

Joseph Déjacque, the first libertarian

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Joseph Déjacque (1821-1864) was one of the first self-proclaimed anarchists, and probably the first person to use the term “libertarian” as a synonym for “anarchist.” He may also have been the first person to describe anarchist alternatives to other political perspectives as “anarchism.”

In the span of a decade, as an impoverished refugee, Déjacque wrote and published an impressive body of work, advocating a kind of revolutionary anarchist communism, in contrast to the “mutualism” developed by his older contemporary, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the first self-proclaimed anarchist.

Déjacque took Proudhon to task for not being “wholly anarchist,” calling on Proudhon to join in the struggle to achieve “the anarchistic community” where “every individual,” man and woman, “might be free to produce and to consume at will and in accordance with [their] dreams, without having to exercise or endure oversight from anyone or over anyone” (*Anarchism*, Vol. 1, page 68).

Déjacque was born in Paris in 1821 and raised by his single mother. He began working at the age of 12 in the paper hanging business. By 1847, he had become involved in the French socialist movement. Then came the French Revolution of 1848, which overthrew the “citizen King,” Louis-Philippe, and proclaimed a new French Republic.

At the beginning of the 1848 Revolution, Déjacque participated in “various socialist clubs” and activities, and became involved with a group of socialist feminists who advocated “Women’s Emancipation” (Hartman and Lause, Introduction to *In the Sphere of Humanity*, page 7). Many of these women were later to suffer the same fates as their male counterparts at the hands of the counter-revolutionaries in France, being shot, imprisoned, executed and forced into exile. Déjacque gave a moving tribute to one of them, Louise Julien, upon her death in 1853, hailing her as “a heroic apostle of the social revolution” (Déjacque, 1853, page 7).

Déjacque fought on the barricades during the June 1848 workers’ uprising in Paris. The uprising was violently put down, with thousands of workers being killed by “Republican” troops. Déjacque survived the uprising, but was imprisoned, along with thousands more of the French working class. That a “Republican” government would act so brutally against French workers turned many socialists, including Déjacque, away from any alliance with bourgeois republicans, even after Napoleon III seized power in a coup d’état in December 1851 and transformed the Republic into the Empire.

Déjacque was “released in March 1849,” only to be rearrested “in June 1849 when the royalists” came into control of the National Assembly (Hartman and Lause, page 9). He was arrested again in 1851, for publishing “a collection of romantic poems and vignettes on class struggle” (Hartman and Lause, page 9).

After his release from prison, he went into exile, first in Belgium, then in England and the United States. Speaking in 1852 on the anniversary of the June uprising at a funeral in London for another working class French refugee, attended by exiled French politicians, bourgeois republicans, and socialists, Déjacque shocked the politicians and republicans by telling them that, for the working class, the “common enemy” was “all who, in London and Paris, dream of governing to better guarantee their social privileges against proletarian demands, the one in the name of Empire, the other in the name of the Republic” (Hartman and Lause, page 13).

Déjacque and other working class refugees in England lived in poverty. They had difficulty accessing donations from their compatriots back in France, much of which was controlled by the bourgeois politicians and republicans. Déjacque’s fearless denunciations of the bourgeois

republicans for their betrayal of the French workers during the June Days did not help matters, and in 1854 he left for the United States.

He spent some time in New York, where he joined the “International Association,” a precursor of the First International, which also had a significant anarchist component, mostly from among the working class French exiles in England and the United States. French anarchists in London formed a “Club of Free Discussion,” and would end their meetings with cries of “Vive L’Anarchie!” (R. Graham, *We Do Not Fear Anarchy, We Invoke It*, page 59).

Déjacque wrote one of his first substantial political essays while in New York in 1854, “The Revolutionary Question” (in *Anarchism*, Vol. 1, pp. 60–63). He took an explicitly anarchist stance, calling for the abolition of “government in all its guises, be they monarchist or republican.” He extolled the virtues of anarchy, which he defined as “individual sovereignty, complete, boundless, utter freedom to do anything and everything that is in human nature.” In place of the state, he proposed the creation of a revolutionary commune.

In 1855, Déjacque left New York for New Orleans. Shortly after his arrival, he gave a speech urging “armed slave rebellion within hearing of the slaves themselves” (Hartman and Lause, page 20). It was from New Orleans that Déjacque also published his open letter to Proudhon, “On Being Human, Male and Female” (in *Anarchism*, Vol. 1, pp. 68 – 71).

Déjacque took Proudhon to task for his patriarchal anti-feminism. Déjacque prefaced his Letter with a parody of the masthead of Proudhon’s revolutionary newspaper from the 1848 French Revolution, *Le Representant du Peuple*, which had asked “What is the Producer? Nothing. What should he be? Everything!” Instead, Déjacque asked “What is man? Nothing. What is woman? Nothing. What is the human being? EVERYTHING” (Graham, 2015, page 51).

Déjacque wrote that he did not wish to “establish hierarchic distinctions between the sexes and races, between men and women, between blacks and whites” (*In the Sphere of Humanity*, page 31). He urged Proudhon to “speak out against man’s exploitation of woman,” and told him not to describe himself as an anarchist unless Proudhon was prepared to “be an anarchist through and through” (*Anarchism*, Vol. 1, page 71).

While still in New Orleans, Déjacque wrote *L’Humanisphere, utopie anarchique*, a kind of anarchist communist utopia. In 1858 he returned to New York, where he began publishing his own anarchist newspaper, *Le Libertaire* (“The Libertarian”), likely making him the first person to use “libertarian” as a synonym for anarchist. It was also in the pages of *Le Libertaire* that Déjacque first used the word “anarchism.” Instead of posing the choice confronting revolutionaries as one between “socialism or barbarism,” as Marx did, Déjacque posed the alternatives as being between Jesuitism or anarchism (Shawn Wilbur, 2016).

Déjacque returned to France around the beginning of the U.S. Civil War in the Spring of 1861. He hoped that the Civil War would turn into a proletarian social revolution, with white workers uniting with black slaves to destroy capitalism and the U.S. “fossil Republic” (Hartman and Lause, page 31).

Not much is known of Déjacque’s fate upon his return to France. He was likely dead by the time the International Workingmen’s Association was founded in London by mainly French and English workers in September 1864. According to the anarchist historian, Max Nettlau, his ideas were not discussed by the Internationalists, despite the fact that many of the International’s French members had been his comrades (Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism*, page 80).

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