Declaration of Émile Henry at his trial

Émile Henry

1894

Gentlemen of the jury,

You know the charges for which I am accused: the explosion on Bons-Enfants street, that killed five people and led to the death of a sixth, the explosion of Café Terminus, which killed one person, led to the death of a second one, injured several others — at last, six revolver shots at those who were pursuing me after this last attack.

Proceedings showed you I aknowledge to be the author responsible for these acts.

Therefore, this is not a defence I am presenting to you. I don't want, in any way, to escape the reprisals of the society I have attacked.

Moreover, I recognize only one tribunal, myself; and the verdict of any other is irrelevant for me.

I only want to give you the explanation of my acts, and tell you how came to commit them.

I am an anarchist only recently. It wasn't until mid-1891 that I joined the revolutionary movement. Before that, I had lived in circles totally imbued with prevailing values. I was habitued to respect and even love the concepts of fatherland, family, authority and property.

But the teachers of this generation forget too often one thing: that life, with its struggles and iniquities, takes upon itself, being an indiscrete one, to open the eyes of ignorants and show them reality.

This is what happened to me as it happens to all. They told me that life was easy and largely open to the intelligent and energetic, experience showed me that only cynics and servile can have a good spot in the banquet.

They told me that social institutions were based on justice and equalty, and I saw all around me only lies and trickeries.

Each day removed an illusion.

Wherever I went, I was witness of the same suffering among some, the same pleasures among the others.

I didn't waste time realize that the grand words they had taught me to venerate: honor, devotion, duty, were only a mask veiling the most shameful wickednesses.

The industrial who was establishing a massive wealth on the work of the workers, who, them, were left without nothing, was said to be an honest gentleman.

The deputy, the minister whose hands were always open to bribes, were said to be devoted to public good.

The officer who tested his new-model rifle on seven years old children was said to have done his duty, and in the middle of Parliament, the President of the Council congratulated him!

Everything I saw revolted me, and my mind turned to the criticism of social organization. This criticism has been made too often for me to repeat it.

I only have to say that I became the enemy of a society I considered criminal.

For a time, I was attracted to socialism, I didn't waste any in fleeing this party. I had too much love for freedom, too much respect for individual initiative, too much a repugnance to be incorporated, to accept a number in the regimented army of the Fourth Estate/State.

Furthemore, I saw that — in essence — socialism doesn't change anything to this order. It keeps the authoritarian principle, and this principle, whatever what some so-called freethinkers can say, is only a relic of the faith in a superior power.

Scientific studies had gradually introduced me to the workings of natural forces.

But, I was materialistic and atheist; I realized that the God hypothesis was pushed aside by modern science which didn't need it anymore. Religious and authoritarian morality, based on falsities, had to disappear. But then, what new morality was in harmony with the laws of nature that had to regenerate this old world and give birth to an happy humankind ?

It was at this moment that I was put in relation with some anarchist companions, that I still consider today as some of the best I ever knew.

First, it was their character that attracted me. I liked in them their profound honesty, their complete frankness, their deep disdain of all prejudices, and I wanted to know the idea that made those men so different from the others.

This idea found in my mind a fertile ground which was ready to receive it by my own observations and personal reflections.

It only clarified what was still vague and uncertain in me.

I became anarchist myself.

I don't have to delve here into anarchist theory as a whole, I will only address its revolutionary, destructionary and negating side — for which I appear before you.

In this time of acute struggle between the bourgeoisie and its enemies, I am almost tempted to say, with Souvarine in '*Germinal*' : 'All reasoning about the future is criminal because it impedes on plain and simple destruction and hinders the march of Revolution.'

As soon as an idea is ready, once it has found its formula, it must be realized without waiting. I was convinced that the current organization was evil, I decided to fight against it, to hasten its disparition.

I brought a deep hatred to the struggle, renewed each day by the revolting spectacle of this society where everything is low, everything is dodgy, everything is ugly, everything is an obstacle to human passions, of the generous tendencies of the heart, of the free development of the mind.

I decided to strike as strongly and effectively as I could. Let us turn to the first attack I committed, the explosion on Bons-Enfants street.

I followed closely the events in Carmaux.

The first news of the strike filled me with joy: the miners seemed to finally be ready to give up once and for all peaceful and useless strikes, where the confident worker patiently waits for his few francs to win against the millions of companies.

They seemed to be embarking a path of violence, it was resolutely affirmed on 15 August 1892.

The offices and buildings of the mine were invaded by a crowd weary of suffering without taking vengeance, justice was about to fall upon the engineer hated by his workers, when weaklings interposed stepped in.

Who were these men ?

They were the men who destroy every revolutionary movement because they are afraid that, once the people are unleashed, it won't listen to their voice anymore, those who push millions of men to endure privations for months and months, in order to make a spectacle of their suffering and create themselves a popularity which will permit them to have a new mandate — I am speaking about the socialist leaders — indeed, those men took the lead in the striking movement.

Suddenly, we saw a cloud of fine speakers gentlemen descend upon the area, they placed themselves entirely at the disposition of the strike, organized subscriptions, held conferences, called for funds on all sides. The miners handed over all initiative to them. What followed is well known.

The strike dragged on, the miners became reacquainted with hunger, their usual partner, they ate the small reserve fund of their trade union, then the one of the other corporations that went to their help, then, after two months, with tails between their legs, they returned to their pit even poorer than before. It would have been simple, from the outset, to attack the Company in its only vulnerable point: money; to burn the coal stocks, break the extraction machinery, destroy the drainage pumps.

Thus, the Company would have capitulated very fast. But the high pontiffs of socialism don't use such methods, which are anarchist ones. In this game, one can risk prison, and who knows, maybe one of those bullets that did wonders at Fourmies. We don't earn a single municipal or parliamentary seat that way. Anyways, order, briefly disturbed, ruled again in Carmaux.

The Company, more powerful than ever, resumed its exploitation and the gentlemen shareholders congratulated one another on the result of the strike. Well then, the dividends would still be there.

This is when I decided to add my voice to this gathering of honorable tones, one that the bourgeois had already heard, but which they believed dead with Ravachol, the voice of dynamite.

I wanted to show the bourgeoisie that now, there would be no more complete joys, that its insolent triumphs would be troubled, that its golden calf would violently shake on its pedestal, until the ultimate blow, which would throw it into filth and blood.

At the same time, I sought to make the miners understand that there is only one category of men who care sincerely about their suffering and are ready to avenge them: the anarchists.

Those men are not in Parliament, like gentlemen Guesde and the others, they march to the guillotine.

Thus, I prepared a bomb. For a moment, I recalled the accusation that was made against Ravachol. And the innocent victims ? I settled the matter quickly. The house in which the offices of the Carmaux Company were located was occupied only by bourgeois. There would therefore be no innocent victims.

The bourgeoisie, as a whole, lives from the exploitation of misarable; it must then pay for its crimes as a whole.

As such, it was with the absolute certainty of the legitimacy of my act that I placed my bomb in front of the offices of the Company/Society.

I explained during the proceedings how I hoped, in the case in which my bomb was discovered before exploding, that it would explode at a police station and still reach my enemies. These are the motives that led me to commit the first attack of which I stand accused.

Let's turn to the second one, the Café Terminus attack. I came to Paris during the Vaillant afffair. I witnessed the immense repression that followed the Palais Bourbon attack and the draconian measures taken by the government against anarchists.

Everywhere, they spied, they raided, they arrested. In random roundups, crowds of people were torn from their families and thrown into prison. What became of the women and the children of these comrades during imprisonment ? Nobody took care of them.

The anarchist was no longer a man, he was a wild beast that was hunted from all sides and whom the entire bourgeois press — that vile slave of force — demanded to be exterminated in every tone.

At the same time, anarchist newspapers and pamphlets were seized and the right of assembly was banned.

Even worse, when they wanted to get completely rid of a companion, a snitch would place a packet — claiming it contained tannin- in their room. Then, the next day, a raid was conducted — under an order dated two days earlier. They then would find a box full of suspect powders, the comrade would go to trial and receive three years in jail.

Ask the despicable snitch who entered in the home of companion Merigeaud if that's not true to ?

But all these methods were good. They were hitting an enemy they had feared, and those who trembled sought to appear brave.

As the crowning act of this crusade against heretics, didn't M. Raynal, minister of the Interior, claim from the podium of the Chamber that the measures taken by the government had been effective, that they had spread terror in the anarchist camp. It wasn't enough. They sentenced to death a man who had killed no one. They had to appear brave until the end : they guillotined him one fine morning.

But, gentlemen of the bourgeoisie, you reckoned without your host.

You had arrested hundreds of people, you violated countless homes, but there were still men you ignored outside your prisons, and who, in the shadows, were witnessing your hunt for anarchists. They only waited for the opportune momentto, in turn, hunt the hunters.

Raynal's words were a challenge launched at the anarchists. The gauntlet was picked up.

The Café Terminus bomb is the answer to all your violations of freedom, your arrests, your raids, your press laws, your mass expulsions of foreigners, your victims sent to the guillotine. But why, will you ask, go attack peaceful consumers, who listen to music, and who, maybe, are not magistrates, deputies or civil servants ?

Why? It's very simple — The bourgeoisie treated all anarchists in a single bloc — One man, Vaillant, threw a bomb, the nine-tenths of the companions had never even heard about him. It didn't matter at all. You launched a mass persecution. Anyone with even one single anarchist acquaintance was hunted down.

Well then! Since you hold a whole party responsible for the acts of a single man, and strike as a bloc, then we strike as a bloc.

Should we only attack deputies who make laws against us, magistrates who apply those laws, policemen who arrest us ?

I don't think so.

All these men are merely instruments — they do not act in their own name, their functions were instituted by the bourgeoisie to defend itself, they are not more guilty than the rest.

The honorable bourgeois who, without holding any office, still earns the profits of their bonds, who live in idleness from the benefits produced by the work of workers, those too must have their share of the reprisals.

And not only them, but also all those who are who side with the current order, who applaud the government's actions and become their accomplices, those clerks/workers who earn from 300 to 500 francs and who hate the people even more than the fat bourgeois, this stupid and arrogant crowd which always sides with the strongest, the type of people who go to Terminus and other big cafés.

This is why I struck in the mass, without choosing my victims..

The bourgeoisie must understand that those who have suffered are finally weary of suffering : they bare their teeth and strike back with the same brutality used against them.

They have no regard for human life, because the bourgeois themselves don't care about it.

It's not for the murderers who did the Bloody Week and Fourmies to call others murderers.

They spare neither the women nor the children of the bourgeoisie, because the women and children of those they love are not spared either. The children, who, in the faubourgs, are slowly dying of anemia because bread is rare at home — are they not innocent victims ? The women who, in your workshops, grow pale and exhaust themselves to earn fourty sous per day, and they must count themselves lucky when poverty doesn't force them to prostitute themselves — are they not innocent victims ? The elderly, whom you made producing machines all their lives, and whom you throw in the streets and hospitals when their strengths are over — are they not innocent victims ?

At least, have the courage to own up your crimes, gentlemen bourgeois, and agree that our reprisals are well highly justified.

Of course, I have no illusions. I know my actions can't yet be fully understood by crowds not insufficiently preparated.

Even among workers, among whom I have long carried propaganda, led astray by your newspapers, some think that I'm their enemy. But I don't care about it. I don't care about the judgement of anybody. I also know that there are individuals claiming to be anarchists yet reject all solidarity with propagandists by the deed.

They try to create a subtle distinction between theorists and terrorists. Being too cowardly to risk their lives, they disown those who act. But the influence they claim to have on the revolutionary amounts to nothing. Today, the arena belongs to action, without illusions nor hypocrisy.

Alexander Herzen, the Russian revolutionary, said it:

'There are two paths: either deliver justice and march forward — or show mercy and stumble halfway'

We will neither show mercy nor stumble, and we will forever march forwards until the Revolution, goal of our efforts, comes to crown our work by making the world free.

In this war without pity we declared against the bourgeoisie, we ask for no pity.

We give death, we will know how to suffer it.

Thus, I wait for your verdict with indifference.

I know my head is not the last one you'll sever — others will fall, because the starving are starting to walk into your grand cafés and grand restaurants Terminus and Foyot.

You will add other names to the bloody list of our deaths. You hanged them in Chicago, beheaded them in Germany, hanged them in Jerez, shot them down in Barcelona, guillotined them in Montbrison and Paris, but what you will never be able to destroy is Anarchy.

Its roots run too deep ; it is stronger than a rotten society now crumbling apart, it is a violent reaction against the existing order. It represents the egalitarian and libertarian aspirations that seek to struggle directly at current authority. It is everywhere, which makes it invincible. It will end up killing you.

This, gentlemen of the jury, is what I had to say.

You will now hear my lawyer.

Your laws impose that every accused have a defender, my family has chosen Mr. Hornbostel.

What he could tell you will not change what I said. My statements are the exact expression of my thought. I won't move them.

Courage, Comrades, Long live Anarchy !

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Statements made by Émile Henry during his trial for the bombing at the Café Terminus. The attack and the statement are significant elements in the history of anarchism and terrorism. Indeed, Merriman (2016:1–15), Badier (2010:164–171), and Ferragu (2019:21–31) see in this attack/declaration the first instance of indiscriminate/modern terrorism in history, particularly—though not exclusively—based on Henry's own words: "This is why I struck in the mass, without choosing my victims." Most authors agree that indiscriminate terrorism was born in the 1890s — often revolving around the trio Salvador-Léauthier-Henry (Célestin Nat is not often mentioned but could be, maybe), with Henry being the one to 'theorize' it the first during his trial, in this declaration.

In contrast, Salomé (2016:164–171) argues that Henry was still targeting a specific bourgeois audience. The questions surrounding the motivations behind the attack and this potential definition remain debated. Indeed, Henry very likely received assistance in carrying out the bombing, yet he took sole responsibility, probably exaggerating the violence of his speech to protect his companions (Delpech 2006:190). Furthermore, he may have adopted grandiose rhetoric to impress Elisa Gauthey, the anarchist with whom he was in love (Petit 2023:78–86).

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