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Is the Illegalist Anarchist our Comrade?

Émile Armand

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1911

In the current social milieu anarchism extends from Tolstoy to Bonnot: Warren, Proudhon, Kropotkin, Ravachol, Caserio, Louise Michel, Libertad, Pierre Chardon, Tchorny, the tendencies they represent or that are represented by certain living animators or inspirations whose names are of little importance, are like the nuances of a rainbow where each individual chooses the tint that most pleases his vision.

In placing oneself from the strictly individualist anarchist point of view — and it is with this that I will conclude — the criterion for camaraderie doesn't reside in the fact that tone is an office worker, factory worker, functionary, newspaper seller, smuggler or thief, it resides in this, that legal or illegal, MY comrade will in the first place seek to sculpt his own individuality, to spread anti-authoritarian ideas wherever he can, and finally, by rendering life among those who share his ideas as agreeable as possible will reduce to as useless and avoidable suffering to as negligible a quantity as possible.

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who ruses with the law has no reason to brag about it. In doing this he escapes the dangerous consequences of insubordination, the penal colony, the “most abject of slaveries.” But if he doesn’t have to suffer all this, the submissive anarchist has to deal with “professional deformation”: by externally conforming to the law a number of anarchists finish by no longer reacting at all and pass to the other side of the barricades. An exceptional temperament is necessary in order to ruse with the law without allowing oneself to be caught up in the net of legality.

As for the anarchist-producer in the current economic milieu: this is a myth. Where are the anarchists who produce anti-authoritarian values? By their productivity almost all anarchists collaborate in maintaining the current economic state of affairs. You’ll never make me believe that the anarchist who builds prisons, barracks, churches; who manufactures arms, munitions, uniforms; who prints codes, political journals, religious books, who stocks them, transports them, sells them, is participating in anti-authoritarian production. Even the anarchist who produces necessary items for the use of voters and the elected is false to his convictions.

It is not up to either verbal propagandists or men of the pen to accuse obscure individualists of materially benefiting from their ideas. Do they count as nothing the “moral” and sometimes pecuniary benefit their efforts procure for them? Renown spreads their names “from one end of the earth to the other;” they have disciples, translators, slanderers, persecutors. For what do they count all this?

I find it only fair that every labor receive a salary, in all domains. It is fair that if you suffer for your opinions you should also profit from them. What matters is that by violence, trickery, ruse, theft, fraud or imposition of any kind this profit not be realized to the detriment or harm or wrong of one’s comrades, of those from “our world.”

* * *

I repeat what I said when I began these lines; since there is a last resort, that offered by illegalism is the most dangerous of all, and it must be demonstrated that it brings in more than it costs, which is something quite exceptional. The illegalist anarchist who is thrown in prison has no favors to hope for as far as probation or reduction of his sentence. As the saying goes, his dossier is marked in red. But with this caveat, it must still be pointed out that in order to be seriously practiced illegalism demands a strongly tempered temperament, a sureness of oneself that doesn't belong to everyone. As with all experiences in anarchist life that don't march in step with the routines of daily existence, it is to be feared that the practices of illegalist anarchism take over the will and the thought of the illegalist to such an extent that it renders him incapable of any other activity, any other attitude. The same also goes for certain legal trades that spare those who practice it the need to be at a factory or an office.

Conclusions

Economic anarchists and economic leaders and rulers *impose* on workers working conditions incompatible with the anarchist notion of life, i.e., with the absence of exploitation of man by man. In principle an anarchist refuses to allow to have working conditions imposed on him or to allow himself to be exploited. He only accepts on condition of abdicating and submitting.

And there is no difference between submitting to pay taxes, submitting to exploitation, and submitting to military service.

It is understood that the majority of anarchists submit. "We obtain more from legality by rusing with it, by fooling it, than by confronting it face to face." This is true. But the anarchist

When we consider the thief as such we can't say that we find him less human than other classes of society. The members of the great criminal gangs have mutual relations that are strongly marked with communism. If they represent a survival from a prior age, we can also consider them as the precursors of a better age in the future. In all cities they know where to address themselves so they'll be received and hidden. Up to a certain point they show themselves to be generous and prodigal towards those of their milieu. If they consider the rich as their natural enemies, as a legitimate prey — a point of view quite difficult to contradict — a large number of them are animated by the spirit of Robin Hood; when it comes to the poor many thieves show themselves to have a good heart.

(Edward Carpenter: *Civilization, its Cause and Cure.*)

I am not an enthusiast of illegalism. I am an *alegal*. Illegalism is a dangerous last resort for he who engages in it, even temporarily, a last resort that should neither be preached nor advocated. But the question I propose to study is not that of asking whether or not an illegal trade is perilous or not, but if the anarchist who earns his daily bread by resorting to trades condemned by the police and tribunals is right or wrong to expect that an anarchist who accepts working for a boss treat him as a comrade, a comrade whose point of view we defend in broad daylight and who we don't deny when he falls into the grips of the police or the decisions of judges. (Unless he asks us to remain silent about his case)

The illegalist anarchist in fact doesn't want us to treat him like a "poor relation" who we don't dare publicly admit to because this would do harm to the anarchist cause, or because not separating ourselves from him when the representatives of

capitalist vengeance come crushing down on him would risk losing the sympathy of syndicalists and the clientele of petit-bourgeois anarchist sympathizers for the anarchist movement.

It is by design that the illegalist anarchist addresses himself to his comrade who is exploited by a boss, that is, *who feels himself* to be exploited. He hardly expects to be understood by those who work at a job that is to their taste. Among these latter he places the anarchist doctrinaires and propagandists who spread, defend, and expose ideas in accordance their opinions — this is what we hope, at least. Even if they only receive a pitiful, a very pitiful salary for their labor, their moral situation isn't comparable to the position of an anarchist working under the surveillance of a foreman and obliged to suffer all day the promiscuity of people whose company is antagonistic to him. This is why the illegalist anarchist denies to those who have jobs that please them the right to cast judgment on his profession on the margins of the law.

All those who do written or spoken propaganda work that is to their taste, all those who work at a profession they like, too often forget that they are privileged in comparison with the mass of the others, their comrades, those who are forced to put on their harness every morning, from January first to the next New Year's Eve and work at tasks for which they have no liking.¹

The illegalist anarchist claims he is every bit as much a comrade as the merchant, the secretary at town hall, or the dancing master, none of whom in any way modify — and certainly to no greater degree than he — the economic conditions of current society. A lawyer, a doctor, a teacher can send articles to an anarchist newspaper and give talks at tiny libertarian circles all they want, they nevertheless remain both the supporters

¹ One day in Brussels I discussed the question with Elisée Reclus. He said, in conclusion: "I work at something that pleases me; I don't see where I have the right to judge those who don't want to work at something that doesn't please them."

is inexplicable then why his attitude would change when it's a matter of refusing to serve economically.

We can easily understand that anarchists don't want to contribute to the economic life of a country that doesn't accord them the possibility of explaining by the pen or the spoken word and that limits their faculties and their possibilities of realization and association, in whatever realm. At the same time they, for their part, would allow non-anarchists to conduct themselves however they wish. Those anarchists who agree to participate in the economic functioning of societies where they cannot live according to their desires are inconsistent. We can't understand why they object to those who rebel against this state of things.

The rebel against economic servitude finds himself, *from the instinct for preservation*, by the need and the will to life, to appropriate the production of others. This instinct is not only primordial, it is legitimate, the illegalists affirm, compared to capitalist accumulation, accumulation which the capitalist, taken personally, does not need to exist, accumulation which is a superfluity. Now who are these "others" who the reasoning illegalist attacks — the anarchist who exercises an illegal profession. The "others" are those who want majorities to dominate or oppress minorities, they are the partisan of the domination or the dictatorship of one class or caste over others, they are the voters, the supporters of the state, of the monopolies and privileges it implies. In reality, these "others" are an enemy for the anarchist, irreconcilable adversaries. The moment he economically lays into him, the illegalist anarchist no longer sees in him, cannot see in him, anything but an instrument of the *archist* system.

These explanations provided we can't say that the illegalist anarchist is wrong who considers himself betrayed when those anarchists who preferred following less perilous roads than his abandon or don't care to explain their attitudes.

of the fact that in coming into the world, or in penetrating any country, the human unit finds economic conditions that are imposed on it. Whatever one's opinions, one must, in order to live (or die) in peace, submit to constraint. Where there is constraint the contract is no longer valid, since it is unilateral, and bourgeois codes themselves that a commitment subscribed to under threat is of no legal value. The anarchist thus finds himself in a state of legitimate defense against the executors and the partisans of the imposed economic contract. For example, we have never heard an anarchist, exercising an illegal trade, call for a society based on universal banditry. His situation, his acts, are solely in relation to the economic contract that the capitalists or the unilaterals impose even on those revolted by its clauses. The illegalism of anarchists is only transitory: a last resort.

If the social milieu granted anarchists the inalienable possession of their personal means of production; if they could freely, and without any fiscal restriction (taxes, customs duties), dispose of their products; if they allowed to be employed among them an exchange value that would be struck with no tax, all of this at their own risk, illegalism, in my sense of the word (i.e., economic illegalism), would no longer be understood. Economic illegalism is thus purely accidental.⁴

In any event, economic or otherwise, illegalism is a function of legalism. The day authority disappears — political, intellectual and economic authority — the illegalists will also disappear.

It is on this path that we must orient ourselves in order for illegalist acts to benefit anarchist propaganda.

Every anarchist, submissive or not, considers as a comrade he among his like who refuses to accept military servitude. It

⁴ Socially speaking, the day when the costs for the keeping of a property will be superior to what it brings in property, daughter of exploitation, will disappear.

and the supported of the *archist* system, which gave them the monopoly that permits them to exercise their profession and the regulations they are obliged to submit to if they want to continue working at their trades.

It is not an exaggeration to say that any anarchist who accepts being exploited for the profit of a private boss or the state-boss is committing an act of treason towards anarchist ideas. He is, in effect, reinforcing domination and exploitation, is contributing to maintaining the existence of *archism*. It is doubtless true that becoming aware of his inconsistency he strives to redeem or repair his conduct by making propaganda. But whatever the propaganda done by the exploited he still remains an accomplice of the exploiters, a cooperator in the system of exploitation that rules the conditions under which production takes place.

This is why it is not exact to say that the anarchist “who works,” who submits to the system of domination and exploitation in place, is a victim. He is an accomplice as much as he is a victim. All of the exploited, legal or illegal, cooperate in the state of domination. There is no difference between the anarchist worker who earned 175,000 or 200,000 francs in thirty years of labor and who, with his savings, has purchased a hut in the country, and the illegalist anarchist who grabs a safe containing 200,000 francs and with this sum acquires a house by the seaside. Both are anarchists in word only, it is true, but the difference between them is that the anarchist worker submits to the terms of the economic contract that the leaders of the social milieu impose on him, while the anarchist thief *does not submit to them*.

The law protects the exploited as much as the exploiter, the dominated as much as the dominator in their mutual social relations, and as long as he submits the anarchist is as well protected in his property and his person as the *archist*. The law makes no distinction between the *archist* and the anarchist as long as both accept the injunctions of the social contract.

Whether they will or no, the anarchists who submit: bosses, workers, employees, functionaries, have the public forces, tribunals, social conventions, and official educators on their side. This is the reward for their submission: when they constrain — by moral persuasion or the force of the law — the *archist* employer to pay his anarchist employee, the forces of social preservation could care less that deep down, or even on the outside, the wage earner is hostile to the wage system.

On the contrary, the opponent of, the rebel against the social contract, the illegal anarchist has against him *the entire social organization* when in order to “live his life” he leaps over all intermediary stages in order immediately reach the goal that the submissive anarchist will reach only later, if ever. He runs an enormous risk, and it is only fair that this risk be compensated for by immediate results, if there are results at all.

The recourse to ruse, which the illegalist anarchist constantly practices, is a procedure employed by all revolutionaries. Secret societies are an aspect of this. In order to put up subversive posters we wait for policemen to walk in another sector. An anarchist who leaves for America conceals his moral, political and philosophical point of view. Whatever he might be, apparently submissive or openly rebellious, the anarchist is always an illegal as regards the law. When he propagates his anarchist ideas he contravenes the special laws that repress anarchist propaganda; even more, by his anarchist mentality he opposes himself to the written law itself in its essence, for the law is the concretion of archaism.²

² Though I don't have the statistics required, a reading of anarchist newspapers indicates that the number of those justly or unjustly condemned — to prison, penal colonies, or gunned down — for revolutionary anarchist agitation (including “propaganda by the deed”) is far greater than those justly or unjustly condemned, or gunned down, for illegalism. The theoreticians of revolutionary anarchism bear a large part of responsibility for these condemnations, for they have never couched the propaganda in favor of revolutionary acts with the same reserves that the serious “explainers” of the illegalist act oppose to the practice of illegalism.

The rebellious anarchist cannot fail to be found sympathetic by the submissive anarchist who feels himself to be submissive. In his illegal attitude the anarchist who either couldn't or wouldn't break with legality recognizes himself, realized logically. The temperament, the reflections of the submissive anarchist can lead him to disapprove certain acts of the rebellious anarchist, but can never render him personally antipathetic.³

The illegalist answers the revolutionary anarchist who reproaches him with immediately seeking his financial well being by saying that he, the revolutionary, does nothing different. The economic revolutionary expects from the revolution an improvement in his personal economic situation: if not he wouldn't be a revolutionary. The revolution will give him what he hoped for or it won't, just as an illegal operation furnishes or doesn't furnish what was counted on to he who executes it.. It's simply a question of dates. Even when the economic question is not a factor one only makes a revolution if one expects a personal benefit, a religious, political, intellectual or perhaps ethical benefit. Every revolutionary is an egoist.

* * *

Does the explanation of acts of “expropriation” committed by illegalists have an unfavorable influence, in general and in particular, on anarchist propaganda?

In order to answer this question, which is the most important of all questions, one must not lose sight for a single second

³ The anarchist whose illegalism attacks the state or known exploiters has never indisposed “the worker” concerning anarchism. I was in Amiens during the trial of Jacob, who often attacked colonial officers. Thanks to the explanations in “Germinal” the workers of Amiens were quite sympathetic to Jacob and the ideas of individual expropriation. Even non-anarchist, the illegal who attacks a banker, a factory owner, a manufacturer, a treasurer, a postal wagon, etc, is found sympathetic by the exploited, who consider as valets or squealers those wage earners who defend the coin or the cash of their boss, private or state. I have noted this hundreds of times.