

Why Are We Anarchists?- Elisee Reclus



L'HOMME EST LA NATURE
PRENANT CONSCIENCE D'ELLE-MÊME

The following lines do not constitute a programme. They have no other purpose than to justify the usefulness of elaborating a draft programme which would be subject to the study, to the observations, to the criticisms of all communist revolutionaries.

Perhaps, however, they contain one or two considerations that could fit into the project that I am asking for.

We are revolutionaries because we want justice and everywhere we see injustice reigning around us. The products of labour are distributed in an inverse ration to the work. The idler has all the rights, even that of starving his neighbour, while the worker does not always have the right to die of hunger in silence: he is imprisoned when he is guilty of striking. People who call themselves priests peddle miracles so that they can enslave intellects; people called kings claim to be from a universal master to be master in their turn; people armed by them cut, slash and shoot at their pleasure; people in black robes who say they are justice par excellence condemn the poor, absolve the rich, often sell convictions and acquittals; merchants distribute poison instead of food, they kill in detail instead of killing in bulk and thereby become honoured capitalists.[2] The sack of coins is the master, and he who possesses it holds in his power the destiny of other men. All this seems despicable to us and we want to change it. We call for revolution against injustice.

But "justice is only a word, a mere convention," we are told. "What exists is the right of force!" Well, if that is so, we are no less revolutionary. It is one or the other: either justice is the human ideal and, in this case, we claim it for all; or else force alone governs societies, and in that case we will use force against our enemies. Either the freedom of equals or an eye for an eye [la loi du talion].

But why the rush, all those who expect everything in time tell us, to exempt themselves from taking action. The slow evolution of events suffices for them, revolution scares them. History has pronounced [judgement] between us and them. Never has any partial or general progress been achieved by mere peaceful evolution; it has always been made through a sudden revolution. If the work of preparation takes place slowly in minds, the realisation of ideas occurs suddenly: evolution occurs in the brain, and it is the arms that make the revolution.

And how to bring about this revolution that we see slowly preparing in Society and whose advent we are aiding with all our efforts? Is it by grouping ourselves in bodies subordinate to each other? Is it by constituting ourselves like the bourgeois world that we fight as a hierarchical whole, with its responsible masters and its irresponsible inferiors, held as tools in the hand of a boss? Will we begin to become free by abdicating? No, because we are anarchists, that is to say men who want to keep full responsibility for their actions, who act in accordance with their rights and their personal duties, who impart to a [human] being his natural development, who has no one as a master and is not the master of others.

We want to free ourselves from the grasp of the State, no longer to have above us superiors who can command us, putting their will in the place of ours.

We want to rip apart all external law, by holding ourselves to the conscious development of the inner laws of our nature. By suppressing the State, we also suppress all official morality, knowing beforehand that there can be no morality in obeying misunderstood laws, in obeying a practice which they do not even try to justify. There is morality only in freedom. It is also by freedom alone that renewal remains possible. We want to keep our minds open, amenable in advance to any progress, to any new idea, to any generous initiative.

But if we are anarchists, enemies of every master, we are also international communists, because we understand that life is impossible without social organisation. Isolated, we can do nothing, while through close union we can transform the world. We associate with each other as free and equal men, working for a common task and regulating our mutual relations by justice and reciprocal goodwill. Religious and national hatreds cannot separate us, since the study of nature is our only religion and we have the world for our homeland.

The main cause for savagery and wickedness will cease to exist amongst us. The land will become collective property, barriers will be removed and henceforth the ground belonging to all can be adapted to the enjoyment and well-being of all. The required products will be precisely those which the land can best provide, and production will respond exactly to needs, without ever wasting anything as in the disorderly work that is done today. In the same way the distribution of all these riches amongst men will be removed from the private exploiter and will be done by the normal functioning of society at large.

We do not have to sketch in advance the picture of the future society: It is the spontaneous action of all free men that is to create it and give it its shape, moreover incessantly changing like all the phenomena of life. But what we do know is that every injustice, every crime violating human dignity [lèse-majesté humaine] we always find us rising to fight them. As long as iniquity exists, we, international communist-anarchists, we will remain in a state of permanent revolution.

Élisée Reclus, *La Société nouvelle*, Year 5, No. 2, 1889

[2] Reclus writes “tuent en détail,” a play on words as “vente en détail” means retail sale. (Editor)