

The Modern State

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The world is very close to unification. All lands, including even the small islands scattered across the vast ocean, have entered into the field of attraction of one common culture, in which the European type predominates. Only in a few rare enclaves—in lands of caves where men flee the light, or in very secluded places protected by walls of rock, forests, or marshlands—have some tribes been able to remain completely isolated, living their lives outside the rhythm of the great universal life. However, as jealously as these peoples have hidden themselves, forming small, selfsufficient hereditary circles, scientific researchers have discovered them and integrated them into the whole of humanity by studying their forms, their ways of life, and their traditions, and by placing them in a social classification of which they were previously an unknown member.

The instinctive tendency of all nations to take part in the common affairs of the entire world already manifests itself in many instances in contemporary history. For example, in 1897 we witnessed the six greatest European powers (whatever their secret motives may have been) claiming to seek to maintain a balance of power in Europe, while satisfying both Turkey and Greece.¹ In the process, they fired on some unfortunate Cretans—their “brothers in Christ”—in the name of “public order.” Despite the disheartening spectacle of a large deployment of force against a small people who asked only that justice be rendered to them, it was nevertheless a completely new and telling political phenomenon that soldiers and sailors of various languages and nationalities could join together, grouped in allied detachments under the orders of a leader chosen by lot among the British, Austrians, Italians, French, and Russians. This was an event with an international character, unprecedented in history because of the methodical precision with which it was carried out. It was proven that Europe as a whole is now indeed a sort of republic of states, united through class solidarity. The financial caste that rules from Moscow to Liverpool causes governments and armies to act with perfect discipline.

Since then, history has offered other examples of this council of nations that forms spontaneously in all grave political situations. Since the interests of all are at stake, each wants to take part in the deliberations and profit from the settlement. In China, for example, the temporary alliance that has been achieved between nations is strong enough to unite the military representatives of all the states in a common task of destruction and massacre. Elsewhere, notably in

¹ Reclus refers to Crete’s civil war of 1897 between the Greeks and Muslims. Six major European powers (Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Great Britain, and Russia), in addition to Greece and Turkey, became involved in the conflict and ultimately imposed a peace agreement in conformity with their will.

Morocco, the collective machinations are limited for the time being to diplomatic talks, but at any rate, the case is clear. States have an acute awareness of the effects of all events throughout the world on their own destiny, and they do their best to cope with changes in the balance of power. Nevertheless, it is very important to stress the difference between the solidarity of conservative states and that of peoples during periods of revolution, in which an upsurge takes place in the opposite direction. Whereas the year 1848 rocked the world with tremors of liberty, fifty years later we find that England hands itself over to representatives of the aristocracy and throws itself into a long war behind a band of crooks. France grapples with a recrudescence of a clerical and military mentality. Spain reestablishes the practices of the Inquisition. America, populated by immigrants, tries to close its ports to foreigners. And Turkey takes revenge against Greece.

A movement of convergence toward mutual understanding is occurring all over the world. We may therefore be permitted, in order to comprehend the transformations that will occur in the future, to take as our starting point the state of mind and practice exhibited by the civilized peoples of Europe in the management of their societies and the realization of their ideal. Obviously, each group of men moving toward the same goal will not slavishly follow the same road. It will take, according to the position that it occupies at any given time, the path that is determined by the sum total of all the individual wills that it contains. So what we propose is a kind of average that is related to the particular situation of each nation and each social element according to the temporal and spatial milieu. But in such a study, the researcher must carefully distance himself from any tendency toward patriotism, that vestige of the ancient delusion that one's nation is specially chosen by Divine Providence for the acquisition of wealth and the accomplishment of great things. Corresponding to this natural delusion of all peoples that they rank first in merit and genius is another, which Ludwig Gumplowicz called "acronism." Its effect is that one is content to suppose that contemporary civilization, as imperfect as it may be, is nevertheless the culminating state of humanity, and that by comparison, all past ages were barbaric. This is a "chronocentric" egoism, analogous to the "ethnocentric" egoism of patriotism.

The "rights of man" were proclaimed for thousands of years by isolated individuals and more than a century ago by an assembly that has drawn the attention of peoples ever since. Yet in present-day society these rights are still only recognized in principle, like a simple word whose meaning one hardly begins to fathom. The brutal fact of authority endures against rights, in the family and in society as well as in the state. It endures while at the same time accepting its opposite and intermingling with it in a thousand illogical and bizarre combinations. There are now very few fanatical defenders of the kind of absolute authority that gives to the prince the right of life and death over his subjects, and to the husband and father the same rights over his wife and children. Yet public opinion on such matters wavers indecisively, guided less by reason than by one's individual circumstances and personal sympathies, and by the nature of the stories one hears. Generally speaking, it can be said that man measures the strictness of his principles of liberty by his share of personal benefits from the outcome. He is absolutely strict when it is a question of events that occur on the other side of the world. But when it is a question of his own country or caste, he compromises slightly by mixing his mania for authority with conceptions of human rights. Finally, when he is directly affected, he is likely to let himself be blinded by passion, and he will gladly make authoritarian pronouncements.

In certain countries—France, for example—is it not an established custom, so to speak, that the husband has the right to kill his unfaithful wife? It is above all within the family, in a man's daily relationships with those close to him, that one can best judge him. If he absolutely respects the

liberty of his wife, if the rights and the dignity of his sons and daughters are as precious to him as his own, then he proves himself worthy of entering the assembly of free citizens. If not, he is still a slave, since he is a tyrant.

It has often been repeated that the family unit is the primordial cell of humanity. This is only relatively true, for two men who meet and strike up a friendship, a band (even among animals) that forms to hunt or fish, a concert of voices or instruments that join in unison, an association to realize ideas through common action—all constitute original groupings in the great global society. Nevertheless, it is certain that familial associations, whether manifested in polygyny, polyandry, monogamy, or free unions, exercise a direct influence on the form of the state through the effects of their ethics. What one sees on a large scale parallels what one sees on a small scale. The authority that prevails in government corresponds to that which holds sway in families, though ordinarily in lesser proportions, for the government is incapable of pressuring widely dispersed individuals in the way that one spouse can pressure the other who lives under the same roof.

Just as familial practices naturally harden into “principles” for all those involved, so government takes on the form of distinct political bodies encompassing various segments of the human race that are separated from one another. The causes of this separation vary and intermingle. In one place, a difference in language has demarcated two groups. In another, economic conditions arising from a specific soil, particular products, or diverging historical paths have created the boundaries that divide them. Then, on top of all the primary causes, whether arising from nature or from stages of social evolution, is added a layer of conflicts that every authoritarian society always produces. Thus through the ceaseless interplay of interests, ambitions, and forces of attraction and repulsion, states become demarcated. Despite their constant vicissitudes, these entities claim to have a sort of collective personality and demand from those under their jurisdiction that peculiar feeling of love, devotion, and sacrifice called “patriotism.” But should a conqueror pass through and erase the existing borders, the subjects must, by order of that authority, modify their feelings and reorient themselves in relation to the new sun around which they now revolve.

Just as property is the right of use and abuse, so is authority the right to command rightly or wrongly. This is understood well by the masters and also by the governed, whether they slavishly obey or feel the spirit of rebellion awakening. Philosophers have viewed authority quite differently. Desiring to give this word a meaning closer to its original one,

which implied something like creation, they tell us that authority resides in anyone who teaches someone else something useful, and that it applies to everyone from the most celebrated scholar to the humblest mother.² Still, none of them goes so far as to consider the revolutionary who stands up to power as the true representative of authority.

Individuals and classes with power at their disposal—whether chiefs of state or aristocratic, religious, or bourgeois masters—willingly intervene with brutal force to suppress all popular initiative. In their childish and barbaric illusion, they think themselves capable of stopping the overflowing vitality of the masses, and of immobilizing society for their personal profit. But they can only lift a faltering hand. The unchanging laws of history are beginning to be understood well enough so that even the more audacious exploiters of society do not dare to run head-on into its movement. They must proceed with science and skill in order to divert it onto side roads, like

² Saint-Yves d'Alveydra, *La mission des Juifs*, 41. [Reclus' note]

a train that is switched from the main track. Up to the present, the most frequently used means—and one that unfortunately benefits most the masters of the people—consists of transforming all the energies of a nation into a rage against the foreigner. The pretexts are easy to find, since the interests of states remain different and in conflict through the very fact of their separation into distinct artificial organisms. Beyond the pretexts, there exist the memories of actual wrongs, massacres, and crimes of all sorts committed in former wars. The call for revenge still resounds, and when a new war will have passed like the terrible flames of a fire devouring everything in its path, it will also leave the memory of hatred and serve as leaven for future conflicts. How many examples one could cite of such diversions! Those in power respond to the internal problems of the government through external wars. If the wars are triumphant and the masters take advantage of the opportunity to profit from them through the consolidation of their regime, they will have debased their people through the foolish vanity they call glory. They will have made the people into shameful accomplices by inviting them to steal, pillage, and slaughter, and this solidarity of evil will cause the people's former demands to languish as their cups are once more filled with the red wine of hatred.

In addition to war, those who govern have at their disposal other powerful means of protecting themselves from any threat. These include corruption and demoralization through gambling and all forms of debauchery: betting, horse-racing, drinking, cafés, and nightclubs. "If they sing, they'll pay!" The depraved, debased, and self-hating no longer have the dignity necessary to impel them to revolt. Imagining they have the souls of lackeys, they do themselves justice by accepting their oppression. Thus the wars of the Republic and the burgeoning vices and depravity that succeeded the first years of the Revolution, with its ideals of austerity and virtue, were well timed to prepare the way for the imperial regime and the shameful debasement of character. However, this swing in the opposite direction was largely the result of a normal reaction on the part of society as a whole. It is natural for men to shift from one extreme to the other, in the same way that their lives alternate from activity to sleep, and from rest to work. Moreover, since a nation is composed of many classes and diverse groups, each of which has a particular evolution within the general one, historical movements with opposing tendencies collide and intersect, creating a complicated web that the historian can untangle only with great difficulty.

Thus during the internal struggles of the French Revolution, the people of the Vendée certainly represented the principle of the autonomous and freely federated commune, in opposition to the central government. However, through a contradiction that they were unable to grasp due to their complete lack of education, they also became defenders of the Church, whose goal was universal authority over souls, and of the monarchy, which viewed all members of the commune as nothing but *corvée* labor to be taxed, or even as so much meat to be sliced up on the battlefield.³ Through a strange naïveté that would be comic were it not so tragic, the Negroes of Haiti, struggling for their freedom against the white planters, enthusiastically declared themselves to be subjects of the King; and the rebels of the Spanish colonies of the New World greeted the Catholic King of Spain with cheers! Throughout history, those who revolted against any authority almost always did so in the name of another authority, as if the ideal required nothing more than changing masters. During the time of great ferment in public opinion and of intellectual liberation that led to the revolution of 1830, those who worked for the emancipation of language and for the free study of the history of art and literature of all periods and all cultures (and not only those of

³ Reclus is punning on *taillable*, which refers both to taxing and to cutting.

Greece, Rome, and the Age of Louis XIV), and those who traced their origins back to the Middle Ages and even found ancestry among the Germans and Slavs (in a word, the “romantics”), had for the most part remained royalists and Christians. On the other hand, those who championed political liberty always did so through the classical forms of the Schoolmen, in the traditional style that is the hallmark of the Academies. When Blanqui, blackened with powder, finally laid down his rifle after the three victorious days in July, he simply said: “Down with the Romantics!”⁴ The revolution had disintegrated into two elements: a political one, which aimed at toppling thrones, and a literary one, which worked for the liberation of language and the extension of its domain. Each of these groups of revolutionaries was reactionary from the standpoint of the other. And each faction was quite justified in criticizing the other’s illogic, irrelevancies, absurdities, and stupidities.

The historian who studies the vicissitudes of events and tries to extract what is essential relative to progress has the most difficult problem to resolve, that of discovering the parallelogram of forces underlying the thousand conflicting impulses that collide on all sides. It is easy for him to err, and he often despairs that he is witnessing a collapse when in reality there was progress, or rather when, in the overall assessment of losses and gains, human resources have actually greatly increased.

But how long and difficult does the work of true revolution seem to those who are devoted to the ideal! For if the external forms of institutions and laws respond to the pressure of deeper changes taking place, they cannot produce those changes: a new impetus must always come from the interior. To begin with, it certainly appears that the adoption of a constitution or of laws that give official expression to the victory of that part of the nation which is demanding its rights would ensure the progress that had been achieved. Yet it is possible that the result will be precisely the opposite. While it is true that any charter or laws that are agreed to by the insurgents may sanction the liberty that has been won, it is also true that they will limit it, and therein lies the danger. They determine the precise limit at which the victors must stop, and this inevitably becomes the point of departure for a retreat. For a situation is never absolutely stationary, and if movement does not occur in the direction of progress, it

will occur on the side of repression. The immediate consequence of law is to lull those who have imposed it during their temporary triumph, to drain from zealous individuals the personal energy that animated them in their

victorious efforts, and to transfer it to others, to professional legislators and to conservatives—in other words, to the very enemies of all progressive change. Moreover, the people are conservative at heart, and the game of revolution does not please them for long. They accept evolution because they are not suspicious of it; since they are unaware of it, it is unlikely to arouse their displeasure. Having become legalists, the former rebels are in part satisfied. They enter the ranks of the “friends of order,” and reaction regains the upper hand until the arrival of new groups of revolutionaries who are not tied to the system, and who, aided by the mistakes or follies of the government, smash another hole in the ancient edifice.

As soon as an institution is established, even if it should be only to combat flagrant abuses, it creates them anew through its very existence. It has to adapt to its bad environment, and in order to function, it must do so in a pathological way. Whereas the creators of the institution follow only noble ideals, the employees that they appoint must consider above all their remuneration

⁴ Gustave Geoffroy, *L’Enfermé*, 51. [Reclus’ note]

and the continuation of their employment. Far from desiring the success of the endeavor, in the end their greatest desire is that the goal should never be achieved.⁵ It is no longer a question of accomplishing the task, but only of the profits that it brings and the honors that it confers. For example, a commission of engineers is in charge of investigating the complaints of landowners who were displaced by the construction of the aqueduct of the Avre. It would seem very simple first to study these complaints and then to respond in all fairness. But no—they begin by taking a few years to do a general survey of the region, a task that had already been done, and done well at that. Time passes, expenses accumulate, and the complaints get worse. How often has it happened that the funds allocated for some public work are notoriously insufficient, scarcely enough to maintain the scaffolding, yet the engineers run up fees as if useful work were being accomplished? How many years were necessary for that tireless association, the Loire Navigable, to obtain the authorization to create a channel in the riverbed at its own expense by constructing relatively inexpensive groins? The state would only consider works costing millions, and twenty years later the matter would probably still be under study, like so many other projects that are vital for the intelligent use of French land.

The Law is decreed by the Parliament, which arises from the People, in whom national sovereignty resides. The freer the country, the more venerable its elected legislative body, and the more important the free examination of all the implications of liberty. And no institution is more deserving of critique than parliamentary government.

The Parliament was undeniably an instrument of progress for the nation that gave birth to it, and one can understand the admiration that Montesquieu developed through studying the functioning of the British system, which is so simple, and therefore so logical. Later, during the National Assembly of 1789 and the Convention, the Parliament passed through its heroic period in France, and on the whole, played a rather positive role in the history of the gradual liberation of the individual. Since then, it has spread to all countries of the world, including the Negro republics of Haiti, Santo Domingo, and Liberia. Only Russia (1905), Turkey, China, the European colonies of exploitation, and a few other states remain without national representation. The institution has become diversified in different countries, demonstrating shortcomings in some cases and strengths in others, but one finds everywhere a profound divergence between the evolution of a people and that of its legislative body.

Even if one sets aside systems with poll taxes and plural voting, ignores the fact that with rare exceptions the feminine half of the population is not “represented” at all, and considers only universal suffrage that is honestly applied, one still cannot claim that the laws voted on by the majority of the elected representatives, who are themselves selected by the majority of the voters, express the opinion of the majority of electors. In fact, the opposite is often true. This defect, which is purely mathematical, might be negligible if the state contained only two factions, since the losses and gains would balance out on the whole, but it becomes so much more serious

⁵ Reclus cites “Herbert Spencer, *Introduction to Social Science*, ch. V, 87.” There is, however, no such title. He is apparently referring to chapter 5 of Spencer’s *The Study of Sociology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961; reprint of the 1880 edition). There, Spencer comments that “agencies established to get remedies for crying evils, are liable to become agencies maintained and worked in a considerable degree, and sometimes chiefly, for the benefit of those who reap income from them” (75).

as life intensifies and opinions become more diverse. Yet the Swiss are alone in conferring on the entire electorate the final adoption or rejection of each new law.

Except in very rare cases, the spectacle presented by countries during an election would hardly delight a man of principles. Whether an electoral committee drafts the candidate, or whether he violates his own modesty, ambitions inevitably emerge, and machinations, extravagant promises, and lies have free rein. Moreover, it is certainly not the most honest candidate who has the best chance of winning. Since the legislators must be knowledgeable about all sorts of problems—local and global, financial and educational, technical and moral—no particular ability recommends the candidate to the voters. The winner may owe his success to a certain provincial popularity, his good-natured qualities, his oratorical skills, or his organizational talents, but frequently he is also indebted to his wealth, his family connections, or even the terror that he can inspire as a great industrialist or large property owner. Most often, he will be a man of the party; he will be asked neither to involve himself in public works, nor to facilitate human relations, but rather to fight against one faction or another. In short, the composition of the legislature does not at all reflect that of the nation. It will be generally inferior in moral qualities, since it is dominated by professional politicians.

Once elected, the representative is in fact independent of his electors. It is left up to him to decide on the thousand issues of each day according to his own conscience, and if he does not take the side of his constituents, there exists no recourse against his vote. Far from having any accountability during the four, seven, or nine years of his mandate, and well aware that he can now commit crimes with impunity, the elected official finds himself immediately exposed to all sorts of seductions on behalf of the ruling classes. The newcomer is initiated into the legislative traditions under the leadership of the veteran parliamentarians, adopts the *esprit de corps*, and is solicited by big industry, high officials, and above all, international finance. Even if the parliament happens to be composed of a majority of honest people, it develops a peculiar mentality based entirely on negotiations, compromises, recantations, dealings that must not reach the ears of the general public, and bargaining in the corridors that is covered up by brilliant jousting between skilled orators. All noble character is debased, all sincere conviction contaminated, and all honest intention destroyed.

Thus it is not surprising that so many men refuse to help sustain such an environment by means of their vote and to cooperate in the “conquest of state power.” The revolutionaries at least realize that the forms of the past will endure as long as the workers support their existence and compromise with them, even if only to modify them. They can only deplore the naïveté of those who think that they can “make the Revolution armed to the teeth with ballots.” In order to maintain this illusion, one must ignore the real weakness of this allegedly sovereign parliament, closing one’s eyes to the far more powerful institutions that gather around it, playing with it like a cat with a mouse.

All the movements for emancipation stand together, although the insurgents are often unaware of each other, and they even hold on to their atavistic enmities and resentments. From England and Germany to France and Italy, there are many workers who despise one another, though this does not prevent them from helping each another in their common struggle against capitalist oppression. Similarly, among the women who have thrown themselves impetuously into the

battle for equality between the sexes, there were at first a very significant number who, with their rather patrician or high-brow tendencies, harbored a pious disdain of the worker in his worn-out or dirty clothes. Nevertheless, since the early days of “feminism,” we have witnessed the heroism of brave women who go to the prostitutes to join them in solidarity to protest the abominable treatment to which they have been subjected, and the shocking bias of the law in favor of the corrupters and against their victims. Risking insults and the most unsavory contacts, they dared to enter the brothels and form an alliance with their scorned sisters against the shameful injustice of society. Consequently, the coarse laughter and vulgar insults that greeted their first steps gave way to a profound admiration on the part of many who had mocked them. Here is a courage of a different order than that of the fierce soldier who, seized with a bestial fury, lunges with his sword or fires his rifle.

Obviously, all of the claims of women against men are just: the demands of the female worker who is not paid as much as the male worker for the same labor, the demands of the wife who is punished for “crimes” that are mere “peccadilloes” when committed by the husband, and the demands of the female citizen who is barred from all overt political action, who obeys laws that she has not helped to create, and who pays taxes to which she has not consented. She has an absolute right to recrimination, and the women who occasionally take revenge are not to be condemned, since the greatest wrongs are those committed by the privileged. But ordinarily, a woman does not avenge herself at all. To the contrary, at her conventions she naïvely petitions legislators and high officials, waiting for salvation through their deliberations and decrees; however, experience teaches women year after year that freedom does not come begging, but rather must be conquered. It teaches them, moreover, that in reality their cause merges with that of all oppressed people, whoever they may be. Women will need to occupy themselves henceforth with all people who are wronged, and not only with the unfortunate women forced by poverty to sell their bodies. Once all are united, all the voices of the weak and the downtrodden will thunder with a tremendous outcry that will indeed have to be heard.

Make no mistake about it. Those who seek justice would have neither a chance of realizing it in the future nor a single ray of hope to console them in their misery if the league of all enemy classes had no defections and remained as solid as the human wall of an infantry formation. However, countless renegades leave their ranks. Some go without hesitation to augment the camp of the rebels, while others disperse here and there, somewhere between the ranks of the innovators and the conservatives. In any case, they are too far from their original position to be brought back at the moment of battle. It is perfectly natural that organized bodies are thus weakened by a loss of their best elements through a continual migration. The study of the interconnected facts and laws revealed by contemporary science, the rapid transformation of society, new conditions in the environment, and the need for mental balance in those who are logically attracted to the search for truth—all this creates for the young a milieu completely different from that entailed by a traditional society with its slow and painful evolution. It is true that the representatives of ancient monopolies also gain recruits, especially among those who, tired of suffering for their ideas, finally want to try out the joys and privileges of this world, to eat when they are hungry and take their turn living as parasites. But whatever the particular worth of a given individual who changes his ideals and practices, it is certain that the revolutionary offensive benefits by this exchange of men. It receives those who have conviction and determination, young people with boldness and will, whereas those whom life has defeated head for the camp of the parties of reaction and bring with them their discouragement and their faintheartedness.

The state and the various elements that constitute it have the great disadvantage of acting according to a mechanism so regular and so ponderous that it is impossible for them to modify their movements and adapt to new realities. Not only does bureaucracy not assist in the economic workings of society, but it is doubly harmful to it. First, it impedes individual initiative in every way and even prevents its emergence; second, it delays, halts, and immobilizes the works that are entrusted to it. The cogs of the administrative machine work precisely in the opposite direction from those functioning in an industrial establishment. The latter strives to reduce the number of useless articles, and to produce the greatest possible results with the simplest mechanism. By contrast, the administrative hierarchy does its utmost to multiply the number of employees and subordinates, directors, auditors, and inspectors. Work becomes so complicated as to be impossible. As soon as business arises that is outside the normal routine, the administration is as disturbed as a company of frogs would be if a stone were thrown into their swamp. Everything becomes a pretext for a delay or a reprimand. One withholds his signature because he is jealous of a rival who might benefit from it; another because he fears the displeasure of a supervisor; a third holds back his opinion in order to give the impression of importance. Then there are the indifferent and the lazy. Weather, accidents, and misunderstandings are all used as excuses for the results of ill will. Finally, files disappear under a layer of dust in the office of some malevolent or lazy manager. Useless formalities and sometimes the physical impossibility of providing all of the desired signatures halts business, which gets lost like a parcel en route between capitals.

The most urgent projects cannot be accomplished because the sheer force of inertia of the bureaucracy remains insurmountable. This is the case with the island of Ré, which is in danger of some day being split in two by a storm. On the ocean side, it has already lost a strip of land several kilometers wide in some places, and currently all that remains at the most threatened point is an isthmus of less than one hundred meters. The row of dunes that forms the backbone of the island is very weak there. Considering all the facts, it is inevitable that one day, during a strong equinoctial tide, a raging westerly wind will push the waves across the peduncle of sand and open up a large strait through the swamps and fields. Everyone agrees that it is urgent to construct a strong seawall at the weak point on the island; however, some time ago a small fort was built, a worthless construction now abandoned to the bats, without even a man garrisoned there. No matter, it is in principle under the supervision of the corps of engineers, and consequently all public works are necessarily halted in its vicinity. This part of the island will have to perish. Not far from there, the waters of a gulf have intruded into the salt marshes and changed them into a shallow estuary. It would be easy to recover these "Lost Marshes," and the surrounding residents have formulated a proposal to do so. But the invasion of the sea has made state property of the area, and the series of formalities that the recovery of the land would entail seems so interminable that the undertaking has become impossible. The lost land will remain lost unless a revolution abolishes all clumsy intervention from an ignorant and indifferent state and restores the free management of interests to the interested parties themselves.

In certain respects, minor officials exercise their power more absolutely than persons of high rank, who are by their very importance constrained by a certain propriety. They are bound to respect social decorum and to conceal their insolence, and this sometimes succeeds in soothing them and calming them down. In addition, the brutalities, crimes, or misdemeanors committed by important figures engage everyone's attention. The public becomes enthralled with their acts and discusses them passionately. Often they even risk being removed from office through the intervention of deliberative bodies and bringing their superiors down with them. But the petty

official need not have the slightest fear of being held responsible in this way so long as he is shielded by a powerful boss. In this case, all upper-level administration, including ministers and even the king, will vouch for his irreproachable conduct. The uncouth can give free rein to crass behavior, the violent lash out as they please, and the cruel enjoy torturing at their leisure. What a hellish life it is to endure the hatred of a drill sergeant, a jailer, or the warden of a chain gang! Sanctioned by law, rules, tradition, and the indulgence of his superiors, the tyrant becomes judge, jury, and executioner. Of course, while giving vent to his anger, he is always supposed to have dispensed infallible justice in all its splendor. And when cruel fate has made him the satrap of some distant colony, who will be able to oppose his caprice? He joins the ranks of kings and gods.

The arrogant, do-nothing petty bureaucrat who, protected by a metal grating, can take the liberty of being rude toward anyone; the judge who exercises his “wit” at the expense of the accused he is about to condemn; the police who brutally round up people or beat demonstrators; plus a thousand other arrogant manifestations of authority—this is what maintains the animosity between the government and the governed. And it must be noted that these daily acts do not wrap themselves in the mantle of the law but rather hide behind decrees, memos, reports, regulations, and orders from the prefect and other officials. The law can be harsh and indeed unjust, but the worker crosses its path only rarely. In certain circumstances, he can even go through life without suspecting that he is subject to it, as when he is unaware that he is paying some tax. But every time he acts, he is confronted with decisions decreed by officials whose irresponsibility differs from that of the members of parliament. The decisions of the former are without recourse and continually remind the individual of the guardianship that the state exercises over him.

The number of high and low officials will naturally grow considerably, in proportion to increases in budgetary resources and to the extent that the treasury contrives to find new means of extracting additional revenues from whatever may be taxed. But the proliferation of employees and staff members results above all from what we like to call “democracy,” that is, from the participation of the masses in the prerogatives of power. Each citizen wants his scrap, and the main preoccupation of those who already have an official post is to classify, study, and annotate the applications of others who seek a position. The budget has paid for, and possibly continues to pay for, a forest ranger on the island of Ouessant, which has a grand total of eight trees—five in the garden of the curé and three in the cemetery!

So much pressure is exerted on the government by the multitude of supplicants that the acquisition of distant colonies is due in very large part to the concern for the distribution of government positions. One can judge the so-called colonization of many countries by the fact that in Algeria in 1896 there were a little more than 260,000 French residing within the territorial boundaries, of which more than 51,000 were officials of all kinds. This constitutes roughly a fifth of the colonists,⁶ yet one must also take into account the 50,000 soldiers stationed there. This brings to mind the inscription added on a map to the name of the “town” of Ushuaia, the southernmost urban settlement of the Americas and of the world: “Seventy-eight inhabitants, all officials”!

France is an example of such a “democratization” of the state since it is managed by approximately six hundred thousand participants in the exercise of sovereign power. But if one adds to the officials in the strict sense those who consider themselves as such, and who are indeed invested with certain local or temporary powers, as well as those distinguished from the mass of the nation through titles or distinguishing marks, such as the village policemen and the town

⁶ Louis Vignon, *La France en Algérie*. [Reclus’ note]

criers, not to mention the recipients of decorations and medals, it becomes apparent that there are more officials than soldiers. Moreover, the former are, as a group, much more energetic supporters of the government that pays them. Whereas the soldier obeys orders out of fear, the official's motivation stems not only from forced obedience but also from conviction. Being himself a part of the government, he expresses its spirit in his whole manner of thinking and in his ambitions. He represents the state in his own person. Moreover, the vast army of bureaucrats in office has a reserve force of a still greater army of all the candidates for offices, supplicants and beggars of favors, friends, and relations. Just as the rich depend on the broad masses of the poor and starving, who are similar to them in their appetites and their love of lucre, so do the masses, who are oppressed, persecuted, and abused by state employees of all sorts, support the state indirectly, since they are composed of individuals who are each preoccupied with soliciting jobs.

Naturally, this unlimited expansion of power, this minute allocation of positions, honors, and meager rewards, to the point of ridiculous salaries and the mere possibility of future remuneration, has two consequences with opposing implications. On the one hand, the ambition to govern becomes widespread, even universal, so that the natural tendency of the ordinary citizen is to participate in the management of public affairs. Millions of men feel a solidarity in the maintenance of the state, which is their property, their affair. At the same time, the growing debt of the government, divided into thousands of small entitlements to income, finds as many champions as it has creditors drawing the value of their income coupons from quarter to quarter. On the other hand, this state, divided into innumerable fragments, showering privileges on one or another individual whom all know and have no particular reason to admire or fear, but whom they may even despise—this banal government, being all too well understood, no longer dominates the multitudes through the impression of terrifying majesty that once belonged to masters who were all but invisible and who only appeared before the public surrounded by judges, attendants, and executioners. Not only does the state no longer inspire mysterious and sacred fear, it even provokes laughter and contempt. It is through the satirical newspapers, and especially through the marvelous caricatures that have become one of the most remarkable forms of contemporary art, that future historians will have to study the public spirit during the period beginning with the second half of the nineteenth century. The state perishes and is neutralized through its very dissemination. Just when all possess it, it has virtually ceased to exist, and is no more than a shadow of itself.

Institutions thus disappear at the moment when they seem to triumph. The state has branched out everywhere; however, an opposing force also appears everywhere. While it was once considered inconsequential and was unaware of itself, it is constantly growing and henceforth will be conscious of the work that it has to accomplish. This force is the liberty of the human person, which, after having been spontaneously exercised by many primitive tribes, was proclaimed by the philosophers and successively demanded with varying degrees of consciousness and will by countless rebels. Presently, the number of rebels is multiplying, and their propaganda is taking on a character that is less emotional than it was previously and much more scientific. They enter the struggle more convinced, more daring, and more confident of their strength, and they find an environment that offers more opportunities to avoid the grip of the state. Here is the great revolution that is developing and even reaching partial fulfillment before our eyes. In the past, society has functioned through distinct nations, separated by borders and living under the domination of individuals and classes who claim superiority over other men. We now see another mode of general evolution that intermingles with the previous one and begins to replace

it in an increasingly regular and decisive manner. This mode consists of direct action through the freely expressed will of men who join together in a clearly defined endeavor, without concern for boundaries between classes and countries. Each accomplishment that is thus realized without the intervention of official bosses and outside the state, whose cumbersome machinery and obsolete practices do not lend themselves to the normal course of life, is an example that can be used for larger undertakings. Erstwhile subjects become partners joining together in complete independence, according to their personal affinities and their relation to the climate that bathes them and the soil that supports them. They learn to escape from the leading strings that had guided them so badly, being in the hands of degenerate and foolish men. It is through the phenomena of human activity in the arenas of labor, agriculture, industry, commerce, study, education, and discovery that subjugated peoples gradually succeed in liberating themselves and in gaining complete possession of that individual initiative without which no progress can ever take place.

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Elisée Reclus
The Modern State
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Reclus' most extended critique of the state appears in *L'Évolution, la révolution et l'idéal anarchique* and in the chapter "L'État moderne," in volume 6 of *L'Homme et la Terre* (Paris: Librairie Universelle, 1905–8), 171–223. The following text consists of the most important sections of that chapter (171–77, 188–94, and 214–23).

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