

Why I was a Burglar

“The right to live can’t be begged for—it is taken.”

Alexandre Jacob

2005

In Paris, between 1900 and 1903, Alexandre Jacob (1879–1954) and his comrades organized a group of anarchist burglars which carried out 156 break-ins before being caught. Their targets were the wealthy and the gang’s project was to punish them by striking at their most sensitive organ—their wallet. Jacob and his friends were dubbed “Workers of the Night” by the sensationalist Paris press. These unusual robbers believed that theft should not be for personal gain, but an attack against the world of the powerful. Instead of becoming rich himself from the gang’s enterprises, Jacob generously donated to anarchist causes.

Jacob was captured on April 21, 1903, tried and sentenced to life imprisonment. His term was commuted to five years hard labor at the dreaded penal colony in French Guiana from which he repeatedly tried to escape, thus having his sentence extended. He was released 23 years later only due to the closing of the prison. Upon release, Jacob lived an uneventful life until his suicide in 1954.

Jacob made evident his contempt for bourgeois convention at the conclusion of his 1903 trial in the statement to the court reprinted in part below. It was printed in 1999 by the French publisher L’Insominaque, in a collection of Jacob’s writings, and translated here by a collective member living in Montreal

—S. Laplage

Sirs:

You now know who I am—a rebel living on the fruits of my burglaries. Moreover, I set fire to several mansions and defended my freedom against attacks by the agents of power.

Since I don’t acknowledge anyone’s right to judge me, I don’t implore your pardon or indulgence. You are the strongest! Do what you wish with me—send me to a penal colony or to the scaffolds, it doesn’t matter to me. But one last word before we part.

Since you reproach me, above all, for being a thief, it would be useful to define theft... The more a person works, the less they earn; the less they produce, the more they benefit. Merit is not considered. Only the daring seize power and hasten to legalize their plunder. All is misconduct on one hand idiocy on the other. Having these convictions, how could you expect me to respect this situation?

One who sells liquor or owns a brothel gets rich while a genius dies in poverty on a hospital pallet. The baker kneads bread but has none; the shoemaker makes thousands of shoes, yet we see his toes; the weavers who make stocks of cloth have none to cover themselves with; the mason who builds castles and palaces suffocates in a disgusting hovel. Those who produce nothing have everything.

This situation can only create antagonism between the laboring and possessing—or idle—classes. This struggle ignites and hatred strikes its blows. Society only grants me three means of existing: work, begging, and theft. Work, far from repelling me, pleases me. People can't do without work. What disgusts me is sweating blood and water for the alms that are called a salary and to create the wealth I would be deprived of. In other words, it disgusts me to participate in the prostitution of work. Begging is degradation, the negation of one's dignity. Everyone has a right to life's banquet.

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Theft is restitution, repossession. Instead of being cloistered in a factory, which is like being in a prison colony, rather than begging for what I have the right to, I prefer to rebel and relentlessly combat my enemies by making war on the rich, by attacking their possessions. Of course, I'm sure that you would have preferred that I submit to your laws. As a docile and weak worker, I would have created wealth in exchange for a miserable salary, and when my body was worn out and my brain dulled, I would die in some corner. Then, you would call me an "honest worker," instead of a "cynical bandit." Using flattery, you would award me a medal of work. Priests promise paradise to their dupes; being less abstract, you offer them pieces of paper instead.

Thank you so much sir, for so much kindness, so much gratitude. I prefer to be a cynic aware of my rights than an automaton.

As soon as I began following my conscience, I became, without scruples, a thief. I don't give a damn about your so-called morality that approves respect for property as a virtue while proprietors are in reality the worst thieves. Consider yourselves lucky that this prejudice has become rooted with the ordinary people, as it's your best gendarme. Considering the law's force, you have made this prejudice your most solid protector. But be careful—everything in its time. Everything built on trickery and force can be demolished by trickery and force.

The people evolve each day. Understanding these truths, aware of their rights, every pauper, each beggar—meaning all your victims—having armed themselves with a crowbar, would charge your homes and take back their wealth, wealth they created and that you have stolen. Do you think they would be unhappier? I doubt it. If they reflected upon the situation, they would prefer to run the risk instead of fattening you up while they moan in destitution. Prison...the penal colony...the scaffold! is what one would say. But what are these perspectives compared to a life of being a moron with unlimited suffering...Even the gendarme and the police, your valets who, for the bones you give them to gnaw on, sometimes find death in the struggle they undertake against your enemies.

Obstinate in your narrow selfishness, you remain skeptical about this vision, don't you? The people are afraid, you seem to say. We govern by fear and repression; if they scream, we'll throw them in prison; if they budge, we'll deport them to a penal colony; if they act, we'll guillotine them! A bad calculation, sirs, believe me. The punishments you inflict aren't a remedy against acts of revolt. Repression, far from being a remedy, or even a palliative, only aggravates the problem.

Punishments can only sow the seeds of vengeance and hatred. It's a fatal cycle. Besides, ever since you've been cutting off heads, ever since you've been filling up prisons and penal colonies, have you stopped the manifestations of hatred? Answer! Respond! The facts demonstrate your impotence. As for me, I knew full well that my conduct could only lead me to the penal colony or the scaffold.

You must realize that this didn't prevent my actions. If I stole, it was not a question of gain, but a question of principle, of a right. I preferred to conserve my liberty, my independence, my human dignity to becoming the artisan of my master's fortune. To be blunt, I preferred to steal than to be stolen from.

In order to destroy an effect, one must destroy the cause. If there's theft, it's because there's abundance on hand famine on the other; because everything belongs to a few. The struggle will only disappear when people will share their joy and their sorrow, their work and their wealth—when all belongs to everyone.

Revolutionary anarchist, I made my Revolution.

For Anarchy

fifth Estate

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