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COMMUNISM AND ANARCHY

BY

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Forgotten Books

Communism and Anarchy

Pëtr Kropotkin
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Editor's Preface

Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) was one of the greatest anarchist theoreticians of his time. Although he admired the directly democratic and non-authoritarian practices of the traditional peasant village commune, he was never an advocate of small and isolated communal experimentalism. Many people, upon reading his works, have been inspired to found such communities, both in his own time as well as the hippies of the 1960s (a period when Kropotkin's major works were epublished and influential). Kropotkin did not consider such ventures were likely to be successful or useful in achieving wider revolutionary goals. His friend, Elisee Reclus, who had been involved in such a venture in South America in his youth, was even more hostile to small communal experiments. It is a pity that some of the founders of the many hippy communes in the 1960s (nearly all of which faded rather quickly) did not read Kropotkin more carefully. Unfortunately, they made the same mistakes as many anarchists, communists and socialists had made a century before them. In the anarchist press today one still finds adverts for prospective small and isolated anarchist colonies. Also, many commentaries about Kropotkin still misrepresent him as having had a vision of society consisting of unfederated and independent village-like settlements and of advocating small communal experiments as a means of achieving an anarchist society. The following speech and two 'open' letters, which have not been in print for a century, clearly show, that although not emotionally opposed to such ventures, he was highly sceptical about their chances of success and generally believed them to be a drain upon the energies of the anarchist movement. Despite his warnings, these articles also contain much good and practical advice to those who are still tempted to found small experimental communes in the wilderness, or perhaps, those tempted in some future era to colonise space.

Graham Purchase

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Many Anarchists and thinkers in general, whilst recognizing the immense advantages which Communism may offer to society, yet consider this form of social organization a danger to the liberty and free development of the individual. This danger is also recognized by many Communists, and, taken as a whole, the question is merged in that other vast problem which our century has laid bare to its fullest extent: the relation of the individual to society. The importance of this question need hardly be insisted upon.

The problem became obscured in various ways. When speaking of Communism, most people think of the more or less Christian and monastic and always authoritarian Communism advocated in the first half of this century and practiced in certain communities. These communities took the family as a model and tried to constitute "the great Communist family" to "reform man,". To this end, in addition to working in common, they imposed the living closely together like a family, as well as the isolation or separation of the colony from present civilization. This amounted to nothing less than the total interference of all "brothers" and "sisters" with the entire private life of each member.

In addition to this, the difference was not sufficiently noted as between isolated communities, founded on various occasions during the last three or four centuries, and the numerous federated communes which are likely to spring up in a society about to inaugurate the social revolution. Five aspects of the subject thus require to be considered separately:

1. Production and consumption in common,
2. Domestic life in common (cohabitation: is it necessary to arrange it after the model of the present family?),
3. The isolated communities of our times,
4. The federated communes of the future, and
5. Does Communism necessarily lessen individuality? In other words, the Individual in a Communist society.

An immense movement of ideas took place during this century under the name of Socialism in general, beginning with Babeuf, St. Simon, Fourier, Robert Owen and Proudhon who formulated the predominating currents of Socialism, and continued by their

numerous successors (French) Considerant, Pierre Lerous, Louis Blanc; (German) Marx, Engels; (Russian) Chernychevski, Bakunin; etc, who worked either at popularising the ideas of the founders of modern Socialism or at establishing them on a scientific basis.

These ideas, on taking precise shape, gave birth to two principal currents: Authoritarian Communism and Anarchist Communism; also to a number of intermediary schools bent on finding a way between, such as State Capitalism, Collectivism, Co-operation; among the working masses they created a formidable workers' movement which strives to organise the whole mass of the workers by trades for the struggle against Capital, and which becomes more international with the frequent intercourse between workers of different nationalities. The following three essential points were gained by this immense movement of ideas and of action, and these have already widely penetrated the public conscience:

1. The abolition of the wage system, the modern form of ancient serfdom,
2. The abolition of individual property in the means of production, and
3. The emancipation of the individual and of society from the political machinery, the State, which helps to maintain economic slavery.

On these three points all are agreed, and even those who advocate "labour notes" or who, like Brousse, wish all "to be functionaries," that is employees of the State or the commune, admit that if they advocate either of these proposals it is only because they do not see an immediate possibility for Communism. They accept this compromise as an expedient, but their aim always remains Communism. And, as to the State, even the bitterest partisans of the State, of authority, even of dictatorship, recognise that with the disappearance of the classes of today the State will also cease to exist.

Hence we may say without exaggerating the importance of our section of the Socialist movement — the Anarchist section — that in spite of all differences between the various sections of Socialism (which differences are, before all, based upon the more

or less revolutionary character of the means of action of each section), we may affirm that all sections, by the voice of their thinkers, recognise the evolution towards Free Communism as the aim of Socialist evolution. All the rest, as they themselves confess, are only stepping-stones towards this end.

It would be idle to discuss these stepping-stones without an examination of the tendencies of development of modern society.

Of these different tendencies two, before all, merit our attention. One is the increasing difficulty of determining the share of each individual in modern production. Industry and agriculture have become so complicated, so riveted together, all industries are so dependent one upon the other that payment to the producer by results becomes impossible the more industry is developed, the more we see payment by piece replaced by wages. Wages, on the other hand, become more equal. The division of modern bourgeois society in classes certainly remains and there is a whole class of bourgeois who earn the more, the less they do. The working class itself is divided into four great divisions:

1. women,
2. agricultural labourers,
3. unskilled workers, and
4. skilled workers.

These divisions represent four degrees of exploitation and are but the result of bourgeois organisation.

In a society of equals, where all can learn a trade and where the exploitation of woman by man, of the peasant by the manufacturer, will cease, these classes will disappear. But, even today, wages within each of these classes tend to become more equal. This led to the statement: “that a navvy’s day’s work is worth that of a jeweller”, and made Robert Owen conceive his “labour notes”, paid to all who worked so many hours in the production of necessary commodities.

But if we look back on all attempts made in this direction, we find that with the exception of a few thousand farmers in the United States, labour notes have not spread since the end of the first quarter of the century when Owen tried to issue them. The

reasons for this have been discussed elsewhere (see the chapter: The Wage System, in my book "The Conquest of Bread").

On the other hand, we see a great number of attempts at partial socialisation, tending in the direction of Communism. Hundreds of Communist communities have been founded during this century almost everywhere and at this very moment we are aware of more than a hundred of them, all being more or less Communistic. It is in the same direction of Communism — partial Communism, we mean to say — that nearly all the numerous attempts at socialisation we see in bourgeois society tend to be made, either between individuals or with regard to the socialisation of municipal matters.

Hotels, steamers, boarding houses, are all experiments in this direction undertaken by the bourgeois. For so much per day you have the choice between ten or fifty dishes placed at your disposal at the hotel or on the steamer, with nobody controlling the amount you have eaten of them. This organisation is even international and before leaving Paris or London you may buy bons (coupons for 10 francs a day) which enable you to stay at will in hundreds of hotels in France, Germany, Switzerland, etc., all belonging to an international society of hotels.

The bourgeois thoroughly understood the advantages of partial Communism combined with the almost unlimited freedom of the individual in respect to consumption, and in all these institutions for a fixed price per month you will be lodged and fed, with the single exception of costly extras (wine, special apartments) which are charged separately.

Fire, theft and accident insurance (especially in villages where equality of conditions permits the charge of an equal premium for all inhabitants), the arrangement by which great English stores will supply for 1s. per week all the fish which a small family may consume, clubs, the innumerable societies of insurance against sickness, etc., etc.. This mass of institutions, created during the 19th century, are an approach towards Communism with regard to part of our total consumption.

Finally, there exists a vast series of municipal institutions — water, gas, electricity, workmen's dwellings, trains with uniform

fares, baths, washing houses, etc. — where similar attempts at socialising consumption are being made on an ever increasing scale.

All this is certainly not yet Communism. Far from it. But the principle of these institutions contains a part of the principle of Communism: for so much per day (in money today, in labour tomorrow) you are entitled to satisfy — luxury excepted — this or the other of your wants.

These forays into Communism differ from real Communism in many ways; and essentially in the two following;

1. payment in money instead of payment by labour;
2. the consumers have no voice in the administration of the business.

If, however, the idea, the tendency of these institutions were well understood, it would not be difficult even today to start by private or public initiative a community carrying out the first principle mentioned. Let us suppose a territory of 500 hectares on which are built 200 cottages, each surrounded by a garden or an orchard of a quarter hectare. The management allows each family occupying a cottage, to choose out of fifty dishes per day what is desired, or it supplies bread, vegetables, meat, coffee as demanded for preparation at home. In return they demand either so much per annum in money or a certain number of hours of work given, at the consumers' choice, to one of the departments of the establishment: agriculture, cattle raising, cooking, cleaning. This may be put in practice tomorrow if required, and we must wonder that such a farm/hotel/garden has not yet been founded by an enterprising hotel proprietor.

It will be objected, no doubt, that it is just here, the introduction of labour in common, that Communists have generally experienced failure. Yet this objection cannot stand. The causes of failure have always to be sought elsewhere.

Firstly, nearly all communities were founded by an almost religious wave of enthusiasm. People were asked to become "pioneers of humanity;" to submit to the dictates of a punctilious morality, to become quite regenerated by Communist life, to give

all their time, hours of work and of leisure, to the community, to live entirely for the community.

This meant acting simply like monks and to demand — without any necessity — men to be what they are not. It is only in quite recent days that communities have been founded by Anarchist working men without any such pretensions, for purely economic purposes — to free themselves from capitalist exploitation.

The second mistake lay in the desire to manage the community after the model of a family, to make it "the great family" They lived all in the same house and were thus forced to continuously meet the same "brethren and sisters." It is already difficult often for two real brothers to live together in the same house, and family life is not always harmonious; so it was a fundamental error to impose on all the "great family" instead of trying, on the contrary, to guarantee as much freedom and home life to each individual.

Besides, a small community cannot live long; "brethren and sisters" forced to meet continuously, amid a scarcity of new impressions, end by detesting each other. And if two persons through becoming rivals or simply not liking each other are able by their disagreement to bring about the dissolution of a community, the prolonged life of such communities would be a strange thing, especially since all communities founded up to now have isolated themselves. It is a foregone conclusion that a close association of 10, 20, or 100 persons cannot last longer than three or four years. It would be even regrettable if it lasted longer, because this would only prove either that all were brought under the influence of a single individual or that all lost their individuality. Well, since it is certain that in three, four or five years part of the members of a community would wish to leave, there ought to exist at least a dozen or more federated communities in order that those who, for one reason or other, wish to leave a community may enter another community, being replaced by new comers from other places. Otherwise, the Communist beehive must necessarily perish or (which nearly always happens) fall into the hands of one individual — generally the most cunning of the "brethren".

Finally, all communities founded up till now isolated themselves from society; but struggle, a life of struggle, is far more urgently needed by an active man than a well supplied table. This desire to see the world, to mix with its currents, to fight its battles is the imperative call to the young generation. Hence it comes (as Chaikovski remarked from his experience) that young people, at the age of 18 or 20, necessarily leave a community which does not comprehend the whole of society

We need not add that governments of all descriptions have always been the most serious stumbling blocks for all communities. Those which have seen least of this or none at all (like Young Icaria) succeed best. This is easily understood Political hatred is one of the most violent in character. We can live in the same town with our political adversaries if we are not forced to see them every moment. But how is life possible in a small community where we meet each other at every turn. Political dissent enters the study, the workshop, the place of rest, and life becomes impossible.

On the other hand, it has been proved to conviction that work in common, Communist production, succeeds marvellously. In no commercial enterprise has so much value been added to land by labor as in each of the communities founded in America and in Europe. faults of calculation may occur everywhere as they occur in all capitalist undertakings, but since it is known that during the first five years after their institution four out of every commercial undertakings become bankrupt, it must be admitted that nothing similar or even coming near to this has occurred in Communist communities. So, when the bourgeois press, wanting to be ingenious, speaks of offering an island to Anarchists on which to establish their community, relying on our experience we are ready to accept this proposal, provided only that this island be, for instance, the Isle de France (Paris) and that upon the valuation of the social wealth we receive our share of it. Only, since we know that neither Paris nor our share of social wealth will be given to us, we shall someday take one and the other ourselves by means of the Social Revolution. Paris and Barcelona in 1871 were not very far from doing so — and ideas have made headway since that time.

Progress permits us to see above all, that an isolated town, proclaiming the Commune, would have great difficulty to subsist. The experiment ought, therefore, to be made on a territory — eg, one of the Western States, Idaho or Ohio — as American Socialists suggest, and they are right. On a sufficiently large territory, not within the bounds of a single town we must someday begin to put in practice the Communism of the future.

We have so often demonstrated that State Communism is impossible, that it is useless to dwell on this subject. A proof of this, furthermore, lies in the fad that the believers in the State, the upholders of a Socialist State do not themselves believe in State Communism. A portion of them occupy themselves with the conquest of a share of the power in the State of today — the bourgeois State — and do not trouble themselves at all to explain that their idea of a Socialist State is different from a system of State capitalism under which everybody would be a functionary of the State. If we tell them that it is this they aim at, they are annoyed; yet they do not explain what other system of society they wish to establish. As they do not believe in the possibility of a social revolution in the near future, their aim is to become part of the government in the bourgeois State of today and they leave it to the future to decide where this will end.

As to those who have tried to sketch the outlines of a future Socialist State, they met our criticism by asserting that all they want are bureaus of statistics. But this is mere juggling with words. Besides, it is averred today that the only statistics of value are those recorded by each individual himself, giving age, occupation, social position, or the lists of what he sold or bought, produced and consumed.

The questions to be put are usually of voluntary elaboration (by scientists, statistical societies), and the work of statistical bureaus consists today in Distributing the questions, in arranging and mechanically summing up the replies. To reduce the State, the governments to this function and to say that, by "government", only this will be understood, means nothing else (if said sincerely) but an honourable retreat. And me must indeed admit that the Jacobins of thirty years ago have immensely gone back from their ideals of dictatorship and Socialist centralisation. No one would dare to say today that the

production or consumption of potatoes or rice must be regulated by the parliament of the German People's State (Volksstaat) at Berlin. These insipid things are no longer said.

The Communist state is an Utopia given up already by its own adherents and it is time to proceed further. A far more important question to be examined, indeed, is this: whether Anarchist or Free Communism does not also imply a diminution of individual freedom?

As a matter of fact, in all discussions on freedom our ideas are obscured by the surviving influence of past centuries of serfdom and religious oppression.

Economists represented the enforced contract (under the threat of hunger) between master and workingman as a state of freedom. Politicians, again, so called the present state of the citizen who has become a serf and a taxpayer of the State. The most advanced moralists, like Mill and his numerous disciples, defined liberty as the right to do everything with the exception of encroachments on the equal liberty of all others. Apart from the fact that the word "right" is a very confused term handed down from past ages, meaning nothing at all or too much, the definition of Mill enabled the philosopher Spencer, numerous authors and even some Individualist Anarchists to reconstruct tribunals and legal punishments, even to the penalty of death — that is, to reintroduce, necessarily, in the end the State itself which they had admirably criticised themselves. The idea of free will is also hidden behind all these reasonings.

If we put aside all unconscious actions and consider only premeditated actions (being those which the law, religious and penal systems alone try to influence) we find that each action of this kind is preceded by some discussion in the human brain; for instance, "I shall go out and take a walk," somebody thinks, "No, I have an appointment with a friend," or "I promised to finish some work" or "My wife and children will I be sorry to remain at home," or "I shall lose my employment if I do not go to work."

The last reflection implies the fear of punishment. In the first three instances this man has to face only himself, his habit of loyalty, his sympathies. And there lies all the difference. We say

that a man forced to reason that he must give up such and such an engagement from fear of punishment, is not a free man. And we affirm that humanity can and must free itself from the fear of punishment, and that it can constitute an Anarchist society in which the fear of punishment and even the unwillingness to be blamed shall disappear. Towards this ideal we march. But we know that we can free ourselves neither from our habit of loyalty (keeping our word) nor from our sympathies (fear of giving pain to those whom we love and whom we do not wish to afflict on or even to disappoint). In this last respect man is never free. Crusoe, on his island, was not free. The moment he began to construct his ship, to cultivate his garden or to lay in provisions for the winter, he was already captured, absorbed by his work. If he felt lazy and would have preferred to remain lying at ease in his cave, he hesitated for a moment and nevertheless went forth to his work. The moment he had the company of a dog, of two or three goats and, above all, after he had met with Friday, he was no longer absolutely free in the sense in which these words are sometimes used in discussions. He had obligations, he had to think of the interests of others, he was no longer the perfect individualist whom we are sometimes expected to see in him. The moment he has a wife or children, educated by himself or confided to others (society), the moment he has a domestic animal, or even only an orchard which requires to be watered at certain hours — from that moment he is no longer the "care for nothing," the "egoist", the "individualist" who is sometimes represented as the type of a free man. Neither on Crusoe's island, far less in society of whatever kind it be, does this type exist. Man takes, and will always take into consideration the interests of other men in proportion to the establishment of relations of mutual interest between them, and the more so the more these others affirm their own sentiments and desires.

Thus we find no other definition of liberty than the following one: the possibility of action without being influenced in those actions by the fear of punishment by society (bodily constraint, the threat of hunger or even censure, except when it comes from a friend).

Understanding liberty in this sense — and we doubt whether a larger and at the same time a more real definition of it can be found — we may say that Communism can diminish, even

annihilate, all individual liberty and in many Communist communities this was attempted; but it can also enhance this liberty to its utmost limits.

All depends on the fundamental ideas on which the association is based. It is not the form of an association which involves slavery; it is the ideas of individual liberty which we bring with us to an association which determine the more or less libertarian character of that association.

This applies to all forms of association. Cohabitation of two individuals under the same roof may lead to the enslavement of one by the will of the other, as it may also lead to liberty for both. The same applies to the family or to the co-operation of two persons in gardening or in bringing out a paper. The same with regard to large or small associations, to each social institution. Thus, in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, we find communes of equals, men equally free — and four centuries later we see the same commune calling for the dictatorship of a priest. Judges and laws had remained; the idea of the Roman law, of the State had become dominant, whilst those of freedom, of settling disputes by arbitration and of applying federalism to its fullest extent had disappeared; hence arose slavery. Well, of all institutions or forms of social organisation that have been tried until this day, Communism is the one which guarantees the greatest amount of individual liberty — provided that the idea that begets the community be Liberty, Anarchy.

Communism is capable of assuming all forms of freedom or of oppression which other institutions are unable to do. It may produce a monastery where all implicitly obey the orders of their superior, and it may produce an absolutely free organisation, leaving his full freedom to the individual, existing only as long as the associates wish to remain together, imposing nothing on anybody, being anxious rather to defend, enlarge, extend in all directions the liberty of the individual. Communism may be authoritarian (in which case the community will soon decay) or it may be Anarchist. The State, on the contrary, cannot be this. It is authoritarian or it ceases to be the State.

Communism guarantees economic freedom better than any other form of association, because it can guarantee wellbeing, even

luxury, in return for a few hours of work instead of a day's work. Now, to give ten or eleven hours of leisure per day out of the sixteen during which we lead a conscious life (sleeping eight hours), means to enlarge individual liberty to a point which for thousands of years has been one of the ideals of humanity.

This can be done today in a Communist society man can dispose of at least ten hours of leisure. This means emancipation from one of the heaviest burdens of slavery on man. It is an increase of liberty.

To recognise all men as equal and to renounce government of man by man is another increase of individual liberty in a degree which no other form of association has ever admitted even as a dream. It becomes possible only after the first step has been taken: when man has his means of existence guaranteed and is not forced to sell his muscle and his brain to those who condescend to exploit him.

Lastly, to recognise a variety of occupations as the basis of all progress and to organise in such a way that man may be absolutely free during his leisure time, whilst he may also vary his work, a change for which his early education and instruction will have prepared him — this can easily be put in practice in a Communist society — this, again, means the emancipation of the individual, who will find doors open in every direction for his complete development.

As for the rest, all depends upon the ideas on which the community is founded. We know a religious community in which members who felt unhappy, and showed signs of this on their faces, used to be addressed by a "brother": "You are sad. Nevertheless, put on a happy look, otherwise you will afflict our brethren and sisters." And we know of communities of seven members, one of whom moved the nomination of four committees: gardening, ways and means, housekeeping, and exportation, with absolute rights for the chairman of each committee. There certainly existed communities founded or invaded by "criminals of authority" (a special type recommended to the attention of Mr. Lombrose) and quite a number of communities were founded by mad upholders of the absorption of the individual by society. But these men were not the product

of Communism, but of Christianity (eminently authoritarian in its essence) and of Roman law, the State.

The fundamental idea of these men who hold that society cannot exist without police and judges, the idea of the State, is a permanent danger to all liberty, and not the fundamental idea of Communism — which consists in consuming and producing without calculating the exact share of each individual. This idea, on the contrary, is an idea of freedom, of emancipation.

Thus we have arrived at the following conclusions: Attempts at Communism have hitherto failed because:

1. They were based on an impetus of a religious character instead of considering a community simply as a means of economic consumption and production,
2. They isolated themselves from society,
3. They were imbued with an authoritarian spirit,
4. They were isolated instead of federated,
5. They required of their members so much labour as to leave them no leisure time, and
6. They were modelled on the form of the patriarchal family instead of having for an aim the fullest possible emancipation of the individual.

Communism, being an eminently economic institution, does not in any way prejudice the amount of liberty guaranteed to the individual, the initiator, the rebel against crystallising customs. It may be authoritarian, which necessarily leads to the death of the community, and it may be libertarian, which in the twelfth century even under the partial communism of the young cities of that age, led to the creation of a young civilisation full of vigour, a new springtide of Europe.

The only durable form of Communism, however, is one under which, seeing the close contact between fellow men it brings about, every effort would be made to extend the liberty of the individual in all directions.

Under such conditions, under the influence of this idea, the liberty of the individual, increased already by the amount of leisure secured to him, will be curtailed in no other way than

occurs today by municipal gas, the house to house delivery of food by great stores, modern hotels, or by the fact that during working hours we work side by side with thousands of fellow labourers.

With Anarchy as an aim and as a means, Communism becomes possible. Without it, it necessarily becomes slavery and cannot exist.

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