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The First Libertarian Was A Socialist

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With the dominance of Karl Marx and his most authoritarian adherents over the past century, it can be easy to forget that socialism used to mean more than “when the government does stuff”. Socialism pre-dates Marx and covers a wide variety of beliefs, ranging from technocratic government policies to naturalistic cooperative communities based on voluntary exchange. Broadly, socialists believe that the economic system should be run by and for the benefit of society as a whole rather than individual powerful people.

Libertarianism has similarly become limited in scope. Broadly speaking, libertarianism is the philosophy that freedom is the core political value. With a perspective defined by the Cold War that sees all decision making as either the responsibility of the government or private business interests, most modern libertarians consider free markets run by capitalists as the only way to preserve freedom. For them, the phrase “libertarian socialist” is a blatant contradiction.

This view is plainly ahistorical. Libertarianism began as a socialist movement, and the first person ever to call themselves a libertar-

ian was none other than Joseph Déjacque, publisher and primary author of *Le Libertaire*, a New York newspaper in print from 1858 to 1861.

Joseph Déjacque believed that for true liberty to be achieved, all barriers to free human action needed to be removed. Working as a wallpaper-hanger and house painter from the age of twelve until the end of his life in his early forties, he felt that **true freedom was not possible unless people's basic needs were met**. His vision was radically utopian: In the future, technology would allow all people to work as they wished, take as they needed, and associate freely with whomever they desired.

He called this perfect, rationally ordered society the Humani-sphere. However, this was a flash forward one thousand years into the future. The time in which he lived was far from utopian. Born in Paris around 1821, his youth was defined by the death of his father, a stint in the Navy, and multiple revolutions which ended in brutal suppressions and returns to monarchic rule. He was arrested in 1848 and 1849 for his involvement with socialist revolutionary groups, and in 1851 he fled to Brussels, London, and finally the United States to avoid imprisonment for his political writings.

He was certainly not there to make friends. He actively called out his fellow émigrés for their respectability politics and isolated himself from their petty factionalism. An ardent feminist, he wrote a letter calling out the French Anarchist Proudhon for his sexist beliefs. In New Orleans, he horrified listeners by **calling for a violent slave rebellion in earshot of the slaves** themselves. Still, upon returning to New York, he managed to find enough support to publish *Le Libertaire* on a shoestring budget while continuing to labor as a house painter.

Déjacque rejected all forms of authority, whether it came from religion, the family, bureaucrats, or property owners.

For Déjacque, religion was a form of moral slavery that led people to renounce their rational interests at the behest of the clergy,

who in fact worked hand in hand with kings and emperors. To counter this was to study the natural sciences and work towards rational human progress.

Meanwhile, the family was a miniature dictatorship where “the man is sovereign, the wife and children subjects.” Women were prostituted and their passions suppressed, while the individuality of children was crushed by a rigid and unnatural structure. To move past this, marriage and heredity would need to be abolished. Children would become part of the larger family of humanity where they would be free to develop their own individuality in schools, with free access to the common inheritance. Women would be treated equal to men and love freely whomever they wished.

Déjacque thought of government as the act of delegating power away from the people. Inherently, the selfishness of its leaders would lead to a centralization of authority and resistance to any attempts at significant reform. Overthrowing the government to create a new one was useless: the new government would inherit the same problems as the old and continue to oppress the people. The only genuine solution was to implement direct legislation as a transition to complete individual freedom.

All people would have the right to vote directly on legislation of interest. Public servants would be elected by a direct majority vote and instantly recallable by the people. Police officers, like jurors, would be appointed by lottery at random and serve for a single day.

On property, Déjacque considered it theft. In the most egregious case of landlords and rent, it is the workers who actually build houses. But, if they want to live in the house they built, they have to pay constant tribute in the form of rent to the property owners who may have taken no part whatsoever in building it. The landlord uses the profits from this exploitation to force others to work for him, leading to a recursive process of extracting value.

Déjacque went beyond this and condemned even the workers themselves for holding property beyond what they could person-

ally use. For him, property would inherently lead to inequality, which would develop a power dynamic, leading to control of one person over another. If the only farmer in town hoards the food they produce, people in need will be obligated to obey them or starve. If everyone wants shoes and nobody wants a guitar, the cobbler will end up with power over the luthier. Considering that all people owe their existence to the labor of others, it made more sense that property should be held by the community in general, free for everyone to use. In the very early stages, this could be achieved by organizing worker-run corporations, replacing shops with open markets or “bazaars”, and opening mutual insurance and reciprocal credit banks.

With the advent of the American Civil War, an economic downturn forced Déjacque to return to France, where he shortly died in obscurity and extreme poverty. His newspaper would live far beyond him, as it was resumed in 1895 by Sébastien Faure and produced numerous offshoots until at least 2011.

Déjacque is a chaotic but highly original thinker. His extreme utopianism may mean his proposals are not particularly practical or even reasonable, but they are definitely interesting. In my opinion, the value of reading Déjacque is not in pulling out specific proposals, but exploring a radically new mind space. This helps keep thinking fresh and allows us to see things in a new light.

One simple example that arose for me recently is questioning why we consider intellectual property rights to be a component of economic freedom when it means hoarding and restricting concepts for which there is no real scarcity. Especially in the internet age, bans are placed on human creativity and people are limited in what they are allowed to produce through remixing, montage, or even mere inspiration. Perhaps this is necessary, but it's blatantly a limitation on human freedom and to treat it otherwise demonstrates a clear bias.

Giving toddlers the right to vote may not be the optimal way to run a stable and prosperous society. But, when you read Déjacque, you're forced to contemplate the limits of faith in democratic decision making, the true meaning of freedom, and the legitimate role of power in your own life. At the very least, at a time when our problems are so great and our conception of solutions to those problems feels so hopelessly narrow, the grand imagination of Déjacque reminds us that it's okay to think outside of the limited tools passed down to us by our media and political structures. Maybe it's about time we start dreaming about the future again.