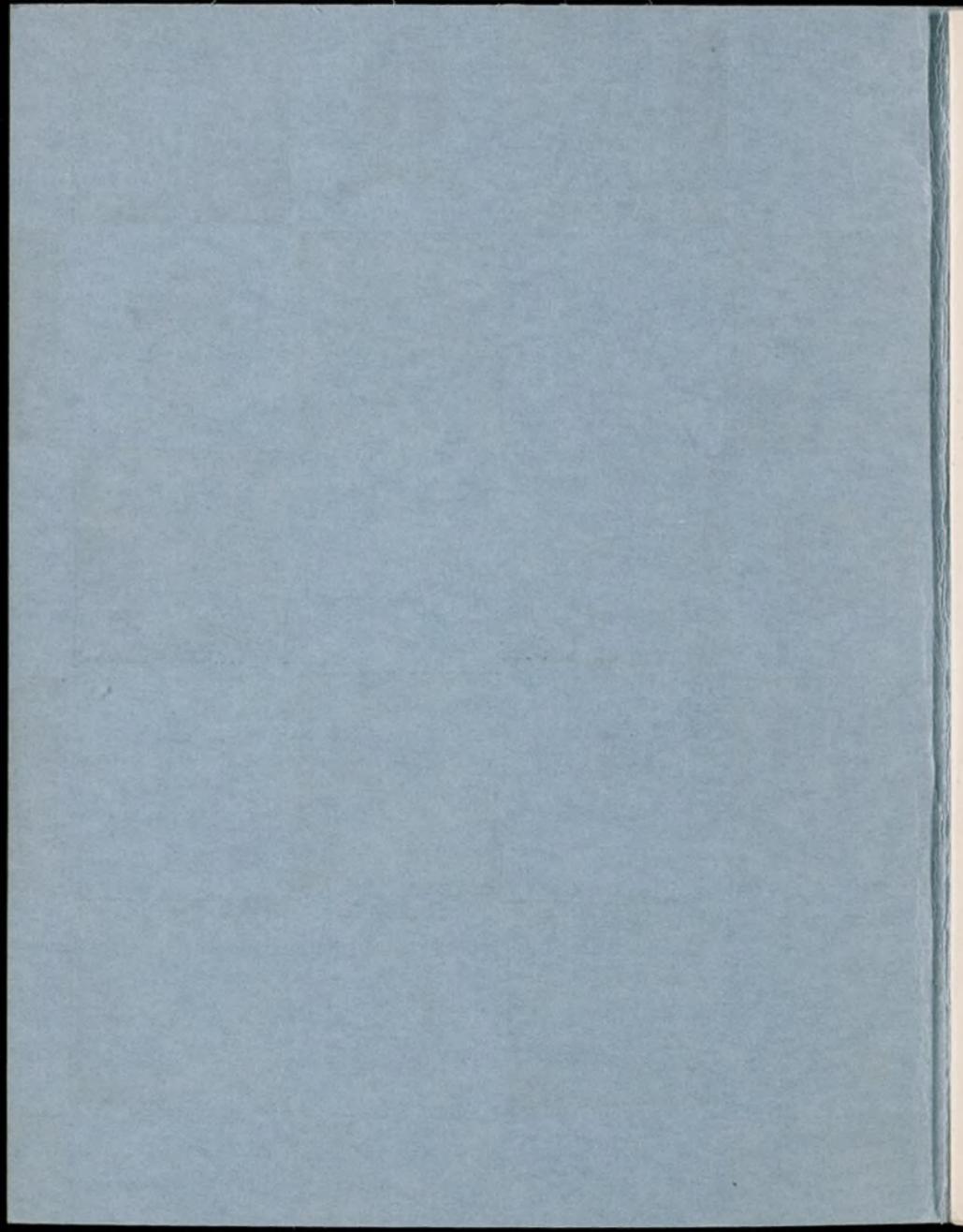


THE STATE

Its Historic Role

Peter Kropotkin



THE STATE: Its Historic Role

by PETER KROPOTKIN

Hardly a day goes by that does not see the announcement of a new Government Bureau, Office, Committee, Division or Department to impose new regulations, rations, commandments and penalties on the American people. Concentration of State power in the hands of men such as Nelson, Hershey and McNutt has become so ruthlessly complete that the very whispering of their names may soon be enough to frighten the little child who refuses to wash behind his ears.

The State has become the largest and most unproductive machine of our times. Its increasing weight rests squarely on the shoulders of the working people; through its Office of War Information and a dozen other agencies it persuades them that it is a thing "of the people, by the people, for the people."

Just what this State really is, how it came to be, and what can be done about it, is presented in this condensation of the original study by Peter Kropotkin.

What Is A State?

Let us first agree as to what we mean by the word State. There are some who like to confuse the State with Society. This confusion is to be met with even among the best thinkers, who cannot conceive society without State concentration; and thence arises the habitual reproach cast on Anarchists of wanting to "destroy society."

Yet to reason thus is to ignore entirely the progress made in the domain of history during the last thirty years; it is to ignore that men have lived in societies during thousands of years before having known the State; it is to forget that for European nations the State is of recent origin—that it hardly dates from the sixteenth century; it is to fail to recognize that the most glorious epochs in humanity were those in which the liberties and local life were not yet destroyed by the State, and when masses of men lived in communes and free federations.

The State is but one of the forms taken by society in the course of history. It not only includes the existence of a power placed above society, but also a territorial concentration and a concentration of many functions of the life of society in the hands of a few.

The Roman Empire was a State in the true sense of the word. Everything flowed toward Rome: economic life, military life, judicial

relations, riches, education, even religion. From Rome came laws, magistrates, legions to defend the territory, governors to rule the provinces, gods. One law, the law imposed by Rome, governed the Empire; and that Empire did not represent a confederation of citizens: it was only a flock of *subjects*.

Origin Of The Village Community

The starting point of human society was not the family, but the clan, the tribe. Men lived tens of thousands of years in the stage of clan or tribe, and during that first stage man developed a whole series of institutions, habits, and customs, far anterior to the paternal family institutions. To maintain this kernel of social customs in force, habit, custom, tradition sufficed. There was no authority to impose it. An alliance between the "law" bearer, the military chief and the witch-doctor did not exist, and there can be no more question of a State with these tribes than there is in a society of bees or ants, or among our contemporaries the Eskimoes.

In the first centuries of our era, immense migrations took place among the tribes and confederations of tribes that inhabited Central and Northern Asia. During these migrations, when so many tribes of diverse origin were intermixed, the primitive tribe which still existed among them broke up. The tribe was based on its common origin, on the worship of common ancestors; but what common

origin could be invoked by the agglomerations that emerged from the migrations? Ancient ties were rent asunder, and under pain of a general breakup, it was essential that new ties should spring up. They were found in the communal possession of *land*. The village community, composed partly or entirely of separate families—all united, nevertheless, by the possession in common of the land—became the necessary bond of union for centuries to come.

The village commune allotted the land according to the size of the families. As to deforestation and clearings made in the woods, construction of bridges, building of forts and turrets which served as refuge in case of invasion, they were done in common—as hundreds of millions of peasants still do, wherever the village commune has resisted State encroachments. In all its business, the village commune was sovereign. Local custom was law and the plenary council of all chiefs of families—men and women—was judge, the only judge, in civil and criminal affairs.

Based on the possession, and very often on the cultivation of the soil in common, sovereign as judge and legislator of customary law the village community satisfied most needs of the social being. But not all his needs: there were still others to be satisfied. However, the spirit of the age was not for calling upon a

government as soon as a new need was felt. It was, on the contrary, to take the initiative oneself, to unite, to league, to federate, to create an understanding, great or small, numerous or restricted which would correspond to the new need. Men of customary law and individual initiative, they were not perverted by the corrupted idea of a government and a church which would be supposed to do everything.

The Free City

From the Atlantic to the middle course of the Volga, and from Norway to Italy, Europe was covered with communes—some becoming populous cities like Florence, Venice, Nuremberg or Novgorod, others remaining boroughs of a hundred or even twenty families, and nevertheless treated as equals by their more or less prosperous sisters.

Generally, the free city was divided into districts or sections which were inhabited, each, by one "art" or "craft." The professional unit was the guild—the trade union, which had its own property, treasury, militia and banner. It remained sovereign.

And we with our faculties blunted by State education rejoice at the "sudden progress" accomplished by the unions, without blushing at the idea that this right of union of which workers were deprived for centuries belonged to them without contention in the Middle

Ages. Belonged to every man—free or serf. Slaves that we are, we believe it to be a “conquest of democracy.” When, in our ignorance, we talk boastingly of our international workers’ congresses, we forget that international trade congresses and even apprentice congresses were already held in the fifteenth century.

This is the pitch of stupidity we have reached by our own warped and vitiated State education, and by our own State prejudices.

All modern industry comes to us from the free cities. In three centuries, industries and arts developed there to such perfection that our century has been able to surpass them only in rapidity of production, but rarely in quality, and very rarely in beauty of the produce.

You perhaps may think of the progress of civilization in our own century which is ceaselessly boasted of? But in each of its manifestations it is but the child of the civilization which grew up in the midst of free communes! All the great discoveries which have made modern science: the compass, the clock, the watch, printing, the maritime discoveries, gunpowder, the law of gravitation, the rudiments of chemistry—where does that all come from, if not from the free cities which developed under the shelter of communal liberties?

In the course of the sixteenth century, modern barbarians come and destroy the whole civilization of the Middle Ages. They fetter the individual; they take all his liberties away, they order him to forget the unions which formerly were based on free initiative and free agreement, and their aim is to level the whole of society in the same submission to the master.

And who are these barbarians? It is the State: the Triple Alliance, constituted at last, of the military chief, the Roman judge, and the priest, the three forming a mutual insurance for domination; the three united in one power that will command in the name of society and will crush that society. And—need we say it?—it was “the defense of the poorer orders” that the king took as a pretext when he came to knock at the gates of the free cities!

The State annihilated the independence of the cities; plundered merchants and artisans' rich guilds; centralized the foreign trade of cities into its own hands—and ruined it; seized the internal administration of guilds; and subjected home trade and manufacturing, even in the slightest detail, to a swarm of functionaries. By these means the State killed both industry and the arts, seizing upon local militias and all municipal administration to crush the weak by taxation for the benefit of the strong.

To allow citizens to constitute a federation among themselves in order to appropriate some functions of the State would have been a contradiction of principle. The State demands personal and direct submission of its subjects without intermediate agents; it requires equality in servitude. To the federative principle, it must substitute the principle of submission and discipline. Submission is its substance. Without this principle it leaves off being *the State*: it becomes a federation.

Through its functionaries the State regulated the capacity of barrels, specified the quality of cloth, and interfered in the smallest details of each industry. What became of those turners, those clock-makers, those fitters who made Nuremberg one of the glories of the Middle Ages by their instruments of precision? Speak of them to James Watt who for his steam engine, looked in vain during thirty years for a man who could make a fairly round cylinder!

Think of the struggles for the rights to write, to speak, or simply to think differently from what the State orders through its academies, universities or churches! Or the struggles that separate us from the day when they will burn the book of infamous punishments, invented by the spirit of the inquisition and of the despotic empires of the East, and known under the name of Penal Code!

Then take the wars, without which States can neither constitute themselves nor stand—wars that become fatal, inevitable, as soon as we admit that a certain region (because it is a State) can have interests opposed to those of its neighbors. What is worse than all I have enumerated, is that the education we all receive from the State, at school and later on in our life, has so vitiated our brains that the idea of liberty itself goes astray and is travestied into servitude.

The modern radical himself is a centralizer, a State partisan, a Jacobin to the core. And the Socialist walks in his footsteps. Like the Florentines at the end of the fifteenth century, who could only invoke the dictatorship of the State to save them from the patricians, the Socialists know only how to invoke the same gods, the same dictatorship and the same State, to save us from the abominations of an economic system created by that very State!

The Choice

History has not been an uninterrupted evolution. At different intervals evolution has been broken in a certain region, to begin again elsewhere. Egypt, Asia, the banks of the Mediterranean, Central Europe have in turn been the scene of historical development. But in every case, the first phase of the evolution has been the primitive tribe, passing on

into a village commune, then into that of the free city, and finally dying out when it reached the phase of the State.

In Egypt, civilization began by the primitive tribe. It reached the village commune phase, and later on the period of free cities: still later that of the State, which, after a flourishing period, resulted in the death of the country.

The evolution began again in Assyria, in Persia, in Palestine. Again it traversed the same phases: the tribe, the village community, the free city, the all-powerful State, and finally the result was—death!

Greece and Rome took the same path. Primitive tribe, village commune, free city, State—death. On the ruins of the Roman Empire, Celtic, Germanic, Slavonian and Scandinavian tribes began civilization anew. Slowly the primitive tribe elaborated its institutions and reached the village commune. It remained at that stage till the twelfth century. Then rose the Republican cities which produced the glorious expansion of the human mind. But then came the State...

Will it again produce death? Of course it will, unless we reconstitute society on a libertarian and anti-State basis. Either the State will be destroyed and a new life will begin in thousands of centers on the principle of an energetic initiative of the individual, of

groups, and of free agreement; or else the State must crush the individual and local life, it must become the master of all the domains of human activity, must bring with it its wars and internal struggles for the possession of power, its surface-revolutions which only change one tyrant for another, and inevitably, at the end of this evolution—death!

Choose yourselves which of the two issues you prefer.

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