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The Lesser Evil

Dominique Misein

Several years ago during an election, a famous Italian journalist invited his readers to hold their noses and fulfill their duty as citizens by voting for the party then in power. The journalist was well aware that to the people this party sent forth the stench of decades of institutional rot—abuse of power, corruption, dirty dealings—but the only political alternative on the market, the left, seemed even more ominous. There was no choice but to hold one's nose and vote for the rulers already in power.

At the time, though it was the subject of much debate, this invitation had some success and can be said, in a sense, to have won the day. This is not surprising. Basically, the journalist's argument used one of the most easily verified conditioned social reflexes, that of the politics of the lesser evil that guides the daily choices of the majority of people. Faced with the affairs of life, good common sense is always quick to remind us that between equally detestable alternatives the best we can do is choose the one that seems to us to be the least likely to bring unpleasant consequences.

How can we deny that our entire life has been reduced to one long and exhausting search for the lesser evil? How can

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Retrieved on 1/30/21 from <https://sites.google.com/site/anarchyinitaly/diavolo-in-corpo/the-lesser-evil>

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we deny that that concept of choosing the good—understood not in the absolute sense, but most simply as what is esteemed as such—is generally rejected *a priori*? All of our experience and that of past generations teach us that the art of living is the hardest and that the most ardent dreams can only have a tragic conclusion: victims of the alarm clock, of the closing titles of a film, of the last page of a book. “It has always been this way”—we are told with a sigh, and from that we conclude that it will always be this way.

Clearly, all this does not keep us from understanding how harmful everything we have to face is. But we know how to choose an evil. What we lack—and we lack it because it has been taken from us—is not the capacity to judge the world around us, the horror of which imposes itself with the immediacy of a punch in the face, so much as the ability to go beyond the given possibilities—or even merely attempt to do so. Thus, accepting the eternal excuse that one runs the risk of losing everything if one is not satisfied with what one already has here, one winds up going through one’s existence under the flag of renunciation. Our own daily lives with their indiscretions offer us numerous examples of this. In all sincerity, how many of us can boast of reveling in life, of being satisfied by it? And how many can say that they are satisfied by their work, by these hours without purpose, without pleasure, without end? And yet, faced with the bugaboo of unemployment, we are quick to accept waged misery in order to avoid misery without wages. How do we explain the tendency of so many to prolong their years of study for as long as possible—a characteristic that is quite widespread—if not in terms of the refusal to enter into an adult world in which one can see the end of an already precarious freedom? And what can we say then of love, that spasmodic search for somebody to love and by whom to be loved that usually ends up as its parody, since merely in order to remove the specter of loneliness we prefer to prolong emotional relationships that are already worn out? Stingy with

amazement and enchantment, our days on earth are only able to grant us the boredom of serial repetition.

So in spite of the numerous attempts to hide or minimize the injuries brought about by the current social system, we see them all. We know all about living in a world that damages us. But to render it bearable, which is to say acceptable, it is enough to objectify it, to furnish it with a historical justification, to endow it with an implacable logic before which our bookkeepers' consciousness can only capitulate. To render the absence of life and its ignoble barter with survival—the boredom of years passed in obligation, the forced renunciation of love and passion, the premature aging of the senses, the blackmail of work, environmental devastation and the various forms of self-humiliation—more bearable, what is better than to relativize this situation, to compare it to others of greater anguish and oppression; what is more effective than to compare it with the worst?

Naturally, it would be a mistake to believe that the logic of the lesser evil is limited to merely regulating our household chores. Above all it regulates and administers the whole of social life as that journalist knew well. In fact, every society known to the human race is considered imperfect. Regardless of their ideas, everyone has dreamed of living in a world different from the present one: a more representative democracy, an economy more free from state intervention, a “federalist” rather than a centralized power, a nation without foreigners and so on even to the most extreme aspirations.

But the desire to realize one's dreams goads one to action, because only action resolves to transform the world, rendering it similar to the dream. Action resounds in the ear like the din of the trumpets of Jericho. No imperative exists that possesses a ruder efficacy, and for anyone who hears it the need to go into action imposes itself without delay and without conditions. But anyone who calls for action to realize the aspirations that enliven her quickly receives strange and unexpected replies. The

neophyte learns in a hurry that an effective action is one that limits itself to realizing circumscribed, gloomy and sad dreams. Not only are the great utopias apparently beyond reach, but even much more modest objectives prove to be barely realizable. Thus anyone who considered transforming the world according to his dream finds herself unable to do anything but transform the dream, adapting it to the more immediate reality of this world. With the aim of acting productively, one finds oneself constrained to repress their dream. Thus, the first renunciation that productive action demands of anyone who wants to act is that she reduce his dream to the proportions recommended by what exists. In this way, she comes to an understanding, in a few words, that ours is an epoch of compromise, of half measures, of plugged noses. Precisely, of lesser evils.

If one considers it carefully, it makes sense that the concept of reformism, a cause to which all are devoted today*, represents an accomplished expression of the politics of the lesser evil: a prudent act subject to the watchful eye of moderation which never loses sight of its signs of acceptance and which proceeds with caution worthy of the most consummate diplomacy. The preoccupation with avoiding jolts is such that when some adverse circumstance renders them inevitable, one hurries there to legitimate it, showing how a worse calamity was avoided. Didn't we just go through a war last summer that was justified as the lesser evil in respect to a savage "ethnic cleansing", just as fifty years ago the use of atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was justified as a lesser evil in respect to the continuation of the world war? And this in spite of the claim of every government on the planet to abhor the recourse to force in the resolution of conflicts.

Indeed. Even the ruling class recognizes the basis of the critiques formulated with regards to the present social order for which it is otherwise responsible. Sometimes one may even find several of its spokespeople in the frontline in formally de-

living it, necessarily leads one to put everything that the real world and its “necessity” drains of meaning into play. Not that Utopia is immune to the logic of the lesser evil—that is not guaranteed. During revolutionary periods, it has been precisely this logic that has stopped the assaults of the insurgents: when the tempest rages and the billows threaten to sweep everything away there is always some more realistic revolutionary who rushes to detour popular rage toward more “reasonable” demands. After all even someone who wants to turn the world upside down fears losing all. Even when from that *all*, there is really *nothing* that belongs to him.

* or “a cause for which everyone votes today”—I suspect both meanings were intended in the Italian.—translator

nouncing the discriminations of the laws of the market, the totalitarianism of “single thought”, the abuses of liberalism. Even for this reality this is all an evil. But it is an inevitable evil, and the most one can do is to try to diminish its effects.

The evil in question, from which we cannot be freed—as should be clear—is a social order based on profit, on money, on merchandise, on the reduction of the human being to a thing, on power—and that has in the state an indispensable tool of coercion. It is only after having put the existence of capitalism, with all of its corollaries, beyond debate that the political attaches can ask themselves which capitalistic form can represent the lesser evil to support. Nowadays, the preference is granted to democracy, which is presented—not inadvertently—as the “least bad of known political systems.” When compared with fascism and stalinism, it easily gets the support of western common sense, more so since the democratic lie is based on the (illusory) participation of its subjects in the management of the public thing that, therefore, comes to seem perfectible. Thus people are easily convinced that “more just” state activity, a “better distribution of the wealth”, or rather a “more prudent exploitation of resources” constitute the only possibilities at their disposal for confronting the problems of modern civilization.

But in accepting this, a basic detail is omitted. What is omitted is an understanding of what essentially unites the different alternatives advanced: the existence of money, of commodity exchange, of classes, of power. Here one could say it is forgotten that to choose an evil—even if it is a lesser evil—is the best way to prolong it. To use the examples above once more—one “more just” state decides to bomb an entire country to convince a “more evil” state to stop the ethnic cleansing operations within its own borders. There’s no use in denying that the difference exists, but we perceive it only in the repugnance that, in this situation, inspires a state logic capable of playing with the lives of thousands of people who are slaughtered and bombed.

Similarly, a “better distribution of wealth” tries to avoid concentrating the fruits of the labor of the customary many into the hands of the customary few. But what does that mean? Briefly, the knife with which the masters of the earth slice the pie of the world’s wealth would change and maybe they would add another place to the table of merry guests. The rest of humanity would have to continue to be content with crumbs. Finally, who would dare to deny that the exploitation of nature has caused countless environmental catastrophes. But it isn’t necessary to be experts in the matter to understand that making this exploitation “more prudent” will not serve to impede further catastrophes, but solely to render them “more prudent” as well. But does a “prudent” environmental catastrophe exist? And within what parameters can it be measured?

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A small war is better than a big war; being a billionaire is better than being a millionaire; circumscribed catastrophes are better than extended catastrophes. How can we not see that along this road the social, political and economic conditions that render the outbreak of war, the accumulation of privilege and the continuing occurrence of catastrophes possible will continue to perpetuate themselves? How can we not see that such politics does not even offer a minimal practical utility, that when the bucket is full to the brim a drop suffices to make it overflow? From the moment we renounce questioning capitalism as a totality common to all the varieties of political regulation, giving preference instead to the mere comparison between various techniques of exploitation, the persistence of “evil” is guaranteed... Rather than asking oneself whether one wants to have a master to obey, one prefers to choose the master who beats one the least. In this way, every outburst, every tension, every desire for freedom is reduced to a tamer decision; instead of attacking the evils that poison us, we blame them on the excesses of the system. Within this context, the greater the virulence with which these excesses are denounced,

the more the social system that produces them is consolidated. The plague once more closes in on this ideological whitewash, without leaving a way of escape. And as long as the question to resolve is that of how to manage domination rather than considering the possibility of getting rid of it and figuring out how to do so, the logic of those who govern and manage us will continue to dictate the measures to take with regard to everything.

After the injury, the mockery cannot be lacking. At every turn of the screw, we are assured that the result obtained cannot be worse than that which came before, that the persecuted politics—always aimed toward progress—will block the path of more conservative politics, that after having suffered so much difficulty in silence we are now on the right road at last. From lesser evil to lesser evil, the countless reformists who overrun this society drive us from war to war, from catastrophe to catastrophe, from sacrifice to sacrifice. And because one accepts this mortifying logic of petty (change) accounting and of submission to the state, by dint of making calculations to weigh between evil and evil, a day could come when one places one’s very own life on the scale: better to croak right now than to continue to languish on this earth. It must be this thought that puts the weapon in the hand of the suicide. Because one plugs one’s nose in order to vote for the benefit of power, one ends up no longer breathing.

As we have seen, remaining within the context of the lesser evil does not raise too many difficulties; the difficulty begins at the moment one leaves this context, at the moment one destroys it. All one has to do is affirm that between two evils the worst thing one could do is to choose either one of them, and there it is: the knock of the police at the door. When one is the enemy of every party, every war, every capitalist, all exploitation of nature, one can only appear suspicious in the eyes of the authorities. In fact it is here that subversion begins. Refusing the politics of the lesser evil, refusing this socially instilled habit that induces one to preserve one’s existence rather than