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Why We Are Anarchists

V. Henri

28 September 1901

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V. Henri, "Pourquoi nous sommes anarchistes," *Les Temps Nouveaux* 7 no. 22 (28 Septembre 1901): 2. Working Translation
by Shawn P. Wilbur

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Comrade, you have a brain, a heart, lungs, eyes, arms and legs; these organs are necessary to your existence; so it is necessary for you to use them: to each of these organs is linked a corresponding need. This need can vary, depending on whether your temperament is more or less nervous, more or less fiery, and according to whether the climate is more or less hot and humid.

But, whatever these conditions may be, since the need exists, in the end you feel a desire; and if, then, the material, moral or social possibility exists for you, you decide to act and the act is accomplished: the act is simply the function that is fulfilled, the tendency to live that accommodates itself to certain conditions. In other words, there are organic, climatological and social conditions that determine each of your acts and, par suite, the exercise, the activity of your organs.

When that exercise is normal and that activity not hampered, when your blood can circulate, your lungs breathe, your brain think freely, when you can use your hands, your eyes, your organs in a work consistent with your desires and thus with your will, a work that pleases you, then you are free, then you act according to your instincts, your needs, your life; then you feel the joy of

living. When, on the contrary, it is not possible to exercise your organs normally, then you lose your liberty, lose the possibility of acting in accordance with yourself, then you suffer pain, suffering, misery. Now, there are very few minutes in your life when you are free, when your activity is not hindered, either by force or the necessity of assuring that you can feed yourself, either by the opposition of your family or the opinions of society, by your fears, your duties or your prejudices! That is why you are miserable! That is why I am an anarchist!

An anarchist! For, on the one hand, I want to develop your faculties, your heart, your brain, so that you can love, think, understand and spread your activity more and more, so that you can live more and be increasingly happy.—An anarchist! Because, on the other hand, I would break the shackles that have hindered your activity, and that come from society, morality and religion. Comrade, I want to achieve your liberty.

What limits your liberty, first of all, are the beliefs and prejudices that have been imposed on you.

Are you free, I say, to obey your human desires at a given moment, if you believe that hell is reserved for those who have not obtained divine grace through the sacraments of the Church? Doubtless, and especially if you are of a robust temperament, your desire could make you forget your fear; but, the act once accomplished, the desire being satisfied, there will remain for you the bitter taste of remorse. Another obstacle to liberty is custom. Very often, already, you have been tempted to act; but the fear of opinion has held you back; and you have had to choose between your desire and your weakness. If you have obeyed your desire, then, as in the previous case, that desire, once satisfied, has left behind the regret and suffering of having acted; if your weakness has won out, it has brought the suffering of unsatisfied desire. — The final thing that limits your liberty is a social state based on law, on the idea of duty and obedience; it is the principle of authority, an invariable principle, which inevitably thwarts a thousand diverse tendencies and

causes a pain that is keener as the opposition between the law and the tendency increases.

Since all these shackles make you suffer, am I not right to wish to destroy them? in order to do that, I must first combat the prejudice and say to all as I say to you: Neither accept nor impose any dubious idea, any truth that you cannot demonstrate yourself, any habit for which you cannot understand the reason; limit yourself to the obvious fact, to the demonstrated truth, to the precise observation, to the rigorous experiment. — Then it is necessary to combat the traditions that accustom us to see a reason for servitude in weakness and a means of enslavement in education. Finally, it is necessary to combat the discipline, or whatever it is, that forces you to be a servant or master in life, but always the slave of a recognized law. So I will combat prejudice, custom and law, which is to say authority in its triple form: intellectual, moral and legal. On these conditions, I could, slowly, eliminate all the causes of your misery and achieve your liberty.

Ah! Comrade, you too love profoundly that liberty that would permit you to live, to expend yourself, to be rich in action, happiness and life.

But you fear what is new; you remember past miseries and your heart becomes wary. Ah! you could challenge me if I asked you for something, a vote, a crown or a place, in exchange for my ideas. But I ask nothing of you; what I want for myself, I want for you, I want for all; and this proves to you that I do not want to return to the barbarous societies where reigned, in all its horror, the right of the strongest.

If someone has insinuated it, they have lied. For if I have said: “Do not be a servant, revolt against every authority, awaken your energy,” I also say to you: “do not be a master; do not impose your own will on anyone.” So you will always see me on the side of the weakest and the oppressed. So you have been lied to; and yet, starting from that lie and profiting from your ignorance, someone

has frightened you, saying that I was a man of rebellion, a man of disorder, a man of violence!!!

A man of revolt! Yes, comrade, I am revolted by all the miseries, all the injustices, all the shames of society. Yes, I am revolted when I see children who have no bread, women who cry, men who groan on their miserable pallets! Tell me if you are not as revolted as I am.

A man of disorder! Ah! I do not know what I idea you have of order, but you are mistaken if you believe that order today is consistent with happiness, liberty and progress. Do you not hear daily of crimes, of suicides?

Don't you see the poverty-stricken around you? Don't you read, from time to time, tales of organized massacres en Chine or in Africa? Is it that order that you wish to preserve eternally? As for me, I regard it as a regime of force, of violence; and that is why I have condemned it!

A man of violence! When a being is oppressed, tell me then how he can be rid of the tyranny, if not by his own effort?

Tell me what victim of oppression, weary of that oppression, has not been forced to revolt? For "all the light of truth can do nothing to stop the violence and only irritates it still more." (Pascal.) Then count, if you can, the victims of the Inquisition, of the crusades, of the religious wars, of the red or white Terror, of the Holy Alliance, of the colonial wars, of armed force. Would you be astonished, finally, that among these victims, some, driven by persecution, had in the end faced up to their aggressors.

A man of utopia, you have also been told! Yes, to put an end to the iniquities, the disorder, the acts of violence; to lessen the heavy burden of misery that weighs on you, that is regarded as a utopia at the present time. That misery must be profound, alas! Look inside yourself, comrade, and ask yourself if you believe it is possible for you to live without being a slave or tyrant. If you do not believe it, they you would be consistent to place yourself on the side of the oppressors. But if you believe it is possible, if you believe that for

one moment, one single moment, you could live freely, how could you believe that what is possible for you is impossible for others!

From that moment it is up to you to take the initiative, to combat your prejudices and those of the people around you, so that the emancipation each makes possible the emancipation of all. "If you want to live, be strong, be great, be energetic. Sow the seeds of life and happiness around you. Each time that you see an iniquity in life, a lie in the world, a suffering imposed by one man upon another, rebel against the lie, the injustice and the sorrow. Struggle for the truth; the struggle is life. Each time that you have struggled, you have lived. And, for a few hours of that magnificent life, wouldn't you trade years of vegetation in the corruption of the marsh? Struggle in order to permit everyone to experience this rich and exuberant life, to wrest themselves bit by bit from the misery and cowardice of our world, to allow every, finally, to enjoy all the happiness that you demand for yourself. » (Guyau.)