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Elisée Reclus
Legal Evolution and Anarchy
1878

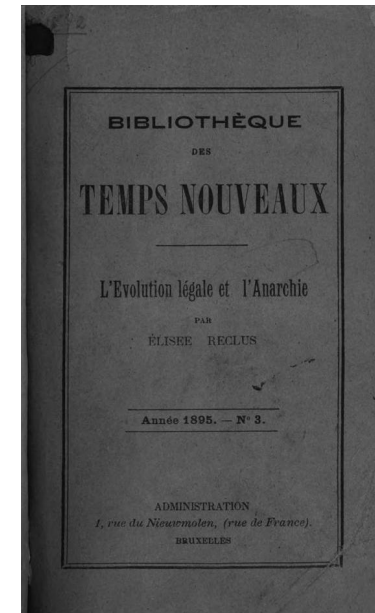
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Translation by @Jo4oBl4ck. The original publication of "Legal
Evolution and Anarchy" [*L'Évolution légale et L'Anarchie*], on the
journal *Le Travailleur* (Geneva, 1878), was followed by the
interesting debate between Élisée Reclus and Gustav Lefrançais,
"*A propos de 'L'Anarchie'* [About "Anarchy"]" which is also
translated here.

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Legal Evolution and Anarchy

Elisée Reclus



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principle, unless it is the miracle as Christians want it, or the authority, another form of whim, as “men of government” want it?

Élisée RECLUS.

1895 reprint note:

This booklet is the reproduction, slightly modified, of a letter written to a companion in exile, a refugee in Buenos Aires. This excellent friend, Baux, still believed in the virtue of laws to improve men and in that of representatives to make law triumph. Having written in this regard to the editors of “Le Travailleur,” a monthly anarchist journal which appeared in Geneva, he was answered by these few pages which, since the time of publication, in February 1878, are reprinted today for the first time.

Legal Evolution and Anarchy

Friends, the word “Anarchy” scares you. You blame us for using it and preventing well-meaning but timid people from coming to us. You blame us above all for having placed ourselves completely outside the State: the path of legal evolution seems to you by far the safest.

Revolutionary socialism seems daunting to you, because it can lead to dictatorship; but you have confidence in the movement of [cooperative] associations and you think that it will be possible to displace capital in this way. You even hope that the people and the bourgeoisie will manage to conclude peace, and, in your dreams for the future, you set in advance on a July 14th, anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, the great feast of the reconciliation of peoples and classes.

Doubtless the word “Anarchy” can frighten those who hold to the derived meaning of this term and see it only as a synonym of disorder, of violent and aimless struggles, but are we wrong to hold to the original meaning of the word, that which all the dictionaries honestly give: “Absence of government”? It is enough for us not to violate the language, regretting that it is not richer and does not provide us with terms that are not vitiated by illogical usage. Moreover, it does not displease us at all that this word claimed by us

stops for a moment those who are interested in the social problem. In the realm of fable, all the marvelous gardens, all the fairy palaces are guarded by some fierce dragon. There is nothing terrible about the dragon that watches over the threshold of the anarchic palace, it is just a word, but if there are some who allow themselves to be frightened by it, it would doubtless be in vain for us to try to hold them back; would men who shrink from a word ever have the necessary freedom of mind to study the thing itself? Alas! they will stick to their prejudices, their routine, their formulas, and will continue to speak of the “social hydra,” in the chosen terms of the official jargon.

Today’s society, which has reached the borderline of two worlds, so to speak, is full of the most bizarre contradictions: it is here that “anarchy” reigns arbitrarily in the sense usually given to the word.

Enter a higher school: the teacher talks about Descartes and tells us how the great philosopher began by making a “clean sweep” [*table rase*] of all prejudices, of all received ideas, of all previous systems. He praises him very much for having had this intellectual vigor; he tells us that from the time when the audacious word of absolute negation was pronounced, human thought was emancipated; but this same professor has only exclamations of horror for all those who would be tempted to imitate his hero! Following the example of Decartes, who was the first to dare to call himself an anarchist, we make a clean sweep of the kings and the institutions that weigh on human societies, we get rid of the traditional obedience that the morality of the masters has, at all times, instilled in the servants. However, we will not imitate Descartes all the way. If he, after having made a clean sweep of God, had not hastened to put him [God] back in place with all his spiritual and temporal *cortège*, if he had not had the prudence to travel in the opposite direction all the road he had provided, sure they would be careful not to give him to us as an example. Neither princes nor republics

brating at his slightest will, how can we be accused of disturbing “public services?”

The freedom of the individual, the solidary well-being of humanity, these are the two goals that we pursue and which must serve one another as means of achievement. Without the complete freedom of man, that is to say without the integral development and the regular play of all his forces, the disorder persists in the social body and the Revolution remains the necessary fact; without the regular functioning of society as a whole, the individual can only suffer, live in misery, ignorance and vice. Thus in the human body the normal play of the cell and the general health of the being absolutely depend on each other. In this dualism the individual and society harmonize and merge.

Is this ideal, or even “Christianity,” as you say? We believe, on the contrary, that it is science. And it is also to scientific methods, to observation and experiment, that we will resort to study the normal conditions of the grouping of men. Sociology is nothing other than this study, and it has already made two essential facts beyond doubt for us: on the one hand, that man, solidary of all other men, perishes by isolation; on the other hand, that all social progress is accomplished by the energy [*ressort*] of individual wills. These are scientific “laws,” very different from those external laws imposed on us by the State, and against which we are in permanent revolt. It is to conform with the first of these laws recognized by our reason that we are collectivists; we are anarchists to conform with the second. Could it be otherwise and do these laws not show themselves to us with the evidence of a mathematical solution?

We will often have the opportunity to deal with these questions in *Le Travailleur*. But don’t you agree with us, since you also want any society to be based “on the free will of the interested parties and against the authority of any outside group constituting the State”? Apart from the free will which you admit like me, apart from the solidarity which I recognize like you, is there any other

to the motto so dear to the bourgeois: "Glory to the strongest and most skilful!"

G. LEFRANÇAIS.

To Companion Lefrançais. [by Elisée Reclus]

Dear companion,

Thank you for writing to me. You are thus giving me the opportunity to explain in a few words one side of the question that I had left in the shade, not foreseeing that there might exist the slightest doubt in the minds in this regard.

It is useless to revisit the discussion of the words anarchy and anarchists. These terms seem good to me, because they have the advantage of being consistent with etymology and logic, and even more, because they shake a little, from its usual torpor, the intelligence of those who hear them for the first time. But even if those criticisms were to be founded, it would be too late now to uphold them. Now friends and foes know us as anarchists, and I fear the "anti-authoritarians" are very likely to be confused with us.

Now we come to the capital objection of your letter. Here it is: Consistent anarchists have no idea of solidarity. They can "do whatever they will with the material," "dispose of their products as they please," "destroy them at their whim," and even "destroy the whole organization of public services which makes up for the insufficiency of the individual."

These criticisms would be just if the anarchists were not at the same time collectivists, and would not seize every opportunity to fight private property. Now, if the whole earth becomes for humanity a field of collective work, if each product is the result of the efforts of all, how can the isolated individual claim the right to destroy any part of the social wealth [*l'avoir social*]? And if, by scientific arrangement of collective property, we transform nature into an immense organism placed at the disposal of man, and vi-

would have given him asylum, and his name would have remained that of a cursed man.

Well! in spite of the persecutions which have not failed us, and the curses with which we have been overwhelmed, from one end of the world to the other, we, the anarchists, do not believe we have to rebuild the State of which we have made a "clean sweep." Besides, as it exists, you admit that the building is quite ugly in appearance, and you understand that we are longing to demolish it. We have had enough of these kings elected by the grace of God or appointed by the will of the people, of these plenipotentiaries or ministers, responsible or irresponsible; of these legislators who were granted, either by the prince or by a herd of electors, their "share of royalty;" of these magistrates who sell to the highest bidder what they call "justice;" of these priests who, representing God on earth, promise places in paradise to those who make themselves their slaves; of these coarse swordsmen who also demand a blind obedience, an absolute suspension of intelligence and personal morality, from all those who have the misfortune to follow suit in their battalions; of these owners or bosses who dispose of the work, and consequently of the life, of the immense crowd of the weak and the poor. We have had enough of all the formulas, religious, legal or so-called moral, which lock us up and keep our minds in bondage, enough of this horrible routine which is the worst of all governments and the best obeyed, as recently demonstrated, with a great deal of evidence, by the philosopher Herbert Spencer.

"But at least will we not be able to transform economic society, peacefully and as if in silence, by the movement of [cooperative] associations?" Certainly, the anarchists, more than other men, have to rely on the force of association, for they expect everything from free affinities between free personalities; but they do not believe that workers' cooperative associations can achieve serious change in society. The attempts made in this direction are useful experiences, and we should be happy to have seen them, but they are enough, and we can now speak out. Society is a whole that we will

not succeed in changing by underpinning it in this way through one of its slightest details. Not to touch capital, to leave intact all those infinite privileges which constitute the State, and to imagine that we can insert a new organism in this whole fatal organism, would be like hoping that it will be possible for us to make a rose germinate on a poisonous euphorbia.

The history of workers' associations is already long, and we know how, in such matters, it is even more dangerous to succeed than to succumb. A failure is one more experience and allows those who have suffered it to enter into the great current of life and of the Revolution. But success is fatal! An [cooperative] association that succeeds, that earns money and becomes proprietor, is obliged to conform with the conditions of capital, it becomes bourgeois, it discounts bills, pursues its debtors, has recourse to lawyers, places its values in the bank, speculates on public funds, accumulates its capital and makes use of it by exploiting the poor. Having become rich, it joins the great brotherhood of the privileged; it is nothing more than a financial company, forced to close itself off from those who bring nothing but their arms. Completely separated from the people, having become a simple social excrescence, it constitutes itself as a State: far from supporting the revolution, it fights it in the extreme; all that was living force in it, when it began its work, now turns against its old friends, the disinherited and the revolutionaries; despite all the goodwill of its members, it passes to the enemy's side: it is nothing but a bunch of traitors. Ah! my friends, nothing depraves like success! As long as our triumph will not be at the same time that of all, let us be lucky to never succeed; let us always be vanquished!

It seems to you possible to achieve the general renewal of society with the help of the bourgeoisie—the petty bourgeoisie, of course, that whose immediate interests are the same as those of the workers. This, it seems to us, is a grave illusion. Let us never rely on any caste, and this one less than any other, for it believes itself to be born for privilege and, quite naturally, it espouses the

better than Christianity, the henceforth indisputable justice of this maxim: “He who does not work must not eat.”

In this case, what has the anarchist ideal to do with the terrible social problem whose solution imposes itself on our minds?

Was it then a pure ideal conception which raised the sublime storm of 1871? Was it for a simple intellectual speculation that those thousands of brave and worthy hearts ceased to beat, before their time, whom thought they saw, in the new advent of the Republic, the end of their miseries and above all the possibility of better days for their children?

Was it only for love of the ideal that our friend, he, the scholar, had taken up the gun and fought in the ranks of the federates of the Commune?

“Let the dead bury their dead,” said citizen Élisée Reclus.

All this, in my opinion, still smells too much like Christianity, an extra-human doctrine with which we must break forever. What is true, the reason why the workers of all countries tend to organize the great definitive uprising, is precisely that they want to put an end to all social constitutions based on abstractions, all ending in their enslavement. It is because they want the three phenomena of life, *production*, *circulation*, and *consumption* to be realized, not only among a few, but among all, and to the extent that the complete development of the faculties of each will entail.

No doubt we agree on this point: that any authoritarian organization, that is to say one resulting from a will other than that of the interested parties, must be recognized as powerless to create this new economic situation, the very negation of the principle of authority, of any reason of State [*raison d'État*].

This is also why the expression anti-authoritarian seems to me to better characterize the goal really pursued by the revolutionary socialists.

Anarchy, on the contrary, leading logically to the entirely ideal pursuit of “do what you will,” could well, against the will of its partisans, quite simply bring us back, by the exaltation of individualism,

For it seems to me, in this respect, that the socialists, more than anyone, must undermine this psychic entity called *man*, for the benefit of which, under the pretext of a very questionable progress, the rights of the individual have been constantly sacrificed.

But, for this very reason, it is necessary to take into account the economic conditions which the guarantee and satisfaction of these rights depend on.

And it is precisely in the analysis of these conditions that we find the best criticism of the purely abstract character of the anarchist conception.

There is indeed no product, however simple its elements, which has not required the cooperation of collective efforts. Now, which of the authors of this product could claim to destroy, by his own whim or his own interest, the result obtained by his collaborators?

And, if one agrees that such a claim would be unjust, then what becomes of anarchy?

“But,” it will be answered, “it is not a question of man as we know him today, and whose faculties, overexcited by antagonistic interests or unhealthy fantasies, are constantly out of balance. We have in view, on the contrary, the individual transformed in such a way, by a rational education, that he can conceive of the satisfaction of what is proper to him only in the guarantee of collective and solidarized interests.”

So be it. But then your *individual*, thus transformed, will not do *what he wants*, but only what reason has made him conceive as strictly conforming to his better balanced needs.

On the other hand, the individual, by the very fact of the integral development to which he aspires and to which he is entitled, will see the sum of his needs increase each day, without the normal duration of his existence increasing in proportion. He will increasingly feel the need to supplement duration with a new power of production which he can only find in the collective force itself and, there again, the great law of solidarity will make him understand,

prejudices and passions. Undoubtedly, the petty bourgeois—like all men—would have a great advantage in not always having before him the specter of misery; undoubtedly, he would have in the new society what he lacks today, the possibility of developing completely and of living without having to beg for his sustenance; but we take into account a special cause of demoralization which does not exist in men obliged to work with their hands, the peasant and the worker. This cause of debasement is contempt for material labor. By the effect of his education, the bourgeois, petty or big, believes that he humiliates himself by taking a tool; his natural ideal is to keep his hands virgin from the taint of work; he is the slave of his black coat, of certain outward habits which classify him among the Gentlemen [*Messieurs*]. There are no humiliations to which he does not expose himself to keep his caste, no infamy that he does not do to obtain the favors which should procure him, with the bread, the right to be among the privileged and the rulers. Parents, teachers, friends have always shown him this goal as the only one worthy of his ambition. One cannot imagine the insults that the “supernumerary” employee must suffer, the abject methods that are demanded of him before he is allowed into the class of mandarins. Once broken by the narrow rolling mill he had to slip into, he no longer has a backbone. Do not expect anything from him, he is no longer a man. Defectors from the bourgeoisie will come to us, and we hope more and more, but it is impossible that the caste will help us one day.

Because we are “levelers”. For us, castes must disappear like the State, of which it is only a miniature, with traditional inequalities as well as legal inequalities; and it is not by political alliances, by works of detail [*œuvres de détail*], by attempts at partial improvement that we believe we can advance the day of the future Revolution. It is better to walk directly towards our goal than to follow roundabout paths that would make us lose sight of the point to be reached. By remaining sincerely anarchists, enemies of the State in all its forms, we have the advantage of not deceiving anyone, and

especially of not deceiving ourselves. We will not, under the pretext of realizing a small part of our program, even with the sorrow of violating another part, be tempted to address power or try to take our part in it too. We will spare ourselves the scandal of those palinodes made by so many ambitious people and skeptics, which trouble the people's conscience so deeply.

And nevertheless, if we were to join the State cadres, such scandals would be inevitable. As soon as the revolutionary has "arrived", as soon as he has established himself in a governmental niche, he naturally ceases to be a revolutionary in order to become a conservative; this is inexorable. From a defender of the oppressed, he in turn turns into an oppressor; after having excited the people, he works to emasculate it. We do not have to cite proper names here: contemporary history cries them out. But how could it be otherwise? It is the place that makes the man; it is the whole machine that gives the cogs their various functions, and they have to adapt to them. As a famous diplomat, Robert Walpole, said long ago: "The interests of the rulers are always absolutely contrary to those of the ruled." Whoever becomes ruler becomes consequently an enemy of the people.

If we want to remain useful to our cause, that of the oppressed and the vanquished, then let us care not to break ranks. Let us at no price separate ourselves from our comrades, even under the pretext of serving them; let our grouping always be spontaneous, our discipline always voluntary. Let every man of honor go on strike as soon as it comes to titles, power, delegation for him which places him above others and gives him a share of irresponsibility. Thus the revolutionary forces will no longer be divided and the people will no longer have to constantly send leaders to power to be oppressed by them—isn't this the story symbolized by the rock of Sisyphus, falling back on those who rolled it with great difficulty to the top of the mountain?

As for men base enough to need a master, let them seek one! For a long time, alas, they will not lack. It is with government as

can destroy it at his whim. Finally, they aspire to a social state such that any pact, any agreement, being considered as an alienation of the freedom of the contracting parties, will no longer have a reason to exist, and also such that any organization will disappear which, under the current name of *public services*, makes up for the insufficiency of the individual, to guarantee him, not only the satisfaction of his most immediate needs, but of those which the development of his faculties creates for him every day.

Undoubtedly, citizen Reclus may not share this way of thinking of the consistent anarchists, he, whose whole life certainly has been a continual homage paid to the principle of conscious solidarity, towards the realization of that which the socialists aspire. But what does it matter, if the logic of the conception necessarily leads to it those who want to translate it into facts?

"Do what you will," such is really the goal pursued by any true anarchist.

Certainly, if one supposes the thing as realizable and especially if one can demonstrate the possibility of it—because supposition alone would not be enough—I do not see indeed why one should be frightened by the "monster"—but here is precisely where the question lies.

Now, without speaking of the discoveries of physiology, demonstrating, it is said, that freedom does not exist for man any more than for any other animal—which, moreover, I am not qualified either to affirm or to combat—now, I say, how can one claim to demonstrate that the *individual* will become free to produce as he pleases and to do with his product what he wishes, in the presence of the contrary affirmations which emerge at every moment from the observation of facts, concerning solidarity in the various series of the economic order?

I say *individual*, on this occasion, so that it is clearly understood that it is a question, not of a type or of the species considered in the collectivity, but indeed (by reason of the very theory of anarchy) of *each* of the individuals that make up the entire species.

into those of the proletariat, could thus become the supreme organizer of the social Revolution?

Finally, how clear and unanswerable is the criticism of the citizen Elisée Reclus, making us feel the dangers, for the economic emancipation of all, of the success of cooperative associations, creating, by their very success, new obstacles to this emancipation!

However, although I agree with him and with you all on these various points, more than ever I reject the title of anarchist to content myself with that of *anti-authoritarian*.

And first of all, whatever citizen Reclus may say, I persist in thinking that, despite all philological explanations, anarchy remaining for the great generality synonymous with disorder, it is useless to waste time trying to redress public opinion in this regard.

“Ah! for the love of Greek, do we have to kiss?”¹

Then, is it really just the fear of being misunderstood for a word, that makes me address to you the objections that the article in question raises in my mind?

Frankly, it’s not just the word that offends me. The “dragon that watches the threshold of the anarchic palace” is much more evil, in my opinion, than our friend supposes.

In short, citizen Reclus’s article rests on the *ideal*, that is to say on a conception outside of real life and its needs. Its main purpose is to inspire revolutionaries with the desire to carry out the famous “do what you will” with which it ends. And that is indeed how true anarchists understand it.—Those who go all the way.

They only understand the Social Revolution as an economic situation guaranteeing the individual such a sum of freedom that he can work when he pleases; do whatever he will with the material; also dispose of his product as he pleases, even to the point that he

¹ In the original: «Ah! pour l’amour du grec, faut-il qu’on s’embrasse?». Albeit subject to confirmation, it sounds quite like G. Lefrançais is resorting to an homophobic saying of the time, alluding to homosexuality in ancient Greece. In which case, needless to say, we absolutely reject it. (Translator)

with religion. You meet thousands of men who say to you with an important air: “If all were like me, we certainly wouldn’t need a government, but we need it for the people. Likewise, I could do without religion, but we need it for women and children.” And this is how governments and religion are made to last. As for us, greatly appreciating freedom for ourselves, we equally appreciate it for others; we do not want masters, nor do we want others to be enslaved to us. Whatever the partisans of the State may say, we know that the solidarity of interests, and the infinite advantages of a life at once free and common, will suffice to maintain the social organism. Only, it will not be constantly troubled by the whims of rulers who chase the peoples of here and there like miserable herds.

Certainly, our illusion would be great if, in our enthusiastic zeal, we relied on a sudden evolution of men in the direction of anarchy. We know that their education of prejudices and lies will keep them in servitude for a long time yet. What will be the “spiral” of civilization that they will have to climb before finally understanding that they can do without edges or chains? We don’t know, but judging by the present, it will be a long way.

While priests and teachers work together for the general stupidity, while kings, generals, officials and policemen, capitalists and bosses do their best work of war and enslavement, those whom the people acclaim as their defenders promise them also to govern them, to constitute a “strong power,” to defend the sacred interests of religion and property. Have we not seen a so-called republican Assembly vote with a unanimous voice thanksgivings to the “noble army” which had just “saved society” by machine-gunning thirty-five thousand prisoners, by cutting the throats of women and children? Do we not see another Assembly, even more republican, give proof of “wisdom and good political sense” by leaving the prisons and the penal colonies full of republicans, and by seizing every opportunity to pay court to the sovereigns of the world? All our legislators, formerly fierce club members, have changed into as many marquises!

Be that as it may, and whether years, decades or centuries separate us from the definitive revolution, we work with no less confidence on the endeavor we have undertaken, studying contemporary history with interest, but without taking a part in it that could make us traitors to our convictions. "Let the dead bury their dead"; let the candidates for power boast about their panaceas of governmental improvement and let us direct all our efforts to augmenting the elements of an egalitarian and free society that already exist, albeit isolated and fragmentary. The work we are pursuing is not chimerical, for on a thousand points at once we can already see it being prepared, just as in a chemical solution a thousand small crystals are formed here and there, before the whole mass is transformed. This whole lot of associations which are springing up everywhere, agricultural, industrial, commercial, scientific, literary, artistic, are they not proof of the change that is taking place in people's minds and which is turning them more and more towards working together? The contempt into which the old formulas of official religion and morality fall, the progress of free thought, do they not testify to a growing self-worth in individuals? The number of refractory socialists living as equals, without a chief who gives them the watchword, without a law that blocks them, with no other bond of cohesion than the feeling of a common duty, mutual affection and esteem, is it not increasing day by day? Finally, among the recent events, are there not some which seem to presage a whole new future? It is not appropriate for us to boast about the Paris Commune, since we took part in it; but is not history already being made, and does it not show that in this vast effervescence a whole new order of things was fermenting, of which neither king, nor priests, nor policemen, nor bosses would have been the masters? And over there, in Russia, how great is the spectacle of those young men and those heroines who leave aside position, fortune, and the infinite enjoyments of life in sciences and arts, to become part of the people, to live with them their miserable existence, then finish their career of devotion in prisons or mines! It is to bring to-

gether all these scattered elements of the great future society that we must devote our forces.

The festive day you are waiting for will come; but it will not only aim to celebrate the federation of peoples without kings; it will also glorify the union of men, now free, living without masters, and fulfilling the prophecy of our great ancestor Rabelais: "Do what thou will!" [*"Fais ce que veux"*]

Elisée Reclus.

About "Anarchy" [Debate with Gustav Lefrançais in *Le Travailleur*, issue 2, February-March 1878]

***To the Editorial Committee of Le Travailleur.* [by Gustav Lefrançais]**

Dear citizens and friends,

I read and reread the article by citizen Elisée Reclus on "Legal Evolution and Anarchy" and, I won't hide it, anti-anarchist that I am, I was at first dazzled by it.

If we were to live in the eternal ideal, nothing could be more splendid, more broadly conceived, than the letter from our friend to Baux, of Buenos-Ayres.

How, indeed, can one not agree with him on the contempt that must be inspired in us by the petty procedures so much advocated by the bourgeois republicans and even by the *makers* of socialism, as intended to facilitate the emancipation of the workers, when these procedures can only annoy any revolutionary initiative?

How not to agree with the man who demonstrates in such a luminous and peremptory way all that is false and demoralizing in this "Legal Evolution," by means of which some of us still like to suppose that the State, falling from the hands of the bourgeoisie