the cynical impudence of the stock market, the sour cruelty of the pawnbroker are the best weapons that all the virtues of the “conquest of bread” and of well-being have to fight with; but instead of fixing their thoughts, their wishes, their businesses, and their actions according to their enlightened sense of justice, most of them flee to some side street with no outlet for progress to escape the dangers of a frank attitude. Such neo-religious, no longer confessing the “absurd faith” of their fathers, devote themselves to a more original mystagogy, without precise dogma and losing itself in a fog of confused feelings: they make themselves spiritualists, rosicrucians, buddhists, or thaumaturges. They are pretend disciples of Shakyamuni, without giving themselves the trouble of studying the doctrine of their master. Melancholic gentlemen and vaporous ladies feign to search for peace in the annihilation of Nirvana.

They speak without ceasing about the ideal that these “beautiful souls” reassure themselves with. Material beings that we are, we have, it is true, the weakness to think of food, it is often lacking; it is currently lacking for millions of our slave brothers, the subjects of the tsar, and to millions of others still; but beyond bread, beyond well-being and all the collective riches that can procure us the implementation of our campaigns, we see arising in the distance before us a new world in which we can fully love ourselves and satisfy this noble passion of the ideal that the lovely, ethereal lovers, flouting material life, say to be the unquenchable thirst of their soul! When there will no longer be neither rich nor poor, when the half-starved will no longer look at the sated enviously, natural friendship can be revived between men, and the religion of solidarity, suffocated today, will take the place of that vague religion which draws evasive images in the vapors of the sky.

The revolution will keep more than its promises; it will renew the sources of life, washing us clean of impure contact with all police and it will finally free us of these vile concerns of money which poison our existence. This is so that each person could freely follow their way: the worker will accomplish the work which suits them; the researcher will study without ulterior motive or mental reservation; the artist will no longer prostitute their ideal of beauty for their job; all people from now on will be friends, we will be able to realize in unison the great things made out by the poets.

So without doubt we will sometimes remember the names of those who, by their devoted propaganda, paid from exile or prison, will have prepared the new society. It’s them we think of when editing *The Conquest of Bread*: they will feel somewhat strengthened in receiving this account of communal thought through their bars or while in foreign lands. The author will certainly approve of me if I dedicate his work to all those who suffer for the cause, and above all to a very dear friend whose entire life was a long battle for justice. I have no reason to say his name: in reading these words of a brother, he will know where my heart beats.

- Élisée Reclus

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