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Elisée Reclus
Evolution, Revolution, and the Anarchist Ideal
1898

Anarchy, Geography, Modernity: Selected Writings of Elisée Reclus.

On February 5, 1880, Reclus delivered an address in Geneva entitled “Evolution et Révolution.” It was published in the journal *Le Révolté* under that title (February 21, 1880): 1–2, and then was reprinted as a pamphlet and translated many times. Reclus finally expanded the discussion into a book entitled *L’Evolution, la révolution et l’idéal anarchique* (Paris: Stock, 1898; Montréal: Lux Editions, 2004), his only full-length work on anarchist politics.

The following text consists of excerpts containing the most important discussions in that work; it includes about one-fourth of the original text.

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Evolution encompasses the entirety of human affairs. We ought to recognize that revolution does also, even though this parallelism is not always evident from the individual events that make up the whole of the life of societies. All advancements are interdependent, and in proportion to our knowledge and power, we desire them all—social and political progress, moral and material progress, and progress in science, art, and industry. In every sphere we are not only evolutionists, but just as much revolutionists, since we realize that history itself is but a series of achievements that follows a series of preparations. The great intellectual evolution that emancipates minds has a logical consequence in the emancipation of individuals in all of their relationships with other individuals.

It can thus be said that evolution and revolution are two successive aspects of the same phenomenon, evolution preceding revolution, and revolution preceding a new evolution, which is in turn the mother of future revolutions. Can any change take place without producing sudden shifts in the balance of life? Does revolution not inevitably follow evolution in the same way that an act follows

the will to act? The two differ only in the time of their appearance. When a mass of fallen debris obstructs a river, the waters gradually accumulate above the impediment, and a lake is formed through slow evolution. Then suddenly the down-river dam begins to leak, and the fall of a pebble precipitates a cataclysm. The obstruction is violently swept away, and the emptied lake once again becomes a river. In this way, a small terrestrial revolution takes place.

If revolution always lags behind evolution, it is because of the resistance of the environment: the water in a stream splashes between its banks because they hinder its flow; thunder rumbles in the sky because the atmosphere resists the electrical charge that flashes down from the cloud. Each transformation of matter and each realization of an idea is, during its actual process of change, thwarted by the inertia of the environment. A new phenomenon can thus come into being only through an effort that is more violent, or a force that is more powerful, than the resistance. Herder, speaking of the French Revolution, expressed this idea: "A seed falls to the ground, and for a long time it seems to be dead. Then suddenly it sprouts, displaces the hard soil that had covered it, violently pushes away its enemy, the clay, and thus becomes a flowering plant that bears fruit." And consider how a child is born: after spending nine months in the darkness of the womb, it also escapes violently, tearing its receptacle and sometimes even killing its mother. Such are revolutions—necessary consequences of the evolutions that preceded them.

However, revolutions do not necessarily constitute progress, just as evolutions are not always directed toward justice. Everything changes; everything in nature moves as part of an eternal movement. But where there is progress, there can also be regression, and if some evolutions tend toward the growth of life, there are others that incline toward death. To stop is impossible, and it is necessary

to move in one direction or another. The hardened reactionary and the gentle liberal, both of whom cry out in fright at the word “revolution,” nevertheless march onward toward a revolution—the last one, which is eternal rest. Disease, senility, and gangrene are evolutions just as much as puberty is. The appearance of worms in a corpse, like the first cry of an infant, indicates that a revolution has occurred. Physiology and history demonstrate that some evolutions indicate decline, and certain revolutions mean death.

We know human history only partially, based on the experience of but a few thousand years, yet it offers endless examples of tribes, peoples, cities, and empires that have perished miserably as a consequence of slow evolutions that led to their downfall. The factors that brought about these maladies of entire nations and races have been manifold and diverse. Climate and soil can deteriorate, as has certainly happened over vast stretches of Central Asia where lakes and rivers have dried up and salt deposits have reclaimed previously fertile lands. Invasions of enemy hordes devastated certain regions to such an extent that they have remained forever desolate; however, many nations were able to flourish again following conquests and massacres, even after centuries of oppression. Thus if a nation falls again into barbarism or completely dies out, one must seek the reasons for its regression and ruin, above all within the nation itself and in its essential constitution, rather than in external circumstances. There is a fundamental cause—indeed, the cause of all causes—that epitomizes the history of decline. It is the establishment of mastery of one part of society over another, and the monopolizing of land, capital, power, education, and honors by a few or by an aristocracy. As soon as the dull masses no longer have the drive to revolt against this monopoly by a small number of men, they are as good as dead, and their disappearance is but a matter of time. The black plague will soon come to finish off such a useless swarm of individuals without liberty. Slaughtering invaders charge from east and west, and the desert moves in to replace immense cities. Thus Assyria and Egypt died and Persia collapsed, and when

the whole Roman Empire belonged to a few great landowners, the barbarians soon replaced the enslaved proletariat.

Every event is two-sided, for it is at once a phenomenon of death and a phenomenon of revival; in other words, it is the result of evolution toward decay and also toward progress. Thus the Roman Empire's destruction, in its immense complexity, consisted of a whole set of revolutions corresponding to a series of evolutions, some of which were disastrous and others fortunate. The destruction of the formidable machine of suppression that had weighed heavily on the world was certainly a great relief for the oppressed, and the violent arrival of the peoples from the north to the world of civilization was also in many respects a fortunate stage in the history of humanity. During the upheaval, many of the enslaved regained a small amount of liberty at the expense of their masters; however, science and industry perished or went into hiding. Statues were smashed and libraries were burned. It seems as though the chain of time had broken, so to speak. The people abandoned their heritage of knowledge. Despotism was followed by a worse despotism, and from a dead religion grew the offshoots of a new one that was more authoritarian, cruel, and fanatical. For a thousand years, the darkness of ignorance and folly propagated by monks spread across the earth.

Since every event and every period of history presents a double aspect, it is impossible to judge any of them categorically. The very example of the renewal that brought the Middle Ages and the night of ignorance to a close shows us how two revolutions can simultaneously be carried out—one resulting in decline, and the other in progress. The Renaissance, which rediscovered the monuments of antiquity, deciphered its books and teachings, freed science from superstitious methods, and once again engaged men in objective studies, also resulted in the definitive end of the spontaneous artis-

the “Montreuil Commune.” Some painters, carpenters, gardeners, housekeepers, and schoolteachers got the idea of simply working for one another, without hiring a bookkeeper as intermediary or asking the advice of a tax collector or notary. If someone needed chairs or tables, he went to see the friend who made them. If someone's house had become a bit shabby, he informed a comrade, who brought his paintbrush and bucket of paint the next day. During good weather, the members put on clean clothes, well cared for and pressed by the women citizens, and then went for a walk to gather fresh vegetables at the garden of another friend. And every day the children studied reading with the schoolteacher. It was too beautiful! Such a scandal had to stop. Fortunately, an “anarchist attack” had spread terror among the bourgeoisie, and the minister whose name recalls the “infamous laws”⁸ had the great idea of offering a New Year's present to the conservatives—a decree of arrests and mass searches. The brave communitarians of Montreuil did not survive, and the most guilty—that is, the best among them—had to submit to that disguised torture called the secret investigation. And so the dreaded little commune was killed. But do not fear—it will be reborn.

⁸ Reclus refers to “les conventions scélérates,” by which he means *les lois scélérates*, which consisted of repressive “emergency regulations” passed in 1894 and 1895 against the anarchists.

but which now have become numerous and wonderfully prosperous. Undoubtedly, several of these associations have turned out very badly, especially the most prosperous among them, in the sense that the realization of profit and the desire to increase it have inflamed the love of wealth among the members of the cooperative, or at least diverted them from the revolutionary enthusiasm of the early years. This is the most formidable danger, human nature being always ready to grasp at excuses to avoid the risks of the struggle. It is easy to confine oneself to one's "good work," thrusting aside the concerns and dangers that arise from devotion to the revolutionary cause in its full scope. One tells oneself that it is especially important to succeed in an undertaking that involves the collective honor of a great number of friends, and one gradually allows oneself to be drawn into the petty practices of conventional business. The person who had resolved to change the world has changed into nothing more than a simple grocer.

Nevertheless, studious and sincere anarchists can learn a great lesson from these innumerable cooperatives that have emerged everywhere and joined to form ever larger entities in such a way as to encompass the most diverse functions, such as those of industry, transportation, agriculture, science, art, and entertainment. The scientific practice of mutual aid is spreading and becoming easy to achieve. All that remains is to give it its true meaning and morality by simplifying the whole system of exchange of services and retaining only the simple recording of statistics of production and consumption, thereby eliminating the large books of "debit" and "credit," which will have become useless.

This profound revolution is not only on the path to fulfillment, but is actually being realized in various places; however, it is pointless to draw attention to the endeavors that seem to us to be closest to our ideal, for their chances of success are greatest if silence continues to protect them, if the clamor of publicity does not disturb their modest beginnings. Let us remember the history of the small society of friends that had gathered under the name of

tic movement that had developed so splendidly during the period of free cities and communes. It came as suddenly as the overflowing of a river that ravages the neighboring farm lands. Everything had to start over, and often, banal imitations of the ancient replaced works that at least had the merit of being original!

The renaissance of science and art was accompanied in the religious world by the split within Christianity called the Reformation. For a long time, it seemed natural to view this revolution as one of the beneficial turning points of humanity, epitomized by the conquest of the right of individual initiative and the emancipation of the mind, which the priests had kept in servile ignorance. It was believed that henceforth, men would be their own masters, each equal through the independence of thought. But we now know that the Reformation also meant the establishment of other authoritarian churches in opposition to the one that had hitherto held the monopoly on intellectual enslavement. The Reformation shifted fortunes and prebends to benefit the new power, and religious orders emerged from both sides—Jesuits and counter-Jesuits—to exploit the people in new ways. Luther and Calvin spoke of those who did not share their views with the same language of fierce intolerance as such figures as St. Dominic and Innocent III. Like the Inquisition, they spied, imprisoned, quartered, and burned, and in principle, their doctrine implied equal obedience to kings and to the interpreters of the "Divine Word."

There is often a most shocking disparity between the revolutionary circumstances that accompany the emergence of an institution and the manner in which it functions, which is completely opposed to the ideals of its naïve founders. At its birth, there may be cries of "Liberty! Liberty!" and the hymn "War against the Tyrants" may resound in the streets; however, "tyrants" still manage to come into their midst as the direct result of the routine, the hierarchy, and

the spirit of regression that gradually encroach on every institution. The longer any institution persists, the more formidable it becomes, for it finally rots the very soil on which it stands and pollutes the atmosphere around it. The mistakes that it sanctions, and the perversion of ideas and feelings that it justifies and promotes, take on such a character of antiquity and even sanctity that rarely does anyone dare to challenge it. Its authority grows with each passing century, and if it nevertheless dies out in the end, as do all things, it is because it finds itself increasingly at odds with the totality of new developments emerging around it.

Some institutions, such as those of religious creeds, have gained such a powerful hold over the soul that many free-thinking historians have thought it impossible for men to liberate themselves from them. Indeed, the popular image of God sitting on his throne in Heaven is not one that is easy to overcome. In the logical order of human development, religious organization followed the political one, and priests came after chiefs, since every image presupposes a primordial reality; however, the religious illusion was placed at the loftiest height in order to make it the original justification for all earthly authority, and it was thus endowed with a majestic character par excellence. One spoke to the sovereign and mysterious power, the “Unknown God,” in a state of fear and trembling that suppressed all thought and all inclination toward critical analysis or personal judgment. Adoration was the only feeling that priests allowed their faithful.

According to social psychology, we must mistrust not only the power that is already established, but also that which is emerging. It is equally important to examine carefully the practical meaning

to perish, even if the fire had not fulfilled the innermost desire of some, since the basic will of the members was at odds with the functioning of their colony.

Most communitarian associations have perished for similar reasons related to their inability to adapt to their surroundings. They were not regulated, as are barracks or monasteries, by the absolute will of religious or military masters and by the no less absolute obedience of their inferiors—soldiers, monks, or nuns. Besides, they did not yet possess the bond of complete solidarity that results in absolute respect for persons, intellectual and artistic development, and the prospect of a great and continually growing ideal. The opportunities for discord and even disunity are even more to be expected when colonists, attracted by the mirage of a distant land, are drawn toward a region completely different from their own, where each thing seems strange to them and where adaptation to the soil, the climate, and local customs is subject to the greatest uncertainties. The phalansterians who accompanied Victor Considérant to the plains of northern Texas shortly after the foundation of the Second Empire were headed toward certain ruin. They settled in the midst of populations whose brutal and coarse customs surely must have shocked their thin Parisian skins. Also, they encountered the abominable institution of black slavery and were even forbidden by law to express their opinion about it. Similarly, the experiment of Freiland, or “Land of Freedom,” attempted under the direction of a Prussian officer in regions known only through vague stories and conquered with difficulty through a war of extermination, offered a farcical spectacle to the historian. It was evident from the beginning that all these heterogeneous elements would not be able to unite in a harmonious whole.

None of these failures can discourage us, for the successive efforts indicate an irresistible striving of the social will. Neither disappointments nor ridicule can deter the seekers. Besides, they always have before them the example of the “cooperatives”—consumers’ associations and other types—which also had difficult beginnings

Thus it is quite remarkable that they accomplish work that may be limited in scope, but that nonetheless introduces to the world around it a new quality of life. Moreover, some signs of the society of the future do occasionally appear here and there among the workers, thanks to favorable circumstances and to the strength of the idea, which pervades even some social circles in the world of the privileged.

Often it pleases our critics to ask us sarcastically about previous attempts to create more or less communal associations in various parts of the world, and we would lack perspective if we were in any way embarrassed to answer such questions. True, the history of these associations reveals many more failures than successes. It could not be otherwise, since what is necessary is total revolution, the replacement of individual or collective work for the benefit of one, by the work of all for the benefit of all. The persons who come together in order to form one of these societies with new ideals are themselves by no means completely rid of prejudices, old practices, and deeply rooted atavisms; they have not yet “shed the old man”! In the “anarchist” or “harmonist” microcosm they have created, they must always struggle against the dissociative and disruptive forces produced by habits, customs, the ever-powerful bonds of family, tempting advice from friends, the return of worldly ambitions, the need for adventure, and the obsession with change. Pride and a feeling of dignity can sustain novices for a while, but at the first disappointment, it is easy for them to succumb to a secret hope that the undertaking will fail and that they will once again plunge into the tumult of life on the outside. We are reminded of the experience of the colonists of Brook Farm in New England, who remained faithful to their association, if only through the bonds of virtue and loyalty to their original intention. Nevertheless, they were delighted when a fire destroyed their communal palace, thus absolving them from the agreement contracted among them in what amounted to a sort of interior vow, albeit not in the monastic sense. Obviously, the association was doomed

of such seemingly innocuous or even seductive words as “patriotism,” “order,” and “social peace.” The love of one’s native soil is, without doubt, a very natural and agreeable sentiment. It is delightful for an exile to hear his cherished maternal language and once more to see places that remind him of his birthplace. And such love is not limited to the land that nourished him and the language that he heard in the cradle, but also extends, through a natural impulse, to the sons of that same land, with whom he shares ideas, feelings, and customs. If he has a noble nature, he will finally become fervently attached, with a passionate solidarity, to those whose needs and ways he knows intimately. If this is “patriotism,” what man of heart could help but feel it? But the word almost always hides a meaning quite different from mere “love for the land of one’s forefathers.”

It is a strange contradiction that one’s native land has never been spoken of with such burning affection as it has since it began to disappear gradually into the great terrestrial homeland of humanity. Flags are seen everywhere, especially at the doors of cabarets and houses of ill repute. The “ruling classes” incessantly boast of their patriotism, while at the same time investing their assets abroad and trading illicitly with Vienna or Berlin in whatever will bring them money—including state secrets. Even scholars, forgetful of having once constituted an international republic throughout the world, speak of “French science,” “German science,” or “Italian science,” as if it were possible to confine the knowledge of facts and the dissemination of ideas within borders, under police protection. They practice protectionism not only for turnips and cotton cloth, but also for the products of the mind. But to the degree that the minds of the powerful become narrower, those of ordinary people are expanded. Men in high positions see their domain and their hopes diminished to the extent that we rebels take possession of the universe and enlarge our hearts. We think of ourselves as comrades throughout the world, from America to Europe and from Europe to Australia. We use the same language to assert the same inter-

ests, and the day is coming when we will in a spontaneous impulse adopt the same tactics and a single rallying cry. Our army awakens in all corners of the world.

In comparison to this global movement, what is commonly called patriotism is nothing but a regression in every respect. One would have to be extremely naïve to be unaware of the fact that the “catechisms of citizenship” preach the love of homeland in order to serve all the interests and privileges of the ruling class, and that for the benefit of this class they promote hatred between the weak and disinherited of various countries. The term “patriotism” and all the modern glosses on it disguise the age-old practices of servile obedience to the will of a leader and the complete abdication of the individual in the face of those who hold power and wield the entire nation like a blind force. Similarly, the words “order” and “social peace” sound quite beautiful to our ears, but we would like to know what those noble apostles, the rulers, mean by these words. Yes, peace and order are great ideals that deserve to be realized, but under one condition: that this peace is not that of the grave, and this order is not that of Warsaw!¹ Our future peace must arise not from the unquestioned domination by some and the hopeless enslavement of others, but from good, straightforward equality among friends.

Although the current state of affairs is atrocious, an immense evolution has taken place, giving promise of the next revolution. This evolution consists in the fact that the “science” of economics,

¹ Reclus’ meaning here is not entirely clear. At the time he was writing, Poland no longer existed as a sovereign state, having been partitioned between Russia, Prussia, and Austria. The largest segment, of which Warsaw was the metropolis, consisted of the “Kingdom of Poland,” which suffered under Russian domination. Presumably, “the order of Warsaw” means the autocratic imposition of order, as that through which the czarist regime suppressed seething nationalism, revolutionary movements, and student unrest in Poland.

to express a mere dream or chimerical hope. But it was repeated more loudly, and now it resounds so strongly that the capitalist world often trembles from it. No, the general strike is not impossible. English, Belgian, French, German, American, and Australian wage workers understand that it is up to them to withhold all labor from their bosses on the same day. And why would they not carry out tomorrow what they understand today, especially if a soldiers’ strike is added to that of the workers? The newspapers unanimously maintain an extremely careful silence when soldiers rebel or leave the military en masse. Conservatives, who prefer to ignore completely any facts that are not in accord with their wishes, would like to believe that such a social abomination is impossible. But collective desertions, partial rebellions, and refusals to shoot are phenomena that occur frequently in poorly trained armies, and that are not completely unknown in the toughest of military organizations. Those among us who remember the Commune are reminded of the thousands of men left in Paris by Thiers, who were disarmed by the people and easily converted to its cause. When the majority of soldiers are pervaded by the will to strike, the opportunity to act upon it will come sooner or later.

The strike, or rather the spirit of the strike in the broadest sense, derives its value above all through the solidarity that it creates among those who demand their rights. In struggling for a common cause, they learn to love one another. But there are also efforts at direct association, and these also contribute increasingly to the social revolution. This uniting of forces by the poor, the farmers, or the industrial workers encounters great obstacles because of the lack of material resources among the individual members. The need to earn a living requires them either to leave their native land in order to sell their labor-power to the highest bidder, or to remain where they are and accept the conditions, as shabby as they may be, created for them by the distribution of labor. In any case, they are enslaved, and their daily work prevents them from making plans for the future and freely choosing their allies in the battle of life.

As soon as the spirit of demanding their due pervades the entire mass of the oppressed, every event, even if it seems to be of minimal importance, will be capable of creating shock waves of change, just as a single spark can cause a whole keg of powder to explode. Already we see harbingers of the great struggle. For example, when in 1890 the call of “May Day” resounded, launched by an unknown person, perhaps an Australian comrade, the workers of the world were suddenly united in a single thought. On that day, the International, which had officially been buried, was brought back to life—not by the command of leaders, but through the pressure of the masses. Neither the “wise counsel” of influential socialists nor the oppressive apparatus of governments was able to prevent the oppressed of all nations from feeling that they are brothers throughout the world, and from affirming this to one another. However, on the surface, “May Day” did not seem to amount to much, merely a platonic expression, a rallying cry, a password! Bosses and governments, aided by the socialist leaders themselves, have indeed attempted to turn those fateful words into nothing more than an empty formula. Nevertheless, this cry and this yearly celebration have taken on an epic significance through their universality.

Another kind of outcry, one that is sudden, spontaneous, and unexpected, can lead to even more surprising results. Due to one cause or another and in relation to some insignificant fact, the force of circumstances—that is, the entirety of economic conditions—will inevitably give rise to the kind of crisis that impassions even the indifferent. At that moment, there will suddenly be an explosion of the tremendous energy that has accumulated in the hearts of men because of a violated sense of justice, unredressed sufferings, and unappeased hatreds. Any day might bring such a cataclysm. The firing of a worker, a local strike, or an unforeseen massacre can be the cause of revolution, for the feeling of solidarity is constantly spreading, and each local tremor tends to shake all of humanity. Several years ago, the new rallying cry of “general strike” burst forth in the factories. This term seemed bizarre, and was thought

which prophesied scarcity of resources and the inevitable death of the starving masses, has been proven wrong, and that moreover, a suffering humanity, believing itself to be poor only a short time ago, has discovered its wealth. Thus its ideal of “bread for all” has been found to be no mere utopia. The earth is vast enough to nourish us all and rich enough to support us comfortably. It can provide enough crops for all to have food, it produces enough fibrous plants for all to have clothing, and it contains enough stones and clay for all to have houses. This is economic reality in all its simplicity. Not only is that which the earth produces adequate for the consumption of its present inhabitants, but it would also be enough if consumption were suddenly to double. This would be the case even if science did not intervene to advance agriculture beyond its empirical methods by placing at its disposal all of the resources now available from chemistry, physics, meteorology, and mechanics. In the great family of humanity, hunger is not only the result of a collective crime, it is moreover an absurdity, since production is more than double what is needed for consumption.

And what of freedom of speech and freedom of action? Are they not direct and logical consequences of freedom of thought? Speech is but thought become audible. Action is but thought become visible. Our ideal thus entails for each man the complete and absolute liberty to express his thoughts in every area, including science, politics, and morals, without any condition other than his respect for others. It also entails the right of each to do as he pleases while naturally joining his will with those of others in all collective endeavors. His own freedom is in no way limited by this union, but rather expands, thanks to the strength of the common will.

It goes without saying that this absolute freedom of thought, speech, and action is incompatible with the maintenance of institutions that restrict free thought, rigidify speech in the form of a

final and irrevocable vow, and even dictate that the worker fold his arms and die of hunger at the owner's command.² Conservatives are by no means wrong when they generalize that revolutionaries are "enemies of religion, family, and property." Yes, anarchists reject the authority of dogma and the intrusion of the supernatural into our lives. In this sense, whatever fervor they may bring into the struggle for their ideals of fraternity and solidarity, they are enemies of religion. Yes, they want to abolish matrimonial trafficking and instead desire free unions based only on mutual affection, self-respect, and the dignity of others. In this sense, as loving and devoted as they are to those whose lives are joined with theirs, they are indeed enemies of the family. Yes, they want to abolish the monopolizing of the earth and its products in order to distribute them to everyone. In this sense, the happiness they would have in guaranteeing to everyone the enjoyment of the fruits of the earth makes them enemies of property. Certainly, we love peace, and our ideal is harmony among all men. Yet war rages around us. It appears before us in the distance as a sad prospect, for in the immense complexity of human affairs, the march toward peace is itself accompanied by struggles. "My kingdom is not of this world," said the Son of Man. Still, he also "brought a sword," creating "the division between son and father, and between daughter and mother." Every cause, even the worst, has its defenders, and even though the revolutionary loves them, he must nonetheless also fight against them.

Nothing good can possibly come to us from the republic and the successful "republicans," that is, those who gain power. To hope

² Reclus is apparently referring to the illusory quality of freedom of speech and contract in a situation of vastly unequal power. In his time, the workers' alleged "free and voluntary agreement" to the conditions of labor when they accepted employment was used as a justification for strikebreaking and the destruction of labor organizations. Their "freedom" thus becomes a precondition for their misery and oppression.

origins and understanding one another in spite of their diversity of languages, joined together to form a single nation, in defiance of all their respective governments. The beginnings of the undertaking were not impressive. Scarcely a few thousand men banded together in this association, which was the original cell of the humanity of the future. But historians understood the fundamental importance of the event that had just occurred. In the early years of the International, the overturning of the Vendôme Column during the Paris Commune showed that the ideas of that organization had become a living reality. Until that time, it was unheard of for a conquered people to overturn enthusiastically the monument of former victories. It was done not to flatter in a cowardly manner those who had in turn just conquered them, but rather to show their fraternal sympathy toward the brothers who had been driven against them, and their feelings of loathing for the masters and kings who on both sides had led their subjects to the slaughterhouse. For those who know how to rise above the petty struggles of factions and contemplate the march of history from a distance, there has never in this century been a more impressive sign of the times than the toppling of the imperial column onto a pile of manure!⁷

⁷ The Vendôme Column was constructed to honor Napoléon I and his imperial army. The statue of the emperor atop the Column was removed during the Restoration but replaced by Louis-Philippe. Napoléon III later replaced this statue with a more imperial depiction of the emperor in a toga, which outraged republicans and radicals. After the Paris Commune was declared, it was decided to destroy the column. On April 12, 1871, Félix Pyat proposed demolition, stating that the column "was a monument of barbarism, a symbol of brute force and false glory, an affirmation of militarism, a negation of international law, a prominent insult to the conquered by their conquerors, a perpetual insult to one of the three great principles of the French Republic, fraternity." The column was destroyed on April 16. See Stewart Edwards, *The Paris Commune 1871* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973), 300–303.

manity: despite the infinite complexity of things, history demonstrates that progress will win out over regression. In considering all the facts of contemporary life, some attest to a relative decline while others conclude that there has been a step forward. The latter view is more valid, since day by day evolution moves us ever closer to that totality of both peaceful and violent transformations that we already call “social revolution.” This will entail above all the destruction of the despotic power of persons and things, and of individual monopoly over the products of collective labor.

The major event in this evolutionary process is the emergence of the Workers’ International. No doubt it has been taking root ever since men of different nations began practicing mutual aid, in complete friendship and for their common interests. It even acquired a theoretical existence when the philosophers of the eighteenth century inspired the French Revolution’s proclamation of the “rights of man.” But these rights have remained a mere slogan, and the assembly that shouted them out to the world was careful not to put them into practice. It did not even dare to abolish the slavery of the blacks of Santo Domingo and only yielded after years of insurrection, when it seemed that the last chance for salvation was to pay this price. The International, which was in the process of formation in all civilized countries, did not fully come to consciousness of itself until the second half of our century, and it was in the sphere of labor that it emerged. The “ruling classes” had nothing to do with it. The International! Since the discovery of America and the circumnavigation of the earth, no achievement was more important in the history of man. Columbus, Magellan, and El Cano⁶ were the first to notice the physical unity of the earth, but the future normative unity that the philosophers desired began to be realized only when the English, French, and German workers, forgetting their different

⁶ Juan Sebastian del Cano, the first circumnavigator of the earth. He sailed with Magellan, and after the latter’s death, navigated the *Victoria* back to Spain, completing the circumnavigation in 1522.

otherwise would be to accept a historical absurdity, utter nonsense. The class that possesses and governs is inevitably the enemy of all progress. The vehicle of modern thought and of intellectual and moral evolution is that part of society which struggles, labors, and is oppressed. It is that part which develops and realizes the idea and which, with great difficulty, constantly sets the chariot of society in motion, while conservatives endlessly try to stall it or bog it down.

But one might ask whether our evolutionary and revolutionary friends, the socialists, are equally liable to betray their cause, and whether we will see them one day go through the usual process of regression after those among them who want to “conquer state power” have succeeded. If the socialists become our masters, they will certainly proceed in the same manner as their predecessors, the republicans. The laws of history will not bend in their favor. Once they have power, they will not fail to use it, if only under the illusion or pretense that this force will be rendered useless as all obstacles are swept away and all hostile elements destroyed. The world is full of such ambitious and naïve persons who live with the illusory hope of transforming society through their exceptional capacity to command; however, when they have risen into the ranks of the leaders, or at least become enmeshed in the vast machine of high-level administration, they understand that their isolated will has no hold over the only real power, which is the inner workings of public opinion, and that all their efforts risk being lost amidst the indifference and ill will that surrounds them. What remains for them to do but follow governmental routine, enrich their families, and dole out positions to their friends?

Some fervent authoritarian socialists tell us that the mirage of power and the exercise of authority can doubtless have grave dangers for men who are simply motivated by good intentions, but that this danger need not be feared by those who have mapped out their plan of action through a program rigorously debated with comrades who will know how to call them to order in case of negligence or betrayal. It is required that programs be duly spelled

out, signed, and countersigned. They are published in thousands of copies. They are posted on the doors of meeting halls, and each candidate knows them by heart. Are these not sufficient guarantees? However, the meaning of these scrupulously debated words varies from year to year according to events and perspectives, and each understands it according to his own interests. And when a whole faction comes to view things differently than it had in the beginning, the clearest statements take on a merely symbolic meaning, and eventually become no more than historical documents.

The fact is that those who aspire to conquer state power must obviously use the means that seem to lead most surely to their goal. In republics with universal suffrage, they court the multitudes, the crowd. They support the interests of the wine industry and make themselves popular at the pubs. They welcome voters from wherever they come, unconcerned about sacrificing substance for form. They invite enemies into their midst, which is like injecting poison directly into the body. In countries with a monarchy, many socialists declare themselves to be indifferent to the form of government, and they even call upon the king's ministers to help them realize their plans for social change, as if it were logically possible to reconcile domination by a single ruler with brotherly mutual aid among men. But the impatience to act can blind one to obstacles, and faith willingly believes that it can move mountains. Lassalle longs to have Bismarck as a partner in establishing a new world.³ Others turn toward the Pope, asking him to head the league of the humble. And when the young Emperor of Germany gathered a few philanthropists and sociologists at his table, there were those who imagined that the new day had finally dawned.

³ Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–64) was a German socialist leader. He is noted for his reformist views, particularly the idea that the working class could gain control of the state by means of universal suffrage and then transform the economy into a system of workers' cooperatives. He was a major opponent of Marx in the socialist movement and was the object of extensive criticism in Marx's "Critique of the Gotha Program."

Europe. But these armies can disintegrate. They can recall the common origin and destiny that connect them with the masses of the people, and the hand that leads them can lose control. Composed largely of proletarians, they can and certainly will become for bourgeois society what the barbarians in the pay of the empire became for Roman society—an element of dissolution. History is full of examples of outbreaks of panic to which the powerful succumb, even those who have preserved their strength of character—for there are also a number of "rulers" who are nothing more than simple degenerates. The latter are the sort who, if trapped in a spreading fire, would not have the energy and physical strength (even if there were a hundred of them) to break through a wooden wall, nor enough dignity to allow women and children to escape first.⁵ When the disinherited are united in their own interests—trade with trade, nation with nation, race with race, or, spontaneously, man with fellow man—and when they know their goal well, there can be no doubt that the opportunity will arise for them to use their force in the service of liberty for all. As powerful as the master may be at that time, he will be quite weak when he faces all who are united with a single will and who rise up against him so that they may be assured from that moment on of their bread and liberty.

Ignorance is decreasing, and among the united revolutionary evolutionists, knowledge will soon be the guide of power. This is the overriding fact that gives us confidence in the promise of hu-

⁵ Reclus was referring to a notorious event that had recently occurred in Paris. "On May 4, 1897, during peak shopping hours, a fire spread with astounding rapidity through the Bazar de la Charité, turning it into a huge inferno in which 117 people perished. In the midst of the panic that broke out at the beginning of the disaster, a number of lives were saved through acts of bravery. On the other hand, several people from high society who were there presented a sad spectacle." Roger Gonot, *Elisée Reclus: Prophète de l'Idéal Anarchique* (Pau, France: Editions Covedi, 1996), 73.

brazenly their arrogant challenge. "You see," they say, "this is the inevitable law and immutable destiny to which both predator and prey are subject."

We should be pleased that the question is thus simplified in all its brutality, for it is that much closer to being resolved. "Force rules!" say the defenders of social inequality. "Yes, it's force that rules!" cry out ever more loudly those who profit from modern industry in its ruthless development, the desired result of which is above all to reduce the number of workers. But could not the revolutionaries say much the same thing as the economists and the industrialists, but with the understanding that cooperation for existence will gradually replace the struggle for survival? The law of the strongest will not always benefit the industrial monopoly. "Might makes right," said Bismarck, like many others before him, but the day is coming when might will be at the service of right. If it is true that ideas of solidarity are spreading, that the conquests of science will eventually reach every level of society, and that moral resources are becoming the property of all, will not the workers, who have both the right and the might, make use of these things in order to create a revolution for the benefit of all? As strong as they may be in money, intelligence, and shrewdness, what can isolated individuals do against the united masses? The rulers have lost hope of giving any moral justification for their cause; now they ask only to rule with a firm hand. This is the only superiority to which they aspire. One could easily cite examples of state officials who were chosen not for their military glory, their noble genealogy, their talents, or their eloquence, but solely for their lack of scruples. In this regard, one has full confidence in them: they allow no prejudice to stand in the way of the conquest of power or the defense of bank notes.

In no modern revolution have the privileged been known to fight their own battles. They always depend on armies of poor people, whom they indoctrinate with the so-called religion of the flag and drill in the so-called maintenance of order. Six million men, without counting all the ranks of police, are employed for such work in

And if some socialists are still fascinated by the prestige of political power expressed as divine right or the right of force, they succumb even more readily to power that is masked by its popular origin in limited or universal suffrage. In order to win votes, or in other words, to earn the favor of the citizens, which initially seems quite legitimate, the socialist candidate readily flatters the tastes, the inclinations, or even the prejudices of his electorate. He blithely ignores disagreements, disputes, and grudges, and for a while becomes the friend, or at least the ally, of those with whom only a short time ago he had exchanged invectives. In the clericist, he tries to find a Christian socialist. In the liberal bourgeois, he conjures up the reformer. And in the patriot, he appeals to the courageous defender of civic dignity. At times, he even takes care not to scare off the "owner" or the "boss." He goes so far as to present them with his demands as if they were guarantees of peace. "May Day," which was supposed to represent victory in a long struggle against Lord Capital, has become a holiday with garlands and farandoles. With these superficial gestures to the voters, the candidates gradually forget the proud language of truth and the uncompromising attitude of combat. Their very spirit undergoes a pervasive transformation, especially among those who reach the goal of all their efforts and assume their places on velvet benches facing the gold-fringed rostrum. At this point they must become experts at exchanging smiles, handshakes, and favors.

This is simply human nature, and it would be absurd on our part to hold a grudge against the socialist leaders who, finding themselves caught up in the electoral machine, end up being gradually transformed into nothing more than bourgeois with liberal ideas. They have placed themselves in determinate conditions that in turn determine them. The consequences are inevitable, and the historian should limit himself to pointing it out as a danger to revolutionaries who would rashly throw themselves into the political fray. Besides, one need not exaggerate the results of this evolution of socialist politicians, for the struggling masses are always composed

of two elements whose respective interests must increasingly diverge. Some are bound to abandon the original cause, while others remain faithful to it. These developments imply a new categorization of individuals, in which they are grouped according to their actual affinities. Thus we have recently seen the Republican Party split in two, forming on the one hand the crowd of “opportunists,” and on the other, the socialist factions. The latter will also have to divide, one group watering down its program to make it more palatable to the conservatives, and the other group maintaining its spirit of straightforward evolution and honest revolution. After having had their moments of discouragement and even skepticism, they will “let the dead bury the dead” and will return to take their place among the living. But if only they knew that every party requires *esprit de corps*, and, consequently, solidarity in evil as well as in good. Each member of a party becomes bound up with the mistakes, the lies, and the ambitions of all his comrades and masters. It is only the free man—who of his own accord joins his strength with that of other men acting out of their own will—who has the right to disavow the mistakes or misdeeds of his so-called companions. He takes responsibility only for himself.

Since the present function of the state consists foremost of defending the interests of landowners and the “rights of capital,” it is indispensable for the economist to have at his disposal some successful arguments and fantastic lies that the poor, wanting very much to support the national economy, can accept without question. But alas! These fine-sounding theories, invented in the past for consumption by the dull masses, can no longer be accepted. One might well blush to repeat the old assertion that “work is always rewarded by wealth and property.” In claiming that labor is the source of wealth, the economists are perfectly conscious that they are not telling the truth. Like the socialists, they know that

great wealth is not the product of personal effort, but of the work of others. They are not unaware that speculation and success in the stock market, the source of great fortunes, can be justly compared with the exploits of bandits. They certainly would not dare to claim that the individual who has a million to spend each week, which is equivalent to the amount necessary to support a hundred thousand persons, distinguishes himself from other men through intelligence and virtue a hundred thousand times superior to that of the average person. It would be foolish, and almost complicitous, to waste time debating the hypocritical arguments on which this alleged source of social inequality is based.

But another kind of reasoning is used that at least has the merit of not being founded on a lie. Against the demands made on behalf of society, some invoke the right of the strongest, and even the respected name of Darwin (though without regard for his actual views), in order to defend injustice and violence. The strength of muscle and jaw, of cudgel and bludgeon—this is the ultimate argument! In actuality it is the right of the strongest that triumphs in the monopoly of wealth. The one who is best equipped materially, the most favored through birth, education, and friends, the best armed through force or trickery, and who finds before him the weakest enemies, has the best chance of succeeding. He is more capable than others of building a lofty fortress from which he can fire on his unfortunate brothers.

Thus the crude battle of conflicting egos determines the outcome. But in former times, one hardly dared acknowledge this theory of iron and fire, which seemed too violent, and preferred instead the language of hypocritical virtue. It was veiled by solemn expressions so that the people would not understand the meaning. “Work is a bridle,” said Guizot.⁴ But naturalists’ studies of the struggle between species for existence and the concept of the survival of the fittest have encouraged the theoreticians of force to announce

⁴ François Guizot (1787–1874) was a French statesman and historian.