

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Anarchism—A Plea for the Impersonal

Harry Kelly

February 1908

Harry Kelly

Anarchism—A Plea for the Impersonal

February 1908

<https://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/anarchist-beginnings/harry-kelly-anarchism-a-plea-for-the-impersonal-1908/>
Harry Kelly, "Anarchism—A Plea for the Impersonal," *Mother Earth* 2, no. 12 (February 1908): 555-562.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

THE student of Anarchism must often ask himself why, in this most Anarchistic of all countries, the Anarchist movement has made, and is making, such slow progress. That Anarchism concerns itself with the individual, and that America is the most individualistic of all civilized countries, is hardly debatable; and yet the Anarchist movement, which in itself represents the definite, concrete expression of the Anarchist philosophy, is almost where it was twenty years ago. The Mutualist wing, which found its ablest exponent in Dyer D. Lum is extinct; the Individualist wing has lost so much ground that it can hardly be called a movement; and the Communist wing, the only one of the three that shows any signs of growth, has—as a movement—made but little progress. To those who may be disposed to question the above statements, I will say right now that

First,—As to the Mutualist section, during twelve years' active work as an Anarchist propagandist I have seen or heard no signs of it.

Second,—If a theory which, after thirty years' active work by such an able man as Benj. R. Tucker, can show nothing better than one small publication, Liberty, that appears but once in two months, and probably one or two public speakers who lecture once or twice a year, can be called a movement, then our statement may not be believed. Further, it is well known that even Liberty would not exist, were it not that its editor and publisher—a man of means—foots the deficit. In short, Mr. Tucker is the “movement.”

Third,—The Communist wing has a number of papers in different languages and carries on a more or less energetic oral propaganda throughout the country in Yiddish, English, Italian, German, Bohemian, and Spanish; but if compared with the growth of Anarchist ideas, sentiments, and methods at large, the development of the movement has been slow indeed. I am not concerned in this paper with the very important fact that Anarchist ideas and even methods have been very much clarified and systematized since the Pittsburg convention, in 1884; it is important and encouraging, but why has the numerical increase been so small?

Many and diverse reasons will no doubt be given, if the facts are accepted, as I believe they will be. Chief among those reasons will be the desire for ease and comfort, lack of moral courage, the spirit of compromise, environment, and so forth. All of these can be and will be given with considerable justification, but in so doing, do we not admit the unfitness of Anarchist ideas to the modern man? It seems so to us; but believing in those ideas, we seek farther afield.

Men may be moral cowards, desire ease and comfort more than liberty of thought and expression, have the spirit of compromise deeply rooted in them and be unable to rise superior to their surroundings; but, after all, they have the privilege of rejecting any theory which, in their opinion, puts too great a restraint upon their desire to live and be happy.

At the risk of appearing heretical, I venture to say that the brake upon the wheel of development of Anarchism is the adulation of the individual. The mass of people in this or any other country are not self-conscious egoists, but I am bold to say that egotistic principles rule this country, and they also make themselves felt in the Anarchist movement. It is a truism that society is an aggregation of units, and that it requires free units to make a free society—a fact which Socialists overlook: our meaning is quite different. Take the average man, aristocrat, bourgeois, or worker, and advance the following theory: Here is a proposition which, if applied to life, will do away with the necessity of exploitation and its evils. You, Mr. Aristocrat or Mr. Bourgeois, will be able to do healthy, useful work and do away with the anxiety of the present. The earth is as fertile as it was, and with modern scientific methods you will have more than sufficient, and be respected and loved by that large portion of your fellow-men who now hate and despise you. And you, Mr. Workingman, “you have a world to win and nothing to lose but your chains.”—Or you appeal to them on the basis of personal freedom, self-expression, and so forth. This is putting it upon a purely personal basis; let us see how it works. The three classes appealed to soon find that it is more than probable that these ideas will not be realized in their time and generation; at least there is the possibility; so the reward for their labors, if any, is a spiritual one, and the loss a material one. They were appealed to on a material basis, material even in the sense that working for the realization of an ideal is spiritual; it has to do with the future; the right to express yourself in sex and other personal matters is material, because it deals with the present. It is as with the successful politician, before and after election. Perhaps he had ideals before he got the office, but after his arrival his ideals assume a personal bias. John Burns was an idealist and revolutionist before he was elected to Parliament; he was convinced that society must be reconstructed; but after he was elected he said that

“the day of the agitator has passed, the day of the legislator has arrived.” What need of a revolution! Have / not been elected? The revolution is here—for me. The capitalist who wanted Anarchism because it promised him comforts, without the anxiety of business, strikes, etc., finds himself slipping down in the social scale, as he devotes his time to propagating beautiful, but unpopular theories; and that not being what he expected, he quits. The workingman who attached himself because he wanted more comforts, finds that the best way to obtain them is by adapting himself to things as they are, instead of trying to reconstruct society; and he thus withdraws.

We are all egoists in the sense that the mainspring of our actions is the desire to obtain happiness and avoid pain. There are higher and lower forms of happiness, as there are higher and lower forms of art, and it is as true now as it was in Aristotle’s time that the man who places his talents, genius, time, and energy at the service of humanity represents a higher type than he who simply strives for himself or his immediate family. Self-interest is the most potent of propelling forces with many of our actions, but that very self-interest is what deters most people from declaring themselves the enemies of the existing social order and its conventional lies. He who proclaims himself a reformer or revolutionist because he wishes to better his economic condition, or desires freedom in his personal relations, rests his faith on uncertain ground, and a slight change in either is enough to turn the scale and make a defender instead of an enemy of present conditions. Concern yourself with yourself, and your desire to change social conditions soon crystalizes into a desire to change your condition, and your career as a social reformer has seen its finish. Some might urge that what I say is an admission that Anarchism is not coming in our time. To such let me reply that I neither affirm nor deny; prophecy is not in my line; but I do insist that, to speed Anarchism or make it possible, it must become more humanitarian and less personal. I am convinced that Anarchism, like every

the millions of tramps and hundreds of thousands of prostitutes; these and many other things. If we appeal to a man upon this basis and win him, he will stay with us—not for a day or an hour—but till the end.

to bury oneself on a farm or in a colony is to spread libertarian or humanitarian ideas, a study of such ventures will soon undeceive them. Liberty to do that which one feels himself or herself best fitted for is essential to all progress, but let us not deceive ourselves into the belief that, because we desire a particular form of life, it is necessarily the best one to live. It is not sufficient to do what you want; rather want to do the best thing. In short, if interest in freedom centres around our personality, that interest disappears in proportion as our liberty and well being are increased. Philosophic speculations as to freedom do not make for vitality in a movement; activity is wanted, and the one place for activity is among the people. Mock and insult the masses because of their seeming supineness in allowing themselves to be exploited; but remember it is death to one's enthusiasm and an end to activity to separate from them.

We feel the "call of the wild" as keenly as those who think humanity will be saved, or at least appreciably helped, if they sell butter and eggs instead of paper napkins; but we are under no illusions about it. We shall probably succumb in the end; but we at least have made a fight, and we go, knowing that we go not to further an ideal, but to live our own life,—something we have not done these many years. If the Anarchist movement in America is to again have vitality it must return to first principles: To make of Anarchism a humanitarian theory, rather than a desire for self-expression. The latter must indeed not be lost sight of, but the former must be the keynote. To urge upon our readers and hearers that if it be glorious to struggle for freedom and self-expression for oneself, it were still more glorious to struggle for freedom and self-expression for others. To urge upon the young to interest themselves in a movement to save the millions of children slaving out their childish lives in factory, mill, and mine, to save those thousands upon thousands of unfortunate men and women who are killed or maimed every year by preventable accidents; to restore to happy homes

other social or political theory, must have an economic basis; it must become more a mass movement and less an individual one. This is not to question, much less deny, the desire for personal liberty or self-expression, or that Communism, Collectivism, or Mutualism must be the system. Anarchism does not concern itself with any special theory of economics, but an economic base there must be, unless it is to become an abstraction. Personal liberty and self-expression will always appeal with greater force to certain individuals than the why's and wherefore's of obtaining a living; it may well be that they are the pioneers of humanity in its march to higher things. We feel of them and akin to them, but mankind, as a whole, is much more concerned with its own present than with the future of coming generations, and comfort is a more potent factor in determining our lives than theories of liberty.

The sex question is probably more in evidence in the American Anarchist movement than in the European. In fact, the Individualist section—if we except Liberty—has almost merged itself into the movement for sex reform; certainly most of those we know make that question their touchstone. This is not because the Europeans desire freedom in matters of sex or sex discussion less than we do, but because their Anarchism is less introspective than ours. They concern themselves more with the mass movement than we do; they fight the capitalist; we fight Comstock. Instead of participating in the trade unions, organizing the unemployed, or indulging in soap-box oratory, we rent comfortable halls and charge ten cents' admission. Added to that are, in many cases, ten cents carfare, and Anarchism has become a luxury. Instead of inspiring the workers with revolutionary ideas we teach them speculative theories of liberty, with the result that our Mrs. Grannis's and "Little Tim" Sullivans' are increasing the number of oppressive laws on the statute books. "The right to be born well" is surely worth fighting for, more especially because it means fighting for the unborn; but In the midst of inequality of opportunity

it must apply largely to those whose progenitors are economically well situated; in other words, the exploiting classes; and being such, they do not immediately concern us. It may be and probably will be said that in fighting for sex freedom we fight for the present and future generations; all that is quite true, yet it does not gainsay our point that there is not enough idealism in the desire for self expression to maintain a strong, healthy movement.

The Socialists and Single Taxers do precisely the same thing in the economic field as the Anarchists do in matters pertaining to personal freedom. Priding themselves on their practicability and common sense—whatever the latter may mean—they appeal to man's selfinterest, with results that would be amusing if they were not pathetic. The Single Taxers, as a party, have distinctly lost ground during the past ten years; yet our dear old Bolton Hall, most charming and idealistic of men, repeats the same old cry in his "Three Acres and Liberty," while the Socialists are at this moment distributing a leaflet to the unemployed, asking them to vote for Socialism and get a job, though it must be apparent to even the most superficial mind that voting for Socialism is a very roundabout way of getting a "job," and working for the single tax is not likely to improve the individual's position for a long time to come. The Anarchist movement in America alone furnishes plenty of examples of those who came here from Europe revolutionists, idealists—and poor men. Accumulating a little money, they invested it in tenement houses or other forms of "business," and as the "business" absorbed them more and more, they gradually shed their radical ideas, becoming doctrinaires or plain philistines. Some sought to harmonize the idealist and practical by becoming Marxian Socialists, for according to latter day interpretations of the materialistic conception of history they can be class-conscious Socialists and tenement house proprietors at the same time. With these people Anarchism was a personal thing. They were the centre of gravity; they rebelled against conditions because the

latter restricted their actions and their liberty. Liberty with them had to do with material things, and finding not only no immediate chance of improving their economic condition in the struggle for freedom, but every possibility of jeopardizing what position they did have, they promptly withdrew.

There is still a third class of propagandists; but as they are but few in America, I shall deal briefly with them. I refer to those whom, for lack of a better description, I shall call "Tolstoyans." They hold largely to the theory of non-resistance, (some more strongly than others) and believe that by getting back to the land and engaging in useful, productive labor they set an example for others to follow. This almost invariably leads to sophistry, for they are unable to live except by adapting themselves to the methods of those around them, selling their produce at the highest price obtainable, or by assistance from those "who live in the system," as the saying is. I have in mind a colony of people holding these ideas, located at Perleigh, Essex, England. They lived, some twenty or more of them, in a large barn and, true to their humanitarian instincts, gave shelter to a tramp one night; unfortunately, the tramp had the small-pox, and so the entire colony became afflicted. As a matter of self-protection the villagers were forced to quarantine them, furnish them with doctors, nurses, etc., and before they were over the trouble this small village of poor people were saddled with a debt of nearly three hundred pounds sterling. Hairs might be split over this very interesting question: Had the colonists a right to express themselves and get the small-pox, and by so doing force other people to pay for that self-expression or get the small-pox themselves? I am concerned here with but one phase of the question, as with all those who seek to live their own lives. That they had a right to live their own lives goes without question; but that it is humanitarian or idealistic, I deny. To live one's life in one's own way is a fascinating thing; propaganda by example is often more effective than the written or spoken word; but if there are any who believe that