

Anarchist Communist Revolution: In Commemoration of Imprisonment

Why is life so hard for tenant farmers?

Uchiyama Gudō

1908

You tenant farmers, you who produce food, the most important thing for human beings, the one thing we cannot do without, you all, since the old times of your ancestors, have worked hard to produce food, this most essential thing of all, but every year ends in scarcity for you. What sort of bad luck is this?

Is it because of what the Buddhists call bad retribution from your past lives? But seriously, folks, if today, in our world of the twentieth century, you are still deceived by this kind of superstition, you will really end up like cows and horses. Are you folks happy about being still poor every single year and complaining that what you have is not enough? Suppose that during the cold winter you could take your aging parents to Zushi or Kamakura, or Numazu, or Hayama, because they hate the cold and so that they can take some rest in one of those places — in that case you could still bear your situation. Again, if in the hot summer you could take your ailing wife and children to Hakone or Nikkō,¹ where they could find some relief from the heat; even if this year you don't have enough, you could still find some comfort. Suppose that, in order to send your eldest son to Germany to study, his little brother to the university, and your eldest daughter to a women's high school, you had to sell a hundred hectares of forest, or pledge fifty hectares of arable land as collateral for a loan; even so, counting on the good things that await you in the future because of that investment, your conversations with your wife in bed would not be so gloomy or painful.

However, when you folks complain, all year long, every year, that you don't have enough, it's certainly not because you allow yourselves such luxuries. You don't buy a new kimono just because it's New Year or O-bon,² in our twentieth-century world civilization, architectural technology has made many advances, but in spite of that our houses haven't changed for a long time; in fact, your houses are exactly the same as they were five hundred or one thousand years ago. But all this is quite obvious; in order to buy a kimono, you have to give money to a mercer; for the house, you have to pay the wages of the carpenters. but you folks, unfortunately, don't

¹ All of these are famous tourist resorts; in Gudō's time they were also areas in which the upper classes in the Tokyo region had vacation homes.

² O-bon is the midsummer festival which takes place on August 15.

have such money. That is why your kimonos are always in rags and your houses are like animals' burrows.

On the other hand, since you produce food, do you eat food of the best quality? Of course not. The best rice is taken by the landowner, and you have to eat millet or barley, still you work much more than the landlords and the merchants. In spite of that, every year you must suffer penury; this is the tenant farmers' fate.

Why is it so? There is a song saying,

*Why are you so poor? If you want to know the reason I will tell you:
That's because there is vermin that sucks people's blood;
They are the emperor, the rich, and the big landowners.³*

Folks, try to think. Of what you produce with your sweat all year long, half is taken by a thief called the landlord; with the half that's left, you buy sake, soy sauce, salt and manure. But on the sake, on that manure, on everything, nothing excluded, there are taxes – money that is taken by that big thief called the government. On top of that, other thieves called merchants make their own profit. That's why folks like you tenant farmers, who don't own your land, will never be able to avoid poverty throughout your life, no matter how hard and earnestly you work.

And it could still be acceptable, if that were all. If you have a son, after you raise him in poverty, how glad you are that he can finally help you making even just one more ridge in the field, so that you can hope to be able to just barely avoid borrowing money. But at that point, when your son is twenty-one, he is taken by the army, no matter how you hate that. Then, for three years, you have to send him money, while – and you don't even want to hear about that – he is trained to become a murderer. Then, if there is a war, he is forced to go to a bloody place, where he either kills people or is himself killed. There are even fathers who, during the three years their son is taken away from them by the army, are forced to go begging with their wives and other children. There are so many young people in the army who, because their families are poor and cannot send them money, are hazed by their senior comrades, and end up hanging themselves, or jumping into a river, or killing themselves on a railway.

This is how they harass you, you tenant farmers! You folks wake up early in the morning with the birds and work until dark, yet cannot get rid of poverty.

Why does all this happen? We are all born as human beings, but if you are born in a family of landowners or rich people you can play at school or abroad until you are twenty four, twenty five or even thirty; then, when you go back home, you can escape the summer heat to a cool place, and you [can] build a house on the warm coast and spend winter there leisurely. Isn't it so? They wear silk kimonos without having to pick up even one single leaf of mulberry, and live in luxury drinking sake and eating meats as they please. They enjoy themselves without doing anything all their life. You folks perhaps don't know it, but the big landlords and the rich open 2,000 or 3,000 yen for one person to enjoy their summer months in Nikko or Hakone, don't they? I mean, 3,000 yen! There's no way you folks could make that much money even if you work all day, without resting and without eating much, from when you are twenty until when you are fifty. And those people don't even have to join the army.

³ This revolutionary "song" is Uchiyama's variation on a popular socialist song, "Shakaitō rappabushi ("Fanfare of the Socialist Party"), first published in a socialist magazine in 1906; see Morinaga, *Uchiyama Gudō*, p. 131.

Tenant farmers! I'm sure you'd like to live a life of luxury like those rich people and big landowners. To have fun and eat good food once in a while. but you can't do that, because you hold on to some particular superstitions. And because since the old time of your ancestors you have treasured those superstitions, you cannot even dream of a life of luxury like the landowners and the rich enjoy. But if you folks listen to what we have to tell you and just give up these superstitions now, you will truly become free men able to live in comfort.

However, if you give up these superstitions the emperor and the rich will no longer be able to afford their own live of ease and luxury, and so from ancient times the emperors and daimyos have been cheating you by telling you that these superstitions are precious and essential things. Therefore, you should not forget that, for you folks, today's emperor and ministers, and in the past the Tokugawa and the daimyos from the ancient times of your ancestors, are your greatest enemies, against whom you should have piled up many grudges.

Even today, in the Meiji era, it is the same thing. The government, using everyone from university professors down to elementary school teachers, is doing everything in its power to prevent you from giving up these superstitions. And you folks, you are thankful for that. That is why you won't be able to get rid of poverty for all your life— no, not just your own life but also the lives of your descendants.

Now what are these superstitions that schoolteachers teach you and your children? A superstition is a wrong idea that one holds precious like a sacred thing. I will tell you later why you people have been holding on to these wrong ideas since the remote past; now, let me tell you what these wrong ideas, these superstitions, are.

- Since you are graciously given the chance to cultivate the fields by the landowners, you must pay him land rent (shōsakumai) as a token of your gratitude.
- Precisely because there is government, we peasants can work in peace. We must pay our taxes as a token of gratitude for that.
- If our country did not have enough armaments, we peasants would end up being killed by the foreigners. Therefore, we must send our young, strong boys into the army.

This is it. Because these wrong ideas have penetrated deeply into your minds, you do not protest against paying land rent, taxes, or sending your sons into the army, no matter how poor you are. If someone told you, it's OK not to pay your land rent, it's OK not to pay your taxes, it's OK not to send your beloved son to the army, you would think such a person is a rebel or a traitor to the country and you would not listen or read about such ideas, even though these ideas are in fact meant for your freedom and for improving your life. This is what I would like you to think and read carefully about the most.

Now why do some people say it's OK not to pay rent to the landowners? Well, the fields that you tenant farmers cultivate— try to leave them alone, from spring until fall, without plowing, sowing, and fertilizing them. When the fall comes, there will not be a single grain of rice; in the summer no one will be able to harvest even half a grain of barley. If you think of it this way, one immediately understands. Rice ripens in the fall, and barley in the summer, only because you tenant farmers work without rest all year round. If you think of it this way, the rice and the barley that result from your own work, all belong to you tenant farmers. Why in the world should one give half of it to the landowner? That's nonsense!

The land originally existed in nature and our ancestors developed it so that they could grow food. Why is it that he who takes possession of the things he himself has harvested after cultivating the land is called a rebel?

For a long time you tenant farmers have been robbed by the landowners, but now, right now, if you awaken from your delusion, you can finally take your revenge not only by not paying your annual rent, you also have the right to take back the barley and the money accumulated in the landowner's storehouse. It's definitely not thievery to take away everything from inside the landowner's storehouse. On the contrary, to recover what has been taken away from you tenant farmers, and from all of us, over a long time is an honorable endeavor.

Next, why is it OK not to pay taxes to the government? Tenant farmers, there is no need for complicated arguments. You tenant farmers, just how is your life better thanks to the existence of the government? If there is just one little thing we are grateful to His Excellency, Mr. Government, tell me. Since of old, it is said that you cannot win against crying babies and the land steward. Indeed, the exercise of odious oppression is the job of those in power, isn't it? You tenant farmers work hard and pay your taxes honestly in order to support those hideous people, and as a consequence you remain poor. This is the maximum of stupidity.

Folks, let's stop paying taxes to the stupid government, and let's ruin those hideous people as soon as we can! Then, let's take back the wealth that the government has stolen from us over a long time through force and oppression, from the time of our ancestors, and let's keep it in common! That is your natural right, and people who love justice should actively rebel against the government for freedom and a better life for all.

To destroy the present government and establish a free country without an emperor is not treason but an action appropriate to heroes who love justice. Why is this so? The boss of this government, the emperor, is not the son of a god, as the schoolteachers deceptively tell you. The ancestors of the present emperor came from a remote corner of Kyushu; murdering and stealing, they eventually killed one of their fellow brigands, Nagasunebiko;⁴ it's as if Kumasaka Chōhan or Shuten Dōji from ōeyama had won.⁵ It is easy to understand that the emperor is not a god if you just think about it. One might think that he is actually a god just because [his dynasty] has continued for 2,500 years, but in fact for all this time he has been tormented by his guards⁶ on the outside, and inside he has been treated as a toy by his own servants. Even now in this Meiji era, it's just the same. The emperor, they say, has been suffering because of internal politics and international relations. However, one reaps as one has sown, and this suffering of the emperor's is all of his own making and is none of our concerns. Rather, because of him, you tenant farmers have troubles every single day getting enough food to eat in spite of your earnest labor! They say that Japan is the land of the gods, but you tenant farmers have little to be thankful for that.

That bunch of wimps, university professors and scholars, cannot say or write about all these obvious things; instead they tell the people hundreds of lies to the point that they end up deceiving themselves! Elementary schoolteachers are especially at pains to teach about being grateful

⁴ According to the *Nihon shoki* (720 CE), an ancient Japanese myth-historical text, the tribal leader Nagasunebiko organized the resistance against Emperor Jinmu's conquest of the Kumano area, but was eventually killed by a god of the imperial clan; see W.G. Aston, trans., *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to AD 697* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1972), pp. 113, 126–128.

⁵ Kumasaka Chōhan, a character in medieval war hero Minamoto no Yoshitsune's cycle of stories, became a synonym for a great thief; Shuten Dōji is a terrible monster and brigand of popular legend.

⁶ The text has *ban'ei*, probably a misspelling for *banpei* (guards); I have modified my translation accordingly.

to the emperor, but are gradually getting better at telling lies, and every year on the occasion of the three great holidays, they teach you and your children, looking as if they didn't know [any] better, that the emperor is the son of the gods. You are taught that you must work hard and serve this descendant of thieves who wears the mask of a god, and because of that you folks will be forever be unable to get rid of poverty. After hearing all this, even the most patient among you would most certainly decide to join the [revolutionary] movement, even at the cost of your own lives, to take back what has been stolen from all of you.

Tenant farmers! Because of these old superstitions, you have believed that if the country has no army, the common people will not survive. Of course, both in the past and the present, it is obvious that, if war breaks out, a country without an army will be destroyed by a country that has one. However, wars happen because there are those great thieves called emperors and governments. Isn't war a fight between one government and another? It boils down to this: because thieves fight among themselves, the common people suffer. If we eliminate the thief called government, war will disappear. If there is no more war, then there is no need to send your beloved sons to the army. It's as simple as that!

Now, all this means that the fastest way to eliminate that great thief called government is to stop paying rent to the landowners, paying taxes and sending your sons into the army.

There are several methods to put this ideology into practice. First, you tenant farmers, even just ten or twenty among you, should form a labor union and put these things into practice— namely, don't pay land rent to the landowner, don't pay taxes to the government, and don't send your sons into the army. If you begin acting in this way, and since many people love justice, your movement will spread from one village to one district, from one district to one prefecture, and eventually from Japan to the whole world, and at that point the ideal land of anarchist communism, where all are free and live a comfortable life, will be realized.

Nothing can be realized without sacrifice. If you want to join us, for the sake of justice, let's start the movement even at the risk of our own lives.

On June 22, 1908, in the capital of the Empire of Japan, I and some ten other comrades raised the red flag of anarchist communism and declared our resistance against the emperor, and on August 29 of the same year we were convicted.

I printed this booklet to commemorate the imprisonment of Ōsugi Sakae, Arahata Shōzō, Satō Satori, Momose Susui, Utsunomiya Takuji, Morioka Eiji, Sakai Toshihiko, Muraki Genjirou,⁷ Ōsuga Sato, Yamakawa Hitoshi, Ogure Rei,⁸ and Tokunaga Yasunosuke.

This booklet should be used by the few comrades in the capital to continue to spread our message during the absence of our imprisoned comrades, until they get out of prison in one to four years.

Those of you who, after reading this booklet, understand that the coming revolution is for the realization of anarchist communism, please send letters or postcards to the comrades in prison. This is their only consolation, but it is also a gospel to study the courage of the fighting heroes.

Please address the letters to the comrades in prison.

To: Mr. or Ms. So-and-so, Inmate in Ushinome Ichigaya Tokyo Prison, Tokyo City.

Clearly write also the name and address of the sender.

⁷ Indicated as Kimura Genjirō in Gudō's text.

⁸ Also known as Ogure Reiko.

This booklet awakens you from your long-lasting superstitious dreams, and urges you to participate in our revolution that will take place in the near future; the content of this booklet has to be spread widely and deeply, so that people do not misunderstand our reasoning. I hope this message will be spread to as many people as possible, people who will not be afraid even of throwing dynamite for the cause of anarchist communism. I also hope that those people who, after reading this booklet, do not agree with us, will still think seriously about whether our present society is a just society, and whether our ideals will perfect this society or not.

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