

Advice to My Anarchist Comrades

Elisée Reclus

1901

Dear Comrades,

It is our usual habit to exaggerate both our strengths and our weaknesses. During revolutionary periods, it seems that the least of our actions has incalculably great consequences. On the other hand, during times of stagnation, even though we have dedicated ourselves completely to the cause, our lives seem barren and useless. We may even feel swept away by the winds of reaction.

What then should we do to maintain our intellectual vigor, our moral energy, and our faith in the good fight?

You come to me hoping to draw on my long experiences of people and things. So as an old man I give you the following advice.

Do not quarrel or deal in personalities. Listen to opposing arguments after you have presented your own. Learn how to remain silent and reflect. Do not try to get the better in an argument at the expense of your own sincerity.

Study with discretion and perseverance. Great enthusiasm and dedication to the point of risking one's life are not the only ways of serving a cause. It is easier to sacrifice one's life than to make one's whole life an education for others. The conscious revolutionary is not only a person of feeling, but also one of reason, for whom every effort to promote justice and solidarity rests on precise knowledge and on a comprehensive understanding of history, sociology, and biology. Such a person can incorporate his personal ideas into the larger context of the human sciences, and can brave the struggle, sustained by the immense power he gains through his broad knowledge.

Avoid specialization. Side neither with nations nor with parties. Be neither Russians, Poles nor Slavs. Rather, be men who hunger for truth, free from any thoughts of particular interests, and from speculative ideas concerning the Chinese, Africans or Europeans. The patriot always ends up hating the foreigner, and loses the sense of justice that once kindled his enthusiasm.

Away with all bosses, leaders, and those apostles of language who turn words into Sacred Scripture. Avoid idolatry and value the words even of your closest friend or the wisest professor only for the truth that you find in them. If, having listened, you have some doubts, turn inward toward your own mind and re-examine the matter before making a final judgement.

So you should reject every authority, but also commit yourself to a deep respect for all sincere convictions. Live your own life, but also allow others the complete freedom to live theirs.

If you throw yourself into the fray to sacrifice yourself defending the humiliated and down-trodden, that is a very good thing, my companions. Face death nobly. If you prefer to take on slow and patient work on behalf of a better future, that is an even better thing. Make it the goal of every instant of a generous life. But if you choose to remain poor among the poor, in complete solidarity with those who suffer, may your life shine forth as a beneficent light, a perfect example, a fruitful lesson for all!

Greetings, comrades.

Elisée Reclus.

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