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The French firebrand Joseph Déjacque lived a short life defined by a wild and beautiful struggle against authority, a life of intense passion for freedom and genuine class war. Unlike many of the seminal figures of the anarchist movement, Déjacque was truly of the working class. Born in 1821, he was raised in Paris by a single mother, who had become a widow when he was very young, and he worked full time from the age of 12. His trade was house painting and wallpaper hanging, but as we shall see, he was an able polemicist and poet; his words were a shot of adrenaline to radicals and a thunderstrike against the ruling classes of his day.

His work was very explicitly neither academic nor literary; it was, as he put it, "the cry of a rebel slave" and "social poet." Even within a philosophical tradition defined by its resistance to fixed ways of thinking, Déjacque stands apart as an outsider, a radical amongst radicals, "unencumbered by orthodoxy or infantile presuppositions." His style is deliberately provocative and irreverent, and his prose carries a sense of physical energy, drama, even danger. He joined the navy in 1841, a young man hoping to escape the drudgery of labor and perhaps seeking danger, but he returned to

Paris two years later to resume the work he had known before and take up the cause of revolutionary agitation.

While he was, as an anarchist, opposed to the coercive violence and domination of the state, he did not shrink from violence in theory or practice, believing that the victims of state oppression and capitalist exploitation were naturally entitled to fight back and foment revolution. According to the eminent scholar of anarchism George Woodcock, "Déjacque's advocacy of violence was so extreme as to embarrass even the anarchists in a later generation," prompting Jean Grave to remove several passages "that might have been interpreted as incitements to criminal acts" from his reprint of Déjacque's *The Humanisphere*. Yet he was not totally optimistic that the condition of decentralized, stateless communism he envisioned could be established through revolutionary means in the short term.[1] He thus outlined an intermediate state of small communes governed by universal and direct democracy, which would gradually give way to the abolition of government, true anarchy, and full communism.[2] This vision of the path to the abolition of the state and the rule of capitalists perhaps undermines the notion that there has been any neat split in the anarchist movement between gradualists and revolutionists, demonstrating that in the ideas of many early anarchist theoreticians, these strategies coexisted.

Déjacque came of age during a time of profound social and political change in France. Napoleon died in exile the year he was born, and the July Revolution took place when he was a young boy. As a man in his twenties, he became an active participant in the legendary upswell of revolutions in 1848, fighting on the barricades during the June Days uprising of workers in Paris. Demonstrating the always unrivaled power of ordinary working people, the French masses toppled France's monarchy in a matter of days,

[1] Zoe Baker, Means and Ends: The Revolutionary Practice of Anarchism in the United States and Europe (AK Press 2023), page 71.

[2] Id.

King Louis Philippe, "the Citizen King," fleeing to England to cower and hide. Within months, France would have a new constitution, and Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew would be elected France's first president. In 1851, for the publication of *The Lazarenes, Social Fables and Poems*, Déjacque was tried on charges of "inciting to the misfortune of the Republic government, inciting to hatred among citizens and apologetics for deeds identified as criminal under the law." For telling the truth, he was convicted, handed a fine of 2,000 francs, and sentenced to two years in prison. Déjacque's honest assessments were an embarrassment to a French ruling class obsessed with maintaining credibility and control at a time of social awakening and political change. He never served this sentence, having already escaped France, first to England and then to the United States.[3]

When he arrived in the United States, Déjacque spent a brief period in New York, organizing, writing and speaking there before moving to New Orleans. An active abolitionist who spoke out and agitated against slavery, particularly during this time in New Orleans, Déjacque called for the Northern proletariat to unite in solidarity with the slaves of the South in social insurrection against the master class. Damning society's property-owning class as "thieves," "lazy-bones," and "vampires," he saw what few of our "intellectuals" today have the clear-sightedness see or the courage to admit, that the reign of capital is a barbarity protected by force of law in violation of justice. In an article in *The Libertarian*, Déjacque praises John Brown, the abolitionist hero of Bleeding Kansas and Harpers Ferry, Virginia (today West Virginia), martyred that year for his fight against the evils of slavery. "The masters," he wrote in 1861 shortly before the end of *The Libertarian*'s run, "should be expropriated in the cause of public morality for crimes against humanity."

[3] Max Nettlau, A Short History of Anarchism (Freedom Press 1996), page 75.

In one of the most interesting episodes of his life for students of anarchist history, Déjacque criticized Pierre-Joseph Proudhon for his sexism and misogyny. In an 1857 letter, he attacks Proudhon for adopting "the privileged man's point of view of social progress," arguing that men and women are fundamentally equal and that Proudhon's acceptance of patriarchy was incompatible with libertarianism. Déjacque dismisses Proudhon as a liberal, not a true libertarian. He writes, "You cry against the great barons of capital, and you would rebuild a proud barony of man on vassal-woman." Déjacque urges Proudhon[4], "Do not describe yourself as an anarchist" until you are prepared to "speak out against man's exploitation of woman."[5] He would not permit his anarchism to be tainted by misogyny or patriarchy, just as he didn't want it corrupted by practical politics or capitalist social and economic relations.

Between the two, Déjacque was the truer to anarchism's core values and spirit, and in confronting Proudhon's sexism he provides a fine summary of the anarchist's general worldview, writing,

> For me, humanity is humanity: I do not establish hierarchic distinctions between the sexes and races, between men and women, between blacks and whites. The difference in sexual organism is no more than the difference in skin color as a sign of superiority or inferiority.

Here, in his remonstrative letter to Proudhon, Déjacque anticipates later anarchists who seek to generalize their anti-

[4] In a footnote to his history of the American individualist anarchists, James J. Martin notes that while Max Nettlau believed Déjacque "arrived at his anarchist beliefs independently of Proudhon," Ernst Viktor Zenker saw him as at first a Proudhonian.

[5] Robert Graham, ed., Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas, Volume 1: From Anarchy to Anarchism (300CE to 1939) (Black Rose Books 2005), page 71.

an insistence on acknowledging a haunting truth: the rulers rule because we allow them to. If we want freedom, we have to take it.

Notes.

experience of working and sharing ideas and encouragement with other workers. What he lacked in formal education, he more than made up for in his natural intellectual power and his ability to see through the dissimulations of the rich and powerful. He was the nightmare of the ruling class come to life.

Over the past several decades, the influence of anarchist communism on Marxism has been clear, with ecological and decentralist currents gaining ground on the more statist and authoritarian varieties that dominated the previous century. While it is difficult to say just how much of this influence can be attributed to any one figure within the history of anarchism, what is perhaps more clear is that history has vindicated a vision of communism more closely aligned with Déjacque's radically libertarian one. In a 2012 paper, the Brazilian geographer Marcelo Lopes de Souza wrote, "[W]e—contemporary Marxists and libertarians—have inherited animosities and bad feelings that are no longer suitable or justifiable." He notes that these categories of identity are historical contingencies rather than "immutable entities," with popular usage changing over time. He also points out that anarchists such as Élisée Reclus regarded state socialists as "brothers," appreciating the groups' common goal of a society without the systematized exploitation of working people and the vast inequality and social breakdown that accompany that exploitation.

Whatever the extent of his influence, Déjacque's thought remains a potent and relevant challenge to the twin monstrosities of our age, the authoritarian state and destructive, exploitative capitalism. His real-life struggles against social, political, and economic forms of domination anticipate and provide inspiration for today's antifascists and black blocs around the world. He impels all anti-authoritarians toward active rebellion and direct action, railing against our meek resignation and acceptance of electoralism and neutered political participation. Throughout his body of work, there is a clear sense of urgency and responsibility,

authoritarian critiques of capitalism and the state to other forms of domination and oppression like sexism and racism. He understood the connection between these overlapping instances of oppression at a time when even the most radical voices clung to old hatreds and prejudices; he thus gives us an anarchism that is at once consistent and set against dogmatism. As the anarchist historian, translator and publisher Shawn P. Wilbur observes, "Déjacque is notable for using the conventional anarchist vocabulary much more than most of his contemporaries." He seems to predict much of the style and language that would become standard in the movement in the decades that followed his death—indeed, as Zoe Baker observes, his work "was not widely known among anarchists until the 1890s."[6]At that point, upon the rediscovery of Déjacque unique contributions, it became clear to many of the movement's historians and leading lights that he had been a bellwether and a visionary.

The influence of the visionary utopian socialist Charles Fourier is clearly evidenced in Déjacque's thought. As Patrick Samzun writes, "Fourier's harmonious world of passional attraction was reshaped across the Atlantic by a revolutionary proletarian."[7]Déjacque sees himself as radicalizing Fourier's thought, stripping it of the content imbued by Fourier's "commercial education, bourgeois tradition, some prejudices in favor of authoritarian and servitude which made him deviate from absolute liberty and equality." While clearly influenced by Proudhon, he also departs explicitly from Proudhon's emphasis on mutual ex-

[6] Zoe Baker, Means and Ends: The Revolutionary Practice of Anarchism in the United States and Europe (AK Press 2023). Baker goes on: "This can be seen in the fact that Max Nettlau's first article on Déjacque was only published in 1890 in the German anarchist paper Freiheit. Jean Grave's republication of Déjacque's book L'Humanisphère did not occur until 1899. In 1910, Kropotkin referred to this text as having been only "lately discovered and reprinted."

[7] Patrick Samzun, "Between Wrath and Harmony: A Biolyrical Journey Through L'Humanisphère, Joseph Déjacque's 'Anarchic Utopia' (1857)," Utopian Studies, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2016), page 93.

change, looking forward to "the absolute overthrow of commerce." Déjacque nonetheless shares much of Proudhon's emphasis on the decentralized, federated system of autonomous communities that has become characteristic of classical anarchism. He calls for "universal individualism," seeing "natural government" as "the government of individuals by individuals," but accepts only full communism on the basis of "attraction and solidarity" as the proper instantiation of this arch-individualism.

These ideas are front and center in Déjacque's mature thought. After returning to New York from New Orleans, he set about to publish a journal of communist anarchism, which would become the home of some of the most radical ideas of the nineteenth century—indeed, of the modern age. He chose to call the paper *The Libertarian* (in the original French, *Le Libertaire*), and it is noteworthy as one of the first anarchist publications ever, in either Europe or the United States. Following Déjacque and the advent of *The Libertarian*, the term itself becomes something close to a synonym of anarchist, signifying a decentralist opposition to all relationships of inequality and power, regardless of whether they manifest in the political, economic, or social realm. Robert Graham, the noted expert on the history of anarchism, observesthat Déjacque was "probably the first person to use the term 'libertarian' as a synonym for 'anarchist,'"[8] and that "[h]e may also have been the first person to describe anarchist alternatives to other political perspectives as 'anarchism.'" While *The Libertarian* was short-lived, running from 1858 to 1861, it continues to be a source of ideas and inspiration within the anarchist movement; owing to the fact that it was a Francophone journal published in America, it has by and large remained in regrettable obscurity, though this presents an opportunity for curious radicals to discover some of anarchism's boldest

[8] As Matthew Crossin explains, "Classic libertarians contend that the right-wing appropriation [of libertarian] is actually authoritarian, given its support for the inherently hierarchical and exploitative social relations produced by capitalism."

challenges to authoritarianism.[9] The paper also saw the first publication of Déjacque's book *The Humanisphere*, which was serialized within its pages, beginning in the first year of its run. The book is presented as a warning, a forecast of the coming revenge of a proletarian class that has awakened and reorganized society on a cooperative basis.

Déjacque had very little use for superstitions of any kind; he challenged, without exception, the most important and powerful social institutions of his time—and history has tended overwhelmingly to vindicate those challenges. God was, to him, a poison to human beings, a "a mix of nicotine and arsenic," concocted by some people to control and dominate other people. He follows Proudhon in regarding God (and religion generally) as a profound evil standing in the way of a more just and free world for the vast majority of actual people. Very much in the vein of other classical-era anarchists, Déjacque writes, "Religious faith submerged consciences, brought devastation in minds and hearts. All the robberies of force were legitimated by the ruse." In his *Essay on Religion*, published in 1861, he says that religion has been the "consecration of every inertism in humanity and universality, the petrification of the past, its permanent immobilization." He argues that religion, like politics, needs a revolution, and that this requires the destruction of God and all authority here on earth.

By the spring of 1861, it was time for Déjacque to return to France. It is not completely clear what became of Déjacque after his return, and there has been some disagreement about the date and circumstances of his death. His career as a writer and publisher is even more remarkable when we consider that his formal education had concluded before he was a teenager. His perspective is the raw and unvarnished one of the laboring intellectual, sharpened by the

[9] Janine C. Hartman and Mark A. Lause, eds., In the Sphere of Humanity: Joseph Déjacque, Slavery, and the Struggle for Freedom (University of Cincinnati Libraries 2012), page 26.