

A Few Words To Bring The Controversy To An End

Errico Malatesta

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Merlino is developing an odd approach to debate. From what is said to him he picks out some phrase that he then wrenches out of its context, toying with it and twisting it and, because he then ignores the context, he manages to depict you as saying whatever suits him. Besides, he never answers questions put to him nor replies to rebuttals; but swoops on some incidental example or detail and addresses it, ignoring the essential point at issue; so that the subject of contention is never the same from one response to the next.

And actually, who could guess that we were in the throes of debating whether parliamentarism is or is not compatible with anarchy?

If things carry on like this, we can spend a good century arguing without ever discovering whether we agree or not.

Anyway, let us follow where Merlino leads.

Why is Merlino saying that “we are gradually becoming closer?”

Is it because we concede the need for cooperation and agreement between the component members of society and because we defer to conditions outside of which cooperation and agreement are not possible? But, sure, that is socialism and Merlino knows perfectly well that we have always been socialists and therefore always very “close.”

The point, now, is whether socialism is to be anarchist or authoritarian, that is, whether agreement should be voluntary or imposed.

And what if people refuse to agree? Well, in that case, there will be tyranny or civil war, but not anarchy. Anarchy is not brought about by force; force can and should be used to sweep away the material stumbling blocks and allow the people a free choice as to how they wish to live; but, beyond that, it can achieve nothing.

So, if “a handful of good-for-nothings or hotheads, or even a single individual pig-headedly say no, is anarchy then to be ruled out?” Damn it! Let’s not bandy phoney arguments. Such individuals are free to say *no*, but they will not be able to stop others from pushing for *yes*—and so they will have to fit in as best they can. And if “good-for-nothings and hotheads” were sufficiently numerous as to be in a position to seriously thwart society and prevent it from blithely functioning, then ...sad to say, anarchy would still be a way off.

We do not depict anarchy as some idealized paradise indefinitely postponed precisely because it is too beautiful.

Men are too flawed, too used to competing with and hating one another, too brutalized by suffering, too corrupted by authority for a rearrangement of society to be likely to turn them all, overnight, into ideally good and intelligent beings. But no matter the measure of the impact we can expect that rearrangement to produce, the system needs changing and, in order to change it, we must bring about the essential preconditions that allow for such change.

Our reckoning is that anarchy is feasible in the near future, because we think that the requisite conditions for it to exist are already embedded in the social instincts of men today; so much so, that one way or another, they keep society afloat in spite of the disruptive, anti-social operations of government and property. And we reckon the remedy and bulwark against the noxious tendencies of some and against the dangers posed by the conflicts of interests and inclinations, is not government, whatever its hue, but freedom; being made up of men, any government cannot help but tilt the scales in favor of the interests and tastes of those who are in government. Freedom is the great reconciler of human interests, as long as it is rooted in equality of conditions.

Whilst we want to see anarchy made a reality, we are not waiting for crime or the possibility of crime to be banished from the face of society; but we want no police because we do not believe they have the ability to prevent crime or clear up after it, whereas the police themselves are the source of a thousand woes and a standing menace to freedom. Social defense must be taken care of by the whole society; if arms must be taken up in order to defend ourselves, we want to see everyone armed rather than a number of us constituted as some praetorian guard. We remember only too well the fable of the horse that submitted to the bridle and let itself be mounted by a man, the better to hunt the stag—and Merlino is well aware of how much of a lie there is in talk of “oversight by the citizenry,” when those in need of such oversight are the very ones who command strength.

Nor is Merlino any more rigorous when he borrows our example of the “European Entente”. We have never claimed that equality and justice were features of present day relations between states, any more than we have denied the need for a federative, libertarian orchestration of international interests. We merely said that the violence and injustice, which prevail in relations between states today, would not be remedied by some international government or Parliament. Greece today is under the yoke of the Great Powers and she resists it; if she was represented in some world Parliament and had agreed to abide by the determinations of the majority of that Parliament, she would be subject to an equal or greater violence, and would have no right to resist it.

Moreover, what is Merlino talking about when he says that we are mid-way between Individualism and Socialism?

Individualism is either a theory of struggle, “every man for himself and devil take the hindmost,” or it is a teaching that everyone should think for himself and do as he pleases without a care for others, out of which universal harmony and happiness emerge, as if by some law of nature.

In either sense, we are the polar opposites of individualists, every bit as much as Merlino may be. The issue between him and us is an issue of freedom or authority and, to be quite frank, it strikes us that he has reached (or, rather, has strayed to) a position midway between authoritarianism and anarchism.

We come now to the matter of tactics.

Merlino is astounded that we should have rejoiced at the socialists' success.¹ We find his astonishment truly odd.

We rejoice when democratic socialists get one over on the bourgeois, just as we would celebrate if republicans got one over on the monarchists, or the liberal monarchists on the clericals.

We would be a lot happier still if we had managed to convert to anarchism those who cast their votes for the socialists, and had we managed to ensure that not a single vote was cast for the socialists. But in the present instance, had the hundred thousand-odd voters who did cast their votes for the socialists not done so, that would not have been because they were anarchists but because they would either have been various shades of conservatives, or folk who abstained out of sheer indifference, or who cast their votes indiscriminately for whoever was paying, promising, or threatening the most. And Merlino is astounded that we should rather know them to be socialists, or half-baked socialists?

Good and evil are quite relative; and a reactionary party may well represent a step forwards in comparison with an even more reactionary one.

We are always delighted to see a clerical turn into a liberal, a monarchist into a republican, a fence-sitter into something; but it does not follow from that that we—whose thinking is streets ahead of theirs—must become monarchists, liberals, or republicans.

Take an example: given the current status of the southern provinces, it would have been an excellent sign if the supporters of Cavallotti quite simply had met with success on a wide scale;² and we would have rejoiced at that, just as we reckon the democratic socialists would have as well. But that is not to say that the socialists and anarchists should have championed Cavallotti's supporters in southern Italy. Instead, the socialists stand their own candidates everywhere, even if that might lessen the chances of the less reactionary candidate—whereas we lobby everywhere for deliberate abstention, not bothered by whether or not it might favor this candidate or that. For us, it is not the candidate that counts, insofar as we do not see the point of having "good deputies"; what matters is some indication of people's frame of mind; and of the thousand and one bizarre frames of mind in which the voter may be found, the best is the one that opens his eyes to the pointlessness and dangers of returning someone to Parliament, and the one that impels him to work directly for what he wants through joining forces with all whose wishes are the same as his.

Finally, what possessed Merlino to finish his letter with innuendoes that are, to say the least, in poor taste, given the current status of his relations with anarchists?³ Merlino claims that he is still an anarchist and strives to get us to think of anarchy in his terms and to have us embrace

¹ The reference is to the socialists' success in the latest elections.

² Felice Cavallotti, leader of the radical Left, was a popular figure of Italian politics. He died in a duel in 1898.

³ The closing paragraph of Merlino's article reads: "One last word. You claim that all anarchists are abstentionists. How wrong you are! The fiercest abstentionists vote for the republicans, for the socialists, for their personal friends, not to mention the Azzarettis, which are quite a few! What is gained by abstentionist tactics is to take part in elections not in the name of our own principles, but under a false name and to the advantage of other parties." Antonino Azzaretti was a Sicilian anarchist who had expressed public support for a certain right-wing candidate.

his tactics; which he is entitled to do. But why adopt that tone, which may well be appropriate in dealings with an opponent that he does not care about wounding, but which is out of place towards comrades he is out to persuade and win over?

Some time ago, in responding in *Il Messaggero* to Malatesta⁴ who had talked about the anarchist party's "incipient reorganization" Merlino was poking fun, while he *knew* that the anarchists actually were reorganizing and had already produced results, very modest results to be sure, but real for all that. And now here he is dredging up the history of self-styled abstentionist anarchists who vote; here he is, casting Azzaretti up to us, the very same Azzaretti we ourselves denounced in these columns.⁵

Well, if there abstentionists who vote — and we know that, actually, there are—that means that they are not fully aware of the views they profess; or else that they cannot find in the anarchist ranks the strength needed to stand up to outside influences; the cure lies, not in all of us abjuring our programme or adding to the causes of confusion and weakness, but in nurturing individuals' consciousness and bolstering the party's organization.

And if, after that, there are still knaves who sell out, it merely remains for them to be unmasked and driven out.

⁴ Malatesta is referring to himself in third person because his editorial note is unsigned.

⁵ Malatesta had harshly criticized Azzaretti three weeks before in an article titled "Cose sporche" (dirty stuff).

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The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.

Translated from Malatesta's note to the article "Poche parole per chiudere la polemica," by Francesco Saverio Merlino, *L'Agitazione* (Ancona) 1, no. 6 (18 April 1897). This further exchange between Merlino and Malatesta follows directly the one of March 28, included here before the present one. In this further article, Merlino claims that the respective positions are "gradually becoming closer."

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