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Anarchists and Criminals

Victor Serge

Feb. 1, 1912

For the hundred thousandth time the question has been posed to us, without any ambiguity, by policemen in search of conspiracies, by journalists in need of copy, by judges, by passersby who set themselves up as executioners.

What should the attitude of anarchists be towards criminals? Reserved? Hostile? Sympathetic?

We will attempt to answer.

There are criminals and there are criminals.

There are those who live on the margins of society's laws because their nature is different from that of good citizens. And there are the others, those who didn't become — or who didn't remain — honest men, simply because they were weak or pursued by misfortune.

The first are those who aren't adapted: rebels, anarchist temperaments.

The second often end up going straight and later in life become squealers, pimps, barkeepers, shopkeepers.

The first among these, a thief, thanks to his underhanded tact, to his insinuating agility, to his flair for money would have been a capable business agent, or an agent of the law quick to

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execute delicate missions. He would have hooked consciences with a dexterity similar to that he showed in picking locks.

The other one, the assassin, if he hadn't been turned from the straight and narrow path by a romantic adventure, would have been a perfect soldier, one of those select killers that dazzle colonizers. This pallid pimp, if it hadn't been for implacable bad luck, would doubtless be one of M. Guichard's best agents... and so on and so forth.

The criminal has a professional psychology whose foundations reside in certain instincts which society knows how to put to good use. The assassin's or the thief's defects, barely modified, become the qualities of a judge, a soldier, or a cop.

But in the midst of social waste all aptitudes don't find the means of being employed. There is wastage. And the skillful find the means to get away with things without breaking with the Criminal Code. But some fail as a result of accidental circumstances.

Whatever the case, as outlaws they preserve the mentality of honest people. They are rebels against mutual assistance, pursue their vulgar interests, they are prideful, lacking in daring, fearful. They are squealers who hand people over to the authorities; low crooks who mutually betray each other, lie and sell each other out. It would perhaps be more exact to say that they wait for the occasion that will allow them to enter the social category they should never have left. They engage in fraud, but respect property. They go from correctional court to the assize, but think that magistrates are indispensable. They suffer in jails, but never think of the iniquity or the absurdity of jails.

But the others are their neighbors, carrying out the same struggle, enduring the same sufferings, but for other reasons. Those whose indocile temperaments drove them from workshops, or whose ingeniousness, whose desire for a better life, whose lively intelligence led them to break with the law, or those whose adventurous character couldn't accommodate itself to the monotonous life of the wage earner.

They are outlaws through instinctual vigor, through dignity, through originality. They are outlaws because honesty is a framework too narrow for their lives, because their desire for happiness can't be satisfied while in a state of submission.

And as much as they might want, in their moments of weakness, to go straight, to take their place among the countless beneficiaries of cowardice, they won't succeed. They aren't made for commerce; they find work that can be monetized repugnant. Adventure still has invincible attractions for them.

They can most often be distinguished from the others by their stature in battle and in misfortune. They are of an extreme, disconcerting, courageous daring.

They are bandits.

To be sure, they remain far from us, far from our dreams and wishes. But what difference does that make? The fact is that in the social rot they are a ferment of disaggregation; they aren't part of the herd, they're a few ardent individualities, and like us they alone proclaim their will to live at whatever cost!

Well, these criminals interest me, and I have as much sympathy for them as I have contempt for failed honest men — or those who have "arrived."

The anarchist, in any event, will often be their brother. The same risks run for the same goal frequently brings them together.

Intellectual and moral rebel, it is in fact only logical that the anarchist doesn't fear becoming, whenever the circumstances seem favorable, an economic rebel.