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Elisée Reclus

To My Brother the Peasant

1893

Anarchy, Geography, Modernity: Selected Writings of Elisée Reclus.

In 1873, Reclus wrote an article entitled “Quelques mots sur la propriété” for *L’Almanach du peuple*. He later revised and expanded it, publishing it as a pamphlet under the title *A mon frère le paysan*. In his “Biographie d’Elisée Reclus” in *Les Frères Elie et Elisée Reclus* (Paris: Les Amis d’Elisée Reclus, 1964), Paul Reclus writes that “it was translated into a dozen European languages, even including two dialects of Breton” (91). While this small work is a classic of anarchist propaganda and possesses all the rhetorical qualities appropriate to the genre, it is also of interest for its comments on the relationship between capitalism and technological rationality.

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To My Brother the Peasant

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“Is it true,” you ask me, “that your comrades, the urban workers, are thinking of seizing the land from me, this sweet land that I love and that bears me crops? It does so very meagerly, I’ll admit, but nonetheless it bears them. It has fed my father and my father’s father. And won’t it provide a little bread for my children, too? Is it true that you want to seize this land from me?”

“No, brother, it’s not true. Because you love the soil and cultivate it, the harvest indeed belongs to you. You are the one who produces the bread, and no one has any more right to it than you, the wife who shares your lot, and the child born of your union. Keep your fields in peace, keep your spade and plow to turn the hard soil, and the seed with which to make it fruitful. Nothing is more sacred than your labor, and a thousand curses on whoever would seize the land that has become nourishing through your efforts!”

But what I say to you, I do not say to others who claim to be farmers but who in reality are not. Who are these self-styled workers, these fertilizers of the soil? One of them is born a great lord. As he is being placed in his cradle, wrapped in fine wools and soft, beautiful silks, the priest, the judge, the lawyer,

and other dignitaries arrive to greet the newborn as a future master of the earth. Sycophants, both men and women, hasten from all around to bring him presents of silver brocades and golden rattles. While he is being showered with gifts, pencil pushers are recording in great books that the little one is the owner of springs and rivers in one place, woods, fields, and prairies in another, and additional parks, fields, woods, and pastures in yet another. He owns property in the mountains and also in the plains. He is even the master of great underground domains in which men work by the hundreds and thousands. Some day, when he grows up, he may decide to visit what he inherited as his birthright, or perhaps he will never even bother to go and see all these things; however, he won't forget to have the produce gathered and sold. From all over, by highways and railroads, by riverboats and by oceangoing ships, he is brought large bags of money, the income from all his landholdings. So, when we have gained strength, will we leave all these products of human toil in the safe of the heir? Will we have respect for this property? No, my friends, we will take all of it. We will tear up the documents and maps, break down the doors of the chateaus, and seize the estates. "Work, young man!" we will tell him. "Work if you want to eat. None of this wealth belongs to you any more."

And what about the other lord, the one who was born poor, without a pedigree, and whom no flatterer came to admire in the rude cottage or garret of his birth, but who was lucky enough to become wealthy through his work, honest or otherwise? He did not have a clod of earth to call his own, but owing to speculation, savings, favors from the authorities, or good fortune, he knew how to acquire immense stretches of land, which he now encloses with fences and walls. He harvests where he has not sown the seed, and he gathers and eats the bread that another has earned through his labor. Will we respect this second kind of ownership, that of the nouveau riche who never works his land himself but who has it worked

by slave labor and calls it his own? No, we will not respect this second kind of ownership any more than the first. Here again, when we have gained strength, we will seize these estates as well and tell the one who considers himself the master: “Stand back, upstart! Since you once knew how to work, get back to work! You will have the bread that you gain through your labor, but the land that others cultivate is no longer yours. You are no longer the master of bread!”

And so, yes—we will seize the land, but we will seize it from those who hold onto it without working it, in order to return it to those who do. However, the latter will not then be allowed in turn to exploit other unfortunate people. The amount of land to which the individual, the family, or the community of friends has a natural right is the amount that can be worked through individual or collective labor. As soon as a parcel of land exceeds the amount that they are able to cultivate, they would be wrong to claim this additional portion. Its use belongs to another worker. The boundary will be drawn in different ways between the various lands cultivated by individuals or groups, depending on the requirements of production. The land that you cultivate, brother, is yours, and we will help you to keep it by every means in our power. But the land that you do not cultivate is for a companion. Make room for him, for he, too, knows how to make the land fruitful.

But even though each of you has the right to your share of land, do you want to remain isolated? Completely alone, the small farmer, whether landowner or tenant, is too weak to struggle against a stingy nature and an evil oppressor at the same time. If he survives, it is through a feat of willpower. He must adjust to all the whims of the weather and submit a thousand times to voluntary torment. Whether in freezing cold or blistering heat, whether in rain or wind, there is always work to be done. If floods drown his harvest or heat scorches it, he sadly gathers whatever remains,

which will not be enough to provide for him. When sowing time arrives, he withholds grain that could have been eaten and scatters it in the field. In his despair, he is left with a grim faith: if necessary, he sacrifices a portion of his meager harvest, trusting that after a harsh winter, treacherous spring, and burning summer, the grain will still come up again, doubling or tripling the seed, or perhaps even increasing it tenfold. What intense love he feels for this land, which brings him so much misery and toil, so much suffering from fears and disappointments, yet so much joy when he sees the undulating stalks full of grain! No love is stronger than that of the peasant for the soil he plows and sows, from which he is born and to which he will return! Yet so many enemies surround him and covet the land that he loves! The tax collector taxes his plow and takes some of his grain from him, the merchant seizes another portion, and finally the railroad defrauds him when transporting his produce. He is tricked from all sides. We have called out to him, "Don't pay the tax, don't pay the rent!" Nevertheless, he still pays, because he is alone, does not trust his neighbors, the other small farmers, whether landowners or tenants, and does not dare to consult with them. They are kept submissive by fear and disunity.

The peasants who have joined in a *Zadrougas* ("group of friends") or in a *mir* (little "universe") such as those in Russia or other Slavic countries are stronger against the common enemy—the state and the feudal lord. Their collective property is not divided into countless enclosures by hedges, walls, and ditches. They do not have to quarrel over the ownership of an ear of corn growing to the right or the left of the furrow. There are no bailiffs, attorneys, or notaries to regulate business between comrades. After the harvest and before the time comes to begin their work again, they gather to discuss their common interests. The young man who has just married, and the family that has added a child or taken in a guest, explain their new situation and take a larger portion of the common resources in

Never did ancient slavery more methodically mold and shape human material to reduce it to being a tool. What remnants of humanity are left in a haggard, twisted, scrofulous being who suffocates in an atmosphere thick with suint, grease, and dust?

Avoid this death at all costs, comrades. If you have a little plot of land, guard it jealously: it is your life and that of your wife and children whom you love. Join with your companions whose land, like yours, is threatened by factory owners, sport hunters, and money lenders. Forget all your little grudges against your neighbors and band together in communes where there is a solidarity of interests and where each clump of earth is defended by all members of the community. If you number a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand, you will be quite strong against the lord and his valets, but you will not yet be strong enough to take on an army. Therefore, each commune must form an alliance with the others, so that the weakest might partake of the strength of all. In addition, you must call out to those who have nothing, to those disinherited people of the cities. You have perhaps been taught to despise them, but you must love them because they will help you to keep your land and to reconquer what has been taken from you. With them, you will attack and knock down the high walls of the enclosures. With them, you will found the great commune of men, where you will work in unison to invigorate and beautify the land, and live happily on this good earth that gives us bread.

But if you do not do this, all will be lost. You will die slaves and beggars. As the mayor of Algiers recently said to a delegation of humble, unemployed people: "So, you're hungry? Why don't you just eat one another!"

If the happiness of humanity consisted of creating a few millionaires who, to satisfy their whims and desires, hoarded the produce amassed by all the subjugated workers, then this scientific exploitation of the earth by an overseer of galley slaves would certainly be the ideal world. The financial results of these enterprises are extraordinary. The amount of grain yielded by the work of five hundred men can feed fifty thousand. The expense incurred for a meager wage yields an enormous amount of produce that is dispatched by the shipload and sold for ten times the cost of production. Even so, if the mass of consumers becomes too poor because they are without work and wages, they will be unable to buy all of this produce. Condemned to die of starvation, they will no longer enrich the speculators. But the latter are not in the least interested in the distant future. Their attitude is first to make money, travel the road paved with gold, and let the future take care of itself—the children will manage! *“Après nous le déluge!”*

This is your fate, fellow workers who love the plowed field where you saw for the first time the mystery of little sprouts of wheat piercing the hard lumps of soil. This is the fate they are preparing for you! They will take field and harvest away from you; indeed, they will take you yourselves and attach you to a screeching, smoking iron machine. There, completely surrounded by coal smoke, you will have to swing a lever back and forth ten to twelve thousand times every day. This is what they will call agriculture. In addition, you must not expect to go courting just because your heart tells you to take a wife. And don't even turn your head to look at the young woman who is passing by—the foreman will not like it if the boss is cheated of his labor. If it suits the boss to let you get married and have offspring, it is because he finds you to his liking. For you have the kind of slavish soul that he wishes most to mold, and you are abject enough for him to authorize you to help perpetuate the race of abjection. The future that has been awaiting you is that of the working man, woman and child of the factory!

order to satisfy their increased needs. Boundaries are decreased or increased according to the availability of land and the number of members. Each cares for his field, happy to be at peace with his brothers, who work their share of the land, which has been apportioned to meet the needs of all. During emergencies, the comrades help each other out. If a fire devours one of the cottages, all participate in rebuilding it. If a gully erodes part of a field, another portion is granted to the holder of the damaged land. One person grazes the community's herds, and in the evening, the sheep and cows follow the road back to their stables without being driven. The commune is at once the property of each and of all.

But the commune, like the individual, is still very weak if it remains isolated. Perhaps it does not have enough land for all of its members, and all will have to suffer from hunger! It almost always finds itself in conflict with a lord richer than itself, who claims ownership of a certain field, forest, or pasture. It puts up a good fight, and if the lord were alone, the commune would indeed quickly triumph over this greedy and arrogant personage. But he is not alone—he has on his side the governor of the province, the chief of police, the priests, the judges, and the entire government with its laws and its army. Should he need them, he has at his disposal cannons to bombard anyone who would fight him for the contested land. And even though the commune might be absolutely in the right, it is certain that the powerful will prove it wrong. And as much as we have cried out to the commune, as we did to the individual tax victim, “Don't give up!” it must also succumb, a victim of its isolation and weakness.

Thus all you small landowners, whether isolated or joined in communes, are indeed weak against those who try to enslave you—the land grabbers who are after your small plot of land and the authorities who try to take all the income from it. If you do not know how to join together, you will soon share the fate of millions upon millions of men who are already stripped

of all rights to sow and reap and who live as wage slaves. They find work when the bosses are interested in giving it to them, and are always obliged to beg in a thousand ways, sometimes asking humbly to be hired, sometimes even holding out their hands to plead for a meager pittance. They have been deprived of land, and you might be among them tomorrow. Is there really such a big difference between their fate and yours? They have already become victims of this threat, while it spares you for a day or two. Unite, all of you, in your misfortune or in your peril! Defend what you still have, and reconquer what you have lost!

Otherwise your fate will be horrible, for we are in an age of science and method, and our rulers, served by an army of chemists and professors, are preparing a social structure for you in which all will be regulated as in a factory. There, the machine controls everything, even men, who are simple cogs to be disposed of when they take it upon themselves to reason and to will.

This is what has happened in the vast stretches of the great American West. Groups of speculators who are on very good terms with the government (as are all the rich, including those lucky scoundrels who have become rich) have been granted vast domains in fertile regions, which through large infusions of manpower and capital they have turned into grain factories. Here, farming takes place on the scale of an entire province. This vast space is entrusted to a sort of general, who is educated, experienced, good at farming and business, and skilled in the art of evaluating the exact value of the productive power of land and muscle. Our man establishes himself in a comfortable house in the center of his land. In his barns he has a hundred plows, a hundred sowers, a hundred harvesters, and twenty threshing machines. About fifty freight cars pulled by locomotives continuously come and go on the railways between the depots in the fields and the nearest port, whose piers and ships also belong to him. A network of telephones connects the pala-

tial house to all the outbuildings of the estate. The master's voice is heard everywhere. He can listen to every sound and observe every act. Nothing is done without his orders, and nothing escapes his surveillance.

And what becomes of the worker or the peasant in this world that is so well organized? Machines, horses, and men are used in the same manner: they are viewed as so much force to be quantified numerically, and they must be used most profitably for the employer, with the greatest productivity and the least expense possible. The stables are laid out in such a way that as soon as the animals leave the building, they begin to plow the furrow several kilometers long that will extend to the end of the field. Each of their steps is calculated and each profits the master. Similarly, all of the workers' movements are regulated from the moment they leave the communal dormitories. There, neither women nor children come to disrupt the work with a hug or a kiss. The workers are grouped into squads, each with their sergeants, captains, and the inevitable informer. Their duty is to perform methodically the work they are ordered to do, and to observe silence in the ranks. When a machine breaks down, they throw it into the scrap heap if it is not possible to repair it. When a horse falls and breaks a leg, they shoot it in the ear and drag it to the mass grave. When a man succumbs to pain, breaks an arm or leg, or is incapacitated by fever, they are kind enough not to finish him off, but they get rid of him all the same: they let him die out of the way, without annoying anyone with his moans. At the end of the vast undertaking, when nature takes a rest, the manager also takes a rest and fires his army. The following year, he will always find an adequate supply of muscle and bone to hire, but he will be careful not to employ the same workers as the previous year. They might speak of their experience, think that they know as much as the master, obey orders grudgingly, and who knows? They might become attached to the soil they cultivate and imagine that it belongs to them!