

Free Speech Suppressed in Barre, Vt.

Transcript of Lecture in FREE SOCIETY

Emma Goldman

March 5th, 1899

We append here an extract from the undelivered speech¹ entitled “Authority vs. Liberty”:

Have you ever, my friends, thought about the meaning of authority and about its injurious effects upon liberty? I doubt that you did, for else how could you continue to worship it, to kneel before its altars and offer such awful sacrifices to this insatiable monster. Let me show you what authority has done, look what it is doing today, be it exercised under the cloak of religion, government, paternal rights or public gossip. Let me impress you with the disastrous results it has produced, and some of you—those who think, those who love liberty—will agree that authority must be replaced by liberty.

There was a time, when to doubt the powers of God and his representatives meant death, horrible torture, agonizing persecution. Hideous and countless crimes were committed in the name of God, and his self-appointed earthly representatives perpetuated their existence by compelling implicit obedience to their authority. No one is able to tell all the struggles, all the sufferings, through which the rebellious minds went on account of the tyrannical absurdities of Church authority. Thousands, yea, millions of lives were sacrificed, the earth was deluged with the blood of heretics before the authority of gods and devils lost its hold upon the thinking men and women. Thousands refuse allegiance to religion today, they know that it is rooted in ignorance, fraud and humbug; and they combine their efforts to pull down the relics of Church authority. The growth of freedom from Church authority, Church despotism would be very encouraging indeed—but for the fact that a large number of unbelievers, freethinkers, atheists and infidels have not yet advanced far enough in freedom to benefit the world at large. Unfortunately they have only changed the form of authority; they have done away with the authority of the Bible and have replaced it with that of the statute book. They are ready to persecute and to condemn all those who refuse to acknowledge the right of the State to dictate to society just as quickly as the religious monomaniacs were to burn heretics and witches.

¹ In January 1899, EG delivered three lectures in Barre, Vermont, a center of Italian immigrant anarchism. Initially, she spoke unimpeded by the local authorities. At least two lectures were held at Tomasi's Hall, on “The New Woman” (26 January) and on “The Corrupting Influence of Politics on Man” (28 January). There is no extant record of the third meeting. On 31 January, Mayor Gordon, urged on by a committee of “leading citizens,” ordered local police to prevent EG from delivering a fourth talk, on “Authority vs. Liberty.” *Free Society* responded by printing a portion of EG's undelivered address, 5,000 copies of which were printed by local anarchists.

What is the statute book? Nothing else but the commands of earthly gods, monarchs, despots, czars, kings or presidents. True, to disregard heavenly authority meant persecution and death, yet it is still more dangerous to rebel against earthly authorities. They are so much more numerous, they have so much more power to back them, they can enforce their will in so many ways, that it sometimes seems as if there were no salvation for mankind. It is easy to convince a man nowadays that a supernatural being is an absurdity, that the story of creating the world out of nothing is ridiculous; science has demolished these fables; intelligent men and women do no longer spend their time in killing dead gods, nor are subject to Church authority.

Much more difficult it is to convince men that the authority of government, of the State, is injurious, and that man made laws are the worst foes of society. Abolish all laws? Do away with the State? You destroy society, people say when one enters into the discussion of the fallacy of belief in authority. No intelligent man or woman wants to destroy society, for society and State are not identical. Hear what Thomas Paine says: "Society has grown as necessity of man, but government out of folly of mankind."² He said it a hundred years ago, and we have learned that the State is really of recent date, while society exists since the world exists. I do not distinguish between monarchy and democracy, whether one man or a dozen of men backed by force represent authority; it has the same aim; the results are the same. They exercise their power at all cost and check every independent tendency. The statute book forbids theft, robbery and murder as crimes against the law, but those who worship these new gods profit by it. Thou shalt not kill, steal rob and cheat, says the law; at the same time under its very wing wars are carried on, whole nations are destroyed, prisons are crowded, armies enlarged, battleships built, thousands beheaded, garrotted, hung and sent to the electric chair, while a few are getting richer and richer, monopolizing half the earth, and the great mass of producers hunger, the army of the unemployed is on the increase and uncounted thousands of children die for lack of food and want of air.

And why all this misery? Because the State authority has taught you so long the sacred rights of property that you have learned to take it as truth. You do not recognize that it is the statute book by which capitalism is maintained; you do not understand that there is a new trinity: God, Capitalism—God, the State and God, the Church. So long have you submitted to this "worthy" trinity that you believe that authority is absolutely necessary—and that if it be abolished men would cut each other's throats. How little you know of human nature, how little you know its history. Says Kropotkin, the scientist: "You fail to recognize that the most glorious epochs in humanity were those, in which the liberties were not destroyed by the State and when masses of men lived in free communes and free federations."³ Only those who do not think, who do not reason, who accept everything that is because they do not investigate still cling to authority. Intelligent people see clearly that authority in any form is but a check to development and growth, that it is but a chain tied to a man from cradle to grave which hinders the free use of his limbs. It has terrorized the mass of mankind into submission and slavery, it maintains itself by force only, producing cunning, shrewdness and violence.

² Compare Thomas Paine at the beginning of his *Common Sense*: "Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness."

³ Quote is from Kropotkin's *The State: Its Historic Role*; originally, *L'État: Son Rôle Historique*, serialized in *Les Temps Nouveaux* beginning 19 December 1896. The first English-language version appeared in the London *Freedom* between May 1897 and June 1898, and was issued shortly thereafter as Freedom Pamphlet No. 11 (September 1898).

Some I hear ask: "Do you not acknowledge authority in science, art and literature?" Most certainly I do. But that authority has no force to back it, it cannot compel my acceptance nor can it prevent my rejection of it. If, for example, I refuse to accept Spencer⁴ as an authority on Communism, he cannot punish me, he cannot imprison me, he cannot hang me. He represents his thoughts only, and probably does not care one bit whether men accept his theories or not.⁵ But should I refuse to recognize the order of the chief of police in Barre, which prevents my speaking to you,⁶ I should find myself in your prison in short order. There lies the difference. Behind Spencer there is no force, behind your chief of police are the clubs and pistols of your policemen; and it is this brutal force that makes authority a curse to humanity.

Let us see, on the other hand, what liberty has brought us, and then choose together whether you prefer to bow your neck before authority or walk erect under the banner of liberty.

We have precious little of it and we are rapidly losing it; but even under the curse of government, side by side with despotism, the actions of individual free efforts are legion. Schools adopt free methods of instruction, they develop the liberal tendencies in their pupils; hundreds of societies spring up for self-improvement and the benefit of mankind. Societies for scientific research are founded without the aid of government and they produce the best works. Poets, artists, scientists and others have worked upon individual effort and not by dictation of government. Everything that is good and noble, grand and beautiful, wise and useful, has been done by the spirit of liberty, from the love of freedom, in spite and in the teeth of government and authority. When man will have recovered from the effects of authority, when he will understand that freedom is the most precious thing, when he will be free to live, to work, to act, to develop, to enter into social relations with whom he is in sympathy, then warfare, conquests, robbery, theft, corruption, poverty and all the ornaments of the State, all the burden of authority will be looked upon as relics of barbarism.

This, my friends, is a rough sketch of Anarchism, of the ideal you hate and persecute, the ideal of thousands of men and women in all spheres of life, who are proud of being called Anarchists. You are shocked when you hear that word, you shiver at its very sound. Your fear is but the result of authority, which has instilled into you the hatred for those who wish you well, who at the risk of their own lives and comforts try to free you from the clutches of your masters. You do not see our work in this light, you join in the cry of fools and knaves "Hang the Anarchists!" but I see the time coming when you'll understand that all efforts to check the growth of Anarchism are in vain. For its teachings are based upon the power of the individual within himself and not without. Its philosophy is based on that stern, undisputable logic that liberty is just as necessary for man as air, light and food.

Do not waste your time in trying to stop the waves of the ocean with a broom; it is useless. Already the elements are growing into immensity, tearing down every obstacle in the way; after the storm has passed the air will be calm and pure, and the world will be filled with the sweet odor of liberty.

⁴ EG refers to English philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer, whose work was influential among individualist anarchists.

⁵ EG's discussion of her recognition of authority in matters of art, science, and literature echoes Michael Bakunin in *God and the State*, who also stated that he recognized authority when it was founded on knowledge and not propped by force, and when subscribing to such authority was an individual choice.

⁶ According to the May 1899 London *Freedom*, local anarchists immediately printed 5,000 copies of a four-page manifesto protesting the suppression of EG's lecture, along with a lengthy extract from "Authority vs. Liberty."

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