

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Pëtr Kropotkin
About Individualism
March 5, 1902

Retrieved on 26th January 2021 from www.panarchy.org

The communist anarchist Kropotkin underlines in this letter to Max Nettlau his adherence to a society that allows the maximum development of individuality. In this way he differentiates his vision from that of the supporters of individualism, which would result in the spread of petty selfishness and the exploitation of the many by a few.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

About Individualism

Pëtr Kropotkin

March 5, 1902

Viola, Bromley, Kent

March 5, 1902

My dear friend,

I read your letter with a great deal of personal and general interest, and I would like to be able to answer it at length, as well as to discuss one of its essential points, individualism. Maybe someday I will write a few articles on individualism. At any rate, I will try to answer you now without entering into lengthy details.

I will start with the central point of your letter, in which you ask why youth is not the same now as it was in 1890–94. According to you, it is because at the time, we were affected by the libertarian movement in art and literature and so forth.

Well, we still are. The only difference is that it is they who no longer want us, and that, after having given us several comrades, they are now what they have always been, Epicureans and very bourgeois individualists who evidently find in Nietzsche (as their predecessors found in Darwin) ideas which suit them better or possibly offer them more justification than anarchy.

In my opinion, the 1890–94 movement can be explained in this manner: with the Boulangist agitation' creating an alarming atmo-

sphere, the young working class believed that a few heroic and devoted persons would be sufficient to provoke the revolution. Some serious and learned members of the bourgeoisie thought the same thing. Since then we have realized that this was an illusion, and have been forced, in France as elsewhere, to join the slow process of organization and preparatory propaganda among the working classes. This is the point where we are now.

As for the French bourgeois youth, it has always liked bold and striking affirmations, particularly between the ages of nineteen and thirty. The negativism, the “nihilism” of anarchy enticed them. On the other hand, they were impressed by the devotion and the self-sacrificing spirit of the young working class. And finally, a movement similar to that of the nihilism of Bazarovov is flourishing in France, a movement concerned with mores (moeurs), a Kulturbewegung, whose object is to reject conventional lies. It has happened, with this difference: in Russia, the nihilist movement 1859 – 69) was followed by the populist movement, v narod (“to the people”), whereas in France, nothing like this occurred. This is why the revolutionary movement has not gained anything directly from it. Where are the Mirabeaus? Where are the authors of dithyrambs to Ravachol? Who came forward to work for the revolutionary cause? Has this young generation produced a single person who could relieve the old one? Nihil.

The youth of today is Nietzschean because, as you so aptly put it, Nietzscheanism is a “spurious” individualism. It is bourgeois individualism which cannot exist unless the masses are oppressed and note this well-without lackeyism, servility towards tradition and the obliteration of the individual of the oppressor, as well as in the oppressed masses. The “beautiful blond beast” is, after all, a slave to the king, to the priest, to law and tradition, another possession of the exploiting clique, without individuality.

It is not because we became trade unionists that youth has left us. Attracted by the picturesque, they lost interest as soon as the picturesque and the dramatic became less forceful and they had

example, the negation of justice) which could never be accepted from us.

But enough! I have to end this letter and I will do so abruptly. Tomorrow I have to start working and will not be able to write to you.

Best wishes from all of us.

Peter

movement had won, that they had the intelligence to force Europe to make the next step, is true beyond question. But in order to get there, the rising of the masses was necessary. Without that, the elites would have been thrown into jail.

Yes, to get to your idyll, the revolution is still necessary — and the question is to know what will facilitate its preparation. That is the whole question, and you will agree that Barcelona, Trieste, and Milan are preparing its way: they are giving it the element which was missing in 1890–94 — the people.

That is why I find your comparison of the unionist anarchist movement with the social democratic movement very unfair. Obviously, the Spanish movement or the French syndicalist movement represents a limitation of the ideal, not theoretically, but insofar as it was embodied in certain men at a certain time. Clearly every realization in actuality does not live up to the ideal from which it derives its origin (this letter, for example, does not live up to the ideal that made me write it). But there the resemblance ends. One of these two movements is, in theory and in practice, in favor of tradition, the opposite of revolutionary. The one seeks to accelerate the course of events, the other to stop them!

Given our ideal, we should aim to stamp all that we do with the mark of this ideal: we must be inspired by it. Without this, we can no more reproach the movement in Barcelona than we can criticize all the activities of 1890–94, including the publication of individualist articles in newspapers, or even individual acts. (That is, although it didn't inspire in me the ideal expressed in the beginning of this letter, the individualism which was preached at that time, due to a series of misunderstandings, was not sufficiently differentiated from the pseudoindividualism of the bourgeoisie which leads to the weakening of the individual).

As for Tolstoy, if he had not been a Christian while at the same time being a communist and an anarchist he would not have had any more success than the anarchists—not to mention his great talent which permitted the acceptance of ideas coming from him (for

to apply themselves to pedestrian tasks. “I came to you because I thought the revolution was near at hand, but I see now that a long period of educational work is needed.” How often have I heard this said in the last twenty-five years!!! They enjoyed the flamboyance of Ravachol, of Vaillant, of Pauwels, and as soon as they realized that they were being asked to prove their thirst for liberty with sacrifices, they returned to their petty concerns. I am not demanding individual acts of revolt from them; Epicurians would be incapable of that. But when it comes to defending the cause of the oppressed (remember the last plea of Grave), the libertarian school, the small daily efforts of propaganda, where are they? We must find more workers! Do you know of a movement, a call to arms that produced fewer leaders than the aforesaid movement?

Why? Because a narrow and selfish individualism such as that offered from Mandeville (Fable of the Bees) to Nietzsche and the young French anarchists, cannot inspire anyone. It does not offer anything great and inspiring.

I will go still further—and this seems to me of the greatest importance (a new philosophy to be developed): what has been called “Individualism” up to now has been only a foolish egoism which belittles the individual. Foolish because it was not individualism at all. It did not lead to what was established as a goal; that is the complete, broad, and most perfectly attainable development of individuality. It seems to me that nobody except Ibsen has been able to reach the conception of true individualism; and even he, having foreseen it by an inspiration of genius, did not succeed in expressing it in a comprehensible way. All the same, there is in Ibsen a certain vision of future individualism, which I foresee, and which will be the superior affirmation of individuality. This will be as different from misanthropic bourgeois individualism as from Christian communism and equally hostile to both since they are impediments to the full development of individuality.

I think that the individualism which will become the ideal of philosophy in the near future will not lead anyone to appropriate

to himself more than the part which is due him from the common patrimony of production (the only one that the bourgeoisie has understood). Individualism will not consist in the creation throughout the world of a mass of slaves serving the chosen nation (individualismus or pro sibi Darwinianum or rather Huxleianum). Nor will it be a sensual type of individualism and the “liberation from the notion of good and evil” that a few French anarchists have preached-vague reminders of our fathers, the “aesthetes,” the “lovers of beauty,” the Byronic and Don Juan-like poets who preached it as well. It will not consist either in the oppression of one’s neighbor (individualismus Nietzscheanum) which reduces the “beautiful blond beast” to the level of an animal in a herd. It will consist, rather, in a sort of individualismus or personalismus or pro sibi communisticum, which I see coming and which I would try to define well if I had the necessary time.

That which has been represented as individualism so far has been pathetic and skimpy-and what is worse, contains in itself the negation of its goal, the impoverishment of individuality, or in any case the denial of what is necessary for obtaining the most complete flowering of the individual. We saw kings who were rich and filled their paunches and we immediately represented individualism as the tendency to become a king, surrounded by slaves like a king, pampered by women like a king (and what women! who would want them?), eating nightingales’ tongue (cold and always served with the same sauce!) on gold or silver plates like a king! And yet, is there anything in the world more typically bourgeois than a king! And, worse still, more enslaved than a king!

Nietzsche’s “blond beast” makes me laugh. Yet, due to a warped representation established in literature during the era (1820–1830) when these people, the aesthetes, wanted you to believe that they represented a superior type of humanity- we still continue to believe naively that these people who only asked to be left to their excessive pleasures (“All pleasures are mine!” goes the tune from

We ought to aim never to make any concession to the bourgeois and authoritarian principle. But to pretend that anyone at all can remain a prouder libertarian by limiting himself to writing on or speaking of individualist anarchy, than by taking part in the syndicalist movement, is, my dear friend, simply an aberration. For the worker who must sell his labor, it is impossible to remain free, and it is precisely because it is impossible that we are anarchists and communists. Nietzsche was able to remain very free-and yet!-what if he had had serfs to keep him alive and what if he had profited from their work to live. Furthermore, precisely for this reason, he did not understand anything about the economic workers’ revolt. The great Nietzsche, for he was great in a certain revolt, remained a slave to bourgeois prejudice. What a terrible irony! As for the bourgeois who claims to be free and to keep his full independence while he sells his mind, his brush, or his pen to other bourgeois, he ends up one day by selling himself body and soul to Rhodes or to Waldeck [-Rousseau], and while he is writing touching articles on Ravachol and the right of theft, he is already more of a slave (in mind and in deed) than the cooper of Barcelona enlisted in the organization which signs itself Salud y Anarquia and numbers a hundred thousand workers.

Your utopia is very fine. We might pass through such a similar period. But to get there, we we’ll need a revolution, just as the Anabaptist and Lutheran revolutions of the sixteenth century, the Cromwellian revolution of 1648 and the beginnings of the French Revolution were necessary preludes to the tolerance which prevailed at the time of the encyclopedists. I think that your principal error is in attributing the gains which were really conquered by the force of the popular revolution to an evolution created by an elite. At least a hundred thousand Anabaptists were decapitated in Holland and northern Germany (the number is given by recent historians of the Reformation), almost a hundred thousand peasants were killed in the uprising in 1515 — that is far from an evolution made by the elite! That they profited from what the peasant and workers’

cranks. And the cranks are you and me—all of us, the rebels. They buy libraries and paintings, but they need a few models for their art, which, although young, is already so developed in sculpture and architecture. Here is my opinion: from among a hundred men taken at random in Europe, you will not find as many enthusiasts, ready to set forth on untraveled paths, as in America. The dollar is nowhere given so little importance: it is won or it is lost. In England, one values and worships the pound, but definitely not in America. That is America. Any village in Oregon is better than the smallest hamlet in Germany.

But, coming back to the subject of your letter, you say that the method changed in 1894? Is it really true?

The tone is definitely calmer than it was then—just as the tone in the years 1884–90 was calmer than it had been in 1881–82. It is one of those fluctuations which accompany any development. We will find this tone again, heightened (but already more profound and thorough), as soon as we enter a more tormented period. I really don't see any change.

I myself have always been a communist. From the *Jura Bulletin* to *La Revolte*, I have always preached active participation in the workers' movement, in the revolutionary workers' movement. Recently, I made a collection of *La Rivolte*. And in each issue, I found one and often two of my articles dealing with the revolutionary workers' movement. From *La Revolte*, at least one cannot say that we have changed. Are you referring to Pouget, who wrote *La Voix du Peuple* instead of *Peinard*? I So, he is perfectly right when, after having worked on the elaboration of the idea, he works on diffusing it, on instilling anarchist and revolutionary ideas in the milieu which, alone, will take arms and make the revolution. As for the young people who have written articles which are sometimes very anarchistic (while remaining out of touch with reality), some continue to help us in newspapers and schools; others I suppose, will soon offer their services in order to attain the "perfect" development of their individuality. To these people—*bon voyage!*

Gounod's *Faust*) represented a superior development of individuality, a progress, a desideratum—the pearls of the human race!

Up to now, these so-called advocates of individualism have had as opponents only Christian preachers who proclaimed the annihilation of the personality. Fate has dealt them a good hand. In undermining Christianity, Nietzsche, next to Fourier, is unequalled. The same thing happens when one contrasts the altruist and egoist. It is easy for the latter to prove that the altruist is also guided by egoism—while the stupid egoist is incapable of understanding his own interest and is like the Zulu king who thought he was "asserting his personality" while eating a quarter of a steer a day. The stupid egoist should be contrasted (as was done by Chernyshevskii) with the perfect egoist—the "thinking realist" of Pisarev who became capable of infinitely more social good than the staunchest of the Christian or Comtian altruists. One should say and know at the same time that he is guided only by egoism.

With these few brief remarks, you can probably understand what I mean by personalism or *pro sibi communismum*: the individuality which attains the greatest individual development possible through practicing the highest communist sociability in what concerns both its primordial needs and its relationships with others in general. The bourgeoisie has asserted that the flowering of the personality demands slaves and the sacrifice of others (not himself, etc ...) and the result of this was the weakening of individuality which characterizes modern bourgeois society. Is that individualism?!! Oh, wouldn't Goethe's "individuality" have put it to shame! But let us consider the same Goethe with his strong personality. If he had had a share in work with others, would he have balked at it? No. He would have been a delight to his co-workers; he would have brought with him so much enthusiasm, gaiety, zest, and a sociable and communist spirit. And at the same time, he would have lost none of his great personal poetry or philosophy: he would even have gained from it the enjoyment of ordinary things in a communal work, while learning about a new

aspect of the human genius (consider his joy in discovering mutual reliance!). His whole being and personality having developed in this new direction (since nothing human was unfamiliar to him), another aspect would have been added to his genius. In the communal life in Russia, I knew people who, while remaining what the Russians call *miroski chelovek* (a communal man) in the fullest sense, were also individual personalities breaking with all the narrowness of their village and continuing alone, isolated on their way—whether that involved an individual political revolt or a personal moral revolt or a revolt against religion...

This is why I find the individualism of which the young French anarchists spoke to us for a while petty and false, because it fails to achieve its chosen goal. This sounds all the more false to me when I consider that there are men who, at this very moment, consciously march to the gallows for the common cause, after having strongly affirmed their own personalities. It is only because the concept of individualism is so poorly understood that others, calling themselves individualists, believed that they belonged to the same intellectual and political group as these heroes. Those who called themselves “individualists” (in the bourgeois sense) have as little right to claim them for “their own” as the [early] Christians would have had. They belong to a type of man who I see coming and who Ibsen has tried to create in his plays.

This letter is getting so long that I must skip over some very important points brought up in your letter. As I said before, if the movement has slowed down in France, it is because the general situation is not as revolutionary as it was before 1894–95, and we have realized that one cannot begin a revolution with a handful of people. It was foolish to imagine that the strong effort of a few could succeed in inciting the revolution: things did not happen that way, and it was necessary to organize the preparatory movement which precedes all revolutions. It was necessary, in addition, to have an ideal for the revolution. Could bourgeois individualism have been the one? No! And as for anarchist communism, was it

Besides, a new factor must be considered in the nineteenth century: progress in transportation, which encourages world trade, thriving domestic trade (in America, in France, in Russia), and the conquest of millions of slaves in Africa and the Far East.

In addition, the defeat of France and the proximity of Metz to Paris has made France militaristic. All this prevents revolution.

I know that the period we are going through in England invites pessimism. But do you know that our sadness, our pessimism due to the failure of England is only the result of our ignorance? Elisée [Reclus] must see in modern England only what he had seen a long time ago when he predicted England’s death like Spain’s death. Out of ignorance, I protested when he mentioned it to me one day in 1881. But that was due to my ignorance. When has England had a less abominable attitude toward her foreign policy than at present? The Ionian Isles (Gladstone) and Pretoria (the same Gladstone) are the only exceptions.⁴ Pitt paid Russia, Prussia, and Austria to fight Napoleon and supported the bombardment of Copenhagen and Alexandria. England paid for Poland’s insurrection and for Turkey’s fight with Russia, and let both be crushed, and so forth. Among Pitt, Palmerston, Disraeli and Chamberlain—in what way is the fourth worse than the other three? In what way has there been any decline? [Kropotkin adds in a note: “And don’t forget the rise of the stock market, like in sixteenth century Genoa, in Venice, in Rome and in Carthage!”]

England must perish, unless she accomplishes “the revolution of the communes,” which would mean the disintegration of the state; and she must take the initiative (or follow France) in repeating the revolution of the seventeenth century.

As for America—go and see it; it is worth the effort, and I think you will change your ideas completely. “America — land of the dollar” is as false an assertion as saying that the Pont Neuf is the oldest bridge in Paris. Elie Reclus once told me: “If everyone says that something is one way you can be certain in advance that it is completely incorrect!” Land of the dollar? It is more like a land of

April 1 and May 21, the day of the coming of the troops of Versailles—the number of the defenders of the Commune decreased and never did the Commune have more than ten thousand men in April and May to defend Paris. (I questioned Lefranquís and Pindy, etc. on this particular point and they were very positive about it.) On May 21, when the people heard the news of the coming of the armies of Versailles, they rose up with a word from Delescluze. “Enough courtiers!” etc. And since at least 35,000 were slaughtered, there must have been a minimum of 50,000 men on the barricades.

All revolutions, everywhere, always, those in deed and those involving intellectual ideas, are made by minorities. But where do these minorities come from? Who initiates the first skirmish in the streets? Certainly not the bourgeois! Always the working class—the same holds true for Barcelona.

This might lead to misunderstanding.’ Here is my idea: outbreaks always come from the oppressed class, from the people. There comes a moment when the discontent of the people (ready to become active) corresponds to the discontent of the “intelligentsia,” of the bourgeoisie (never ready to become active). Then there is revolution.

The jacqueries, the peasants’ war, Stenka Razin, Pugachev, also Milan, Trieste, Lyon in 1830, and so forth—those were the great insurrections. All these incidents added to the force of the discontented bourgeoisie—not to mention the revolution of 1789.

This is natural. I thought it was taken for granted by every socialist and every anarchist. You make me think that I should write everything down.

Going on to another subject, I see no reason for your pessimism. Revolution, like industrialism, has been moving since 1648 from the west to the east: England, France ... It is Germany’s turn now, as it approaches its 1848, just as Russia is approaching its 1789 (a little more advanced). In the meantime, England and France profit from the fruits of revolutions in the countries that lag behind them in making revolutions, so as to make progress of their own.

strong enough, not among the millions, but more especially among the anarchists themselves? No! (Force only comes from practical experience in life). As in this preparatory movement that we have been engaged in for five or six years, the absence of debate on such matters as the Boulangist and Dreyfus questions will force us to start this work again (but only for a few years).

If only we could explain our idea, as you say, during this lull! But we are faced with a problem that has not existed until now: the ethic of a society of equals, who are completely free. Christian ethics only had to copy the Buddhist ethic, the one of Lao-tse, and so forth, diluting it and minimizing it. We have to create the new ethic of the socialist society of the future. The anarchist working class is creating this ethic. Their work involves a thousand aspects. The general idea is taking shape. But whether we lack a great mind or whether that work is still too unfinished is difficult to distinguish. Yes, we have to follow the path, not only of the few “individualists” of Iago, but also of the ancient Greeks. We still have a long way to go, as you see.

As for your comments on the past and present role of the workers, I won’t take too seriously the point you made about exaggeration—an inevitable exaggeration in brevity. I only fear that even in granting much importance to this inevitable exaggeration, there remains a substratum on which it will be difficult for us to agree. You pointed out the lack of solidarity among workers. Fine. And then? As far as I am concerned and I think the same is true for thousands of anarchists and a hundred thousand socialists—I did not need to overrate the qualities of the workers in order to espouse the cause of the social, predominantly workers’ revolution. But it was in order to forge solidarity gradually among various trades, and later among nations, to expand the notion of solidarity, to enable you to expand it today as you did before, that the International was founded. It is precisely to awaken this solidarity—without which progress would be difficult—that we must work to insure that the syndicates and the trade unions

not be pushed aside by the bourgeois who, after having failed as moderates, are trying to reach power through more radical ways.

My purpose is not to determine “which is better—the bourgeois or the worker?” It does not interest me any more that, the question of determining “which is better—man or woman?)) — a question which fascinated the heroes in a Russian short story in a very amusing way. All I know is that the worker at least is accustomed to doing a certain amount of unpleasant work—real work, not only amusement—which is an important point for the future. In addition, the worker is used to manual labor; in his dreams of the future he does not seek a place among the governing class, as the social democrats do. Being exploited today at the bottom of the social ladder, it is to his advantage to demand equality. He has never ceased demanding it, he has fought for it and will fight again for it again, whereas the bourgeois, greedy and stupid, thinks it is to his advantage to maintain inequality. The bourgeois creates his politics and science, and forges his power with this interest in mind. And each time that we fought for equality, the bourgeois was for inequality for the right to govern, while the working class was on the other side. No amount of reasoning or statistics will do anything to change this, and as I already told you in my last letter, it was again the people, the worker who fought in the last skirmish that you were able to cite (1870; and I see no reason for it to be any different the next time than it was in 1871 in Milan, in Barcelona, in Trieste— everywhere!

As for the tolerance you mention, I can only repeat that in my opinion, the side which is in the right has exercised too much tolerance. I support aggressiveness and I think that preaching passivity, as Christianity did and as you seem to desire (but I remember in time the correction made about the exaggeration inevitable in any short letter), is an impediment to progress. Yes, there are in present society survivals of cannibalism, the savage period of the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the abominations of the oriental despots — absolutely everything since the beginning of history. You will see

a beautiful example of these survivals if you come to England in June: Huxley’s kneeling before the queen to receive the investiture of the Grand Cross was already quite a sight to see. But we are going to see some even more spectacular ones around Edward VII, with this revival of the most savage and cannibalistic periods. Who knows? Should I see all that with a condescending eye? No, dear friend, eclecticism is death, the, worst death, the death of the intellect.

Your understanding of revolution seems to me absolutely wrong. You probably speak with the historians when you say: “Then in the aftermath of the overthrow of the government in Russia, the peasants will burn the estates, and so forth.” But I think I have shown that this conception is completely erroneous.

If the manors had not been burned starting in May 1789, the Bastille would not have been taken in July, nor would there have been a night like the fourth of August. And saying this, I have the advantage of Taine’s opinion, and Taine was the only person (except maybe Kareev, who is of the same opinion) who has studied the movements preceding the revolution of July 14. “I know of three hundred outbreaks before July 14,” wrote Taine, who necessarily knows of only a few since most of the “feudal documents” have been burned. The jacquerie, begun in 1788 and lasting until 1793 (that is, the six jacqueries mentioned by Taine), was the basis on which the revolution developed and without which there would have been no revolution.

Individuals?! Do you think that Bakunin was not equal to Danton and that Guillaume was worth less than Robespierre? It is only because they lacked the foundations of a jacquerie of the peasants and workers in all the large cities of the northeast, east, and southeast that they did not become great historical figures like their predecessors.

Your conception of the Commune is also absolutely contrary to everything I have heard said by the communards. On March 18, they had all of Paris. Between the elections—let us say between