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Jean Grave

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1899

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Comrades,

(It is on purpose that I use this word: comrade, which, having no gender, perfectly expresses my thought, by uniting us all under a common name, removing the distinctions of age and sex which should no longer exist when we meet for a work of study or propaganda.)

Therefore, comrades,

Before telling you what the courses will be that this meeting is announcing, it will perhaps be good to give you the history of the idea that led us there.

On different occasions, several of us had the opportunity to hear the complaints of fathers of families in search, for their children, of a healthy and logical education, and complaining of not being able to find this in today's society.

Education, what it is, what it has been, you all know, and we are not the only ones to recognize it, — many of the most adamant bourgeois are themselves beginning to understand its drawbacks. — Education, monopolized by the State, able to be given only under its control, having created a separate caste of

those who are charged with teaching, starts from this original truth that man is a lazy being who thinks and acts only under the pressure of need, but that they have found the means to change into error, by putting obstacles in the way of the satisfaction of needs, and by substituting their wills, and their methods, for those of need itself. And so, instead of seeking to develop the need to learn that every individual has, instead of drawing inspiration from the results acquired to facilitate research for every awakened conscience, instead of making the task attractive to them, they made education an instrument of torture, they claimed to force into people's heads ideas that they were not even sure they understood themselves, in such a way as to repel even the most thirsty for learning.

This system which had the result of shaping brains to the whim of educators, of killing the initiative of the student, by stuffing him with ready-made ideas, asking only of him memory, and not of the critical mind, taking great care even to stifle the latter, when he wanted to exercise it, this education suited too well those who have given themselves the mission of leading humanity, for them not to try to amplify and perfect it in this sense.

“To inculcate the spirit of obedience, of submission to masters, to annihilate one's will before that of a higher authority, always abstract, but represented by beings of flesh and blood: the priest, the officers of all kinds, civilian or military; the gendarme, the judge, the deputy, the policeman or the king, if necessary, the braided uniform of the office boy.”

This was the task of those who were entrusted with the care of raising the young generations. We have the results today. They succeeded so well that those who were to benefit from it are beginning to complain about it, themselves affected by the evil that they would have liked to see spread only among those alone whom they exploit.

Their work is before our eyes: supposedly intelligent men, making themselves the defenders of falsehood, iniquity and

lies, in order to try to breathe a little life into decrepit institutions that are growing anemic under the effect of the self-infection of their own principles, not realizing that they are contributing to their further demolition.

And for centuries and centuries our poor humanity has been subjected to this compression; one after the other, generations have had to let their brains be kneaded, to recite as articles of faith the ramblings of those who had made themselves their masters. How has the critical spirit been able to resist this formidable compression? It is because, after all, if it is very easy to obtain an apparent submission from individuals, it is impossible to reach their intimate thoughts; and it is not even up to the individual himself to change his thoughts.

He can be forced to act differently from what he thinks; he can be made to act of his own accord—how numerous are the examples!—in contradiction to all his ways of reasoning. He will never lack more or less subtle arguments to prove to himself that he had all sorts of reasons for acting in this way. But the very need to justify oneself implies dissatisfaction with oneself. And that is why, from time to time, a few cries of protest arise against error, against falsehood.

But, if the intellectual character of the human being has been able, by taking refuge in his inner self, to resist compression and extinguishing, it has not been the same for his moral character.

Instead of the frankness, the independence of character which must be natural to man, since we find them very developed among peoples who have not been contaminated by our so-called civilization, — it is true that we then accuse them of coarseness and unsociability, — everywhere the respect for conventions which we despise within ourselves, but which we dare not shake off, for fear of dying of hunger, — which is certainly to be considered — but also because that would put you on the wrong side of this or that person in your

entourage, your relations; for fear, most often, of appearing original! as if that were not the very basis of the development of our individuality.

So, instead of tending to rise, instead of trying to escape the general decline, we have only one goal: not to stand out too much in the midst of the ambient erasure. Everywhere people who, in order not to have to fight for their existence, seek to attach it to the famous chariot of the State. Everywhere the oppression suffered by individuals, because they were made to believe that they would oppress each other, if no one was specially charged with this care. Everywhere the misery endured by those who produce, the misery endured until the puncture, because the authority, as a good protector of the privileged, made the exploited believe that they would be forced to fight over the fruits of their work, if a tutelary organization were not there to take away the best part of it from them.

And this is how our societies, called civilized, work, — doubtless because the police are their firmest support.

Unable to prevent science from emerging, our masters have channeled it, put obstacles in its way, carefully reserved it for those of their caste, only allowing to filter through to the exploited what it was impossible to hide from them, but by distorting it and stuffing it with absurd prejudices, so as to distort the conception of those to whom it thus arrived sophisticated.

And these prejudices, these ready-made ideas, these false notions are so incorporated in us, that we bring them, so to speak, at birth, we pick them up throughout our existence, and they become so many obstacles to our intellectual emancipation.

For, where the role of power is even more harmful is when it acts by persuasion. Excess of power often engenders revolt, but what recourse can we have against those who abuse your ignorance to distort your judgment?

On all sides, we are assured that we live under a regime of liberty. And it is undeniable, in fact, that, in many cases, we

their reasoning indicates it to them as more logical, and not because it has been taught to them as such.

At this time when leagues are formed to teach individuals to respect the laws, by scorning those who are responsible for ensuring their execution, for some others to scorn the laws in order to keep all their faith in those who interpret them; still others having the naivety to believe that they will be able to make the individual respected by the laws and those who make them, we simply want to teach individuals that they must know how to respect themselves, and to make themselves respected, without laws, against and against the laws, and their parasites.

And in doing so, we are aware of doing excellent revolutionary work.

For when the number of individuals conscious of their being, of their role in life, of their strength and their will has grown, that will be the end of the leaders and exploiters; for, no longer awaiting their emancipation from causes external to them, they will know how to live as they have conceived, by overthrowing whatever tries to obstruct them.

can say loud and clear what we think, throw some truth in the face of the system that crushes us. The result is indeed, from time to time, a few months in prison, as a warning, to those who let themselves be carried away too far, reminding them that authority never abdicates; but political prison is not made to frighten anyone, and can sometimes be so useful to you that some would rather seek it.

At the present time, we can therefore proclaim the truth, — the penal colony and violent death are only for those who, tired of making an abstraction of it, try to make a reality of it.

And, again, if one had to give only one's life to help a truth come to light, that would not be an obstacle: the road to progress is covered with the corpses of those who could not resist the impulse that pushed them to be right against their time.

But if, from a judicial point of view, one risks little in becoming the champion of truth, if one can be right against political power, it is not the same for the economic organization that has grown in strength and power. And what it has been able to put in chains and fetters on human thought is incalculable!

How many would know how to die bravely in the struggle, who are incapable of resisting prolonged misery? How many would know how to endure it themselves, but who, taken by family duties, must crush the desires for independence that would tend to burst forth in their actions, their words, their writings?

Free! you are free; only, as you can only live by renting out your productive force and those who employ it do not want anything to be disturbed in the magnificent state of things which enables them to exploit you, you who have dreamed of disturbing such a beautiful social state, be free to starve, there will be no more work for you.

Also, aided by the fear of tomorrow, official education has so well killed individualities, depressed characters, weakened energies, that the bourgeois themselves are forced to cry out

about the decline and want to react, by creating for their own, alongside what they have done, a teaching charged with awakening dormant energies, of arousing emasculated initiatives. Such as Mr. Demolins who, in a book that caused a sensation, announces the opening of a school of this kind.

“To arouse the questions of the student, to discover his aptitudes to direct them, instead of putting in presence an inferior (the student) and a superior (the teacher), to make the student feel one personality in front of another at the same time as one opens his intelligence, to exercise his muscles in manual work which puts him in a position to know how to use his limbs; to awaken his emulation by the attraction of what he is taught, and not by rewards or punishments that are always arbitrary”, this is what Mr. Demolins proposes, this is what we want too, and that neither of us invented, since Miss Dupont has already been practicing it for seventeen years in her professional school, and that it is also practiced in England, if we judge from the examples that Mr. Demolins himself cites.

Only Mr. Demolins believes in the legitimacy of individual property, he is convinced of the rights of capital; the energies and initiatives that he dreams of awakening are those of these handlers of capital who do not shy away from any innovation when it is a question of making them return the maximum, not letting themselves be stopped by any sentimental consideration when their interest is at stake and accustomed to seeing in the personnel they employ only tools that are put aside when they are broken!

Ah! yes: Mr. Demolins believes in God. But we know that God’s love has never prevented anyone from saintly shearing the sheep entrusted to him by his all-powerful will. Also, Mr. Demolins would prepare for us a fine generation of handsome gentlemen who will take charge of tightening the screws on the proletariat, if events, more powerful than human will, do not come to change the course of things.

they will no longer have to think, no longer worry about tomorrow.

The most glaring injustices will be perpetrated before their eyes without them seeing them. The complaints of the victims will rise, shrill, in their ears without them hearing them. University education will have done its work by interposing, between them and reality, the veil of hypocrisies and conventions, by obscuring forever, in whole or in part, the light of truth.

Who among us can boast of having preserved our vision intact? Our distorted education prevents us from seeing things as they are. Full light bothers us, we need glasses, umbrellas, curtains, shutters, screens that filter the light, letting it penetrate only gradually, so as not to tire our poor eyes unaccustomed to full sunlight.

How many ideas, how many conceptions we have thus, in some corners of our brain, that we believed to be excellent, whose correctness we would be ready to support tooth and nail!

But, when in contradiction with the fools, we analyze them, pass them to criticism, we realize that we hold them we do not know from whom, we have taken them we do not know where, and that they have been formed in our mind we do not know how.

And how many spend their entire existence religiously rehashing received ideas, without ever having known how to analyze them?

This is why progress has been so slow, has only been made by the light of pyres, and why, in the century of steam and electricity, many people still hold to Stone Age beliefs.

In the school as we understand it, children will learn to consider life as it is, to open their eyes without fear, to look things in the face, men without fear; they will learn to search, examine, weigh, discuss, criticize, accepting a solution only when

that mean that they are more intelligent? Alas, no! for the education that the State measures may well inflate the brain, but does not exercise it or develop it. And many people who strut about the “education” given to their offspring remind me of an anecdote that was told to me by an English lady friend of mine, who had lived for some time in Spain, and had studied the customs there to some extent.

There she had made the acquaintance of a good workman, sober, honest, industrious, full of self-esteem and dignity, as are, over there, most workers.

He spoke to this lady of his family, of his numerous children; how he had brought them up, and directed them in life.

Beppo was apprenticed to a carpenter, Alfonso a shoemaker, Carmen was learning the milliner’s trade, Pedro was learning to be blind!

“To be blind!” cried the lady in horror.

“But yes! I have given each of my children a fine trade.” And the father straightened up with pride. “But Pedro has the best of all. He also resembles me, and I have a weakness for him.”

And then he explained to the scandalized lady how much he paid for the treatment of the fortunate Pedro, whose sight was being weakened by a gradual darkening of his beautiful, lively and bold eyes. It would take little more than two or three months for him to be completely blind. What a fine career, that of a blind beggar!

Certainly, the father was proud of the sacrifices made for each of his children. But it was those made in favor of Pedro that made him most proud.

All parents, in our social state, are at that point when they boast about the education given to their children. They give the University bright, bold minds, curious to see and learn, we will take care of stifling that. The operation takes a little more than three months, but the results will be no less complete. We will give them back de-virilized beings who, for fear of the fight, will have only one objective: to settle into some function where

It was this desire, this need to escape from the stupefying education of the State, which gave some of us the idea of trying to create an embryo of a school, where the children of our comrades would find a healthy and rational education.

But the economic causes, which I spoke of earlier, did their work. After two years of propaganda, we had 1,800 francs in the till, when we would have needed at least 30,000 francs.

When we started, of course, we had not deluded ourselves about the difficulties to be overcome, we knew that we were undertaking a long-term project; but at this rate, we were very likely to only open the school when we ourselves had returned to a state of childhood. Another drawback: individuals are so easily detached from things that drag on!

To interest people, we had to set something up, to indicate to them, already, a beginning of realization.

Evening classes cost much less to set up. Unable to speak to the very young, we will speak to the older ones. If we succeed in realizing everything we conceive, perhaps we will find, later, the necessary competitions which will allow us to realize our first idea.

Certainly, the program that we present to you is very limited. As friend Quillard will explain to you shortly, when speaking to you of the subjects which will be treated, infinite is the number of human knowledges, and our six poor courses cut a poor figure.

But it was above all a question of beginning. We did not stop at the simplicity of our list. Once the example is given, memberships will come to us. Already, we have some promises for the future. Each year, we are convinced, we will be able to add some new subject to the things taught, a new name to the list of the six comrades of the first hour.

It is not that there is a lack of people capable of having a clear vision of things. But, it cannot be stressed enough, the economic conditions are such that most of them cannot say out loud what they think, and that the simple fact of coming

here to try to explain their way of seeing things would have made it impossible for them to find a way to earn a living.

When one is alone, one can allow oneself the luxury of being independent. It no longer depends on you alone, when other beings depend on your work. And since the state of our funds does not allow us to pay the goodwill that we solicit, one understands the difficulties.

But there are others who do not have the same excuses. In science, in the arts, in literature, many are those who allow themselves to be drawn into edifying confessions, to formulate our conclusions, to express our aspirations, to make more acerbic the criticisms that we formulate against the organization that crushes us.

Only, when they are asked to join those who seek to realize these aspirations, to combat the cause of the evils so well described, to apply to the economic system the scientific truths so clearly expressed, fool's errand! Most of them recoil in fear!

They are willing to consent to formulating truths; but on condition that no practical application is sought from them: Justice, Progress, Solidarity, Initiative, big words with which they are willing to juggle, to which, if necessary, they will put capital letters; but on condition that this, for them, always remains a matter of discourse. They are no longer, from the day when individuals, rather ill-advised, want to make social truths of them, in the economic order as well as in the political order.

Our courses are not intended to create specialists. Our ambition would be to allow everyone to acquire general notions in each branch of human knowledge, clear and precise notions which, by making them embrace the complexity of things, will allow them to form a sure, logical and rational judgment. Some "intellectuals" will perhaps treat us like Bouvard and Pécuchet. But if Flaubert was a great writer, he was reactionary on many points, and far from mocking the two types created by the novelist, I keep my contempt for those who boast of the few scraps of knowledge that they owe to their privileged situation in or-

Love, if we judge from our literature, would almost suffice in itself to fill the framework of human activity. Everything teaches the child, the young man, the young girl that they are made to love. But we keep them apart from each other. After having exalted the sweetness of love to them, we do everything possible to make it a mystery to them; if we do not tell them that it is a hideous thing to consume, we let them suppose it.

The sexes remain a mystery to each other. Their imagination, overexcited, makes them consider themselves as something that we dread, but that we burn to know. The whole being finds itself stretched towards this unknown; the other faculties are annihilated by this obsession.

Also, when the time for emancipation arrives, it is an irresistible push, and love, which should be the harmonious union of two beings, is, most often, only the meeting of two overexcited physical needs of which nothing will remain when satisfaction has come.

Love being a normal function, and woman and man being called to live side by side all their lives, why shroud this organic function in mystery, when, every day, it is accomplished before our eyes, despite the prudishness of our educators?

Why should the sexes not get used, from a young age, to knowing each other, since this knowledge will be essential for them to know how to direct their lives.

Is it not by accustoming ourselves to seeing things as they are that we will form a clear conception of existence, thus protecting ourselves against thoughtless enthusiasms which lead in their wake to cruel disappointments, and against disappointments themselves, which are only the result of our false notions of reality?

Let us learn to have our personality respected; let us learn to respect that of every human being, this will be a great step towards common emancipation.

The bourgeoisie boasts of having spread education. That is true. Today, we have far fewer illiterate individuals. But does

ties, his conceptions; teaching him that he must expect nothing outside his own initiative, that he must not tolerate other obstacles than those brought by circumstances; respecting other initiatives in order to be able to have his own respected, this is the first work of education — and what we need most urgently.

Another point of rational education is that of the co-education of the sexes. On this point again we are not the promoters, since our friend Robin had accomplished it with sufficiently happy results that the system survived his dismissal.

We do not, moreover, claim to have discovered America. We know that everything we can say has been said before us; we gather up scattered ideas and try to coordinate them as best we can. This is still a rather fine task. There are so few who are capable of it.

But let us return to our project.

Giving girls and boys the habit of treating each other as comrades will do much more for the emancipation of women than all the laws demanded by feminists. Much more, above all, than all the so-called rights that they want to give them as a gift and which are only fool's traps.

Man knows something about it, having used it enough for his own benefit.

At a young age, girls and boys remain confused in the same games. But, as soon as the age of reason begins to awaken, they are separated and educated separately, as if they were dissimilar species, called to live a different life.

They are not told — but this is clear from all our habits, from a whole literature, from all conversations — that woman is game that the boy will have to lead the hunt when he is big and that his merits will be proportionate to the number of pieces he has shot.

To woman: that man is a brutal, selfish being, whom she must try to coax and chain by all the graces and duplicity of which she is capable.

der to mock those who make every effort to escape the ignorance to which our social state would like to condemn them.

For a long time, — still today — it was believed that man was a whimsical, capricious, lazy animal, who accomplished nothing rationally, acting only under the pressure of punishment or the lure of reward, and that it was necessary, early on, to submit to discipline, to accustom to coercion.

Economists, very learned people, — it is they who affirm it — have made an aphorism of it to justify the current social state: "Man, they say, seeks pleasure and flees pain." La Palisse could not have found better.

Only, they add: "Consuming being a pleasure, producing being a pain, man left to himself would always want to consume without ever producing. It is therefore necessary to give everything to some, to leave nothing to others; in this way there will always be a certain number who will be forced to work.

But the economists' axiom is only half true.

That the individual turns to the side of least effort is quite natural. Forcing others to work for your benefit, to the ignorant brute, while all his faculties were stretched towards the conquest of his pasture, could seem a very desirable solution, and one did not fail to apply it; it could even last without great effort as long as people were stupid enough to comply with this solution.

Only, each thing has its drawbacks, each action calls for its reaction. Work which should be a pleasure, a gymnastics for your muscles, a food for your activity, by the fact that a few are forced to produce for all has become, on the contrary, a real pain, leading to suffering all the greater because it was imposed on you, not by your needs, but by conditions external to your will. And those who are subjected to it no longer want to comply with it. We are entering the phase where the law of least effort will force our leaders to work themselves to satisfy their personal needs.

Everything is linked in the social state. Those who organized education started from the same principles as those who helped economic development. They were just as intelligent!

Study, which should have been a treat for the need to learn that every being with healthy faculties has, has been made so arid, so harsh, that it is, for our brain, as hard a punishment as the work of production for our muscles.

Intelligences have not been asked what they wanted to know, what they were likely to assimilate. From what seemed best known, we took what best tickled the needs of those who became educators, we made a potpourri that we contrived to make enter, willingly or by force, into the most rebellious brains, without worrying about those who died from it.

Then, as most balked at this indigestible food, as some refused the methods of ingestion, it was authorized to declare doctorally that man is only an ignorant being, who learns only under the fear of the rod. The latter, at all times, having been considered as the supreme reason.

And for thousands of years human education has been made in this way. It is useless to be surprised then if man is vain and grovelling — one does not exclude the other. — What should surprise us much more is that he has not become completely perverted.

It is that it is easier to establish a program and decree that all will have to conform to it, than to study the aspirations of each and find the method that is adequate for him.

There will always be weak minds to conform to the orders received. If, along the way, independent characters are broken, it is all the better for the social order, which does not admit that it is discussed.

Whatever is good in the results obtained will be attributed to the way of proceeding; the harmful results being attributable only to the vicious character of the human beast.

Thus are opinions established.

A truly rational education, capable of developing intelligence, and—what is even more difficult—capable of forming characters, must therefore be free of rewards and punishments. When the age of the one who learns does not allow him to understand that the need to acquire certain knowledge is one of the conditions for the development of his being, the attraction of the work pursued must be the only motive.

Rational education must take into account the preferences and repugnances of the individual. Its aim is not to create aptitudes, but to seek them out and help them to develop. What it must aim for is not to cram into brains a ready-made science, indigestible because misunderstood, and consequently unassimilable.

Setting aside clichéd formulas, it is to provoke the reflection of the one who listens that the presentation of the one who teaches must aim. It is to arouse his questions, his objections that he must aim.

Expand the brain, but respect the individuality of the student. Arouse his curiosity, his initiative; confront him with contradictory opinions so that his spirit of criticism and deduction can be exercised; lead him to accept the explanations given only when he himself has put them through his own criticism. This is the work to be done.

If we know how to make teaching attractive, punishments and rewards are useless, on the contrary harmful. To arouse the activity of the student, the pleasure he will find in it will be sufficient. Tolstoy, in his school of Yasnaya Polyana, demonstrates this to us abundantly. The lessons will always be found too short.

The same is true, moreover, for the work of adults. As hard and long are the minutes that we spend on imposed work, so quickly and lightly pass the hours devoted to the work that pleases us, chosen by us.

Teaching the individual to develop himself in all his potentialities, to act according to his nature, his tendencies, his affini-