

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



# The Illusion of Anarchism

Dora Marsden

1914

ANARCHISTS are an interesting body of people whom governments take too seriously and who, unfortunately, do not take themselves seriously enough. Governments fear them as hostile, bent on mischief: whereas they are harmless, after the disconcerting harmless manner of infants. For the People indeed: for Humanity, they conceive themselves filled with an ardent passion: but towards the ways of humans — when they, as men, emerge from out the blurred composite mass of “Humanity” — they are averse in the thorough-going implacable way possible only to people who frame their dislikes on principle. Doubtless, if one were to search the world over for the bitterest-sounding opponents of the theory that we are all “born in sin” with our natural bent inherently set towards “evil”, one would fix upon the anarchists: but this is their idiosyncrasy: a foil to contrast with their main tenets. Their opposition penetrates no deeper than a dislike for the phrase, because perhaps more commonplace persons than themselves have espoused it. In substance it forms the body of anarchism, and anarchists are not separated in anyway from kinship with the devout. They belong to the Christians’ Church and should be recognised as Christianity’s picked children. Only quality dis-

Dora Marsden  
The Illusion of Anarchism  
1914

Retrieved on 01/14/2021 from <https://consciousegoism.6te.net/pdfs/essays/TheIllusionOfAnarchism.pdf>  
Originally published in *The Egoist* Volume I Number 18  
(October 15th, 1914)

**[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)**

tinguishes them from the orthodox: a distinction in which the advantage is theirs. As priests administering the sacraments they would not be ill-placed.

At the birth of every unit of life, there is ushered into existence — an Archist. An Archist is one who seeks to establish, maintain, and protect by the strongest weapons at his disposal, the law of his own interests; while the purpose of every church — institutions all teaching anarchism as the correct spirit in conduct — is to make men willing to assert, that though they are born and inclined archists, they OUGHT to be anarchists. This is the true meaning of the spirit of renunciation — the rock on which the Church is built. The “OUGHT” represents the installation of Conscience, that inner spiritual police set in authority by the will and the skill of the preacher. Its business is to bind the Archistic desires which would maintain and press further their own purposes in favour of the purposes of whomsoever the preacher pleases: God: or Right: or the People: or the Anointed: or those set in Office. Whether the preacher or the individual’s desires will prevail will pivot about the strength of the man’s individual vitality. If the man is alive, his own interests are alive, and their importance stands to him with an intense assertiveness which corresponds with the level of his own vitality, of which the strength of his own interests alone can provide a sure index. Being alive, the first living instinct is to intensify the consciousness of life, and pressing an interest is just this process of intensifying consciousness. All growing life-forms are aggressive: “aggressive” is what growing means. Each fights for its own place, and to enlarge it, and enlarging it is growth. And because life-forms are gregarious there are myriads of claims to lay exclusive hold upon any place. The claimants are myriad: bird, beast, plant, insect, vermin — each will assert its own sole claim on any place as long as it is permitted: as witness the pugnacity of gnat, weed, and flea: the scant ceremony of the housewife’s broom, the axe which makes a clearing, the scythe, the fisherman’s net, the slaughter-

house bludgeon: all assertions of aggressive interests promptly countered by more powerful interests! The world falls to him who can take it, if instinctive action can tell us anything.

It is into this colossal encounter of interests, i.e., of lives, that the anarchist breaks in with his “Thus far and no farther. Lower interests may be vetoed without question, or with a regretful sigh, but MAN must be immune. MAN as MAN must be protected: his Manhood is his shield: to immunity his Manhood creates and confers his Right. The lower creation stands and falls by its might or lack of it: but Manhood confers a protection of its own.” Who guarantees the protection? “The conscience of him who can infringe it. If that fails, then the outraged consciences of other men, jealous for the dignity of ‘Man’. Such an one as does not hold in awe the Rights of Man, who does not bow down to the worth of Man as Man, and not merely as a living being, and hold it Sacred and Holy, he shall be held to be not of the community of Man but a monster preying upon the human fold, fit only to be flung out, and to foregather with his familiars — wolves and strange monsters.” That is the creed of an Anarchist, whose other name is “Humanitarian”. His creed explains why he loves humanity but disapproves of men whose ways please him not. For men do not act after the anarchistic fashion one towards another. They are friendly and affectionate animals in the main: but interests are as imperative with them as with the tiger and the ape, and they press them forward, deterred only by the calculation of the hostility they may arouse by disturbing the interests which they cross, as cross they must, since by extending the tentacles of interest is their way of growth. That this is so would be plainer to see if men had single interests (as some men have, and then it is all plain enough). But men have many, and what might be expected to be a straight course is a zigzagged line. And interests lead not only by way of oppositions: by wrestling for possessions: in love, for instance, they lead to a seeming commingling of interest. It is only seeming: the love interest is as archistic as

any other. Into this stimulating clash of powers the anarchist introduces his “law” of “the inviolability of individual liberty”. “It is feasible to push,” he would say, “the line of satisfaction of men’s wants — since being born into life and sin they will not wholly renounce them — but only to the lengths where it can be squared with the wants of everyone else. Such wants will work out perhaps, and probably merely to the satisfaction of certain elementary needs: of earth-room, of sustenance and clothing: a title to which are the indefeasible Rights of Man. Only when these have been assumed to all may the interests of any be pushed further. To wealth, according to his necessities, each has a *right*; in return each must serve as he can”. It must be acknowledged that it is a creed which lends itself exceeding well to eloquence carrying the correct noble ring with it; it makes converts increasingly; and when it wears thin in one garb it readily rehabilitates itself in changed raiment; as Christianity, as Humanitarianism, anarchism successfully and continually seduces Public Opinion.

Why it should have no difficulty in drawing Public Opinion to its side the nature of Public Opinion makes evident. Public Opinion intrinsically is — bellowing. It is the Guardian of the *Status quo*: its purpose is to frighten off any invader who would disturb established interests: it is always, in its first stage, on the side of good faith, the maintenance of contracts, and fixed arrangements: it is like a watch-dog barking at all new-comers, be these friendly or hostile. Its bark is worse than its bite, however, and flouted or ignored, it will always arrive at a temporary halt. The halt is to gain time to see what measure of strength the disturbing force has. Public Opinion, it is to be noted, is the affair of non-combatants, and is supposed, therefore, to be also Disinterested Opinion. Which does not in any way follow. Public Opinion is in fact the calculation of the self-interest of non-combatants. Its primary and involuntary bellowing function is its first instinct with intent to warn off disturbers: but if the aggressor perseveres unmoved and

will slip from his grasp: whereas his paramount interest is to retain his hold on it. The “exploitation” is nevertheless as sure and as certain as that of the sorriest old rascal who ever coined wealth out of misery. Mother-love, sex-love, with friendship even, it is one and the same.

But whatever may be the illusions which lead him on, the anarchist’s hopes are vain. Water will take to running uphill before men take seriously towards anarchism and humanitarianism. The forces of their being are set the other way. The will to create, to construct, to set the pattern of their will on the world of events will never be restrained by any spiritual embargo, save with those whose will would count for little anyway. There is some substance, indeed, in the old market-place cry about levelling “down” instead of “up”. The embargoists, the anarchists, and all the saviours, are bent on levelling-down: they are worrying about the few desiring too much: whereas none can desire enough. The “problems” of the world — which are no problems — will be solved by the “down-and-outs” themselves: by a self-assertion which will scatter their present all too apparent anarchism. When it becomes clear to them that it is only seemly to want the earth, they will feel the stirrings of a power sufficient at least for the acquisition of a few acres.

proves to be more powerful than the member of the settled order whom he is attacking, Public Opinion, *i.e.*, the interests of the non-fighters, gets ready to come to terms. It gets ready to live at ease with a force which apparently has come to stay. It has poised the merits of the two claimants: and peace — the maintenance of the *Status quo* — first weighted the side of the defenders: but the aggressor having won success, success becomes his defence, and proves an adequate makeweight. Which is why success succeeds. It is easy to defend the defensive side: to hold him “in the right” at the outset: the defensive is the defensible: it would have been difficult to do otherwise: since to defend the aggressor is an anomaly in terms: the aggressor can only be “justified”: and only success can justify him. But let the aggressor fail, and for Public Opinion he at once appears diabolical. For instance, if Germany is successful now, the German Emperor will command the admiration of the world, and will get it. Should Germany lose there will be none so poor as to pay him reverence. His reputation, as far as Public Opinion goes now, lies in the womb of time: a matter of accidental forces more or less. The heinous offence for which the world will hold him a demoniacal monster is — a miscalculated judgment; that which will make him the Hero of his Age — its Master — will be just — a verified judgment. Which explains why a good fight will justify any cause; a good fight being one which is aggressive and WINS. Thus forces, on any pretext whatsoever, having been mustered for a test, the question of public repute will pivot about a nice estimation of the strength of those forces. Execration is not meted out to the despoilers of art treasures as such — only if the despoiler likewise shows signs of being the vanquished. Louvain will be a trifle, regrettable but necessary, if the German hosts are victorious. So contrariwise: any schoolboy may lightly hold the reputation of Napoleon as to “Right” at his caprice — *because of Waterloo*. It is Waterloo which separates Napoleon from Alexander and Julius Caesar: not the bloodstained plains of Europe;

as it is Naseby and Marston Moor which pales the memory of Wexford and Drogheda, and makes Cromwell a Kingly Hero instead of a villainous knave and murderous assassin. On like counts, too, was George Washington a Hero and “right”, while President Kruger was a scheming seditionist, and “wrong”.

Public Opinion, therefore, is nothing more than a loose form of alliance founded among non-principals, based on a momentarily felt community of interests on the defensive. The initial shock of invasion having been parried, the passage of time, and especially the course of events, will begin to make clear to what extent this first apparent community of interest with the defensive was due to mere alarm, and how far it represented something more permanent. Moreover, in the account of the development of Public Opinion it is to be recognised that the very dash and daring and picturesqueness of the aggressive may actually give birth to an interest in which the non-combatants will find themselves involved by sheer fascination: to such an extent even it may be that to be permitted to share in the general risk of the fight will appear a high privilege. A great aggressor will find he can always count on this. The conquerors have been the well-beloved. Napoleon had the adoration of the men whose lives he was “wasting”. *They* would have called it a glorious opportunity enabling them to spend themselves lavishly with a correspondingly lavish return in pleasure. It is indeed a most ludicrous error to assume that interests are all “material”. There are interests that are of pleasure, interests of spiritual expansion, interests of heightened status, quite as compelling as those of material profit; it is indeed doubtful, even among the meaner sort, whether the “material” interests have as strong a pull as the others. Moreover, *kinds* of interests are very unstable, and will develop from one form to another with extreme rapidity under the influence of threat or challenge. So, at the appearance of a great personality who can give body to more spacious interests, even the most inti-

another. “The State is fallen, long live the State” — the furthest-going revolutionary anarchist cannot get away from that. On the morrow of his successful revolution he would need to set about finding means to protect his “anarchistic” notions: and would find himself protecting his own interests with all the powers he could command, like a vulgar Archist: formulating his Laws and maintaining his State, until some franker Archist arrived to displace and supersede him.

The process seems so obvious, and the sequence is so unailing, that one wonders how the humanitarian fallacies gain the hearing they do, though the wonder diminishes when one reflects how the major proportion of the human species holds it a just grievance that we walk upon our feet and not upon our heads, and that the tendency of falling objects is down and not up. According, one might argue, it is *because* it is the human way for men to push their interests outwards that humanitarians step forward and modestly suggest that they should direct them backwards. Object that outwards is the human way and the retort is that inwards is the divine one — and better, higher. And there may be something too in a customary confusing of an attitude which refuses to hold laws and interests sacred (*i.e.*, whole, unquestioned, untouched), and that which refuses to respect the existence of forces, of which Laws are merely the outward visible index. It is a very general error, but the anarchist is especially the victim of it; the greater intelligence of the Archist will understand that though laws considered as sacred are foolishness, respect to any and every law is due for just the amount of retaliatory force there may be involved in it if it be flouted. Respect for “sanctity” and respect for “power” stand at opposite poles: the respecter of the one is the verbalist, of the other — the Archist: the egoist.

And there are the illusions about the ways of love: where one seems to desire not one’s own interests but another’s. Again it is mere seeming: the lover is a tyrant kept within bounds by the salutary fear that the substance of his desire

primary interest: because so, they live in the vicinity of a bright-glowing strength. Neglect to analyse the meaning of friendly Public Opinion has misled anarchists as to its real nature and as to what attitudes towards their fellows, men can be persuaded to adopt. Combination of interests against a powerful aggressive interest, which is the first stage of Public Opinion, is a momentary affair, intended to parry the attack of a force which is feared because its strength is unknown. The reverse side to this temporary hostility of Public Opinion towards the aggressor is the favourable acceptance of the doctrine of non-pushfulness: of anarchism proper. But the friendliness is as short-lived as the hostility: since fear of the unknown is not a permanent feature of the public temper: rather is an accommodating adjustment: to strong forces emerging out of the unknown, its permanent characteristic. Friendliness to, and admiration for, strong interests is the permanent attitude of this world's children: only varied by some direct antagonism born of an opposition to one's own particular personal and private interest. Hence the reason why anarchism — embargoism in all its many forms — never penetrates more than skin deep. It is always encouraged by great promise of adherents: always it finds itself abandoned by men in earnest with their powers about them: always the world is for the Archists, who disperse and establish "States" according as their powers enable them.

So, opposition to the "State" because it is the "State" is futile: a negative, unending fruitless labour. "What *I* want is *my* state: if I am not able to establish that, it is not my concern *whose* State is established: my business was and still remains the establishing of *my* own. The world should be moulded to my desire if I could so mould it: failing in that, I am not to imagine that there is to be no world at all: others more powerful than I will see to that. If I do make such an error it will fall to me to correct it and pay for it". Thus the Archist. When the curtain rings down on one State automatically it rises upon

mate interests — those of nationality and kinship — will suffer a seachange: —

"If my children want, let them beg for bread,  
My Emperor, my Emperor is taken."

*There* is bespoken the influence of one Emperor: a second has welded spirited, jealous and antagonistic States — even indeed the younger generations of the subdued provinces into a homogeneous unit under the influence of a fantastically adventurous yet living dream. By interests of a different sort England soothed Scotland into unanimity as she is engaged in soothing the Dutch in South Africa. Other interests — those of status and prestige — are the forces which have won for England at this present moment the loose alliance which is implied in a friendly American Opinion. That Americans share a common language and in a measure all the prestige of the English tradition, literary and military, implicates the status of Americans with the maintenance of British Status: they would have hated England readily enough had she given indication just now that she was on the point of lowering it.

At the present time, it is true, England is blushing with the embarrassment of the unfamiliar, by allowing a parrot-like press and pulpit to persuade the world that she is now a disinterested fighter in a great and holy Cause. She appears to be beginning to feel herself infected with the preacher's own liquid emotions as she listens how she is going forth — not for her own sake but — TO RIGHT THE WRONG, to avenge the weak, to champion civilisation, to suppress the Vandal and the Hun, a Bayard, a Galahad, the Armed Messenger of Peace, waging a spiritual warfare. There is one consolation indeed — the "Tommies" are too far off, and too busy to hear any of it. And there is this excuse for the preachers: that they have looked round carefully and have not yet set eyes on any of those likely and tempting bits of territory which hitherto have always been hanging as bait when England has gone to war: it hasn't occurred to them that this war, far from requiring

excuse in poetic babble, was necessary to save England's soul from the devastating unconfidence bred in these years of peace. To please their souls let them call it a spiritual war: at any rate it answers a spiritual need, and in the nick of time: Englishman's need, not Belgium's, or culture's, or civilisation's, democracy's, and the rest. Twenty years hence the conflict probably would have been too late; as it now seems likely to prove twenty years too soon for Germany. The cause of the war is German disparagement of English spirit: both as to its fire and its intelligence. The Germans believed that, average for average, they were better quality: that English prestige was an anachronism, an heritage already sunk to a relic bequeathed from a spiritual past, from whose strength modern England has fallen off: that the nation was devitalised, and as interests can only be held in proportion to the vitality of those who forward them, they could be torn away if seriously challenged by their naturally ordained successors. And they had plenty of evidence to support them. The spiritual fire glows out not merely in one direction: it is all-pervading: and German philosophy, German Science, German inventiveness, energy, daring, and pushfulness provided evidence which all the world might see and compare. By that comparison, Germans had convinced themselves, and were convincing the world — *and us*. They were undermining English confidence, not by their boasts but by their deeds: and naturally, if they excelled in the arts of peace why not in the art of war, where prestige registers an accurate level? They were wearing down our spiritual resilience: the subtle thing of the spirit which, once lost, is never recaptured. A people which feels this subtle thing departing from it will strike instantly for its preservation, or know itself lost before a blow has been struck. It has seemed a puzzle, and to none more than to England herself, why she has suddenly found herself in such abnormally good odour. It is an unusual situation for her — in these latter days. The explanation is the promptness — haste

almost — with which she entered into the war. It was because she seized the first suggestion of an opportunity to vindicate herself, that she instantly stood up — vindicated, rehabilitated with the respect that had in latter days been given her with a questioning grudge. Had she hesitated it would have been the sufficing sign of weakness, of the insensitive lack of pride which the world was more than half expecting, and was more than a little shocked not to find. The “friendliness” of which she has been the recipient since is the outcome. The explanation applies as much to feeling within the limits of the Empire and to malcontents at home, as in the world outside. And the result immediately to follow, one can safely trust, will be equally in her favour: that is, the brilliant vindication of British spirit on the seas and the battlefields will speedily have a counterpart in British laboratories: in renewed and confident strength of spirit in English philosophy, literature and art (where it is needed, God wot!). Confidence, which dare look at plain fact without latent undermining fear, confidence and deeply stirred emotions are the materials which inspire a new spirit in the Arts. After the war, because of the war — the Renaissance!

So, to return to our anarchists, embargoists, humanitarians, culturists, christians, and any other brand of verbalists: the world is to the Archists: it is a bundle of interests, and falls to those who can push their own furthest. The sweep of each interest is the vital index of him who presses it. And interests have this in common: the richness of the fruit they bear grows as they push outwards: the passions they excite are then stronger; the images called up — the throb, the colour, vividness — intenser. For this, a man has the evidence of his fellows to add to the weight of his own: men will even desert their own greyer interests: greyer because less matured: when lured by the fascinating vividness of another's interests far-thrown: the great lord can always count on having door-keepers in abundance. To keep the door has become their