

Why I Was a Burglar

Marius Jacob

1905

Messieurs:

You now know who I am: a rebel living off the products of his burglaries. In addition I burned down several hotels and defended my freedom against the aggressions of the agents of power.

I laid bare to you my entire existence of combat: I submit it as a problem for your intelligence.

Not recognizing anyone's right to judge me, I don't ask for either pardon or indulgence. I don't go begging to those I hate and hold in contempt. You are the stronger. Dispose of me as you wish; send me to a penal colony or the scaffold. I don't care! But before going our separate ways let me tell you one last thing.

Since you primarily condemn me for being a thief it's useful to define what theft is.

In my opinion theft is a need that is felt by all men to take in order to satisfy their appetites. This need manifests itself in everything: from the stars that are born and die like beings, to the insect in space, so small, so infinite that our eyes can barely distinguish it. Life is nothing but theft and massacre. Plants and beasts devour each other in order to survive.

One is born only to serve as feed for the other. Despite the degree of civilization or, to phrase it better, perfectibility to which he has arrived, man is also subject to this law, and can only escape it under pain of death. He kills both plants and beasts to feed himself: he is insatiable.

Aside from objects of alimentation that assure him life, man also nourishes himself on air, water, and light. But have we ever seen two men kill each other for the sharing of these aliments? Not that I know of. Nevertheless these are the most precious of items, without which a man cannot live.

We can remain several days without absorbing the substances for which we make ourselves slaves. Can we do the same when it comes to air? Not even for a quarter of an hour. Water accounts for three quarters of our organism and is indispensable in maintaining the elasticity of our tissues. Without heat, without the sun, life would be completely impossible.

And so every man takes, steals his aliments. Do we accuse him of committing a crime? Of course not! Why then do we differentiate these from the rest? Because the rest demand the expending of effort, a certain amount of labor. But labor is the very essence of society; that is, the association of all individuals to conquer with little effort much well-being. Is this truly the image of what exists? Are your institutions based on such a mode of organization? The truth demonstrates the contrary.

The more a man works the less he earns. The less he produces the more he benefits. Merit is not taken into consideration. Only the bold take hold of power and hasten to legalize their rapine.

From top to bottom of the social scale everything is but dastardly on one side and idiocy on the other. How can you expect that penetrated with these truths I could have respected such a state of things?

A liquor seller and the boss of a brothel enrich themselves, while a man of genius dies of poverty in a hospital bed. The baker who bakes bread doesn't get any; the shoemaker who makes thousands of shoes shows his toes; the weaver who makes stocks of clothing doesn't have any to cover himself with; the bricklayer who builds castles and palaces wants for air in a filthy hovel. Those who produce everything have nothing, and those who produce nothing have everything.

Such a state of affairs can only produce antagonism between the laboring class and the owning, i.e., do-nothing, class. The fight breaks out and hatred delivers its blows.

You call a man a thief and bandit; you apply the rigor of the law against him without asking yourself if he could be something else. Have we ever seen a *rentier* become a burglar? I admit that I've never known of this. But I, who am neither *rentier* nor landlord, I who am only man who owns just his arms and his brains to ensure his preservation, had to conduct myself differently. Society only granted me three means of existence: work, begging, or theft. Work, far from being hateful, pleases me: man cannot do without working. His muscles and brain possess a sum of energy that must be spent. What I hated was sweating blood and tears for a pittance of a salary; it was creating wealth that wouldn't be allowed me.

In a word, I found it hateful to surrender to the prostitution of work. Begging is degradation, the negation of all dignity. Every man has a right to life's banquet.

The right to live isn't begged for, it's taken.

Theft is the restitution, the regaining of possession. Instead of being cloistered in a factory, like in a penal colony; instead of begging for what I had a right to, I preferred to rebel and fight my enemy face to face by making war on the rich, by attacking their goods.

Of course I understand that you would have preferred that I submit to your laws; that as a docile and worn out worker I would have created wealth in exchange for a miserable salary, and when my body would have been worn out and my brain softened I would have died on a street corner. Then you wouldn't have called me a "cynical bandit," but an "honest worker." Using flattery, you would even have given me the medal of labor. Priests promise paradise to their dupes. You are less abstract: you offer them a piece of paper.

I thank you for so much goodness, so much gratitude, messieurs. I'd prefer to be a cynic conscious of my rights instead of an automaton, a caryatid.

As soon as I took possession of my consciousness I gave myself over to theft without any scruples. I have no part in your so-called morality that advocates the respect of property as a virtue when in reality there are no worse thieves than landlords.

Consider yourselves lucky, messieurs, that this prejudice has taken root in the people, for this serves as your best gendarme. Knowing the powerlessness of the law, of force, to phrase it better, you have made them the most solid of your protectors. But beware: everything only lasts a certain time. Everything that is constructed, built by ruse and force, can be demolished by ruse and force.

The people are evolving every day. Can't you see that having learned these truths, conscious of their rights, that all the starving, all the wretched, in a word: all your victims, are arming themselves with jimmys and assaulting your homes to take back the wealth they created and that you stole from them

Do you think they'll be any more unhappy? I think the contrary. If they were to think carefully about this they would prefer to run all possible risks rather than fatten you while groaning in misery.

"Prison...penal colonies...the scaffold," it will be said. But what are these prospects in comparison with the life of a beast made up of all possible sufferings.

The miner who fights for his bread in the earth's entrails, never seeing the sun shine, can perish from one minute to the next, victim of an explosion; the roofer who wanders across the roofs can fall and be smashed to pieces; the sailor knows the day of his departure but doesn't know if he'll return to port. A good number of other workers contract fatal maladies in the exercise of their métier, wear themselves out, poison themselves, kill themselves to create for you. Even gendarmes and policemen — your valets — who, for the bone you give them to nibble on, sometimes meet death in the fight they undertake against your enemies.

Obstinate in your narrow egoism, do you not remain skeptical in regard to this vision? The people are frightened, you seem to be saying. We govern them through fear and repression. If he cries out we'll throw him in prison; if he stumbles we'll deport him to the penal colony; if he acts we'll guillotine him! All of this is poorly calculated, messieurs, believe you me. The sentences you inflict are not a remedy against acts of revolt. Repression, far from being a remedy, or even a palliative, is only an aggravation of the evil.

Collective measures only plant hatred and vengeance. It's a fatal cycle. In any case, since you have been cutting off heads, since you have been populating the prisons and the penal colonies, have you prevented hatred from manifesting itself? Say something! Answer! The facts demonstrate your impotence.

For my part I knew full well that my conduct could have no other issue than the penal colony or the scaffold. You must see that this did not prevent me from acting. If I gave myself over to theft it was not a question of gain, of lucre, but a question of principle, of right. I preferred to preserve my liberty, my independence, my dignity as a man rather than to make myself the artisan of someone else's fortune. To put it crudely, with no euphemisms: I preferred to rob rather than be robbed!

Of course I, too, condemn the act through which a man violently and through ruse takes possession of the fruits of someone else's labor. But it's precisely because of this that I made war on the rich, thieves of the goods of the poor. I too want to live in a society from which theft is banished. I only approved of and used theft as the means of revolt most appropriate for combating the most unjust of all thefts: individual property.

In order to destroy an effect you must first destroy the cause. If there is theft it is only because there is abundance on one hand and famine on the other; because *everything* only belongs to *some*. *The struggle will only disappear when men will put their joys and suffering in common, their labors and their riches, when all will belong to everyone.*

Revolutionary anarchist, I made my revolution. Vive l'anarchie!

For Germinal, to you, to the cause.

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At the turn of the 20th century Marius Jacob led a band of armed criminals originally based in Paris, though their activities eventually spread throughout France. Jacob claimed to have been involved in 106 robberies, and in 1903 his band killed a policeman in the course of a gun battle in Abbeville. He was captured 18 months later and put on trial on 1905. He was found guilty and sentenced to forced labor for life. The following originally appeared in the "Balai Social" in April 1905.

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