

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Anarchism and Violence

L. S. Bevington

1896

L. S. Bevington
Anarchism and Violence
1896

Retrieved on 11/08/2018 from
<http://www.indiana.edu/%7Eeltrs/vwwp/bevington/anarchvi.html>

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

What? bomb-throwing—killing—violence, useful? What sort of Anarchists are those who say that? Where is their Anarchism, their belief in freedom, and the right of every living man to his own life and liberty? Anarchism is not bomb throwing, violence, incendi- arism, destruction. Odd that anything so self evident should need saying. Odder still that one set of Anarchists should be obliged to turn round in the thick of battle against the common foe to say it to another set. Real Anarchists too, not hybrids, with one eye on free- dom and the other on property. Of course the capitalist press has naturally found it convenient to identify Anarchists with bombs, and equally of course, some of our “social” democratic friends have said within themselves, “There, there! so would we have it.” All the same, Anarchism not only is not, but in the nature of the case can- not be, bomb throwing. An “ism” is an abiding body of principles and opinions—a belief with a theory behind it. The throwing of bombs is a mechanical act of warfare,—of rebellion, if you like;— an act likely to be resorted to by any and every sort of “believer” when the whole of his environment stands forearmed against the practical application of his creed. The two cannot anyhow be iden- tical; the question of the hour is—Is one of them ever a rational

outcome of the other? Can anyone professing this particular “ism” resort to this kind of act, without forfeiting his consistency? Can a real Anarchist—a man whose creed is Anarchism—be at the same time a person who deliberately injures, or tries to injure, persons or property. I, for one, have no hesitation in saying that, if destitute because of monopoly, he can.

I go even further. It seems to me that under certain conditions, (within and without the individual) it is part and parcel, not of his Anarchism but of his personal whole heartedness as an Anarchist, that he feels it impossible in his own case not to abandon the patiently educational for the actively militant attitude, and to hit out, as intelligently and intelligibly as he can, at that which powerfully flouts his creed and humanity’s hope, making it (for all its truth, and for all his integrity) a dead letter within his own living, suffering, pitying, aspiring soul. I may be wrong, but it seems to me that there are now and again conditions under which inaction on the part of the Anarchists amounts to virtual partisanship with the “reaction”, and this, even though the only kind of effectual activity left open to them be of the directly militant kind.

The extraordinarily rapid spread of our Ideal during the past few years seems to me to have been indirectly indirectly but clearly traceable to the quickening effect of the militant but generally intelligible acts of a few maddened individuals upon the thousands of minds in all countries which were already unconsciously hungry for the Idea, and which found themselves thus compelled to closer reflection and aroused to definite self-recognition as Anarchists.

For what is Anarchism? Belief in Anarchy as the ultimate solution of all social and economic difficulties. A belief, that is, that Anarchy (or freedom from laws made and fixed by man for man,) is the ideal state in which alone complete harmony and a self adjusting equilibrium between our individual interests and our social instincts can be secured and maintained. A belief that nearly all human depravity on one hand, and nearly all human wretchedness on the other, have been brought about through men’s bondage to

the coercive regulations imposed by fallible, purblind humans on one another, in the interests, not of general progress and universal friendship, but of this or that imposing class. Anarchy, which claims the full release of the majority from the dictation of the minority, and likewise the full release of the minority from the dictation of the majority, means, further, the removal of all the enervating restrictions and excuses which have hitherto hindered the individual from developing his self-controlling tendencies in spontaneous obedience to the inevitably social and peaceful instincts of his own humanity, as a creature who from time immemorial has been incessantly dependent on his fellows for all the necessities and amenities of life. Anarchy means a life for man analogous, on a higher plane, to the life of bees, beavers, ants, and other gregarious creatures, who have not only all natural resources, but also one another's products freely and peacefully open to them, and who do but cooperate the more perfectly and happily in securing the common interests of all for the fact that they are free, as individuals to follow their inherent instincts and inclinations untrammelled by considerations so foreign to their well being as property laws within their own communities.

Despite its supreme advantages, our faculty of language has immensely complicated and confused our development as social beings, since it has decoyed us by means of dangerous and misleading abstractions from the surely and safely educational paths of actual experience, causing a long and painful digression from the natural high road of our progress as a species.

Language!—hence, on one hand, the abstractions, “property”, money, credit, law, subjection, crime; and on the other, those sad resulting concretes,—poverty, parasitism, degeneration, despair, and the wholesale tormenting of man by man. Nature shows us that among wild creatures, destitute of true language, and so safe against abstractions and prejudices, it is precisely the most social which have become the most intelligent. We human beings cannot develop wholesome customs, at once tough

and flexible,—self modifying and fitted to our individual comfort and our reciprocal protection by one another, so long as we are harassed by the crude provisions of artificially coercive law. And we are, one and all, the poorer for this.

For, surely, the world's wealth should be at least as freely accessible to every human creature as it is to every other creature. Surely the natural human being should be as free to use his whole set of faculties from the first, and so to be a joy to himself and a welcome "fellow" to his fellows, as is the mere bee or beaver. It would be possible enough if once we could explode that property superstition which involves, and ever must involve government—or the coercive regulation of everybody's life and chances so as to suit those who can obtain prohibitive custody of the natural and produced capital of the race.

But now—what is there about Anarchism which should suggest, justify, or render intelligible the use of violence in any of those who profess it? Anarchy in itself bodes peace; with happy, amicable co-operation. Where Anarchy is already the rule with an intelligent species, deliberate violence, whether organised or not, can never be needed between the members of that species, but only in casual self-defence, or in the repelling of aggression from without. (Even under Anarchy, I fear we shall sometimes have to kill rattlesnakes, tigers and noxious vermin!) Anarchy, however, means—No more dividing of a race against itself, through the contentious and antagonisms of nations and classes; no more dividing of the individual against himself, as a luckless creature who can only be his best, socially at his own risk and cost; or, egotistically, at social risk and cost.

Were the conditions in which we live our present lives a condition of freedom from all laws that fall short of, or are in conflict with the natural and salutary laws of life—then indeed would violence find no place in our conduct towards our fellow mortals.

But we live in a world where property-getting is made virtually compulsory, under penalty of one kind or another; and to us also

man antagonisms and effectually hinder the arrival of that peace and prosperity for which the world is waiting.

Meanwhile let us leave indiscriminating killing and injuring to the Government—to its Statesmen, its Stockbrokers, its Officers, and its Law.

The enemies of our cause are exceedingly anxious that no moral distinctions be drawn on this burning question of Anarchist violence. The big, indiscriminating, morally inert public are encouraged in their prejudices by the capitalist press, which is at once their sycophant and their deceiver. For the blind and their leaders all violence is held to be vile, except legalised and privileged violence on an enormous scale. Cordite, manufactured wholesale by poor hired hands for the express purpose of “indiscriminate massacre of the innocent” in the noble cause of markets and of territory, is regarded with stupid equanimity by the very same public who are taught by their pastors and masters to cry “Dastard!” when a private individual, at his own risk, fights a cordite-manufacturing clique of privileged rogues with their own weapons.

Of course we know that among those who call themselves Anarchists there are a minority of unbalanced enthusiasts who look upon every illegal and sensational act of violence as a matter for hysterical jubilation. Very useful to the police and the press, unsteady in intellect and of weak moral principle, they have repeatedly show themselves accessible to venal considerations. They, and their violence, and their professed Anarchism are purchaseable, and in the last resort they are welcome and efficient partisans of the bourgeoisie in its remorseless war against the deliverers of the people.

But let us stick to our text—“Bomb-throwing is not Anarchism”; and whenever violent action is unintelligent and merely rancorous, it is as foolish and inexpedient as it is base.

Killing and injuring are intrinsically hideous between man and man. No sophistry can make “poison” a synonym of “food”, nor make “war” spell “peace”. But there are cases where poison becomes medicinal, and there is such a thing as warring against the causes of war. No Anarchist incites another to violence, but many an Anarchist repudiates, as I do, the hypocritical outcry against Anarchist militancy raised by those who pass their lives in active or passive support of the infamous institutions which perpetuate hu-

who abominate property-seeking and property-wielding as the poisonous root of every misery and turpitude. We who are full of the spirit of what shall be, and who ceaselessly and hungrily press towards its realisation, cannot—dare not—be frankly and fully ourselves in our dealings with our fellows, because some of these fellows have decreed that neither industry nor good citizenship shall be the passport to food and freedom, but solely and simply—money, or its phantom “credit”. But, so long as Government exists, we cannot, even as an experiment, establish Anarchy, we cannot live our individual lives as Anarchists,—freely, uprightly, simply, generously, bravely—in the midst of a political society where it is virtually punishable with death or misery to turn one’s back on legal considerations for the sake of moral considerations. We cannot live as we wish in an artificial society presided over by an unpunishable set of punishers—any Government. Government, whatever its form, is Property’s body guard and hireling, and in the nature of the case cannot admit the independent freedom of any citizen whatever without self frustration. So long as artificial Law exists, every citizen falls perforce into one of two categories, he belongs virtually either to the property seeking, law abiding class, or to the law breaking, law ignoring, “criminal” class. The law may not legally be experimented upon or even improved upon by extra-legal methods; it will punish you if you ignore its provisions in any of your dealings on the plea of having discovered a shorter or better way to well-being. And another desperate feature of the Anarchist case lies in the fact that Government is a permanent necessity so long as property remains a recognised and tolerated institution. So long as this purely conventional bond between any man or men, and any thing or things, has to be recognised as a preliminary to every kind of action, and is made to usurp the place of, and to crowd out natural and simple purpose on every occasion, such recognition must be maintained under penalty—by force—against those who would go their way, however harmlessly regardless of its bars and boundaries.

Meanwhile, the Anarchist is not a mere claimant for intellectual liberty of thought and speech respecting these things. Even these lesser boons are not fully granted by those in power, for the idea of freedom is as attractive as it is sound; nature takes care to award a specially intense kind of happiness to the consciously attained correspondence of logical Idea with vital and ineradicable instinct; and Anarchism strikes home, and takes deep root in precisely most discriminating minds where-ever it gets a chance of propagation. The State, like its sinister coadjutor, the Church, fears full daylight, and is perfectly consistent in discouraging plain-speaking—diplomatically.

But the Anarchist, as I said, claims more than the right to hold and expound his creed; he feels no rest, and he will give us no rest, until way be made for its natural expansion, and its is practical realisation, as a principle of life. For he feels, sees, knows, and at no moment forgets all the evils caused by the laws of property, and by the Governments which in cold blood concoct, and cruelly enforce them. He is heartily tired of being made an unwilling party to that which he repudiates as monstrous.

So we see that the Anarchist is in a unique position. Of all would-be experimenters, benefactors, or deliverers, he alone is a person who by virtue of the principles he holds must be a revolutionist, and so must have, not one party, but all parties, not one sect, but all sects, not one nation, but all nations, as such, dead against him. For he would overthrow or break down every frontier, as well as every form of law-making and of prosecuting domination. The law, if you tease it enough, will help you slowly to minimise every minor evil contained within its own provisions, but will never aid you one step towards its own eradication as the chief evil of all. It is useless now as it was in the days of the revolutionary Galilean to look to Satan for the casting out of Satan. Nature is against that plan. No evolving thing stops in mid-career of development along its own lines, and puts an end to its own existence just because you tell it to. A cancer that has got

a good hold of the living tissues which its foul life is torturing and disabling, will not dissipate itself merely because the physician and the patient join their hands in prayer to it to do so. The cancer is, so to speak, quite within its rights if it replies—“Why, I am quite as much part of the general order of things as you are. The law of evolution regulates my development just as truly as it does yours. I have got a hold on you because you are just what I require to feed on; and I shall not die of my own accord until I have eaten you up first.” So then the surgeon is sent for, and the enemy is audaciously and summarily dealt with.

Similarly, you cannot blame Capitalism for developing after its kind. The Property-Tyrant may cease to call himself a ruler and law-maker. A sect of Mammonites, which would be a pestiferous sect if it could, is now in the world, declaiming against the government, not of man by man, but of the propertyist by the politician, and sometimes assuming the name of Anarchist—but demanding, under all disguises, Absolute rule by the Property-holder.

Another sect declaims futilely against private property while proposing the official direction of all property holding in the common interest. These two things, Individualism here, Democratic Communism there, seem at first glance opposed in principle. They are not. The evolution of the idea of domination has developed two branches from a parent stem; there are ideas nowadays of how the governing is to be done. One is plutocratic, and says—“Leave me my purse, and leave me free to do my will with you by its means.” The other is democratic, and says—“Give me your purse, and leave me free to do my will with you by its means.” But we will listen to no 'crat at all; the wage system is developing after its kind, so is the Government superstition. In their nature intimately dependent on one another, in destroying the root of one, we destroy both. Capitalism must evolve—but if we love its victims, and either through experience or sympathies participate in their sufferings, we shall see to it that the cursed thing be laid low in mid career.