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Errico Malatesta
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Anarchism and Reforms

Errico Malatesta

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A brief review of our first issue in the Naples-based Communist periodical *Prometeo* deals mainly with an article by Merlino¹ and the reviewer, reflects on the basic incomprehension of those who claim to know all and are never wrong. He says, ‘Although the definition may seem strange, there does undoubtedly exist a category of reformist anarchist.’

Clearly *Prometeo* believes it has made a discovery.

Despite the the pleasantness of the word, which has been abused and discredited by the politicians, anarchism has always and could never be other than reformist. We prefer to use the word reformer to avoid any possible confusion with those who are officially classed as ‘reformist’ and who strive for small and often illusory improvements in order to make the regime

¹ Saverio Merlino (1858–1930), Italian anarchist and was a contemporary of Malatesta’s and they remained friends until Merlino’s death in 1930 in spite of the fact that he had stopped calling himself an anarchist many years before and became a kind of social democrat who, according to Malatesta in his obituary of his friend, ‘in his intentions and in his hopes, sought to bring together all the advanced parties and groups’ — including the anarchists — though he declared himself in favour of parliamentary elections and, according to Malatesta, ‘joined the Neapolitan section of the Socialist Party’ — Editor.

more palatable, thereby helping to reinforce it; or those who, in good faith, seek to eliminate social ills while recognising and respecting (in practice if not in theory) the very political and social institutions which have given rise to and which feed those ills.

Revolution, in the historical sense of the word, means the radical reform of institutions, swiftly executed through the violent insurrection of the people against entrenched power and privilege. And we are revolutionaries and insurrectionaries because we want not just to improve the institutions that now exist, but to destroy them utterly, abolish all and every form of power by man over man and all parasitism, of whatever kind, on human labour. Because, too, we want to do so as quickly as possible and because we are convinced that institutions born of violence maintain themselves by violence and will only fall if opposed by sufficient violence.

But revolution cannot happen on demand. Must we, then, remain passive spectators, awaiting the right moment to present itself.

And even after a successful insurrection, shall we be able to realise suddenly all our desires and by some miracle convert from the hell of government and capitalism to the heaven of libertarian communism — that is, complete liberty of the individual in solidarity of interest with others?

These are illusions which take root in authoritarian soil; for authoritarians see the mass of the people as raw material to be manipulated into whatever mould they please through the wielding of power by decree, the gun and the handcuff.

But they are not anarchist illusions. We need the consent of the people and must therefore persuade by propaganda and by example. We must educate and seek to change the environment in such a way that education is accessible to an ever-increasing number of people.

Everything in history as in nature occurs gradually. When a dam bursts (that is, very rapidly, though always under the

influence of time) it is either because the pressure of water has become too great for the dam to hold any longer or because of the gradual disintegration of the molecules of which the matter of the dam is made. In the same way revolutions break out under growing pressure of those forces which seek social change and the point is reached when the existing government can be overthrown and when, by processes of internal pressure, the forces of conservatism are progressively weakened.

We are reformers today in that we seek to create the most favourable conditions and the greatest possible number of responsible and aware people necessary in order to bring about a successful people's insurrection. We shall be reformers tomorrow, when the insurrection has triumphed and liberty been won, in that we shall seek, by all the means of which freedom disposes — by propaganda, example and resistance — including violent resistance against those who would destroy our freedom — to win over an ever greater number of people to our ideas.

But we shall never recognise — and this is where our 'reformism' differs from that kind of 'revolutionism' which ends submerged in the ballot-boxes of Mussolini or others of his ilk — we shall never recognise the [existing] institutions. We shall carry out all possible reforms in the spirit in which an army advances ever forwards by snatching the enemy-occupied territory in its path. And we shall always remain hostile to any government — whether monarchist like today's or republican or Bolshevik, like tomorrow's.