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Abstentionism and anarchism

Camillo Berneri

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In a letter to Gambuzzi (Locarno, 6 November 1870), Bakunin wrote that he was happy [to hear] that the former had returned to Naples to try to get elected as a deputy, and added:

You will perhaps be surprised to see me, a determined and passionate abstentionist, pushing my friends to get elected as deputies now. The truth is that things and circumstances have changed. First of all, my friends, starting with you, have been so insistent about our ideas, about our principles, that there is no danger that they could ever forget them, dishonor them, sacrifice them, and fall back into their old political habits.

Moreover, the times have become so grave, the danger that threatens the freedom of all countries so formidable, that it is necessary that men of goodwill everywhere rise to the occasion, and above all, that our friends be in a position

where their influence is as effective as possible. Cristoforo (Fanelli) promised to write me and to keep me informed about your electoral struggles, which interest me enormously.

Fanelli was elected deputy for Torchiara in December 1870, and Friscia was reelected in Sicily.

When the most active organizers of the First International were elected as deputies, Bakunin saw in this the organization's empowerment due to the [resulting] increased material ease (free travel), the possibility of broader connections, greater influence among the masses, and greater freedom of propaganda. Faced with the parliamentary institution, he remained an anti-parliamentarian and an abstentionist, and his conduct in 1870 was not at all close to that of Andrea Costa¹ nor that of F. S. Merlino.²

For Bakunin, the problem was one of strategy and not of tactics. Not distinguishing between the former and the latter leads to an abstentionist cretinism that is no less childish than the cretinism of parliamentarism. What is the difference between strategy and tactics? I will use a very simple example to

¹ Andrea Costa (1851–1910) started out as an anarchist, helping organize the Congress of Rimini in 1872 where Italian sections of the International Workingmen's Association formed an Italian Federation of the International that sided with Bakunin over Marx, and later joining the Anarchist International of St. Imier. In 1879, however, he renounced anarchism in his open letter "To my friends from Romagna", causing an internal crisis in the Italian anarchist movement, and in 1882, he became the first socialist to get elected to the Italian Chamber of Deputies. In 1892, his Italian Revolutionary Socialist Party merged with two other groupings to form the Italian Socialist Party (PSI).

² Francesco Saverio Merlino (1856–1930), Italian lawyer and anarchist militant. Merlino attended the London Congress of the Anarchist International in 1881 along with Malatesta and Kropotkin; in 1897, however, he published an article in a bourgeois newspaper calling for support of socialist and republican candidates in the upcoming general elections. Following a subsequent polemic with Malatesta, he broke with anarchism and joined the Neapolitan section of the PSI in 1899.

One could reply that all these hypotheses are nothing but flights of fancy, but this response does not get around the problem: if an anarchist assesses a given political situation as one that is so exceptional that it requires the participation of anarchists in elections, will he stop being an anarchist and a revolutionary if – even though he does not carry on propaganda that nurtures electoral and parliamentarist illusions, and even though he does not strive to break the theoretical and tactical tradition of abstentionism – he goes to the polls without any wishful thinking about the programs and the candidates of the parties on the ballot, but rather wanting to contribute to the disappearance of the illusions that the masses have with regard to a popular government; wanting to contribute to the goal of getting the masses to go beyond their shepherds?

It is possible that the anarchist is mistaken in his assessment of the political moment, but the problem is whether, by judging a political moment in this manner and acting accordingly, he stops being an anarchist.

The problem, in short, is as follows: is abstentionism a tactical dogma that does not permit of any strategic exception?

It is a question I ask those who are now furious at the Spanish anarchists who have considered it useful not to fuel abstentionism. But before commenting on this specific case, allow me to explain how I view the issue of abstention in [the context of] the Spanish situation, which should not be equated with the French one.

would not raise their hands at assemblies to approve an agenda which was in accordance with their ideas and which was presented by a speaker whom they had just warmly applauded... so as to not vote.

If tomorrow a plebiscite were to be held (on disarmament versus armed national defense, autonomy for ethnic minorities, decolonization versus the keeping of colonies), there would still be some ossified anarchists who would believe it their duty to abstain.

This abstentionist cretinism is so extreme that it is not worthwhile to dwell on it. On the other hand, there is every reason to examine the oversimplification that is abstentionism. In the letter quoted above, Malatesta recalled that when Cipriani⁴ had been elected deputy in Milan, some of his comrades had been scandalized because, after having promoted abstention, he, Malatesta, had been pleased with the result of the election: "I said, and would say it again, that because there are those who, deaf to our propaganda, go to the polls, it is comforting to see that they vote for a Cipriani rather than for a monarchist or a clerical – not because of any practical effects that this may have, but because of the feelings it reveals."

Now, I would like to be able to ask Malatesta the following question: if an electoral triumph of left-wing parties proved to be an invigorating drink raising the dejected morale of the working class, if that triumph caused the exponents of those parties to discredit themselves while at the same time weakening the fascist forces, if that triumph were a *sine qua non* for the possible development of a social revolution, how should an anarchist act?

⁴ Amilcare Cipriani (1844–1918), Italian socialist and revolutionary. After representing Italy at the founding congress of the First International in 1864 and participating in the defense of the Paris Commune, he was elected to the Italian Chamber of Deputies in 1886, 1897, and 1913, but never took his seat as he refused to swear an oath of loyalty.

which one should attribute no meaning that goes beyond that of serving as an illustration.

I find myself barricaded at home, surrounded by a mob of fascists shouting: "Die!" The police arrive and try to prevent the attackers from breaking down the door of my house. It would be idiotic and absurd for me to start shooting at the policemen from the window. If I did so, I would commit a serious error of strategy.

I find myself at a demonstration in a city square. The police shoot at the demonstrators. I take the floor and explain to the crowd that the policemen represent the repressive power of the State and as such should find before them armed and determined demonstrators, etc. If instead I spoke of the policemen who arrest the insane, who save people during floods, etc., I would make an error of tactics.

With this difference cleared up, a problem arises: if it is clear that parliamentarism cannot be reconciled with anarchism, is abstentionism a question of strategy or a question of tactics for anarchists?

This question occurred to me for the first time in 1921 as a result of the following little adventure. My postman was a socialist. Seeing that I was receiving leftist newspapers, he treated me with a certain familiarity, although we would never exchange more than greetings or a quick comment about the political situation, and he would show his sympathy for me by asking my family when he would not see me: "And Camillo? How is Camillo?" Not far from my home there was a workers' house inhabited by socialists and communists, and when I passed by on spring or summer evenings, the tenants who were enjoying the fresh air would greet me cordially, even though I had only become friends with one of them.

The shoemaker, in front of his shop that I used to go past every day, would greet me too, even though I was not a client of his.

The house searches, the arrests, being often seen in the company of workers – all of that won me the sympathy of the “people” of the neighborhood. One afternoon, though, I saw the postman enter my studio along with other youths unknown to me. It was election time and they came to pick me up as a voter. “We have a car”, they told me. I replied: “If I wanted to vote, I would walk or take the tram; it’s not out of laziness that I don’t go to the polls.” And... there I gave them a lesson in anarchism, of which – no doubt through a fault of my own, but also because they were all heated up about the “electoral battle” – they understood so little that they left with the “We will remember this!” of the *sans-culottes* of 1789. That same day I realized that the “people” of the neighborhood had judged me a “deserter” and that my... popularity was compromised.

The trouble was that for the first time, I wondered whether abstentionism was always appropriate. Those who know just what sort of thing the election of 1921 was³ will perhaps excommunicate me, but they will certainly not shoot me if I tell them that I refrained from abstentionist propaganda and that I turned against the vestal virgins of anarchism to defend the few comrades of the Florentine Anarchist Union (two or three) from the ostracism to which they were condemned for having gone to the polls. I said it then and I will say it again: the error is one of strategy and not of tactics; it is a venial sin rather than a mortal sin.

But the vestal virgins concluded that I was “too young” not to be told that I had understood nothing of anarchism.

The appeal to principles leaves me cold, since I know that it is the opinions of men, and not of gods, that go under that name; opinions which got lucky for two or three years, for decades, or even for centuries, but which ended up looking

³ The Italian general election of 1921 led to a quick succession of weak liberal governments that ultimately ended with the Fascist March on Rome and the appointment of Mussolini as prime minister in October 1922.

baroque to everyone [involved]. Malatesta’s heresies are now sacrosanct principles for all the Malatestians. Now, it is true that Malatesta, being neither a priest nor a megalomaniac, expounded his ideas as opinions and not as principles. Principles only have legitimacy in experimental sciences, and even there they are but formulations of laws – approximate formulations.

An anarchist cannot but detest closed ideological systems (theories that are called “doctrine”) and cannot attribute to principles more than a relative value.

But this is a subject that would have to be expanded upon, so I will return to the explosive issue of abstentionism.

As I look upon the total weakness of the antiparliamentary critique in our press, a gap that seems very serious to me, I am not an abstentionist, since I do not believe, and have never believed, in the usefulness of abstentionist propaganda during election time, and I have always refrained from carrying it on, except occasionally in a face-to-face setting with someone who was, in my opinion, receptive to going from the ballot to the gun.

Abstentionist cretinism is that political superstition which considers the act of voting to be an injury to human dignity, or assesses the political situation by the number of non-voters – or even combines one of these childish behaviors with the other.

Malatesta already dealt with the former [belief] when he wrote to Fabbri in May 1931, observing that many comrades attributed extreme importance to the act of voting and did not understand the true nature of the electoral question. Malatesta cited typical examples.

One time, in London, a borough council distributed forms to ask the residents of the neighborhood whether they wanted a public library to be built. There were some anarchists who, even though they wanted a library, did not want to take part in the referendum because they believed that answering “yes” would amount to voting. In Paris and in London, anarchists