

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



What is Anarchism?

William C. Owen

April 1920

We receive pleasure or suffer pain through our own individual organs, breathe with our own lungs, think with our own brains, and move about actively or are bed-ridden, according to the condition of our own muscles. From ourselves we never get away. We cannot. The basic law of our existence is that each of us is a kingdom in himself, and that beyond the limits of his individual kingdom none of us can stray.

Each one of us strives, instinctively and unceasingly, to protect and develop his own kingdom, because failure to do so is punished remorselessly. If my body lacks food or adequate protection against the cold, I suffer physically. If my intellectual wants go unsatisfied, it is I who fret. If my life is loveless, mine is the heart that aches. Of necessity, therefore, I struggle, consciously or unconsciously, to give my life the things it calls for; to satisfy its various appetites, to make the most of this, the one piece of real property I acquired with birth, and shall relinquish only with my death.

Men accumulate what they call "property" only because they find or think it necessary to the security and happiness of their own individual lives, encased in their own individual bodies. The saint may flatter himself that he is giving himself to God; the rev-

William C. Owen
What is Anarchism?
April 1920

Retrieved on 2020-06-11 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Freedom (London) 34 no. 371 (April, 1920): 21.

theanarchistlibrary.org

olutionist that he is sacrificing himself to his cause; the patriot that he is bleeding for his country. In reality, each is only striving to satisfy what happens to be, for him, his strongest appetite, which he must feed or suffer. Each is cultivating what seems to him the portion of his own kingdom it will pay him best to cultivate. Each, by life's mysterious law, is seeking his own happiness in his own way. Do you condemn that law? I say it is the most glorious of laws, because under it every one of us struggles incessantly for happiness. Only out of that universal struggle can general happiness come.

Still under the influence of those cruel religions which teach that man was born in sin, we do not see, as yet, the beauty of that law. Instead of encouraging every individual to pursue happiness with every ounce of energy he can command; instead of urging him to develop his own kingdom to the utmost, and get out of it all the incalculable pleasures now lying dormant in it: instead of spurring him on to get, at any cost, all that his physical and intellectual and spiritual appetites demand, we seek to thwart and prevent him. If people would put into the development of their own kingdoms the energy they now devote to hindering others from developing, the world would be far happier than it is to-day.

The teaching of Anarchism is "Mind your own business, and leave me to look after mine!" "Do not hinder my development, and I will not hinder yours!" It is the best of teachings, because it makes for general development—physical, intellectual and spiritual—and development means happiness. We are all happier, physically, when we are better fed and clothed and housed. We are all happier intellectually when we have permitted our minds to grow and taught them to climb. We are all happier spiritually when we have given our natural affections their proper due. For myself, I have no wish to live in a community where the majority are starving, or among those who despise the things of the mind, or among those who look down on their fellow-creatures as inferiors. When I get into that sort of a bog, I myself am compelled to sink, and I do not like it. Precisely because I am an individualist, I am sociable, for I

recognise that I rise with others, and that when they are drowning they pull me also down.

We are living at present, and suffering intensely, under the regime of Militarism: and against all I have written above Militarism is incessantly in arms. Militarism lives by invasion. Militarism seeks to crush and render helpless, that it may rule and impose its orders. We are to-day in the full tide of Militarism, and, as I think, it is sweeping the entire revolutionary movement off its feet. If it were not so, we, who have suffered so long and cruelly from despotism should not be chanting the praises of "Dictatorship by the Proletariat." Was that the goal for which we started? Never. For the moment we have lost our way.

Militarism is necessarily stupid, because Militarism never argues. It does not believe in free speech, the unfettered interchange of thought, or any of that nonsense. Its only logic is that of the bayonet and gun. And its stupidity is now paralysing the activity of all the world, and bringing it to ruin.

See how, for the moment, it has hypnotised society! It has driven even our hard-headed merchants into the lunacy of believing that they prosper when their markets are destroyed and their best customers—in this case the Germans—rendered bankrupt. It has filled millions with such delusions as that murder is a noble art; that there are too many people in the world; that "My country, right or wrong," is the highest of all moralities; that it is the God-given duty of the chosen few to issue orders, and of the many to obey them; that the man born outside our own artificial borders is an enemy, against whom we must protect ourselves. Every one of these ideas is a reversion to barbarism.

All whose ignoble ambition is to govern others, instead of giving them full opportunity to govern themselves; all whose purpose is to live as parasites on the toil of others; all such dishonest natures eagerly champion military ideas.

By the assiduous inculcation of those ideas, they have poisoned all this age's thought and corrupted incalculably those movements

which had the overthrow of human slavery as their original aim. Hence it comes that Trade Unionists and Syndicalists are thinking only of how they will boss the show when they shall have climbed to power; that Socialists state openly their determination to make the minority toe the mark; that many who were good Anarchists ten years ago, to-day cheer wildly for Dictators. A pitiful collapse!

As I see it, the masses are robbed because, as individuals, they have been rendered helpless; and the remedy is to restore the individual to his original and natural strength. I have called myself an Anarchist because I supposed this to be Anarchism's aim. If it is not, I am no Anarchist.