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Émile Henry

Letter to the Director of the Conciergerie

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1894

Translated for marxists.org by Mitchell Abidor. This text was
written from jail just two weeks after Henry had thrown a
bomb at Paris' Café Terminus, killing one and injuring twenty.
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1894

During the visit you made to my cell Sunday, the 18th of this month, we had a quite friendly discussion of anarchist ideas.

You said you were very surprised to learn our theories in a different light, and you asked me to summarize our conversation in writing, in order to better know what the anarchists want.

You can easily understand, *monsieur*, that in just a few pages one can't expound upon a theory which analyses our current social life in all of its manifestations; that studies these manifestations the way a doctor examines a sick body, and which then condemns them because they're contrary to human happiness and, in place of them, builds an entirely new life, based on principles completely antagonistic to those upon which the old society was built.

Besides, others have already done what you ask of me: Kropotkin, Reclus, Sébastien Faure have set forth their ideas, and pushed their development as far as possible.

Read *Évolution et Révolution* by Reclus, *La Morale Anarchiste, Les Paroles d'un Révolté, La Conquete du Pain* by Peter Kropotkin; *Autorité et Liberté, Le Machinisme et ses Conséquences* by Sébastien Faure; *La Société Mourante et l'Anarchie* by Grave; *Entre Paysans* (Fra Contadini) by Malatesta; read also the numerous pamphlets and manifestoes that have appeared over the last fifteen years, each expounding new ideas, according to whether study or circumstances suggested them to their authors.

Read all of this and then you would form a well-founded judgment on anarchy.

Nevertheless, don't think that anarchism is a dogma, a doctrine that can't be attacked, indisputable, venerated by its followers as the Koran is by Muslims.

No, the absolute freedom that we call for ceaselessly expands our ideas, raises them towards new horizons (following the will of diverse individuals) and removes them from the rigid frameworks of regimentation and codification.

We are not "believers;" we don't bow before Reclus or Kropotkin. We debate their ideas, we accept them when they develop sympathetic impressions in our brains, but we reject them when they don't strike a chord within us.

We are far from possessing the blind faith of the collectivists, who believe in something because Guesde said it had to be believed in, and who have a catechism whose paragraphs it would be sacrilegious to dispute.

This being established, I am going to try to briefly and rapidly expound for you what *I* understand by anarchy, without involving other comrades who, on certain points, could have views different from mine.

You would not dispute the fact that the current social system is evil, and the proof that it is, is that everyone suffers from it. From the poor itinerant, with neither bread nor roof, who knows constant hunger, to the millionaire, who lives in fear of a revolt of the poor that would trouble his digestion, all of humanity lives in a state of anxiety.

On what bases does bourgeois society rest? Putting aside the principles of family, fatherland, and religion, which are nothing but corollaries, we can affirm that the two cornerstones, the two fundamental principles of the current state are authority and property.

I don't want to go on any longer on this subject: it would be easy for me to prove that all the ills we suffer from flow from property and authority.

Poverty, theft, crime, prostitution, war, revolution are all nothing but the results of these principles.

The two bases of society being thus evil, there is no reason to hesitate. There's no need to try any of a group of palliatives (e.g. socialism) that serve only to shift the wrong. The two vicious germs must be destroyed, and eradicated from social life.

This is why we anarchists want to replace private property with communism, and authority with freedom.

No more deeds of possession or domination: absolute equality.

When we say absolute equality we don't claim that all men will have the same brain, the same physical organization: we know that there will always be the greatest diversity in cerebral and physical aptitudes. It is precisely this variety of capacities that will bring into being the production of all that is necessary for humanity, and we count on this as well to maintain emulation in an anarchist society.

But in order to make victorious this ideal, to set anarchist society on a solid base, we must begin with the work of destruction. The old, worm-eaten edifice must be torn down.

This is what we are doing.

The bourgeoisie claims that we will never arrive at our goal.

The future, the very near future, will teach them.

Vive l'Anarchie!

In place of the current authoritarian organization, the grouping of individuals by sympathies and affinities without laws or leaders.

No more private property; the gathering in common of products; each one working and consuming according to his needs, which is to say, as he wishes.

No more family, selfish and bourgeois, making man the property of woman and woman the property of man; no more demanding of two beings who loved each other but a moment that they remain attached till the end of their days.

Nature is capricious: it always demands new sensations. It wants free love. This is why we want free unions.

No more fatherlands, no more hatred between brothers, pitting against each other men who have never set eyes on each other.

Replacement of the narrow and petty attachment of the chauvinist for his country by the large and fruitful love of all of humanity, without distinction of race or color.

No more religions, forged by priests to degrade the masses and give them the hope of a better life, while they themselves enjoy life in the here and now.

On the contrary, the continual expansion of the sciences, put within the grasp of every being who will feel attached to their study, little by little bringing all men to a materialist consciousness.

The particular study of hypnotic phenomena, which science is beginning to become aware of, in order to unmask the charlatans who present to the ignorant, in a marvelous and superstitious light, facts which are purely physical.

In a word, absolutely no more hindrances to the free development of human nature.

The free blossoming of physical, cerebral and mental faculties.

I am not so optimistic as to believe that a society built on such foundations will arrive at perfect harmony. But I have the profound conviction that two or three generations will suffice to tear mankind from the influence of the artificial civilization which it submits to today and to return it to the state of nature, which is the state of goodness and of love.

There will be engineers and laborers: this is obvious. But one will not be considered superior to the other, since the work of the engineer is useless without the collaboration of the laborer, and vice versa.

Everyone being free to choose his trade, there will exist only beings that obey, without any constraints, the leanings nature places in them (guarantee of good productivity).

Here a question must be asked: And the lazy? Will everyone want to work?

We answer yes, everyone will want to work, and here is why:

Today, the average workday is ten hours.

Many workers are kept busy at labors that are absolutely useless to society, in particular on armaments for the army and navy. Many are also unemployed. Add to this a considerable number of able-bodied men who produce nothing: soldiers, priests, policemen, magistrates, civil servants, etc.

We can thus say, without being accused of exaggeration, that of a hundred capable of producing some kind of labor, only fifty furnish an effort truly useful to society. It is these fifty who produce all of society's riches.

From this flows the deduction that if everyone worked, instead of ten hours the workday would decrease to only five.

Beyond this we should consider that in the current state of things the total of manufactured products is four times, and of agricultural products three times the amount required to meet humanity's needs; which is to say that a humanity three times more numerous would be clothed, housed, heated, fed; in a word, would have all of its needs satisfied if waste and other causes didn't destroy that overproduction. (You will find these statistics in the little pamphlet: "The Products of the Land and of Industry").

From what has gone before, we can draw the following conclusion:

A society where all would work together, and which would be satisfied with productivity not far beyond its consumer needs (the excess of the first over the second would constitute a small reserve) would have to ask of each of its able-bodied members an effort of only two or three hours, perhaps less.

Who would then refuse to give such a small quantity of labor? Who would want to live with the shame of being held in contempt by all and being considered a parasite?

. . . Property and authority march together, the one supporting the other to keep humanity enslaved.

What is the right to property? Is it a natural right? Is it legitimate that one eats while the other fasts? No. Nature, in creating us, made us with similar organisms, and the laborer's stomach demands the same satisfaction as that of the financier.

Nevertheless, one class today has taken all, stealing from the other class the bread not only of its body, but also of its soul.

Yes, in a century that we call one of progress and of science, is it not painful to think of the millions of intelligences hungry for knowledge and that cannot flourish? How many children of the common man, who could have become men and women of great value, useful to humanity, will never know anything but the few indispensable notions taught in elementary school.

Property! That is the enemy of human happiness, for it alone creates inequality, and in its train hatred, envy, bloody revolt . . .

Established authority serves no other purpose than the sanctioning of property. It is there to put force at the service of the act of despoiling.

Work being a natural need you will accept along with me that no one would flee from the demand of as minimal an effort as that which we spoke of above.

(Labor is so natural a need that History shows us several statesmen treating themselves with joy from the cares of politics to work as simple laborers: To cite two well-known cases: Louis XVI worked with locks, and in our day Gladstone, "The Great Old Man" [in English in the original] profits from his vacations to himself chop down some of the oaks of his forests, like a common lumberjack).

So you see, *monsieur*, there would be no reason to have recourse to the law to avoid the problem of idlers.

But if in some extraordinary case someone wanted to refuse his assistance to his brothers, it would *still* be less costly to feed this unfortunate, who can only be described as sick, than to maintain

legislators, magistrates, police and prison wardens to break him down.

Many other questions arise, but they are of a secondary nature, the most important thing being to establish that the suppression of property would not cause a cessation of production due to the development of laziness, and that anarchist society would know how to feed itself and satisfy all of its needs.

All the other objections that can be raised will be easily refuted by taking inspiration from the idea that an anarchist milieu would cause to grow in each of its members the love of and solidarity with his like, for man will know that in working for others he works for himself.

A seemingly better-founded objection is the following:

If there is no more authority, if there is no fear of the gendarme to stop the criminal's arm, don't we risk seeing crimes and misdemeanors multiply at a frightening rate?

The answer is easy:

We can categorize the crimes committed today in two principal categories; crimes of interest and crimes of passion.

The first group will disappear on its own, since there can be no attacks on property in a milieu which has done away with property.

As for the second group, no law can stop them. Far from this being the case, the current law — which acquits a husband who kills his adulterous wife — does nothing but favor the frequency of these crimes.

On the contrary, an anarchist milieu would raise the moral level of humanity. Man will understand that he has no rights over a woman who gives herself to another man, since that woman does nothing but follow her nature.

Consequently crimes, in a future society, will become increasingly rare, until they disappear completely.

Monsieur, I am going to summarize for you my ideal of an anarchist society.

No more authority, which is far more contrary to human happiness than the few excesses that could occur at the beginning of a free society.