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Errico Malatesta
Errors And Remedies
1896

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Errors And Remedies

Errico Malatesta

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There is such a variety of folk calling themselves anarchists these days and peddling such a variety of disparate and contradictory ideas as anarchy, that it really is small wonder that the public, being new to our ideas and unable to make out at a glance the big differences lurking under the blanket of a common name, remains deaf to our propaganda and regards us with suspicion.

Of course we cannot stop others from adopting whatever title they choose; nor would our jettisoning the title of anarchists achieve anything beyond adding to the confusion, since the public would reckon that we had merely switched flags.

All we can do, and what we should do, is to differentiate ourselves clearly from those whose notion of anarchy differs from our own, or who draw from the very same theoretical concept practical consequences opposite to the ones we draw. And such differentiation should come from a clear exposition of our ideas and from the relentless repetition, frankly and loudly, of our view of all things that fly in the face of our ideas and morality, without regard to personalities or party. Such a purported party fellowship between people who ultimately did not belong and could not have belonged to the same party, has

actually been one of the chief causes of the confusion. And a pass has been reached where lots of people praise, coming from “comrades,” the very same actions that they rail against in the bourgeois; and it looks as if their only yardstick in gauging good and bad may be this: whether the author of the deed under examination adopts the name anarchist, or not.

A multiplicity of errors has led some into utter contradiction of the principles that they, in theory, profess, and others to countenance that contradiction; just as there are many reasons for the attraction into our ranks of folk who mock socialism and anarchy and anything that looks beyond their own personal interests.

I cannot embark upon a systematic and comprehensive survey of such errors here. I shall merely allude to a few of them in the order that they come to mind.

First and foremost, let us talk of morality.

It is commonplace to find anarchists who “deny morality.” Initially, this is merely a figure of speech, signifying that, in terms of theory, they accept no absolute, eternal, immutable morality, and that, in practice, they defy the bourgeois morality that countenances exploitation of the masses and condemns those acts that pose a danger and a threat to the privileged. But then, gradually, as is customarily the case with so many other things, the rhetorical flourish is mistaken for a precise encapsulation of the truth. They forget that under the current moral code, in addition to the rules inculcated by priests and bosses in the interests of their ascendancy, there exist, and these account for the main substance of it, other rules that are the outworking of and preconditions for all social co-existence; they forget that rebelling against any rule imposed by force does not actually mean a rejection of all moral restraint and any sense of obligation towards others; they forget that, in order to wage

a reasonable fight against one moral code, one has to measure it in theory and in practice, against a higher code of morality; and, if only temperament and circumstances contribute a little, they wind up becoming immoral in the absolute sense of the word; which is to say, men with nothing to regulate their conduct, no criterion to guide them in what they do, and who surrender passively to the impulses of the moment. Today they take the crust of bread from their own mouths in order to help a comrade; tomorrow they will slay a man for visiting a brothel!

Morality is that line of conduct that each man regards as good. The morality that prevails at a given point in time, in a particular place, in a given society may be found wanting; and in fact we hold bourgeois morality to be dire; but a society without some form of morality is inconceivable, nor can any thoughtful person manage without some yardstick by which to gauge what is good and what is bad as far as he and others are concerned. In fighting established society, we counter the individualistic morality of the bourgeois, the morality of strife and competition, with a morality of love and solidarity, and strive to establish institutions that live up to how we think of relations between people. How else could we see evil in the bourgeois's exploitation of the people?

Another damaging claim, honestly made by many, but in others merely an excuse, is that the current social climate does not allow us to be moral; and that, as a result, it is pointless our making efforts that can never succeed, and the wisest course would be to glean as much as one can for one's own benefit from the current set-up with nary a care for anyone else, except changing one's ways, come the change in the arrangement of society. Certainly any anarchist, any socialist will understand the economic factors at work that force a man today to vie with his fellow men, and any good observer will see the powerlessness of individual rebellion against the overwhelming might of the social environment. But it is equally certain that without the rebellion of the individual who joins forces with other in-

dividual rebels to stand up to that environment and try to alter it, that environment would never change.

All of us, without exception, are obliged to live lives pretty much at loggerheads with our ideals; but we are socialists and anarchists because of and to the extent that we are irked by this contradiction, and strive to reduce it to a minimum. On the day we conform to our surroundings, we would of course be spared the determination to change them and turn into mere bourgeois; penniless bourgeois, maybe, but for all that, bourgeois in our deeds and in our intentions.

Another source of very grave errors and blame has been the construction placed by many upon the theory of violence.

Today's society is underpinned by force of arms. No oppressed class has ever managed to emancipate itself without recourse to violence; the privileged classes have never surrendered a part, the tiniest fraction, of their privileges, except because of force or fear of force. Established social institutions are such that changing them by means of phased, peaceful reforms appears to be impossible; and the necessity for a violent revolution that, by breaching and trampling all over the law, re-founds human society upon fresh foundations cannot be avoided. The obstinacy and brutality with which the bourgeoisie reacts to even the most anodyne demand from the proletariat are proof of the inevitability of violent revolution. It is therefore logical and essential that socialists, and especially anarchists, form a revolutionary party and look forward to and expedite the revolution.

Unfortunately, however, people have a tendency to mistake the means for the end; and violence, which we see as being—and so it must stay—a harsh necessity, has for many turned into virtually the sole purpose of the struggle. History is awash with examples of men who, having embarked upon struggle

be ground down by the weight of the greatest suffering rather than trespass against a principle.

As for myself, I would breach every principle in the world in order to save someone; in which I would in fact be upholding a principle, for, as I see it, all social and sociological principles boil down, essentially, to one: the welfare of men, of all men.

for a lofty purpose, have then, in the heat of battle, lost the run of themselves and lost sight of their purpose and turned into ferocious butchers. And, as recent events have shown, many an anarchist has not avoided this terrifying danger in violent struggle. Irked by persecution, driven mad by the instances of blind savagery emanating daily from the bourgeoisie, they have begun to ape the example set by the bourgeois; and a spirit of vengeance, a spirit of hatred has replaced the spirit of love. And, like the bourgeois, they have described such vengeance and hatred as justice. Then, in order to justify such acts, which might be explained away as the effects of the proletariat's dire predicament and taken as yet further reason to call for the destruction of a state of affairs that can generate such dismal outcomes, a few have started devising the weirdest, most fanatical, most authoritarian theories; and, heedless of self-contradiction, they have depicted these as the very latest advance in anarchist thinking. Simultaneously claiming to be determinists, and denying the very notion of responsibility, they have set about tracking down those responsible for the present state of affairs, and have identified them not only in the conscious bourgeois who knowingly do evil, not only in the mass of bourgeois who are bourgeois by birth and who have never questioned their status, but also in the mass of workers who are the main prop of oppression by enduring it without rebelling; and have settled upon the... death penalty for them all. And there has even been the odd one who, raving about some "latent responsibility," has concluded that pregnant women and children deserve butchering! Rightly querying the right of bourgeois judges to impose as much as one hour's imprisonment, they set themselves up as arbiters in the life and death of others and go so far as to say that *those who do not think as we do deserve killing!* Which defies belief and which many refuse to credit! Yet only a few weeks back, there, in one "anarchist" newspaper for all to read, were these words: "A bomb went off in Barcelona at a religious procession, leaving

40 dead and who knows how many injured upon the ground. The police have arrested upwards of 90 anarchists in the hope of apprehending the heroic author of the outrage.” No rationale, no meaning, nothing; there is heroism in the slaughter of defenseless women, children, and men—because they were Catholics. This is a step beyond vendetta: it is the morbid fervor of bloodthirsty mystics, a blood sacrifice upon the altar of a God... or of an idea, which amounts to the same thing. Oh Torquemada! Oh Robespierre!

I hasten to say that the vast majority of Spanish anarchists spoke out against the demented deed. But there are those who purport to be anarchists and who exult in the act; and that is sufficient for governments to pretend to lump us all together and for the public to genuinely mix us up.

Let us shout it loudly at all times; anarchists should not and cannot be avengers; they are liberators. We bear hatred towards none; we are not fighting to avenge ourselves or to avenge anyone else; we seek love towards all, liberty for all.

Since existing social inevitability and the stubborn resistance from the bourgeoisie oblige the oppressed to have recourse to the last resort of physical force, we do not shrink from the harsh necessity and ready ourselves to employ it successfully. But let us have no unnecessary victims, not even in the enemy camp. The very purpose on behalf of which we struggle requires us to be kind and humane even in the heat of battle; so I fail to understand how one can fight for a purpose like ours without our being kindly and humane. And let us not forget that a liberating revolution cannot be born of massacre and terror, these having been—and ever so it shall remain—the midwives to tyranny.

On the other hand, another mistake, the opposite of the one the terrorists make, poses a threat to the anarchist movement. Partly by way of a backlash against the way that violence has been misused in recent times, partly due to lingering Christian notions and above all due to the influence of the mystical

preaching of Tolstoy, whose genius and moral qualities have made it fashionable and conferred a cachet upon it, the supporters of passive resistance are starting to acquire a measure of significance among anarchists, their principle being that we must endure oppression and degradation in our own cases and in those of others rather than do harm to the oppressor. This is what has been described as *passive anarchy*.

Since some, impressed by my aversion to needless, harmful violence, have tried to credit me—I am none too sure whether the intention is to praise me or blacken me—with leanings in the direction of Tolstoyism, let me use this opportunity to state that, in my view, that doctrine, no matter how sublimely altruistic it might seem, is in reality the very negation of instinct and social obligations. A man may, if he is very... Christian, patiently endure all manner of vexation without using every available means to defend himself and perhaps remain a moral person. But in practice and much against his will, would he not be simply terrifically selfish if he were to let others suffer oppression without trying to come to their defence? If, say, his preference were to see some class ground into misery, some people downtrodden by the invader, some man suffer trespass against his life and liberty, rather than that a hair on the head of the oppressor be harmed?

There may be instances in which passive resistance is an effective weapon, in which case it would certainly be the most commendable weapon, in that it would be the most sparing one in terms of human suffering. But in most instances, professing passive resistance amounts to the oppressors’ being reassured against the fear of rebellion and thus a betrayal of the cause of the oppressed.

Odd to note how the *terrorists* and the *Tolstoyans*, precisely because they, one and all, are mystics, arrive at pretty much the same practical consequences. Those who would not hesitate to destroy half of humanity as long as the *idea* emerged triumphant; and those who would let the whole of humanity