

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Elisée Reclus
Why Are We Anarchists?
1899

[https://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/working-translations/
elisee-reclus-why-are-we-anarchists-1899/](https://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/working-translations/elisee-reclus-why-are-we-anarchists-1899/)

La Société nouvelle, année 5 no. 2, 1889 [Working Translation by
Shawn P. Wilbur]

theanarchistlibrary.org

Why Are We Anarchists?

Elisée Reclus

1899

The few lines that follow do not constitute a program. Their only purpose is to explain the usefulness of elaborating a draft program which would be submitted to the study, the observations and the criticisms of all the communist revolutionaries.

Perhaps, however, they contain one or two considerations that could find their place in the proposal for which I call.

We are revolutionaries because we want justice and because we see injustice reign everywhere around us. The products of labor are distributed in reverse proportion to labor. The idler has all the rights, even that of starving his fellow, while the worker does not always have the right to die of starvation in silence: he is imprisoned when he is guilty of the strike. People who call themselves priests try to foster believe in miracles so that intelligence can be enslaved to them; people called kings claim to descend from a universal master in order to be master in their turn; people armed by them cut, slash and shoot as they please; people in black robes who call themselves the justice par excellence condemn the poor, absolve the rich, often selling convictions and acquittals; merchants distribute poison instead of food; *they kill at retail instead of killing in bulk* and thus become honored capitalists. The sack of gold coins

is the master, and he who possesses it holds in his power the destiny of other men. All this seems to us infamous and we want to change it. Against injustice we appeal to the revolution.

But, we are told, "justice is nothing but a word, a pure convention pure." "What exists is the right of the strong!" Well, if that is the case, we are no less revolutionary as a result. One of two things is true: either justice is the human ideal and, in this case, we demand it for all; or else force alone governs societies and, in that case, we will use force against our enemies. Either the liberty of equals or the law of the talion.

But why rush, say all those who, in order to dispense with acting themselves, wait all the time. The slow evolution of things being sufficient for them, the revolution frightens them. Between them and us, history has made its decision. *No progress, whether partial or general, is accomplished by simple, peaceful evolution; it is always made by sudden revolution.* If the work of preparation occurs slowly in minds, the realization of the ideas takes place abruptly: evolution is accomplished in the brain, and it is arms that make the revolution.

And how to carry out this revolution that we see slowly preparing itself in Society, the coming of which we aid with all our efforts? Is it by grouping ourselves in bodies subordinated to one another? Is it by forming ourselves on the model of the bourgeois that we combat in a hierarchical ensemble, having its responsible masters and its irresponsible inferiors, held like tools in the hands of a boss? Would we begin by abdicating in order to become free? No, for we are anarchists, men who want to maintain full responsibility for their acts, who act by virtue of their individual rights and duties, which give a being its natural development, who have no one for master and are masters of no one.

We want to free ourselves from the embrace of the State, to no longer have above us superiors who can command us and put their will in the place of our own.

We want to tear up all external law, *keeping only to the conscious development of the internal laws of our nature.* By eliminating the State, we also eliminate all official morals, knowing in advance that there can be no morality in obedience to poorly understood laws, in the practical obedience that we do not even seek to understand. There is morality only in liberty. It is also through liberty alone that renewal remains possible. We want to keep our minds open, lending itself in advance to all progress, to every new idea, to every generous initiative.

But, if we are anarchists, the enemies of every master, we are also communist internationals, for we understand that life is impossible without social grouping. Isolated, we can do nothing, while through close union we can transform the world. We associate with one another as free and equal men, laboring at a common work and governing our mutual relations by justice and reciprocal benevolence. Religious and national hatreds cannot separate us, since *the study of nature is our only religion* and because we have the world for a homeland. As for the great cause of ferocity and meanness, it will cease to exist among us. The earth will become collective property, the barriers will be removed and from now on the soil, belonging to all, could be developed for the pleasure and well-being of everyone. The products demanded will be precisely those that the earth can best furnish, without anything every being lost as occurs in the disorganized labor that is performed today. As well, the distribution of all this wealth among men will be taken from the private exploiter and will be made part of the normal functioning of Society as a whole.

We do not have to draw a picture of the future society in advance: *It is up to the spontaneous action of all the free men to create it and give it its form, which will, incidentally, be constantly changing, like all the phenomena of life.* But what we know is that all injustice, every crime of reason humanity, will always find us standing to combat it. As long as iniquity endures, we, international anarchist-communists, will remain in a state of permanent revolution.