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The Precursors of Anarchism

Émile Armand

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Émile Armand, pseudonym of Ernest-Lucien Juin (1872–1962)
was a French individualist anarchist writer and activist. He
wrote for anarchist magazines such as *L'Ère nouvelle*,
L'anarchie, *L'EnDehors*¹ and *L'Unique*. Original source
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Contents

ANTIQUITY	5
THE MIDDLE AGE	8
THE RENAISSANCE	11
MODERN TIMES	14

children, against all superstitions and materialism, contributed to undermine the columns of authority. It would take a large volume to record the names of all those who, in different ways, contributed to shake faith in Church and State.

So we will stop at William Godwin, whose *Survey of Political Justice and its Influence on Virtue and General Happiness* (1793) seems to us the first doctrinal work of anarchism worthy of the name. It is true that Godwin is an anarchist communist, but we think that his denial of law and the State fits perfectly with any tendency of anarchism.

ANTIQUITY

Certainly, it is not easy to know exactly, and what documents could tell us? – when the governmental or state authority began. No few explanations have been given as to the foundation and establishment of authority. Are we to believe that groups of men, as they became more and more numerous, were compelled to entrust the administration of their affairs and the settlement of their disputes to the more intelligent or the more feared: the sorcerers or the priests? Or that the primitive groupings, showing themselves in general more and more hostile to each other, were obliged to concentrate the defense of the place and of things in the hands of the bravest or most skilled warriors – or women warriors –? Be that as it may, everything tends to show that authority is prior to individual property. It is evident that authority was established when goods, things and, in some cases, children and women, were already the property of the social organization. Fatally, the regime of individual property (i.e., the possibility for one member of the community to hoard more land than he needed for his and his family's subsistence and to exploit the surplus for others) only complicated, perfected and made authority, whether theocratic or military, more tyrannical.

Were there, at that time, beings who rebelled against the authority, however rudimentary, that prevailed in their primitive groupings? Were there objectors and disobedients in those distant times when meteorological phenomena were attributed to dark and superior forces, now good and now evil, and when the creation of man was considered the work of a superior organism? If we want to believe in some of the myths that have been handed down to us, we must convince ourselves that man has not always passively accepted to be a plaything in the hands of divinity or the slave of its representatives: the myths of Satan and Prometheus, of the rebellious angels and the Titans, are proof of this. Even later, when governmental or ecclesiasti-

cal authority was firmly established, there were manifestations which, although confined within a peaceful framework, nevertheless showed that there was a spirit of rebellion in the air. Among these we may classify the satirical scenes and comedies, the Roman saturnal feasts, the Christian carnival and various others. And not a few tales circulated among the people, who always listened to them with almost puerile joy, and whose theme was almost always the same: the victory of the weak, the oppressed and the poor, over the tyrant and the rich.

When we come to Greek antiquity, with Gorgias he denied all dogmas; with Pythagoras he made man the measure of all things; with Aristippus he gave life to the hedonistic school (for whom there is no other good than pleasure, and immediate pleasure wherever it arises): with Antisthenes, Diogenes and Cratylus of Thebes he created the Cynics; with Zeno, Chrysippus and their successors he brought the Stoics: a group of extraordinary men who criticized and denied the values hitherto accepted and recognized. Continuing their marvelous ascent, the Cynics, from the negation of the values of Hellenic culture, came to the negation of its institutions: marriage, homeland, property, the State. It is certain that behind the barrel and lantern of Diogenes, there was more than mere mockery and words of wit. Diogenes pierced, with his biting sarcasms, the strongest and most feared among those who were already disputing the spoils of spirited Athens. And Plato, scandalized by the more than popular form of his preaching, had dubbed him «a Socrates in delirium». Yet the Cynics, by equating manual labor with intellectual labor, by denouncing useless work, by declaring themselves citizens of the world, by regarding the generals as «donkey drivers,» by ridiculing popular superstitions down to the demon of Socrates, and by reducing the purpose of life to the exercise and development of the moral person, could well be considered, like their teacher, physicians of the soul, heralds of freedom and truth. From the social point of view they were advocates of community, and extended this

the young poet Southey, who later, following Burke's example, completely repudiated his youthful dreams. According to Sylvain Maréchal – also confirmed in part by Lord Byron – it seems that this epicurean group intended to create an Abbey of Thélème by putting all things in common among its members, including sexual pleasures. And – still according to Maréchal – the great artists, the most renowned men of letters and the most celebrated men of England would have been part of this group, which was eventually dissolved by a special bill of Parliament (Dictionary of Atheists, in the entry: Thélème).

Manuel Devaldes, for his part, in his *Figures d'Angleterre*, presents La Pantisocratie as a colony project that would be carried out in America among the illinoisans: a colony project, based on economic equality and where two hours of daily work would be enough to ensure food and other needs of the colonists. According to him, it seems that, after Southey's defection and the death of the two main initiators, the Pantisocracy had died before it was born.

Meanwhile, in Germany, Schiller wrote the *Brigantes*, in which the protagonist rises against conventions and laws that never created a great man, while freedom created giants and extraordinary beings.

Fichte, for his part, affirms that if humanity had been morally perfect, there would have been no need for States; Wilhelm de Humboldt, in 1792, defends the thesis of the reduction of the State to its minimum function; Vittorio Alfieri, in Italy, writes *Della Tirannide*.

Everywhere authority, in one form or another, is struck in the breach. Spinoza, Comenius, Vico, Voltaire, Lessing, Herder, Condorcet, on some sides and some forms of their activity were libertarians. Spee, Thomasius, Beccaria, Sonnenfelds, John Howard, Mary Wollstonecraft, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, La Mettrie, d'Holbac, fighting against the tortures inflicted on sorcerers, against the severity of punishments, against slavery, for the liberation of women, for a better education of

of authority, is manifest in all his pamphlets, satires of all kinds, written with an eagerness and a frankness of which we have now completely lost the example. The names of Thomas Hobbes, John Toland, John Wilkes, Jonathan Swift, and William De Foe, I think it is sufficient to mention.

Thus we come to the Irishman Edmond Burke and his *Vindication of Natural Society* (1756), whose dominant idea is this: whatever form of government there is no one better than another: «The different kinds of governments have vied with each other in the absurdity of their constitutions and in the oppressions they have made their subjects suffer.... Even the freest governments, with respect to their greatness and duration, have known more confusion and committed more acts of flagrant tyranny than the most despotic governments known to history.»

Edmond Burke, unfortunately, later disavowed everything he had written; when he wrote his *Reflections*, he rose up against the French Revolution. An American, Thomas Paine, a deputy to the convention, answered him with *The Rights of Man*, 1791–92. But Paine himself, refusing to vote for the death of Louis XVI, was imprisoned and narrowly escaped the guillotine. He took advantage of his imprisonment to write *The Age of Reason* (*The Age of Reason*, 1795): «In all its different degrees, society is always an advantage, while government, even under its best aspects, is a necessary evil: under its worst, an intolerable evil.... The business of governing has always been monopolized by the most ignorant and most rascally individuals that mankind has ever known.»

In 1796 a pamphlet appeared in Oxford entitled: *The inherent Evils of all State Government demonstrated*. This pamphlet attributed to A.C. Cuddon is strongly impregnated with individualistic anarchism, and Benjamin R. Tucker made a new edition in 1885, in Boston.

In London, under the influence of the French Revolution, a group called the Pantisocracy had arisen. Its animator had been

principle not only to things but to persons, a conception dear to many philosophers of antiquity.

The Cynics, and especially Diogenes, have been reproached for their pride in their isolation, for posing as models, and for exaggerating a way of life that was the negation of any organized society. Diogenes had earlier replied: «I am like the choir-masters, who force the tone to lead their pupils.»

The first teaching of Zeno – the leader of the Stoics – was very similar to that of the Cynics. In his *Treatise on the Republic*, he rejected customs, laws, sciences and arts, while claiming, like Plato, the community of goods. The essence or substance of the Stoic system is this: that the good of man is freedom, and that freedom is only gained by freedom. The wise man, according to the Stoics, is synonymous with the free man: he owes his good only to himself, and his happiness depends only on himself. Sheltered from the blows of fate, insensible to everything, master of himself, with no other need than himself, he finds in himself a serenity, a freedom and a happiness that has no limits. He is no longer a simple man: he is a god and more than a god, for the happiness of the gods is the privilege of their nature, while the happiness of the wise man is the conquest of his own freedom. Zeno logically denied the omnipotence, protection and control of the State; for man must serve exclusively himself, and it is from individual harmony that collective harmony must arise. Hedonism, Cynicism and Stoicism are opposed to the artificial right which makes the individual an instrument in the hands of the State, the natural right which gives the individual the right to dispose of himself as he wishes. Zeno used this theory, as the Cynics had already done, to combat the exaggerated nationalism of the Greeks and to admit an instinct of society, a natural instinct which impels man to associate with other men. Undoubtedly, the Cynics and the Stoics can be considered the first internationalists.

THE MIDDLE AGE

We shall see how this idea of natural law, of the law of nature, of natural religion, will be followed and taken up by various philosophers. And we will also see how the triumph of Christianity was not as complete as its supporters claimed. In fact, there were not a few heretics of the time who thought it prudent to cover themselves with the mask of religion in order to carry out their propaganda with some security.

Here is, for example, the Gnostic Carpocrates of Alexandria, founder of the Carpocratic sect, whose son Epiphanes collected the whole doctrine in his work *On Justice*. Divine justice for this author is found in the community and in the equality of this community. He says: similar to the sun that is not measured to anyone, it must be the same for all other things, for any pleasure. If God has given us desire, it is so that we and all other living beings can satisfy it completely, and not because we put limits on it.

Apparently, the Carpocratians were exterminated. However, still around the 6th century, inscriptions indicating Carpocratic tendencies were found both in Cyrenaica and North Africa.

In any case, whether destroyed or not, the Carpocratians had successors. We do not know whether the initiates of the sects that embraced their conceptions or analogous ideas, had suppressed within their groups all forms of authority: whether they had not «organized» in the present way. What we know is that the political system then in force found in them irreconcilable adversaries. They formed international secret societies, interrelated, whose itinerant members were fraternally welcomed by the corresponding associations. They taught clandestinely: the numerous trials of those who were discovered and fell victim to their propaganda sufficiently demonstrate this. Unfortunately, all too often, we do not know their true opinions. We are only told about their crimes (?) and deviations (?).

Once the revolutionary whirlwind had passed, Maréchal took up his pen again. In 1798 appeared his *Culte et voix d'une société d'hommes sans Dieu*. In 1799, *Les voyages de Pythagore*, in 6 volumes. In 1800, his great work, *Dictionnaire des athées anciens et modernes*, for which the astronomer Jérôme Lalande wrote the supplement. Finally, in 1807, *De la Virtu...* a posthumous work, which was probably printed but never appeared in public, and which Lalande used for his second supplement to the «*Dictionnaire des athées*». Moreover, Napoleon did not allow the distinguished astronomer to write on atheism for a long time.

In England, Winstanley and his Levellers can be regarded to some extent as precursors of anarchism. However, John Lilburne, one of them, denounced authority «in all its forms and aspects»: his fines and prison sentences no longer counted. He was exiled to Holland. On three different occasions, the jury acquitted him, the last time in 1613 for violation of an expulsion decree. Cromwell held him in captivity «for the good of the country»; and in 1656, having become a Quaker, he was released. Which did not prevent him from dying a year later of galloping etiology. He was only 39 years old.

Around 1650, he had Roger William (who had begun his career as governor of the territory that later formed the State of Rhode Island, in the United States), and more than him, one of his supporters, William Harris, thundered against the immorality of all earthly powers, and against the crime of all punishment. Was he a mystical visionary or an isolated anarchist?

There is no doubt that among the perfect opponents of the State can be counted the early Quakers.

Also in Northern Europe, the Dutchman Peter Cornelius Hockboy (1658), the Englishman John Bellers (1695) and the Scotsman Robert Wallace (1761) spoke in favor of voluntary and cooperative socialism. In his *Perspectives*, Robert Wallace speaks of a humanity composed of multiple communes. The protest against governmental abuses, against the excesses

no king but their patriarchs, renouncing forever to return to the cities they have so painstakingly built, whose stones are all wet with their tears and stained with their blood. The soldiers, sent to take these men back to their urban agglomerations, turn to freedom, stay with those whom they were to lead back to servitude, send their uniforms back to the tyrant, who dies of rage and hunger devouring himself. The idea is undoubtedly reminiscent of La Boétie's *Voluntary Servitude*. He then published the *Almanach des honnêtes femmes* in 1790, adorned with a satirical illustration of the Duchess de Polignac. As a continuation of the *Almanach des honnêtes femmes* which he had published two years earlier and which, as we have said, had cost him more than four months in prison, here he replaces each saint with a well-known woman. These celebrated women are divided into twelve classes, according to their «gender» (one in each class: January, Fricatrices; February, Tractatrices, and so on: Fellatrices, Lesbiennes, Corinthiennes, Samiennes, Phoeniciennes, Siphnassiennes, Phicidisseuses, Chaldisseuses, Tribades, Hircinnes).

This almanac, today very rare, is only found in the Inferno of the Bibliothèque Nationale.

Sylvain Maréchal, a curious character, only accepted the revolution of 1789 with reservations. The first anarchist newspaper to appear in France, *L'Humanitaire* (1841), affirmed that as long as there were masters and slaves, poor and rich, there would be neither liberty nor equality. Maréchal continued his publications: in 1791, *Dame nature à la barre de l'Assemblée Nationale*; in the year II, *le Jugement dernier des rois*; in 1794, *La fête de la raison*. He collaborated in the *Révolutions de Paris*, in *l'Ami de la Révolution* and in the *Bulletin des amis de la Vérité*. His friend, the Hebertist Chaumette, was a victim of the Terror, but escaped from Robespierre, just as he managed to escape Thermidor's reaction and the persecutions of the Directory, even though, as we are assured, he had collaborated in the *Manifesto of the Equals*.

Let us mention others. In 1022, the synod of Orleans condemned to the stake eleven Cathars (Albigensians) accused of having practiced free love. In 1030, at Monforte, near Turin, heretics were accused of having declared themselves against religious ceremonies and rites, marriage, the slaughter of animals and in favor of the community of goods. In 1052, in Goslar, several heretics were burned for having pronounced themselves against the killing of any living being: that is, against war, against murder and against the killing of animals. In 1213, the Waldenses were burned in Strasbourg for preaching free love and community of goods. They were not men of letters or scholars, as was often the case at that time, but simple craftsmen: weavers, shoemakers, masons, carpenters, etc.

It was at this time that many «sectarians», basing themselves on the passage of St. Paul's epistle to the Galatians – «If you are led by the spirit, you are no longer under the law» – placed the human being, the personality, above the law. Men and women shared ideas very close to those of the carpocrats, which in practice led to a kind of libertarian communism: they lived as best they could in more or less clandestine colonies, under the threat of implacable repression if they were discovered.

In the twelfth century Amaury or Amalric de Bène, from the area around Chartres, professed these ideas at the Sorbonne. He had more energetic disciples than himself, among them Ortlieb of Strasbourg, who made known his anarcho-panteistic doctrine in Germany, where they found enthusiastic and convinced supporters acting under the name of *Bruder und Schwestern des freien Geistes* (Brothers and Sisters of a Free Spirit). Max Beer, in his *History of Socialism*, treats these «brothers» as individualistic anarchists, who had placed themselves outside of society, its laws, its usages and customs, and whom society organized in reciprocity fought mercilessly.

And besides, how could it have been otherwise? It can be imagined that for Amalric de Bène and his followers, God was as much in Jesus as in the pagan thinkers and poets; he spoke through the mouth of Ovid as through that of St. Augustine. Were such men worthy of living?

Among the different species of known heresies, it is necessary to make certain distinctions. We must distinguish, for example, between Amalekian pantheism-anarchism – whose followers considered themselves particles of the Holy Spirit, rejecting all forms of asceticism, all moral coercion and placing themselves, so to speak, beyond good and evil – and the heirs of Manichaean Gnosticism, with the Albigensian ascetics whose aspiration tended to overcome matter. Of the rest, despite efforts, it is not always easy to make an exact distinction. The Catholic historian Doellinger, who has studied the history of all these sects in depth, does not hesitate to affirm that if they had won – speaking especially of the Waldenses and the Albigenses – «there would have been a general convulsion, a complete return to barbarism and pagan indiscipline».

In the first pantheist-anarchist group we will gather the heresy of Tanchelin of Antwerp, that of the Kloefers of Flanders, that of the Hommes de l'Intelligence, that of the Turlupins, that of the Picards or Adamites (who had affiliates as far as Bohemia), that of the Loists, also of Antwerp. Everywhere men or associations had arisen who wanted to react against the dominant system, represented especially by Catholicism, whose high dignitaries led a most scandalous existence, maintaining prostitution, exploiting pleasure and gambling houses, bearing arms and fighting as professional warriors.

In conclusion, I will say that I personally fully share Max Nettlau's opinion, namely, that in the last years of the Middle Ages, southern France, the Albigensian countries, a part of Germany extending as far as Bohemia, the bordering regions of the Lower Rhine, as far as Holland and Flanders, as well as parts of England, Italy and Catalonia, constituted a breeding ground

voyage de Bougainville: «You are two children of nature: what rights do you have over him that he does not have over you?» Stirner, later, will say no better.

In the *Revue Socialiste* of September 1888, Benoît Malon devoted about ten pages to Don Deschamps, a Benedictine of the thirteenth century, precursor of Hegelism, transformism and anarchic communism.

And here we come to Sylvain Maréchal, poet, man of letters, librarian (1750–1803), who was the first to openly manifest anarchist ideas, albeit slightly tainted with Arcadianism. Sylvain Maréchal was a polygraph who dealt with all subjects. He began with *Bergeries* (1770) and *Chansons anacréontique* (1779). In 1781 he found a way to bring to light his fragments of a *Poème morale sur Dieu, le Pibrac moderne*.

In 1782 he published *L'âge d'or*, a collection of pastoral tales; in 1784 the *Livre échappé au déluge ou Psaumes nouvellement découverts*. In 1788, while librarian of the library of Mazarine, he published his *Almanach des honnêtes gens*, in which he substituted the names of saints for those of famous men and women, and in which he placed Jesus Christ in the middle of Epicurus and Ninon de Lenclos. So the almanac is condemned to be burned at the hands of the executioner, and its author sent to Saint Lazare to serve four months in prison. In 1788 his *Apologues modernes à l'usage du dauphin* was also published.

It is here, in this book, that we find the story of the king who, after a cataclysm, sends all his subjects back to their homes, ordering that from now on each father of a family should be king in his own house. And it is also here that the principle of the *Grève générale* (general strike) is expounded as a means of establishing a society in which the Earth will be the common property of all inhabitants, and where «liberty and equality, peace and innocence» will reign. In his other work, *Le Tyran triomphateur*, he imagines a struggling people who abandon the city to the soldiers and take refuge in the mountains where, divided into families, they live with no master but nature and

make room for a fraternal affection, giving this the opportunity to manifest itself, some having more opportunity to offer help and others to receive it...». «If, then, this good mother has given to all a figure more or less similar; if she has granted to all, without any distinction, this great gift of the voice and of the word to allow us to relate more fraternally, and so that by habit and the mutual exchange of our thoughts we make communion of our wills; If he has endeavored by every means to make the knots of our common covenant in society tighter and tighter; if he has shown in everything that he wishes to make us all united and all equal at the same time; if this is so, there is no doubt that we are not all companions, and no one can think that nature has placed anyone in servitude, since she has placed us all in company.»

As we see, from this we can extract a whole social system.

MODERN TIMES

The monarchy was becoming more and more absolute. Louis XIV had reduced half of the intelligentsia to the state of beggary, forcing the other half to resort to Dutch printers. In *Les soupirs de la France esclave qui aspire à la liberté* (1689–1690) and in other works of the same type appearing in Amsterdam, no trace of anarchism is to be found. One has to wait for Diderot to hear the enunciation of this sentence which alone contains all anarchism: «I neither want to give nor receive laws.» In the conversation of a father with his children (*Collected Works*, vol. V., p. 131) Diderot had given priority to the man of nature over that of the legislator. Everyone remembers the phrase of the Marshal, in *Colloquy of a Philosopher with the Marshal*: «Evil is simply that which brings more disadvantages than advantages, as opposed to good which brings more advantages than disadvantages.» And that of the farewell to the old man, in *Supplément du*

for sects fighting against marriage, the family and property, drawing down upon them terrible repression.

And it was not only in Europe that anti-authoritarian movements developed. In Tschamtschiang's *History of Armenia* (Venice 1795), there is mention of a Persian heretic, such a *de Mdsik*, who denied «all law and all authority». And in the literary supplement of the *Temps Nouveaux* (Paris, vol. II, pp. 556–557) there is an article entitled «An anarchic precursor», in which the Turkish physician Abdullah Djevdet presents a Syrian poet of the 15th century: *Ebr-Ala-el Muari*.

THE RENAISSANCE

Arriving at the Renaissance, we must surrender to the starkest evidence: the Catholics, aided by the secular state, succeeded in destroying or reducing to impotence the pantheistic-anarchist heretics. Even the Protestants were not much more tender with the Anabaptists: a kind of authoritarian communists referring back to the Old Testament. John of Leiden's dictatorship in Münster passed like a thunderbolt. The old world was forced to bow its head under the omnipotence of the State, now more strongly served and centralized than in the Middle Ages.

That is why the discovery of America inflames the spirit of thinkers and original beings, whose mentality has not been completely crushed by the mill of political organization. There is talk of happy islands, of Eldorados, of Arcadie. Sebastian Münster described, in his *Kosmographie* (1544), the life of the new islands: «where one lives free of all authority, where neither good nor evil is known, where wrongdoers are not punished and where parents do not dominate their children. No law: absolute freedom of sexual relations. No trace of a God, no baptism, no cult».

It is probable, however, that his aspirations towards freedom were but a derivation of the emergence of Freemasonry and the various orders of the illuminati.

One of the most brilliant geniuses of the Renaissance, François Rabelais, with the creation of the Abbey of Thélème (Gargantua) can also be considered as a precursor of anarchism. Elisée Reclus called him «our great ancestor». It is true; in describing his environment of freedom, he took little account of the economic factor, but it is not at all improbable that he was much more attached to his century than he himself doubted. Yet he has painted for us his refined mansion in the same spirit with which Thomas More painted idealized England in his Utopia, and with which Campanella painted his theocratic Italian republic in the City of the Sun. Or how the author of Royaume d'Antangil (the first French Utopia, 1516) depicted his Protestant constitutional monarchy. This did not prevent Rabelais from describing the life of the abbey free from any form of authority.

It will be recalled that Gargantua did not want «walls around». «Look,» approved the monk, «and not without reason: for where there are walls in front and behind, there are necessarily murmurings, envy and silent conspiracies. The two sexes, living side by side, did not look sidelong at each other...» «Such was the sympathy between men and women, that every day they dressed alike.» «Their system of life was subject neither to laws, nor statutes, nor rules: it was guided only by their own will and free will.» They got up when they felt like it; they drank, ate, worked and slept when they felt like it. No one woke them up, no one forced them to drink or eat or do anything. So had Gargantua decreed. His rule consisted in the clause Do what thou wilt, for free people, well born, well educated, conversing in honest company, have by nature an instinct and an incentive which impels them always to virtuous actions, far from vice, which they call honor. For those who, by vile compulsion or intimidation, fall into a

state of complete depression and subjection, abandon the noble idea of freeing themselves from the yoke of servitude to which they tended by natural virtue; for by nature we always tend to undertake forbidden things, and to aspire to what we are denied.... This great liberty created in them the laudable emulation of doing whatever was agreeable to one. Thus, if someone said: 'let us drink', everybody drank; if he said: 'let us play', everybody played; if he said: 'let us go and have fun in the country', everybody went there».

Rabelais, as we see, is naturally quite utopian.

Another precursor – and a famous one at that – is, without fear of contradiction, La Boétie. Etienne de La Boétie, in his major work, *Contr'uno* or *Of Voluntary Servitude* (1577) bases the central idea on the refusal to oppose the service of the tyrant, whose power finds its source in the voluntary servitude of men. «The fire that arises from a small spark grows stronger and spreads burning all the wood it finds and reaches. Without water being poured on it to extinguish it, it is enough if no more wood is thrown on it, for having nothing more to burn it consumes itself, becomes formless and is no longer fire. It is the same with tyrants: the more they plunder, the more they demand, the more they ruin and destroy, the more they are given the more they are served, and the more they are strengthened the more they can impose themselves and destroy everything. Now, if we give them nothing, if we no longer obey them and if we no longer fight for them, they remain naked and undone, reducing themselves to nothingness, like the root which, having no more sap and nourishment, becomes a dry and dead branch.... Resolve not to serve and you will be free.»

La Boétie does not foresee any definite social organization. However, he speaks of nature having made men in the same way and, one would say, in the same way «she has not sent the strongest and the most cunning as brigands...», to mistreat «the weakest: rather it is to be believed that, making of some the larger parts and of others the smaller, she has wished to