Pëtr Kropotkin

The Coming Anarchy

1887

The views taken in the preceding article[1] as to the combination of efforts being the chief source of our wealth explain why more anarchists see in communism the only equitable solution as to the adequate remuneration of individual efforts. There was a time when a family engaged in agriculture, and supported by a few domestic trades, could consider the corn they raised and the plain woollen cloth they wove as production of their own and nobody else's labour. Even then such a view was not quite correct: there were forests cleared and roads built by common efforts; and even then the family had continually to apply for communal help, as it is still the case in so many village communities. But now, under the extremely interwoven state of industry, of which each branch supports all others, such as the individualistic view can be held no more. If the iron trade and the cotton industry of this country have reached so high a degree of development, they have done so owing to the parallel growth of the railway system; to an increase of knowledge among both the skilled engineers and the mass of the workmen; to a certain training in organization slowly developed among British producers; and, above all, to the world-trade which has itself grown up, thanks to works executed thousands of miles away. The Italians who died from cholera in digging the Suez Canal, or from 'tunnel-disease' in the St. Gothard Tunnel, have contributed as much towards the enrichment of this country as the British girl who is prematurely growing old in serving a machine at Manchester; and this girl is much as the engineer who made a labour-saving improvement in our machinery. How can we pretend to estimate the exact part of each of them in the riches accumulated around us?

We may admire the inventive genius or the organising capacities of an iron lord; but we must recognise that all his genius and energy would not realise one-tenth of what they realise here if they were spent dealing with Mongolian shepherds or Siberian peasants instead of British workmen, British engineers, and trustworthy managers. An English millionaire who succeeded in giving a powerful impulse to a branch of home industry was asked the other day what were, in his opinion, the real causes of his success? His answer was: — 'I always sought out the right man for a given branch of concern, and I left him full independence — maintaining, of course, for myself the general supervision.' 'Did you never fail to find such men?' was the next question. 'Never.' 'But in the new branches which you introduced you wanted a number of new inventions.' 'No doubt; we spend thousands in buying patents.' This little colloquy sums up, in my opinion, the real case of those industrial undertakings which are quoted by the advocates of 'an adequate remuneration of individual efforts' in the shape of millions bestowed

[1] *Nineteenth Century*, February 1887. The present article has been delayed in consequence of the illness of the author.

on the managers of prosperous industries. It shows how far the efforts are really 'individual.' Leaving aside the thousand conditions which sometimes permit a man to show, and sometimes prevent him from showing, his capacities to their full extent, it might be asked in how far the same capacities could bring out the same results, if the very same employer could find no inventions were not stimulated by the mechanical turn of mind of so many inhabitants of this country. British industry is the work of the British nation — nay, of Europe and India take together — not of spate individuals.

While holding this synthetic view on production, the anarchists cannot consider, like the collectivists, that a remuneration which would be proportionate to the hours of labour spent by each person in the production of riches may be an ideal, or even an approach to an ideal, society. Without entering here into a discussion as to how far the exchange value of each merchandise is really measured now by the amount of labour necessary for its production — a separate study must be devoted to the subject — we must say that the collectivist ideal seems to us merely unrealisable in a society which would be brought to consider the necessaries for production as a common property. Such a society would be compelled to abandon the wage-system altogether. It appears impossible that the mitigated individualism of the collectivist school could co-exist which the partial communism implied by holding land and machinery in common — unless imposed by a powerful government, much more powerful than all those of our own times. The present wage-system has grown up from the appropriation of the necessities for production by the few; it was a necessary condition for the growth of the present capitalist production; and it cannot outlive it, even if an attempt be made to pay to the worker the full value of his produce, and money be substituted by hours of labour cheques. Common possession of the necessaries for production implies that common enjoyment of the fruits of the common production; and we consider that an equitable organisation of society can only arise when every wage-system is abandoned, and when every-body, contributing for the common well-being to the full extent of his capacities, shall enjoy also from the common stock of society to the fullest possible of his needs.

We maintain, moreover, not only that communism is a desirable state of society, but that the growing tendency of modern society is precisely towards communism — free communism — notwithstanding the seemingly contradictory growth of individualism. In the growth of individualism (especially during the last three centuries) we merely see the endeavours of the individual towards emancipating himself from the steadily growing powers of Capital and the State. But side by side with this growth we see also, throughout history up to our own times, the latent struggle of the producers of wealth for maintaining the partial communism of old, as well as for reintroducing communist principles in a new shape, as

soon as favourable conditions permit it. As soon as the communes of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries were enabled to start their own independent life, they gave a wide extension to work in common, to trade in common, and to a partial consumption in common. All this has disappeared; but the rural commune fights a hard struggle to maintain its old features, and it succeeds in maintaining them in many places of Eastern Europe, Switzerland, and even France and Germany; while new organizations, based on the same principles, never fail to grow up as soon as it is possible. Notwithstanding the egotistic turn given to public mind by the merchant-production of our century, the communist tendency is continually reasserting itself and trying to make its way into the public life. The penny bridge disappears before the public bridge; so also the road which formerly had to be paid for its use. Museums, free libraries, and free public schools; parks and pleasure grounds; paved and lighted streets, free for everybody's use; water supplied to private dwellings, with a growing tendency towards disregarding the exact amount of it used by the individual; tramways and railways which have already begun to introduce the season ticket or the uniform tax, and will surely go much further on this line when they are no longer private property : all these are tokens showing in which direction further progress is to be expected.

It is putting the wants of the individual above the valuation of the services he has rendered, or might render, to society; it is in considering society as a whole, so intimately connected together that a service rendered to any individual is a service rendered to the whole society. The librarian of the British Museum does not ask the reader what have been his previous services to society, he simply gives him the book he requires; and for a uniform fee, a scientific Society leaves its gardens and museums at the free disposal of each member . The crew of a lifeboat do not ask whether the men of a distressed ship are entitled to be rescued at a risk of life; and the Prisoners' Aid Society do not inquire what the released prisoner is worth. Here are men in need of service; they are fellow men, and no further rights are required. And if this very city, so egotistic to-day, be visited by a public calamity — let it be besieged, for example, like Paris in 1871, and experience during the siege a want of food — this very same city would be unanimous in proclaiming that the first needs to be satisfied are those of the children and old, no matter what services they may render or have rendered to society. And it would take care of the active defenders of the city, whatever the degrees of gallantry displayed by each of them. But, this tendency already existing, nobody will deny, I suppose, that, in proportion as humanity is relieved from its hard struggle for life, the same tendency will grow stronger. If our productive powers be fully applied for increasing the stock of the staple necessities for life; if a modification of the present conditions of property increased the number of producers by all those who are not producers of wealth now; and if manual labour reconquered

its place of honour in society — all this decuplating our production and rendering labour easier and more attractive — the communist tendencies already existing would immediately enlarge their sphere of application.

Taking all that into account, and still more the practical aspects of the question as to how private property might become common property, most of the anarchists maintain that the very next step to be made by society, as soon as the present regime of property undergoes a modification, will be in a communist sense. We are communists. But our communism is not that of either the Phalanstere or the authoritarian school : it is anarchist communism, communism without government, free communism. It is a synthesis of the two chief aims prosecuted by humanity since the dawn of its history — economical freedom and political freedom.

I have already said that anarchy means no-government. We know well that the word 'anarchy' is also used in the current language as synonymous with disorder. But that meaning of 'anarchy' being a derived one, implies at least two suppositions. It implies, first, that whenever there is no government there is disorder; and it implies, moreover, that order, due to a strong government and a strong police, is always beneficial. Both implications, however, are anything but proved. There is plenty of order — we should say, of harmony — in many bunches of human activity where the government, happily, does not interfere. As to the beneficial effects of order, the kind of order that reigned at Naples under the Bourbons surely was not preferable to some disorder started by Garibaldi; while the Protestants of the this country will probably say that the good deal of disorder made by Luther was preferable, at any rate, to the order which reigned under the Pope. As to the proverbial 'order' which was once 'restored at Warsaw,' there are, I suppose, no two opinions about it. While all agree that harmony is always desirable, there is no such unanimity about order, and still less about the 'order' which is supposed to reign on our modern societies; so that we have no objection whatever to the use of the word 'anarchy' as a negation of what has been often described as order.

By taking for our watchword anarchy, in its sense of no-government, we intend to express a pronounced tendency of human society. In history we see that precisely those epochs when small parts of humanity broke down the power of their rulers and reassumed their freedom were epochs of the greatest progress, economical and intellectual. Be it the growth of the free cities, whose unrivalled monuments — free work of free associations of workers — still testify of the revival of mind and of the well-being of the citizen; be it the great movement which gave birth to the Reformation — those epochs witnessed the greatest progress when the individual recovered some part of his freedom. And if we carefully watch the present development of civilised nations, we cannot fail to discover in it a

marked and ever-growing movement towards limiting more and more the sphere of action of government, so as to leave more and more liberty to the initiative of the individual. After having tried all kinds of government, and endeavoring to solve the insoluble problem of having a government 'which might compel the individual to obedience, without escaping itself from obedience to collectively,' humanity is trying now to free itself from the bonds of any government whatever, and to respond to its needs of organisation by the free understanding between individuals prosecuting the same common aims. Home Rule, even for the smallest territorial unity or group, becomes a growing need; free agreement is becoming a substitute for the law; and free co-operation a substitute for the governmental guardianship. One after the other those functions which were considered as the functions of government during the last two centuries are disputed; society moves better the less it is governed. And the more we study the advance made in this direction, as well as the inadequacy of governments to fulfill the expectations laid in them, the more we are bound to conclude that Humanity, by steadily limiting the functions of government, is marching towards reducing them finally to nil; and we already foresee a state of society where the liberty of the individual will be limited by no laws, no bonds — by nothing else by his own social habits and the necessity, which everyone feels, of finding co-operation, support, and sympathy among his neighbours.

Of course, the no-government ethics will meet with at least as many objectives as the no-capital economics. Our minds have been so nurtured is prejudices as to the providential functions of government that anarchist ideas must be received with distrust. Our whole education, since childhood up to the grave, nurtures the belief in the necessity of a government and its beneficial effects. Systems of philosophy have been elaborated to support this view; history has been written from this standpoint; theories of law have been circulated and taught for the same purpose. All politics are based on the same principles, each politician saying to the people he wants to support him : 'Give me the governmental power; I will, I can, relieve you from the hardships of your present life.' All our education is permeated with the same teachings. We may open any book of sociology, history, law, or ethics : everywhere we find government, its organisation, its deeds, playing so prominent a part that we grow accustomed to suppose that the State and the political men are everything; that there is nothing behind the big statesmen. The same teachings are daily repeated in the Press. Whole columns are filled up with minutest records of parliamentary debates, of movements of political persons; and, while reading these columns, we too often forget that there is an immense body of men — man-kind, in fact — growing and dying, living in happiness or sorrow, labouring and consuming, thinking and creating, besides those few men whose importance has been so swollen up as to overshadow humanity.

And yet, if we revert from the printed matter to our real life, and cast a broad glance on society as it is, we struck with the infinitesimal part played by government in our life. Millions of human beings live and die without having had anything to do with government. Every day millions of transactions are made without the slightest interference of government; and those who enter into agreements have not the slightest intention of breaking bargains. Nay, those agreements which are not protected by government (those of the Exchange, or card debts) are perhaps better kept than any others. The simply habit of keeping his word, the desire of not losing confidence, are quite sufficient in the immense overwhelming majority of cases to enforce the keeping of agreements. Of course, it may be said that there is still the government which might enforce them if necessary. But not to speak of the numberless cases which even could not be brought before a court, everybody who has the slightest acquaintance with trade will undoubtedly confirm the assertion that, if there were not so strong a feeling of honour to keep agreements, trade itself would become utterly impossible. Even those merchants and manufacturers who feel not the slightest remorse when poisoning their customers with all kinds of abominable drugs, duly labelled, even they also keep their commercial agreements. But, if such a relative morality as commercial honesty exists now, under the present conditions, when enrichment is the chief motive, the same feeling will further develop very fast as soon as robbing somebody of the fruits of his labour is no longer the economical basis of our life.

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