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Anarchism Defined by an Anarchist

C. L. James

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The very impartial article by Professor Ely on “Socialism in America,” which appeared in your June issue, suggests to me that a somewhat less external view of that movement known as anarchism might possibly be interesting.

Anarchism, like Protestantism, has no particular author, but the founder of the I. W. P. A. is Karl Marx, and Marx’s work, “Capital,” is fairly entitled to be considered the great text-book of anarchistic socialism. According to anarchists, possession must be carefully distinguished from *property*. Possession is the power, right, or privilege of using anything which is inseparable from man’s life on earth. Property is the right to use or withhold from use—*jus utere vel abutere*, Cicero says—and this right evidently is not natural, but is derived from government, which, moreover, itself sprang from war, and, under all its forms, is designed primarily to maintain by the military power the claim of property owners to withhold from use in order to exact a tribute. Hence Proudhon’s apothegm, “Property is robbery.” Mr. Ely, therefore, is hardly correct in saying that anarchists quarrel only with existing forms of government. They

care little or nothing for the difference between democracy, republicanism, aristocracy, or monarchy. The essential thing is, they say, that under all these systems the rich employ the brave to maintain by force their method of “robbing” the poor and timid. And the important distinction between different phases of this “robbery” is not political, but economic. The simplest phase is chattel slavery, where the rich, with the aid of their mercenary defenders, own land, tools, and men. This system went down in Europe, and, but for the rebellion, would have gone down in America, by a natural law of decay. It cannot flourish after its extension has been checked, for the reason that, while shivery rapidly develops a new country, it beggars and exhausts an old one. It killed the Roman Empire, and, with the empire, may be said (in Europe) to have killed itself. The system of landlordism and serfdom is better adapted to a rude state of society, with a weak general government. Therefore, it flourished in the Middle Ages as at no other time. It disappeared about the end of the fifteenth century, for various reasons, the chief of which is that the growth of commerce and manufactures rendered other investments more profitable than land, and made it easier and cheaper to hire men as wage workers than to rule over them as over serfs.

Thus came in the modern system of capitalism and wage labor, which, however, according to Marx, is as certainly transitory as its predecessors. Capitalism means partial freedom of contract, wages rising (absolutely) with profits, a high general standard of comfort, diffused education, democracy. But it is also true, of course, that relatively to the profits of capital, wages fall when profits rise. Thus there is opened an increasing gulf between the capitalist and the wage worker. Again, competition among capitalists, continually reducing the price of commodities to the cost of production, necessitates increasingly minute subdivision of labor, destroying that technical skill which made the old-fashioned shoemaker or blacksmith independent; degrading the laborers into portions of the machine they operate; stimulating the competition for employment

which prevails among them; increasing the frequency of those periods when they are thrown out of work and reduced from comfort to beggary, and, of course, contributing to increase the revolutionary discontent of educated men, nurtured in hope and enjoyment, who see themselves hopelessly distanced by those whom they can in no way regard as their superiors.

The chasm which threatens to engulf our social system is still further widened by the destruction of small capitalists in the battle of competition, and the growth of great monopolies, advancing *pari passu* with the pauperization of the laboring class. The miseries and dangers thus engendered by the very nature of modern trade and industry, are greatly aggravated by the periodical gorging of the market with goods produced in excess of the demand during seasons of speculation, and the consequent forced migration of capital to other branches by the dreary road along which lie bankruptcy, stagnation, reduced consumption, reduced production, slow liquidation, and that gradual revival of business which closes a financial crisis.

The critical character of these periodical revulsions is greatly aggravated by the fluctuations of that uncertain currency which speculative business has everywhere introduced. It has so far been palliated by the extension of the market into new countries—America, India, Egypt, China, etc. But when this process reaches an end, and one commercial system extends over the world, then, if not sooner, prices will actually foil to the cost of production, and the catastrophe of production for profit will be reached. Anarchy, therefore, according to anarchists, is the inevitable end of the present drift and tendency of things. Trimmers may devise means to put it off; Napoleons and Bismarcks may, for a time, stifle it in blood, but the longer it is deferred, the more violent will be the reaction which brings it in at last. That only is wise statesmanship which gives up moribund institutions to die. That only is reform which anticipates in a less painful manner the work of revolution.