

The Anarchist Defense of Louis Lèveillé

in “L’Anarchie en cour d’assises” by Sébastien Faure, 1891

Louis Lèveillé

1891

[On May 1, 1891, after a Labor Day demonstration, police attacked protestors in Clichy. A violent battle ensued and gunfire was exchanged. Three anarchists were arrested. Henri Louis Decamps was sentenced to five years in prison, Charles Auguste Dardare to three and Louis Lèveillé (who was wounded in the fight) was acquitted. Ravachol would later take revenge for the injustice in March the following year.]

Members of the Jury,

I asked my comrade and friend, Sébastien Faure, to present my defense. Even though the law, by special arrangement, allows the accused to choose his defender, either a relative or friend outside the profession of lawyers, Your Honor has clearly refused my request on this matter.

First of all I protest against this disrespect of the law committed by those very men who are responsible for applying it within these walls and yet they do not respect it.

I regret that Sébastien Faure is not in the defense box, first because I know better than anyone else that he is the most likely to help me here; and then since the matter is not what the Members of the Jury are used to examining everyday, it will take a comrade, a partner, an anarchist to give or convey to these arguments the style they deserve; and finally because with the persuasive, lively and sincere eloquence that characterizes the apostles of our Idea, Sébastien Faure could make you understand the motives that have brought me before you and he could explain to you the whys and wherefores of this struggle that my friends and I have supported against the local and national police who have assaulted us. And I am sure, Sirs, that your verdict would be for acquittal.

I am forced to express at the beginning of my defense these regrets of mine and my firm objection.

If, in the first days after my arrest and in the course of my trial, I denied firing a shot, it is not, sirs, because I wanted to shirk the responsibility of my actions. But convinced that if absolutely reliable witnesses did not come forward, I would be released and figuring that when up against the representatives of the authority imprisoning me all ways are fair to be free, I had, for an instant, hope.

But today, I have declared and I categorically declare that I fired on those who attacked me. I have done my duty like my friends Decamp and Dardare. I want to be sentenced or acquitted with them. If you find them guilty, I am guilty, too. And I will take my part of the responsibility full and entire.

I will not try to arouse your anger by telling you how they treated us. Suffice it to say, sirs, that after being shot in the thigh, devoured by fever and in serious pain, when I asked for water to clean my wound, they answered me with their boots and pistol butts. Suffice it to say that this painful agony lasted for six days and remained without care until May 20, that is for twenty days in all. And yet, sirs, in times of war, even when the most savage instincts have free rein, it is an absolute rule that the wounded who have fallen into enemy hands will be cared for and the prisoners respected. But for the police, we are worse than enemies because we are revolutionaries—we are *anarchists*.

And so it should be no surprise that the prosecution is seeking the death penalty for us. And why? Because, being the determined adversaries of the Authority that

starves, humiliates, imprisons and kills, we want Anarchy to triumph. Anarchy that they have always represented as a doctrine of hatred and violence but that is, in reality, a doctrine of peace, fraternity and love, seeing that the goal of Anarchy is to substitute the solidarity of individual interests for their opposition and to replace competition (the source of all dualism, of all animosity and of all social crimes) with universal association and harmony.

The people who stand most vehemently against anarchist theories are those who understand them the least. Anarchy, which in the present state of things is not and cannot be but a negation of the entire authoritarian system, is not and cannot be, during a struggle, but the practice of disobedience, insubordination and defiance—in a word, revolt.

As such, the anarchist idea is as old as the principle of authority because from the day when a man claimed he commanded other men, these men more or less refused to obey. But just as ignorance created the Gods and gave birth to governmental systems, so this same ignorance kept humans from shaking off the yoke and clearly seeing their rights.

Moreover, it was bound to happen that being thrown on a planet with inexhaustible treasures in its belly but not knowing how to dig and make the most of it, humans, faced with the difficulties of feeding themselves, of protecting themselves against bad weather and of moving freely, argued and fought and killed each other to get what their desires, needs and aspirations demanded.

The recognition of this perpetual “struggle for life” might make you think that these conflicts, rivalries and battles are inevitable, that they have always existed and that they will continue until the end of history. But ignorance, that evil of primitive ages, has been gradually reduced by the knowledge accumulated over the centuries. Humanity has been steadily enriched in wonderful ways; the conquests of the human mind have multiplied; the horizon has expanded beyond measure; the elements tamed by man have become his most diligent, most docile and most disinterested collaborators; labor, supported by Science, has made extraordinary underground riches spring forth; farming, expertly developed, has covered the ground with wonderful crops, savory fruits, sweet-scented flowers and hardy trees; floods have been averted, epidemics victoriously battled; natural evils have been almost wiped out!

And in the heart of this fertile, beautiful, luxuriant earth, some men, who once stood side by side with others to reach their goals, have been stupid enough to keep wanting to grab everything; and others stupid enough to accept being despoiled. The grabbers are scandalously becoming richer and richer and fewer and fewer while the family of disinherited are becoming poorer and poorer and more and more numerous. How is that these millions and millions of poor do not get any payback from this handful of billionaires?

It is not too hard to answer this question. This comes from:

1st, every kind of prejudice carefully maintained by the privileged in the brains of the masses; these prejudices are the government, laws, property, religion, country, family, etc. This is a moral restraint.

2nd, the system of repression that dishonors the land: judges, police, soldiers, prison guards—there is your physical restraint.

To sum up, I'll say that the evil comes from the law that, being made by those in power, has no other purpose but to justify their imposture, to consecrate their depredation and to guarantee their impunity; the law that requires a governmental system which logically drags behind it the coercive and repressive forces I just mentioned.

Everyone is aware these truths. To such a point that they are starting to wonder today if a government is really necessary. While the partisans of all authoritative systems say "yes", the anarchists alone say "no". And at the end of this 19th century, the anarchist concept is summed up in these three words that have the power of terrifying some and making others smile in disbelief: "No more government".

Yes, no more government.

Everything is there because from the day that the government (and I understand by this every governmental system, whatever the form and whatever its name), from the day, then, that every government disappears, the written laws and the codes will have no more reason to exist, seeing that they will no longer rely on any force to be feared and respected. At the same time, the natural law will easily take the place of artificial laws because, don't forget, sirs, Anarchy is free play in the humanity of natural laws or, more precisely, (since I want to avoid this word "law") of the natural forces that regulate the entire Universe.

No more Codes! No more judges! No more police! No more soldiers! No more priests! No more leaders! In a word, no more governments!

Such is our watchword! Such is our rallying cry! Such is the slogan of Anarchy fighting against the old social order.

And why a government? Ask individually each of the 500 people assembled here.

A strange thing. Recognizing that it is not the government that cultivates the land, sews clothes, kneads bread, builds houses, mines coal, fabricates machines, writes books and pushes knowledge to new directions, each will answer that *for him* a government is useless, that he does not feel the need. And grouped together, assembled here, when I come to say that this useless machinery is harmful, that it sucks out all our energy, costs too much to maintain (and you know as well as I do what the cost of governmental machinery is!) and therefore this harmful machinery should be done away with, you rear up under the whiplash of this simple statement!

Why is that? Because for centuries they have said over and over again, "A government is necessary." And your fathers believed it and without even thinking you believe it, too.

If you open any dictionary to the letter A and look up the word Anarchy, you will see the following definition: "Chaos, upheaval, absence of order and harmony." Is this the meaning of Anarchy? It comes from two Greek words: Alpha privative, A, meaning "absence of" and Arke which means "power". So that according to official knowledge absence of order is synonymous with absence of power and we should conclude that there is no order without authority and where there is no government, there can only be disorder.

Ah! How easy it would for me to take this error in hand and, with my eyes open not only on the past but on the present as well, to prove that this age of ours is living under a regime of excessive governmental centralization but our generation is running around in appalling disorder.

Allow me, briefly, in a few quick images, to paint you a picture of Modern Society.

On the top:

Priests trafficking religious sacraments and ceremonies; bureaucrats bowing their heads but ripping off and running off with the cash; military officers selling so-called national defense secrets to the enemy; writers directing their thoughts to glorify injustice, poets idealizing the ugly, artists *apothosizing* the iniquitous, as long as their depravity lands them a cushy chair at the Academy, a seat at the Institute or some entitlements... an income.

Lying salesmen cheating on the weight, quality and provenance of their merchandise; industrialists adulterating their products; speculators fishing for billions in the inexhaustible Ocean of human stupidity.

Politicians, thirsting for domination, banking on the ignorance of some and the good faith of others; penpushers, so-called journalists, prostituting their pens with an indifference that has no equal except in the foolishness of the readers.

On the bottom:

Home builders without homes, garment workers without clothes, bakers without bread, billions of producers suffering unemployment and therefore hunger; crowds of people wandering around, all over the place, in search of a bridge to build, a tunnel to construct, a hole to dig; families piled up in slums; fifteen-year old girls, in order to eat, forced to put up with the foul gropings of old men and the lewd assaults of young bourgeoisie.

Blind masses, who seem totally unfit to recognize their dignity; this rabble rushing after a minister who exploits them and lavishing ridiculous praise on him; crowds gathering at a station before a monarch, a son, brother or cousin of the coming king; and in the intoxication of national celebrations, in the numbing fanfares and whirling public balls, people willingly forget that yesterday they were dying in misery and slavery and tomorrow they will perish in servitude and hardship.

Such is the desperate picture that our present humanity offers. That is the order that the most *governmentalized* of Societies offers you.

And while the colors are very dark indeed, they are not painted on for fun; there is depravity, shame, atrocity and torture that no human language can describe.

But at the heart of this corruption that is eating away at the powerful and of this servility that dishonors the weak, at the heart of this hypocritical cynicism that characterizes the haughty and of the incredible naivety in which the lowly perish, in the midst of the insolence that the “upper classes” flaunt and of the fawning of the “lower classes”, in the midst of the savage greed of the robbers and of the unfathomable apathy of the robbed, between the wolves of power, religion and wealth and the sheep of work, poverty and servitude, there are a handful of brave men standing tall, a phalanx that has not been contaminated by the arrogance of the haughty or the platitudes of the humble.

Yesterday a half a handful; today an army; tomorrow a numberless crowd; they follow the Truth; they care no more about the fearful tittering of the rich than they do about the dreary indifference of the poor.

To the powerful they say:

“You reign only through ignorance and fear. You are the degenerate heirs of barbarians, tyrants and criminals.

“Who maintains you in your idle lives? Your victims!

“Who protects you and defends you against the enemies from within and without? O bitter irony—Your victims!

“Who elects you into public office? Once again, your victims!

“And their ignorance, so carefully maintained by you, not only does not see these disturbing inconsistencies, but it turns it into resignation, respect, almost veneration.

“But we will unmask you without pity and we will expose your hideous faces, you butchers, where we can see the hypocrisy, avarice, pride and cowardice.”

And what do these same men say to the lowly, the exploited, the enslaved?

Listen:

“O you who are born in a cradle of straw, who grow up in the claws of misery and live condemned to hard labor and the premature old age of scapegoats, don’t despair.

“Proletariat, grandsons of ancient slaves, sons of medieval serfs, know that your misery is not hopeless.

“All of you who make up this enslaved humanity whose wounded feet have left bloody traces in its human wake for too many centuries now, trust in the future.

“In rags, in pain, with empty stomachs, barefoot, exploited, wounded, disinherited, you are drained a little more every day by the power and prestige of your masters but every day your battalions are becoming stronger and stronger.

“Lift up your hearts and your heads! Know your rights! Understand that every man is equal to every other man. It is wrong that some have rights to exercise and others duties to fulfill. Refuse to obey and no one will think of commanding you.

“At last, raise up your dignity.

“Let the spirit of revolt grow in you and with Freedom you will become happy!”

That, sirs, is what anarchists are. Such is their language and such is ours.

I conclude:

We are guilty if by awaking the sense of dignity among our comrades, we fail to do so in ourselves.

Criminals, yes, we will be criminals if by calling men to revolt, we bow before the threats and submit to the orders of the representatives of authority.

Cowards, the worst of cowards if arousing the courage of our partners in the fight and encouraging them to be brave, we do not defend our life and liberty when they are in danger.

That is why I had to do what I did, we had to do what we did (my friends, I know, think the same as me). And we have no regrets.

If you condemn me, my convictions will remain unshakeable.

There will be one more anarchist in prison, but one hundred more on the streets. And our example will be followed. It will be the starting point of revolts that will multiply, that will become more and more collective, until the universal Revolution introduces into the everyday world the ideas for which I live, for which I suffer with a certain joy, for which I am ready, like all anarchists, to shed my blood if necessary, without swaggering or staggering, until not a drop is left.

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Translated from the French by Michael Shreve

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