

The New Era

Pëtr Kropotkin

1896

The following address is one with which Kropotkine opened a series of meetings in London, which our friends of the Freedom group propose to give for the Anarchistic propaganda. To our regular readers this address will contain much with, which they are already familiar; but new readers may be interested in the following summary of the subject:

This address is the first of a series organized to discuss the subjects of Anarchism and Communism, and before entering upon the matter proper, our comrades have asked me to give an outline of Anarchism. I now proceed to do this, but confess that I should have felt infinitely happier if, instead of being limited to a mere sketch, it were possible for me to have ten or a dozen evenings on which to unfold all there is to be said upon Anarchism ; the subject is at once so vast and demands such continual explanation. “Now, when, after being a member of some socialist or radical group, we enter the ranks of the Anarchists, we are inclined to look upon Anarchism as simply a mode of action which is to lead with greater directness and certainty to the end we propose to attain—that is, the Social Revolution.

But, little by little, as we assimilate it, we become impassioned over this Anarchistic ideal, and we discover that, far from being a Utopian or a purely speculative conception, this ideal is the result of an innate tendency implanted in human Society — a tendency which has ever formed the strength of the masses, and which, throughout the course of history, has preserved them from being completely enslaved by a minority eager for riches and power.

Still later, as we begin to consider the relations that exist between our historical and sociological conceptions and our accepted views of the facts of nature, we discern little by little that the Anarchistic conception of social relations forms an integral part of the ideas which, especially at the close of this century, are throwing a new light upon our views of natural facts; that even the very form of Anarchistic thought differs essentially from that which forms at present the basis of all scientific thought, and that were this new method of thinking applied to knowledge generally, the aspect of science would be materially altered.

For Anarchism is more than a method of action, more than a Utopia, more than a mere social theory.

It is the application to social matters of a manner of thinking, of reasoning, of conceiving of natural facts, in a word of philosophy, which is now in very truth dawning upon the thinkers of the day and which will undoubtedly mature into the philosophy of the twentieth century. Our

ideas on social phenomena change at the same time with our ideas upon the universe and current knowledge.

“I have, therefore, to consider Anarchism under three aspects: As a mode of action, as a social theory and as part of a general system of philosophy. Only, I shall take them in the inverse order, and after having developed certain ideas in order to connect our principles with the accepted conception of natural facts. I will consider Anarchism as a social theory, and lastly as a mode of action.

You must, I am sure, when reading works upon the general development of human thought, have met with the following just reflection: That during a certain period man believed that time earth was the centre of the universe, and that sun, planets and stars all revolved around our globe in four-and-twenty hours. Man being the superior being upon the earth, the entire universe existed for him. For him, the sun, the moon and stars, respectively, revolved upon their orbits around this earth, his habitation; one and all had been created for him, and the supposed creator of the universe watched over him in order to protect him from a possible confusion of these elements and from that element of evil—the devil. This science and this philosophy reigned supreme during the dark period of man’s subjection. The powerful theocracies of the East became their outward expression.

But as ideas and men began to throw off the yoke of religion it was perceived that a far too important position had been assigned to the earth and to man. It was discovered that the sun was the centre of our planetary system; that this sun, immense as it was in comparison to the earth, was but a grain of sand among millions of other suns, as large, and larger, than our own.

In every work of philosophical history you will find brilliant pages portraying the influence of this change of ideas upon the structure of the world. All the thought of the period in its entire application to social relations felt the rebound; and many a no less brilliant page could be written to demonstrate how the material enfranchisement of man influenced his conceptions upon the cosmogony of the universe.

Well, now, an analogous fact is occurring today. We are entering upon an era when exactly as important a change is taking place throughout all scientific, all philosophical thought. A new philosophy is arising, and Anarchism, far from being a simple Utopia, or, as has not unfrequently been said, a crude theory, appears on the contrary as an essential and fundamental part of this new philosophy—that part, in fact, which treats of our social relations.

Remember always the conception of the universe of which I have just spoken. The Newtonian philosophy (or, rather, that philosophy which, in appropriating the discoveries of Newton, overpowered the last three centuries) told us of a sun which was the lord of the planetary system. He it was who chained down the earth, the planets and the comets to their orbits. By his powerful attraction he kept them within stated distances and compelled them to revolve around him in wide circles. He was the heart, the soul, the king—the governor of the system. Order, perfect amid rigid, reigned throughout this system, thanks to his power; and were there factors of disorder or disturbance, these were hut of a passing nature. Soon the force of attraction of the all-powerful star restored the equilibrium, and during infinite periods of time this order would last, because the disturbances themselves mutually accomodated or destroyed each other so as to re-establish the ordained cycle. “Worship the luminous star! Sing to the glory of the great geometrician!” cried the astronomer.

“To-day all this is changed.”

It has been discovered that the vast space beyond these planets and suns is peopled by others extremely minute—small masses of matter these, which circulate in every sense, having each their own distinct life, and whose effects, infinitesimal as they respectively may be, are yet so immense when taken together that they completely modify the force of the giants placed in the centre of the system. Kant and Laplace derived the planets from one central mass. To-day we displace the centre of gravity. The central mass or agglomeration, is itself but the result of the action of these infinitely small molecules of matter, and it is these little Pariahs who build up the planets, who retain the heat in the sun, who by their rapid revolutions maintain the life of the whole. One step further, and attraction itself, which has (contrary to Newton) been placed in the centre of our radiant sun, becomes but the result of the movements of molecules—of the infinitely small.

In a word, without entering further into technical detail, up to the present time we have been accustomed to consider the whole and its result, without inquiring particularly into the origin of this result or lingering over the humble units which go to form the whole. Now, on the contrary, our attention is fixed on the very particles upon which we have hitherto barely cast a furtive glance, with the result that before long we shall be enabled to decipher every individual action of and each individual unit that helps to form the grand total. A mathematician, when studying a whole—that is, a given quantity and its resultant—would remark: “We are to-day about to fix our attention upon the minute parts of which this whole is composed.”

Such is the point to which astronomy is tending, and not astronomy alone, but the general conception of the universe-cosmogony.

Now, what we see occurring in the study of the universe is being repeated in every branch of science, including that which treats of the relations of mankind.

Anarchism forms, in fact, one of the most important parts of our method of conceiving of nature—a philosophy which proclaims itself and which might be termed synthetic philosophy, if Spencer had not already employed that name to designate a system from which he has drawn so many incomplete and contradictory conclusions, if frequently opposed to our own.

Anarchistic thought is thus but a branch of that general method of reasoning which promises to become the philosophical thought of the civilized world.

A few other examples, taken also from the domain of science, will even more clearly establish this idea.

A similar change is taking place in the sciences which treat of animate beings.

Where hitherto men spoke of creation or of the appearance of species, they to-day study the variations which occur in the individual under the influence of environment and of the adaptations of their organs to conditions which vary every day.

The individual himself is treated as a complex being, as a colony of infinitely minute atoms, associated together, yet each retaining its own distinct life. The divers organs of plants, of animals, of men, are considered as a collection of cells, or rather of organisms living each its own life and associating together for the purpose of forming organs, which in their turn group themselves together, yet each preserving its own individuality throughout—the whole going to form the complete individual. “Man”, replies the physiologist of to-day, “is not a being!” He is a colony of micro-organisms, of cells grouped into organs. Study them, study these groupings, if you wish to know what man is.”

Formerly we were told of the soul of man, which was endowed with a separate, an almost isolated, existence. To-day we discover that what was called the soul or spirit of man is an

excessively complex thing, a collection, an agglomeration of faculties, each of which requires to be studied separately. They are, of course, intimately associated; no activity can manifest itself in one without every other responding to the call. But each possesses its own life, each its own centre of activity, the organs. And instead of being the science of the psychic faculties appertaining to the individual as a whole, psychology becomes a study of the separate functions of which the life of that individual is composed.

But it is especially in sociology that the change becomes most apparent.

I will not speak of history, because you all know how the point of view on that subject is changed, how the cult of “heroes” disappears, and how, the more it is studied, the role of the masses acquires importance, how the great deeds of history appear more and more as the result of thousands of individual wills. Who is there who has not perceived this, even should he only have read the war of 1812 as depicted by Tolstoi? No, we do not need to speak of history; but let us take, for instance, political economy.

The founder of this system, Adam Smith, entitled his work “The Wealth of Nations.” The products of nations, their imports and exports, their rates of exchange, etc., were what then occupied the political economist. But to-day political economy no longer interests itself with the wealth of nations. It wishes to know if the individual, if each individual, has his wants supplied. It no longer desires to measure the wealth of a nation by the value of its exchanges. It measures this by the number of its prosperous individuals, as compared with the number of those vegetating in misery. The point of view is entirely changed; so that now, before writing upon the wealth of nations, the student would consider it necessary to go from house to house, to knock at every door and inquire of those behind each whether they had had a meal, whether each child has a clean bed, whether in each household there was bread for to-morrow. The needs of the individual and the measure of their supply—such is the material required by the political economy developing itself to-day.

And, finally, in politics, we no longer ask what is the precise form inscribed upon the code of each nation, what the distinctive mark of the State. We desire to know how far each individual is free, how far the needs of each local autonomy are satisfied, what is the intellectual level of each person, how far each is the slave of his prejudices, up to what point he is free to express his thoughts—all his thoughts—, and to act in accordance with the impulses of his mind and heart. It is still of the individual that we wish to know, feeling that the political condition of a nation—the result—will appear of itself once we understand the individuals which compose it.

In a word, upon whichever side of the sciences touching animate and inanimate nature or human communities we turn our eyes, everywhere we find this eminently characteristic tendency of the age. Formerly we were satisfied to study the results, the grand totals; to-day our attention is fixed upon the minute individualities composing those sum-totals. “Just as to the astronomer our great central star becomes eclipsed before the multitudinous lesser ones throughout space, so the nation, the State, appears as the simple product of agglomerations of individuals, developing, growing before the very eyes of historian, political economist, politician and social reformer.

At once the product and instigator of that method of thought which now begins to dominate every science, Anarchism is the offspring of that vast impulse, that great stirring up of opinion, which is over-mastering all minds and which should govern our subsequent development. It is the application of this method of thought to our economic and political affairs at the moment when man is liberating himself from the prejudices which have been forced upon him by religion,

science, education and legislation, which reflected mere abstractions the better to lead him to forget the reality—man toiling, suffering, struggling in misery.

Another idea, no less rich In consequence, dawns also upon modern thought. “When we note how all things hold together in Nature, how rare are the cataclysms which it would seem might frequently destroy all life in our globe, as well as the solar systems themselves, man cannot but conceive that there is a certain harmony in Nature, and seek to discover its cause. “Why, for instance, do these pursue their course through space without dashing against and destroying one another? Why do not volcanic eruptions and sudden subsidences from time to time annihilate whole continents, engulfing them under subterranean lava or beneath the waves? Why do not whole species of plants and animals become extinct in a few years—devoured, annihilated by other species? How is it, in fact, that human communities remain so stable? How can they last without being disintegrated by internal convulsions? Why not a chaos of continual cataclysms? “To this question, which man has never ceased to pose himself, the answer has varied with the ages. Formerly the reply was concise. It was the Creator who protected His own handiwork. Later a better solution offered. It was especially in our present Jacobinic era that the idea of law came to be substituted for that of divine arbitrariness. But, instead of remaining satisfied with what is called “natural law”—a simple suggestion, perceived by us, though without a full comprehension of the conditional character of such “natural laws” (it being plain that if one thing is produced another like it must necessarily be produced), we came by and by to consider the “law”—that is, the relation of phenomena to each other to be a something superior to phenomena, a something, as it were, linked to phenomena, but governing and directing them. “The whole science of our century was conceived under the domination of this idea. Not only the natural sciences, but also those treating of man; and not only has the science of universities been affected by it, but the language of the politician, the reformer and the revolutionist. “The idea of law, of control, of order, imposed upon things as well as individuals, permeates all our language, and we hear the echo of it in revolutionary meetings as often as in the courts of a bourgeois university. Our whole philosophy is tinctured with the Jacobinism of 1793.

But a new current is already making itself felt in science which should before long influence all our conceptions. If a certain harmony exists in Nature (that it has limits is well to remember), if fearful convulsions but rarely disturb the order of the great facts of Nature, if everything and every living creature finds itself more or less adapted to the conditions under which it lives, it is because they are the products of these very conditions. It is their surroundings which have made them what they are.

This is why they are not in danger of destruction. The free play of constructive and destructive energies itself creates the things which represent the most durable equilibrium between the opposing forces. And if such a harmony exists, it can but be the result of these forces continually changing, continually renewed by them, according to the needs of the hour. , ‘It is Lamarck and Fourier clasping hands. The idea of Lamarck applied to human communities; the idea of Fourier applied to the phenomena of nature.

Harmony, order, wherever there exists order and harmony, are not the products of a divine will. Neither are they the products of laws imposed by anyone single active force. They maintain themselves solely on one condition—that of being freely established and in equilibrium with all other forces moving toward the same end. If the play of any of these energies is impeded by the human will, none the less do they continue to operate, but their effects will accumulate, until one day the dam will burst, and there ensues disaster—a deluge, a revolution. Harmony is not a thing

that lasts indefinitely. It can exist only upon condition of continual modification, of changing its aspect every moment—for nothing exists either in Nature or amongst human relations that does not change momentarily. Continual change is the very life of Nature. And if there is this harmony in Nature, and if cataclysms are always local and rare, it is precisely because among natural forces there is no outside will endeavoring to shackle their energies. Each moves freely; all commingle together; and all together create things which last, because among the infinitely small energies pertaining to a work, as among the individualities grouped closely together to form the whole, a close bond of solidarity is established.

Finally, we perceive that the harmony of Nature should not be exaggerated. If growths which it has taken millions of years to form, such, for instance, as living creatures and continents, become modified with incredible slowness, that has nothing to do with phenomena of recent origin. We must distinguish between the harmony of celestial spaces and that of life, which develops with infinitely greater speed. Plant and animal species vary, and give rise to new species far more rapidly than has been supposed. The same applies to geological changes. With this order of facts evolution does not move with the slow and uniform step we desired to attribute to it. Evolution in these forms becomes constantly interrupted by local revolutions, and these revolutions, these periods of accelerated evolution are every whit as much a part of the harmony of Nature as the periods of slow evolution.

These, in brief, are the two great currents of ideas which are beginning to penetrate the thought of our century.

If we understand by philosophy, not merely physical abstractions, but a general survey of all the phenomena of the universe, of life, human communities and their relations, as well as the application of these views to each little fact of life and daily struggle, we can affirm that the whole philosophy of the century is about to suffer a profound modification. Anarchism is simply a part of this general survey. We might say that it is its application to the relations between men in communities, if thought as a rule did not tend in an opposite direction—that of constructing the philosophy of the universe from a simple observation of human affairs.

But there is a predominating fact which it is well to note, The philosophy which, on one side, is elaborated from the study of science, and Anarchism on the other, are two branches of the selfsame great impulse which is operating in the minds of men; two sisters advancing, as it were, hand in hand together; and that is why we can assert that Anarchism is more than a Utopia, more than a theory; it is the general viewing together of facts and phenomena which is forced upon us by our era.

We see, therefore, that Anarchism is not a thing of yesterday, It is impossible, however, in this address, to enter into the details of its origin, but those who wish to study these will find traces of them in the philosophy of Greece.

At bottom, popular movements have always been tinged with anarchistic principles, and everything that has been imposed by the minorities (at first of sorcerers, later on of priests, scientists, soldiers and lawyers) has been contrary to these anarchistic tendencies of the masses. The masses ever proclaiming the “droit coutumier” (customary or ordinary rights); the minorities—States, universities, Christian churches and the like—habitually imposing law that had been elaborated amidst the despotisms of the East, and today known as Roman, or rather as Byzantine, law.

The revolt 1800 years ago of Judea and the risings in the East which followed; the religious struggles of the ninth century in Armenia; those of the Rationalists in the twelfth century; finally those of the Anabaptists—all owed their origin to. this fundamental idea: Equality for all, no

private fortunes, no law other than that of the conscience of man. Recent researches of German historians develop the fact that the Reformation was not only coincident with, but in reality was caused by the Anabaptist movement, whose members preached the same revolt against law and authority, declaring that there was nothing obligatory in codes, such, for instance, as were comprised within the Bible, other than what each man found applicable to or desirous for his own needs. These historians prove clearly that the whole weight of the struggle of that century was borne by the Anabaptists; massacred immediately by the thousand once the Lutheran Church—by authority and “Roman right,” of course—took the lead of the movement.

Unfortunately all these movements looked to religion for their support. But even when the philosophy of the eighteenth century finally broke away from all religious tradition and turned toward science for support, it was still anarchistic. At its origin it announced the principles which to-day are the foundation of our ideas, Thus, from an intellectual standpoint, we are the direct descendants of this philosophy; and from the standpoint of action and the ideal, we are the descendants of all the popular movements which have occurred in history. Whatever their outward aspect, their essence has always been the same—Communism and Anarchism.

So much for our origin. Let us now pass on to a statement of our ideas.

Until the present time political economy occupied itself solely with the wealth of nations, At starting, it studied the annual statistics of capital in the hands of the possessing classes, basing its studies upon the supposition that when a nation is wealthy owing to the number of its possessing classes, every individual in that nation will also be wealthy. But to-day we know this supposition to be false, and under the impelling power of our era our attention is drawn to each component member of the nation. Such also is our method of interpreting social economy. We study the individuals, their necessities and the means of their satisfaction.

We enter the cottage of the peasant, the room or hovel of the laborer, the house or the palace of the rich. We there study their requirements and the measure of their supply, We then discover that three-fourths, if not nine-tenths, of society is in need of the actual necessities of life. Men toil, most of them, indeed, are crushed by overwork, notwithstanding which they lack everything. We find insufficient nourishment, want of clothing, an absence of all that is considered essential not alone by the laws of modern hygiene, but even of such hygienic conditions as are to be found among peoples still backward in civilization.

The children even cannot satisfy their hunger. Everywhere in civilized countries we hear the cry: “The children are emaciated ; they cannot be taught, for they come to school with empty stomachs. We must-have bread for these famished tittle beings before instruction is possible.” The small amount of bread they require is wanting in their families. While as to their clothing, we have all read with horror the description given but a few months since of the rags, or absence of clothing, on the little children from Whitechapel, who flocked to the evening reunions organized for their benefit. We all see these rags in city suburbs: we all know the little newsboys who run barefoot at night through the frozen mud of such cities as Newcastle and Glasgow, or, who, numbed with cold, sink exhausted upon the porches of merchant princes’ palaces in maritime cities.

And—but what need to speak of the hovels of the working population in city or country when whole volumes have been published on the subject? Volumes that may well remain little better than waste paper.

Want of nourishment, want of clothing, want of housing all along the line. Want of everything that renders life in ever so little a degree pleasant or intellectual. Who is there to-day who would dare to dispute these facts?

And still we are told of the progress that has already been made, and which is to be so much greater in the future. Well, we hasten to admit this progress where we find it.

Certainly the peasants of France are far less wretched today than they were a hundred years ago. Before they had broken the bonds of serfdom and retaken possession of some small portion of the lands stolen from their Communes by the nobles, they were certainly more miserable than they are at the present time. Let us at once grant the benefits gained between 1789–1793. But we cannot forget, on the other hand, that if the French peasantry no longer as droves of beggars tramp along the highroads by the thousand, it is because the most poverty-stricken among them have already migrated to the towns, and that we now find them in city suburbs—proletarians vastly more wretched than were their forefathers of the countryside.

Again, we cannot but note a great improvement in English manufacturing centres if we compare the artisan of to-day with his brother of 1840. It is true that here also the dregs of those suffering the greatest poverty have been drained into the suburbs of London, Glasgow or Birmingham, but those remaining behind enjoy more ease than did their fathers between the years of 1840–1848. But then, as we are now aware, that period was one of the darkest and most terrible known to modern history. It was the period of the first unbridled exploitation on the part when, vulture-like, it swooped down on populations subdued by bourgeois law, despoiled of their lands, reduced to hunger, disarmed for six centuries. Europe had never known an era so disastrous as this of a victorious capitalism become a master of men by the law that made hanging the penalty for strikes, and by the hunger that preyed upon a peasantry hunted from their lands.

It is easy to speak of amelioration when taking this epoch as the point of comparison. But if we look back a hundred, two hundred, or even three hundred years, the scene changes completely. When we turn, not to those economists who reach their conclusions off-hand, but to those who have spent their lives in the study of prices and wages—men like Thorold Rogers, the Oxford professor—we see that the prosperity of the best paid laborer or artisan of to-day is greatly inferior to that of the humblest laborer or workingman of the Middle Ages. The daily statement of wages inserted in the registers of that period and the price of commodities noted upon the records of sales are there to prove it

Confronted with such facts as these, the panegyrists of bourgeois progress would do better to keep a discreet silence.

At all events, the well paid workmen form the minority. What, then about the others? The patient researches of Charles Booth (the statistician) will tell us. His inquiry made from house to house in the proves that out of the five million inhabitants of that great city, one million and a half—more than a quarter of the population—have not so much as eighteen shillings (\$4.35) a week (and by family) assured to them. When they are certain of the meagre pittance they consider themselves happy. But during two, three or four months of the year they are unable to make even this sum per family, and their distress accordingly becomes extreme. And, remember, it is not ten or twenty thousand people who are thus situated, it is more than a quarter of the population of the wealthiest commercial capital in the world.

What about other cities? What about the agricultural population, whose maximum gains per family amount to some \$3 a week, and who are only secure of that when the weather is open

and they are able to work? Finally, what of that population of our large cities—I mean those thousands who have nothing, and yet have to live from day to day?

Note, moreover, that this quarter, or rather this third of the urban population of England—of the country, that is, which has attained the greatest industrial development, and which exists at the expense of the entire world over and above its own natural riches—note that these millions only earn this uncertain \$3 or \$4.35 as long as there is no crisis. When a crisis arrives, they no longer have this sum a week per family. And these crises, as economists know, are not the exception but the rule. Certain of them recur periodically every ten or twelve years, with the same regularity as the spots on the sun and the droughts in the East. Others take longer to mature. Yet a third have no regular period of recurrence, arriving, like comets; while a fourth class are local, occurring when some industry migrates from its original centre to some other part of the country, where “hands” are cheaper. Sometimes all four kinds fall upon us together, Then we have famine, typhus, some plague, as lately seen in Russia and Germany. It is the stoppage of industries which work by and for the peasant, and which stagnate for want of purchasers ; or else it is a cotton famine in Yorkshire, of a crisis in sugar, as in Dundee in 1886, or a crisis in the iron trade, such as we experienced a few years ago. It means the blackest misery, hunger-stricken men and women, the decimation of children, whole families broken up, enforced, emigration and suffering beyond seas amid the malarial fevers of distant lands.

A little cropping up of prosperity here and there a great deal of misery everywhere, and everywhere that feeling of insecurity for to-morrow which intrudes even into the palaces of the rich—this is what we should find if, instead of talking about brilliant sum totals, we studied the unit, the individual.

But when we think of the almost incredible struggles that the working classes have gone through during the present century to gain the little they own; when we think of their revolts, their strikes, their coalitions, and of the hunger and countless miseries endured during each strike; when we remember the martyrs without number that every strike, every revolt, every little act of rebellion or attempt at coalition has to record ; when we recollect all that these rebels, their wives and children have had to suffer each time that they sought to fetter exploitation, and when before us rise the dead bodies of May, June—of every month of so many years—what about progress then? Small as it is, it is not due to the development of capitalism. On the contrary it has been wrung from the monster by sheer force. If the capitalist, aided by his faithful valet, the government, has not by means of law and hunger, succeeded in reducing the workman into actual bondage, it is because the latter has had his moments of revolt; it is because he struggled, at the price of nameless privations and numberless victims. It is with a stone or a torch in his hand, sometimes with a rifle at his shoulder, that he has torn from the vampire an infinitesimal portion of that which might have come to him from the scientific progress of the century. Every penny gained on wages, every liberty earned in the workshop is marked by the corpses of workmen; and if only the number of these victims could be counted, no one would dare talk to him about “progress” already gained.

(To be continued.)

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