On Revolution and Participation

by Leo Tolstoy

From a private letter of 1896

The existing order of life is subject to destruction. This is admitted both by those who strive to destroy it and those who defend it.

The competitive order will be destroyed and give way to the communistic; the capitalistic order will be destroyed and give way to the socialistic; the order of militarism will be destroyed and give way to disarmament and arbitration; the separatism of narrow nationality will be destroyed and give way to cosmopolitism and a universal brotherhood; all religious superstitions will be destroyed and give way to a rational religious, moral consciousness; every kind of despotism will be destroyed and give way to liberty. In short, violence will be destroyed and give way to a free and loving union of men.

So far, two means have been employed for the attainment of all these ends. The first is violent revolution, the overthrow of the men who supported the undesirable order, and the substitution of others who will establish a new, desirable order of life. The second, without destroying the existing order, involves entering into the ranks of the government and consists in slowly and by degrees obtaining that change of the existing order which is demanded by the human consciousness of our time.

The first method does not attain its end. In the first place, every violent destruction of the existing order evokes a reaction in the majority of indifferent people: a desire to retain the existing order at all costs or even bring back the one that existed before the revolution. Revolution calls forth a reaction, which only frustrates the attainment of its end. In the second place, the men who enter into power retain the old governmental machine of violence, and very soon become just as despotic, sometimes even more despotic, than those which are overthrown. (The reaction of the great French Revolution against the despotism of the royal power, the Napoleonic reaction and that of 1815, the reactions after 1830, 1848, and 1881 in Russia, and now the reaction after the anarchistic explosions and murders in France.)

The second method, which consists in changing the government by taking part in it and improving it, is even less effective. Some men enter into the ranks of government without the aim of gradually improving the existing order. Others recognize the government and enjoy its advantages only in order to be able to modify and improve it. But imperceptibly to themselves, because their whole lives are based on governmental violence, both groups very soon and inevitably not only fail to correct and change the government’s violence, but even become its most ardent defenders.

Men, having come to see the falseness of their situation in the course of several generations, have been trying to change their situation, now with one means and then with another, but neither means has produced any effect, and the situation has grown worse and worse.

There exists one means for the attainment of this end: a very simple and natural means that consists in leaving the state and the government alone and not thinking of them, but instead in thinking only of our life, in elucidating to ourselves the end and significance of our life, and in leading our life in conformity with the elucidated consciousness. And, strange to say, this
means, which entirely leaves out the questions about state, government, and society, is the only one that solves (and in the most incontestable manner at that) all the political, governmental, and social questions.

This means, in relation to the political, governmental, and social questions, does not consist in forcibly destroying the existing order of life or in building our lives upon it with the desire to change it. Instead, it is the simplest kind of a method, which, it would seem, would be the first to occur to people: namely, taking no part in that violence-using structure of life which we deny and wish to change.

In order not to take part in this violence-using and false structure of life, we must (1) clearly understand the meaning and destiny of our lives, (2) clearly understand what in our lives corresponds to the destiny of our lives, and (3) know those means with which it is possible for us to harmonize our lives with the demands of our consciousness.

From the diary of 1896

The situation of most men, who are enlightened with a true enlightenment of brotherly love, is terrible and seems hopeless because deceitful and cunning violators, who compel them to ruin themselves, suppress them.

Only two ways out present themselves, and both are dead ends. One attempts to end violence by means of violence, terrorism, dynamite bombs, and daggers, as did our nihilists and anarchists. The other attempts to end violence by entering into a concerted action with the government, making concessions to it, and, taking part in it, slowly disentangling the net of violence that binds the nation. But both ways out are dead ends.

Dynamite and the dagger, as experience shows us, only provoke reaction and damage the most precious force – the only one that is in our power – public opinion.

The other way out is unsuccessful because the governments have already found out to what extent the participation of people wishing to transform it should be allowed. They allow only that which does not impair the essentials, and are very sensitive in regard to what is detrimental to them. They are sensitive, because their existence is at stake. They admit people who do not agree with them and who wish to reform the governments, not only in order to satisfy the demands of these people, but for their own sakes – for the sake of the governments. These people would be dangerous to the governments if they were left outside the governments and rose against them, by influencing the only, most powerful governmental instrument: public opinion. And so, the governments have to attract them by means of concessions, make these men harmless (harmless like microbe cultures), and then only use them for the purpose of serving the government’s ends: oppressing and exploiting the masses.

Both ways out are solidly and impermeably unproductive. What is left?

It is impossible to break open a way with violence, because you only increase the negative reaction. It is equally impossible to enter the ranks of the government, because one becomes a tool of the government. One thing is left: to struggle against the government with the instruments of thought, words, acts, and life itself, without making any concessions to it, without entering its ranks, and without increasing its force through as.

This one thing is necessary and will certainly be successful. God wants it, and Christ taught it.
From the diary of 1895

We have come to such a time and place that a simply good and sensible man cannot be a partaker in the government, that is, cannot be one with the government. I am not speaking only of Russia. Such a man in England cannot be one with the land ownership, the exploitation of the factories and capitalists, the orders in India, the flogging, the opium trade, the annihilation of nationalities in Africa, the preparations for war, and the wars themselves.

And the point of support, when a man says, “I do not know anything about the government, and I do not care to know, but I know that I cannot live contrary to my conscience” — that point of view is immovable, and all the men of our time ought to stand upon it in order to move life forward. “I know what my conscience commands me to do, but you people, who are busy with the government, arrange the government as you wish so that it may correspond to the demands of the conscience of the people of our time.”

Meanwhile, the people occupy the standpoint of the correction and improvement of the governmental, and thus, by recognizing the necessity of the government, lose their immovable point of support.