

# Parliamentary rot

Sébastien Faure

1921

Comrades,

I wish first of all to relate this third lecture to the two preceding ones, so that you may more easily perceive their connection.

In my first lecture I said: This continent on which we live has twice been the theatre of a false redemption; the first time, a little more than nineteen centuries ago, by Christianity; the second time, one hundred and thirty years ago, by the French Revolution.

I devoted the first lecture to the bankruptcy of Christian redemption and the second to that of bourgeois redemption. These two bankruptcies have come to pass: the first to the dictatorship of Christianity from the beginning of the fifth century to the end of the eighteenth century; the second to the dictatorship of the bourgeois class from 1789 to the present day.

I have specified what should be understood by these words: dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. And I have summed them up in a formula as concise as it is understandable: absolute domination of the bourgeois class over the working class, economic domination by capital, political domination by the State.

It is easy to understand that the class that possesses both power and money can impose the yoke of its dictatorship on the class that possesses neither money nor power.

Capital, that is, money, will never be anything without the support of power, that is, the State.

Without the State, capital would be like an open city, exposed to all assaults, at the mercy of all surprises, of a simple blow of force. The bourgeois state has the mission of watching over the working class's manoeuvres, of preventing it from grouping its forces, from strengthening its action, and if it happens that this working class, emerging from its torpor, from its habitual apathy, goes into battle, the mission - no, I won't say the mission, the expression is too noble - the role of the state is to intervene by force and defeat the insurgents.

The state is not only, as is commonly believed, an agent of administration; it is, above all, an agent of repression. It is like the guard dog who, tied to his kennel, warns the owners of the place, at first by his growls, then by his furious barking, of the approach of the enemy; and if, not letting himself be intimidated by the barking of the guard dog, the enemy enters the place, the state becomes the force charged with defending the safe and saving it at all costs, even at the cost of blood.

Under the fallacious aspect of administrator of public affairs, defender of the law, protector of order, the State is, in essence, nothing more than the gendarme supposed to safeguard, by

systematically organized violence, the established institutions. Without a doubt, the State has the function of administering public affairs. But there is no public affairs, and there cannot be any in a regime where, politically, everyone obeys a few and where, economically, everything belongs to a few. Interests are diverse, opposed, contradictory. There is no common interest, there is no general interest, there is no public affairs.

The State is also the defender of the law. But the law — contrary to what a vain people think — is not made to protect the small, the humble and the poor against the great, the powerful and the rich. It is made to defend the privileges of the great, the powerful, the rich against the constant claims and periodic attempts of the dispossessed and the enslaved.

In short, the State is the protector of order. It is the State that has the duty of ensuring order, and it does not fail in this duty. But what is called order in official jargon, bourgeois order, is the most ignominious and most criminal disorder. Listen to what Kropotkin said:

”Order today - what they understand by order - is nine-tenths of humanity working to procure luxury, pleasure, the satisfaction of the most execrable passions for a handful of idlers.

Order is the deprivation of these nine-tenths of everything that is a necessary condition for a hygienic life, for a rational development of intellectual qualities. To reduce nine-tenths of humanity to the state of beasts of burden, living from day to day, without ever daring to think of the pleasures procured for man by the study of science, by artistic creation - that is order!

Order is misery, hunger, transformed into the normal state of society.

Order is the woman who sells herself to feed her children; it is the child reduced to being locked up in a factory or to dying of starvation; it is the worker reduced to the state of a machine.

It is the ghost of the worker in revolt at the gates of the rich, the ghost of the people in revolt at the gates of the rulers.

Order is an intimate minority elevated to the chairs of government, which imposes itself, for this reason, on the majority and which prepares its children to later occupy the same functions in order to maintain the same privileges by deceit, corruption, force, massacre.

Order is the continual war of man against man, of trade against trade, of class against class, of nation against nation. It is the cannon that never ceases to thunder, it is the devastation of the countryside, the sacrifice of whole generations on the battlefields, the destruction in one year of the wealth accumulated by centuries of hard work.

Order is servitude, the chaining of thought, the debasement of the human race maintained by iron and by the whip. It is the sudden death by firedamp or the slow death by the confinement of hundreds of miners, torn apart or buried every year by the greed of the bosses and machine-gunned or hunted down with bayonets when they dare to complain.

Order, in short, is the drowning in blood of the Paris Commune. It is the death of thirty thousand men, women and children, cut to pieces by shells, machine-gunned, buried in quicklime under the cobblestones of Paris.

That is order!

And disorder, what they call disorder?

It is the revolt of the people against this ignoble order, which breaks its chains, destroys its obstacles and marches towards a better future. It is what humanity has that is most glorious in its history.

It is the revolt of thought on the eve of revolutions; it is the collapse of the hypothesis sanctioned by the immobility of the preceding centuries; it is the appearance of a whole wave of new ideas, of bold inventions; it is the solution of the problems of science.

Disorder is the abolition of ancient slavery; it is the insurrection of the communes, the abolition of feudal serfdom, the attempts to abolish economic serfdom.

The disorder of the peasants' insurrection against the priests and the lords, who burn the castles to make room for the huts, who come out of their dens to seek a place in the sun.

In France abolishing royalty and dealing a mortal blow to serfdom throughout Western Europe.

The disorder in 1848, which makes kings tremble and proclaims the right to work. It is the people of Paris who fight for a new idea and who, even succumbing to massacres, bequeath to humanity the idea of the free commune, opening the way to that revolution of which we feel the approach, and whose name will be the Social Revolution.

Disorder - what they call disorder - is the epoch during which entire generations endure an incessant struggle and sacrifice themselves to prepare for humanity a better existence, freeing it from the servitudes of the past. These are the times when popular genius acquires its free expansion and makes, in a few years, gigantic steps, without which man would have remained in the state of ancient slavery, of being a crawler, debased in misery.

Disorder is the flowering of the most beautiful passions and the greatest self-denials; it is the epic of the supreme love of humanity.

Nothing better could be said, and that is why I read you this page of Kropotkin, which is of masterly vigor. What are the services that the government, the power, the State renders to the working class in exchange for what it demands of it? Because, finally, if the State demands absolute submission from the working class; if it burdens it with taxes, thus confiscating for its own benefit a part of its work; if it demands from the worker several years of his youth, during which he is locked up in barracks; if it gives the old proletarians nothing but a derisory retirement, it would be reasonable to expect that in exchange for all this the State renders to the working class some services.

Well, is it the State that cultivates the land, that sows the grain, that harvests the crops, that grinds the bread, that builds the houses, that weaves the clothes, that operates the machines in the factory and in the workshop and intelligently transforms the raw material into manufactured products? In a word, is it the State which, by its labour, ensures the production necessary to satisfy the needs of the population? Is it the State which, once this production has been obtained, ensures its transport, oversees its equitable distribution so as to avoid the repulsive spectacle of a handful of individuals who have too much and who squander, while a multitude of others who do not have enough, deprive themselves of what is necessary and "tighten their belts"? Ah! No: the State does not work, it consumes; it does not produce, it devours.

In the intellectual domain, does the State render any service to humanity? Does it generously distribute education to the children of the people, so that none of these minds remain in the dark and so that, consequently, whatever they may be, they become luminaries destined to illuminate the painful path of humanity? Is it the State which writes the books, which creates the works of art? Is it he who encourages brilliant discoveries, who inspires fruitful initiatives, who launches thought into new directions, who breaks down the barriers that separate us from the future, who moves mountains and broadens horizons?

Alas! No. The State can only maintain profound ignorance in the masses, because it knows that this is the best way to subdue them, to exploit them and to domesticate them.

You see, then, that the State does not provide any service.

Yes! It provides one. But not to you, not to me, not to us, not to those who work, not to those who suffer. It provides a service – and a notable, important, indispensable one – but to the bourgeois class: it defends it, defends its privileges, bares its teeth to anyone who approaches the safe, saves the safe whenever it is threatened; it has, so to speak, only one role, one only: that of gendarme. The rest is nothing but miracles and sleight of hand.

And, comrades, I have already clearly defined and specified - I hope so - the function of the State, and it is necessary to ask by what sleight of hand the government, the State, manages to conceal its true role from the eyes of the masses, a role which, if it were known, would arouse the indignation of the working masses.

Like all evil works, like all institutions of crime, the State takes refuge in mystery.

In order to simulate his criminal schemes, he has to operate in the shadows, full of deceit and trickery; in the shadow of dogma, of I don't know what, religious or secular, which opposes all control and all discussion.

What is the dogma on which the State is based today? This dogma, and you know it. It is said that it resides in us, in you and in me, in me and in you: it is the dogma of the sovereignty of the people.

The sovereignty of the people! Kabbalistic words that gladly gargle republican and democratic throats on the thousand and one stages where it is common to make the democratic and republican verb heard and see the puppeteers of politics shake.

The discourse - I was going to say the charlatanry - is always the same. All the comedians of politics say:

»People, do not listen to the Sebastian Faures of your time or to their friends. They tell you that you are not free, that you suffer a dictatorship.

Imposture and lie! People, you are free because you are sovereign. It is a truth so evident that it is not necessary to establish the demonstration; it is one of those truths so palpable that it would be useless to insist on it: you are free because you are sovereign. There is no doubt that you cannot directly exercise this sovereignty. But it is because there is a material impossibility that, in practice, distances us from what would be the ideal; the ideal would be that the people were perfectly assembled, discussing or considering the conditions of their existence, making their opinion heard, expressing their feelings and making their will prevail over all the problems that torment or excite humanity on the march towards the future. This would be the ideal, a beautiful ideal, but you know well, people, that it is impossible. How would the work be obtained, the production necessary for the needs of life? How would production be carried out and work carried out, if the population had to worry about studying first, and then discussing and solving the problems that, by the thousands, concern the public welfare? You see, people, that if you possess sovereignty, you cannot exercise it directly. But calm down: our fraternal and democratic constitution has foreseen everything; it has regulated everything; it has divided the country into electoral districts, based on administrative divisions, on the area and on the number of the population.

Citizens, gather in your electoral colleges; study together the programme on which you can agree; draw up the list of your common demands; then, when you have done this work, you will choose from among yourselves the best, the most honest, the most competent, those in whom you have the most confidence and you will entrust them with your interests; they will think, work, speak, decide for you; and in all the assemblies: communal, departmental, national, through them, your will will be affirmed; so that, having representatives everywhere, you are really you,

O people! You are the one who, through the intervention of your delegates, administers the commune, the district and the nation.

”No doubt, Parliament will dictate the law and you, workers, will be obliged to bow before it, to conform to its mandates, to the decisions of the legislator.

But remember that this legislator is your delegate, your representative; remember that the law will be nothing more than the expression of your will and your aspiration, or what is the same, that it is you yourselves who make the law and, when one obeys oneself, it is as if one obeyed no one. You see perfectly well that you are free, as free as can be, since you are sovereign. And finally, if it happens that, by chance, your election was unfortunate, that your leader does not know your intentions, betrays your promises, you will always have the right to renew him and to elect another who is more worthy. You see, citizens, that in the end it is always you, and only you, who have the last word. You used to bear power, today you exercise it. In the Middle Ages, power descended from heaven, today it rises from the earth. In times when religion was omnipotent, it filled the mind with darkness and darkened the conscience; the rulers here below were the representatives of God; today the rulers are the representatives of the people. In the aristocracy, the State was in the hands of a privileged caste; today, in democracy, the State is in the hands of the people. In the monarchy, the State was personal, it had the character of absolute authority; a monarch said: “I am the State!”; today the State is in you, it is in me, it is in the whole world.

“Sovereign? Yes, people, you are, since in reality you make and unmake sovereigns.”

“To the polls, citizens! Vote! No abstentions! Not only is voting an imprescriptible right, it is a sacred duty. To the polls, to the polls!”

We have all heard this speech. And the men of my generation heard it hundreds and hundreds of times. It is always the same. And, incredibly, the naive, gullible, trusting voter always lets himself be taken in. He believes in such an unbelievable way that we wonder how such a miraculous, incomprehensible, inexplicable animal as the voter can still exist.

Who is the artist who will be able, with the necessary richness of colour and the sufficient luxury of detail, to sketch the portrait of that problematic, fantastic, extraordinary, incomparable, miraculous being called an elector?

One more case. (You will recognize that I am not in the habit of abusing it.) I know that quotation makes the discourse heavy, and that is why I avoid it as much as possible. But I cannot resist the desire to read you this page by Octavio Mirbeau, who expresses himself better than I could. Listen:

»One thing astonishes me prodigiously — I dare say it stupefies me — and that is that at the scientific moment in which I write, after the innumerable experiences, after the daily scandal, there can still exist in our dear France (as they say in the Budget Committee) an elector, a single elector, this irrational, inorganic, hallucinated animal, who consents to upset his affairs, his dreams or his pleasures, to vote in favor of someone or something. When one reflects for a single moment, is this surprising phenomenon not likely to defeat the most subtle philosophies and confuse reason? Where will be the Balzac who will give us the physiology of the modern voter? And the Charcot who will explain to us the anatomy and the mentality of this incurable madman? We are waiting for them. I understand that a swindler always finds shareholders, the censure of the defenders, the Opera-comique of the dilettantis; I understand M. Chantavoine persisting in finding rhymes; I understand everything. But that a deputy, a senator finds an elector, that is to say, the improbable martyr, who feeds them with his bread, who clothes them with his wool,

who fattens them with his meat, who enriches them with his money, and has no other prospect than that of receiving, in exchange for these extravagances, blows on the neck, kicks in the back, if not bullets in the chest, truly, that goes beyond the already so pessimistic notions that I had formed up to now of human folly.

»It is understood that I am speaking here of the convinced voter, the theoretical voter, the one who imagines, poor devil!, that he is fulfilling the obligation of a free citizen, that he is sovereignly deploying, expressing his opinions, imposing —oh, admirable and disconcerting madness!— political programs and social demands, and not of the one who “knows the ropes” and who mocks his sovereignty.

»I am speaking of the serious, the austere, the sovereign people, of those who say: “I am an elector! Nothing is done without me. I am the foundation of modern society.” How does this rabble still exist? How, however stubborn, however proud, however paradoxical they may be, have they not become discouraged and ashamed of their work for so long? How is it possible that somewhere, even in the lost moors of Brittany, or in the inaccessible caverns of the Cévennes and the Pyrenees, there is a philistine so stupid, so unreasonable, so blind to what is seen, so deaf to what is said, that he would vote for the blues, the whites, or the reds, without being forced, without being paid, without being made to drink? What extravagant feeling, what mysterious suggestion can this thinking biped, endowed with a will, it is claimed, that marches proudly and upright, certain that it is fulfilling a duty, obey to deposit in any electoral box any ballot, no matter what name is written on it?... What is he thinking, inside himself, that justifies, or simply explains his extravagance? What is he expecting? Because, in short, to consent to give himself over to greedy masters who beat him and strangle him, it is necessary that something extraordinary be said or expected that we do not suppose. It is necessary that, due to powerful cerebral deviations, the idea of a deputy corresponds in him to the ideas of science, justice, disinterestedness, work and integrity. And this is what truly frightens him. Nothing serves as a lesson to him, neither the most burlesque mistakes nor the most sinister tragedies.

“What does it matter to him whether it is Peter or John who asks for his money and his life, since he is obliged to give up the one and give up the other? Well, no! Between these thieves and these executioners, he has the preference; he votes for the most rapacious and the most ferocious. He voted yesterday, he will vote tomorrow and he will always vote. The sheep go to the slaughterhouse, they say nothing to each other and they expect nothing. But at least they do not vote for the butcher who will kill them, or for the bourgeois who will eat them. More sheep than the beasts, more sheep than the sheep, the elector names his butcher and chooses his bourgeois. It took many revolutions to win this right.”

The more promises the candidate makes, the more likely he is to obtain a mandate: men are made in such a way that the more they are promised, the more they are trusted. Every candidate promises. He puts his hands on his heart, raises his eyes to heaven, as if he wanted to testify to the sincerity of his convictions, to declare that he is ready to sacrifice himself for the public good and that, to that end, he will not shrink from any effort. And the day comes!

This consists in depriving the citizen of his sovereignty, pretending to preserve it. Deception consists in suppressing the sovereignty that is at the bottom, in principle, to install it at the top, in fact.

Then, parliament is elected. What elements is it composed of? What does it do? How does it function? What can be expected of it?

All parliamentary action, comrades, I have summarized in four words: Absurdity, Hypocrisy, Corruption and Necessitate.

First, absurdity. Let us talk... We live in a society in which all interests are in conflict. This is obvious. The interests of the boss and the worker are contradictory; The interest of the rulers is in opposition to that of the governed; the interest of the landlord is in conflict with that of the tenant; the interest of the merchants is irreconcilable with that of the consumers. One has the desire to sell as dearly as possible; the other, to buy as cheaply as possible. The same is true of landlords and workers and tenants. All interests are in conflict.

Is it not absurd to suppose that one man, the same man, can represent entirely alone such contradictory interests?

Here he is, in Parliament, called upon to decide on a question in which, for example, the interests of employers and workers, of tenants and property owners, are most seriously at stake. He represents both the one and the other at the same time. He will therefore be inevitably forced to favour the one to the detriment of the other. And yet he was elected by a particular electoral college, comprising 10,000 or 100,000 voters, according to the method of voting - that is not what I am disputing, for they are all as bad as each other. This elected person represents at the same time the most contradictory interests. It is absurd to entrust the same individual with interests that clash, that repel each other. Moreover, even if these interests were harmonious, the number of voters is too large for them to be able to agree on the many aspects of a comprehensive programme. We know this perfectly well; As soon as there are only eight or ten of us discussing various points, it is enough to raise certain questions for us to immediately become passionate in the discussion and stop agreeing. How do you expect thousands and thousands of individuals, who have different and often opposing mentalities, who do not belong to the same class, nor have the same intellectual culture, nor live in the same environment, how do you expect these men, the painful path of humanity? Is it he who favours even when their interests are not in opposition, to be able to understand each other, to agree? And, consequently, how do you expect an individual to reflect in himself the totality of these mentalities, these aspirations, these intellectual cultures, these diverse environments? It is impossible.

I go further. Even if the electors were to agree on almost all points, the questions that the legislator has to study, debate and resolve are too numerous, they belong to a portion of diverse domains, for him to be able, to the satisfaction of all, to bring to each of these questions an adequate solution.

And then there is a contract between the elected and the elector, and a four-year contract. How many events can occur in the course of four years and significantly change the way we think! It may happen that in 1912 we agreed on this or that point. But in 1916, will we still agree when events of the highest importance have occurred in social life and have introduced new, unexpected elements into our private life: the war? And yet, he is the only individual appointed in peacetime to certain tasks - no one had foreseen that two years later he would find himself faced with an exceptional situation - it is the same man who continues to be our representative during the war, as during peace.

It is foolish! I speak of the war because it is a great event which dominates the situation at the moment. But, in four years, there is almost always some more or less serious event which transforms or subverts the situation, not in thought, but in fact. And so it's madness to put these changing interests on one man for four years.

And then there is the habit of saying that in order to solve complex, delicate problems that concern the public interest, competent men are needed, and that there are few people in the masses who have this quality. The masses are ignorant, uneducated, act on instinct, do not think, so to speak, for themselves. But it is from this mass that you accuse of ignorance, from which you deny complete lucidity, from which you demand the act that perhaps requires the most delicacy, foresight and psychology: to choose one from among several, to make your choice and say: this is the one who has the most intelligence, the most convictions, the one who will best defend my interests. How can you not perceive this contradiction? On the one hand, it is said: the masses are clumsy, stupid, ignorant, and on the other hand, it is demanded of this same mass the action that requires more awareness, more intelligence and more psychology. This is absurd.

Another argument that I bring up from those that I present to you under the title of the absurdity of the representative system, is the impossibility of the legislator being aware of all the questions on which it is necessary to pronounce. It would be necessary for him to be omniscient. And omniscience is at the same time, for the legislator, indispensable and impossible.

Indispensable because it is necessary for the legislator to be at the same time a sailor to pronounce on matters concerning the navy, a warrior to vote on matters of war, a financier when it comes to the budget - a complicated and delicate mechanism -, an administrator to give an opinion on administrative questions, an educator, a diplomat, an engineer; in a word, he must have all the knowledge.

Impossible because, in the time in which we live, the scientific field has become so vast that, in order to excel in a single point, it is indispensable for an intelligent and studious man to devote his whole life to specializing; It is only after long and persistent studies, after having acquired indisputable experience, that a man, on a given point, can become competent or superior; and the legislator is required to be competent and superior in everything! He must be a sailor, a warrior, a financier, an administrator, a diplomat, an engineer, an educator, everything! But we live in an age when that is impossible. We are no longer in the times of Pico della Mirandola! There is no man capable of discourse on everything. When a man is competent on one or two points, that is already a lot. It is too much to ask of him to ask for universal competence. Therefore, omniscience will be necessary, but it is impossible and absurd to ask that someone possess it.

These are, comrades, a certain number of arguments that I had to present to you on the first part: the absurdity of parliamentary representation.

Let us pass on to its impotence. Who are those who compose parliament? Of what elements are parliamentary assemblies constituted? I will not do you the wrong of thinking that you believe in the superiority of the elected and of those who sit in parliamentary assemblies. Nor do you believe that they represent what is most glorious in the arts, most illustrious in the sciences, most profound in philosophy, most competent in all matters, most honest in finance in France. Take a look at the Chamber and the Senate. You will see, I admit, some men of real worth, very few! Because the man of real worth distances himself from politics, considers it as something inferior to his superiority, and would think that he would fall and be stained if he descended to that farce, to the lies, to the vulgarities that the electoral battle demands. The truly superior man remains what he is, outside of politics, united to his ideal. He does not stoop to the swamp of politics.

Look at our parliamentarians. You will find doctors without clients, lawyers without lawsuits, unless they are lawyers for dubious merchants, for financiers who are never far from the penitentiary, or who are in Parliament as representatives of the high banks; a bundle of mediocrities



and incompetences which, together, form an even more formidable set of incompetences and nullities.

Montesquieu rightly said: "Take intelligent men, put them together, assembled; and, by a singular, inexplicable phenomenon, these intelligent men will become brutes or imbeciles as soon as they are grouped together, assembled in an assembly."

It is not I who say it; it is Montesquieu who made this profound and accurate observation.

But even if the assemblies were populated by men who recommended themselves by their personal merits, by the brilliant services they had rendered, by the integrity of their conscience, by the firmness of their convictions, by a meritorious past, what could they do?

Parliamentarism is impotence. It is like a sort of lake surrounded by mountains. There may be a few storms on this lake, a certain agitation, but this agitation does not go beyond the limits of the lake, which is held in check, imprisoned by the mountains that dominate it. In Parliament, violent anger, exasperation, solemn oaths, sacred promises are never anything other than small storms, surface agitations without repercussions in the depths; calm, once the agitation has passed, is immediately restored and leaves no trace. Impotence, yes! Even if these men made reforms, would they be attributable to Parliament itself? If you think so, you are mistaken. These reforms never come from above. It is not the man who eats copiously who thinks of improving the existence of the man who lives on scraps. It is not the man who lives in luxurious apartments who is concerned with introducing some comfort, some hygiene, some cleanliness into the miserable squalor. It is not the man who does not work who can see the deplorable conditions in which the working class carries out its work. It is not the idle man who will try to improve the conditions of work, or to shorten the work day and increase the hours of leisure. It is always from below that ideas for reform come. In the crucible of human suffering, the desire for improvement is formulated. It is those who suffer in their own flesh, those who are weighed down by the yoke, those who are subjected to humiliation, those who know the anguish, the uncertainties of tomorrow; it is those who, worried, tormented, harassed by the future, communicate their ideas little by little, exchange their impressions among a few at first; then, imperceptibly, the new idea opens its way. And it is only after it has become powerful, irresistible, that a political party takes hold of it and presents it as originating from itself. There is always a party that champions the success of this or that reform and that, by dint of insistence, ends up making it triumph. But when it triumphs it is because it is supported by a mass so powerful and whose effort became so irresistible that it would be dangerous not to register it in the law. Reforms, you see, do not come from above; they always come from below. It is not necessary to count on parliamentarism to carry them out, but only to register them.

If we wanted to go deeper into the problem you would see that reforms are, on the other hand, ineffective, given the social environment. They are never positive or fruitful.

Reforms do not reform. There has been quite a bit of reform! There were hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of reforms introduced into the legislation. But open your eyes. Do you see that anything has changed? There was a lot of talk, the voters let themselves be fooled. But in reality, the reforms have not reformed anything, the supposed improvements have not improved anything.

Finally, as regards the impotence of the representative regime, I have the idea of telling you a little story, a sort of parable or apologue, which will bring a light, pleasant and humorous note to this somewhat serious discussion.

I saw, about twenty years ago, in the countryside, children who were in the habit of going almost every day to the neighbouring forest. The forest was full of birds, and of murmurs. From time to time, a rustling of leaves, a quick run on the trunk of a tree, on a branch, and suddenly one would see one of those little quadrupeds that you know well appear: a light squirrel, making great efforts, dangerous jumps and incomparable acrobatics. The children had the idea of capturing one of these little animals. They came and brought a squirrel with them. An old villager told them:

– I know that, I had one years ago; one day it disappeared; the cage was probably not closed properly and it went away.

– Then lend us your cage, will you?

– With pleasure, children. It has not been inhabited for some time and will be content to have a tenant.

And the children put the squirrel in the cage. You know it, it is one of those cylindrical cages. And behold, the squirrel, needing to move, began to spin around. The boys were amazed and thought this was superb. But after four or five days they finally realized that the spectacle was not very varied and they imagined that the squirrel was mocking them. It was so beautiful when it was in the forest, jumping from branch to branch! The boys set the captive free.

They went back to the forest and caught a second squirrel. They put it in the same cage, where it ran around and mocked them like the first, so that after a few days the boys set this second captive free. They went back to the forest and caught another. But after four or five such experiences, they came to understand that the squirrel, not having freedom of movement, was condemned to go round in circles in its cage.

Comrades, this is the story of the elector—the boy—and the candidate—the squirrel.

During the months preceding the vote, the candidate jumps from branch to branch, performing marvellous pirouettes; and the child, the reader, dazzled by his tours de force, said to himself: “If only I could catch him! If only I could lay my hands on him! How happy I would be!”

It is not difficult, when one is an elector, to seize hold of one’s candidate. The candidate wants nothing more than that. He is sent to the Palais-Bourbon, which is his cage. And there, this man who stupefied the people—the boy—by his activity, by his grace, by his subtlety, by his agility, does nothing. Once in the cage he becomes impotent.

At the end of four years, the boy says to himself: Oh, this one is making fun of me! I’ll go find another one who won’t play the same trick on me. He goes back to the forest. Unfortunately, the second one plays the same trick on him as the first one. For fifty years, comrades, the candidate has been playing the same tricks on the elector. And yet, the elector is still not convinced. He continues every four years to change the squirrel and put it in the same cage. Believe me, we have the right to say to him: But, poor thing, it is not the squirrel that needs to be changed; the cage needs to be broken!

To say that the representative regime is a regime of corruption is already a banality and I imagine that it is not necessary to go into this point in any considerable detail. It would be, I believe, superfluous. You all know that political work is dirty work, that political means are corrupt, and especially Parliament, because it is in Parliament that all appetites, all greed, all rivalries, all ambitions are found, and therefore only dirty work can be done there, and those who take part in it can only be dirty themselves.

I have seen these things up close and my long experience has taught me that in politics - I am talking about politics as practiced in Parliament, practical politics and not politics as a science - there are only two ideas: the first is that when you are a minority you must try everything to

become a majority; the second is that when you have become a majority and a government, you must resort to all possible means to remain a government and a majority.

Do not think that this is a discovery of my prolific imagination. No. It is an observation based on experience. I do not want to go too far back in history. But let us examine, if you will, the fifty years which separate us from the proclamation of the Third Republic.

At the beginning it was the Republic of the Thiers, of the Mac-Mahons, the conservative Republic of which Thiers said: "The Republic will be conservative or it will be nothing." But there was a minority, which later became a majority in the 363, when Gambetta and his friends, the opportunists of that time, spread throughout the country, went to all the regions to stir up the peasant and urban masses in favour of democracy and the republican idea. When they returned as a majority to the Chamber, they conquered power, and after having been, for five years, a minority and an opposition, they became in turn a majority and a government. They remained in this form as long as was impossible for them.

But during this time there was another republican minority with Brisson, Floquet, Goblet, Clemenceau, Pelletan: I mention the best! This minority was on the attack on power. They remained a minority in the opposition for eighteen years. One day, these opponents seized power; they overthrew the opportunists, of whom one was tired, for they always promised and never fulfilled. In turn, the radical minority became the majority and the government.

But there was another party, the radical-socialist. It is not known exactly whether it is more radical than socialist or more socialist than radical. What is certain is that it was called radical-socialist. And this party, then a minority and opposition, also wanted to seize power. Mysteries have been seen where radical ideas, radical-socialist ideas and even socialist ideas were represented, in almost proportional doses. Coalitions, born of ambitions and appetites, sustained by financial intrigues, supported by shady business and political combinations, whose true purpose is to govern. You see that I am right in saying that in politics there are only two ideas: when you are nothing, try to be everything; when one is everything, one tries to preserve the situation.

Such a system is not designed to educate thought, to strengthen and enlighten consciences, or to establish hearts in the solidity of principles. Such procedures are necessarily corrupting. And how do you expect these men, constantly mixed with dishonest people, to escape corruption? It is impossible. I am not talking about the scandals that break out and make noise, nor about the even more numerous scandals that are drowned! All this is well known.

There is also a scientific certainty: that man adapts himself to the environment in which he lives. And since the environment is a political environment in which reciprocal concessions are made, in which services are rendered to one another, in which no one cares about anything but his own interest, when one adapts to that environment, where is the interest of the country? I have known men who were convinced, whose conscience was upright, whose thought was lofty, whose spirit was generous, whose heart was sensitive; I have seen them enter politics, enter Parliament. What became of them? I am speaking of those who entered full of enthusiasm, with the desire to do good, and who were forced to see that if Parliament is powerless for good, on the other hand, it is omnipotent for evil. Some withdrew, disheartened; others gave in, and, once on the slope, they went all the way. They thought they would be protected from contagion, but the contagion was stronger than them and swept them away. Most parliamentarians are corrupted from the start. They do not need to wait to become corrupt; they bring one more corruption, the one they bring with them.

I am now reminded of a particular case which I am going to tell you about, since the idea has occurred to me. It will make you laugh a little.

It was in 1901. I had gone to Lyon to give lectures. A socialist daily, *Le Peuple*, had just appeared. Friends said to me: "We must found a newspaper; let's found it with you, since you are known in the region." I agreed and we founded *Le Quotidien*.

Seven or eight months later, if not very comfortably, it was still going strong and in the region of Rhone, Loire, Isere, Saone et-Loire, that is to say in the five bordering departments, it was quite widespread.

We had correspondents everywhere, especially in the Loire, in that industrial region that goes from Rivede Gier to Firminy, through St-Chamond, La Ricamarie and Le Chambon.

One day I was reading the newspapers of the region and of Paris, when there was a knock at the door and one of my good friends came in, who had come from Paris, and said to me:

- I am glad to see you.
- How can I help you?
- Do you know what I am here to do?
- What is it?
- I am here to present my candidacy in the Loire.
- Yes...?

– I am not yet sure, but I have been appointed; I am the general secretary of the Socialist Party and therefore I know the entire electoral map of France very well; I have set my sights on the second constituency of Saint-Étienne and I am sure of being elected; I am simply here to test the waters a little and to make some friends. Do you know what you yourself should do?

– No.

– Well, there is a suitable constituency nearby, at Rive de Gier, and if you want to be a candidate, I am sure of success. You will not need to bother yourself: I will campaign as if it were for myself.

And then he looked at me and said:

– Oh, Sebastian, two men like you and me in the Chamber; I, a clever and skilful strategist; you, a fiery and impetuous orator; that would be superb, that would be the Revolution in the Chamber!...

Do you know who spoke like that? You have surely guessed it: it was Briand. I imitated him by saying, patting him on the back in a friendly way:

– We will talk about this again in a year; in six months, you will probably be a deputy; if that can satisfy you, I wish you success; but do not count on me to make the trip; we will continue the conversation in a year.

He was astonished:

– What do you mean? Do you by any chance think that I will not be what I am now there? We have fought together in circumstances dangerous enough for you to doubt the sincerity of my convictions.

I answered:

– I am certain that within six months you will be a deputy and that within a year you will have changed your rifle.

You know, comrades, that I was not mistaken. And how many I have known like that!

But let us continue.

The representative system, finally, has a fourth defect: it is harmful, that is, it is detrimental.

From the moment it is favourable to the capitalist class it follows that it is harmful to the working class.

Corruption dominates above all the workers who, from time to time, appear on the scene of Parliament.

A bourgeois lives there like a fish in water. He is in his element. He has the habit of the parliamentary world. His life, so to speak, has not changed. His interests are perhaps better served. He was once a bourgeois, and he remains a bourgeois.

But the worker, the worker who is removed from his work by favourable scrutiny, where he worked eight, nine, ten hours a day to earn a starvation wage - a man whose position is thus subverted, clearly, offers corruption a fertile field, a kind of breeding ground in which the germ of rottenness easily develops.

That is why it is more dangerous for a worker to stray into Parliament.

The bourgeois is already corrupted, in advance; this does not change him; he is only a little more rotten, a little more corrupted; but the worker who has known the anguish of tomorrow and who, suddenly losing contact with his comrades at work, suddenly enters Parliament, becomes six centième de roi.

This is done to turn him around and upset the conditions of his existence.

It is not surprising that he is transformed. He hopes to conquer, to absorb power, one day, for the benefit of his class, and it is power that absorbs him!

It is necessary, on the other hand, that the means be appropriate to the end and that the proletariat not be content with reforms that, let us say it once again, do not reform anything, with improvements that do not improve anything.

The working class must want a profound revolution, a complete social transformation.

The abolition of wages, the liberation of work, cannot be the work of Parliament but of the revolution.

All these truths are accepted today by all convinced, sincere and enlightened socialists.

Only, they say, why neglect a means which is perhaps of some use, provided that one knows how to use it? Why not conduct both actions together, parliamentary action and workers' action, the battle at the top and the battle from below? Why voluntarily deprive ourselves of one of these sections? That is to diminish our strength. It is to reduce our field of battle.

Those who speak like this, I want to believe them sincere, do not see clearly. They do not realize the work done on one side and neglected on the other, of an activity working in one direction and an activity working in the opposite direction. The good which, by exception, can be obtained from above is far outweighed by the discomfort which will be suffered below. One must not believe that the efforts expended at the top and at the bottom, in the parliamentary, electoral and popular working class domains, combine and add up. They are not added, but subtracted. The operation does not give an addition, but a subtraction. They are not the same thing, they are exactly opposite things.

And besides, do you not feel the danger of telling the people, the working world, that their duty is to deposit once every four years, one minute every fifteen thousand hours, piously, calmly, without effort and without risk, a ballot in the ballot box? The battle demands something more than this periodic gesture. It demands constant activity. All socialists believe they will arrive more quickly at the proposed goal by attacking the bourgeois world from above and from below, entering the assemblies to say, from the height of that magnificent platform, their doctrine and

their hopes. In this way they believe they will arrive more quickly. They suppose that the anarchists are ideologues, and they have nothing but disdainful smiles for what they call a libertarian utopia.

To those who claim to be inspired only by the facts, I invite them to consult the facts. They will see that the facts contradict their assertions. For at least thirty years – since 1890, I could say forty, but I want to stay away from the truth – socialists have taken an active part in elections. How many have there been in the Palais-Bourbon since then? There are sixty. There were undoubtedly more, but today there are sixty. I do not care to know whether there were a hundred a few years ago. I can only confirm that for thirty years socialist candidates have been standing for election and engaged in parliamentary action, and that after thirty years of struggle there are sixty deputies. That is, therefore, two deputies per year. So, if they were to win a majority, that is to say, some 300 deputies in the Palais-Bourbon and 150 senators in Luxembourg, or 450 elected, it would take 225 years to do so. If you think that is going too fast, I think it is a lie! If among the sixty deputies now in Parliament there are talents and luminaries of the party - I suppose that the Socialist Party did not send to the Chamber the least eloquent, the least talented, but on the contrary the most eloquent and the most cultured - he said to them: "Leave Parliament, close its doors, throw your resignation in the face of your colleagues, like a spit." And then, when you have done this, you will spread out over the country, you will go everywhere, to the towns and villages, with the pilgrim's staff, you will travel over the hills and valleys, asking nothing of anyone, and so you will have reason to say: "This is what we can do together, we do not ask you for a mandate, nor a seat in the Palais Bourbon, we want to remain with you, it is with you that we want to fight." What strength would such disinterestedness give you! And so, I am convinced that it would not take 225 years to inspire this country by making it hear the word of revolution. If there were 50 or 60 apostles like this to go around France, inspiring the spirit of revolt and animating the thoughts of the entire people with this breath, in a very short time we would raise a revolutionary force that would make the Power tremble and retreat.

It is time, comrades, to conclude.

The sovereignty of the people is a deception and a lie; a play on words, a sleight of hand. Parliamentarism is a home of rot. Parliament is an absurd, impotent, corrupt and harmful regime.

Parliamentarism is an absurd, impotent, corrupt and harmful regime.

Parliamentary action is an excellent terrain for the bourgeois class, but a bad terrain, the worst, for the working class.

It is necessary to desert it and remain resolutely on the field of the revolutionary battle.

Only the anarchists fight against capitalist society in a constant, conscious and active way by abstentionism, which does not consist only in not using the derisory weapon that the Constitution puts in our hands: the voting ballot.

Their abstentionism is conscious and active. The anarchists have a body of doctrine and methods of action that must, I believe, impress men of good sense, conviction, heart and independent will.

Only the anarchists abstain because they are convinced that parliamentary action is harmful and that electoral struggle is harmful; because they know that political action is pernicious.

In the electoral domain one is obliged to make more or less concessions.

One can never say what one thinks everything that one thinks; and anarchists wish to remain independent in their thoughts, in their conscience, and to reserve the possibility of saying,

without beating about the bush, what they think, everything they think, nothing but what they think.

Anarchists abstain because they do not want to participate in government crimes, and because they know that when one approaches power, one becomes an accomplice, not implicitly but explicitly, to all the crimes committed by governments.

The anarchists do not want to have the slightest part in these crimes, and they do not want to bear any responsibility for this matter.

They abstain because they want to remain in the crowd, because they want to remain in permanent contact with the masses that work brutally, that suffer, that endure authority and that are revolted and exasperated.

They abstain because they understand, in this way, to preserve their right to revolt intact. If you vote, you lose the right to insurrection and from then on you bow in advance, logically, to the law of numbers, to this blind and stupid force of the majority. If I were to use the ballot paper, I would be certain that I lose my right to revolt, because I thus accept the law of the majority and demand, implicitly, that everyone bow to it.

I, who do not vote, have the right to say: Wherever it comes from, whatever its origins and whoever the legislator, the law can only maintain and aggravate iniquity. Even if it diminishes it to a certain extent, iniquity remains. I refuse to recognize the law, because it is the inept application of the blind and stupid force of numbers, as if there were something in common between numbers and progress, right, justice and humanity. I want to preserve my right to revolt and that is why I abstain. If the anarchists abstain, it is because they want to remain faithful to their high and pure philosophy.

This philosophy consists of distancing oneself as carefully from the authority that is exercised as from that which is suffered.

It consists of maintaining an implacable war on those who make the law and those who endure it: on the former, because they abuse authority, on the latter, because they humiliate themselves before it.

The anarchist distinguishes himself and separates himself from everyone, because he does not want to be a master or a slave. He does not want to bow to anyone, but he does not want others to bow to him either.

He does not want to be a slave and carry out foreign orders; but he does not want to be a master or order anyone around either.

He has a horror of the authority that is imposed on him, as he would have a horror of the authority that he imposed on another.

He accepts this marvelous formula that will probably inspire future humanity: "Neither master nor slave."

And to finish, I will say that, in the present state, faced with the society in which we live and which we must endure until we have the strength to overthrow it, we will make our own the lapidary phrase of one of our most illustrious comrades, Elysée Réclus: "In the face of iniquity and as long as it persists, anarchists are and remain in a state of permanent insurrection."

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Sébastien Faure  
Parliamentary rot  
1921

Retrieved on January 31, 2025 from  
<https://es.anarchistlibraries.net/library/sebastien-faure-la-podredumbre-parlamentaria>

**[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](https://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)**