

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT ARE GOVERNMENTS? IS IT POSSIBLE TO EXIST WITHOUT GOVERNMENTS?

THE cause of the miserable condition of the workers is slavery. The cause of slavery is legislation. Legislation rests on organised violence.

It follows that an improvement in the condition of the people is possible only through the abolition of organised violence.

“But organised violence is government, and how can we live without Governments? Without Governments there will be chaos, anarchy; all the achievements of civilisation will perish and people will revert to their primitive barbarism.”

It is usual,—not only for those to whom the existing order is profitable, but even for those to whom it is evidently unprofitable, but who are so accustomed to it that they cannot imagine life without governmental violence,—to say we must not dare to touch the existing order of things. The destruction of government will, say they, produce the greatest misfortunes—riot, theft, and murder—till finally the worst men

will again seize power and enslave all the good people. But not to mention the fact that all this—*i.e.* riots, thefts, and murders, followed by the rule of the wicked and the enslavement of the good—all this is what has happened, and is happening, the anticipation that the disturbance of the existing order will produce riots and disorder does not prove the present order to be good.

“Only touch the present order and the greatest evils will follow.”

Only touch one brick of the thousand bricks piled into a narrow column, several yards high, and all the bricks will tumble down and smash! But the fact that any brick extracted, or any push administered, will destroy such a column and smash the bricks, certainly does not prove it to be wise to keep the bricks in such an unnatural and inconvenient position. On the contrary, it shows that bricks should not be piled in such a column, but that they should be arranged so that they may lie firmly, and so that they can be made use of without destroying the whole erection. It is the same with the present State organisations. The State organisation is extremely artificial and unstable, and the fact that the least push may destroy it, not only does not prove that it is necessary, but on the contrary shows that, if once upon a time it was necessary, it is now absolutely unnecessary, and is therefore harmful and dangerous.

It is harmful and dangerous because the effect of this organisation on all the evil that exists in society is not to lessen and correct, but rather to strengthen and confirm, that evil. It is strengthened and confirmed, by being either justified and put in attractive forms, or secreted.

All that well-being of the people which we see in so-called well-governed States, ruled by violence, is but an appearance—a fiction. Everything that would disturb the external appearance of well-being—all the hungry people, the sick, the revoltingly vicious—are all hidden away where they cannot be seen. But the fact that we do not see them, does not show that they do not exist; on the contrary, the more they are hidden the more there will be of them, and the more cruel towards them will those be who are the cause of their condition. It is true that every interruption, and yet more every stoppage of governmental action, *i.e.* of organised violence, disturbs this external appearance of well-being in our life, but such disturbance does not produce the disorder, but rather displays what was hidden and makes possible its amendment.

Until now, say till almost the end of the nineteenth century, people thought and believed that they could not live without Governments. But life flows onward, and the conditions of life, and people's views, change. And, notwithstanding the efforts of Governments to keep people

in that childish condition in which an injured man feels as if it were better for him to have someone to complain to, people—especially the labouring people, both in Europe and in Russia—are more and more emerging from childhood and beginning to understand the true conditions of their life.

“You tell us that but for you we shall be conquered by neighbouring nations: by the Chinese or the Japanese,” men of the people now say; “but we read the papers and know that no one is threatening to attack us, and that it is only you—who govern us—who for some objects, unintelligible to us, exasperate each other, and then, under pretence of defending your own people, ruin us with taxes for the maintenance of the fleet, for armaments, or for strategical railways, which are only required to gratify your ambition and vanity; and then you arrange wars with one another, as you have now done against the peaceful Chinese. You say that you defend landed property for our advantage; but your defence has this effect: that all the land either has passed or is passing into the control of rich banking companies which do not labour; while we, the immense majority of the people, are being deprived of land and left in the power of those who do not labour. You, with your laws of landed property, do not defend landed property, but take it from those who work it. You say

you secure to each man the produce of his labour, but you do just the reverse: all those who produce articles of value, are, thanks to your pseudo-protection, placed in such a position that they not only never receive the value of their labour, but are all their lives long in complete subjection to, and in the power of, non-workers."

Thus do people, at the end of the century, begin to understand and to speak. And this awakening from the lethargy in which Governments have kept them, is going on in some rapidly increasing ratio. Within the last five or six years the public opinion of the common folk, not only in the towns but in the villages, and not only in Europe but also among us in Russia, has altered amazingly.

It is said that without Governments we should not have those institutions: enlightening, educational, and public, that are needful for all.

But why should we suppose this? Why think that non-official people could not arrange their life for themselves, as well as Government people can arrange it not for themselves but for others?

We see, on the contrary, that in the most diverse matters people in our times arrange their own lives incomparably better than those who govern them arrange things for them. Without the least help from Government, and often in spite of the interference of Government, people

organise all sorts of social undertakings—workmen's unions, co-operative societies, railway companies, *artéls*,¹ and syndicates. If collections for public works are needed, why should we suppose that free people could not, without violence, voluntarily collect the necessary means and carry out anything that is now carried out by means of taxes, if only the undertakings in question are really useful for everybody? Why suppose that there cannot be tribunals without violence? Trial, by people trusted by the disputants, has always existed and will exist, and needs no violence. We are so depraved by long-continued slavery, that we can hardly imagine administration without violence. And yet, again, that is not true: Russian communes migrating to distant regions, where our Government leaves them alone, arrange their own taxation, administration, tribunals, and police, and always prosper until governmental violence interferes with their administration. And in the same way there is no reason to suppose that people could not, by common agreement, decide how the land is to be apportioned for use.

I have known people—Cossacks of the Ourál—who have lived without acknowledging private property in land. And there was such well-being

¹ The *artél*, in its most usual form, is an association of workmen, or employés, for each of whom the *artél* is collectively responsible.—(Trans.).

and order in their commune as does not exist in society where landed property is defended by violence. And I now know communes that live without acknowledging the right of individuals to private property. Within my recollection the whole Russian peasantry did not accept the idea of landed property.¹ The defence of landed property by governmental violence not merely does not abolish the struggle for landed property, but, on the contrary, intensifies that struggle, and in many cases causes it.

Were it not for the defence of landed property and its consequent rise in price, people would not be crowded into such narrow spaces, but would scatter over the free land of which there is still so much in the world. But, as it is, a continual struggle goes on for landed property; a struggle with the weapons Government furnishes by means of its laws of landed property. And in this struggle it is not those who work on the land, but always those who take part in governmental violence, who have the advantage.

¹ Serfdom was legalised about 1597 by Borís Godunóf, who forbade the peasants to leave the land on which they were settled. The peasants' theory of the matter was that *they* belonged to the proprietors, but the *land* belonged to them. "We are yours, but the land is ours," was a common saying among them till their emancipation under Alexander II., when many of them felt themselves defrauded by the arrangement which gave much land to the proprietors.—(Trans.).

It is the same with reference to things produced by labour. Things really produced by a man's own labour, and that he needs, are always protected by custom, by public opinion, by feelings of justice and reciprocity, and they do not need to be protected by violence.

Tens of thousands of acres of forest lands belonging to one proprietor—while thousands of people close by have no fuel—need protection by violence. So, too, do factories and works where several generations of workmen have been defrauded and are still being defrauded. Yet more do hundreds of thousands of bushels of grain, belonging to one owner, who has held them back to sell them at triple price in time of famine. But no man, however depraved—except a rich man or a Government official—would take from a countryman living by his own labour the harvest he has raised, or the cow he has bred, and from which he gets milk for his children, or the *sokhás*,¹ the scythes, and the spades he has made and uses. If even a man were found who did take from another articles the latter had made and required, such a man would rouse against himself such indignation, from everyone living in similar circumstances, that he would hardly find his action profitable for himself. A man so immoral as to do it under such circum-

¹ The *sokhá* is a light plough, such as the Russian peasants make and use.—(Trans.).

stances, would be sure to do it under the strictest system of property defence by violence. It is generally said, "Only attempt to abolish the rights of property in land, and in the produce of labour, and no one will take the trouble to work, lacking assurance that he will be able to retain what he has produced." We should say just the opposite: the defence by violence of the rights of property immorally obtained, which is now customary, if it has not quite destroyed, has considerably weakened people's natural consciousness of justice in the matter of using articles, *i.e.*, has weakened the natural and innate right of property, without which humanity could not exist, and which has always existed and still exists among all men.

And, therefore, there is no reason to anticipate that people will not be able to arrange their lives without organised violence.

Of course, it may be said that horses and bulls must be guided by the violence of rational beings—men; but why must men be guided, not by some higher beings, but by people such as themselves? Why ought people to be subject to the violence of just those men who are in power at a given time? What proves that these people are wiser than those on whom they inflict violence?

The fact that they allow themselves to use violence towards human beings, indicates that they are not only not more wise, but less wise

than those who submit to them. The examinations in China for the office of Mandarin do not, we know, ensure that the wisest and best people should be placed in power. And just as little is this ensured by inheritance, or the whole machinery of promotions in rank, or the elections in constitutional countries. On the contrary, power is always seized by those who are less conscientious and less moral.

It is said, "How can people live without Governments, *i.e.* without violence?" But it should, on the contrary, be asked, "How can rational people live, acknowledging the vital bond of their social life to be violence, and not reasonable agreement?"

One of two things: either people are rational beings or they are irrational beings. If they are irrational beings, then they are all irrational, and then everything among them is decided by violence, and there is no reason why certain people should, and others should not, have a *right* to use violence. And in that case, governmental violence has no justification. But if men are rational beings, then their relations should be based on reason, and not on the violence of those who happen to have seized power. And in that case, again, governmental violence has no justification.