

CHAPTER X

On Doing Something About It

A YOUNG FELLOW has to have a "cause." Utopianism is as natural a disease for the boy of college age as was measles in his childhood. My malady was anarchism. I don't know whether I took to Kropotkin and Prudhon because they furnished me with arguments with which to refute the socialists on the campus or because they wrote much about individualism, which seems to be ingrained in my make-up. At any rate, I experienced a violent love affair with anarchism, which was terminated only when I looked into the economic doctrines of the various schools of anarchism then extant. All of them took a dim view of the institution of private property, without which, it seemed to me even then, individualism was meaningless. If a man cannot enjoy the fruits of his labor, without let or hindrance, he is enslaved to the one who appropriates his property; a slave has no property rights. Besides, I reasoned, the abolition of private property could be accomplished only by the intervention of an all-powerful State, which the anarchists were so bent on destroying. This incongruity curbed my short-lived passion for anarchism.

Bakunin especially disturbed me. His urgency to "do something about it" with bombs did not sit well with me,

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not because I was pacifistically inclined but because I realized no good could come from violence. The bomb-thrower might achieve some change in the government by his tactics, but could he contain the temptation to throw bombs? Could he not use them to acquire and exercise power on his own account? At an early age I developed a distaste toward "doing something about it"—that is, toward organizational and forceful reorienting of society into an image of my own making. I have never been a dues-paying, card-carrying member of any organization, am revolted by any attempt to channel my thinking, and am constitutionally opposed to political action.

I should, of course, like to see society organized so that the individual would be free to carry on his "pursuit of happiness" as he sees fit and in accordance with his own capacities. That is because I assume that the individual is endowed at birth with the right to do so. I cannot deny that right to my fellow man without implying that I do not have that right for myself, and that I will not admit. I claim for myself the prerogative of getting drunk and sleeping off my condition in the gutter, provided, of course, I do not interfere with my neighbor's right to go to the opera; that is my, and his, way of pursuing happiness. How can a third person know that getting drunk or going to the opera is not "good" for either of us? He, or society, or a majority may claim that we, my neighbor and I, have "wrong" values, and might try to tell us so, but the imposition of force to get us to change our values is unwarranted; such use of coercion stems from an assumption of omniscience, which is not a human quality. The best that society can do in the circumstances is to see that one's way of pursuing happiness does not inter-

fere with that of another's—and then to leave us all alone.

That is the way I should like to see society, of which I am a part, organized; but it is not so organized and I find its rules quite distasteful. In the first place, it has instituted a system of taxation whereby one-third of our earnings is confiscated; to the extent of such confiscation the pursuit of happiness is delimited or circumscribed, for one cannot spend (on whiskey or the opera) what one does not have. And then, the spending of this vast amount of money calls for a bureaucracy of proportions, and this monstrous bureaucracy in order to justify its existence pays out largess to favored groups, who must conform to certain regulations and controls in order to get it. Our pursuit of happiness is therefore hamstrung—for our own “good,” to be sure.

This I consider bad, wicked, dastardly, and all that. So, I undertake to “do something about it.” But, how? Obviously I cannot do anything about changing our tax system all by myself, although I can, if I am so minded, refuse to pay taxes and suffer the consequences; the consequences are a further interference with my pursuit of happiness. My one recourse is to associate myself with like-minded people and hope that we may somehow remove from our statute books the tax laws. To do that we must have a considerable number of minds so determined. We must comb the woods for converts to our cause, for most people are more concerned with making the best of life in the here and now than they are in rewriting the rules for the social order. Only a comparatively few are interested in reform. But, by hard digging and by education we do gather together a goodly number, enough to make their influence felt, who are con-

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vinced that our idea is all-wool-and-a-yard wide, and are willing to do or die for it.

Meanwhile, strategy has to be considered. The historic pattern for doing something about it is to confront political power with organized opposition, which, again, is political power. While vengeance is sometimes served by this head-on collision of forces, the record shows that principles remain exactly as they were before the collision. And this is so whether the conflict takes on the form of a violent revolution or of a ballot box battle. The reason for this invariable outcome is found in the necessary technique of political action; there must be a leader, for without one an army is but a mob, easily dispersed. I nominate myself for the job, not because of any particular qualifications I may have, but because my devotion to the idea entitles me to that distinction. Well, then, under my guidance we roll up a sizable vote—for me and presumably for my idea.

But, while heretofore I was a teacher, a propagandist and an organizer, I am now as a legislator confronted with the practical problem of making law. Parliamentarianism blocks my way. And I meet up with conditions and interests that make the changing of law difficult. I find, for instance, that powerful groups have a vested interest in taxation; the veterans are for it and so are the farmers living on subsidies, as are the industrialists whose operations are geared to government income, while the owners of government bonds are most vociferous in opposing my idea. I soon learn that politics is the art of the possible, and it is simply impossible to change the tax structure of the country. So, I think of compromise, consoling my conscience with the thought that

the compromise is merely temporary, and then when conditions are ripe for it, taxation as a whole will be abolished. Besides, I am human and succumb to the temptation to perpetuate my position of prominence; the honorifics of office are most alluring and I agree to the compromise in return for the promise of support from the opposition.

The case of Robespierre comes to mind. He was, as everybody knows, a student and disciple of Rousseau, who was dead set against capital punishment. Yet, when it came to voting on the question of regicide, Robespierre cast his ballot in favor of it, accompanying his vote with a long explanatory speech in which he used another aberration of Rousseau—the General Will—to justify himself. Expediency impelled him to turn Rousseau inside out.

The expediencies of politics plus the frailties of political leaders rule out the possibility of using the political method of putting principle into law. The social order must look after itself; politics and the law will follow the dictates of society, once society knows what it wants and acts as if it wants it. Therefore, to “do something about it” one should concentrate on society and leave politics severely alone; which means education and more education, and ignoring the politician altogether. How such a course might bring about genuine reform becomes evident when we consider the composition of the political machine known as the State.

The weakness of the State lies in the fact that it is but an aggregate of humans; its strength derives from the general ignorance of this truism. From earliest times the covering up of this vulnerability has engaged the ingenuity of the politician; all manner of argument has been adduced to give the State a suprahuman character, and rituals without end

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have been invented to give this fiction the verisimilitude of reality. The divinity with which the king found it necessary to endow himself has been taken over by a mythical fifty-one percent of the electorate, who in turn ordain those who rule over them. To aid the process of canonization, the personages in whom power resides have set themselves apart by such artifices as high-sounding titles, distinctive apparel and hierarchical insignia. Language and behavior mannerisms—called protocol—emphasize their separateness. Nevertheless, the fact of mortality cannot be denied, and the continuity of political power is manufactured by means of awe-inspiring symbols, such as flags, thrones, monuments, seals and ribbons; these things do not die. By way of litanies a soul is breathed into this golden calf and political philosophy anoints it a “metaphysical person.”

But, Louis XIV was quite literal when he said, “L'état c'est moi.” The State is a person, or a number of persons, who exercise force, or the threat of it, to cause others to do what they otherwise would not do, or to refrain from satisfying a desire. The substance of the State is political power, and political power is coercion exercised by persons on persons; the suprahuman character assumed by the State is intended to hide this fact and to induce subservience. The strength of the State is Samsonian, and can be shorn off by popular recognition of the fact that it is only a Tom, a Dick and a Harry.

The anarchists say the State is evil. They are wrong. The State *are* evil. It is not a system that creates privilege, it is a number of morally responsible people who do so. A robot cannot declare war and a general staff cannot conduct one; the motivating instrument is a man called a king or a pres-

ident, a man called a legislator, a man called a general. In thus identifying political behavior with persons, we prevent the transference of guilt to an amoral fiction; we place responsibility where it rightly belongs.

Having fixed in our minds the fact that the State consists of a number of people who are up to no good, we should proceed to treat them accordingly. You do not genuflect before an ordinary loafer; why should you pay homage to a bureaucrat? If a prominent politician hires a hall to make a speech, stay away; the absent audience will bring him to a realization of his nothingness. The speeches and the written statements of a political figure are designed to impress you with his importance, and if you do not listen to the one or read the other you will not be influenced and he will give up the effort. It is the applause, the adulation we accord political personages that registers our regard for the power they wield; the deflation of that power is in proportion to our disregard of these personages. Without a cheering crowd there is no parade.

Social ostracism alone can bring down the top layer of political skullduggery to its moral level. Those whose self-respect has not dropped to the vanishing point will get out of the business and put themselves to honest work, while the degenerates who remain will have to get along on what they can pick up from a reluctant public. Below the top layer there are millions of menials who are more to be pitied than scorned; you find it difficult to scorn the man whose incompetence forces him to the public trough. Yet, if you take the "poor John" attitude toward him you keep reminding him of a higher standard, and you may save him from his own degeneration.

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A government building you regard as a charnel house; you enter it under duress only, and you do not demean yourself by admiring its living or dead statuary. The stars on the general's shoulders signify that the man might have been a useful member of society; you pity the boy whose uniform identifies his servility. The dais on which the judge sits elevates the body but lowers the man, and a jury box is a place where three-dollar-a-day slaves enforce the laws of slavery. You honor the tax-dodger and pay your respects to the man honorable enough to defy the law.

Social power resides in every individual. Just as you put personal responsibility on political behavior, so must you assume personal responsibility for social behavior. You think poorly of legislator Brown not because he has violated a tenet of the Tax Reform Society, to which you belong, but because his voting for a tax levy is in your estimation an act of robbery. It is not a peace society that passes judgment on the war maker, it is the individual pacifist. All values are personal. The good society you envision by the decline of the State is a society of which you are an integral part; your campaign is therefore a personal obligation.

You are ineffective alone? You need an organization to help you? Only individuals think, feel and act; the organization serves only as a mask for those unable to think or unwilling to act on their own convictions. In the end, every organization vitiates the ideal which at first attracted members, and the more numerous its membership the surer this result; this is so because the organizational ideal is a compromise of private values, and in an effort to find a workable compromise the lowest common denominator, descending as the membership increases, becomes the ideal. When

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you speak for yourself you are strong. The potency of social power is in proportion to the number who are of like mind, but that is a matter of education, not organization.

So, let's try social ostracism of politics and politicians. It should work. Reform through politics only strengthens the State.