

A Beautiful Ideal

Emma Goldman

March 17th, 1908

“To the popular mind anarchism stands for destruction; to the more enlightened it stands for an ideal—a beautiful but thoroughly impracticable ideal. Anarchism does stand for the destruction of the institutions that have been and are keeping the human mind in bondage and that are robbing mankind of the right to the use of the necessities of life. Viewed from the standpoint of cents and dollars, anarchism is truly impracticable, and those whose aim in life is wealth and power will do well to keep out of the anarchist movement. But measured by true value, namely, human character, integrity and real usefulness to society, anarchism is the most practical of all theories—a proposition which I shall attempt to prove.

“Anarchism is a theory of human development which lays no less stress than socialism upon the economic or materialistic aspect of social relations; but while granting that the cause of the immediate evil is an economic one we believe that the solution of the social question confronting us today must be wrought out from the equal consideration of the whole of our experience.

“To understand society as a whole it behooves the social student to analyze the separate atoms of society—namely, the individual and the motives that prompt every individual and every collective act. What are these motives?

“First, the individual instinct, standing for self-expression; second, the social instinct, which inspires collective and social life. These instincts in their latent condition are never antagonistic to each other.

“On the contrary, they are dependent upon one another for their complete and normal development. Unfortunately, the organization of society is such that these instincts are being brought into constant antagonism.

“Indeed, the history of our experience in thought and action is the record of this strife within each individual and its reflection within each society.

“To better illustrate my point, let me give you two cases, representing the extreme development of individual and social instinct. Take Russell Sage, for instance, a man whose individual instincts knew no bounds; a man who, to use a common proverb, did not even observe the ordinary honesty existing among thieves.

“I mean that his methods of accomplishing his aim, the accumulation of wealth, were so obscure, so unscrupulous, that even his own colleagues, had little regard for him.

“Indeed, it is safe to say that the instinct that prompted the actions of Russell Sage were so antisocial that every one of his steps resulted in crushing out human life and in bringing untold misery and poverty upon those whom his iron heel did not actually crush.

“Such a type of a man is possible only in a society based upon inequality, a society that is held together not by natural bonds, but by artificial and arbitrary methods.

“Again, let us take a type of human being with the social instinct developed to the extreme— Louise Michelle, the world-renowned anarchist, “Mother Louise,” as she was called by every child of the gutter. Her love for man and beast knew no bounds.

“It mattered not whether it was a forlorn kitten or a homeless dog, or a shelterless human being—she gave to all, even the last crust of bread.

“Yet to satisfy her great soul she was compelled to deny her individual instinct to the extent of living in great and constant poverty, of exposing herself to many dangers, to imprisonment, and to the heat of New Caledonia, whither she had been sent with many other political prisoners after the Paris Commune of ‘71.

“Anarchists insist that conditions must be radically wrong, if human instincts develop to such extremes at the expense of each other.

“Anarchism in its scientific and philosophic calculations represents that force in human life which can harmonize and bring into unity the individual and social instincts of the individual and society.

“The greatest obstacle in the way of such harmonious blending, are property, or the monopoly of things—the denial of the right of others to their use, and authority—the government of man by man, embodied in majority rule, or the absolute disregard of individual life in the organization that for want of a better name stands for society.

“Therefore the first tendency of anarchism is to make good the dignity of the individual human being by freeing him from every kind of arbitrary restraint—economic, political, social.

“In so doing anarchism proposes to make apparent, in their true force the social bonds, which always have and always will knit men together and which are the actual basis of a real normal and sane society. The means of doing this rests with each man’s latent qualities and his opportunities.

“I have already spoken of the coercive and arbitrary tendency of centralization in either the industrial or political life of a people, and I now wish to say a few words on what seems to the anarchist the most dangerous side of centralization.

“Man has been degraded into a mere part of a machine and all that makes for spontaneity, for originality, for the power of initiative, has been either dulled or completely killed in him until he is but a living corpse, dragging out an aimless, spiritless and idealess existence.

“Man is here to be sacrificed upon the altar of things, heaps and heaps of things, that are as dark and dull as the human machines that have produced them.

“Yet how can we talk of social wealth when the production of that wealth can be attained only at the expense of human lives, thousands and thousands of human lives? And what are these lives worth without the power of initiative, of spontaneity?

“Anarchism holds that the simplest human life, it given opportunity and scope, is infinitely more important to society than all the scientific regulation and adjusting of social arrangements.

“For, in proportion as that simple life grows into a conscious, intelligent, well-rounded factor, recognizing its true relation to its fellow, regulations and forms will take care of themselves.

“Anarchists believe that organized authority, or the state, is necessary only in the interest of monopoly. They fail to see that it has at any time in the history of man promoted human welfare

or aided in any way in the building of human character or human possibilities. Anarchism, therefore, aims at the simultaneous overthrow of monopoly and government.

“It is well to distinguish here between government as organized authority, whose purposes are realized at all times through the exercise of brute force—police clubs, state militias, the armies, and the navies of the world—and government in the sense of a spontaneously arising social order and happiness, whose immediate appearance among men awaits only, the disappearance of the world-enslaving and world-slaughtering forces of monopoly.

“The centralized method of production has necessitated a centralized form of government that is constantly increasing its power and forever prying into the minutest detail of human life.

“In fact, it is safe to say that man’s whole life, from the cradle to the grave is under constant surveillance of authority. I think that America illustrates this point perfectly. So long as this country was young, its people battling with the elements and striving for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, every man counted for something.

“People were more closely related to each other and the sense of comradeship and brotherhood was keener and deeper.

“But in proportion as America grew in wealth its method of governing became more centralized, more far-reaching, more contrary to the life and rights of man, until today he is suffered to drag along his wretched existence, not by ‘the grace of God, but by the grace of a network of laws which he knows nothing about and which are absolutely foreign to his natural growth and development.

“With this in view, anarchism stands for voluntary productive and distributive associations, using a common capital and loosely federated into communities, eventually developing into communism in production and consumption, recognizing at all times, however, the right of the individual or a number of individuals to arrange their mode of work—in harmony with their taste or inclination.

“As to crimes and criminals, anarchists know, only too well that they are naught else but symptoms of an artificial social arrangement, enforced by authority. They will disappear to a large extent with the destruction of their creators, namely, capitalism and government.

“Crime, resultant from a defective brain, can surely not be cured by brute force. But certainly modern medical methods and an increased sense of fraternity, aided by improved education, can accomplish more than prison bars, handcuffs, locksteps, or chains.

“The American methods proposed or employed to hound down anarchists have been practiced in European powers for nearly one hundred years and have been given up in despair.

“The truth can not be silenced by constant discoveries of ‘anarchist plots,’ or by designating every demented being as an anarchist, nor even by burning anarchist literature, or establishing a system of espionage, which invades the sanctity of individual privacy and makes the life of its victims an intolerable evil.

“There are thousands of people in this country who see in such methods the last desperate efforts of a dying age. The new, strong in thought and ideals, strong in human sympathy and fellowship is fast approaching, and when it arrives the present will be remembered as a nightmare, that humanity dreamed, rather than as an awful reality it actually lived.”

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The lecture which Emma Goldman was to have read before the Edelstadt Social, March 17th, 1908, at Workingmens' Hall, 12th & Waller Streets, Chicago. But was prevented by Captain Mahoney of Maxwell Street Station with a squad of about fifty police.

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