

John Most and Emma Goldman

Anarchy Defended by Anarchists

1896

To most Americans Anarchy is an evil-sounding word — another name for wickedness, perversity, and chaos. Anarchists are looked upon as a herd of uncombed, unwashed, and vile ruffians, bent on killing the rich and dividing their capital. Anarchy however, to its followers, actually signifies a social theory which regards the union of order with the absence of all government of man by man; in short, it means perfect individual liberty.

If the meaning of Anarchy has so far been interpreted as a state of the greatest disorder, it is because people have been taught that their affairs are regulated, that they are ruled wisely, and that authority is a necessity.

In by-gone centuries any person who asserted that mankind could get along without the aid of worldly and spiritual authority was considered a madman, and was either placed in a lunatic asylum or burned at the stake; whereas to-day hundreds of thousands of men and women are infidels who scorn the idea of a supernatural Being.

The freethinkers of today, for instance, still believe in the necessity of the State, which protects society; they do not desire to know the history of our barbarian institutions. They do not understand that government did not and cannot exist without oppression; that every government has committed dark deeds and great crimes against society. The development of government has been in the order, despotism, monarchy, oligarchy, plutocracy; but it has always been a tyranny.

It cannot be denied that there are a large number of wise and well-meaning people who are anxious to better the present conditions, but they have not sufficiently emancipated themselves from the prejudices and superstitions of the dark ages to understand the true inwardness of the institution called government.

“How can we get along without government?” ask these people. “If our government is bad let us try to have a good one, but we must have government by all means!”

The trouble is that there is no such thing as good government, because its very existence is based upon the submission of one class to the dictatorship of another. “But men must be governed,” some remark; “they must be guided by laws.” Well, if men are children who must be led, who then is so perfect, so wise, so faultless as to be able to govern and guide his fellows.

We assert that men can and should govern themselves individually. If men are still immature, rulers are the same. Should one man, or a small number of men, lead all the blind millions who compose a nation?

“But we must have some authority, at least,” said an American friend to us. Certainly we must, and we have it, too; it is the inevitable power of natural laws, which manifests itself in the physical and social world. We may or may not understand these laws, but we must obey them as they are a part of our existence; we are the absolute slaves of these laws, but in such slavery there is no humiliation.

Slavery as it exists to-day means an external master, a lawmaker outside of those he controls; while the natural laws are not outside of us — they are in us; we live, we breathe, we think, we move only through these laws; they are therefore not our enemies but our benefactors.

Are the laws made by man, the laws on our statute books, in conformity with the laws of Nature? No one, we think, can have the temerity to assert that they are.

It is because the laws prescribed to us by men are not in conformity with the laws of Nature that mankind suffers from so much ill. It is absurd to talk of human happiness so long as men are not free.

We do not wonder that some people are so bitterly opposed to Anarchy and its exponents, because it demands changes so radical of existing notions, while the latter offend rather than conciliate by the zealotry of their propaganda.

Patience and resignation are preached to the poor, promising them a reward in the hereafter. What matters it to the wretched outcast who has no place to call his own, who is craving for a piece of bread, that the doors of Heaven are wider open for him than for the rich? In the face of the great misery of the masses such promises seem bitter irony.

I have met very few intelligent women and men who honestly and conscientiously could defend existing governments; they even agreed with me on many points, but they were lacking in moral courage, when it came to the point, to step to the front and declare themselves openly in sympathy with anarchistic principles.

We who have chosen the path laid down for us by our convictions oppose the organization called the State, on principle, claiming the equal right of all to work and enjoy life.

When once free from the restrictions of extraneous authority, men will enter into free relations; spontaneous organizations will spring up in all parts of the world, and every one will contribute to his and the common welfare as much labor as he or she is capable of, and consume according to their needs. All modern technical inventions and discoveries will be employed to make work easy and pleasant, and science, culture, and art will be freely used to perfect and elevate the human race, while woman will be coequal with man.

“This is all well said,” replies some one, “but people are not angels, men are selfish.”

What about? Selfishness is not a crime; it only becomes a crime when conditions are such as to give an individual the opportunity to satisfy his selfishness to the detriment of others. In an anarchistic society everyone will seek to satisfy his ego; but as Mother Nature has so arranged things that only those survive who have the aid of their neighbors, man, in order to satisfy his ego, will extend his

aid to those who will aid him, and then selfishness will no more be a curse but a blessing.

A dagger in one hand, a torch in the other, and all his pockets brimful with dynamite bombs — that is the picture of the Anarchist such as it has been drawn by his enemies. They look at him simply as a mixture of a fool and a knave, whose sole purpose is a universal topsy-turvy, and whose only means to that purpose is to slay any one and every one who differs from him. The picture is an ugly caricature, but its general acceptance is not to be wondered at, considering how persistently the idea has been drummed into the mind of the public. However, we believe Anarchy — which is freedom of each individual from harmful constraint by others, whether these others be individuals or an organized government — cannot be brought about without violence, and this violence is the same which won at Thermopylae and Marathon.

The popular demand for freedom is stronger and clearer than it has ever been before, and the conditions for reaching the goal are more favorable. It is evident that through the whole course of history runs an evolution before which slavery of any kind, compulsion under any form, must break down, and from which freedom, full and unlimited freedom, for all and from all must come.

From this it follows that Anarchism cannot be a retrograde movement, as has been insinuated, for the Anarchists march in the van and not in the rear of the army of freedom.

We consider it absolutely necessary that the mass of the people should never for a moment forget the gigantic contest that must come before their ideas can be realized, and therefore they use every means at their disposal — the speech, the press, the deed — to hasten the revolutionary development.

The weal of mankind, as the future will and must make plain, depends upon communism. The system of communism logically excludes any and every relation between master and servant, and means really Anarchism, and the way to this goal leads through a social revolution.

As for the violence which people take as the characteristic mark of the Anarchist, it cannot and it shall not be denied that most Anarchists feel convinced that “violence” is not any more reprehensible toward carrying out their designs than it is when used by an oppressed people to obtain freedom. The uprising of the oppressed has always been condemned by tyrants: Persia was astounded at Greece, Rome at the Caudine Forks, and England at Bunker Hill. Can Anarchy expect less, or demand victories without striving for them?

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