

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Anarchistic Socialism

Victor Yarros

August 10, 1889

Victor Yarros
Anarchistic Socialism
August 10, 1889

Retrieved on 2020-06-11 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
“Anarchistic Socialism,” *The Twentieth Century* 3 no. 5 (August 10,
1889): 74–75

theanarchistlibrary.org

State Socialists are in the habit of charging the Anarchists with a partiality for middle-class ideas and institutions, and nothing is more common than the statement that we wish to retain the bourgeois arrangements, while endeavoring to give them an ideal flavor. Our teachings are taken to be identical with those of the individualistic economists of the Cobden-Bastiat school, and we are constantly told that the principles of individualism, inaugurated and embodied by the great revolution in France, have been tried and found wanting, have been condemned and utterly discredited by life itself. Our present social evils are alleged to be the best practical proof of the failure of liberty and the “let alone “ doctrine, which, though necessary for purposes of destruction of superannuated customs, are absolutely of no avail in constructive work. And hence it is urged upon us to abandon these idols and recognize the importance of the principle of association, cooperation, and collective effort, upon which the civilization of the near future is to be based.

A complete refutation of all these claims would be found in the simple fact that true, consistent individualism has never had a fair trial and consequently could never have been discredited.

It is necessary to distinguish between pretence and reality. The middle class economists and champions have indeed talked about the beauties of individualism, and have pretended to uphold the existing regime on the ground of liberty and equality, but, whether from ignorance or class interests, they have steadily ignored the logic of their principle and have seen liberty violated and outraged in many ways without raising a voice in protest. The bourgeois economists have agitated for free trade (a very excellent thing so far as it goes), but have never shown a due appreciation of the other and greater denials of liberty of which the prevailing social system is guilty. England has now got what Cobden worked for; it enjoys free trade. Yet the labor question is as far from settlement as ever, and poverty, pauperism, inequality, and crime are on the increase. What are the modern bourgeois individualists doing to reform and remedy abuses? What are they suggesting as solutions of the burning problems of the day? Why, they are organizing "Liberty and Property Defence Leagues" to combat Socialism and to defend their privileges and monopolies. Their platforms contain not a single measure of positive reform. The true, consistent individualists, the Anarchists, on the other hand, speak in no uncertain tone of the reforms imperatively demanded by present circumstances, and accuse the economists of cowardice, disingenuousness, and superficiality. They point out that Individualism is impossible in the absence of perfect equality of opportunity, which equality is denied by the State-created monopolies of land and credit. A landless and moneyless laborer does not possess any liberty. The right to life and to seeking of happiness in one's own way is meaningless without the access to the means of life. Now, land and capital are essential to him who would live independently and in a more or less civilized manner, and the Government deprives us of both. (It would be carrying coal to Newcastle to enlarge here on the subject of land monopoly, the evils of which, if anything, only are too strongly emphasized by the believers in the Single-tax, and of the money

question I will at present say no more, referring the reader to Mr. Hugo Bilgram's admirable letter on the matter in the issue of June 22, in which he says that "a new industrial era will dawn and the distribution of wealth will assume an equitable basis" as soon as the Government is forced to allow freedom in the issue of currency and organization of banking.

In our forecast of the results of freedom in money and land-occupation we may be altogether mistaken. Perhaps the laborer will be as much the slave of the owner of machinery then as he is now, and perhaps our economic views are false and unscientific. I am entirely willing to allow that this is not impossible. But at least let State Socialists and other critics understand our exact position, and, instead of fighting men of straw, let them examine our contentions and attempt to meet them. As long as this is not done, as long as the Socialists refrain from a careful analysis of our economic theories—and as one who has studied Marx, Lassalle, Hyndman, Hirkop, and Gronlund, I know that nowhere in the literature of "Scientific Socialism" is any attention bestowed on the subject—they have no right to invidiously characterize our conception of Individualism, our idea of free competition and our attitude toward the proletariat.

But this is not the only answer we have to make to the State Socialists. Though we favor the laissez-faire policy, we do not understand it in the sense in which the bourgeois economists have understood it. Their "let alone" principle was based on a false social philosophy, on a puerile theology and immature political economy. Their optimism was that of Dr. Pangloss, and they, believing that a beneficent providence directed everything to the best in this best of worlds, objected to any men-made laws, institutions, or organizations. They opposed combinations of capital. Their "code of nature" taught them to leave everything to unconscious, spontaneous, automatic action and play. But this view does not bear looking into. The modern theory of evolution destroys the sense of such theological notions. Human opinion, conscious intelligent endeavor, is

the agency by which social improvement is furthered, and to oppose conscious action and guidance is pure folly. The Anarchists are emphatically in favor of association and cooperation, and liberty, though a good end in itself, is from the economic standpoint only a means to an end, that end being combination and association. They are fully aware that most of the present blessings are due to cooperation, and the coming social system will have "association" for its watchword. What we protest against is the delusion that the element of compulsion is indispensable, that men must be driven by force to interest themselves in their own welfare, and that government, ever the tool of exploiters, can be converted into a useful instrument of reform. Power will always be abused, and the best man, when placed in unfavorable conditions, loses the distinguishing qualities of noble, refined, and dignified manhood. We do not believe in the government of man by man, and we do not conceive that self-respecting people will consent to be drilled, ordered about, and disciplined by anybody, whether the somebody is called master or public servant. Our ideal of the future is unity in freedom, not enforced uniformity.

A word, now, on the question: what to do in the meantime. It is evident that the efforts of all who hold our views must be devoted to the dissemination of true principles and ideas. The State exists because the people have faith in it. This faith must be shaken and dissolved. We must work to contract the sphere of authority, and to teach the advantages of free association. Buckle has said that the only services governments render to the people consist in the abolition of laws, not manufacture of them, and we must agitate for the abolition of objectionable laws, principally those that we hold responsible for the economic servitude of the laborers. It may be true that just at present the people are inclined to court governmental aid and to expect relief from the intervention of authority, but why he who clearly perceives the error of this method should lend a hand in this reactionary movement, is hard to comprehend. The greater the pressure, the more need of counter influence. The

more widespread the error the more reason for vigorous advocacy of truth. The masses readily accept Socialism only because, as Grant Allen says, it is the first and easiest remedy they are offered. Should we not, then, invite them to take a second, sober thought, and examine more critically the philosophy which they have espoused? Of course we should. And those who reflect and analyze are apt to discover that State Socialism is as one-sided as the semi-individualism it was called to criticize. The latter laid stress on self-help; the former, in emphasizing the principle of cooperation, lost sight of liberty. Anarchistic Socialism appears to reconcile them by a new synthesis.