

A Letter from Mazas Prison

Clément Duval

November 1886

Companions,

Although I am not well known to you, you know that I am an anarchist. I am writing this letter to you to protest against the insanities that must have leaked out about me in particular and about the anarchists in general in all different kinds of newspapers which joined together to say, when I was arrested, that I was an ex-convict and had already been convicted of theft. As if you could call someone a thief who was a worker who had nothing but misery whereas for me theft does not exist except in the exploitation of man by man, in short, in the existence of everyone who lives at the expense of the producing class.

Here is why and how I committed the offense that they call theft. In 1870 I was, like so many others, stupid enough to go and defend the property and privileges of others; but I was 20 years old. From the war I brought back two wounds and rheumatism—a terrible sickness that has already cost me four years in the hospital. After serving as cannon fodder, I served as a guinea pig for the gentlemen of science. They made me take more than a kilo of sodium salicylate, which drastically weakened my eyesight. Proof is that at 36 years old I am wearing glasses and the bosses do not like that.

So, in 1878 I got out after three months in the hospital. I started working again for eight days; I got sick again; I stayed home for a month. I had two children and my companion got sick as well. No money and no bread in the house. Even though I was not part of the anarchist movement, which did not exist or was very small at the time (the study of sociology had not ended and it was still only in an embryonic state, plus they had not yet cut off the heads of anarchists to spread it), I had already, long before, freed myself of the prejudices that block the minds of the masses, an enemy of all authority.

I was an anarchist in heart, in love with what was beautiful, grand, generous, revolting against all abuses and injustices. From this fact I recognized the undeniable right that nature gave to every human being: the right to exist. An opportunity presented itself. With no qualms I put my hand in a stationmaster's cash box. I took my hand out with 80 francs. 80 francs does not go far when you have nothing—medicine is expensive.

Therefore, I decided to go back and visit the stationmaster's cash box, telling myself, "So what? The company steals enough from its employees. I who have absolutely nothing can very well take a little of its surplus." What a bad idea because I was arrested there and sentenced to a year in

prison. I am not embarrassed by this conviction, I take full responsibility. When society refuses you the right to exist, you have to take it and not help it along, which is cowardice.

There, companions, is the exact truth of my conviction. No companion knew about it, so I took sole responsibility for my actions and whoever takes advantage of human stupidity to try to discredit such a just and noble idea as the one that the anarchists defend, trying to dump on the whole of it the faults and wrongs (if faults and wrongs they are) of one of its defenders, is a cretin who trembles before the strict logic of the anarchist idea.

I thought that these explanations might be necessary for the anarchist companions, so I would appreciate it if you would include my letter in the next issue of *Révolté*.

Clément Duval, Mazas Prison, October 24 1886.

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Letter from Clément Duval, *Le Révolté*, n. 29, November 1886. [Clément Duval (1850–1935) was an infamous French illegalist, propagandist, and anarchist who was found guilty in 1886 of theft and attempted murder of a police officer. Originally sentenced to death, his sentence was commuted to deportation and hard labor in the French Guiana prison camps from where he finally escaped in 1901. His Memoir is available on PM Press.]

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