Robert Harding, The Itinerant Street Lecturer
The ABC of Anarchism
1889

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[NOTE.—*No connection with a gentleman named R. Harding, who lectures on behalf of the Social Democratic Federation. This is mentioned from no disrespect either to that gentleman or to the Federation, but to guard against the confusion of two divergent sets of doctrines.*]

The ABC of Anarchism

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Q. What is Anarchism?

A. Anarchism (theory) is the doctrine which denies the expediency, morality and justice of *compelling* men to do even that which it is right they should do. Anarchism (practice) is *(a)* the renunciation of the desire to *compel* minorities and others to do what you think they ought to do, and *(b)* the refusal to be yourself compelled.

Q. But will not those who have superior force on their side always compel?

A. We believe not. We think that if we show them that it is inexpedient, unjust and immoral to do so, the best of them and ultimately the whole of mankind will discontinue the custom.

Q. But is it not a fact that in the past, men always have compelled one another?

A. Yes and they have been miserable in proportion as that as they have done so. But it may also be observed that after a long conflict between coercive force and persuasive force, the latter has always in the end shown itself the more powerful.

Q. Why do you say that Government is *inexpedient?*

A. Because to govern or compel a person makes him a secret rebel. It does this even when in his normal the state the compelled is favorably disposed towards the compelling force. There is probably for example, not a merchant in the City of London who does not secretly rebel against the payment of taxes. There are few, probably, who would drop their taxes into a slot provided for the purpose unless some tax-collector or officer of the law were there to compel them to do so. Those very merchants, however, contribute to their respective churches and chapels *where no compulsion is used.* Many of them give large sums voluntarily to objects in which they are interested.

Q. Then do you assert that governments could be maintained by voluntary contributions? Look at the vast sums they require to keep up their armies! You surely do not say that armies could be maintained by voluntary subscriptions?

A. If not, they have no right to be maintained at all. If hospitals, temperance societies, chapels, and salvation armies, as well as atheist lecture halls and political clubs can create sufficient enthusiasm among various sections of the people to induce them to subscribe toward their Support, why cannot armies do the same?

To this the friend replied:—

I am afraid I shall have to confess that it is because hospitals, temperance societies, chapels, salvation armies, atheist lecture halls and political clubs, despite their diverse and even contradictory ambitions, can justify their existence, that is, can prove that they exist for a useful purpose, while the institution whose object is systematic murder cannot. What say you?

1. I should say that you have state the case just as an Anarchist would state it. It seems to me that the British army, for existence, really exists firstly, To provide comfortable and well-paid places for the idle rich; secondly, To defend British speculators from one of the risks incidental to speculation, viz.—loss. This is done by compelling the weak races to repay money lent to their rulers at exorbitant interest, and the amount of which is in excess of the value of the security. Of course if a money lender knows that his claim will be enforced by arms, his is willing to lend to any amount. And thirdly, To awe the working classes into the acceptance of unfair conditions of labour. For example, to restrain the fried fish shopkeeper and the costermonger from rebelling against the fish ring; to keep the street salesman and the shoeblack from rebelling against the police; to keep the labourers, navies, &c., who might be at work making a channel-tunnel, from insisting that they shall not be hindered, and so on.

2. Well, I am satisfied that armies cannot justify their existence to the reasoning intelligence of the community; but do you really think that *Governments* cannot do so either?

3. We anarchists think they cannot. We see reason to dread that the government of man by man may, unless resisted, bring about the decline and fall of the Anglo-Saxon race. We can, however, go no further until we are able to issue No. 2 of this series of leaflets. We earnestly implore the reader to ponder over what he has read, and to ask himself whether facts de or do not bear out what we have said. Is the instinct of domination a force for good or for evil, for happiness or for woe?