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The “Illegalists”

Doug Imrie

1994–95

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“It is idiotic that those who have figured things out are forced to wait for the mass of cretins who are blocking the way to evolve. The herd will always be the herd. So let’s leave it to stagnate and work on our own emancipation (...) Put your old refrains aside. We have had enough of always sacrificing ourselves for something. The Fatherland, Society and Morality have fallen (...) That’s fine, but don’t contribute to reviving new entities for us: the Idea, the Revolution, Propaganda, Solidarity; we don’t give a damn. What we want is to live, to have the comforts and well-being we have a right to. What we want to accomplish is the development of our individuality in the full sense of the word, in its entirety. The individual has a right to all possible well-being, and must try to attain it all the time, by any means...” (Hégot, an illegalist, writing to the anarchist journal *Les Temps Nouveaux* in 1903, on behalf of a “small circle” who shared his opinions.)

Parallel to the social, collectivist anarchist current there was an individualist one whose partisans emphasized their individual freedom and advised other individuals to do the same. Individualist anarchist activity spanned the full spectrum of alternatives to authoritarian society, subverting it by undermining its way of life facet by facet. The vast majority of individualist anarchists were caught in the trap of wage labor like their collectivist comrades and the proletariat in general: they had to work for peanuts or starve. Some individualists rebelled by withdrawing from the economy and forming voluntary associations to achieve self-sufficiency. Others took the route of illegalism, attacking the economy through the direct individual reappropriation of wealth. Thus theft, counterfeiting, swindling and robbery became a way of life for hundreds of individualists, as it was already for countless thousands of proletarians. The wave of anarchist bombings and assassinations of the 1890s (Auguste Vaillant, Ravachol, Emile Henry, Sante Caserio) and the practice of illegalism from the mid-1880s to the start of the First World War (Clément Duval, Pini, Marius Jacob, the Bonnot gang) were twin aspects of the same proletarian offensive, but were expressed in an individualist practice, one that *complemented* the great collective struggles against capital. The illegalist comrades were tired of waiting for the revolution. The acts of the anarchist bombers and assassins (“propaganda by the deed”) and the anarchist burglars (“individual reappropriation”) expressed their desperation and their personal, violent rejection of an intolerable society. Moreover, they were clearly meant to be *exemplary*, invitations to revolt.

All of society’s snares lay in wait for the **illegalists**, and to survive they were forced to make compromises, such as dealing with organized crime. They were constantly at risk of being set up by informers and agents provocateurs. When their nearly inevitable arrests occurred, some made deals with the cops and turned in their friends; others did long prison terms. In France the laws were draconian then. Prisons were much worse and the penal colonies were

basically death camps¹. The guillotines were constantly supplied with fresh meat. Hundreds of **illegalists** were imprisoned. Many abandoned their anarchist politics, degenerating to the point where they behaved in a completely mercenary way. What started out as a revolt against bourgeois society usually turned into a purely economic affair, reproducing the cycle of “crime” and repression.

Marius Jacob was one of the foremost exponents and practitioners of anarchist illegalism in pre-war France. He was born to working class parents in Marseilles on Sept. 27, 1879. After finishing school he went to sea to train as a sailor. His sailing included a long voyage along the west coast of Africa. At 16 he had to abandon his life as a sailor for health reasons, and returned to France. By then he had already been introduced to the anarchist milieu by a friend, and became an anarchist. Soon after, in 1896, at the end of the period of “propaganda by the deed” in France, he was set up by an agent provocateur who procured explosives then snatched him off. He was sentenced to six months’ imprisonment at age 17. After his release, the police systematically visited each of his employers and got him fired. Together with two anarchist friends he hatched a scheme to pass himself off as a senior police officer, and carried out a fake raid on a pawnshop in Marseilles in May, 1899. He then traveled to Spain and Italy. Upon his return to France he was arrested in Toulon, then imprisoned in Aix-la-Provenec. He escaped and turned to illegalism on a full-time basis.²

¹ For a good account of what the penal colonies were like, see *Dry Guillotine: Fifteen Years Among the Living Dead*, René Belbenoit (E.P. Dutton, 1938).

² For good accounts of Jacob’s life, see A. Sergeant’s *Un anarchiste de la belle époque, Marius Jacob* (Ed. Le Seuil, 1950), Bernard Thomas’ *Jacob* (Ed. Tchou) and Jacob’s text of Sept. 1948, *Souvenirs d’un demi-siècle*. Richard Parry’s *The Bonnot Gang* (Rebel Pr.) is an excellent account of the illegalist individualists whose actions followed Jacob’s arrest by a mere five years. Highly recommended. Finally, *The Art of Anarchy* (Cienfuegos Pr.) contains *magnificent* illustrations by anarchist Flavio Costantini that portray the actions of Jacob’s band and of other illegatists.

Around 1900, Jacob formed a band of anarchist **illegalists** who specialized in burglaries and fencing stolen goods. The band was based in Paris but operated throughout France, as well as in Italy and Belgium. The band was well-organized and very professional. The members' activities fell into three main categories: the scouts, who went from town to town looking for homes whose owners were absent and collected the information necessary to make the break-ins function flawlessly; the burglars, with a set of first-rate tools at their disposal, valued at 10,000 francs (easily \$2500); and a fencing operation to sell the loot. Jacob persuaded some of the members to contribute ten percent of their take to anarchist propaganda efforts; some refused on individualist grounds, preferring to keep their share. The band stole only from "social parasites" like priests, the wealthy and military officers. They spared the poor and those whose occupations they considered useful, like doctors, architects and writers. By common agreement, murder was excluded as an option except in cases of legitimate self-defense. The band was armed. To minimize the risk of violence, they perfected a system of door seats which they attached to all exits of the buildings they were "working" in. Jacob later admitted that he participated in 106 burglaries, whose take was estimated at 5 million francs (an estimate, by the way, that Jacob considerably inflated). One of the most memorable break-ins was at the Cathedral of Tours, where the band stole 17th century tapestries valued at 200,000 francs. They left behind a graffito: "All-powerful god, find your thieves!"

In late 1903, three members of the band were caught in Abbeville by a cop, Provost, who was shot dead. The burglars escaped, but two were caught in a trap set for them in Paris, and this arrest led to the arrests of most of the members. After 18 months investigation by a magistrate, the trial of 23 out of the 29 accused members began in March 1905. Most were found guilty: Jacob and Bour (who apparently killed Provost) were sentenced to hard labor for life in the penal colonies. Fourteen other members received sentences totaling 100 years. Another ten, among them Jacob's mother, were

acquitted. Jacob was deported to the penal colony in the lies du Saint in January 1906 and served twenty years, including 8 years 11 months in chains. Due to a campaign for his release organized primarily by his mother, he was released in 1925. He took up work as a traveling salesman, selling hosiery and clothing until his death by a deliberate morphine overdose on Aug. 28, 1954. The accounts of his friends show that Marius Jacob did not commit suicide out of despair, but out of a calm desire to avoid the infirmities of old age.

Looking back on his experiences in 1948 Jacob observed: "I don't think that illegalism can free the individual in present-day society. If he manages to free himself of a few constraints using this means, the unequal nature of the struggle will create others that are even worse and, in the end, will lead to the loss of his freedom, the little freedom he had, and sometimes his life. Basically, illegalism, considered as an act of revolt, is more a matter of temperament than of doctrine. This is why it cannot have an educational effect on the working masses as a whole. By this, I mean a *worthwhile* educational effect.