

Letter from a Slave-Maker Ant (*Polyergus Rufescens*) to the Queen of Its Anthill, Written During Its Trip Through Europe

Santiago Ramón y Cajal



Introductory note and translation by Kelly J. Drumright © Kelly J. Drumright, por la introducción y la traducción, 2019

Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1852-1934) was a Spanish neurobiologist and histologist commonly referred to as the “founder of modern neuroscience” (Ehrlich 168). Ramón y Cajal was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1906 for his work on the nervous system, becoming the first Spaniard to receive the prestigious accolade. In addition to his medical research and work as a physician, Ramón y Cajal was an avid reader, writer, and art lover. He wrote several stand-alone works of speculative fiction, but only five short stories of this genre remain, collected in the volume *Cuentos de vacaciones* (1905). A century after the original appeared, Laura Otis translated the text as *Vacation Stories: Five Science Fiction Tales* (University of Illinois Press, 2006).

“Carta de una hormiga esclavista (*Polyergus rufescens*), escrita durante su viaje por Europa, a la reina de su hormiguero” [Letter from a Slave-Maker Ant (*Polyergus Rufescens*) to the Queen of Its Anthill, Written During Its Trip Through Europe] is a short text that appears in *Charlas de café. Pensamientos, anécdotas y confidencias* (1920), a compilation of Ramón y Cajal’s recollections from the *tertulias* he frequented at Café Suizo

in Madrid. Upon the café’s demolition in 1920, Ramón y Cajal reconstructed his conversations and grouped them into thematically distinct chapters.

Nestled between the amalgam of essays that comprise Chapter 10, “Sobre la política, la guerra, cuestiones sociales, etc.”, “Letter from a Slave-Maker Ant (...)” adopts a nonhuman perspective in order to critique early 20th Century human society (Ramón y Cajal 361-365). As the title indicates, an unnamed ant sends a missive back to their queen recounting their observations about human social organization and behavior in Europe. The narrator compares human professions, invention, and customs to the behaviors of various *Formicidae* (ant) and other insect species. However, the narrator spends most of the letter lambasting the human proclivity for violence and large-scale armed conflict. This is, perhaps, an unsurprising perspective given the text’s chronological proximity to the First World War. With this story, Ramón y Cajal joins a long lineage of writers who have employed the figure of the ant to evaluate human society. In his article “Ant-Utopias: A Historical Overview of Modern Myrmecological Xenofiction”, Mariano Martín Rodríguez points out that “the anthill



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was sometimes used (...) as a contrasting example of a harmonic, utopian kind of society to be admired and even imitated” (28). Ramón y Cajal’s approach to the ant as a rhetorical device that facilitates criticism certainly fits within the trend Mariano Martín Rodríguez describes.

For this translation, I have relied on the third edition of *Charlas de café* (1922),¹ which is fully digitized and available through HathiTrust Digital Library. My primary goal as a translator was to preserve the letter’s formal and disapproving tone. In translating the title, I opted for the gender-neutral, singular “they” because the narrator specifically identifies as one of the “[hormigas] neutras” (Ramón y Cajal 364). One particularly challenging aspect of the text was changing the species names the author invents to identify various types of human professions—these appear in Latinized Spanish in the original.

Although the reflections contained within “Letter from a Slave-maker Ant (...)” are nearly a century old, readers will find that, unfortunately, Ramón y Cajal’s criticisms of humanity remain all too relevant.

Works Cited

- Ehrlich, Benjamin (trans.) and Santiago Ramón y Cajal (2012). *Café Chats*. *New England Review*, 33, 1: 168-182.
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- Ramón y Cajal, Santiago (1922). *Charlas de café. Pensamientos, anécdotas y confidencias*. Third Edition. Madrid: Imprenta de Juan Pueyo Luna.

¹ All footnotes in the text are by Ramón y Cajal himself.

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My dearest mother:

Completing the mission you assigned me to secretly explore the anthills man inhabits (*Formica ferox* according to our naturalists), I now briefly recount my impressions to you.

These ants are exceptional not because they are wise or cultured, but because of their bulk. They live almost as we do, with several essential differences that say little in favor of their instincts and customs. In truth, they inhabit colossal anthills which they call *cities*, formed by a tangle of family quarters as well as connecting avenues and streets, but the latter appear to be filled with filth. Their dwellings become scorching in summer and glacial in winter because they lack the subterranean floors where we ants take shelter from the heat. In some of the more cultured metropolises, the humans have begun to spruce up their streets by paving them with cobblestones, although not with the perfection of our American relatives.¹

We may recognize various types of the *Formica ferox*: the *formica agricola*, which mimics our sister *Aphenogaster Barbara* (here I use the humans' ridiculous and pedantic nomenclature), but above all copy the ingenious South American *Attini*² who live by sowing and collecting seeds; the *formica lactantium*, which, imitating the conduct of many of our sisters, devote themselves to raising monstrous louses called cows, which are milked daily; the *formica horticola*, obsequious copier of our *laisus niger* and of other Hymenoptera communities who nourish themselves with fruits and vegetables; the *formica sacchara*, dedicated to the production

and sale of sugar, much like our first cousins the bees and the *Myrmecocystus melliger* from Texas; the *formica architectus*, constructor of completely enclosed houses who scandalously plagiarizes our relatives the *calicodoma* bees; finally, following in our footsteps, *Formica ferox* is not without a special military caste whose exclusive occupation is war, etc.

Regarding this unique profession, I have noticed a curious fact. Instead of fighting as we do to make useful slaves, our mercifulness extending to the point of exclusively seizing the larvae of a different race (larvae who, upon reaching adulthood, ignore their condition and serve us selflessly and diligently), men wage war ferociously with those of their same caste with no utility besides the pleasure of exterminating one another, capturing and returning hungry, mutilated prisoners, and exhausting the community's alimentary provisions. Just now I have witnessed, aghast, a general conflagration of nearly all of the great anthills of Europe, the result of which has been the death of ten million workers and the horrific ruin and desolation of all the human communities.

And regarding war, allow me to indicate a certain strange contradiction. *Homo sapiens*, as they take pleasure in calling themselves, possesses a peaceful body and a bellicose mind. Can you envisage a worm endowed with warlike instincts? But because the body has lost the ability to shape weapons of aggression and defense contained within, the brain has taken it upon itself to make up for this loss by fabricating varied, enormously costly lethal machines of annihilation which are then discarded during moments of work. How different from us, we who would never separate ourselves from our formidable hook-like mandibles!... Such an incapacity to man-

¹ *P. barbatus*, which paves its nests with small stones.

² Admirable ants, in whose vast nests they heap the flesh of certain mashed leaves where they plant a fungus (*Rhocietes gongyophora*, Müller), later living off of its spores.



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ufacture organic defensive instruments has brought with it a grave inconvenience: the creation of a supremely onerous social class of *armed idlers* to protect the *defenseless laborers*. Despite such a class, not a day passes without pillaging and violence. It is no wonder that beings endowed with irresistible predatory instincts find it comfortable and expeditious to kill off hunger by exchanging the weighty tool of work for the bandit's swift and efficient revolver!...

Representatives of the *Formica ferox* appear quite smug for having invented flight (what a brave novelty!) several million years after insects, reptiles, bats, and birds. But humans' flight is nothing more than an expeditious method of suicide; they disgrace it by flying not to make love in the blue, as we do, but to murder on a large scale. Therefore, humans are unaware of the Hymenopterans' sublime nuptial flight. The aviators would do better to cut their wings in a timely fashion and live secluded in their homes, in imitation of our queens.

Each nation lives fighting bloodily amongst themselves when they do not have foreigners to plunder. All of the social classes—like our soldiers, workers, and queens, we might say—squabble with one another. And now some deign to imitate the communism of the bees and ants! Such fools! For they wish to establish the new regime, conserving the plurality of the *females*, the separation of families, and the full freedom of love!... We resolved this dispute millions of years ago, but with logic and foresight, which is to say, by rejecting corrupting individualism and delegating the reproduction of the species to a single female, our most venerated queen, and several chosen males. And we, the gender neutral, do not feel nostalgia for love because we know from experience that love, slavery, and death are the same thing.³

³ Reader, do not forget that the queen is shut away and absolutely consumed with the tasks of maternity, and

Another incomprehensible custom has upset me enormously.

The *Formica ferox* is educated in schools where they are taught to speak and understand the Universe a little. Studying to learn! Has greater idiocy ever been seen?... Without demanding teachers or black-clad professors, we know how to communicate our desires and emotions, how to educate our children and slaves, how to navigate in unknown lands, how to distinguish harmful plants and animals from useful ones, how to undertake long hunting expeditions without hesitation, and how to work peacefully and jointly for the benefit of the community. We disregard rational logic as shameful, vile, and fallacious, and we have replaced it with the excellent method of direct vision or *intuition*, the supreme intellectual perfection of which all mammals, including humans, are envious. Fabre, one of the few friends we have among the humans, has compared instinct with genius.

In sum, and with this I conclude my lengthy missive. The human vermin have solved nothing transcendental: they still argue about the enigma of knowledge and instinct; they are only just beginning to divine the mechanism of the Cosmos; they are ignorant of life's essence, and in the practical and legal order, they have not even solved the urgent problems of social peace and the best political regime, let alone the enigma of death. Regardless of the apostles' preaching, it should worry you little when, just as the dust of the ruins has cleared and the blood dried, all of the most populous colonies of *Formica ferox* ready themselves for new wars, infinitely bloodier and deadlier than before. They say the coming battle will be decided entirely in the air by throwing cylinders of microbes and asphyxiating gases onto harmless towns.

Let us not lament too much such incredible

the few males perish once the queen is inseminated. The workers, however, may live for many years, as Lubbock has demonstrated.



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madness. Many insects from the bryophyte-eating family will find an endless refectory in the human corpses, which will also be a gift and delight for the nomadic tribes of hunting ants (*Myrmecocystus viatus*, *Aphenogaster testaceopilosa*, *Tapinoma erraticum*, etc.).

And as I have nothing more to learn here, rather much to forget, I will return as soon as possible to the anthill, our beloved homeland.

I embrace you warmly with my antennae,
R. y C.