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Are We Good Enough?

Pëtr Kropotkin

1888

One of the commonest objections to Communism is, that men are not good enough to live under a Communist state of things. They would not submit to a compulsory Communism, but they are not yet ripe for free, Anarchistic Communism. Centuries of individualistic education have rendered them too egotistic. Slavery, submission to the strong, and work under the whip of necessity, have rendered them unfit for a society where everybody would be free and know no compulsion except what results from a freely taken engagement towards the others, and their disapproval if he would not fulfill the engagement. Therefore, we are told, some intermediate transition state of society is necessary as a step towards Communism.

Old words in a new shape; words said and repeated since the first attempt at any reform, political or social, in any human society. Words which we heard before the abolition of slavery; words said twenty and forty centuries ago by those who like too much their own quietness for liking rapid changes, whom boldness of thought frightens, and who themselves have not suffered enough from the iniquities of the present society to feel the deep necessity of new issues!

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Men are not good enough for Communism, but are they good enough for Capitalism? If all men were good-hearted, kind, and just, they would never exploit one another, although possessing the means of doing so. With such men the private ownership of capital would be no danger. The capitalist would hasten to share his profits with the workers, and the best remunerated workers with those suffering from occasional causes. If men were provident they would not produce velvet and articles of luxury while food is wanted in cottages: they would not build palaces as long as there are slums.

If men had a deeply developed feeling of equity they would not oppress other men. Politicians would not cheat their electors; Parliament would not be a chattering and cheating box, and Charles Warren's policemen would refuse to bludgeon the Trafalgar Square talkers and listeners. And if men were gallant, self-respecting, and less egotistic, even a bad capitalist would not be a danger; the workers would have soon reduced him to the role of a simple comrade-manager. Even a king would not be dangerous, because the people would merely consider him as a fellow unable to do better work, and therefore entrusted with signing some stupid papers sent out to the other cranks calling themselves kings.

But men are not those free-minded, independent, provident, loving, and compassionate fellows which we should like to see them. And precisely, therefore, they must not continue living under the present system which permits them to oppress and exploit one another. Take, for instance, those misery-stricken tailors who paraded last Sunday in the streets, and suppose that one of them has inherited a hundred pounds from an American uncle. With these hundred pounds he surely will not start a productive association for a dozen of like misery-stricken tailors, and try to improve their condition. He will become a sweater. And, therefore, we say that in a society where men are so bad as this American heir, it is very hard for him to have misery-stricken tailors around him. As soon as he can he will sweat them; while if these same tailors had a secured

But everything went on quite smoothly, notwithstanding the many blunders still committed by practical people. These slaves who were reputed improvident, selfish brutes, and so on, displayed such good sense, such an organising capacity as to surpass the expectations of even the most unpractical Utopists; and in three years after the Emancipation the general physiognomy of the villages had completely changed. The slaves were becoming Men!

The Utopists won the battle. They proved that *they* were the really practical people, and that those who pretended to be practical were imbeciles. And the only regret expressed now by all who know the Russian peasantry is, that too many concessions were made to those practical imbeciles and narrow-minded egotists: that the advice of the left wing of the unpractical camp was not followed in full.

We cannot give more examples. But we earnestly invite those who like to reason for themselves to study the history of any of the great social changes which have occurred in humanity from the rise of the Communes to the Reform and to our modern times. They will see that history is nothing but a struggle between the rulers and the ruled, the oppressors and the oppressed, in which struggle the practical camp always sides with the rulers and the oppressors, while the unpractical camp sides with the oppressed; and they will see that the struggle always ends in a final defeat of the practical camp after much bloodshed and suffering, due to what they call their 'practical good sense'.

If by saying that we are unpractical our opponents mean that we foresee the march of events better than the practical short-sighted cowards, then they are right. But if they mean that they, the practical people, have a better foresight of events, then we send them to history and ask them to put themselves in accordance with its teachings before making that presumptuous assertion.

living from the Communist stores, none of them would sweat to enrich their ex-comrade, and the young sweater would himself not become the very bad beast he surely will become if he continues to be a sweater.

We are told we are too slavish, too snobbish, to be placed under free institutions; but we say that because we are indeed so slavish we ought not to remain any longer under the present institutions, which favour the development of slavishness. We see that Britons, French, and Americans display the most disgusting slavishness towards Gladstone, Boulanger, or Gould. And we conclude that in a humanity already endowed with such slavish instincts it is very bad to have the masses forcibly deprived of higher education, and compelled to live under the present inequality of wealth, education, and knowledge. Higher instruction and equality of conditions would be the only means for destroying the inherited slavish instincts, and we cannot understand how slavish instincts can be made an argument for maintaining, even for one day longer, inequality of conditions; for refusing equality of instruction to all members of the community.

Our space is limited, but submit to the same analysis any of the aspects of our social life, and you will see that the present capitalist, authoritarian system is absolutely inappropriate to a society of men so improvident, so rapacious, so egotistic, and so slavish as they are now. Therefore, when we hear men saying that the Anarchists imagine men much better than they really are, we merely wonder how intelligent people can repeat that nonsense. Do we not say continually that the only means of rendering men less rapacious and egotistic, less ambitious and less slavish at the same time, is to eliminate those conditions which favour the growth of egotism and rapacity, of slavishness and ambition? The only difference between us and those who make the above objection is this: We do not, like them, exaggerate the inferior instincts of the masses, and do not complacently shut our eyes to the same bad instincts in the upper classes. We maintain that *both* rulers and ruled are spoiled

by authority; *both* exploiters and exploited are spoiled by exploitation; while our opponents seem to admit that there is a kind of salt of the earth – the rulers, the employers, the leaders – who, happily enough, prevent those bad men – the ruled, the exploited, the led – from becoming still worse than they are.

There is the difference, and a very important one. *We* admit the imperfections of human nature, but we make no exception for the rulers. *They* make it, although sometimes unconsciously, and because we make no such exception, they say that we are dreamers, ‘unpractical men’.

And old quarrel, that quarrel between the ‘practical men’ and the ‘unpractical’, the so-called Utopists: a quarrel renewed at each proposed change, and always terminating by the total defeat of those who name themselves practical people.

Many of us must remember the quarrel when it raged in America before the abolition of slavery. When the full emancipation of the Negroes was advocated, the practical people used to say that if the Negroes were no more compelled to labour by the whips of their owners, they would not work at all, and soon would become a charge upon the community. Thick whips could be prohibited, they said, and the thickness of the whips might be progressively reduced by law to half-an-inch first and then to a mere trifle of a few tenths of an inch; but some kind of whip must be maintained. And when the abolitionists said – just as we say now – that the enjoyment of the produce of one’s labour would be a much more powerful inducement to work than the thickest whip. ‘Nonsense, my friend,’ they were told – just as we are told now. ‘You don’t know human nature! Years of slavery have rendered them improvident, lazy and slavish, and human nature cannot be changed in one day. You are imbued, of course, with the best intentions, but you are quite “unpractical”.’

Well, for sometime the practical men had their own way in elaborating schemes for the gradual emancipation of Negroes. But, alas!, the schemes proved quite unpractical, and the civil war – the blood-

iest on record – broke out. But the war resulted in the abolition of slavery, without any transition period; – and see, none of the terrible consequences foreseen by the practical people followed. The Negroes work, they are industrious and laborious, they are provident – nay, too provident, indeed – and the only regret that can be expressed is, that the scheme advocated by the left wing of the unpractical camp – full equality and land allotments – was not realised: it would have saved much trouble now.

About the same time a like quarrel raged in Russia, and its cause was this. There were in Russia 20 million serfs. For generations past they had been under the rule, or rather the birch-rod, of their owners. They were flogged for tilling their soil badly, flogged for want of cleanliness in their households, flogged for imperfect weaving of their cloth, flogged for not sooner marrying their boys and girls – flogged for everything. Slavishness, improvidence, were their reputed characteristics.

Now came the Utopists and asked nothing short of the following: Complete liberation of the serfs; immediate abolition of any obligation of the serf towards the lord. More than that: immediate abolition of the lord’s jurisdiction and his abandonment of all the affairs upon which he formerly judged, to peasants’ tribunals elected by the peasants and judging, not in accordance with law which they do not know, but with their unwritten customs. Such was the unpractical scheme of the unpractical camp. It was treated as a mere folly by practical people.

But happily enough there was by that time in Russia a good deal of unpracticalness in the air, and it was maintained by the unpracticalness of the peasants, who revolted with sticks against guns, and refused to submit, notwithstanding the massacres, and thus enforced the unpractical state of mind to such a degree as to permit the unpractical camp to force the Tsar to sign their scheme – still mutilated to some extent. The most practical people hastened to flee away from Russia, that they might not have their throats cut a few days after the promulgation of that unpractical scheme.