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*Etceteras . . .*

## Tolstoy's Manifesto on the State, Christian Anarchy, and Pacifism

ROBERT HIGGS

Leo Tolstoy's book *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, completed in 1893, was written in Russian, but the Russian censors forbade its publication in the author's native country. It circulated in unpublished form, however, and was almost immediately translated into other languages and published abroad. It had substantial influence on the course of history, perhaps most of all because of its influence in shaping Gandhi's views on nonviolent resistance to the state. Today, however, the book is not well known except to scholarly specialists and a small band of anarchists; for ordinary readers, it qualifies as a piece of esoterica. Although over the years I had been struck repeatedly by quotations from this work that I encountered on the Web, only recently did I get around to reading it in its entirety.

The book is odd in several respects. In a purely literary sense, it is by no means a masterpiece, as Tolstoy's great novels, written earlier in his life, are widely acclaimed to be. In places, it reads more like a set of notes for a book than a polished work. For example, it contains many very long block quotations, much unnecessary repetition, and a detailed, itemized synopsis at the beginning of each chapter. In the words of Constance Garnett, who translated the book into English in 1894, "Tolstoy disdains all attempt to captivate the reader . . . and his style is often slipshod, involved, and diffuse" ([1894] 2005, xviii). However, Tolstoy's craftsmanship as a writer still shines in the brilliance of some of his formulations, especially in the second half of the book. The book is perhaps the most epigrammatic work I have ever read. One passage after another—sometimes two or three pages as a whole—cries out for quotation, so forceful and clear is the construction.

Odd, too, is Tolstoy's own curiously uneven command of different aspects of his subject.

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*The Independent Review*, v. 19, n. 3, Winter 2015, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2015, pp. 471-479.

In regard to the nature and operation of the state and the sociology of human interrelations in the sociopolitical order, his clear-eyed insights cut to the quick. He makes even an analyst such as James Buchanan ([1979] 1999), who often complained about people's "romantic" views of politics and the state, seem himself utterly romantic. Here in brief compass is Tolstoy's decidedly unromantic account of how governments are composed and how they sustain themselves, notwithstanding their essentially criminal nature:

Governments and the ruling classes no longer take their stand on right or even on the semblance of justice, but on a skillful organization carried to such a point of perfection by the aid of science that everyone is caught in the circle of violence and has no chance of escaping from it. This circle is made up now of four methods of working upon men, joined together like the links of a chain ring.

The first and oldest method is intimidation. This consists in representing the existing state organization—whatever it may be, free republic or the most savage despotism—as something sacred and immutable, and therefore following any efforts to alter it with the cruelest punishments. . . . [O]nce [state] authority has come into certain hands, the police, open and secret, the administration and prosecutors, jailers and executioners of all kinds, do their work so zealously that there is no chance of overturning the government, however cruel and senseless it may be.

The second method is corruption. It consists in plundering the industrious working people of their wealth by means of taxes and distributing it in satisfying the greed of officials, who are bound in return to support and keep up the oppression of the people.

. . . The third method is what I can only describe as hypnotizing the people. . . . This hypnotizing process is organized at the present in the most complex manner, and starting from their earliest childhood, continues to act on men till the day of their death. It begins in their earliest years in the compulsory schools. . . . In countries where there is a state religion, they teach the children the senseless blasphemies of the Church catechisms, together with the duty of obedience to their superiors. In republican states they teach them the savage superstition of patriotism and the same pretended obedience to the governing authorities.

. . . The patriotic superstition is encouraged by the creation, with money taken from the people, of national fêtes, spectacles, monuments, and festivals

to dispose men to attach importance to their own nation, and to the aggrandizement of the state and its rulers, and to feel antagonism and even hatred for other nations. . . . [U]nder every government without exception everything is kept back that might emancipate and everything encouraged that tends to corrupt the people.

. . . The fourth method consists in selecting from all the men who have been stupefied and enslaved by the three former methods a certain number, exposing them to special and intensified means of stupefaction and brutalization, and so making them into a passive instrument for carrying out all the cruelties and brutalities needed by the government. . . . These physically vigorous young men . . . hypnotized, armed with murderous weapons, always obedient to the governing authorities and ready for any act of violence at their command, constitute the fourth and principal method of enslaving men.

By this method the circle of violence is completed.

Intimidation, corruption, and hypnotizing bring people into a condition in which they are willing to be soldiers; the soldiers give the power of punishing and plundering them (and purchasing officials with the spoils), and hypnotizing them and converting them in time into these same soldiers again. ([1894] 2005, 146–49, subsequently cited by page number only)

I perceive several parallels between the preceding analysis and my own analyses of the nature and functioning of the state (see especially Higgs 1987, 2007, and 2012).

In stark contrast to Tolstoy's acute analysis of the state, his understanding of economics is abysmal—seemingly a blend of Marxism and man-in-the-street fallacies and prejudices—and leads him into foolish notions of equivalence between state acts and capitalist acts. Thus, he asks rhetorically, “[W]hat is the use of capital in the hands of private persons, when it can only be of use as the property of all?” (209). “[O]ne may confidently assert,” he declares, “that in any society where, for every man living in ease, there are ten exhausted by labor, envious, covetous, and often suffering with their families from direct privation, all the privileges of the rich, all their luxuries and superfluities, are obtained and maintained only by tortures, imprisonment, and murder” (224). Tolstoy seems not to have had any understanding of the productive power of specialization and exchange, the sources of productivity increase, the incentives for trade and investment, and the general workings of the market system. In his eyes, the economy is a negative-sum game in which the well-to-do gain all that they possess by brutally exploiting and robbing the poor. “[A]ll trade indeed . . . is founded on a series of trickery” (257), and a merchant's “whole occupation . . . [is] based on what in his own language is called swindling” (258). Moreover, “the merchant . . . often

goes further and commits acts of direct dishonesty” (258). His wealth constitutes “ill-gotten gains” (258), and, adding further deceit to intrinsic injury, he uses a portion of his wealth to fund hospitals, museums, schools, and other public institutions, thereby “regarding himself and being regarded by others . . . as a pattern of probity and virtue” (258). Likewise, “[a] manufacturer is a man whose whole income consists of value squeezed out of the workmen, and whose whole occupation is based on forced, unnatural labor”; on the grandest scale, he is nothing but “the harsh slave-driver of thousands of men,” whose “human lives [are] morally and physically ruined by him” as he “calmly [goes] about his business, taking pride in it” (258). Tolstoy confidently declares that “it is a recognized scientific principle that labor alone creates wealth, and that to profit by the labor of others is immoral, dishonest, and punishable by law” (87).

Classical economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo, who espoused a labor theory of value, never drew such outrageous conclusions from it, and by the late nineteenth century, while Tolstoy was still intellectually active, the labor theory of value was subjected to thorough refutation, and only socialists and economic illiterates held out in its defense. Tolstoy seems also to have given no thought to what the consequences would be, for the poor as well as for others, if his communistic preferences for the distribution of property were to be adopted in practice. It is possible that his economic views were derived too much from his observations of economic life in nineteenth-century Russia, where the market system was but a shadow of its more developed form in such places as England and the United States—indeed, in Russia serfdom was not abolished until 1861, and the state interfered extensively in the market system. Yet Tolstoy nowhere qualifies his economic statements as being specifically applicable to Russia, and their language, as shown in the preceding examples, takes the form of sweeping, universalistic declarations.

As we have already seen, Tolstoy had excellent insights into the role of (what I call) ideology—in his scheme of things, “hypnotizing the people”—in the maintenance of a state-dominated social order. Thus, three of the entries in the synopsis of his long, final chapter read as follows:

- The Existing Order of Society . . . is only Maintained by the Stupefaction of the Conscience, Produced Spontaneously by Self-Interest in the Upper Classes and through Hypnotizing in the Lower Classes
- Hypocrisy Allows Men Who Preach Christianity to Take Part in Institutions Based on Violence
- Undisguised Criminals and Malefactors Do Less Harm than Those Who Live by Legalized Violence, Disguised by Hypocrisy (214–15)

Tolstoy seems to believe that among the upper classes the ideological enchantment occurs naturally (“spontaneously”) to soothe the exploiters’ consciences and relieve their cognitive dissonance, whereas among the lower, exploited classes the ideological

enchantment is manufactured deliberately by functionaries of the state and the church. Especially critical is ideology's effect on the police and military personnel, who act as the state's ultimate protectors and enforcers: "[F]rom their childhood up men see that murder is not only permitted, but even sanctioned by the blessing of those whom they are accustomed to regard as their divinely appointed spiritual guides, and see their secular leaders with calm assurance organizing murder, proud to wear murderous arms, and demanding of others in the name of the laws of the country, and even of God, that they should take part in murder" (233).

Tolstoy believed that the social order ultimately rests on public opinion, but he also understood that the sociopolitical system's kingpins did not sit back hoping that a congenial state of public opinion would prevail but instead acted affirmatively and vigorously to see that such a state of opinion was cultivated and impressed on members of the general public from the cradle to the grave.

Notwithstanding his acute understanding of the power of ideology, Tolstoy entertained a view of how the dominant ideology was changing and would continue to change that seems to me completely lacking in contemporary evidence and utterly at variance with everything we now know about how ideology did change during the past century or so. He writes: "The time will come—it is already coming—when the Christian principles of equality and fraternity, community of property, nonresistance of evil by force, will appear just as natural and simple as the principles of family or social life seem to us now" (84; see also 98, 152, 179, 189, 191, 203–10). Thus, in this view, as in others, he greatly overestimated the hold that Christian morality had on the souls of people in the West at the time he was writing, not to speak of later and even less Christian times. Friedrich Nietzsche's contemporaneous declaration that "God is dead" came closer to the empirical mark: what Tolstoy expected to be a flood tide of Christianity turned out to be, at least in Europe and its overseas offshoots, an ebb tide.

Tolstoy is one of the most important Christian anarchists in history, but his views on Christianity differed greatly from those of a typical Christian. For example, he regarded the various Christian churches as totally corrupt and as the propagators of false and spurious doctrines. "Strange though it may seem to us who have been brought up in the erroneous view of the Church as a Christian institution, and in contempt for heresy, yet the fact is that only in what was called heresy was there any true movement, that is, true Christianity, and that it only ceased to be so when those heresies stopped short in their movement and also petrified into the fixed forms of a church" (47). Thus, in Tolstoy's view, the church, rather than liberating people in spirit if not in body, only helped the dominant elites to retain their hold on political, social, and economic power while oppressing the great mass of the people. Self-serving members of the upper crust were, in his eyes, willing to avert their eyes from the truth, especially the Truth of Christianity as expressed by the Sermon on the Mount. "[H]ow could the notion occur to anyone that all that has been repeated from century to century with such earnestness and solemnity by all those archdeacons,

bishops, archbishops, holy synods, and popes, is all of it a base lie and a calumny foisted upon Christ by them for the sake of keeping safe the money they must have to live luxuriously on the necks of other men?” (31; see also 62).

In view of such observations, it came as no great surprise when, notwithstanding Tolstoy’s immense popularity and stature among the Russian people, the Orthodox Church finally excommunicated him in 1901. This action, however, seems to have done more damage to the church’s reputation than to Tolstoy’s (Taffel 2005, viii).

The Sermon on the Mount constituted not only the heart of Tolstoy’s Christianity, but the bulk of it as well. Thus, he declares: “The churches are placed in a dilemma: the Sermon on the Mount or the Nicene Creed—the one excludes the other” (62). For him, Christianity was above all a commitment to love others as one’s self and to abstain from the use of force and violence, even in resistance to evil or in self-defense.

Let a man but realize that the aim of his life is the fulfillment of God’s law, and that law will replace all other laws for him, and he will give it his sole allegiance, so that by that very allegiance every human law will lose all binding and controlling power in his eyes.

The Christian is independent of every human authority by the fact that he regards the divine law of love, implanted in the soul of every man, and brought before his consciousness by Christ, as the sole guide of his life and other men’s also. (161; see also 162–64, 176, 182)

Thus, even as a Christian anarchist, Tolstoy comes close to occupying a class of his own (though not quite entirely his own, given that a few small Christian sects, such as the Amish, the Mennonites, and in some ways the Quakers, have shared his radical rejection of violence, civil government, and participation in war).

Tolstoy’s Christianity was so primitive that it dispensed with even what most Christians have considered utterly fundamental in their faith, such as belief in the divinity of Jesus. David Taffel explains:

Whether Jesus really taught the doctrine of non-violence—or ever even existed—is a matter of no importance to Tolstoy, for what he holds to be of religious significance in Christianity is solely the truth of what Jesus is reported to have taught. This teaching does not derive its authority from the divinity of its teacher. Rather, it has inherent religious authority because it is *the truth*, and if one lives one’s life in accordance with it, one knows it to be true because one experiences a genuinely religious life. It is as though, for Tolstoy, the doctrine of non-violence opens a doorway to an archetypal worldview that under the right circumstances may be discovered by anyone

and that, once consciously discovered and deeply experienced, cannot be denied. . . . [Thus,] the coming of the kingdom of God is not primarily a historical event to be awaited, it is an inward obligation to be fulfilled. (xiii, emphasis in original)

Aside from its interest as a manifesto for Christian pacifism and anarchism, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* contains many anticipations of ideas later developed in economics and public choice, and it deserves much greater attention in these regards than it has received. For example, Tolstoy showed a clear understanding of how the worst get on top in the state, à la F. A. Hayek (1944):

The good cannot seize power, nor retain it; to do this men must love power. And love of power is inconsistent with goodness; but quite consistent with the very opposite qualities—pride, cunning, cruelty. . . . [R]uling means doing to others what we would not they should do unto us, that is, doing wrong. . . . [I]n all probability, not the better but the worse have always ruled and are ruling now. There may be bad men among those who are ruled, but it cannot be that those who are better have generally ruled those who are worse. (185, 186)

Likewise, long before social scientists such as Mancur Olson (1965) began to discuss the individual's incentive to free-ride in cases where widespread participation is necessary if a collective good is to be created (as in political resistance or revolution), Tolstoy demonstrated a clear understanding of this situation: "Yes, but what is one to do?" people often ask in genuine perplexity. 'If everyone would stand out it would be something, but by myself, I shall only suffer without doing any good to anyone.' And that is true. . . . It is better for his personal welfare for him to submit [that is, to accept the currently existing condition], and he submits" (157).

Tolstoy also understood, though, how a spark of resistance by one or a few individuals might set ablaze a cumulative participation, ultimately energizing many if not all into supporting the position taken initially by only a few brave souls willing to stick their necks out, à la Timur Kuran's penetrating 1997 analysis of "private truth, public lies."

Every new truth, by which the order of human life is changed and humanity is advanced, is at first accepted by only a very small number of men who understand it through inner spiritual intuition. The remainder of mankind who accepted on trust the preceding truth on which the existing order is based, are always opposed to the diffusion of the new truth. . . . [Then] slowly and one by one, but afterward more and more quickly, [men] pass over to the new truth. . . . And so the movement goes on more and more quickly, and on an ever-increasing scale, like a snowball, till at last a public

opinion in harmony with the new truth is created, and then the whole mass of men is carried over all at once by its momentum to the new truth and establishes a new social order in accordance with it. (193)

For Tolstoy, such a cumulative process was already in motion, carrying ever more people toward belief in true Christianity and hence toward action in accordance with Jesus Christ's commandments that we love one another as ourselves and that we abstain from violence even to resist evil or to defend ourselves or innocent others. As already noted, this understanding completely misread the direction in which the dominant ideology was moving in the West and probably elsewhere. In fact, Christianity, whether in Tolstoy's sense or in the church's sense, was already losing its hold on people's hearts and minds in the late nineteenth century. Christianity certainly was not going to disappear, of course, and even today Christian churches claim a multitude of members, even if, in most cases, not as many as previously. Nevertheless, Tolstoy's expectation that people were in the early stages of a conversion in belief and action to core precepts of Christianity was widely in error, and hence the transformation of the social, political, and economic order that he expected to flow from such a conversion was also not going to occur. Indeed, if Tolstoy were alive today to assess the world's condition, he might well be more appalled than he was when he penned his nonfiction magnum opus in the early 1890s.

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**Acknowledgments:** I am grateful to Gary Chartier for his comments on a draft of this article.



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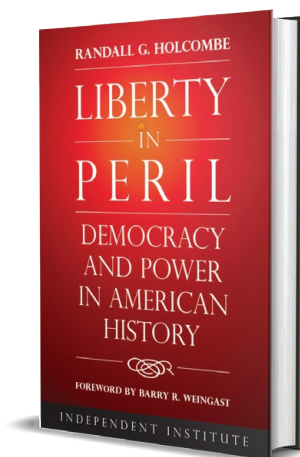
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