

Extremists and the Pleasures of Destruction

by Theodore Dalrymple



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It is a matter of speculation how far a person's political opinions are determined by his temperament, his circumstances and his ratiocination, but it is certainly true that many extremists make their choice young, burn their boats and then cannot return, at least for a very long time, to normal life.

For personal reasons unnecessary to go into, I was reading recently a biography of the French anarchist of the Belle Époque, Alexandre Jacob (1879–1954). He was a very interesting person. He left school early and by the age of 14 he was planning explosions with dynamite. He became a very accomplished and prolific burglar of the houses of the wealthy, using the proceeds not to enrich himself but to fund anarchist organizations—rather a contradiction in terms, one

might have thought.

Once, burgling the house of someone whom he had thought to be a rich aristocrat, he discovered that the rich aristocrat was in fact poor, and therefore took nothing from the house. But he was not always a model of chivalry, and was quite prepared to kill the police, whom he regarded as paid lackeys of the rich. During his eventual trial his allies threatened the jurors, and (such was their sense of justice) their wives and children, with death if they passed too harsh a verdict on him.

Jacob was eventually sent to the prison in French Guiana for life, which was a kind of death penalty that dared not speak its name, for the average life expectancy there was 5 years, the number of deaths every year being more or less the same as of the new prisoners so that the prisoners never grew more numerous. Nearly 380 of the 500 prisoners who arrived with him died within six months of arrival.

While imprisoned, Jacob killed two people and tried to escape 17 times. But he was highly, even brilliantly, intelligent, and calmed down with age. Eventually he was released, and became a reasonably successful businessman in France until the German Occupation ruined him (he refused to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the black market). He never expressed regret for what he had done, but did express doubts about the wisdom of violent action. He committed suicide at the age of 75.

[Epoch Times](#).