

Anarchism and a Moribund Society

Olivia Rossetti

A most interesting and important book on the Anarchist movement, entitled “La Société Mourante et l’Anarchie” has just been brought out in French by Jean Grave, for some time past editor of *La Révolte*. Another work of Grave’s, “Society on the Morrow of the Revolution,” published under the nom de plume Jean le Vagre, which has reached its 13th edition in France, is already known to our readers, having run through Freedom, from January 1890 to March 1891.

The 1st chapter of “Anarchism and a moribund Society” deals with the growth and development of the Anarchist idea, showing how it sprang up from the undefined aspirations of humanity—the “enragées” in the French Revolution being amongst its pioneers; how it began to be put into shape by Proudhon and others, and in spite of the scant means of propaganda has grown into a wide-spread movement; how this rapid growth, in spite of every obstacle, is, in itself, a strong proof of the truth of the idea. Grave then points out that the only real reason for governmental Authority is the defence of private property, and that when this is destroyed government will be no longer required, and will of itself cease to exist.

The next chapter is devoted to showing that the terms Anarchism and Communism are not opposed to each other, as the Individualists try to make out. Societies or associations, says Grave, are recognised by Anarchists, as by Individualists, as having been created for the benefit of the individual, and not the individual for that of societies, their object being to obtain the greatest possible results with the least expenditure of labor; and therefore a state of free communism, in as much as it would accomplish this object and satisfy the physical and intellectual requirements of man, who is essentially a social animal and not an isolated individuality unaffected by the conditions of his fellow beings, would be a benefit to each and all, and not subject the individual to tyranny. Both Individualism and Altruism pushed to an extreme are equally harmful, but combined they resolve themselves into a third term, Solidarity, the ruling principle of the future society.

Speaking later on of the objection so often raised against Anarchists that they are too fond of discussing abstract questions, Grave very truly points out that, in as much as they aim at bringing about a total change of present conditions, it is absolutely necessary for them to go deeply into all sorts of questions, so that they may clearly show the workers that they will never improve their condition by a mere change of masters; the mere fact of being Anarchists implies that we do not wish people to follow our advice unless convinced of its desirability, which can only be shown by serious study and by reasoning out all sorts of questions to their logical conclusion.

We must prepare ourselves intellectually for the Revolution by thought and education, just as the bourgeoisie prepared themselves for the abolition of royalty.

Grave next attacks the important question as to whether man is in himself bad or whether he is not rather the creature of circumstances, the expression of his environment, deteriorating or improving in direct ratio with his surroundings. Grave inclines to this latter opinion, but considers that the fact that men are as good as they are under existing conditions is a strong proof of an essential tendency towards goodness. But be they good or bad, the downfall of capitalism is alike inevitable, as in either case people still have the right to live as they wish and to revolt if exploited. We cannot help, however, thinking that it is not owing to a tendency towards goodness, as Grave puts it, but rather owing to a spirit of cowardice that men have allowed themselves to be tyrannised and exploited.

The following chapters deal with existing institutions, which Anarchists wish to destroy: private property, the family as at present understood, government, the magistracy, jingo patriotism, and militarism. After sketching the growth of private property, Grave contends that the bourgeoisie, unable any longer to maintain the theory of their divine right to all the means of life, have built up a completely false science to defend it; how, after terming everything Capital which is put out in the shape of labor, intelligence, machinery, etc., for the production of wealth, and requiring to be paid back in the shape of subsistence, security against risk, and wear and tear of machinery, etc., they have still been unable to account for the surplus money capital, and so have been reduced to the absurdity of saying that that capital is the reward of abstinence!

The chapter on government is a masterpiece of clear, logical reasoning. It shows how the bourgeoisie only conceded universal suffrage when they saw it could do them no harm, how the idea of representing a nation is a complete impossibility, and how majority rule resolves itself really into minority rule, or at best means mediocrity rule. Almost everyone will agree that they themselves could do without government, but they do not think others could, as human beings are as a rule so bad, which, as Grave says, comes to this: Taken as a whole men are too bad to be able to agree among themselves, but taken individually they are fit to govern others.

The chapter on proposed reforms also deserves careful study, showing how it does that all such measures put in force under the present capitalist system must always turn in the long run to the advantage of the capitalists and the greater misery of the workers. He also deals with the mistake of advising the use of governmental machinery to bring about Anarchism, truly saying that the only way to bring about Anarchism is to act as Anarchists. The Revolution, he concludes, is under present circumstances necessary and inevitable, and must be used by the Anarchists as a means to bring about an end—Anarchism.

These are in outline the contents of this most interesting book. It is written in a clear, emphatic style, involved sentences and ambiguous terms being carefully avoided. All French-speaking comrades should read it, and we hope a translation may soon be ready for English-speaking friends. The preface by Octave Mirbeau, a leading French journalist, is also very interesting.

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