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The Anarchists

What they are, what they are not

Sébastien Faure

1920

Little is known about anarchists, and what is worse, they are poorly known. Question a hundred people in the street and ask them what they know about anarchists. Many will respond by spreading their arms or shrugging their shoulders, expressing their ignorance. Others, not wanting to say that they know nothing about them and considering themselves sufficiently informed by the newspaper from which they devoutly gather information, will answer:

“Anarchists are common bandits. Without scruples as without pity, respecting nothing that, for honest people, is sacred: Property, law, homeland, religion, morality, family, they are capable of the worst actions. Theft, pillage and assassination are erected by them as meritorious acts.”

“They claim to serve a magnificent ideal: they lie. In reality, they only serve their base instincts and their abject passions.”

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“It is possible that in their ranks some sincere people go astray. These are impulsive, delusional, fanaticized by the leaders who throw them into danger, while they, the cowards, jealously keep themselves away from responsibilities.”

“Basically, their only desire is to live without doing anything, after having seized the goods that the thrifty worker has painfully saved. These people are only bandits and bandits among the most dangerous and the most contemptible, because, to conceal the true goal that their odious crimes propose, they have the impudence to evoke the glorious and immortal principles on which it is necessary and desirable that any society rests: equality, justice, fraternity, liberty.”

“Also, society, whose foundations the anarchists violently attack, would fail in all its duties, if it did not repress with the utmost energy the detestable propaganda and the criminal enterprises of these public malefactors.”

If the privileged who are constantly trembling at the thought of seeing the prerogatives they enjoy taken away from them were the only ones to utter such remarks, this would be understandable, although this language would be proof of their ignorance and bad faith.

The misfortune is that a crowd, less and less considerable it is true, but still very numerous, of poor devils who would have nothing to lose and who, on the contrary, would have everything to gain, think and speak in this way if the current social organization were to disappear.

And yet, anarchist literature is already copious and rich in clear teachings, precise theses, and luminous demonstrations.

For half a century, a whole galaxy of libertarian thinkers, writers, and propagandists has arisen who, by word, pen, and action,

velop, will strengthen itself and when the evil, having perfidiously and in the shadows grown, bursts into full light, it will be necessary to begin the fight again to overcome it definitively. No! No! No ill-cut rib, no half-measures, no concessions. All or nothing.

War is declared between the two principles that dispute the empire of the world: authority or freedom. Democracy dreams of an impossible conciliation; experience has demonstrated the absurdity of an association between these two principles which exclude each other. We must choose.

Only the anarchists speak out in favor of freedom. They have the whole world against them.

No matter! They will win.

have spread, in all languages and in all countries, the anarchist doctrine, its principles, and its methods; so that everyone should be able to embrace or reject anarchism, but that no one today should be ignorant of it.

It is the fate of all torchbearers to be abominably slandered and persecuted; it is the fate of all social doctrines that attack official lies and current institutions, to be distorted, ridiculed and combated with the most odious weapons.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, this was the case of the leading workers of the French Revolution and of the principles on which they claimed to lay the foundations of a new world; during the first half of the nineteenth century, which witnessed the crushing of the “one and indivisible” Republic by the Empire, the Restoration and the July Monarchy, this was the case of the republicans; during the second half of the nineteenth century, which saw the blossoming and development of the triumph of democracy which they intended to substitute for bourgeois democratism; at the dawn of the twentieth century which records the accession of the socialists to power, it is inevitable that the anarchists will be slandered and persecuted and that their conceptions, which attack the lies and the institutions in force, will be distorted, ridiculed and combated by the most perfidious means.

But it is the duty of the heralds of the new truth to confound slander and to oppose the incessant blows of lies with the constant riposte of truth. And, since impostors and ignoramuses — the latter under the influence of the former — persist in vilifying our feelings and distorting our conceptions, I believe it necessary to expose, in as clear a summary as possible: who we are, what we want and what is our revolutionary ideal.

Who are we?

We have the most false idea of anarchists, as individuals. Some consider us as harmless utopians, as sweet dreamers; they treat us as chimerical spirits, with twisted imaginations, as much as to say half-mad. The former deign to see in us sick people whom cir-

cumstances can make dangerous, but not systematic and conscious evildoers.

Others have a very different judgment of us: they think that anarchists are ignorant brutes, hateful, violent and madmen, against whom one cannot guard too much, nor exercise too implacable a repression.

Both are wrong.

If we are utopians, we are so in the same way as all those of our predecessors who dared to project on the screen of the future images in contradiction with those of their time. We are, in fact, the descendants and the continuators of those individuals who, endowed with a perception and a sensitivity more lively than their contemporaries, foresaw the dawn, although plunged into night. We are the heirs of those men who, living in an era of ignorance, misery, oppression, ugliness, hypocrisy, iniquity and hatred, glimpsed a city of knowledge, well-being, freedom, beauty, frankness, justice and fraternity and who, with all their strength, worked to build this marvelous city.

That the privileged, the satisfied and all the retinue of mercenaries and slaves interested in maintaining and appointed to defend the regime of which they are or believe themselves to be the profiteers, disdainfully let fall the pejorative epithet of utopians, dreamers, eccentric minds, on the courageous artisans and the clairvoyant builders of a better future, that is their business. They are in the logic of things.

It is no less true that, without these dreamers whose heritage we make fruitful, without these chimerical builders and these morbid imaginations — this is how innovators and their disciples have always been described — we would be in ages long since disappeared, of which we have difficulty believing that they existed, so many men were ignorant, savage and miserable!

Utopians, because we want evolution, following its course, to distance us more and more from modern slavery: wage labor, and

wanting to obey, but wanting to command, is not being an anarchist. Refusing to let one's work be exploited, but consenting to exploiting the work of others, is not being an anarchist. The libertarian refuses to give orders as much as he refuses to receive them. He feels as much repugnance for the condition of leader as for that of subordinate. He does not consent to constrain or exploit others any more than to be exploited or constrained himself. He is at an equal distance from the master and the slave. I can even declare that, all things considered, we grant to those who resign themselves to submission the mitigating circumstances that we formally refuse to those who consent to command; for the former sometimes find themselves in the necessity — it is for them, in certain cases, a question of life or death — of renouncing the revolt, while no one is under the obligation to order, to act as leader or master.

Here bursts forth the profound opposition, the unbridgeable distance which separates the anarchist groups from all the political parties which call themselves revolutionary or pass for such. For, from the first to the last, from the whitest to the reddest, all the political parties seek to drive out of power the party which exercises it only to seize power and become its masters in their turn. All are partisans of authority... on the condition that they hold it themselves.

Fourth consequence. We do not only want to abolish all forms of authority, we also want to destroy them all simultaneously and we proclaim that this total and simultaneous destruction is indispensable.

Why?

Because all forms of authority hold together; they are indissolubly linked to each other. They are accomplices and united. To let even one survive is to favor the resurrection of all. Woe to the generations that will not have the courage to go as far as the total extirpation of the morbid germ, of the source of infection; they will quickly see the rot reappear. Harmless at the beginning, because it is invisible, imperceptible and as if without force, the germ will de-

benevolence of the State and religion. It is also thus of he who denies and combats the State, but admits and supports religion and property.

The integral anarchist condemns with the same conviction and attacks with equal ardor all forms and manifestations of authority and he rises up with equal vigor against all the constraints that these or those involve.

Therefore, in fact as in law, anarchism is antireligious, anticapitalist (capitalism is the present historical phase of property) and anti-statist. It leads the triple combat against authority head on. It spares no blows to the State, nor to property, nor to religion. It wants to suppress all three.

Second consequence. Anarchists do not grant any effectiveness to a simple change in the personnel who exercise authority. They consider that rulers and the wealthy, priests and moralists are men like any other, that they are, by nature, neither worse nor better than ordinary mortals and that, if they imprison, if they kill, if they live off the work of others, if they lie, if they teach a false and conventional morality, it is because they are functionally under the necessity of oppressing, exploiting and lying.

In the tragedy that is being played out, it is the role of the government, whatever it may be, to oppress, to make war, to collect taxes, to strike those who break the law and to massacre those who rebel; it is the role of the capitalist, whatever he may be, to exploit work and to live as a parasite; It is the role of the priest and the moral teacher, whoever they may be, to stifle thought, to obscure conscience and to chain the will.

That is why we wage war against the mountebanks, whoever they may be, of the political parties, whoever they may be, their sole effort tending to persuade the masses from whom they beg for votes, that everything is going badly because they do not govern and that everything would be fine if they governed.

Third consequence. It follows from the above that, always logical, we are the adversaries of authority to be submitted to. Not

to make the producer of all wealth a free, dignified, happy and fraternal being.

Dreamers, because we foresee and announce the disappearance of the State, whose function is to exploit work, to enslave thought, to stifle the spirit of revolt, to paralyze progress, to break initiatives, to stem the impulses towards the better, to persecute the sincere, to fatten the schemers, to rob the taxpayers, to maintain the parasites, to encourage lies and intrigue, to stimulate murderous rivalries, and, when it feels its power threatened, to throw on the fields of carnage all that the people count as healthiest, most vigorous and most beautiful?

Chimerical minds, twisted imaginations, half-mad, because, noting the slow transformations, too slow for our liking, but undeniable, which push human societies towards new structures built on renovated bases, we devote our energies to shaking, to finally destroy it from top to bottom, the structure of capitalist and authoritarian society?

We challenge the informed and attentive minds of today to seriously accuse of imbalance the men who plan and prepare such social transformations.

Insane, on the contrary, not half but totally, are those who imagine that they can block the road to contemporary generations that are rolling towards the social revolution, as the river heads towards the ocean: it may be that with the help of powerful dikes and clever diversions, these madmen slow down the course of the river more or less, but it is inevitable that sooner or later it will rush into the sea.

No! Anarchists are neither utopians, nor dreamers, nor madmen, and the proof is that governments everywhere hunt them down and throw them into prison, in order to prevent the word of truth that they propagate from reaching freely the ears of the disinherited, whereas, if libertarian teaching were a chimera or madness, it would be so easy for them to make it unreasonable and absurd.

Some claim that anarchists are ignorant brutes. It is true that not all libertarians possess the high culture and superior intelligence of the Proudhons, the Bakunins, the Elisée Recluses and the Kropotkins. It is true that many anarchists, struck by the original sin of modern times: poverty, had to leave school early and work to live; but the mere fact of having risen to the anarchist conception denotes a lively understanding and attests to an intellectual effort of which a brute would be incapable.

The anarchist reads, meditates, educates himself every day. He feels the need to constantly widen the circle of his knowledge, to constantly enrich his documentation. He is interested in serious things; he is passionate about the beauty that attracts him, for the science that seduces him, for the philosophy that thirsts him. His effort towards a deeper and broader culture does not stop. He never considers that he knows enough. The more he learns, the more he enjoys educating himself. Instinctively, he feels that if he wants to enlighten others, he must first of all make provision for light.

Every anarchist is a propagandist; he would suffer to keep silent about the convictions that animate him and his greatest joy consists in exercising around him, in all circumstances, the apostolate of his ideas. He considers that he has wasted his day if he has not learned or taught anything and he carries so high the cult of his ideal, that he observes, compares, reflects, studies always, as much to get closer to this ideal and make himself worthy of it, as to be better able to expose it and make it loved.

And this man would be a thick brute? And it is such an individual who would be of a crass ignorance? Lie! Slander!

The most widespread opinion is that anarchists are hateful, violent. Yes and no.

Anarchists have hatreds; they are lively and multiple; but their hatreds are only the logical, necessary, fatal consequence of their loves. They hate servitude, because they love independence; they detest exploited labor, because they ardently defend the truth; they

We want to annihilate the State, abolish property and eliminate religious imposture from life, so that, freed from the chains whose crushing weight paralyzes their progress, all men can finally — without god or master and in the independence of their movements — head, with a quick and sure step, towards the destinies of well-being and freedom which will convert earthly hell into a place of bliss.

We have the unshakeable certainty that when the State, which feeds all ambitions and rivalries, when property which fomented greed and hatred, when religion which maintains ignorance and arouses hypocrisy, have been struck dead, the vices of these three combined authorities cast into the hearts of men will disappear in their turn. “Dead the beast, dead the venom!”

Then, no one will seek to command, since, on the one hand, no one will consent to obey, and on the other hand, every weapon of oppression will have been broken; no one will be able to enrich himself at the expense of others, since private wealth will have been abolished; lying priests and hypocritical moralists will lose all ascendancy, since nature and truth will have regained their rights.

This is, in its broad outlines, the libertarian doctrine. This is what the anarchists want.

The anarchist thesis entails, in practice, some consequences which it is essential to point out.

The brief exposition of these corollaries will suffice to situate anarchists in relation to all other groups, all other theses and to specify the features by which we differentiate ourselves from all other philosophical-social schools.

First consequence. He who denies and combats moral authority: religion, without denying and combating the other two, is not a true anarchist and, if I dare say, an integral anarchist, since, although an enemy of moral authority and the constraints that it implies, he remains a partisan of economic and political authority. The same is true, and for the same reason, of he who denies and combats property, but admits and supports the legitimacy and

Authority over objects: Property is so criminal and intangible that, in societies where it is pushed to the extreme limits of its development, the rich can die of indigestion with ease and impunity, while, for lack of work, the poor die of hunger. (“The wealth of some,” says the liberal economist J.-B. Say, “is made of the misery of others.”).

Religion — this term being taken in its broadest sense and applying to everything that is dogma — is the third form of authority. It weighs on the mind and the will; it darkens thought, it disconcerts judgment, it ruins reason, it enslaves conscience. It is the entire intellectual and moral personality of the human being that is its slave and victim.

Religious or secular dogma — cuts from on high, decrees brutally, approves or blames, prescribes or forbids without appeal: “God wants it or does not want it. — The fatherland demands it or forbids it. — The law orders or condemns it. — Morality and justice command or prohibit it”.

Fatally extending into the domain of social life, religion creates, maintains and develops a state of consciousness and a morality in perfect agreement with codified morality, guardian and protector of property and the State, of which it becomes the accomplice and of which it thus becomes what, in certain circles fond of superstition, chauvinism, legality and authoritarianism, is readily called “the preventive and additional gendarmerie”.

I do not claim to exhaust here the enumeration of all the forms of authority and constraint. I point out the essential ones and, to make it easier to find one’s way around, I classify them. That’s all.

As deniers and implacable adversaries of the principle of authority which, on the social level, clothes a handful of privileged people with omnipotence and places law and force at the service of this handful, the anarchists wage a fierce battle against all the institutions which proceed from this principle and they call to this necessary battle the prodigiously numerous mass of those who are crushed, starved, debased and killed by these institutions.

abhor iniquity, because they have the cult of the just; they hate war, because they fight passionately for peace.

We could extend this enumeration and show that all the hatreds that swell the hearts of anarchists have as their cause their unwavering attachment to their convictions, that these hatreds are legitimate and fruitful, that they are virtuous and sacred. We are not naturally hateful, we are, on the contrary, of affectionate and sensitive hearts, of a temperament accessible to friendship, to love, to solidarity, to everything that is of a nature to bring individuals together.

It could not be otherwise, since the dearest of our dreams and our goal is to eliminate everything that sets men in an attitude of combat against each other: property, government, Church, militarism, police, judiciary.

Our hearts bleed and our conscience revolts at the contrast of destitution and opulence. Our nerves vibrate and our brain rebels at the mere mention of the tortures suffered by those who, in all countries and by the millions, are dying in prisons and penal colonies. Our sensitivity shudders and our whole being is seized with indignation and pity, at the thought of the massacres, the savageries, the atrocities which, by the blood of the combatants, water the battlefields.

The haters are the rich who close their eyes to the picture of the poverty which surrounds them and of which they are the cause; they are the rulers who, with dry eyes, order the carnage; they are the execrable profiteers who collect fortunes in blood and mud; they are the police dogs who sink their fangs into the flesh of the poor devils; they are the magistrates who, without batting an eye, condemn in the name of the law and of society, the unfortunates whom they know to be the victims of this law and this society.

As for the accusation of violence with which they claim to overwhelm us, it is enough, to do justice, to open our eyes and to note that, in the present world as in past centuries, violence governs, dominates, crushes and murders. It is the rule, it is hypocritically

organized and systematized. It asserts itself every day under the forms and appearances of the tax collector, the owner, the boss, the policeman, the prison guard, the executioner, the officer, all professionals, in multiple forms, of force, of violence, of brutality.

The anarchists want to organize free understanding, fraternal aid, harmonious agreement. But they know — by reason, by history, by experience — that they will be able to build their will for well-being and freedom for all only on the ruins of established institutions. They are aware that only a violent revolution will overcome the resistance of the masters and their mercenaries. Violence thus becomes, for them, an inevitability; they undergo it, but they only consider it as a reaction made necessary by the permanent state of legitimate defense in which the disinherited find themselves, at all times, situated.

What we want.

Anarchism is not one of those doctrines that wall up thought and brutally excommunicate anyone who does not submit to it in everything and for everything. Anarchism is, by temperament and by definition, refractory to any regimentation that traces limits to the mind and encircles life. There is, there can be neither libertarian credo nor catechism.

What exists and what constitutes what can be called anarchist doctrine is a set of general principles, fundamental conceptions and practical applications on which agreement has been established between individuals who think as enemies of authority and fight, individually or collectively, against all the political, economic, intellectual and moral disciplines and constraints that flow from it.

There can therefore be and, in fact, there are several varieties of anarchists; but they all have a common trait that separates them from all other human varieties. This common point is the negation of the principle of authority in social organization and the hatred of all the constraints that flow from institutions based on this principle.

Thus, whoever denies authority and combat is an anarchist. The libertarian conception is little known; it is poorly understood. It is necessary to clarify and develop somewhat what precedes. I am coming to that.

In contemporary societies, wrongly called civilized, authority takes three main forms generating three groups of constraints:

1. the political form: the State;
2. the economic form: property;
3. the moral form: religion

The first: the State, sovereignly disposes of people; the second: property, reigns despotically over objects; the third: religion, weighs on consciences and tyrannizes wills.

The state takes man from the cradle, registers him in the civil status registers, imprisons him in the family if he has one, delivers him to Public Assistance if he is abandoned by his family, encloses him in the network of its laws, regulations, defenses and obligations, makes him a subject, a taxpayer, a soldier, sometimes a prisoner or a convict; finally, in the event of war, an assassin or a murderer.

Property reigns over objects: soil, subsoil, means of production, transport and exchange, all these values of common origin and destination have gradually become, through plunder, conquest, brigandage, theft, trickery or exploitation, the thing of a minority. It is authority over things, consecrated by legislation and sanctioned by force. It is, for the owner, the right to use and abuse (*ius utendi et abutendi*), and, for the non-possessing, the obligation, if he wants to live, to work on behalf of and for the benefit of those who have stolen everything. (“Property,” says Proudhon, “is theft.”). Established by the plunderers and supported by an extremely powerful mechanism of violence, the law consecrates and maintains the wealth of some and the poverty of others.