

# **Nationalities Considered from the Point of View of Liberty**

Hector Morel

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*By A Proletarian.*

Liberty is impossible, where authority becomes necessary!

## Preface

Proletarians, to you is dedicated this book by a proletarian.<sup>1</sup> The questions that it treats have thus far—and by design—been forced back into the shadows and silence.

This little book could with good reason be called *The Revolutionary Way*. Let those who do not feel themselves strong enough to be men, reject it without reading it; but, let those who love truth above all, who take for their motto conscience, liberty, and labor, let those read it, for they will draw from it the notions which alone inspire justice and make men free.

In a word, to each laborer in modern times, it comes to speak again the axiom of ancient wisdom: “Know thyself.”

## Nationalities

“Nation, a pompous word for barbarity,  
“Does love stop where your steps cease?  
“Tear down these flags, another voice cries to you:  
“Selfishness and hate alone have a homeland,  
“Brotherhood has none....

Lamartine.

If there are words that we have used and abused, which we use and abuse every day, they are unquestionably the words nation and homeland. Everything in society which aims to muzzle and exploit the people, to paralyze and hold back the development of human intelligence, is always and invariably advanced in the name of the homeland: Laws and regulations, ordinances and decrees, scaffolds and prisons, police and gendarmes, etc., etc., all this hideous paraphernalia of chains and slavery, of plunder and misery, of exploitation and servitude, has only been invented, only exists, in the interest of the good order and internal security of nations.

There are no forfeits, no iniquities, none of the crimes that tyrants heap on humanity, that are not justified in advance, glorified even, as being acts of high patriotism. If despotism is enthroned, it is in order to see to the security of the citizens; if some majesty wants to live out the pleasant fantasy of sending to the butcher’s some thousands of human creatures, it is “for the glory and honor or the homeland.” We seize every year the strongest and most vigorous youth of our countries, in order to cram them into the barracks, those dens of brutalization and demoralization; we create and train permanent armies, and raise fortifications,—armies and fortifications consuming

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<sup>1</sup> *Nationalities*, published in Belgium in 1862, was the work of Hector Morel and at least portions of the work originally appeared the radical paper *le Prolétaire*. It’s one more of the lost classics of the early libertarian tradition, elaborating on Proudhon’s federalism, and adding to it a very strong critique of nationalism and the notion of the homeland. Where Proudhon was inclined to grant some legitimacy to cultural naturalism,—emphasizing, for instance, the special character of the French people,—the “Proletarian” brought a much more thorough critique. The poor have no country, and the despots who use the notion of a homeland to rule them have no organic connection, and no allegiance, to the nations that they rule.—Translation by Shawn P. Wilbur, October, 2009.

hundreds of millions, it is true,—but it is in order to insure “the security and independence of the country.” We pass a halter around the neck of the citizen, and call it a passport; we establish import duties,—and these shameful and barbarous obstacles to the free circulation of men and things are “for the nation’s contingencies;” we create new charges every day, constantly increase the taxes, and it is to feed, lodge, clothe, to provide with heat and, finally, with education, the class—so interesting and necessary—of the directors, tutors and protectors,—and, to say it all in a word,—of the devourers of the people.

If the industrial exploiters call for some laws of prohibition,—in order to be more able to fleece the producers and consumers as they wish,—it is in order “to protect the nation’s labor;” if certain money-grubbers, eager for lucre, desiring to see their hoard grow still and always, found a bank or house of credit, you can be certain that they will not fail to shout from the rooftops that they only wish “to promote the development of labor and of local industry.” Finally, there would be no end of it, if we wanted to enumerate one by one the innumerable benefits for which the laborer is indebted to that tutelary and beneficial divinity, the homeland.

Nevertheless, the only thing that she has never done,—that good and excellent mother, the homeland,—is to insure for all her children, for the price of their labor, well-being and liberty. It seems to us, however, that this, and this alone, should be her sole reason to exist.

It is by making echo ceaselessly in our ears these great words,—love of country, national independence, patriotic devotion and other equivalent nonsense in use by the exploiters,—that they manage to keep the proletariat in that abject condition of servitude and moral slavery, which is and will remain the shame of this so-called civilized and enlightened century.

A strange anomaly, indeed: man, in our modern societies, is proclaimed, a priori, free and equal to other men; the laws, codes, education, mores, all finally come together to give rise to, develop in him the precious germ of liberty and individual autonomy,—that supreme law towards which humanity gravitates, driven by the attractive and irresistible ascent of progress,—and nearly all of these same men are deprived, robbed of every individual prerogative, of every right of personal possession.

By what aberration of the mind is such a monstrous phenomenon implanted and maintained in societies? How is it possible to tell men and to persuade men that they are free, when for them liberty consists of submission,—without even daring to murmur a complaint,—to the most arbitrary laws, the most humiliating conditions which could be imposed on them by other men?

We do not hesitate to declare that this is accomplished by establishing lines of demarcation between the citizens, by penning up the peoples like herds of livestock, and finally by creating and organizing nationalities; and we maintain that as long as that misleading illusion, that brilliant patriotic mirage, endures, the laborers will have no hope of real freedom, and consequently, of seeing the poverty that debases and gnaws at them disappear! For the nation, whatever one says or does, is composed and will always be composed of two elements, the governing class and the class that is governed: to one goes all the privileges and all the enjoyments; to the other all the charges and all the privations; to the latter the labor that wears them thin, and to the former the salaries that make them fat.

“The ferocious beasts have their lairs,” wrote Gracchus, that energetic and generous egalitarian reformer, “and some Roman citizens, who have been called the masters of the world, have not a roof to sleep under, or an inch of land on which to rest.”

It is true that among these same Romans, there were found some, like Lucullus, for example, whose dinners cost fifteen thousand francs per head! Now, in order for the proud and arrogant

patrician to be able to dine thus, it was absolutely necessary that the plebes fasted!!! Of course, the interest of homeland as well as good order demands such. To be forced to die in times of war, to work like a beast of burden, to fast and suffer in times of peace, such has always been the lot of the people in that admirable nursery of slaves that one calls a nation!

Liberals and republicans, clericals and royalists, soldiers of despotism and soldiers of liberty, all proclaim patriotism at every opportunity, as the holiest, the most sacred of sentiments and the one before which all others must efface themselves. Thus, the attractive outpourings of souls, the gentle intoxications of hearts, the sweet emotions of love, all these pure sensations, these ineffable enjoyments, this science of sentiment finally, which develops the most beautiful faculties of the human being, which elevates the soul, and makes the intelligence glide up to the highest regions of art and poetry, all that must remain silent in order to give place to this stupid and brutal fiction, the homeland!!!

In the balance of despotism, indeed, what weight have the pure joys of the family, the powerful impulsions of labor, the impassioned drive for liberty? Alas! It was a question of love and science, of art and poetry, of labor and liberty! The homeland calls you: go, young men, to the ardent imagination, to great and nobles thoughts, to poetic aspirations; go to enlarge the number of brutes that are regimented; tear yourself from the burning bosoms of the ones you love; push back every thought of love, every dream of the future, and at the wish of the bloody goddess, race to kill your fellows, or to be killed by them!

The homeland offers you a rifle and a saber! What could be more sentimental! What is more poetic!!!

“To die for the homeland,  
“This is the finest lot,  
“The most worthy of envy,”

howled, in 1848, that filthy mob that was called the *garde mobile*, while the hail of bullets harvested in large trenches the Parisian laborers.

“All your days are for the homeland,”

exclaimed with a delirious enthusiasm the energetic but inconsistent revolutionaries de ‘93, and the heroic republican phalanxes thus became the populicidal cohorts of the thermidorian and directorial throat-cutters; and later, the henchmen of the most horrible, and the bloodiest despotism.

And that was logic!

What creates the homeland, indeed, is neither those territorial circumscriptions, nor the citizens that inhabit them. No. It is the despots who exploit them; and that is so true, that in all eras of history and in every country without exception, acts described by such and such a government as crimes of high national treason, become under other conditions, acts of high patriotic virtue.

Let us cite a few examples in order to make ourselves better understood.

In Spain, Espartero, Narvaez, O’Donnell, are by turns, and according to whether they are victors or vanquished, proclaimed heroes or traitors, saviors or enemies of the homeland.—In England, Ionians and Scots, Irish or Indians, are, and have always been pitilessly gunned down, decimated, every time that they have dared to demand their rights of nationality. Love of the

homeland does not exist for them. Only the shopkeepers of the city of London have the right to profess the patriotic virtues.—In 1849, the Romans were, at the whim of Pious IX (called the Holy Father), bombarded, gunned down, imprisoned, and exiled by foreign soldiers; and the French bombardiers and gunners were proclaimed the defenders, the supporters and the protectors of the Roman nation.—Belgium made a revolution, in 1830, to free itself from foreigners. We have been given a German king, a French queen, and the majority of our ministers and of our principal public functionaries are of foreign importation. It is these brave men of exotic provenance who are charged with inculcating in us the patriotic virtues, the love of the Belgian nationality!—See what happens in Italy. M. Garibaldi calls the Sicilian people to arms, in the name of liberty and Italian unity, and after having driven out “the foreign Bourbon,” he sticks in his place a king from Savoy, who burns the villages, shoots, as brigands, the citizens who refuse to recognize him as the incarnation of Italian unity.—Shall we speak of Prussia, Russia, and Austria, those three monstrous despotisms made up of bits and pieces, claspings in their bloody claws hundreds of diverse peoples, who are forbidden, under pain of martyrdom, to even pronounce the name of their homeland?

And in France, that classic land of revolution and liberty, see today this people which was once the teacher of the other peoples, sprawled full-length in the muck: it no longer thinks, no longer speaks, no longer breathes. It is a corpse, finally. Well, in this country, the nation is, for the moment, named Bonaparte, as it was once named Louis-Philippe, Charles X, etc., etc. Now, Bonaparte having judged that heart, thought, and intelligence are useless things, dangerous even, and especially detrimental to French interests, it follows that this country condemns as an enemy, and rejects from its heart, every citizen who decides for himself that he wants to make use of one of these three faculties that nature has dealt out to him to distinguish him from the brute: a gag and a saber are sufficient for him. One sends men to battle in China and in Cochinchina, among the Turks and the Russians, and always in the name of the greater glory of the homeland which, in this case, is represented by a multicolored rag hanging from the end of a pole. The response would be difficult for them, if one asked these brave and spiritual francomaniacs, what quantity of well-being the people collect from these periodical throat-slittings. But what does it matter to them?! The emperor wishes it thus, and isn't the wish of the emperor the wish of France?

And if, after the example of Louis XIV, the magnanimous emperor took it on a whim to dragoon some hundreds of thousands of his blissful subjects, say half of “the intelligent people,” to rush upon the other half, on the pretext that they are enemies...?

The history of the past, and especially contemporary history, offers more than one example of these bloody massacres, worked by a people on itself, at the wish of the heads of the nations.

A thing worthy of note, and one that the eulogists of nationalities would do well to consider, is that none of the present sovereigns of Europe is originally from the country that he governs; and there is not one—we say not a single one—whose scepter is not soiled with the blood of his subjects!

We repeat: nation and homeland are synonyms of government, authority, and despotism.

“Rome is no longer in Rome,” said the dictator Pompey, “it is wherever I am.”

After the battle of Pharsale, Rome was all... where was Caesar!

Let the tyrants, the exploiters, and the privileged chant dithyrambs in praise of the homeland. Let them erect altars to it, let them pamper it. We understand without trouble that it is for them a very fine cow to milk; but:

“Have the poor a homeland?  
“What to me are your wines and wheat,  
“Your glory, and your industry,  
“And your assembled orators?”

No. The poor have no homeland; what has been named thus, has never been for them anything but a triple faisceau of masters, chains and gags. The word homeland derives from society; society obviously implies contract; contract supposes in the individual, spontaneity, consent, free will, and therefore, reciprocity of engagements and of guaranties: in other words, balance or equilibrium of the rights and duties of each. Now, where is the nation which offers to all, and especially to the workers, such conditions of existence? Alas! Has it never existed? Scan the history of the entire world, among the ancient peoples as among the moderns,—and no matter the form of government,—the nation always presents to you this terrible and ominous tableau: tyrants and subjects, masters and slaves, exploiters and exploited; which is to say, authority, rights, and privileges on one side; on the other, servitude, duties, charges. Consult the social contracts, past and present constitutions,—whatever their spirit and origin,—monarchist or republican, liberal or democratic, that have been voted in by the representatives or granted by the despots; they all can be summarized thus:

Art. 1. The people MUST obey, suffer and labor.

Art. 2. The possessor MUST command, enjoy and do nothing.

No, the poor have no homeland, for, we repeat, either the homeland is a protective mother to all and must, in return for their labor, insure for all its children well-being and liberty, or it has no reason to be; it has no right to their love or devotion; and in the day of danger, it can expect nothing from them. Thus let it address itself to the rich, to the possessors of all things. They alone enjoy all its benefits, and they alone must defend and protect it.

Oh! We have for certainty of it, the hatred that social injustice inspires in us, and the logic of the revolutions! Yes, whatever one says and does, the day will come when, despite saber and holy water, despite the persecution and ignorance which are heaped on them, the embittered people will finally understand all the horrible meaning of those two words,—symbols of misery and oppression:—God and homeland. You may well, satisfied gentlemen, sing on all notes, and repeat on all the gamuts, love and patriotic devotion, but a more powerful voice,—the voice of progress and reason,—will soon dominate yours, and that voice, reflected from all points on the horizon, will repeat to the disinherited of the earth: “God is the reign of evil. The homeland is the kingdom of injustice and oppression!”

“But,” one will object, “a human being could not live in isolation; his essentially sociable nature, the very law of his existence, makes it a necessity for him to come together with his fellows, to form groups and set up societies. From that come these great agglomerations of peoples, called nations or homelands, which have existed at all times. To deny the principle of nationalities is thus to misunderstand at once, both the very essence of the nature of man and the law of universal movement.”

This objection,—a favorite theme of all the nationalist preachers,—has, we admit, a certain appearance of gravity and reason which first of all strikes us and leads us along. But in order for this objection to be taken seriously, to be acceptable, it would be necessary to be able to demonstrate its truth; it would first be necessary that the synonymy of these terms—nation, homeland, group, and society—could be established.

Who would dare to attempt it? Who could maintain it?

Someone will try to tell us, perhaps, that the principle of nationalities is as old as the world, that all peoples have recognized and practiced it. They will cite for us the example of the ancients: the Egyptians and the Greeks, the Romans and the Gauls, the sons of Zoroaster and the worshippers of Jehovah, etc., etc.

What won't one say, when it is a question of defending an absurd and untenable cause?

From the fact that the primitive peoples were amused to make up every sort of amphigoric nonsense, and to attribute to it a sacred character, haven't the propagators of religiosity also inferred religious truths, and the certainty of the existence of a God perching who-knows-where? But what does this nonsense prove, if not the ignorance and credulity of our first fathers? And don't we know moreover that simple and uncultivated minds are always disposed to attribute the most ordinary and comprehensible phenomena to intervention of a supernatural or divine power? At the least flash of lightning in times of storm, how many people hasten to sign themselves, believing thus to ward off and turn from themselves the anger of the Most-High? Don't we still see in our days, in the countryside, flocks of Christians, under the leadership of a "shepherd," herded along the lanes, bellowing like calves, in order to obtain from the Creator, sometimes the cessation of the rain, sometimes that of good weather?

Try to tell these brave folk that the rain and the sun don't care about their braying, and you should see their faces!

This digression on religious fanaticism is not an hors-d'œuvre. Mark it well. On the contrary, it applies perfectly to national fanaticism: The patriot, just like the believer, has his fetish, just as ridiculous, every bit as stupid as the bugaboo of the other. This one has his God, his Cross, and his Prayer; that one has his Law, his Flag, and his patriotic Songs. And both are equally ready for all the devotions, all the sacrifices,—not for their fellow,—but for their venerated idol: the one for his Father the Creator, the other for his Mother the Homeland.

To give the character of immutability to an institution, just because it dates from a long series of centuries, isn't that to push the absurd to its final limits? Indeed, it would be as good to say that, since anthropophagi, slavery, castes, and human sacrifices have been institutions dear to our ancestors, they are worthy of all our respect, and all our veneration. As if the simplest reason, the most common good sense, were not there to teach us that, in its successive evolutions, humanity, free from all the subjections of the past, of all the erring ways of its childhood, freeing itself from the obstacles brought against its regular development, by the ignorance of some and the perfidy of others, rises, grows, perfects itself unceasingly, and advances with an upward progression towards the accomplishment of its destiny: the entire liberation of the races, which is to say man in possession of the rights and prerogatives inherent in his own nature.

By creating free and independent beings, nature established between them no other links than the solidarity of their interests and their needs, no other law than attraction, no other guide than their reason and their faculties, and in whatever condition, at whatever vantage point one is placed, the laws of nature are never violated with impunity.

Let us cite for example, what happens in what is commonly called the high intellectual spheres:

In the domain of Art,—Music, Poetry, Painting, Sculpture, etc., etc.,—are the beautiful, the true, and harmony finally, possible apart from natural laws? Can one create, invent, or perfect, either in the sciences or in industry, if one does not scrupulously respect the laws of physics?—The novel itself, that high speculation of the mind which could with good right claim its place in the world of the arts, isn't all its value, all its moral power, in the observance of the same laws?



What is philosophy? “The search for the reason of things,” said Proudhon.—What orator would dare to compare himself to the Paysan du Danube?

From these elevated regions, let us pass to the domain of the moral and affective life.—What sentiment could ever equal material affection, when no influence of fortune or of fanaticism comes to paralyze its natural expansion?

Let us speak of love, that supreme law of being, that gentle incarnation of all that is beautiful, of all that is great in the world. What could we say of it, good lord, in the presence of a perverted and depraved society, oozing vice and corruption from every pore? How, in fact, are we to recognize the wish of nature in the midst of such excess? Alas! Where today do we encounter these holy and chaste emotions, these pure and ineffable enjoyments, that the divine breath of true and natural love communicates to the souls of the elite, and which are truly the quintessence of life?

Oh! Tender and sweet poetry of hearts, what retreat inaccessible to humans have you then chosen, in order to punish us for having transgressed the laws of nature?

And then, observe that other phenomenon, as strange as it is easy to verify: the more a man is elevated in the social hierarchy, the more he moves through the degrees of fortune and dignity, the more the moral sense, the affective faculties, subside and relax in him. At this point it would be difficult, if not impossible, to meet in the high social regions a true familial sentiment, one of those deep and sincere affections which command sacrifice, abnegation, and great devotions.

No, no, the laws of nature are never violated with impunity. Now nature has not created the kings, the proprietors, the privileged; it has no more created these vast fields of exploitation, these immense human sheepfolds that we call nations. No. Those are the works of despotism. Nature created only free men.

Man, such as he came from nature’s hands, is thus prototype of the social ideal.

Society, nation, these two terms which, at first glance, seem to be synonyms, have diametrically opposed meanings and deny one another: group and society, imply liberty and individual autonomy; homeland and nation, imply authority and subjection. Societies are constituted so to speak by themselves and entirely naturally. Affinities of mores, taste, temperament, and language; influences of climate, and geographical arrangements, combine to bring together beings whose interests and needs are identical, or nearly so. We see from then on that spontaneous and instinctive tendency which leads them, brings them together, and groups them, without any law but the impulsive force, with no authority but their free and voluntary initiative. Such is the origin of societies or of the social life.

Let us see now how nations are created.

A conqueror swoops down on a country; he sacks, pillages, robs, and spreads desolation and death everywhere; then, in the name of force, he proclaims himself the master, seizes everything, imposes laws for which he demands of each and all obedience and respect; he establishes a government, chooses a staff of functionaries and servitors of all ranks and grades; in short, he founds a nation. Force, plundering and conquest: such are thus the origin of nationalities.

And let no one come to tell us that these are the products of a fanciful imagination, invented on a whim to support the thesis that we maintain. No, what we say here is from history, from authentic and faithful history, and we challenge anyone to cite for us, in the whole world, a single example of nations taking their origin from another source.

The poet has said before us:

“Close to the bourn where each State commence,  
“No ear of corn is pure of human blood.”<sup>2</sup>

“Society, nation,” we have said, “these two terms which, at first glance, seem to be synonyms, have diametrically opposed meanings and deny one another: group, and society, imply liberty, and individual autonomy; homeland, and nation, imply authority, and subjection.”

This truth is so elementary that all that is necessary to demonstrate it is to indicate how much the moral sense and the understanding are distorted and perverted in the human race.

“Liberty,” says Rousseau, and with him the majority of modern writers, “is possible, practicable, in a republican polity like Athens and Sparta, where the citizens can without inconvenience—because of their small number—gather and occupy themselves directly with public affairs; but in a large nation, like France, for example, where the number of inhabitants does not allow them to gather en masse, it becomes impracticable. Thus the necessity of an active authority, of a strong power.”

Then, after having concluded in favor of dictatorship, the Genovese philosopher adds: “In order to be dictator, to be able to govern men, it is necessary to know their passions, their needs, their vices, all their defects, finally, and to possess none of them.” This amounts to saying—for such a situation is impossible—that the best of governments isn’t worth anything and can never have any value.

How, after such a peremptory declaration, has Rousseau not been able to settle on the negation of nationalities, and consequently on the affirmation of social groupings? For, by his own admission, it is there, and only there, that the citizens can be really free and enjoy the fullness of their rights.

Alas! It is because, above all, Rousseau was a philosopher, a savant, a great man, and posterity must engrave these titles in the pantheon of history.

Ah! the intrepid disciples of the revolutionary Jesus were more logical. “The great nations dominate them,” their leader said, “but among you there must be no dominator” And they organized themselves in groups, under the significant designation of “Church” (which, as everyone knows, literally means “society”)! Admitting among them only men and citizens, and condemning, rejecting every patriotic or national distinction. They proclaimed themselves citizens of the world; in a word, they were not Spaniards, nor Gauls, nor Romans: they were Christians!!! Now, that was, know it well, the secret of all their strength, all their power. And who would dare to deny that, even in our own time, the power which their alleged successors have at their disposal, rests in large part on that cosmopolitanism which is the very essence of their principles?

To maintain the principle of nationalities is thus to want to perpetuate forever authority and servitude, opulence and misery, exploitation and the salariat; for one can well make revolutions, but as long as political and administrative centralization will be maintained, they will have done nothing. Let the revolutionaries and especially the laborers reflect on it.

Liberty is impossible, where authority becomes necessary!

If we consult the history of the world, the facts are there, abundant, unimpeachable, testifying in a dazzling fashion in favor of our statement.

Let us go back to the first ages of humanity: wherever you look, the first men come together, grouping themselves first by families, then by tribes, under the sole impulse of the identity of

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<sup>2</sup> From Beranger’s “The Holy Family of Peoples.” This passage appears to have been subject to some bizarre mistranslations.—Editor.

their interests and their needs: some, the herding peoples, being particularly fond of the plains and grazing their herds there; others, the fishing peoples, living on the seacoasts and engaging there in their industries; still others, the hunting peoples, living by preference in the wooded countries and living there from the products of the hunt. Among these various peoples, there are no masters, no arbitrary laws made by a few to the detriment of the majority; each participates directly and without any delegation in government, or rather in the administration of public affairs: they assemble, freely discussing their interests; each member of society is a law unto himself and his own master. Also we do not find among these primitive peoples the least conflict, the least hint or rumor of war; it is the patriarchal life, the embryo of social life in all its purity.

Let us suppose for a moment—against those who affirm that war has been and is still the most powerful auxiliary of progress—that humanity had continued its upward march in that normal and regular way, which is, whatever is said, the only one conforming to the wishes of nature, and that in its successive transformations, instead of having to deal with the authoritarian reaction, it only had to evolve towards its perfectibility, without hindrances other than those inherent in its own nature, does one believe in this case that the moral, physical and intellectual development of beings would not have been other than what we see today?

But what good does it do us to lament the evil of the times and human perversion! Let us leave that to the moralists. And since the evil exists, let us commit ourselves to seeking its causes and remedy.

Soon, necessity pushing men to seek elsewhere the means of existence that their native soil refuses to them from now on, due to the increase of populations, numerous migrations were organized, especially among the hunting peoples, essentially nomadic men, disinclined to industry and much more apt to struggle than to labor. These masses of emigrants descended on the inhabitants of the plains, taking hold of their herds, of the fruits of their labors; then, after having despoiled them, they reduced them to a state of servitude or slavery. Servitude and slavery, just like nationalities, their corollaries, have no other origin! And this is not just our claim; it is inflexible history itself, of which we are only the faithful echo. Indeed, if we follow the course of the centuries, we will always invariably produce the same facts: everywhere brutal force is put in the service of idleness, or ambition, of love mad with sensual pleasures, imposing itself as supreme law, substituting itself for justice, labor and liberty; everywhere we also see this conclusive phenomenon produced, namely, that liberty is proportional to the diffusion of social groups. In other words, the stronger the political and administrative centralization in a country, the less liberty is enjoyed by the citizens.

Let us take for examples the two most powerful peoples of antiquity, the Greeks and the Romans.

Rome was an essentially unitary and centralized republic. There, all was done for and in the name of the homeland. Man, the citizen was nothing. Right, justice liberty and human dignity were summed up in two words: “glory, homeland.” Centralization no longer knew any limits; and the republic that the historians were pleased to represent to us as a free government, was in reality only a horrible oligarchy, which is to say the most pitiless despotism, as well as the most absolute.

Greece was an aggregation of small republics, each of which preserved its liberty and absolute autonomy with a jealous pride; between them were no federative laws, no authority which obliged them to unite. They had only one link, only one law: solidarity. With what a show of spontaneous organization do we see them, when the common independence was threatened, put

an end to their rivalries and unite against the common enemy; and when the danger passed, each regained its independence, its liberty, its self finally. There, there was no centralization: the man took precedence over the citizen, the citizen took precedence over the patriot. The inhabitants of Sparta, Athens, Thebes, etc. were Spartan, Athenian, Theban, before being Greek; and while the Romans—give or take a few exceptions—did not cultivate, and knew only war, the Greeks cultivated, independent of war, the sciences, the arts, and poetry; and among them the philosopher, the poet and the artist came before the warrior.

See as well what difference there was in the mores and characters of the two peoples: the Roman, somber, fierce, haughty, appeared to us with all the attributes of domination; the Greek, on the contrary, polite, sociable, full of urbanity, appeared to us with all the attributes of the free and cultivated man; and while the Greek left to posterity that great and beautiful maxim in which we find in germ all of human progress—“know thyself”—Rome left us its famous “right of use and abuse,” that monstrous definition of justice, from which logically follow all privileges, and all exploitations.

In order to complete this table of comparison, we will say: Rome, that powerful republic, that type of centralization and unitarism, of nationality strongly constituted, collapsed under the weight of its own institutions. After having passed from patrician oligarchy to consular and dictatorial despotism, it is going to ruin itself in abject and bloody imperialism, the crimes and turpitudes of which will terrify the world.

The Greek republics, founded on the principle of the diffusion and autonomy of groups, were only seen to alter the purity of institutions, to dispense with liberty, under the blows of foreign invasion.

Is that conclusive enough?

Do you want other examples?

Let us consult the histories of Germany and Italy. How have the kings managed to keep these diverse peoples under their thumb? By dividing them in groups and allowing to each a semblance of autonomy! But, it will be said, that is precisely the work that despotism undertakes against liberty.—Doubtless, we respond and that quite simply proves that despotism, more than the revolutionaries, gets along well in the art of organizing and grouping peoples! And we will add that, in this case, what is profitable to authority, would be, and for much stronger reason, profitable to liberty; for, let us suppose for an instant that each of the groups making up the Italian and German confederations, constituted in free and autonomous republics (there already exist in Germany several small republics: Bremen, Hamburg, Frankfort, etc.), do you believe that liberty would be more open to attack than the tyranny of principicules which dominates these countries today? Now, no revolution, no internal material force, has been able thus far to undermine the German and Italian confederations. Doubtless one would not protest to us what is actually happening in Italy, for Italy is nothing less than the mistress of her destinies, and her brief triumph is rather the work of the French and Piedmontese despots than that of the Italian people.

Shall we speak of Switzerland, that small federative republic which, for centuries, has given the world an example of what can be done by peoples allowed to be masters of their own destinies? What good is it to speak of it?! Doesn't everyone know, indeed, that it owes its power and its strength, precisely to the political and administrative decentralization which is the very basis of its organization?

Let us limit ourselves then to this simple historical comparison:—Despite the smallness of its territory and the small number of its inhabitants, Switzerland has been constantly able to repulse

the attempts at invasion by the Austrians, Prussians and Bergundians, and to maintain towards and against all, in the midst of absolutist Europe, its independence and its liberty, while in France, that great and powerful nation, that country of centralization and unity par excellence, one great battle lost (Waterloo), has been enough to deliver, tied hands and feet, millions of men to the mercy of a handful of foreign soldiers!!!

Is that peremptory enough? And is it not at least strange that these lessons of history have not been understood by the French democracy, which nonetheless boasts of its foresight and skill? Must new and bloody deceptions come to open its eyes? Alas! We would like to be able to doubt it. But the humdrum spirit of its leaders, their love of tradition, sadly tells us too much on that subject. Their brains have been so harassed with the phantoms of feudalism and Girondinism; they have such fear of them, that they cast themselves willingly into the arms of the first despot that comes along, rather than allow their precious national unity to be undermined. In their eyes, from the ocean to the Rhine, from Quiévrain to the Pyrenees, there are neither men nor women; there can only be the French. They require a strong power as well; their libertarian ideal is the national convention, flanked by the committee for public safety.

And these men made war on Bonaparte!!!

Since we have cited feudalism, let us see if that institution does not come, as well, to corroborate our statement in favor of the diffusion of social groups.

What was French feudalism?

A social or proprietary hierarchy, an aristocratic federation, a sort of nobiliary republic, of which the kings were in reality only the chiefs or principal suzerains.

Towards the last years of the reign of Charles the Bald, the lords profiting from the disasters of the State and the weakness of the monarch, rendered hereditary in their families some titles which had previously been detachable. The dukes or provincial governors, the counts or governors of towns, officers of an inferior order, usurped equally the lands and justice, and thus became lords and proprietors of the places of which they had the civil or military administration: such was the origin of the suzerain hierarchy or of the feudal institution.

France was divided into hereditary fiefs, or large territorial properties, belonging to a small number of families who alone had importance and political right. Each lord enjoyed a nearly sovereign power in his domains, but their power was unequal, and they came under the authority of one another: the simple lords answering to the barons, those to the counts, the counts to the dukes, etc. The royalty was the center around which these feudal States grouped themselves, but the king himself was only the principle suzerain, and his sovereignty was often contested. There existed some very special cases, says Monteil, when the vassal could make war on the suzerain, on the king. The rights of the feudal lords were carried to such a point, says another historian, that their vassals were forced, in certain instances, to follow them in war against the king himself.

Now, take the Roman oligarchy with its dictatorial and consular power, patrician Venice with its decemvirate and its Doge, and tell us, what difference there is for the masses—from the social or the political point of view—between these aristocratic republics and aristocratic French feudalism?

Certainly, and let the reader mark it well, it is far from our intention to praise in any way the feudal regime. No. We do not make ourselves the panegyrists of that anti-social monstrosity, any more than of the other governments of which we have spoken previously. To carry light to a question, which until today has remained shrouded in shadows and silence, to show to all that nationalities are the most radical, most absolute negation of social life and liberty, that

is our aim. In order to attain it, the best means, we think, are to establish a parallel, based on unimpeachable historical facts, between the unitary and centralizing principle, and the principle of the decentralization or the autonomy of the groups.

Let us take up our tale again:

All the power of feudalism rests on that subdivision, on that federation of groups, rendered solidary by the identity of interests; and as long as the high feudal lords were able to maintain the integrity of that intelligent and skillful organization, its power was invulnerable. That is so true that it has taken royalty six centuries of perseverance and efforts to strike and break that formidable faisceau, and still it only achieved it by making an appeal to the public element,—by the liberation of the communes,—and to the religious element by holy war (the crusades); the shrewd and bloody politics of Louis XI and Richelieu did the work!

“Louis XI,” said the revolutionary writers, “has rendered an eminent service to the revolution by crushing feudalism; for, gathering under one head all the forces of despotism, it suffices for the revolution to pull down that head in order to finish despotism in a single blow.” We are entirely of that opinion. But what these same writers did not say—although logic required it of them—was that the national convention and the committee of public safety, have rendered the counter-revolution a no less signal service, by concentrating in a single house, and gathering in a few hands all the living forces of the revolution.

The hesitation of Robespierre on 9 Thermidor, the inaction of St.-Just and his friends for just a few hours, has allowed a handful of counter-revolutionaries to be able to decapitate the republic, in the presence and despite the will of a population whose revolutionary devotion and energy cannot be contested for a single instant!

And on the 18 Brumaire, it was enough for the first Bonaparte to cast by the crossroads the five hundred braillards of St.-Cloud, in order to become by that sole fact the master, the sole arbiter of that French nation, the recent struggles of which came to shake the entire world, to awaken the peoples, inspiring in them its hatred of tyrants, its ardent love of liberty.

And what occurred then has been able to renew itself in 1848–51 with the same impunity and in a fashion more horrible still, without the French revolutionaries dreaming for a single instant of seeking the causes of so many successive defeats, or profiting from the numerous and bloody lessons inflicted on them by the eternal enemies of the people! No. Tradition above all. Their fathers were partisans of national unity, of political and administrative centralization; they are and will remain unitarists and centralizers, and, like their forefathers the Jacobins, they see no salvation for liberty except in the famous motto:

“Unity, indivisibility of the republic—or death!”

Ah! Boileau, you were right:

“From Paris to Peru, from Japan to Rome,

“The most foolish animal, in my opinion, is man.”

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In a personal letter that a friend addressed to us, we find in post-scriptum the following objection to our work on Nationalities. Although we have not been explicitly authorized, we have

made a veritable duty of submitting it to the consideration of our readers, persuaded that our friend will himself approve of our conduct.<sup>3</sup>

Here is that objection:

“...In your study on nationalities you say: ‘How have the kings managed to keep these diverse peoples under their thumb? By dividing them in groups;’ and you add: ‘That proves that, more than the revolutionaries, despotism gets along well in the art of organizing and grouping peoples!’

“If I have understood your thought well, you mean by this that, the more the peoples are divided, fragmented, the more certain their triumph will be. This, moreover, stands out in all your work, for you take for your motto: denationalization, decentralization.

“That is, allow me to observe, a strange logic; and if the energy of your convictions did not burst from each line, we would be truly tempted to suspect, if not the sincerity, at least the radicalism and intelligence of the work. So I take authorization from our old friendship to address to you some lines on the subject. I know you well enough to be certain in advance that you will receive them as I have addressed them to you, fraternally and between free men.

“Look around you, my poor friend, and see the condition in which our old Europe finds itself: everywhere the peoples are divided, scattered, crushed under an iron thumb; everywhere tyranny extends its evil branches, squeezing, dominating all: Formidable and well-disciplined armies, powerful political and administrative hierarchy, unity of action and of command: such is the terrible and formidable organization on which despotism rests.

“And you would go to battle against such an enemy, with forces scattered here and there, without unity and without any cohesion? But you have not reflected on it. Isn’t it obvious, on the contrary, that to combat with advantage such compact, well-disciplined masses, it is absolutely necessary to be able oppose to them a unity, and a compactness that is at least equal?

“What would England do if the 200 millions of Indians that it holds under its odious thumb rose up as a single man? What would the Anglo-Franco-Spanish expedition become, if the Mexicans—like the Greeks of whom you speak—united against the common enemy? And finally what would Bonaparte and his famous *zouzous* have done, if the French proletarians said resolutely and all together: ‘We want to be free’?

“Oh! Believe me, my brave friend,—and it is from the bottom of my heart that I speak to you,—instead of preaching, as you do, decentralization of the revolutionary forces, it is their cohesion, their centralization, their fusion in a single *faisceau* that you should have them pursue at all costs. The triumph of liberty has this price. To divide in order to reign, such was always the motto of tyrants. Union makes strength, such must be our own. How has your reason, logic and good sense not already told you this?

“I would have many more things to communicate on this important subject, but lacking the space, I am obliged to limit my observations to this. (I may perhaps return to them.) Besides, I count on your good will and intelligence come to my aide and make up for my forced brevity.”

Of all the objections which could be made, this one certainly seems at first the most serious. But if its author will permit me to say so, if he had taken care to read our work my attentively,

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<sup>3</sup> The part of our work to which this objection was addressed, had already been published in the journal *le Prolétaire*.

no doubt he would have abstained from writing to us as he did, for all his critique rests on his own misunderstanding. A few lines will suffice to convince him.

“See,” our correspondent says to us, “the terrible and formidable organization on which European despotism rests: Formidable and well-disciplined armies, powerful political and administrative hierarchy, unity of action and of command. And you would go to battle against such an enemy, with forces scattered here and there, without unity and without any cohesion!!! But you have not reflected on it...”—Then after having strongly counseled us to preach union, he adds: “To divide in order to reign, such was always the motto of tyrants. Union makes strength, such must be our own. How have your reason, logic and good sense not already told you this?”

Oh, certainly! We have known these things for a long time, and it was not necessary to write to us in order to recall them to our mind, for they mark the culminating point where the attention of the revolutionary thinker must be constantly fixed. Yes, there must be unity in tendencies and in action. Yes, there is a necessity, and an absolute necessity, to group together all the living forces of the revolution. Yes, finally, union makes strength, but what is union in the revolutionary language? What is meant by these words: to group, to centralize, to merge? Some give us as an example the powerful and strong institution of the Jesuits; other cite freemasonry; still others—and these are the most numerous—show us as a type military and governmental organization; all finally do their utmost to cry to the people: Unite yourselves, and group yourselves under the banner of a leader! Let us be one as our enemies are one, and we will vanquish them!

Well! We want nothing of that union. We combat it with all the strength of our convictions, for it would reduce man to the state of an automated machine; it would take from him all initiative, all liberty, all individual spontaneity. What we want, ourselves, is free men, having consciousness and knowledge of their mission. We maintain that in the revolutionary science, the force of cohesion is as much more powerful, and more active, as each of the parties that compose it are more free, and more independent.

Every revolution accomplished by a party, under the leadership and at the wish of one or several men, is a revolution stillborn; for, in this case, the interests of the popular cause are left at the mercy of a few men, and history is there to show us the numerous deceptions, and the consequences, as inevitable as they are disastrous, of these leonine compromises.

“There are,” said Saint-Just, “revolutionaries in the sense of crime. We want to be revolutionaries in the sense of virtue.”

On this point, we are of the opinion of Saint-Just: To Garibaldi triumphing in the name of the royalty, we prefer Pisacane falling in the cause of the social republic

A party certainly can, in certain cases, lead with good results a purely and exclusively political revolution. But do we believe that, in the present conditions of society, it would be possible for us to accomplish a revolution like that for which we wait, essentially social and economic? Obviously not. There are masses driven by an irresistible and intuitive need, determined by some brilliant act of despotism, which precipitate and accomplish these great movements which alone merit the title of revolution.

To study in advance these movements, by predicting, by determining the necessary consequences in order to pursue their complete development, such must be the role of the serious and convinced revolutionary. It is also, we believe, the only way to understand and to practice that so-desired union, of which the fraternitaires democrats makes such a deplorable abuse.



For us, union is the convergence of all the intelligences, of all the individual forces—but free, spontaneous, without ties, without any engagement—towards a single point: the study of the economy of revolutions and the search for the libertarian solution.

One last word in order to finish with the objection of our friend.

We preach, you say, denationalization, decentralization, and even fragmentation. Yes, without doubt; and it is with all the energy of a deep and enlightened conviction that we proceed. And we maintain—challenging the contradiction (while recognizing it)—that this is the only road to salvation for the people. But it is well understood—and how has our opponent not already understood it?—that these things can only be done on the day of the victorious revolution, when the people will be the sole arbiters of their destinies. It is, if you like, the question of tomorrow, that terrible and formidable question of the day after which, unless we would see the revolution—a new Saturn—devour its own children, must be studied and resolved the day before!

## Conclusion

The work that we have attempted here is certainly the most difficult, and the most important which has ever been attempted in revolution: “To shine the light on a question which, until this day, has remained shrouded in shadows and silence, to demonstrate to all by unimpeachable historical facts, that the principle of nationalities, of centralization, is the most radical, the most absolute negation of social life and of liberty: such has been, we repeat, our aim in writing these lines.”

Have we accomplished that aim?

In the eyes of intelligent men, who are not blinded by absurd and ridiculous patriotic prejudices, we do not hesitate to reply: Yes! For it is impossible that serious, disinterested revolutionaries, friends of truth and justice, will not understand all that there is of lies, of the anti-social, all that is contrary to dignity, and to human individuality, in this corraling, this absorption of individuals which paralyzes every intellectual and moral blossoming, leading the species fatally towards that degeneration of which the history of nations offers us so many and such sad examples, and which in our days, preoccupies to such a high degree the most profound thinkers and those least disposed to pessimism. In fact, in order to soar along that path of perfectibility assigned by nature and the law of universal movement, the being needs the enjoyment of all its faculties, of its free will, and, finally, of its autonomy.

What is the supreme aim of the revolution?

It is the accomplishment of the wishes of nature, the entire freeing of the human race, the triumph and absolute reign of liberty. This definition of the revolution cannot be contested by anyone—whatever point of view one takes—for, all are obliged to proclaim that man is born free, and every social law which limits his liberty, is judged bad and tyrannical.

Now, what is liberty?

Many volumes have been written on this important question; many solutions have been presented, but no revolutionary writer, to my knowledge, has managed until now to give a perfectly exact definition. For some, liberty, is “the right to do all that the law does not forbid;” for others—and these believe it very strongly—beginning from the absurd principle that every right necessarily implies a duty, affirm that liberty cannot exist if “a wise regulation does not come to direct

the movements by balancing the rights and duties of each;” and finally the great French eunuchs of ‘48, defined it thus in their burlesque constitution: “It is the right to come and go!!!”

For us, liberty is the enjoyment of life; and we maintain that simple definition as the only true, the only incontestable one: to live is to have the full and complete knowledge of one’s being, the free possession of one’s self; it is, finally, to enjoy all the prerogatives inherent to human nature. “In order to be a good man, it is necessary to be free,” a philosopher said; now, one cannot be free, which is to say a good man, under the ferule of a tyrant, whether that tyrant is called man or law!!!

Like life, liberty is one, and cannot be divided with impunity; it is or it is not.

In order to obscure the intelligence, to distort the understanding, and on the specious pretext that man is manifested in multiples and diverse aspects, we have saddled liberty with a multitude of names: liberty of the press, of association, of examination, of conscience, of speech, etc., etc., as if these various aspects of human manifestations, made up anything but the diversity of the forms, the unity of which is their synthesis. In these different aspects, life is also manifested in all animated beings. Is life less one in its essence and in its development? The dualists themselves would not dare to maintain it.

Thus we repeat, liberty is the enjoyment of life in all its fullness, in its complete development.

Can liberty or individual autonomy exist with centralization or national autonomy? That is the whole question. To ask such a question is to resolve it.—Nation implies government, authority, which is to say privilege and despotism, or in other words, rules, limits imposed on the free and facultative aspirations of each; in the nation, individual liberty, that supreme guarantee without which there is no true security for the citizens, thus finds itself fatally, and in fact, confiscated for the profit of the collectivity, which is to say of a hieroglyphic fiction, invented by the privileged and the exploiters, in order to better insure their domination over the masses. We give the name of national collectivity to the most disparate, the most monstrous thing we can imagine, the ensemble of the citizens, and we define it thus: “All citizens are equal before the law.”

But what is the law?

“A relation of justice,” said Saint-Just. What relation of justice, we ask in our turn, can there be between the governing and the governed, the master and the servant, the exploiter and the exploited, and the rich and the poor? The law, with all due respect to the great and energetic revolutionaries of ‘93, is only, and can only be an instrument of oppression and servitude, and most odious of all, for it is always in the name of justice and right that it is imposed; as if right and justice, emanations of human the conscience, could have something in common with that chose sinful, product of plunder and of cunning.

What are the people in the eyes of the law?—Nothing.

What do they count for in the nation?—For nothing.

Do you want proof? All public acts are made invariably in the name of the nation, in the name of all the citizens; thus one says: national constitution, national representation, national justice, national bank, etc., etc., while it is constant and well-known that the proletarian, which is to say the immense majority of the population, has nothing to do or say in these dens where his chains are forged, where the fruit of his labor is devoured. Alas! we are occupied with him, we think of him, only when it is a question of imposing new charges on him.

And then, let us cite one of the supposed advantages which the laborers enjoy in the heart of the nations, and under the empire of these famous laws that we say have been created in the interests of all? “Men are equal before the law!” What a bitter and cruel mystification! Ah! without

doubt, there is also equality between the South American planter and the unfortunate negro bent under the whip; between the mine worker and exploiter of the coal fields of the Borinage. At the hour when, in Gand, in Lyon, and in all the countries of Europe, innumerable masses of laborers suffer, for want of work, all the tortures of poverty and hunger, what is equality before the law to them? What does the Mother Country do in order to come to their aid? Alas! it tosses them a meager handout, and confines its soldiers to the barracks!

Liberty, we have said, is impossible where authority becomes necessary.

Authority is the logical and natural consequence of nationalities, of political and administrative centralization. If then, the revolution—and there can be no doubt on this subject—aims at the triumph of liberty, it is absolutely necessary to proclaim decentralization loud and clear, and to affirm, consequently, the organization of the social groups, by taking for basis, first of all, the autonomy of the commune, together with the federative principle.

That the dominators and their satellites wish to maintain at any price the anti-social principle of the great national agglomerations, we conceive with no trouble, for it is for them a question of existence; but that revolutionaries consent to follow the same drifting course, that is what is no long conceivable.

Proletarians! Do you want to be freed from the terrible and pitiless capitalist exploitation? Do you want to see disappear forever from the heart of your families, hunger, poverty, and all their hideous cortege? Do you want to be free, finally? (For it is only by liberty, know it well, that the laborer can hope to enjoy the good things in life!) Examine and study what is said and done around you; see what you are in the heart of these nations of whose beneficent tutelage you endlessly boast. Do not ask to take us at our word. No. Believe nothing, and have faith only in those things which are clearly demonstrated and conform to the truth and to your interests. Away with those who preach to you blind belief: whether they speak in the name of liberty or of despotism, they can only be impostors!

Let good sense, reason and intelligence be your only guides; and, inspired by such counselors, your social education will soon be accomplished.

At the day of that great popular triumph, break that horrible faisceau that we call national unity and centralization; shake off the governmental tutelage; annihilate the laws, those heavy chains, and proclaim that Justice, Labor and Liberty, that sweet trinity of peace and love, alone from now on, will be appointed to govern the world!

End.

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