

ANARCHY

a pamphlet

by Errico Malatesta

Anarchy is a word that comes from the Greek, and signifies, strictly speaking, “without government”: the state of a people without any constituted authority.

Before such an organization had begun to be considered possible and desirable by a whole class of thinkers, so as to be taken as the aim of a movement (which has now become one of the most important factors in modern social warfare), the word “anarchy” was used universally in the sense of disorder and confusion, and it is still adopted in that sense by the ignorant and by adversaries interested in distorting the truth.

We shall not enter into philological discussions, for the question is not philological but historical. The common interpretation of the word does not misconceive its true etymological signification, but is derived from it, owing to the prejudice that government must be a necessity of the organization of social life, and that consequently a society without government must be given up to disorder, and oscillate between the unbridled dominion of some and the blind vengeance of others.

The existence of this prejudice and its influence on the meaning that the public has given to the word is easily explained.

Man, like all living beings, adapts himself to the conditions in which he lives, and transmits by inheritance his acquired habits. Thus, being born and having lived in bondage, being the descendant of a long line of slaves, man, when he began to think, believed that slavery was an essential condition of life, and liberty seemed to him impossible. In like manner, the workman, forced for centuries to depend upon the goodwill of his employer for work, that is, for bread, and accustomed to see his own life at the disposal of those who possess the land and capital, has ended in believing that it is his master who gives him food, and asks ingenuously how it would be possible to live, if there were no master over him?

In the same way, a man whose limbs had been bound from birth, but who had nevertheless found out how to hobble about, might attribute to the very bands that bound him his ability to move, while, on the contrary, they would diminish and paralyze the muscular energy of his limbs.

If then we add to the natural effect of habit the education given to him by his master, the parson, the teacher, etc., who are all interested in teaching that the employer and the government are necessary, if we add the judge and the policeman to force those who think differently – and might try to propagate their opinion – to keep silence, we shall understand how the prejudice as to the utility and necessity of masters and governments has become established. Suppose a doctor brought forward a complete theory, with a thousand ably invented illustrations, to persuade the man with bound limbs that, if his limbs were freed, he could not walk, or even live. The man would defend his bands furiously and consider anyone his enemy who tried to tear them off.

Thus, if it is believed that government is necessary and that without government there must be disorder and confusion, it is natural and logical to suppose that anarchy, which signifies absence of government, must also mean absence of order.

Nor is this fact without parallel in the history of words. In those epochs and countries where

people have considered government by one man (monarchy) necessary, the word "republic" (that is, the government of many) has been used precisely like "anarchy," to imply disorder and confusion. Traces of this meaning of the word are still to be found in the popular languages of almost all countries.

When this opinion is changed, and the public are convinced that government is not necessary, but extremely harmful, the word "anarchy," precisely because it signifies "without government," will become equal to saying "natural order, harmony of needs and interests of all, complete liberty with complete solidarity."

Therefore, those are wrong who say that anarchists have chosen their name badly, because it is erroneously understood by the masses and leads to a false interpretation. The error does not come from the word, but from the thing. The difficulty which anarchists meet in spreading their views does not depend upon the name they have given themselves, but upon the fact that their conceptions strike as all the inveterate prejudices which people have about the function of government, or "the state," as it is called.

Before proceeding further, it will be well to explain this last word (the "State") which, in our opinion, is the real cause of much misunderstanding.

Anarchists generally make use of the word "State" to mean all the collection of institutions, political, legislative, judicial, military, financial, etc., by means of which management of their own affairs, the guidance of their personal conduct, and the care of ensuring their own safety are taken from the people and confided to certain individuals, and these, whether by usurpation or delegation, are invested with the right to make laws over and for all, and to constrain the public to respect them, making use of the collective force of the community to this end.

In this case the word "State" means "government," or, if you like, it is the abstract expression of which government is the personification. Then such expressions as "Abolition of the State," or "Society without the State," agree perfectly with the conception which anarchists wish to express of the destruction of every political institution based on authority, and of the constitution of a free and equal society, based upon harmony of interests, and the voluntary contribution of all to the satisfaction of social needs.

However, the word "State" has many other meanings, and among these some that lend themselves to misconstruction, particularly when used among men whose sad social position has not afforded them leisure to become accustomed to the subtle distinction of scientific language, or, still worse, when adopted treacherously by adversaries, who are interested in confounding the sense, or do not wish to comprehend it. Thus the word "State" is often used to indicate any given society, or collection of human beings, united on a given territory and constituting what is called a "social unit," independently of the way in which the members of the said body are grouped, or of the relations existing between them. "State" is used also simply as a synonym for "society." Owing to these meanings of the word, our adversaries believe, or rather profess to believe, that anarchists wish to abolish every social relation and all collective work, and to reduce man to a condition of isolation, that is, to a state worse than savagery.

By "State" again is meant only the supreme administration of a country, the central power, as distinct from provincial or communal power, and therefore others think that anarchists wish merely for a territorial decentralization, leaving the principle of government intact, and thus confounding anarchy with cantonal or communal government.

Finally, "State" signifies "condition, mode of living, the order of social life," etc., and therefore we say, for example, that it is necessary to change the economic state of the working classes, or that the anarchical State is the only State founded on the principles of solidarity, and other similar phrases. So that if we say also in another sense that we wish to abolish the State, we may at once appear absurd or contradictory.

For these reasons, we believe that it would be better to use the expression "abolition of the State" as little as possible, and to substitute for it another, clearer, and more concrete—"abolition of government."

The latter will be the expression used in the course of this essay.

We have said that anarchy is society without government. But is the suppression of government possible, desirable, or wise? Let us see.

What is the government? There is a disease of the human mind, called the metaphysical tendency, that causes man, after he has by a logical process abstracted the quality from an object, to be subject to a kind of hallucination that makes him take the abstraction for the real thing. This metaphysical tendency, in spite of the blows of positive science, has still strong root in the minds of the majority of our contemporary fellowmen. It has such influence that many consider government an actual entity, with certain given attributes of reason, justice, equity, independent of the people who compose the government.

For those who think in this way, government, or the State, is the abstract social power, and it represents, always in the abstract, the general interest. It is the expression of the rights of all and is considered as limited by the rights of each. This way of understanding government is supported by those interested, to whom it is an urgent necessity that the principle of authority should be maintained and should always survive the faults and errors of the persons who exercise power.

For us, the government is the aggregate of the governors, and the governors – kings, presidents, ministers, members of parliament, and what not – are those who have the power to make laws regulating the relations between men, and to force obedience to these laws. They are those who decide upon and claim the taxes, enforce military service, judge and punish transgressors of the laws. They subject men to regulations, and supervise and sanction private contracts. They monopolize certain branches of production and public services, or, if they wish, all production and public service. They promote or hinder the exchange of goods. They make war or peace with governments of other countries. They concede or withhold free trade and many things else. In short, the governors are those who have the power, in a greater or lesser degree, to make use of the collective force of society, that is, of the physical, intellectual, and economic force of all, to oblige each to their (the governors') wish. And this power consti-

tutes, in our opinion, the very principle of government and authority.

But what reason is there for the existence of government?

Why abdicate one's own liberty, one's own initiative in favor of other individuals? Why give them the power to be the masters, with or against the wish of each, to dispose of the forces of all in their own way? Are the governors such exceptionally gifted men as to enable them, with some show of reason, to represent the masses and act in the interests of all men better than all men would be able to act for themselves? Are they so infallible and incorruptible that one can confide to them, with any semblance of prudence, the fate of each and all, trusting to their knowledge and goodness?

And even if there existed men of infinite goodness and knowledge, even if we assume what has never happened in history and what we believe could never happen, namely, that the government might devolve upon the ablest and best, would the possession of government power add anything to their beneficent influence? Would it not rather paralyze or destroy it? For those who govern find it necessary to occupy themselves with things which they do not understand, and, above all, to waste the greater part of their energy in keeping themselves in power, striving to satisfy their friends, holding the discontented in check, and mastering the rebellious.

Again, be the governors good or bad, wise or ignorant, how do they gain power? Do they impose themselves by right of war, conquest, or revolution? If so, what guarantees have the public that their rules have the general good at heart? In this case it is simply a question of usurpation, and if the subjects are discontented, nothing is left to them but to throw off the yoke by an appeal to arms. Are the governors chosen from a certain class or party? Then inevitably the ideas and interests of that class or party will triumph, and the wishes and interests of the others will be sacrificed. Are they elected by universal suffrage? Now numbers are the sole criteria, and numbers are clearly no proof of reason, justice, or capacity. Under universal suffrage the elected are those who know best how to take in the masses. The minority, which may happen to be the half minus one, is sacrificed. Moreover, experience has shown it is impossible to hit upon an electoral system that really ensures election by the actual majority.

Many and various are the theories by which men have sought to justify the existence of government. All, however, are founded, confessedly or not, on the assumption that the individuals of a society have contrary interests, and that an external superior power is necessary to oblige some to respect the interests of others, by prescribing and imposing a rule of conduct, according to which each may obtain the maximum of satisfaction with the minimum of sacrifice. If, say the theorists of the authoritarian school, the interests, tendencies, and desires of an individual are in opposition to those of another individual, or perhaps all society, who will have the right and the power to oblige the one to respect the interests of the other or others? Who will be able to prevent the individual citizen from offending the general will? The liberty of each, they say, has for its limit the liberty of others: but who will establish those limits, and who will cause them to be respected? The natural antagonism of interests and passions creates the necessity for government, and justifies authority. Authority intervenes as moderator of the social strife and defines the limits of the rights and duties of each.

This is the theory; but to be sound the theory should be based upon an explanation of facts. We know well how in social economy theories are too often invented to justify facts, that is, to defend privilege and cause it to be accepted tranquilly by those who are its victims. Let us here look at the facts themselves.

In all the course of history, as in the present epoch, government is either brutal, violent, arbitrary domination of the few over the many, or it is an instrument devised to secure domination and privilege to those who, by force, or cunning, or inheritance, have taken to themselves all the means of life, first and foremost the soil, whereby they hold the people in servitude, making them work for their advantage.

Governments oppress mankind in two ways, either directly, by brute force, that is physical violence, or indirectly, by depriving them of the means of subsistence and thus reducing them to helplessness. Political power originated in the first method; economic privilege arose from the second. Governments can also oppress man by acting on his emotional nature, and in this way constitute religious authority. There is no reason for the propagation of religious superstitions but that they defend and consolidate political and economic privileges.

In primitive society, when the world was not so densely populated as now and social relations were less complicated, if any circumstance prevented the formation of habits and customs of solidarity, or destroyed those which already existed and established the domination of man over man, the two powers, political and economic, were united in the same hands – often in those of a single individual. Those who by force had conquered and impoverished the others, constrained them to become their servants and to perform all things according to their caprice. The victors were at once proprietors, legislators, kings, judges, and executioners.

But with the increase of population, with the growth of needs, with the complication of social relationships, the prolonged continuance of such despotism became impossible. For their own security the rulers, often much against their will, were obliged to depend upon a privileged class, that is, a certain number of cointerested individuals, and were also obliged to let each of these individuals provide for his own sustenance. Nevertheless they reserved to themselves the supreme or ultimate control. In other words, the rulers reserved to themselves the right to exploit all at their own convenience, and so to satisfy their kingly vanity. Thus private wealth was developed under the shadow of the ruling power, for its protection and – often unconsciously – as its accomplice. The class of proprietors arose, and, concentrated little by little into their hands all the means of production, the very fountain of life – agriculture, industry, and exchange – ended by becoming a power in themselves. This power, by the superiority of its means of action and the great mass of interests it embraces, always ends by subjugating more or less openly the political power, that is, the government, which it makes its policeman.

This phenomenon has been repeated often in history. Every time that, by military enterprise, physical brute force has taken the upper hand in society, the conquerors have shown the tendency to concentrate government and property in their own hands. In every case, however, because the government cannot attend to the production of wealth and overlook and direct everything, it finds it necessary to conciliate a powerful class, and private property is again established. With it

comes the division of the two sorts of society, and that of the persons who control the collective force of society, and that of the proprietors, upon whom these governors become essentially dependent, because the proprietors command the sources of the said collective force.

Never has this state of affairs been so accentuated as in modern times. The development of production, the immense extension of commerce, the extensive power that money has acquired, and all the economic results flowing from the discovery of America, the invention of machinery, etc., have secured the supremacy to the capitalist class that it is no longer content to trust to the support of the government and has come to wish that the government composed of members from its own class, continually under its control and specially organized to defend it against the possible revenge of the disinherited. Hence the origin of the modern parliamentary system.

Today the government is composed of proprietors, or people of their class so entirely under their influence that the richest do not find it necessary to take an active part themselves. Rothschild, for instance, does not need to be either M.P. or minister, it is enough for him to keep M.P.'s and ministers dependent upon him.

In many countries, the proletariat participates nominally in the election of the government. This is a concession which the bourgeois (i.e., proprietary) class have made, either to avail themselves of popular support in the strife against royal or aristocratic power, or to divert the attention of the people from their own emancipation by giving them an apparent share in political power. However, whether the bourgeoisie foresaw it or not, when first they conceded to the people the right to vote, the fact is that the right has proved in reality a mockery, serving only to consolidate the power of the bourgeoisie, while giving to the most energetic only of the proletariat the illusory hope of arriving at power.

So also with universal suffrage – we might say, especially with universal suffrage – the government has remained the servant and police of the bourgeois class. How could it be otherwise? If the government should reach the point of becoming hostile, if the hope of democracy should ever be more than a delusion deceiving the people, the proprietary class, menaced in its interests would at once rebel and would use all the force and influence that come from the possession of wealth, to reduce the government to the simple function of acting as policeman.

In all times and in all places, whatever may be the name of that the government takes, whatever has been its origin, or its organization, its essential function is always that of oppressing and exploiting the masses, and of defending the oppressors and exploiters. Its principal characteristic and indispensable instruments are the policeman and the tax collector, the soldier and the prison. And to these are necessarily added the time serving priest or teacher, as the case may be, supported and protected by the government, to render the spirit of the people servile and make them docile under the yoke.

Certainly, in addition to this primary business, to this essential department of governmental action other departments have been added in the course of time. We even admit that never, or hardly ever, has a government been able to exist in a country that was civilized without adding to its oppressing and exploiting functions others useful and indispensable to social life. But this fact

makes it nonetheless true that government is in its nature a means of exploitation, and that its position doom it to be the defense of a dominant class, thus confirming and increasing the evils of domination.

The government assumes the business of protecting, more or less vigilantly, the life of citizens against direct or brutal attacks; acknowledges and legalizes a certain number of rights and primitive usages and customs, without which it is impossible to live in society. It organizes and directs certain public services, such as the post, preservation of the public health, benevolent institutions, workhouses, etc., and poses as the protector and benefactor of the poor and weak. But to prove our point it is sufficient to notice how and why it fulfills these functions. The fact is that everything the government undertakes is always inspired with the spirit of domination and intended to defend, enlarge, and perpetuate the privileges of property and of those classes of which the government is representative and defender.

A government cannot rule for any length of time without hiding its true nature behind the pretense of general utility. It cannot respect the lives of the privileged without assuming the air of wishing to respect the lives of all. It cannot cause the privileges of some to be tolerated without appearing as the custodian of the rights of everyone. "The law" (and, of course, those who have made the law, i.e., the government) "has utilized," says Kropotkin, "the social sentiments of man, working into them those precepts of morality, which man has accepted, together with arrangements useful to the minority – the exploiters – and opposed to the interests of those who might have rebelled, had it not been for this show of a moral ground."

A government cannot wish the destruction of the community, for then it and the dominant class could not claim their wealth from exploitation; nor could the government leave the community to manage its own affairs, for then the people would soon discover that it (the government) was necessary for no other end than to defend the proprietary class who impoverish them, and would hasten to rid themselves of both government and proprietary class.

Today, in the face of the persistent and menacing demands of the proletariat, governments show a tendency to interfere in the relations between employers and work people. Thus they try to arrest the labor movement and to impede with delusive reforms the attempts of the poor to take to themselves what is due to them, namely, an equal share of the good things of life that others enjoy.

We must also remember that on one hand the bourgeoisie, that is, the proprietary class, make war among themselves and destroy one another continually, and that, on the other hand, the government, although composed of the bourgeoisie and, acting as their servants and protector, is still, like every servant or protector, continually striving to emancipate itself and to domineer over its charge. Thus, this seesaw game, this swaying between conceding and withdrawing, this seeking allies among the people and against the classes, and among classes against the masses, forms the science of the governors and blinds the ingenuous and phlegmatic, who are always expecting that salvation is coming to them from on high.

With all this, the government does not change its nature. If it acts as regulator or guarantor of

the rights and duties of each, it perverts the sentiments of justice. It justifies wrong and punishes every act that offends or menaces the privileges of the governors and proprietors. It declares just and legal the most atrocious exploitation of the miserable, which means a slow and continuous material and moral murder, perpetrated by those who have on those who have not. Again, if it administers public services, it always considers the interests of the governors and proprietors, not occupying itself with the interests of the working masses, except insofar as is necessary to make the masses willing to endure their share of taxation. If it instructs, it fetters and curtails the truth, and tends to prepare the minds and hearts of the young to become either implacable tyrants or docile slaves, according to the class to which they belong. In the hands of the government everything becomes a means of exploitation, everything serves as a police measure, useful to hold the people in check. And it must be thus. If the life of mankind consists in strife between man and man, naturally there must be conquerors and conquered, and the government, which is the means of securing to the victors the results of their victory and perpetuating those results, will certainly never fall to those who have lost, whether the battle be on the grounds of physical or intellectual strength, or in the field of economics. And those who have fought to secure to themselves better conditions than others can have, to win privilege and add domination to power, and have attained the victory, will certainly not use it to defend the rights of the vanquished, and to place limits to their own power and to that of their friends and partisans.

The government – or the State, if you will – as judge, moderator of social strife, impartial administrator of the public interests, is a lie, an illusion, a Utopia, never realized and never realizable. If, in fact, the interests of men must always be contrary to one another, if, indeed, the strife between mankind has made laws necessary to human society, and the liberty of the individual must be limited by the liberty of other individuals, then each one would always seek to make his interests triumph over those of others. Each would strive to enlarge his own liberty at the cost of the liberty of others, and there would be government. Not simply because it was more or less useful to the totality of the members of society to have a government, but because the conquerors would wish to secure themselves the fruits of victory. They would wish effectually to subject the vanquished and relieve themselves of the trouble of being always on the defensive, and they would appoint men, specially adapted to the business, to act as police. Were this indeed actually the case, then humanity would be destined to perish amid periodical contests between the tyranny of the dominators and the rebellion of the conquered.

But fortunately the future of humanity is a happier one, because the law that governs it is milder.

Thus, in the contest of centuries between liberty and authority, or, in other words, between social equality and social castes, the question at issue has not really been the relations between society and the individual, or the increase of individual independence at the cost of social control, or vice versa. Rather it has had to do with preventing any one individual from oppressing the others; with giving to everyone the same rights and the same means of action. It has had to do with substituting the initiative of all, which must naturally result in the advantage of all, for the initiative of the few, which necessarily results in the suppression of all the others. It is always, in short, the question of putting an end to the domination and exploitation of man by man in such a way that all are interested in the common welfare, and that the individual force of each, instead of oppressing, combating, or suppressing others, will find the possibility of complete development,

and everyone will seek to associate with others for the greater advantage of all.

From what we have said, it follows that the existence of a government, even upon the hypothesis that the ideal government of authoritarian socialists were possible, far from producing an increase of productive force, would immensely diminish it, because the government would restrict initiative to the few. It would give these few the right to do all things, without being able, of course, to endow them with the knowledge or understanding of all things.

In fact, if you divest legislation and all the operations of government of what is intended to protect the privileged, and what represents the wishes of the privileged classes alone, nothing remains but the aggregate of individual governors. "The State," says Sismondi, "is always a conservative power which authorizes, regulates, and organizes the conquests of progress (and history testifies that it applies them to the profit of its own and the other privileged classes) but never does it inaugurate them. New ideas always originate from beneath, are conceived in the foundations of society, and then, when divulged, they become opinion and grow. But they must always meet on their path, and combat the constituted powers of tradition, custom, privilege and error."

In order to understand how society could exist without a government, it is sufficient to turn our attention for a short space to what actually goes on in our present society. We shall see that in reality the most important functions are fulfilled even nowadays outside the intervention of government. Also that government only interferes to exploit the masses, or defend the privileged, or, lastly, to sanction, most unnecessarily, all that has been done without its aid, often in spite of and opposition to it. Men work, exchange, study, travel, follow as they choose the current rules of morality or hygiene; they profit by the progress of science and art, have numberless mutual interests without ever feeling the need of any one to direct them how to conduct themselves in regard to these matters. On the contrary, it is just those things in which no governmental interference that prosper best and give rise to the least contention, being unconsciously adapted to the wish of all in the way found most useful and agreeable.

Nor is government more necessary for large undertakings, or for those public services which require the constant cooperation of many people of different conditions and countries. Thousands of these undertakings are even now the work of voluntarily formed associations. And these are, by the acknowledgment of everyone, the undertakings that succeed the best. We do not refer to the associations of capitalists, organized by means of exploitation, although even they show capabilities and powers of free association, which may extended until it embraces all the people of all lands and includes the widest and most varying interests. We speak rather of those associations inspired by the love of humanity, or by the passion for knowledge, or even simply by the desire for amusement and love of applause, as these represent better such groupings as will exist in a society where, private property and internal strife between men being abolished, each will find his interests compatible with the interest of everyone else and his greatest satisfaction in doing good and pleasing others. Scientific societies and congresses, international lifeboat and Red Cross associations, laborers' unions, peace societies, volunteers who hasten to the rescue at times of great public calamity, are all examples, among thousands, of that power of the spirit of association which always shows itself when a need arises or an enthusiasm takes hold, and the means do not fail. That voluntary associations do not cover the world and do not embrace every

branch of material and moral activity is the fault of the obstacles placed in their way by governments, of the antagonisms created by the possession of private property, and of the impotence and degradation to which the monopolizing of wealth on the part of the few reduces the majority of mankind.

The government takes charge, for instance, of the postal and telegraph services. But in what way does it really assist them? When the people are in such a condition as to be able to enjoy and feel the need of such services they will think about organizing them, and the man with the necessary technical knowledge will not require a certificate from a government to enable him to set to work. The more general and urgent the need, the more volunteers will offer to satisfy it. Would the people have the ability necessary to provide and distribute provisions? Never fear, they will not die of hunger waiting for government to pass a law on the subject. Wherever a government exists, it must wait until the people have first organized everything, and then come with its laws to sanction and exploit what has already been done. It is evident that private interest is the great motive for all activity. That being so, when the interest of every one becomes the interest of each (and it necessarily will become so as soon as private property is abolished), then all will be active. If they work now in the interest of the few, so much more and so much better will they work to satisfy the interests of all. It is hard to understand how anyone can believe that public services indispensable to social life can be better secured by order of a government than through the workers themselves who by their own choice or by agreement with others carry them out under the immediate control of all those interested.

Certainly in every collective undertaking on a large scale there is need for division of labor, for technical direction, administration, etc. But the authoritarians are merely playing with words, when they deduce a reason for the existence of government, from the very real necessity for organization of labor. The government, we must repeat, is the aggregate of the individuals who have received or have taken the right or the mean to make laws, and force the people to obey them. The administrators, engineers, etc., on the other hand, are men who receive or assume the charge of doing a certain work. Government signifies delegation of power, that is, abdication of the initiative and sovereignty of everyone into the hand of the few. Administration signifies delegation of work, that is, the free exchange of services founded on free agreement.

The Anarchist Black Cross of Boston is affiliated with the larger Anarchist Black Cross Network (ABCN). The ABCN is a decentralized network of local groups that works strategically against capitalism and the state by targeting its prison system and the prison-industrial complex. The Network supports imprisoned comrades through letter-writing campaigns, legal help, and visits when possible. It also works to call attention to the rising incarceration rate and its link to capitalism, along with exposing the truth behind the private prison industry and for-profit imprisonment.



Boston ABC fits into this picture as the defensive arm of the local anarchist struggle. We hope to help forge an organized support network for local activists in need.

We invite you to join us in a collective spirit of resistance. We see the harsh prison/law enforcement system as both our most immediate threat and the state's most strategic weapon. We are by no means a single-issue organization. However, as we see the prison system as a byproduct of capitalism, thus we pursue the ultimate goal of the classless/stateless society that shall abolish prisons and law enforcement altogether!

Boston ABC operates in an open, consensus-based manner. All who are interested are encouraged to contact us at abc-boston@hush.com. For more information on the ABCN, go to www.anarchistblackcross.org.



Boston ABC
PMB 258
198 Tremont Street
Boston, MA 02116
abc-boston@hush.com
www.anarchistblackcross.org