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978-0-521-45398-1 - Peter Kropotkin: The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings

Edited by Marshall Shatz

Excerpt

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*The Conquest of Bread* is Kropotkin's most detailed exposition of anarchist communism. The central place it occupied in his thought is indicated by the number of times he reissued it over the years. It originated as a series of articles in anarchist newspapers in the 1880s and appeared in book form in French in 1892. Kropotkin published English editions in 1906 and 1913, and in 1919 he prepared a new Russian edition which was published in 1922.

The text reprinted here is that of the revised English edition of 1913, published in London.

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## Preface

One of the current objections to communism, and socialism altogether, is that the idea is so old, and yet it has never been realized. Schemes of ideal states haunted the thinkers of ancient Greece; later on, the early Christians joined in communist groups; centuries later, large communist brotherhoods came into existence during the reform movement. Then, the same ideals were revived during the great English and French Revolutions; and finally, quite lately, in 1848, a revolution, inspired to a great extent with socialist ideals, took place in France. 'And yet, you see,' we are told, 'how far away is still the realization of your schemes. Don't you think that there is some fundamental error in your understanding of human nature and its needs?'

At first sight this objection seems very serious. However, the moment we consider human history more attentively, it loses its strength. We see, first, that hundreds of millions of men have succeeded in maintaining amongst themselves, in their village communities, for many hundreds of years, one of the main elements of socialism – the common ownership of the chief instrument of production, the land, and the apportionment of the same according to the labour capacities of the different families; and we learn that if the communal possession of the land has been destroyed in Western Europe, it was not from within, but from without, by the governments which created a land monopoly in favour of the nobility and the middle classes. We learn, moreover, that the medieval cities succeeded in maintaining in their midst, for several centuries in succession, a certain socialized organization of production and

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trade; that these centuries were periods of a rapid intellectual, industrial and artistic progress; while the decay of these communal institutions came mainly from the incapacity of men of combining the village with the city, the peasant with the citizen, so as jointly to oppose the growth of the military states, which destroyed the free cities.

The history of mankind, thus understood, does not offer, then, an argument against communism. It appears, on the contrary, as a succession of endeavours to realize some sort of communist organization, endeavours which were crowned here and there with a partial success of a certain duration; and all we are authorized to conclude is, that mankind has not yet found the proper form for combining, on communistic principles, agriculture with a suddenly developed industry and a rapidly growing international trade. The latter appears especially as a disturbing element, since it is no longer individuals only, or cities, that enrich themselves by distant commerce and export; but whole nations grow rich at the cost of those nations which lag behind in their industrial development.

These conditions, which began to appear by the end of the eighteenth century, took, however, their full development in the nineteenth century only, after the Napoleonic wars came to an end. And modern communism has to take them into account.

It is now known that the French Revolution, apart from its political significance, was an attempt made by the French people, in 1793 and 1794, in three different directions more or less akin to socialism. It was, first, *the equalization of fortunes*, by means of an income tax and succession duties, both heavily progressive, as also by a direct confiscation of the land in order to subdivide it, and by heavy war taxes levied upon the rich only. The second attempt was a sort of *municipal communism* as regards the consumption of some objects of first necessity, bought by the municipalities, and sold by them at cost price. And the third attempt was to introduce a wide *national system of rationally established prices of all commodities*, for which the real cost of production and moderate trade profits had to be taken into account. The Convention worked hard at this scheme, and had nearly completed its work, when reaction took the upper hand.

It was during this remarkable movement, which has never yet been properly studied, that modern socialism was born – Fourierism

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with L'Ange, at Lyons, and authoritarian communism with Buonarroti, Babeuf, and their comrades. And it was immediately after the Great Revolution that the three great theoretical founders of modern socialism – Fourier, Saint Simon and Robert Owen, as well as Godwin (the no-state socialism) – came forward; while the secret communist societies, originated from those of Buonarroti and Babeuf, gave their stamp to militant, authoritarian communism for the next fifty years.

To be correct, then, we must say that modern socialism is not yet a hundred years old, and that, for the first half of these hundred years, two nations only, which stood at the head of the industrial movement, i.e., Britain and France, took part in its elaboration. Both – bleeding at that time from the terrible wounds inflicted upon them by fifteen years of Napoleonic wars, and both enveloped in the great European reaction that had come from the East.

In fact, it was only after the revolution of July, 1830, in France, and the reform movement of 1830–2 in this country, had begun to shake off that terrible reaction, that the discussion of socialism became possible for a few years before the revolution of 1848. And it was during those years that the aspirations of Fourier, Saint Simon, and Robert Owen, worked out by their followers, took a definite shape, and the different schools of socialism which exist nowadays were defined.

In Britain, Robert Owen and his followers worked out their schemes of communist villages, agricultural and industrial at the same time; immense co-operative associations were started for creating with their dividends more communist colonies; and the Great Consolidated Trades' Union was founded – the forerunner of both the Labour Parties of our days and the International Working Men's Association.

In France, the Fourierist *Considérant* issued his remarkable manifesto, which contains, beautifully developed, all the theoretical considerations upon the growth of capitalism, which are now described as 'scientific socialism'. Proudhon worked out his idea of anarchism and mutualism, without state interference. Louis Blanc published his *Organization of Labour*, which became later on the programme of Lassalle. Vidal in France and Lorenz Stein in Germany further developed, in two remarkable works, published in 1846 and 1847 respectively, the theoretical conceptions of *Considérant*;

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and finally Vidal, and especially Pecqueur, developed in detail the system of collectivism, which the former wanted the National Assembly of 1848 to vote in the shape of laws.

However, there is one feature, common to all socialist schemes of that period, which must be noted. The three great founders of socialism who wrote at the dawn of the nineteenth century were so entranced by the wide horizons which it opened before them, that they looked upon it as a new revelation, and upon themselves as upon the founders of a new religion. Socialism had to be a religion, and they had to regulate its march, as the heads of a new church. Besides, writing during the period of reaction which had followed the French Revolution, and seeing more its failures than its successes, they did not trust the masses, and they did not appeal to them for bringing about the changes which they thought necessary. They put their faith, on the contrary, into some great ruler, some socialist Napoleon. He would understand the new revelation; he would be convinced of its desirability by the successful experiments of their phalansteries, or associations; and he would peacefully accomplish by his own authority the revolution which would bring well-being and happiness to mankind. A military genius, Napoleon, had just been ruling Europe, why should not a social genius come forward, carry Europe with him and translate the new Gospel into life? That faith was rooted very deep, and it stood for a long time in the way of socialism; its traces are even seen amongst us, down to the present day.

It was only during the years 1840–8, when the approach of the revolution was felt everywhere, and the proletarians were beginning to plant the banner of socialism on the barricades, that faith in the people began to enter once more the hearts of the social schemers: faith, on the one side, in republican democracy, and on the other side in *free* association, in the organizing powers of the working men themselves.

But then came the revolution of February, 1848, the middle-class Republic, and, with it, shattered hopes. Four months only after the proclamation of the Republic, the June insurrection of the Paris proletarians broke out, and it was crushed in blood. The wholesale shooting of the working men, the mass deportations to New Guinea, and finally the Napoleonic *coup d'état* followed. The socialists were prosecuted with fury, and the weeding out was so terrible and so

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thorough that for the next twelve or fifteen years the very traces of socialism disappeared; its literature vanished so completely that even names, once so familiar before 1848, were entirely forgotten; ideas which were then current – the stock ideas of the socialists before 1848 – were so wiped out as to be taken, later on, by our generation, for new discoveries.

However, when a new revival began, about 1866, when communism and collectivism once more came forward, it appeared that the conception as to the means of their realization had undergone a deep change. The old faith in political democracy was dying out, and the first principles upon which the Paris working men agreed with the British trade-unionists and Owenites, when they met in 1862 and 1864, at London, was that ‘the emancipation of the working men must be accomplished by the working men themselves’. Upon another point they also were agreed. It was that the labour unions themselves would have to get hold of the instruments of production, and organize production themselves. The French idea of the Fourierist and mutualist ‘Association’ thus joined hands with Robert Owen’s idea of ‘The Great Consolidated Trades’ Union’, which was extended now, so as to become an International Working Men’s Association.

Again this new revival of socialism lasted but a few years. Soon came the war of 1870–1, the uprising of the Paris Commune – and again the free development of socialism was rendered impossible in France. But while Germany accepted now from the hands of its German teachers, Marx and Engels, the socialism of the French ‘forty-eighters’, that is, the socialism of Considérant and Louis Blanc, and the collectivism of Pecqueur, France made a further step forward.

In March, 1871, Paris had proclaimed that henceforward it would not wait for the retardatory portions of France: that it intended to start within its Commune its own social development.

The movement was too short-lived to give any positive result. It remained communalist only; it merely asserted the rights of the Commune to its full autonomy. But the working classes of the old International saw at once its historical significance. They understood that the free commune would be henceforth the medium in which the ideas of modern socialism may come to realization. The free agro-industrial communes, of which so much was spoken in England

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and France before 1848, need not be small phalansteries, or small communities of 2,000 persons. They must be vast agglomerations, like Paris, or, still better, small territories. These communes would federate to constitute nations in some cases, even irrespectively of the present national frontiers (like the Cinque Ports or the Hansa). At the same time large labour associations would come into existence for the inter-communal service of the railways, the docks, and so on.

Such were the ideas which began vaguely to circulate after 1871 amongst the thinking working men, especially in the Latin countries. In some such organization, the details of which life itself would settle, the labour circles saw the medium through which socialist forms of life could find a much easier realization than through the seizure of all industrial property by the state, and the state organization of agriculture and industry.

These are the ideas to which I have endeavoured to give a more or less definite expression in this book.

Looking back now at the years that have passed since this book was written, I can say in full conscience that its leading ideas must have been correct. State socialism has certainly made considerable progress. State railways, state banking and state trade in spirits have been introduced here and there. But every step made in this direction, even though it resulted in the cheapening of a given commodity, was found to be a new obstacle in the struggle of the working men for their emancipation. So that we find growing amongst the working men, especially in Western Europe, the idea that even the working of such a vast national property as a railway network could be much better handled by a federated union of railway employees, than by a state organization.

On the other side, we see that countless attempts have been made all over Europe and America, the leading idea of which is, on the one side, to get into the hands of the working men themselves wide branches of production, and, on the other side, to always widen in the cities the circles of the functions which the city performs in the interest of its inhabitants. Trade unionism, with a growing tendency towards organizing the different trades internationally, and of being not only an instrument for the improvement of the conditions of labour, but also of becoming an organization which might, at a given moment, take into its hands the management



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of production; co-operation, both for production and for distribution, both in industry and agriculture, and attempts at combining both sorts of co-operation in experimental colonies; and finally, the immensely varied field of the so-called municipal socialism – these are the three directions in which the greatest amount of creative power has been developed lately.

Of course, none of these may, in any degree, be taken as a substitute for communism, or even for socialism, both of which imply the common possession of the instruments of production. But we certainly must look at all these attempts as upon *experiments* – like those which Owen, Fourier and Saint Simon tried in their colonies – experiments which prepare human thought to conceive some of the practical forms in which a communist society might find its expression. The synthesis of all these partial experiments will have to be made some day by the constructive genius of some one of the civilized nations. But samples of the bricks out of which the great synthetic building will have to be built, and even samples of some of its rooms, are being prepared by the immense effort of the constructive genius of man.

*Brighton*

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## CHAPTER I

### Our riches

#### I

The human race has travelled a long way, since those remote ages when men fashioned their rude implements of flint and lived on the precarious spoils of hunting, leaving to their children for their only heritage a shelter beneath the rocks, some poor utensils – and Nature, vast, unknown and terrific, with whom they had to fight for their wretched existence.

During the long succession of agitated ages which have elapsed since, mankind has nevertheless amassed untold treasures. It has cleared the land, dried the marshes, hewn down forests, made roads, pierced mountains; it has been building, inventing, observing, reasoning; it has created a complex machinery, wrested her secrets from Nature, and finally it pressed steam and electricity into its service. And the result is, that now the child of the civilized man finds at his birth, ready for his use, an immense capital accumulated by those who have gone before him. And this capital enables man to acquire, merely by his own labour combined with the labour of others, riches surpassing the dreams of the fairy tales of the Thousand and One Nights.

The soil is cleared to a great extent, fit for the reception of the best seeds, ready to give a rich return for the skill and labour spent upon it – a return more than sufficient for all the wants of humanity. The methods of rational cultivation are known.

On the wide prairies of America each hundred men, with the aid of powerful machinery, can produce in a few months enough