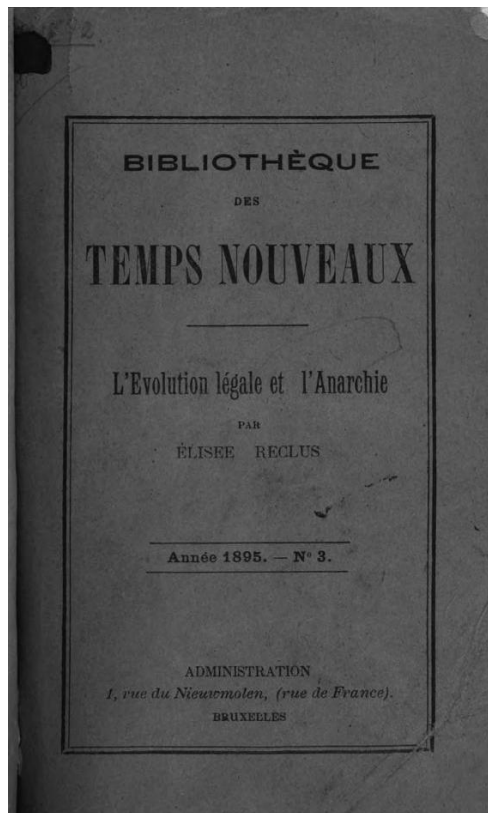


Legal Evolution and Anarchy

Elisée Reclus



1878

Contents

[Note from the 1895 reprint]	3
Legal Evolution and Anarchy	3
Appendix	7
Regarding “Anarchy” [A response to Gustave Lefrançais, 1878]	7

[Note from the 1895 reprint]

This brochure is the reproduction, slightly modified, of a letter written to a companion in exile, a refugee in Buenos Aires. This excellent friend, Baux, still believed in the virtue of laws to improve men and in that of representatives to make law triumph. Having written to this effect to the editors of "Le Travailleur" ["The Worker"], a monthly anarchist journal which appeared in Geneva,⁽¹⁾ he was answered by these few pages which, since the time of publication, in February 1878, are reprinted today for the first time.

Legal Evolution and Anarchy

Friends, the word "Anarchy" scares you. You blame us for using it and preventing well-meaning but timid people from coming to us. You blame us above all for having placed ourselves completely outside the State: the path of legal evolution seems to you by far the safest.

Revolutionary socialism seems daunting to you, because it can lead to dictatorship; but you have confidence in the movement of [cooperative] associations and you think that it will be possible to displace capital in this way. You even hope that the people and the bourgeoisie will manage to conclude peace, and, in your dreams for the future, you set in advance a July 14, anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, the great feast of the reconciliation of peoples and classes.

Doubtless the word "Anarchy" can frighten those who hold to the derived meaning of this term and see it only as a synonym of disorder, of violent and aimless struggles, but are we wrong to stick to the original meaning of the word, that which all the dictionaries honestly give: "Absence of government"? It is enough for us not to violate the language, regretting that it is not richer and does not provide us with terms that are not vitiated by illogical use. Moreover, it does not displease us at all that this word claimed by us stops for a moment those who are interested in the social problem. In the realm of fable, all the marvelous gardens, all the fairy palaces are guarded by some ferocious dragon. There is nothing terrible about the dragon who watches the threshold of the anarchic palace, it is just a word, but if there are some who allow themselves to be frightened by it, it would doubtless be in vain for us to try to hold them back; would men who shrink from a word ever have the necessary freedom of mind to study the thing itself? Alas! they will stick to their prejudices, their routine, their formulas, and will continue to speak of the "social hydra", in chosen terms of the official jargon.

Today's society, which has reached the borderline of two worlds, so to speak, is full of the most bizarre contradictions: it is here that "anarchy" reigns arbitrarily in the sense usually given to the word.

Enter a higher school: the teacher talks about Descartes and tells us how the great philosopher began by making a "clean sweep" ["table rase"] of all prejudices, all received ideas, all previous systems. He praises him very much for having had this intellectual vigor; he tells us that from the time when the audacious word of absolute negation was pronounced, human thought was emancipated; but this same professor has only exclamations of horror for all those who would be tempted to imitate his hero! Following the example of Decartes, who was the first to dare to call himself an anarchist, we make a clean sweep of kings and institutions that weigh on human

⁽¹⁾ This journal is digitized and available online in archivesautonomies.org

societies, we get rid of the traditional obedience that the morality of the masters has, at all times, instilled in the servants. However, we will not imitate Descartes to the end. If after having made a clean sweep of God, he had not hastened to put him back in place with all his spiritual and temporal procession, if he had not had the prudence to travel in the opposite direction all the road he had provided, of course they would be careful not to give him to us as an example. Neither princes nor republics would have given him asylum, and his name would have remained that of a cursed man.

Well! in spite of the persecutions which have not failed us and the curses with which we were overwhelmed, from one end of the world to the other, we, the anarchists, do not believe we have to rebuild the State of which we have made a "clean sweep". Besides, as it exists, you admit that the building is quite ugly in appearance, and you understand that we are longing to demolish it. We have had enough of these kings elected by the grace of God or appointed by the will of the people, of these plenipotentiaries or ministers, responsible or irresponsible; of those legislators who were granted, either by the prince or by a flock of electors, their "share of royalty"; Of those magistrates who sell to the highest bidder what they call "justice"; of those priests who, representing God on earth, promise places in paradise to those who make themselves their slaves; of those rude swordsmen who also demand a blind obedience, an absolute suspension of intelligence and personal morals in all those who have the misfortune to follow suit in their battalions; of those owners or bosses who dispose of the work, and consequently of the life, of the immense crowd of the weak and poor. We have had enough of all the religious, legal or so-called moral formulas, which lock us up and keep our minds in bondage, enough of this dreadful routine which is the worst of all governments and the best obeyed, as recently demonstrated, with a great deal of evidence, by the philosopher Herbert Spencer.

"But at least will we not be able to transform economic society, peacefully and as if in silence, by the movement of [cooperative] associations?" Certainly, anarchists, more than other men, have to reckon with the force of association, for they expect everything from free affinities between free personalities; but they do not believe that workers' cooperative associations can achieve serious change in society. The attempts made in this direction are useful experiences, and we should be happy to have seen them, but they are enough, and we can now speak out. Society is a whole that we will not succeed in changing by underpinning it by one of its finest details. Not to touch capital, to leave intact all these infinite privileges which constitute the State, and to imagine that we will be able to enter on all this fatal organism a new organism, as much would be worth hoping that it will be possible for us to make a rose sprout on a poisonous spurge.

The history of workers' associations is already long, and we know how, in such matters, it is even more dangerous to succeed than to succumb. A failure is one more experience and allows those who have suffered it to enter into the mainstream of life and of the Revolution. But success is fatal! An association which succeeds, which earns money and becomes owner, inevitably conforms to the conditions of capital, it becomes bourgeois, it discounts drafts, pursues its debtors, has recourse to lawyers, places its values in the bank, speculates on public funds, accumulates its capital and makes use of it by exploiting the poor. Having become rich, it joined the great brotherhood of the privileged; it is nothing more than a financial company, forced to close itself off from those who bring nothing but their arms. Completely separated from the people, having become a simple social excrescence, it constitutes itself as a State: far from supporting the revolution, it fights it to the limit; all that was living force in it when it began its work, it now turns against its old friends, the disinherited and the revolutionaries; despite all the goodwill of

its members, it goes over to the enemy's side: it is nothing more than a bunch of traitors. Ah! my friends, nothing depraves like success! As long as our triumph will not be that of all at the same time, let us be lucky to never succeed; let us always be defeated!

It seems to you possible to achieve the general renewal of society with the help of the bourgeoisie — the petty bourgeoisie, it is understood — of that bourgeoisie whose immediate interests are the same as those of the workers. This, it seems to us, is a serious illusion. Let us never count on one caste, and on this one less than on any other, for it believes itself born for privilege and, quite naturally, it espouses its prejudices and passions. Undoubtedly, the petty bourgeois — like all men — would have a great advantage in not always having before him the specter of misery; undoubtedly, he would have in the new society what he lacks today, the possibility of fully developing and living without having to beg for his pittance; but it is necessary to take into account a special cause of demoralization which does not exist among the men obliged to work with their hands, the peasant and the worker. This cause of debasement is contempt for material labor. By the effect of his education, the bourgeois, petty or big, believes that he humiliates himself by taking a tool; his natural ideal is to keep his hands virgin from the taint of work; he is the slave of his black coat, of certain outward habits which classify him among the gentlemen. No humiliations he does not expose himself to in order to keep his caste, no meanness he does not do to obtain the favors which should give him, along with bread, the right to be among the privileged and the rulers. Parents, teachers, friends, have always shown him this goal as the only one worthy of his ambition. One cannot imagine the insults that the “supernumerary” employee must suffer, the abject formulas that are demanded of him before he is allowed into the mandarin class. Once broken by the narrow rolling mill he must have slipped into, he no longer has a backbone. Do not expect anything from him, he is no longer a man. Defectors from the bourgeoisie will come to us and, we hope, more and more, but that the caste will help us one day, it is impossible.

Because we are “levelers”. For us, caste must disappear like the State, of which it is only a miniature, with traditional inequalities as well as legal inequalities; and it is not by political alliances, by works of detail, by attempts at partial improvement that we believe we can advance the day of the future Revolution. It is better to walk directly towards our goal than to follow roundabout paths that would make us lose sight of the point to be reached. By remaining sincerely anarchists, enemies of the State in all its forms, we have the advantage of not deceiving anyone, and especially of not deceiving ourselves. Under the pretext of carrying out a small part of our program, even with the sorrow of violating another part, we will not be tempted to turn to power or try to take our part as well. We will spare ourselves the scandal of those palinodes of so many ambitious, and so many skeptics, which so deeply disturb the conscience of the people.

And yet, if we were to maintain the State cadres, such scandals would be inevitable. As soon as the revolutionary has “arrived”, as soon as he has established himself in a government niche, he naturally ceases to be a revolutionary in order to become a conservative; this is fatal. From a defender of the oppressed, he in turn turns into an oppressor; after having aroused the people, he works to emulate it. We do not have to cite proper names here: contemporary history cries them out. But how could it be otherwise? It is the place that makes the man; It is the whole machine that gives the cogs their various functions and they have to adapt to them. As a famous diplomat, Robert Walpole, has long said: “The interests of the rulers are always absolutely contrary to those of the ruled.” Whoever becomes ruler is consequently an enemy of the people.

If we want to remain useful to our cause, that of the oppressed and the vanquished, then let us care not to leave the ranks. Let us at no cost separate ourselves from our comrades, even under

the pretext of serving them; may our grouping always be spontaneous, our discipline always voluntary. Let every man of honor go on strike as soon as it comes to titles for him, a power of delegation that places him above others and gives him an element of irresponsibility. Thus the revolutionary forces will no longer be divided and the people will no longer have to incessantly push leaders in power to be oppressed by them. Isn't that the story symbolized by the rock of Sisyphus, falling on those who rolled it with great difficulty to the top of the mountain?

As for men base enough to need a master, let them seek one! For a long time, alas! they will not miss it. It is with government as with religion. You meet thousands of men who say to you in a big way: "If all were like me, we certainly wouldn't need government, but we need it for the people. Likewise, I could do without religion, but it is necessary for women and children." And this is how we make governments and religion last. As for us, greatly appreciating freedom for ourselves, we also appreciate it for others; we do not want masters, nor do we want others to be enslaved to us. Whatever supporters of the state say, we know that the solidarity of interests and the infinite benefits of a free and at the same time common life will be enough to maintain social organism. Only, it will not be constantly disturbed by the whims of the rulers who chase the peoples from here and there like miserable flocks.

Certainly, our illusion would be great if, in our enthusiastic zeal, we counted on a sudden evolution of men in the direction of anarchy. We know that their education in prejudice and lies will keep them in bondage for a long time to come. What will be the "spiral" of civilization through which they will have to ascend before finally understanding that they can do without edges or chains? We don't know, but judging from the present, it will be a long way. While priests and teachers work together for the general stupidity, while kings, generals, officials and policemen, capitalists and bosses do their best work of war and enslavement, those whom the people acclaim as their defenders promise them also to govern it, to constitute a "strong power", to defend the sacred interests of religion and property. Have we not seen a so-called republican Assembly vote with a unanimous voice thanksgivings to the "noble army" which had just saved society by strafing thirty-five thousand prisoners, slaughtering women and children? Do we not see another Assembly, even more republican, giving proof of "wisdom and good political sense" by leaving the prisons and the convicts full of republicans and by seizing every opportunity to pay court to the sovereigns of the world? All our legislators, once fierce clubists, have changed into so many marquises!

Be that as it may, and whether years, decades or centuries separate us from the definitive revolution, we nevertheless work with confidence at the *oeuvre* we have undertaken, studying contemporary history with interest, but without taking a part in it that could make us traitors to our convictions. "Let the dead bury their dead"; let the candidates for power boast their panaceas of government improvement and let us direct all our efforts to augmenting those elements of an egalitarian and free society that already exist, albeit isolated and fragmented. The work we are pursuing is not chimerical, for on a thousand points at a time we see it already being prepared, just as in a chemical solution a thousand small crystals are formed here and there, before the whole mass is transformed. This crowd of associations which are born from all sides, agricultural, industrial, commercial, scientific, literary, artistic, are they not proof of the change which takes place in the minds and which turns them more and more towards the work in common? The contempt into which the old formulas of official religion and morality fall, the progress of free thought, do they not testify to a growing personal worth in individuals? The number of refractory socialists, living as equals, without a leader who gives them the watchword, without a law which

constrains them, with no other bond of cohesion than the feeling of a common duty, mutual affection and esteem, is it not increasing day by day? Finally, among the recent events, are there not some that seem to portend a whole new future? It is not to us that it is appropriate to praise the Paris Commune, since we took part in it; but isn't history already being made, and doesn't it show that in that vast turmoil a whole new order of things was fermenting, of which neither king, nor priests, nor policemen, nor bosses would have been the masters? And over there, in Russia, how great is the spectacle of those young men and those heroines who leave aside position, fortune, and the infinite pleasures of the life of the sciences and the arts in order to become part of the people, to live with them its miserable existence, then end their career of dedication in prisons or mines! It is to bringing together all these scattered elements of the great future society that we must devote our forces.

The feast day that you are waiting for will come; but its aim will not only be to celebrate the federation of peoples without kings; it will also glorify the union of men, now free, living without masters, and will fulfill the prophecy of our great ancestor Rabelais: "Do what you want!"

Élisée Reclus.

[Originally published in *Le Travailleur*, Jan-Feb 1878]

Appendix

Regarding "Anarchy" [A response to Gustave Lefrançais, 1878]⁽²⁾

Dear companion,

Thank you for writing to me. You are thus giving me the opportunity to explain in a few words one side of the question that I had left in the shade, not foreseeing that there might exist the slightest doubt in the minds in this regard.

There is no need to revisit the discussion of the words anarchy and anarchists. These terms seem good to me, because they have the advantage of being consistent with etymology and logic, and even more, because they shake a little from its usual torpor the intelligence of those who hear them for the first time. But even if these criticisms were to be founded, it would be too late now to uphold them. Now friends and foes know us as anarchists, and I fear the "anti-authoritarians" are very likely to be confused with us.

Now we come to the capital objection of your letter. Here it is: Consistent anarchists have no idea of solidarity. They can "do whatever they want with the material, dispose of their products as they see fit, destroy them as they please, and even destroy the whole organization of public services which makes up for the insufficiency of the individual."

These criticisms would be correct if the anarchists were not at the same time collectivists, and would not seize every opportunity to fight private property. Now, if the whole earth becomes for humanity a field of collective work, if each product is the result of the efforts of all, how can the isolated individual claim the right to destroy any part of social assets? And if, by the scientific development of collective property, we transform nature into an immense organism placed at the disposal of man and vibrating at his slightest will, how can we be accused of disturbing "public services?" The freedom of the individual, the solidary well-being of humanity, these are the two

⁽²⁾ Translated from *Le Travailleur*, Feb-Mar 1878 (See previous footnote)

goals that we pursue and which must serve one another as means of achievement. Without the complete freedom of man, that is to say without the integral development and the regular play of all his forces, the disorder persists in the social body and the Revolution remains the necessary fact; without the regular functioning of society as a whole, the individual can only suffer, live in misery, ignorance and vice. Thus in the human body the normal play of the cell and the general health of the being absolutely depend on each other. The dualism of the individual and of society harmonize and merge.

Is this ideal or even “Christianity”, as you say? We believe, on the contrary, that it is science. And it is also scientific methods, observation and experience that we will have recourse to in studying the normal conditions of the grouping of men. Sociology is nothing other than this study, and it has already made two essential facts beyond doubt for us: on the one hand, that man, integral with all other men, perishes by isolation; on the other hand, that all social progress is accomplished by the impulse of individual wills. These are scientific “laws”, very different from those external laws imposed on us by the state, and against which we are in permanent revolt. It is to conform with the first of these laws recognized by our reason that we are collectivists; we are anarchists to conform with the second. Could it be otherwise and do these laws not show themselves to us with the evidence of a mathematical solution?

We will often have the opportunity to deal with these questions in *Le Travailleur*. But don't you agree with us since you also want any society to be based “on the free will of those concerned and against the authority of any outside group constituting the state”? Apart from the free will which you admit like me, apart from the solidarity which I recognize like you, is there another principle, unless it is the miracle as the Christians want it, or the authority, another form of whim, as the “men of government” want it?

Élisée RECLUS. [*Le Travailleur*, February-March 1878]

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translated on July 2021 from books.google.pt
Translation by João Black from the French original, "*L'Évolution Lègale et L'Anarchie*". In the image is the cover of the 1895 reprint of the text as a leaflet. Here, as can be seen, we have appended additional words by the author, found in the Geneva journal "*Le Travailleur*" (Feb-Mar 1878).

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