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Elisée Reclus

On Voting

October 11, 1885

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On Voting

Elisée Reclus

October 11, 1885

Clarens, Vaud

September 26, 1885

Compagnons:

You ask a man of good will, who is neither a voter nor a candidate, to reveal his ideas on the exercising of the right to suffrage.

You haven't given me much time to answer, but since I have quite clear convictions on the subject of the electoral vote, what I have to say to you can be formulated in a few words.

To vote is to abdicate. To name one or several masters for a short or long period means renouncing one's own sovereignty. Whether he becomes absolute monarch, constitutional prince or a simple elected representative bearing a small portion of royalty, the candidate you raise to the throne or the chair will be your superior. You name men who are above laws, since they write them and their mission is to make you obey.

To vote means being a dupe. It means believing that at the ringing of a bell men like you will suddenly acquire the virtue of knowing and understanding everything. Your elected representatives having to legislate on everything, from matches to warships, from the pruning of trees to the extermination of red

or black villages, it seems to you that their intelligence grows thanks to the immensity of the task. History teaches you that that the contrary is the case. Power has always made mad, and speechifying makes stupid. It is inevitable that mediocrity prevails in sovereign assemblies.

To vote means evoking treason. Voters doubtless believe in the honesty of those to whom they grant their votes, and they are perhaps right the first day, when the candidates are still in the throes of their first love. But every day has its tomorrow. As soon as the setting changes, men change with it. Today the candidate bows before you, and perhaps too deeply. Tomorrow he will stand upright, and perhaps too tall. He begged for votes and he will give you orders. When a worker becomes a supervisor can he remain what he was before obtaining the boss' favor? Doesn't the fiery democrat learn to bow his head when the banker deigns to invite him to his office, when the king's valets do him the honor of conversing with him in the antechambers? The atmosphere of these legislative bodies is unhealthy: you are sending your representatives into a corrupting milieu. Don't be surprised that they leave it corrupted.

So don't abdicate, don't place your fate in the hands of men who are necessarily lacking in capability and future traitors. Don't vote! Instead of trusting your interests to others, defend them yourselves. Instead of hiring lawyers to propose a future mode of action, act! Occasions aren't lacking for men of good will. To place upon others the responsibility for one's own conduct means to be lacking in valor.

I salute you with all my heart, comrades.

Elisée Reclus