

Preface to the First French Edition of *The Conquest of Bread*

Elisée Reclus

1892

Peter Kropotkin asked me to write a few words at the beginning of his work, and I comply with his wishes, with a certain embarrassment in doing so. Not being able to add anything to the array of arguments that he presents in his work, I risk weakening the force of his words. However, friendship excuses me. While for the French “republicans” supreme good taste is to prostrate at the feet of the Tsar, I like to get closer to the free men whom he would have beaten with rods, whom he will lock in the dungeons of a citadel or hang in a dark courtyard. With these friends, I forget for a moment the abjection of the renegades who, in their youth, made themselves hoarse by crying “Liberty! Liberty!” and who are now trying to combine the two tunes of *La Marseillaise* and the *Bozhe Tsarya Khrani*.¹

Kropotkin’s previous work, *Words of a Rebel*, was above all an ardent critique of bourgeois society, at the same time so ferocious and so corrupt, and appealed to revolutionary energies against the State and the capitalist regime. The current work, following *Words*, has a more calmer bearing. It is addressed to men of goodwill who honestly desire to assist in social transformation, and presents to them in broad outline the phases of imminent history which will enable us to finally constitute the human family on the ruins of banks and States.

The title of the book, *The Conquest of Bread*, should be taken in the broadest sense, because “man does not live by bread alone”. At a time when the generous and valiant are trying to transform their ideal of social justice into a living reality, it is not conquering bread, even with wine and salt, that our ambition is limited to. It is also necessary to conquer all that is necessary, or even simply useful, for life’s comforts; we must be able to assure to all the full satisfaction of needs and pleasures. As long as we have not made this first “conquest”, as long as “there will be poor with us”, it is a bitter mockery to give the name of “society” to this group of human beings who hate and destroy each other, like ferocious animals locked in an arena.

From the first chapter of his work, the author enumerates the immense riches that humanity already possesses and the prodigious machinery that it has acquired through collective labour. The products obtained each year amply suffice to supply bread to all men, and if the enormous capital of cities and houses, of arable fields, of factories, of transportation routes, and of schools

¹ The national anthems of the French Republic and the Russian Empire, “God Save the Tsar!” (*Translator*)

became communal property instead being held as private property, comfort would be easy to conquer: the forces that are at our disposal would be applied, not to useless or contradictory work, but to the production of all that man needs for food, housing, clothing, comfort, scientific studies, artistic culture.

Nevertheless, the recovery of humanity's possessions, expropriation, in a word, can only be accomplished by anarchic communism: it must destroy the government, tear up its laws, repudiate its morality, ignore its agents, and set to work following its own initiative and grouping itself according to its affinities, its interests, its ideals, and the nature of the work undertaken. This question of expropriation, the most important in the book, is also one of those which the author has dealt with in the greatest details, plainly and without violent words, but with the calm and clarity of vision that the study of an imminent revolution, now unavoidable, requires. It is after this overthrow of the State that the groups of freed workers, no longer having to toil in the service of the monopolisers and the parasites, will be able to devote themselves to attractive occupations of freely chosen labour and proceed scientifically to the cultivation of the soil and to industrial production, interspersed with recreation given to study or pleasure. The pages of the book which deal with agricultural work are of vital interest, because they relate facts which practice has already confirmed and which it is easy to apply everywhere on a large scale, for the benefit of all and not just for the enrichment of a few.

Some like to speak of the "Fin de siècle" to mock the vices and failings of the elegant youth; but it is now a matter of much more than the end of a century; we coming to the end of an epoch, of an era of history.² It is the entire antiquated civilisation that we see coming to an end. The right of force and the caprice of authority, the harsh Jewish tradition and the cruel Roman jurisprudence no longer impose upon us; we profess a new faith, and as soon as this faith, which is at the same time a science, has become that of all those who seek the truth, it will take shape in the world of achievements, for the first of historical laws is that society models itself on its ideal. How could the defenders of the antiquated order of things maintain it? They no longer believe; having neither guide nor flag, they fight haphazardly. Against the innovators they have laws and guns, police officers with clubs and artillery divisions, but all of that cannot offset a thought, and whole regime of arbitrariness and oppression is destined soon to be lost in a sort of prehistory.

Certainly, the imminent revolution, however important it may be in the development of humanity, will not differ from previous revolutions by making a sudden leap; nature makes none. But we can say that, by a thousand phenomena, by a thousand profound changes, an anarchic society has already been in full growth for a long time. It shows itself wherever free thought emerges from the letter of dogma, wherever the genius of the researcher ignores old formulas, wherever human will expresses itself in independent actions, wherever sincere men, rebelling against any imposed discipline, unite of their own free will to educate each other and to regain together, without a master, their share of life and of the complete satisfaction of their needs. All that is anarchy, even when it is unaware of itself, and more and more it comes to know itself. How could it not triumph, since it has its ideals and the audacity of its will, while the crowd of its adversaries, from now on without faith, abandon themselves to destiny, crying "Fin de siècle! Fin de siècle!"

² *Fin de siècle* is a French term meaning "end of century", which encompasses both the meaning of the similar English idiom turn of the century and also refers to the closing of one era and onset of another. It is typically used to refer to the end of the nineteenth century, considered by many as period of social degeneracy but at the same time a period of hope for a new beginning. (*Translator*)

The coming revolution will therefore be brought to pass, and our friend Kropotkin is acting in his right as a historian by placing himself now on the day of the revolution in order to present his ideas on the taking possession of the collective assets due to the work of all, and by appealing to the timid, who are perfectly aware of the reigning injustices, but who do not dare to openly revolt against a society upon which a thousand ties of interest and traditions make them depend. They know that the law is iniquitous and lying, that the magistrates are the courtiers of the strong and the oppressors of the weak, that a law abiding life and continual probity of labour are not always rewarded with the certainty of having a piece of bread, and that the cynical impudence of the speculator, the harsh cruelty of the pawnbroker are better weapons than all the virtues for the “conquest of bread” and of well-being; but instead of adjusting their thoughts, their wishes, their undertakings, and their actions according to their enlightened sense of justice, most flee into some sideways dead-end to escape the dangers of a frank attitude. Such as the neo-religious, who no longer confessing the “absurd faith” of their fathers, indulge themselves in some more original mystagogy, without precise dogmas and losing themselves in a fog of confused feelings: they become spiritualists, Rosicrucians, Buddhists, or thaumaturges. Pretend disciples of Shakyamuni, but without taking the trouble to study the doctrine of their master, the melancholy gentlemen and vaporous ladies feign to seek peace in the annihilation of Nirvana.

But since they constantly talk about the ideal, these “beautiful souls” can be reassured. Material beings that we are, we have, it is true, the weakness of thinking about food, because we have often lacked it; it is currently lacking for millions of our Slavic brothers, the subjects of the Tsar, and millions more; but beyond bread, beyond well-being and all the collective wealth that can come from the implementation of our agitation, we see emerging in the distance before us a new world in which we will be able to fully love each other and satisfy this noble passion for the ideal that the ethereal lovers of beauty, ignoring material life, say is the unquenchable thirst of their soul! When there is no longer either rich or poor, when the hungry will no longer have to look at the sated with an envious eye, natural friendship will be able to be reborn between men, and the religion of solidarity, stifled today, will take the place of that vague religion which draws fleeting images on the vapours of the sky.

The revolution will achieve more than its promises; it will renew the sources of life by cleansing us of the impure contact of all politics and by finally freeing us of those vile preoccupations with money which poison our existence. It is then that everyone will be able to follow their path freely: the worker will do the work which suits him; the researcher will study without ulterior motive; the artist will no longer prostitute his ideal of beauty for his livelihood and all now friends, we will be able to achieve together the great things foreseen by the poets.

Then the names of those who, through their devoted propaganda, paid for by exile or prison, have prepared the new society will undoubtedly be remembered. We think of them in publishing *The Conquest of Bread*: they will feel somewhat strengthened by receiving this account of the idea we share through their prison bars or in a foreign land. The author will certainly approve if I dedicate his book to all those who suffer for the cause, and above all to a very dear friend whose whole life has a long fight for justice. I do not have to say his name: by reading these words of a brother, he will recognise himself by the beatings of his heart.

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