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20th of May 1904

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The So-Called Anarchist Decadence

Elisée Reclus

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A libertarian journalist from Paris recently uttered an anguished cry about the decadence in which anarchy has apparently already fallen into and in which it threatens to drown. Several of our comrades were troubled in their peace of mind at hearing that voice, which was very eloquent, and they asked with some anxiety those of their friends, that they believed more or less authorized because of their experience and their studies to form a personal opinion, perhaps a more optimistic one.

Having not read all of these answers, it would be difficult for me to make on judgement of the general feeling which emerged from the entirety of anarchist groups. Still, it seems to me that most comrades have not been shaken out of their good moods of confidence and determination: they're not scared of the thought of being soon alone haggard and hungry on another raft of the Medusa⁽¹⁾, lost in a seemingly endless ocean. I've even met friends who were moved by a joyful spirit, saying the current events were giving them hope.

⁽¹⁾ Probably referring to the painting "The Raft Of The Medusa" by Géricault

Since the time, still close, when the word "anarchy" in the sense of "society without masters", forced itself into the official lexicons, it seems to them that the progress has been enormous, even if, strongly unequal in its appearances. If, by a sudden trick, it was possible to obtain the statistics of those who proclaim themselves "anarchists" consciously or unconsciously, the number would be a hundred times higher than what it was during the gatherings in Geneva, The Hague or Saint-Imier.⁽²⁾

Recently, a diminution in appearance may have happened, but does it really matter, as so many individuals, who we would have rather not have to deal with, had obeyed to the prestige of the word, without a care for the the actual meaning that this word contained? We live in time in which it was fashionable, in the glamorous society, to call oneself an anarchist to frighten the bourgeois and make the dowager jump out of their velvet seats. Some took mysterious demeanors spreading dread and satanistic curiosity: the cranks were at the same time poets and bomb throwers, trying to make it known that they were working alongside nebulous fellows to create "reversing cauldrons"⁽³⁾. It was then the good times to move the ladies of a double thrill of admiration and terror, and to prepare one's own future effects in the literary world, in theatres, at the salon, in the chambers leading to the Academy. Honor Crosses, pensions, sub prefectures, and foreign missions have had reason of these new anarchists. Shouldn't we be happy about it? The more we are getting rid of fake brothers, dodgy comrades, or companions who serve and betray us at the same time, the more we'll be pleased to end up between ourselves, pursuing our ideas, realising our works.

This is a physiological law: after a certain period of ingestion, comes that of digestion, at least as important, and the only one

⁽²⁾ Saint-Imier here refers to the first anti-authoritarian congress in 1872

⁽³⁾ "Reversing cauldrons" is the bomb built by Emile Henry which exploded on the 8th of November 1892, killing 5 cops.

that counts for the assimilation of nutriments. Man doesn't seem as busy as during the meal, but it is now that his life is renewed.

How charming would it be, if the number of so called anarchists could diminish of all those who, in spite of their principles, are still dogmatic preachers and founders of parties! Vanity wins so easily over the best resolutions that many comrades hold forth talks on the most diverse subjects, without really knowing them, and try to group around them other comrades so as to make them their disciples. In that regard, many anarchists are far too similar to politicians. What can declarations of faith do to change characters and ways of life. And so each year, we have to deal with waste produced by polemicists and journalists who will be brought back into standard life by their sheppards.

Remain the anarchists who are anarchists to the core, those who really think that every power, every law, distorts the master and the subject, and who, taking this as their starting point of their activity, only work as equals, using all their muscles and their will to overthrow the oppressors and uplift the humbles.

This is nothing easy, this is not a job made to rest, whatever say those busy with electoral work and deep in political interests. The life of the anarchist corresponds to his moral value entirely, because he gives everything that he has, for one in the struggle, and second in propaganda. The examples are endless of courageous comrades who have sacrificed everything, their well being, their family, their liberty. How many among our comrades can tell us the horrors of prison, of battalions sent to Africa, of penal colonies in Guyane? More importantly how many, of which the misery and the torture, in front of empty cribs, wasn't as dramatic but was more striking.

And all that heroism is nothing but the natural scenery produced in contemporary society by the energy of certitudes. Where does it originate from, if it isn't from the now clearer and clearer truth. Science progresses. Each day it reveals to us new facts, fruits of observation and experience and obtained through the personal ini-

tiative of researchers, which is of essentially anarchist nature. Each day, it teaches us to classify all these new knowledges following a logical order, independently of any routine, of Aristotelean tradition or any other, and this is again pure anarchy. Each day, the intellectual and moral world changes axis, taking as the regulator of its evolution, not only the wims of kings, the domga of priests, the repetition of schools, but the economic and social conditions of a milieu, better and better studied. Isn't that too anarchy, even if hardly conscious of itself?

Finally among the sad ones who have thrown themselves outside of the usual workings of society and who are known under the perfect name of "demoted"⁽⁴⁾, the proportion of those who start to wonder about the causes of their condition and who find scientific explanations only grows with the progress of education and find themsevles, inevitably, on the way towards anarchy. By a double converging movement, that is to say, by the progress of objective science and by the subjective evolution of individuals, the part of the anarchist conception in the human ideal, never stops growing and, curiously, paradoxically in appearence, the union of ideas and wills towards the goal of a determined work, is stronger as the individuals differentiate, and personalize themselves in their own ways. Having no master to fight, they unite voluntarily with their equals. The immensity of their desires sometimes results in some of them being desperate, speaking of "anarchist decadence", but the current of history proves them wrong, regardless of small oscillations of the moment, we see the strength of revolutionary wills growing more and more, and generally away from the Nietzsche who'd want to crush the weak and away from the Tolstoi who tell us to not resist the strong.

⁽⁴⁾ In french "déclassé", meaning unemployed or literally, "without a class"