

An Appeal to the Young

First published in 1880 in Kropotkin's paper, *La Revolté*

Pyotr Kropotkin

1890

“Peter Kropotkin...was recognized by friend and foe as one of the greatest minds...of the nineteenth century...The lucidity and brilliance of his mind combined with his warm-heartedness into the harmonious whole of a fascinating and gracious personality.” -Emma Goldman

REVOLT!

Addressed to young men and women preparing to enter the professions, *An Appeal to the Young* was first published in 1880 in Kropotkin's paper, *La Revolte*, and was soon thereafter issued as a pamphlet. An American edition was brought out by Charles H. Kerr in 1899, in the wake of the great Anarchist's first U.S. speaking tour; his *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* was also published (by Houghton-Mifflin) that year. A new edition in Kerr's "Pocket Library of Socialism" appeared in 1901; just after Kropotkin's second U.S. tour. (In Chicago, he had been introduced to a large audience by Clarence Darrow, a close associate of the Kerr Company.) Yet another Kerr edition in the 1910s went through many printings, and was still on the Kerr list well into the 1930s.

Long unavailable in any U.S. edition, it is reprinted here in the standard English translation by pioneer British socialist H.M. Hyndman, whose lush Victorian prose ably captures the eloquence, fervor and charm of this celebrated revolutionary classic.

Revolutionary Classics
Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company
Established 1886

It is to the young that I wish to address myself today. Let the old — I mean of course the old in heart and mind — lay the pamphlet down therefore without tiring their eyes in reading what will tell them nothing.

I assume that you are about eighteen or twenty years of age; that you have finished your apprenticeship or your studies; that you are just entering on life. I take it for granted that you have a mind free from the superstition which your teachers have sought to force upon you; that you don't fear the devil, and that you do not go to hear parsons and ministers rant. More, that you are not one of the fops, sad products of a society in decay, who display their well-cut trousers and

their monkey faces in the park, and who even at their early age have only an insatiable longing for pleasure at any price...I assume on the contrary that you have a warm heart, and for this reason I talk to you.

A first question, I know, occurs to you — you have often asked yourself: “What am I going to be?” In fact when a man is young he understands that after having studied a trade or a science for several years — at the cost of society, mark — he has not done this in order that he should make use of his acquirements as instruments of plunder for his own gain, and he must be depraved indeed and utterly cankered by vice who has not dreamed that one day he would apply his intelligence, his abilities, his knowledge to help on the enfranchisement of those who today grovel in misery and in ignorance.

You are one of those who has had such a vision, are you not? Very well, let us see what you must do to make your dream a reality.

I do not know in what rank you were born. Perhaps, favored by fortune, you have turned your attention to the study of science; you are to be a doctor, a barrister, a man of letters, or a scientific man; a wide field opens up before you; you enter upon life with extensive knowledge, with a trained intelligence. Or, on the other hand, you are perhaps only an honest artisan whose knowledge of science is limited by the little that you have learnt at school; but you have had the advantage of learning at first hand what a life of exhausting toil is the lot of the worker of our time.

I stop at the first supposition, to return afterward to the second; I assume then that you have received a scientific education. Let us suppose you intend to be — a doctor. Tomorrow a man in corduroys will come to fetch you to see a sick woman. He will lead you into one of those alleys where the opposite neighbors can almost shake hands over the heads of the passersby; you ascend into a foul atmosphere by the flickering light of a little illtrimmed lamp; you climb two, three, four, five flights of filthy stairs, and in a dark, cold room you find the sick woman, lying on a pallet covered with dirty rags. Pale, livid children, shivering under their scanty garments, gaze at you with their big eyes wide open. The husband has worked all this life twelve or thirteen hours a day at, no matter what; now he has been out of work for three months. To be out of employ is not rare in his trade; it happens every year, periodically. But, formerly, when he was out of work his wife went out a charwoman — perhaps to wash your shirts — at the rate of fifteen pence a day; now she has been bedridden for two months, and misery glares upon the family in all its squalid hideousness.

What will you prescribe for the sick woman, doctor — you who have seen at a glance that the cause of her illness is general anemia, want of good food, lack of fresh air? Say, a good beefsteak every day? a little exercise in the country? a dry and well-ventilated bedroom? What irony! If she could have afforded it this would have been done long since without waiting for your advice.

If you have a good heart, a frank address, an honest face, the family will tell you many things. They will tell you that the woman on the other side of the partition, who coughs a cough which tears your heart, is a poor ironer; that a flight of stairs lower down all the children have the fever; that the washerwoman who occupies the ground floor will not live to see the spring; and that in the house next door things are still worse.

What will you say to all these sick people? Recommend them generous diet, change of air, less exhausting toil...You only wish you could but you daren't and you go out heartbroken, with a curse upon your lips.

The next day, as you still brood over the fate of the dwellers in this dog-hutch, your partner tells you that yesterday a footman came to fetch him, this time in a carriage. It was for the owner of a fine house, for a lady worn out with sleepless nights, who devotes all her life to dressing, visits, balls, and squabbles with a stupid husband. Your friend has prescribed for her a less preposterous habit of life, a less heating diet, walks in the fresh air, an even temperament, and, in order to make up in some measure for the want of useful work, a little gymnastic exercise in her bedroom.

The one is dying because she has never had enough food nor enough rest in her whole life; the other pines because she has never known what work is since she was born.

If you are one of those miserable natures who adapt themselves to anything, who at the sight of the most revolting spectacles console themselves with a gentle sigh and a glass of sherry, then you wilt gradually become used to these contrasts, and the nature of the beast favoring your endeavors, your sole idea will be to lift yourself into the ranks of the pleasure-seekers, so that you may never again find yourself among the wretched. But if you are a Man, if every sentiment is translated in your case into an action of the will; if, in you, the beast has not crushed the intelligent being, then you will return home one day saying to yourself, "No, it is unjust; this must not go on any longer. It is not enough to cure diseases; we must prevent them. A little good living and intellectual development would score off our lists half the patients and half the diseases. Throw physic to the dogs! Air, good diet, less crushing toil — that is how we must begin. Without this, the whole profession of a doctor is nothing but trickery and humbug."

That very day you will understand Socialism. You will wish to know it thoroughly, and if altruism is not a word devoid of significance for you, if you apply to the study of the social question the rigid induction of the natural philosopher, you will end by finding yourself in our ranks, and you will work as we work, to bring about the Social Revolution.

But perhaps you will say, "Mere practical business may go to the devil! I will devote myself to pure science: I will be an astronomer, a physiologist, a chemist. Such work as that always bears fruit, if only for future generations."

Let us first try to understand what you seek in devoting yourself to science. Is it only the pleasure — doubtless immense — which we derive from the study of nature and the exercise of our intellectual faculties? In that case I ask you in what respect does the philosopher, who pursues science in order that he may pass life pleasantly to himself, differ from that drunkard there, who only seeks the immediate gratification that gin affords him? The philosopher has, past all question, chosen his enjoyment more wisely, since it affords him a pleasure far deeper and more lasting than that of the toper. But that is all! Both one and the other have the same selfish end in view, personal gratification.

But no, you have no wish to lead this selfish life. By working at science you mean to work for humanity, and that is the idea which will guide you in your investigations.

A charming illusion! Which of us has not hugged it for a moment when giving himself up for the first time to science?

But then, if you are really thinking about humanity, if you look to the good of mankind in your studies, a formidable question arises before you; for, however little you may have of the critical spirit, you must at once note that in our society of today science is only an appendage to luxury, which serves to render life pleasanter for the few, but remains absolutely inaccessible to the bulk of mankind.

More than a century has passed since science laid down sound propositions as to the origins of the universe, but how many have mastered them or possess the really scientific spirit of criticism?

A few thousands at the outside, who are lost in the midst of hundreds of millions still steeped in prejudices and superstitions worthy of savages, who are consequently ever ready to serve as puppets for religious impostors.

Or, to go a step further, let us glance at what science has done to establish rational foundations for physical and moral health. Science tells us how we ought to live in order to preserve the health of our own bodies, how to maintain in good conditions of existence the crowded masses of our population. But does not all the vast amount of work done in these two directions remain a dead letter in our books? We know it does. And why? Because science today exists only for a handful of privileged persons, because social inequality which divides society into two classes — the wage-slaves and the grabbers of capital — renders all its teachings as to the conditions of a rational existence only the bitterest irony to nine-tenths of mankind.

I could give plenty more examples, but I stop short: only go outside Faust's closet, whose windows, darkened by dust, scarce let the light of heaven glimmer on its shelves full of books; look round, and at each step you will find fresh proof in support of this view.

It is now no longer a question of accumulating scientific truths and discoveries. We need above everything to spread the truths already mastered by science, to make them part of our daily life, to render them common property. We have to order things so that all, so that the mass of mankind, may be capable of understanding and applying them; we have to make science no longer a luxury but the foundation of every man's life. This is what justice demands.

I go further: I say that the interests of science itself lie in the same direction. Science only makes real progress when a new truth finds a soil already prepared to receive it. The theory of the mechanical origin of heat, though enunciated in the last century in the same terms that Hirn and Clausius formulate it today, remained for eighty years buried in the academical records until such time as knowledge of physics had spread widely enough to create a public capable of accepting it. Three generations had to go by before the ideas of Erasmus Darwin on the variations of species could be favorably received from his grandson and admitted by academical philosophers, and not without pressure from public opinion even then. The philosopher, like the poet or artist, is always the product of the society in which he moves and teaches.

But, if you are imbued with these ideas, you will understand that it is above all important to bring about a radical change in this state of affairs which today condemns the philosopher to be crammed with scientific truths, and almost the whole of the rest of human beings to remain what they were five, ten centuries ago — that is to say, in the state of slaves and machines, incapable of mastering established truths. And the day when you are imbued with wide, deep, humane, and profoundly scientific truth, that day you will lose your taste for pure science. You will set to work to find out the means to effect this transformation, and if you bring to your investigations the impartiality which has guided you in your scientific researches you will of necessity adopt the cause of Socialism; you will make an end of sophisms and you will come amongst us. Weary of working to procure pleasures for this small group, which already has a large share of them, you will place your information and devotion at the service of the oppressed.

And be sure that, the feeling of duty accomplished and of a real accord established between your sentiments and your actions, you will then find powers in yourself of whose existence you never even dreamed. When, too, one day — it is not far distant in any case, saving the presence of our professors — when one day, I say, the change for which you are working shall have been brought about, then, deriving new forces from collective scientific work, and from the powerful help of armies of laborers who will come to place their energies at its service, science will take a

new bound forward, in comparison with which the slow progress of today will appear the simple exercises of tyros.

Then you will enjoy science; that pleasure will be a pleasure for all.

If you have finished reading law and are about to be called to the bar, perhaps you, too, have some illusions as to your future activity — I assume that you are one of the nobler spirits, that you know what altruism means. Perhaps you think, “To devote my life to an unceasing and vigorous struggle against all injustice! To apply my whole faculties to bringing about the triumph of law, the public expression of supreme justice — can any career be nobler?” You begin the real work of life confident in yourself and in the profession you have chosen.

Very well: let us turn to any page of the Law Reports and see what actual life will tell you.

Here we have a rich landowner; he demands the eviction of a cotter tenant who has not paid his rent. From a legal point of view the case is beyond dispute; since the poor farmer can't pay, out he must go. But if we look into the facts we shall learn something like this: The landlord has squandered his rents persistently in rollicking pleasure; the tenant has worked hard all day and every day. The landlord has done nothing to improve his estate. Nevertheless its value has trebled in fifty years owing to rise in price of land due to the construction of a railway, to the making of new highroads, to the draining of a marsh, to the enclosure and cultivation of wastelands. But the tenant, who has contributed largely towards this increase, has ruined himself; he fell into the hands of usurers, and, head over ears in debts, he can no longer pay the landlord. The law, always on the side of property, is quite clear: the landlord is in the right. But you, whose feeling of justice has not yet been stifled by legal fictions, what will you do? Will you contend that the farmer ought to be turned out upon the high road? — for that is what the law ordains — or will you urge that the landlord should pay back to the farmer the whole of the increase of value in his property which is due to the farmer's labor? — that is what equity decrees. Which side will you take? For the law and against justice, or for justice and against the law?

Or when workmen have gone out on strike against a master without notice, which side will you take then? The side of the law, that is to say, the part of the master who, taking advantage of a period of crisis, has made outrageous profits? or against the law, but on the side of the workers who received during the whole time only 2s. A day as wages, and saw their wives and children fade away before their eyes? Will you stand up for that piece of chicanery which consists in affirming “freedom of contract”? Or will you uphold equity, according to which a contract entered into between a man who has dined well and the man who sells his labor for bare subsistence, between the strong and the weak, is not a contract at all?

Take another case. Here in London a man was loitering near a butcher's shop. He stole a beefsteak and ran off with it. Arrested and questioned, it turns out that he is an artisan out of work, and that he and his family have had nothing to eat for four days. The butcher is asked to let the man off, but he is all for the triumph of justice! He prosecutes, and the man is sentenced to six months' imprisonment. Blind Themis so wills it! Does not your conscience revolt against the law and against society when you hear similar judgments pronounced every day?

Or again, will you call for the enforcement of the law against this man who, badly brought up and ill-used from his childhood, has arrived at man's estate without having heard one sympathetic word, and completes his career by murdering his neighbor in order to rob him of a shilling? Will you demand his execution, or — worse still — that he should be imprisoned for twenty years, when you know very well that he is rather a madman than a criminal, and in any case, that his crime is the fault of our entire society?

Will you claim that these weavers should be thrown into prison who in a moment of desperation have set fire to a mill; that this man who shot at a crowned murderer should be imprisoned for life; that these insurgents should be shot down who plant the flag of the future on the barricades? No, a thousand times no!

If you reason instead of repeating what is taught you; if you analyze the law and strip off those cloudy fictions with which it has been draped in order to conceal its real origin, which is the right of the stronger, and its substance, which has ever been the consecration of all the tyrannies handed down to mankind through its long and bloody history; when you have comprehended this, your contempt for the law will be profound indeed. You will understand that to remain the servant of the written law is to place yourself every day in opposition to the law of conscience, and to make a bargain on the wrong side; and, since this struggle cannot go on forever, you will either silence your conscience and become a scoundrel, or you will break with tradition, and you will work with us for the utter destruction of all this injustice, economic, social and political.

But then you will be a Socialist, you will be a Revolutionist.

And you, young engineer, you who dream of improving the lot of the workers by the application of science to industry — what a sad disappointment, what terrible disillusion await you! You devote the useful energy of your mind to working out the scheme of a railway which, running along the brink of precipices and burrowing into the very heart of mountains of granite, will bind together two countries which nature has separated. But once at work, you see whole regiments of workers decimated by privations and sickness in this dark tunnel — you see others of them returning home carrying with them, maybe, a few pence, and the undoubted seeds of consumption; you see human corpses — the results of a groveling greed — as landmarks along each yard of your road; and, when the railroad is finished, you see, lastly, that it becomes the highway for the artillery of an invading army...

You have given up the prime of your youth to perfect an invention which will facilitate production and, after many experiments, many sleepless nights, you are at length master of this valuable discovery. You make use of it and the result surpasses your expectations. Ten, twenty thousand “hands” are thrown out upon the streets! Those who remain, most of them children, will be reduced to mere machines! Three, four, ten masters will make their fortunes and will drink deep on the strength of it...Is this your dream?

Finally, you study recent industrial advances, and you see that the seamstress has gained nothing, absolutely nothing, by the invention of the sewing machine; that the laborer in St. Gothard tunnel dies of ankylosis, not — withstanding diamond drills; that the mason and the day-laborer are out of work, just as before, at the foot of the Giffard lifts. If you discuss social problems with the same independence of spirit which has guided you in your mechanical investigations, you necessarily come to the conclusion that under the domination of private property and wage-slavery, every new invention only makes his slavery heavier, his labor more degrading, the periods of slack work more frequent, the crisis sharper, and that the man who already has every conceivable pleasure for himself is the only one who profits by it.

What will you do when you have once come to this conclusion? Either you will begin by silencing your conscience by sophisms; then one fine day you will bid farewell to the honest dreams of your youth and you will try to obtain, for yourself, what commands pleasure and enjoyment — you will then go over to the camp of the exploiters. Of, if you have a tender heart, you will say to yourself: “No, this is not the time for inventions. Let us work first to transform the domain of production. When private property is put to an end, then each new advance in industry

will be made for the benefit of all mankind; and this mass of workers, mere machines as they are today, will then become thinking beings who apply to industry their intelligence, strengthened by study and skilled in manual labor, and thus mechanical progress will take a bound forward which will carry out in fifty years what nowadays we cannot even dream of.”

And what shall I say to the schoolmaster — not to the man who looks upon his profession as a wearisome business, but to him who, when surrounded by a joyous band of young pickles, feels exhilarated by their cheery looks and in the midst of their happy laughter — to him who tries to plant in their little heads those ideas of humanity which he cherished himself when he was young?

Often I see that you are sad, and I know what it is that makes you knit your brows. This very day, your favorite pupil who is not very well up in Latin, it is true, but who has nonetheless an excellent heart, recited the story of William Tell with so much vigor! His eyes sparkled; he seemed to wish to stab all tyrants there and then; he gave with such fire the passionate lines of Schiller:

Before the slave when he breaks his chain,
Before the free man tremble not.

But when he returned home, his mother, his father, his uncle sharply rebuked him for want of respect to the minister or the rural policeman; they held forth to him by the hour on “prudence, respect of authority, submission to his betters,” till he put Schiller aside in order to read “Self-Help.”

And then, only yesterday, you were told that your best pupils have all turned out badly. One does nothing but dream of becoming an officer; another in league with his master robs the workers of their slender wages; and you, who brood over the sad contrast between your ideal, and life as it is.

You still brood over it! Then I foresee that in two years, at the outside, after having suffered disappointment after disappointment, you will lay your favorite authors on the shelf, and you will end by saying that Tell was no doubt a very honest fellow, but after all a trifle cracked; that poetry is a first-rate thing for the fireside, especially when a man has been teaching the rule-of-three all day long, but still poets are always in the clouds and their views have nothing to do with the life of today, nor with the next visit of the Inspector of Schools...

Or, on the other hand, the dreams of your youth will become the firm convictions of your mature age. You will wish to have wide, human education for all, in school and out of school; and seeing that this is impossible in existing conditions, you will attack the very foundations of bourgeois society. Then, discharged as you will be by the Education Department, you will leave your school and come among us and be of us; you will tell men of riper years but of smaller attainments than yourself how enticing knowledge is, what mankind ought to be — nay, what we could be. You will come and work with Socialists for the complete transformation of the existing system, will strive side by side with us to attain true equality, real fraternity, never-ending liberty for the world.

Lastly, you, young artist, sculptor, painter, poet, musician, do you not observe that the sacred fire which inspired your predecessors is wanting in the men of today? that art is commonplace and mediocrity reigns supreme?

Could it be otherwise? The delight of having rediscovered the ancient world, of having bathed afresh in the springs of nature which created the masterpieces of the Renaissance no longer exists for the art of our time; the revolutionary ideal has left it cold until now, and, failing an ideal, our

art fancies that it has found one in realism when it painfully photographs in colors the dewdrop on the leaf of a plant, imitates the muscles in the leg of a cow, or describes minutely in prose and verse the suffocating filth of a sewer, the boudoir of a whore of high degree.

“But, if this is so, what is to be done?” you say. If, I reply, the sacred fire that you say you possess is nothing better than a smoldering wick, then you will go on doing as you have done, and your art will speedily degenerate into the trade of decorator of tradesmen’s shops, of a purveyor of librettos to third-rate operettas, and tales for Christmas Annuals – most of you are already running down that grade with a head of steam on...

But, if your heart really beats in unison with that of humanity, if like a true poet you have an ear for Life, then gazing out upon this sea of sorrow whose tide sweeps up around you, face to face with these people dying of hunger, in the presence of these corpses piled up in the mines, and these mutilated bodies lying in heaps on the barricades, looking on these long lines of exiles who are going to bury themselves in the snows of Siberia and in the marshes of tropical islands; in full view of this desperate battle which is being fought, amid the cries of pain from the conquered and the orgies of the victors, of heroism in conflict with cowardice, of noble determination face to face with contemptible cunning – you cannot remain neutral; you will come and take the side of the oppressed because you know that the beautiful, the sublime, the spirit of life itself are on the side of those who fight for light, for humanity, for justice!

You stop me at last!

“What the devil!” you say. “But if abstract science is a luxury and practice of medicine mere chicane; if law spells injustice, and mechanical invention is but the means of robbery; if the school, at variance with the wisdom of the ‘practical man,’ is sure to be overcome; and art without the revolutionary idea can only degenerate, what remains for me to do?”

Well, I will tell you.

A vast and most enthralling task; a work in which your actions will be in complete harmony with your conscience, an undertaking capable of rousing the noblest and most vigorous natures.

What work? – I will now tell you.

It rests with you either to palter continually with your conscience, and in the end to say, one fine day: “Perish humanity, provided I can have plenty of pleasures and enjoy them to the full, so long as the people are foolish enough to let me.” Or, once more the inevitable alternative, to take part with the Socialists and work with them for the complete transformation of society. Such is the irrefragable consequence of the analysis we have gone through. That is the logical conclusion which every intelligent man must perforce arrive at, provided that he reasons honestly about what passes around him, and discards the sophisms which his bourgeois education and the interested views of those about him whisper in his ear.

This conclusion once arrived at, the question “What is to be done?” is naturally put.

The answer is easy.

Leave this environment in which you are placed and where it is the fashion to say that the people are nothing but a lot of brutes; come among these people – and the answer will come of itself.

You will see that everywhere, in England as well as in France, in Germany as well as in Italy, in Russia as well as in the United States, everywhere where there is a privileged and an oppressed class, there is a tremendous work going on in the midst of the working class, whose object is to break down forever the slavery enforced by the capitalist feudality and to lay the foundation of a society established on the basis of justice and equality. It is no longer enough for the man of the

people today to pour forth his complaints in one of those songs whose melody breaks your heart, such as were sung by the serfs of the eleventh century, and are still sung by the Slav peasant; he labors with his fellow toilers for the enfranchisement, with the knowledge of what he is doing, and against every obstacle put in his way.

His thoughts are constantly exercised in considering what should be done in order that life, instead of being a curse for three-fourths of mankind, may be a real enjoyment for all. He takes up the hardest problems of sociology and tries to solve them by his good sense, his spirit of observation, his hard experience. In order to come to an understanding with others as miserable as himself, he seeks to form groups, to organize. He forms societies, maintained with difficulty by small contributions; he tries to make terms with his fellows beyond the frontier; and he prepares the days when wars between peoples shall be impossible, far better than the frothy philanthropists who now potter with the fad of universal peace. In order to know what his brothers are doing, to have a closer connection with them, to elaborate his ideas and pass them around, he maintains — but at the price of what privations, what ceaseless efforts! — his working press. At length, when the hour has come, he rises, reddening the pavements and the barricades with his blood, he bounds forward to conquer those liberties which the rich and powerful will afterward know how to corrupt and to turn against him again.

What an unending series of efforts! What an incessant struggle! What toil perpetually begun afresh; sometimes to fill up the gaps occasioned by desertion — the results of weariness, corruption, prosecutions; sometimes to rally the broken forces decimated by the fusillades and cold-blooded butchery! At another time to recommence the studies sternly broken off by wholesale slaughter.

The newspapers are set on foot by men who have been obliged to force from society scraps of knowledge by depriving themselves of sleep and food; the agitation is kept up by halfpence deducted from the amount needed to get the barest necessities of life; and all this under the constant dread of seeing his family reduced to the most fearful misery, as soon as the master learns that “his workman, his slave, is tainted with Socialism.”

This is what you will see if you go among the people.

And in this endless struggle how often has not the toiler vainly asked, as he stumbled under the weight of his burden:

“WHERE, THEN, ARE THESE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN TAUGHT AT OUR EXPENSE? THESE YOUTHS WHOM WE FED AND CLOTHED WHILE THEY STUDIED? WHERE ARE THOSE FOR WHOM, OUR BACKS BENT DOUBLE BENEATH OUR BURDENS AND OUR BELLIES EMPTY, WE HAVE BUILT THESE HOUSES, THESE COLLEGES, THESE LECTURE-ROOMS, THESE MUSEUMS? WHERE ARE THE MEN FOR WHOSE BENEFIT WE, WITH OUR PALE, WORN FACES, HAVE PRINTED THESE FINE BOOKS, MOST OF WHICH WE CANNOT EVEN READ? WHERE ARE THEY, THESE PROFESSORS WHO CLAIM TO POSSESS THE SCIENCE OF MANKIND, AND FOR WHOM HUMANITY ITSELF IS NOT WORTH A RARE CATERPILLAR? WHERE ARE THE MEN WHO ARE EVER SPEAKING IN PRAISE OF LIBERTY, AND NEVER THINK TO CHAMPION OUR FREEDOM, TRAMPLED AS IT IS EACH DAY BENEATH THEIR FEET? WHERE ARE THEY, THESE WRITERS AND POETS, THESE PAINTERS AND SCULPTORS? WHERE, IN A WORD, IS THE WHOLE GANG OF HYPOCRITES WHO SPEAK OF THE PEOPLE WITH TEARS IN THEIR EYES, BUT WHO NEVER, BY ANY CHANCE, FIND THEMSELVES AMONG US, HELPING US IN OUR LABORIOUS WORK?”

Where are they, indeed?

Why, some are taking their ease with the most cowardly indifference; others, the majority, despise the “dirty mob,” are ready to pounce upon them if they dare touch one of their privileges.

Now and then, it is true, a young man comes among us who dreams of drums and barricades and seeks sensational scenes, but he deserts the cause of the people as soon as he perceives that the road to the barricade is long, that the work is heavy, and that the crowns of laurel to be won in the campaign are intermingled with thorns. Generally these are ambitious schemers, out of work, who, having failed in their first efforts, try in this way to cajole people out of their votes, but who a little later will be the first to denounce them when the people wish to apply the principles which they themselves have professed; perhaps will even be ready to turn artillery and Gatlings upon them if they dare to move before they, the heads of the movement, give the signal.

Add mean insult, haughty contempt, cowardly calumny from the great majority, and you know what the people may expect nowadays from most of the youth of the upper and middle classes in the way of help towards the social evolution.

But then, you ask, “What shall we do?” When there is everything to be done! When a whole army of young people would find plenty to employ the entire vigor of their youthful energy, the full force of their intelligence and their talent to help the people in the vast enterprise they have undertaken!

What shall we do? Listen.

You lovers of pure science, if you are imbued with the principles of Socialism, if you have understood the real meaning of the revolution which is even now knocking at the door, don't you see that all science has to be recast in order to place it in harmony with the new principles; that it is your business to accomplish in this field a revolution far greater than that which was accomplished in every branch of science during the eighteenth century? Don't you understand that history — which today is an old wives' tale about great kings, great statesmen and great parliaments — that history itself has to be written from the point of view of the people, from the point of view of work done by the masses in the long evolution of mankind? That social economy — which today is merely the sanctification of capitalist robbery — has to be worked out afresh in its fundamental principles as well as in its innumerable applications? That anthropology, sociology, ethics, must be completely recast, and that the very natural sciences themselves, regarded from another point of view, must undergo a profound modification, alike in regard to the conception of natural phenomena and with respect to the method of exposition.

Very well, then, set to work! Place your abilities at the command of the good cause. Especially help us with your clear logic to combat prejudice and to lay, by your synthesis, the foundations of a better organization; yet more, teach us to apply in our daily arguments the fearlessness of true scientific investigation and show us, as your predecessors did, how men dare sacrifice even life itself for the triumph of the truth.

You, doctors, who have learnt Socialism by a bitter experience, never weary of telling us today, tomorrow, onward to decay if men remain in the present conditions of existence and work; that all your medicaments must be powerless against disease while the majority of mankind vegetate in conditions absolutely contrary to those which science tells us are healthful; convince the people that it is the causes of disease which must be uprooted, and show us all what is necessary to remove them.

Come with your scalpel and dissect for us, with an unerring hand, this society of ours, hastening to putrefaction. Tell us what a rational existence should and might be. Insist, as true surgeons, that a gangrenous limb must be amputated when it may poison the whole body.

You, who have worked at the application of science to industry, come and tell us frankly what has been the outcome of your discoveries. Convince those who dare not march boldly toward the future what new inventions the knowledge we have acquired carried in its womb, what industry could do under better conditions, what man might easily produce if he produced always with a view to enhance his own productions.

You poets, painters, sculptors, musicians, if you understand your true mission and the very interests of art itself, come with us. Place your pen, your pencil, your chisel, your ideas at the service of the revolution. Figure forth to us, in your eloquent style, or your impressive pictures, the heroic struggles of the people against their oppressors; fire the hearts of our youth with that revolutionary enthusiasm which inflamed the souls of our ancestors; tell women what a noble career is that of a husband who devotes his life to the great cause of social emancipation! Show the people how hideous is their actual life, and place your hand on the causes of its ugliness; tell us what a rational life would be if it did not encounter at every step the follies and the ignominies of our present social order.

Lastly, all of you who possess knowledge, talent, capacity, industry, if you have a spark of sympathy in your nature, come, you and your companions, come and place your services at the disposal of those who most need them. And remember, if you do come, that you come not as masters, but as comrades in the struggle; that you come not to govern but to gain strength for yourselves in a new life which sweeps upward to the conquest of the future; that you come less to teach than to grasp the aspirations of the many; to divine them, to give them shape, and then to work, without rest and without haste, with all the fire of youth and all the judgment of age, to realize them in actual life. Then and then only will you lead a complete, a noble, a rational existence. Then you will see that your every effort on this path bears with it fruit in abundance, and this sublime harmony once established between your actions and the dictates of your conscience will give you powers you never dreamt lay dormant in yourselves.

The never-ceasing struggle for truth, justice and equality among the people, whose gratitude you will earn – what nobler career can the youth of all nations desire than this?

It has taken me long to show you, of the well-to-do classes, that in view of the dilemma which life presents to you, you will be forced, if courageous and sincere, to come and work side by side with the Socialists, and champion in their ranks the cause of the social revolution. And yet how simple this truth is after all! But when one is speaking to those who have suffered from the effects of bourgeois surroundings, how many sophisms must be combated, how many prejudices overcome, how many interested objections put aside!

It is easy to be brief today in addressing you, the youth of the people. The very pressure of events impels you to become Socialists, however little you may have the courage to reason and to act.

To rise from the ranks of the working people, and not to devote oneself to bringing about the triumph of Socialism, is to misconceive the real interests at stake, to give up the cause and the true historic mission.

Do you remember the time, when still a mere lad, you went down one winter's day to play in your dark court? The cold nipped your shoulders through your thin clothes, and the mud worked into your worn-out shoes. Even then when you saw chubby children richly clad pass in the distance, looking at you with an air of contempt, you knew right well that these imps, dressed up to the nines, were not the equals of yourself and your comrades, either in intelligence, common sense, or energy. But, later, when you were forced to shut yourself up in a filthy factory

from five or six o'clock in the morning, to remain twelve hours on end close to a whirling machine, and, a machine yourself, were forced to follow, day after day, for whole years in succession, its movement with relentless throbbing — during all this time they, the others, were going quietly to be taught at fine schools, at academies, at the universities. And now these same children, less intelligent, but better taught than you, have become your masters, are enjoying all the pleasures of life and all the advantages of civilization. And you? What sort of lot awaits you?

You return to little, dark, damp lodgings where five or six human beings pig together within a few square feet; where your mother, sick of life, aged by care rather than years, offers you dry bread and potatoes as your only food, washed down by blackish fluid called, in irony, tea; and to distract your thoughts, you have ever the same never-ending question, "How shall I be able to pay the baker tomorrow, and the landlord the day after?"

What! Must you drag on the same weary existence as your father and mother for thirty and forty years? Must you toil your life long to procure for others all the pleasures of well-being, of knowledge, of art, and keep for yourself only the eternal anxiety as to whether you can get a bit of bread? Will you wear yourself out with toil and have in return only trouble, if not misery, when hard times — the fearful hard times — come upon you? Is this what you long for in life?

Perhaps you will give up. Seeing no way out of your condition whatever, maybe you say to yourself, "Whole generations have undergone the same lot, and I, who can alter nothing in the matter, I must submit also. Let us work on, then, and endeavor to live as well as we can!"

Very well. In that case life itself will take pains to enlighten you.

One day a crisis comes, one of those crises which are no longer mere passing phenomena, as they were a while ago, but a crisis which destroys a whole industry, which plunges thousands of workers into misery, which crushes whole families. You struggle like the rest against the calamity. But you will soon see how your wife, your child your friend, little by little succumb to privations and fade away under your very eyes. For sheer want of food for lack of care and of medical assistance, they end their days on the pauper's stretcher, while the life of the rich sweeps past in joyous crowds through the streets of the great city gleaming in the sunlight — utterly careless and indifferent to the dying cries of those who perish.

Then you will understand how utterly revolting this society is; you will reflect upon the causes of this crisis and your examination will go to the very depths of this abomination which puts millions of human beings at the mercy of the brutal greed of a handful of useless triflers; then you will understand that Socialists are right when they say that our present society can be, that it must be reorganized from top to bottom.

To pass from general crises to your particular case. One day when your master tires by a new reduction of wages to squeeze out of you a few more pence in order to increase his fortune still further, you will protest; but he will haughtily answer, "Go and eat grass, if you will not work at the price I offer." Then you will understand that your master not only tries to shear you like a sheep, but that looks upon you as an inferior kind of animal altogether; that, not content with holding you in his relentless grip by means of the wage-system, he is further anxious to make you a slave in every respect. Then you will either bow down before him, you will give up the feeling of human dignity, and you will end by suffering every possible humiliation; or the blood will rush to your head, you shudder at the hideous slope on which you are slipping down, you will retort, and, turned out workless on the street, you will understand how right Socialists are when they say, "Revolt! Rise against this economical slavery!" Then you will come and take your

place in the ranks of the Socialists and you will work with them for the complete destruction of all slavery — economic, social and political.

Some day, again, you will learn the story of that charming young girl whose brisk gait, frank manners, and cheerful conversation you so lovingly admired. After having struggled for years and years against misery, she left her native village for the metropolis. There she knew right well that the struggle for existence must be hard, but she hoped at least to be able to gain her living honestly. Well, now you know what has been her fate. Courted by the son of some capitalist, she allowed herself to be enticed by his fine words, she gave herself up to him with all the passion of youth, only to see herself abandoned with a baby in her arms. Ever courageous, she never ceased to struggle on; but she broke down in this unequal strife against cold and hunger, and she ended her days in one of the hospitals, no one knows which...

What will you do? Once more there are two courses open to you. Either you will push aside the whole unpleasant reminiscence with some stupid phrase. "She wasn't the first and won't be the last," you will say. Perhaps, some evening, you will be heard in a public room, in company with other beasts like yourself, outraging the young girl's memory by some dirty stories; or, on the other hand, your remembrances of the past will touch your heart; you will try to meet the seducer to denounce him to his face; you will reflect upon the causes of these events which recur every day, and you will comprehend that they will never cease so long as society is divided into two camps; on one side the wretched and on the other the lazy — the jugglers with fine phrases and bestial lusts. You will understand that it is high time to bridge over this gulf of separation, and you will rush to place, yourself among the Socialists.

And you, woman of the people, has this left you cold and unmoved? While caressing the pretty head of that child who nestles close to you, do you never think about the lot that awaits him, if the present social conditions are not changed? Do you never reflect on the future awaiting your young sister, and all your own children? Do you wish that your sons, they too, should vegetate as your father vegetated, with no other care than how to get his daily bread, with no other pleasure than that of the gin-palace? Do you want your husband, your lads, to be ever at the mercy of the first comer who has inherited from his father a capital to exploit them with? Are you anxious that they should remain slaves for master, food for powder, mere dung wherewith to manure the pasture lands of the rich expropriator?

Nay, never; a thousand times no! I know right well that your blood has boiled when you have heard that your husbands, after they entered on a strike, full of fire and determination, have ended by accepting, cap in hand, the conditions dictated by the bloated bourgeois in a tone of haughty contempt! I know that you have admired those Spanish women who in a popular rising presented their breasts to the bayonets of the soldiery, in the front ranks of the insurrectionists. I am certain that you mention with reverence the name of the woman who lodged a bullet in the chest of that ruffianly official who dared to outrage a Socialist prisoner in his cell. And I am confident that your heart beats faster when you read how the women of the people in Paris gathered under a rain of shells to encourage "their men" to heroic action.

Every one of you, then, honest young folks, men and women, peasants, laborers, artisans and soldiers, you will understand what are your rights and you will come along with us; you will come in order to work with your brethren in the preparation of that Revolution which, sweeping away every vestige of slavery, tearing the fetters asunder, breaking with the old worn-out traditions, and opening to all mankind a new and wider scope of joyous existence, shall at length establish true Liberty, real Equality, ungrudging Fraternity throughout human society: work with all, work

for all — the full enjoyment of the fruits of their labor, the complete development of all their faculties; a rational, human and happy life!

Don't let anyone tell us that we — but a small band — are too weak to attain unto the magnificent end at which we aim.

Count and see how many of us there are who suffer this injustice.

We peasants who work for others and who mumble the straw while our masters eat the wheat, we by ourselves are millions of men.

We workers who weave silks and velvets in order that we may be clothed in rags, we, too, are a great multitude; and when the clang of the factories permits us a moment's repose, we overflow the streets and squares like the sea in a spring tide.

We soldiers who are driven along to the word of command, or by blows, we who receive the bullets for which our officers get crosses and pensions, we, too, poor fools who have hitherto known no better than to shoot our brothers, why, we have only to make a right-about-face towards these plumed and decorated personages who are so good as to command us, to see a ghastly pallor overspread their faces.

Ay, all of us together, we who suffer and are insulted daily, we are a multitude whom no man can number, we are the ocean that can embrace and swallow up all else.

When we have but the will to do it, that very moment will Justice be done: that very instant the tyrants of the Earth shall bite the dust.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Pyotr Kropotkin
An Appeal to the Young
First published in 1880 in Kropotkin's paper, *La Revolté*
1890

Retrieved on June 18, 2020 from <http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu>
First appeared in French, 1880. "Aux Jeunes Gens". *Le Révolté*, June 25; July 10; August 7, 21.

theanarchistlibrary.org