

An Anarchist Society

Pyotr Kropotkin



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Pyotr Kropotkin (1842-1921) was perhaps the best known exponent of anarchist communism. In **Modern Science and Anarchism**, he sets forth an anarchist conception of society as a dynamic equilibrium, constantly changing, except when forced into a particular path or pattern by authoritarian institutions, which such patterns will eventually be superseded as society bursts asunder the artificial constraints of coercive institutions. Kropotkin's dynamic conception of anarchism and social organisation is also well expressed in his earlier essay, "The Philosophy of Anarchism," included in **Volume One** of *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas, From Anarchy to Anarchism (300CE-1939)*, **Selection 41**. The preceding passages are taken from the revised and extended 1912 edition of *Modern Science and Anarchism*, reprinted in **Evolution and Environment**, ed. George Woodcock (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1995).

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This text found at:

Robert Graham's Anarchism Weblog

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The greater number of Anarchists accept the Communist solution. They see that the only form of Communism that would be acceptable in a civilized society is one which would exist without the continual interference of Government, i.e., the Anarchist form. And they realize also that an Anarchist society of a large size would be impossible, unless it would begin by guaranteeing to all its members a certain minimum of well-being produced in common. Communism and Anarchy thus complete each other.

**Pyotr Kropotkin,
1912**

just as the feeling of human solidarity will have to find other channels for its expression besides the Churches, so also the economic and political liberation of man will have to create new forms for its expression in life, instead of those established by the State.

Consequently, the chief aim of Anarchism is to awaken those constructive powers of the labouring masses of the people which at all great moments of history came forward to accomplish the necessary changes, and which, aided by the now accumulated knowledge, will accomplish the change that is called forth by all the best men of our own time.

This is also why the Anarchists refuse to accept the functions of legislators or servants of the State. We know that the social revolution will not be accomplished by means of *laws*. Laws can only *follow* the accomplished facts; and even if they honestly do follow them — which usually is *not* the case — a law remains a dead letter so long as there are not on the spot the living forces required for making of the *tendencies* expressed in the law an accomplished *fact*.

On the other hand, since the times of the International Working Men's Association, the Anarchists have always advised taking an active part in those workers' organisations which carry on the *direct* struggle of Labour against Capital and its protector — the State.

Such a struggle, they say, better than any other indirect means, permits the worker to obtain some temporary improvements in the present conditions of work, while it opens his eyes to the evil that is done by Capitalism and the State that supports it, and wakes up his thoughts concerning the possibility of organising consumption, production, and exchange without the intervention of the capitalist and the State.

The opinions of the Anarchists concerning the form which *the remuneration of labour* may take in a society freed from the yoke of Capital and State still remain divided.

To begin with, all are agreed in repudiating the new form of the Wage System which would be established if the State became the owner of all the land, the mines, the factories, the railways, and so on, and the great organiser and manager of agriculture and all the industries. If these powers were added to those which the State already possesses (taxes, defence of the territory, subsidized religions, etc.), we should create a new tyranny, even more terrible than the old one.



An Anarchist Conception of Society

[A] variety of considerations, historical, ethnological, and economic, have brought the Anarchists to conceive a society very different from what is considered as its ideal by the authoritarian political parties. The Anarchists conceive a society in which all the mutual relations of its members are regulated, not by laws, not by authorities, whether self-imposed or elected, but by mutual agreements between the members of that society and by a sum of social customs and habits — not petrified by law, routine, or superstition, but continually developing and continually readjusted, in accordance with the ever-growing requirements of a free life, stimulated by the progress of science, invention, and the steady growth of higher ideals.

No ruling authorities, then. No government of man by man; no crystallisation and immobility, but a continual evolution — such as we see in Nature. Free play for the individual, for the full development of his individual gifts — *for his individualisation*. In other words, no actions are imposed upon the individual by a fear of punishment; none is required from him by society, but those which receive his free acceptance. *In a society of equals* this would be quite sufficient for preventing those unsocial actions that might be harmful to other individuals and to society itself, and for favouring the steady moral growth of that society...

Of course, up till now no society has existed which would have realized these principles in full, although the striving towards a partial realization of such principles has always been at work in mankind. We may say, therefore, that Anarchism is a certain ideal of society, and that this ideal is different from the ideal of society which has hitherto been advocated by most

philosophers, scientists, and leaders of political parties, who pretended to rule mankind and to govern men.

But it would not be fair to describe such a conception as a *Utopia*, because the word “Utopia” in our current language conveys the idea of something that cannot be realized.

Taken in its usual current sense, therefore, the word “Utopia” ought to be limited to those conceptions only which are based on merely theoretical reasonings as to what is *desirable* from the writer’s point of view, but not on what is already *developing* in human agglomerations. Such were, for instance, the Utopias of the Catholic Empire of the Popes, the Napoleonic Empire, the Messianism of Mickiewicz, and so on. But it cannot be applied to a conception of society which is based, as Anarchism is, on an analysis of *tendencies of an evolution that is already going on in society*, and on *inductions* therefrom as to the future — those tendencies which have been... for thousands of years the mainspring for the growth of sociable habits and customs, known in science under the name of Customary Law, and which affirm themselves more and more definitely in modern society.

With regard to what is very often said as to the necessary slowness of every new step that is made by evolution, let us remember that not further than at the end of the eighteenth century — at the very time when the United States had started in life — a society of a somewhat larger size without a monarch was considered a foolish Utopia. But the North and the South American Republics, the Swiss Republic and France have proved since, as we know, that the “Utopians” were not the Republicans but the admirers of monarchy. It was the latter, who, guided by their desires only, did not take into account the *tendencies* of societies developing far from the yoke of monarchist traditions; the latter, who, and not the Republicans, attributed too much importance and stability to the monarchist institutions — without noticing that they were not an outcome of human nature, but an outcome of temporary historical conditions.

When we look into the origin of the Anarchist conception of society, we see that it has had a double origin: the criticism, on the one side, of the hierarchical organisations and the authoritarian conceptions of society; and on the other side, the analysis of the tendencies that are seen in the progressive movements of mankind, both in the past, and still more so at the present time.

Future progress lies in this direction, and Anarchism works precisely that way.

Passing now to the economic views of Anarchists, three different conceptions must be distinguished.

So long as Socialism was understood in its wide, generic, and true sense — as an effort to *abolish* the exploitation of Labour by Capital — the Anarchists were marching hand-in-hand with the Socialists of that time. But they were compelled to separate from them when the Socialists began to say that there is no possibility of *abolishing* capitalist exploitation within the lifetime of our generation: that *during that phase of economic evolution which we are now living through* we have only to *mitigate* the exploitation, and to impose upon the capitalists certain legal limitations.

Contrary to this tendency of the present-day Socialists, we maintain that already now, without waiting for the coming of new phases and forms of the capitalist exploitation of Labour, we must work for its *abolition*. We must, already now, tend to transfer all that is needed for production — the soil, the mines, the factories, the means of communication, and *the means of existence, too* — from the hands of the individual capitalist into those of the communities of producers and consumers.

As for the *political* organisation — i.e., the forms of the commonwealth in the midst of which an economic revolution could be accomplished — we entirely differ from all the sections of State Socialists in that we do not see in the system of *State Capitalism*, which is now preached under the name of Collectivism, a solution of the social question. We see in the organisation of the posts and telegraphs, in the State railways, and the like — which are represented as illustrations of a society without capitalists — nothing but a new, perhaps improved, but still undesirable form of the Wage System. We even think that such a solution of the social problem would so much run against the present libertarian tendencies of civilized mankind that it simply would be unrealizable.

We maintain that the State organisation, having been the force to which the minorities resorted for establishing and organising their power over the masses, cannot be the force which will serve to destroy these privileges. The lessons of history tell us that a new form of economic life always calls forth a new form of political organisation; and a Socialist society (whether Communist or Collectivist) cannot be an exception to this rule. Just as the Churches cannot be utilized for freeing man from his old superstitions, and

recognized and rewarded by the present society on the condition of never going “too far” in their criticisms of that society, and especially — never going over to acts that may lead to its destruction, or even to a serious reform. Those only are allowed to attain a certain “development of their individualities” who are not dangerous in this respect — those who are merely “interesting,” but not dangerous to the Philistine.

The Anarchists, we have said, build their previsions of the future upon those data which are supplied by the observation of life at the present time.

Thus, when we examine into the tendencies that have prevailed in the life of civilized countries since the end of the eighteenth century, we certainly do not fail to see how strong the centralizing and authoritarian tendency was during that time, both among the middle classes and those working men who have been educated in the ideas of the middle classes and now strive to enter the ranks of their present rulers and exploiters.

But at the same time it is a fact that the anti-centralist and anti-militarist ideas, as well as the ideas of a free understanding, grow stronger and stronger nowadays both among the working men and the better educated and more or less intellectually free portions of the middle classes — especially in Western Europe.

I have shown, indeed, elsewhere (in *The Conquest of Bread* and in *Mutual Aid*) how strong at the present time is the tendency to constitute freely, *outside the State and the Churches*, thousands upon thousands of free organisations for all sorts of needs: economic (agreements between the railway companies, the Labour Syndicates, trusts of employers, agricultural co-operation, co-operation for export, etc.), political, intellectual, artistic, educational and so on. What formerly belonged without a shadow of doubt to the functions of the State, or the Church, enters now into the domain of free organisation.

This tendency develops with a striking rapidity under our very eyes. It was sufficient that a breath of emancipation should have slightly limited the powers of Church and State in their never-satisfied tendency towards further extension — and voluntary organisations have already germinated by the thousand. And we may be sure that every new limitation that may be imposed upon State and Church — the two inveterate enemies of freedom — will still further widen the sphere of action of the free organisations.

From the remotest, Stone-Age antiquity men must have realized the evils that resulted from letting some of them acquire personal authority — even if they were the most intelligent, the bravest, or the wisest. Consequently, they developed, in the primitive clan, the village community, the medieval guild (neighbours’ guilds, arts and crafts’ guilds, traders’, hunters’, and so on), and finally in the free medieval city such institutions as enabled them to resist the encroachments upon their life and fortunes both of those strangers who conquered them, and those clansmen of their own who endeavoured to establish their personal authority. The same popular tendency was self-evident in the religious movements of the masses in Europe during the earlier portions of the Reform movement and its Hussite and Anabaptist forerunners. At a much later period, namely, in 1793, the same current of thought and of action found its expression in the strikingly independent, freely federated activity of the “Sections” of Paris and all great cities and many small “Communes” during the French Revolution. And later still, the Labour combinations which developed in England and France, notwithstanding Draconian laws, as soon as the factory system began to grow up, were an outcome of the same popular resistance to the growing power of the few — the capitalists in this case.

These were the main popular Anarchist currents which we know of in history, and it is self-evident that these movements could not but find their expression in literature. So they did, beginning with Lao-tse in China, and some of the earliest Greek philosophers (Aristippus and the Cynics; Zeno and some of the Stoics). However, being born in the masses, and not in any centres of learning, these popular movements, both when they were revolutionary and when they were deeply constructive, found little sympathy among the learned men — far less than the authoritarian hierarchical tendencies...

If the revolt against the State, so long as it was advocated, before 1848 and later on till the Paris Commune, by middle-class writers, took the character of a revolt of the *individual* against society and its hypocrisy — now, when a similar revolt began to take place among the working men, it took a deeper character. It became a research of those forms of *society* which might get rid of the oppression and exploitation of men by other men which is now going on with the aid of the State. In the International Working Men’s Association its founders saw the embryo of that society which would be called into existence by a social revolution — a society where the

functions now belonging to Government would be substituted by free agreements growing out of the direct relations between free groups of producers and consumers. In these surroundings the ideal of the Anarchist ceased to be *individual*: it became *social*.

In proportion as the workers of Europe and America began to know each other directly, without the intermediary of Governments, they grew more and more convinced of their own forces and of their capacity for rebuilding society on new bases. They saw that if the people resumed possession of the land and of all that is required for producing all sorts of necessaries of life, and if the associations of men and women who would work on the land, in the factories, in the mines, and so on, became themselves the managers of production, they would be able, in such conditions, to produce with the greatest ease all that is necessary for the life of society, so as to guarantee well-being for all, and also some leisure for all. The recent progress in science and technics rendered this point more and more evident. Besides, in a vast international organisation of producers and consumers, the exchange of produce could be organised with the same ease — once it would not be done for the enrichment of the few.

At the same time, the ever-growing thinking portion of the workers saw that the State, with its traditions, its hierarchy, and its narrow nationalism, would always stand in the way of the development of such an organisation; and the experiments made in different countries with the view of partially alleviating the social evils within the present middle-class State proved more and more the fallacy of such tactics.

The wider the sphere of those experiments, the more evident it was that the machinery of the State could not be utilized as an instrument of emancipation. The State is an institution which was developed for the very purpose of establishing monopolies in favour of the slave and serf owners, the landed proprietors, canonic and laic, the merchant guilds and the moneylenders, the kings, the military commanders, the “noble-men,” and finally, in the nineteenth century, the industrial capitalists, whom the State supplied with “hands” driven away from the land. Consequently the State would be, to say the least, a useless institution, once these monopolies ceased to exist. *Life would be simplified*, once the mechanism created for the exploitation of the poor by the rich would have been done away with.

The idea of independent Communes for the territorial organisation, and of federations of Trade Unions for the organisation of men in accordance with their different functions, gave a *concrete* conception of society regenerated by a social revolution. There remained only to add to these two modes of organisation a third, which we saw rapidly developing during the last fifty years, since a little liberty was conquered in this direction: the thousands upon thousands of free combines and societies growing up everywhere for the satisfaction of all possible and imaginable needs, economic, sanitary, and educational; for mutual protection, for the propaganda of ideas, for art, for amusement, and so on. All of them covering each other, and all of them always ready to meet the new needs by new organisations and adjustments.

More than that. It begins to be understood now that if human societies go on developing on these lines, coercion and punishment must necessarily fall into decay. The greatest obstacle to the maintenance of a certain moral level in our present societies lies in the absence of social equality. Without *real* equality, the sense of justice can never be universally developed, because *Justice implies the recognition of Equality*; while in a society in which the principles of justice would not be contradicted at every step by the existing inequalities of rights and possibilities of development, they would be bound to spread and to enter into the habits of the people.

In such a case the individual would be *free*, in the sense that his freedom would not be limited any more by *fear*: by the fear of a social or a mystical punishment, or by obedience, either to other men reputed to be his superiors, or to mystical and metaphysical entities — which leads in both cases to intellectual servility (one of the greatest curses of mankind) and to the lowering of the moral level of men.

In free surroundings based upon Equality, man might with full confidence let himself be guided by his own reason (which, of course, by necessity, would bear the stamp of his social surroundings). And he might also attain the full development of his individuality; while the “individualism” considered now by middle-class intellectuals as the means for the development of the better-gifted individuals, is, as every one may himself see, the chief obstacle to this development. Not only because, with a low productivity, which is kept at a low level by Capitalism and the State, the immense majority of gifted men have neither the leisure nor the chance to develop their higher gifts; but also because those who have that leisure are