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The anarchist idea and its developments

Pëtr Kropotkin

1891

Anarchy means the negation of authority. But since authority claims to legitimize its existence based on the need to defend social institutions, such as the family, religion, and property, a host of mechanisms have emerged to ensure the exercise and sanction of this authority: the law, the judiciary, the army, the legislative and executive branches, etc. Thus, forced to respond to everything, the anarchist idea had to attack all social prejudices and thoroughly immerse itself in all human knowledge in order to demonstrate that its conceptions were consistent with the physiological and psychological nature of man, adequate to the observance of natural laws. The current organization, however, was established in defiance of all logic, making our societies unstable, disrupted by revolutions that are themselves caused by the accumulated hatred of those crushed by arbitrary institutions. Thus, in combating authority, anarchists had to attack all the institutions whose defenders power had created for itself, whose usefulness it sought to demonstrate in order to legitimize its own existence.

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Retrieved on April 3, 2025 from https://fr.m.wikisource.org/wiki/L%E2%80%99id%C3%A9_anarchiste_et_ses_d%C3%A9veloppements
Published first in *La Révolte*, year 5, number 6, October 31, 1891.

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The scope of anarchist ideas thus expanded. Starting from a simple political negation, it was necessary to also attack economic and social prejudices, to find a formula that, while denying the individual appropriation that is the basis of the current economic order, simultaneously affirmed aspirations for the future organization. The word "communism" naturally came to occupy its place alongside the word "anarchism."

It is this diversity of questions to be attacked and resolved that has made anarchist ideas so successful and contributed to their rapid expansion. This means that, starting from a minority of unknowns, without means of propaganda, they now invade, to a greater or lesser extent, the sciences, the arts, and literature.

Hatred of authority and social demands date back a long time; they began as soon as man realized he was being oppressed. But how many phases and systems did the idea have to go through to materialize in its current form?

It was Rabelais who was one of the first to formulate the intuition, describing life in the Abbey of Thélème, but how obscure it still remains; how little he believes it applies to society as a whole, since entry into the community is reserved for a privileged minority.

In 93, we are indeed talking about the anarchists. Jacques Roux and the Enragés seem to us to be those who saw the revolution most clearly and sought most to turn it to the benefit of the people. So bourgeois historians have left them in the shadows: their history is still to be written: the documents, buried in museums, archives and libraries, are still waiting for the one who will have the time and energy to unearth them, bring them to light and bring us the key to things that are still very incomprehensible to us in this tragic period of history. We can therefore formulate no assessment of their program.

We must first come to Proudhon to see anarchy pose as an adversary of authority and power and begin to take shape. But it was still only a theoretical enemy; in practice, in his social organization,

Proudhon allowed the administrative machinery that was the very essence of government to persist under different names. Anarchy emerged, until the end of the empire, in the form of a vague mutualism that, in France, in the first years following the Commune, was to sink into the misguided and deviant movement of producer and consumer cooperatives.

But long before it came to fruition, a current had broken away from the original branch. The International had given birth, in Switzerland, to the Jura Federation, where Bakunin propagated Proudhon's idea of anarchy as the enemy of authority, but by developing it, broadening it, and making it one with social demands.

This is where the true birth of the current anarchist movement dates from. Certainly, many prejudices still existed, many illogicalities still emerged in the ideas put forward. The propaganda organization still contained many seeds of authoritarianism, many elements remained of the authoritarian conception, but what did it matter! The movement was launched, the idea grew, became purer and became more and more concise. And when, barely twelve years ago, anarchy asserted itself in France at the Congress of the Center, although still very weak, although this assertion was only the work of a tiny minority and was opposed not only by those satisfied with the current social order, but also by those pseudo-revolutionaries who see in popular demands only a means of climbing to power, the idea had in itself enough force of expansion to succeed in establishing itself, without any means of propaganda other than the goodwill of its adherents, enough vigor to lead the supporters of the capitalist regime to insult it, to persecute it; people of good faith to discuss it, which is a proof of strength and vitality.

So, despite the crusade of all those who, to any degree, can consider themselves leaders of one of the various factions of public opinion, despite the slander, despite the excommunications, despite the prison, the anarchist idea is making headway. Groups are being founded, propaganda organs are being launched in France,

Spain, Italy, England, Portugal, Belgium, Holland, Norway, America, Australia, Argentina: in Slavic, German, Hebrew, Czech, Armenian; almost everywhere, in almost every language.

But, even more enormously, from the small group of disaffected people where they were formulated, anarchist ideas have radiated into all classes of society. They have infiltrated everywhere where human beings are mentally active. The arts, science, and literature are contaminated by new ideas and serve as their vehicle.

They began first as unconscious formulas, as vague, ill-defined aspirations, often jokes rather than real convictions. Today, not only are anarchist aspirations formulated, but we know that it is anarchy that is being spread and we boldly label it.

Anarchists are therefore no longer the only ones who find everything bad and desire change. These complaints, these aspirations, are formulated by the very people who believe themselves to be the defenders of the capitalist order. Moreover, we are beginning to feel that we must no longer limit ourselves to sterile wishes, but that we must work towards achieving what we ask for; we are beginning to understand and applaud action, to understand propaganda by deed, that is to say, by comparing the pleasures that must come from acting as one thinks and the troubles one must experience from violating a social law, we are increasingly striving to conform our way of life to our way of seeing things, according to the degree of resistance that our particular temperament can offer to the persecutions of social vindictiveness.

Today the idea has been launched, nothing can stop it.