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Confession of a Convict

Alexander Berkman

1913

(The 19th of December, 1913, was “confession evening” at the “Twilight Club”, New York, among whose members are the “best” people, supreme court judges, and other pillars of society. “Confessions” were made by a drunkard, a dope fiend, an actress, a labor agitator, a convict, etc., some of whom spoke in complete darkness, to hide their identity.)

This is an evening of confession, and I therefore at once confess myself a lawbreaker, a criminal — if you will — and a convict.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentleman, I beg your kind indulgence, for the convict’s manner is uncouth, his speech ragged, his thoughts indecently naked. For only the convict, the outcast from the fold of commonplace respectability and dull conformity, can afford the luxury of frank, honest expression. And I should be honest with you — not only because of my lack of respect for that which is respected but the general consensus of stupidity, but rather because I hold in high respect my fellow convicts the world over, and — myself.

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And I make my confession, not in the protecting shadow of cowardly darkness, but in the full glare of the challenging light which defies all sham and hypocrisy, however generally revered, and which is neither afraid nor ashamed of anything that is human.

And the convict, the criminal, Ladies and Gentlemen, is human. So human, indeed, that one of your great ethical teachers was compelled to cry out: "I have within me the capacity for every crime". Nor do I believe that Emerson merely said this is an abandonment of generosity, with the desire of uttering something a great and leveling. I think he meant exactly what he said. For I believe that "within every bit of human flesh and spirit that has ever crossed the enigma bridge of life, from the prehistoric racial morning until now, all crime and all virtue were germinal." Out of the same stuff are we sprung, you and I and all of us, and if perchance in you the virtue has grown and not the vice, do not therefore conclude that you are essential different from him whom you have helped to put in stripes and behind bars. Your balance may be more even, you may be mixed in smaller proportions, or the outside temptation has not come upon you.

But has virtue really grown in you, and not vice? If the most respected and righteous among us, if our holiest and purist and better-than-thou pillars of church and state and society were for once to enter this confessional, in the frank abandon of their naked souls, would there be a single one left to cast and the first stone at the criminal and convict? Would there be any essential difference between the trust magnate and pick-pocket, except in the size of the booty they have stolen? Would there be any real difference between the great general or the judges on the criminal bench, and the ordinary murderer, except in the number of their victims? Would there be any difference between the employer of cheap labor or the Christian proprietor of a large department store, and the despicable creature we know has the cadet, except in the number of the girls they have forced into prostitution?

Your good police and detective departments will see to it that the ex-convict shall get no show. He will be speedily arrested on one pretext or another, and a kind Christian judge will decree that he be put away for a long term of years, for is it not his second offense?

Let us be done with all this sham and hypocrisy. Let us admit once for all that crime is social; that our wrong economic conditions, by enriching the few at the cost of the many, are the true and only sources of crime. And let us emancipate ourselves from the stupid notion that the criminal is a being different or apart from the rest of us. There is no need of holding our skirts that he may not contaminate us. Indeed it is we who contaminate the criminal; it is we, society at large, that are guilty of far greater and more terrible crimes against the criminal than he has ever committed against us. In justice to him, and to ourselves, primarily, let us be honest, and brave enough to look the facts in the face; and if we are sincere in this matter, if we really and truly want to do away with the criminal and the convict, let us eradicate the causes of crime, rather than try hypocritically to patch up and hide our social sores.

The first step in reforming the criminal is to reform ourselves, for he is our brother, of the same blood and flesh. A more enlightened social attitude toward crime and criminals will serve to humanize, to some extent, our penal institutions, and will inject a little of the milk of kindness into the bitter cup of the convict. And the next step is to treat the cause instead of the effect. When you cease to justify and maintain present conditions of capitalistic exploitation and governmental oppression, and all other institutions based upon man's inhumanity to man, when honest men will realize their solidarity with the aspirations of labor for complete emancipation from all bondage, when M A N will at last awaken from his nightmare of private ownership, of punishment and authority, then will crime and criminals forever disappear and make this earth fit for decent men and women to live in.

And whose crime is the greater — that of the man who steals my pocketbook or that of respected captains of industry who weave the very flesh and blood of their starving slaves into the luxury and license of the master's life?

Who is the real criminal, Ladies and Gentlemen? Is it the starveling who occasionally steals a loaf of bread or burglarizes my house or is it he who is the eternal vampire on the body of labor, forever feeding on the bone and marrow of the worker, exploiting and oppressing him, always keeping him on the verge of starvation that he may exercise his benevolent charity upon him, and ultimately degrading him to the lowest depths.

Thus is society organized, you'll say. Yes, thus: that a handful of the masters of life vampire upon the whole people. And therefore I indict modern society, this unholy union of authority and capital; I indict society as the greatest — aye, the only Criminal, the great universal crime that breeds and feeds the swamp of our whole social life with all its misery and degradation, all its evil and crimes.

For what is ordinarily called crime is but starvation. Ninety percent. Of all lawbreaking is of an economic nature. But it is not lawbreaking that makes the criminal. For as Oscar Wilde aptly said, "You may keep the law, and yet be worthless. You may break the law and yet be fine." It is starvation that fills our prisons. It is our wrong and unjust economic conditions that are the source of fully nine-tenths of all crime. And as to the other tenth, — though a crime may not be against property, it may spring from misery and rage and depression produced by our perverted social conditions. Jealousy, itself, an extraordinary source of crime in modern life, is an emotion closely bound up with our conceptions of property. Abolish private property and the social robbery it involves, and you will have abolished the chief fountainhead of all crime and the spirit that generates it in human society.

And now, as to the criminal in our prisons and penitentiaries. Why, do you know, he is not to be found there. There you will indeed find men convicted of offenses against the law; but the real,

bigger criminals, — they are the large fish that break through the net of the law which is built to catch only the little fry.

The species “criminal” is a fiction of uncritical prejudice that deals only with theories, with imaginary abnormalities and aberrations. Through the obscure spectacles of preconceived notion and stubborn narrow-mindedness, men of the Lombroso stamp see only the “criminal species”, entirely blind to the conception of crime as a social phenomenon, blind to the fact that the criminal, as an individual, is a unit of the larger species Man. The so-called criminal is not a little drop outside the ocean of life. He is one of us; his crime but the feverish pulse-beat of our sick social body.

The theory of the criminal species is at best but a cheap salve for the guilty social conscience. I suspect that if a good many respectable, decent, never-did-a-wrong-thing-in-their-lives people were to undergo the measurement test offered to the so-called “born criminal”, malformed ears and disproportionately long thumbs would be equally found among them, if they took the precaution to represent themselves as criminals first.

I speak from experience. In my close association with criminals during fourteen years, in daily and hourly contact, not as an outsider, but as an equal — I have come to know them well and intimately. When I first came in touch with them, I entertained the idea of the criminal type, the species “criminal”, a classification very much beloved by our prison reformists and criminologists. But closer contact and better understanding dispelled the fiction of the species and revealed the man, the individual, behind the convict.

There is no criminal type. In fact, the so-called criminal and convict is far more individualized, far more of a distinct personality than the average stupid citizen. He possesses a certain amount of initiative, considerable daring and independence of thought and action — traits, which, you will agree with me, are not the common earmarks of the average man. I have found no criminal type, but what I did find is that there are two classes of victims — the ac-

cidental and the professional. The accidental victim is the criminal by accident, one who has committed a crime as a result of some unusual combination of circumstances. The professional, on the other hand, is the one who follows crime as the ordinary pursuit of his life, similarly as the business man follows his profession of “stealing an honest living.”

The line between these two classes is not drawn sharply nor is it a definite one. Very often the accidental victim, because of his prison experience and all it involves, is forced into the ranks of the professional. Now, what happens to the men who get into prison? What do we do to them? Do we try to call out their better nature by humane and kind treatment? Oh, no! My time is too limited to permit me to dwell on this matter, but everyone even slightly familiar with conditions in our penal institutions is aware that the whole system is built on the principle of revenge, of brutal humiliation and barbarous punishment. I need only refer to the blackjack, the dungeon, the bullring, the water cure, to give you an idea of the spirit dominant in those institutions. And no wonder. For the prison in the last analysis is the mirror of society at large, the perfect model of our social arrangement whose cornerstone is hypocrisy, deceit, oppression and injustice. Punishment is degrading, even more to the one wielding the whip than to his victim. The history of crime clearly demonstrates that the more punishment is inflicted, the more crime is produced. And after you have tortured the poor convict for several years, degraded him to the lowest, broken him in body and spirit, you turn him out into a cold world without money or friends, and with the stigma of “convict” burned into his very soul. Having embittered and demoralized him to the verge of desperation, you demand that he become a good and useful citizen.

Is it any wonder, then, that your prisons have proved to be veritable hot-houses of crime — for what is the ex-convict to do, with every one an Ishmael against him?