

The Artist as Equal, Not Master

Jean Grave

1899

It is not only to those who are dying of want that anarchy addresses itself. To satisfy one's hunger is a primordial right that takes precedence over all other rights and stands at the head of the claims of a human being. But anarchy embraces all the aspirations and neglects no need. The list of its demands includes all the demands of humanity.

Mirbeau, in his *Mauvais Bergers*, makes one of the characters proclaim to workmen on strike their right to beauty. And, indeed, every being has a right not only to what sustains life, but also to whatever renders it easy, enlivens it, and embellishes it. They are rare, alas! in our social state, who can live their lives fully.

Some there are whose physical needs are satisfied, but who are inhibited in their evolution by a social organization which is conditioned by the narrowness of conception of the average intellect, - artists, litterateurs, savants, all who think, suffer morally, if not physically, from the present order of things.

Daily they are wounded by the pettiness of current existence, and disheartened by the mediocrity of the public to whom they address themselves, and whom they must consider if they wish to sell their works - a situation which leads those who would not die of hunger to compromise, to vulgar and mediocre art.

Their education has led many of them to believe that they are of an essence superior to the peasant, to the manual worker, from whom, for that matter, they are for the most part descended. They have been persuaded that it is necessary, if their "talent" is to develop and their imagination is to have full swing, that the "vile multitude" take upon its shoulders the heavy tasks, devote itself to serving them, and wear itself out in making, by its labour, life easy for them; that they must have, if their genius is to attain its complete fruition, the same atmosphere of luxury and of idleness as the aristocratic classes.

A healthy conception of things teaches that a human being, to be complete, must exercise his limbs as well as his brain, that labour is degrading only because it has been made a sign of servitude, and that a man truly worthy of the name does not need to impose the cares of his existence on others...

The artist and the litterateur belong to the masses. They cannot isolate themselves, and inevitably feel the effects of the surrounding mediocrity. It is vain for them to entrench themselves behind the privileges of the ruling classes, to attempt to withdraw into their "ivory tower"; if there is debasement for him who is reduced to performing the vilest tasks to satisfy his hunger,

the morality of those who condemn him to it is not superior to his own; if obedience degrades, command, far from exalting character, degrades it also.

To live their dream, realize their aspirations, they, too, must work-for the moral and intellectual elevation of the masses. They, too, must understand that their own development is made up of the intellectuality of all; that, whatever the heights they believe they have attained, they belong to the multitude. If they strain to rise above the multitude, a thousand bonds hold them to it, fetter their action and their thought, preventing them forever from reaching the summits they have glimpsed. A society normally constituted does not admit slaves, but a mutual exchange of services between equals.

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