

A Revolt is No Revolution

Errico Malatesta

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This was the headline under which *La Rivendicazione* in Forlì carried, in its 5 October edition, an article over the signature of N. Sandri, regarding which a few critical comments may be in order.

Revolution, the author writes, taken in the precise sense of *thoroughgoing and lasting upheaval* affecting any established institution, is rather more than some revolt or cobbled-together riot on the part of the people. Such riots, he goes on to say, nearly always backfire on those who mount them, and public affairs fall back into the hands of folk who bide their time as long as the fighting lasts and then make of the fighters' dead bodies a footstool for themselves to rise on.¹ Then, out of the blue, he goes on to say that "any partial revolt is a revolution aborted"; that *real, humanitarian revolution* has made great strides, that the proletarian stands on the brink of seeing his legitimate wishes realized and that he must not "through nervousness or hysteria jeopardize the stability of what has been built up through so much effort and sweat and almost completed."

For a start, we need to agree on some terms when it comes to the meaning of the word revolution. *Thoroughgoing and lasting change* is all well and good, but we have to add, achieved by breaching the law, meaning by means of *insurrection*. It seems to us that the notion of revolution needs to be understood as an insurrection and, in any case, that is precisely how it is construed in everybody's political vocabulary.

Occasionally one hears references to peaceful revolution or violent revolution, indicative of the sort of elasticity of meaning always attached to words which concisely articulate widely varying actions and relationship, such as phenomena in the socio-political realm. But mention of revolution on its own is understood by all to refer to a popular uprising intent upon forcibly overthrowing the existing order and replacing it with a different one that denies and is dismissive of the legality that went before it.

Let us not get muddled here. No matter how thoroughgoing and lasting, any change procured by lawful and peaceful means would be described as a reform and not as a revolution. And it is precisely according to whether they believe in the possibility of achieving a given purpose

¹ This last metaphor is a paraphrase of a verse from Vincenzo Monti's tragedy *Aristodemus*, where the character of the ambitious is portrayed: "The man who is ambitious must be cruel / Between his views of greatness and himself, / Place ev'n his father's and his brother's heads, - / Beneath his feet he'll trample them; and make / Of both, a footstool for himself to rise on."

by lawful means or reckon it necessary to resort to insurrection that parties, regardless of their ideals, are divided into the reformist and the revolutionary.

We are for revolution, first because we think it useful and necessary and then because we can see its coming as inexorable and would regard it as puerile and harmful to go off looking for impossible alternatives; but since, above and beyond our being revolutionaries we are socialists and anarchists, we are out, and this the chief aim of our propaganda, to ensure that in the coming revolution, the people, far from trusting in good or bad spokesmen, take the resolution of the social question into its own hands, take immediate possession of property, demolish government in any guise, and sort out its affairs for itself. If in this revolution, as in political ones, people have to bear the cost of the war and then await its reward from a new government, then, to be sure, all the blood that an uprising costs will have been shed in vain and, in the current circumstances, that upheaval would merely postpone the social revolution for a generation or two.

But although this might not be clear from the article in question nor from the overall conduct of the newspaper, our belief is that even *Rivendicazione* purports to be revolutionary and wants to see the people, without delegation of powers, itself carrying out the thoroughgoing social change that anarchist socialists advocate.² So the question boils down to an argument over whether revolts, partial riots, hasten or postpone the great revolutionary eruption that should end the bourgeois world.

The writer of the *Rivendicazione* article says that “every partial revolt is a revolution aborted”. Our belief, rather, is that revolts play a huge part in bringing the revolution about and laying its groundwork, and that it is always revolts that are the deciding factor.

It is deeds that trigger ideas, which in turn react with deeds and so on. But for turmoil and popular rioting, generated by necessity, but for the outrages and crimes of every sort that undermine the very foundations of social coexistence and shout a terrifying reminder in the revellers’ ears, minds would never have been prompted to inquire into the causes of public malaise and to search for a cure and socialism would never have been born. Once it was, and once the propaganda increasingly opening eyes to needs started up and fixed a specific target for the hopes and agitations of sufferers, riots and increasingly conscious revolts have begun that give a fresh impetus to propaganda—and so on until revolution.

How could it be otherwise?

How ever could those millions of men—brutalized by exhausting toil; rendered anaemic by inadequate and unwholesome food; educated down through the ages in respect for priest, boss, and ruler; forever absorbed in the quest for their daily bread; superstitious; ignorant; fearful—one fine day perform an about face and emerge from their hovels, turn their backs on their entire past of patient submission, tear down the social institutions oppressing them and turn the world into a society made up of equals and brothers—had not a long string of extraordinary events forced their brains to think? If a thousand partial battles had not nurtured the spirit of rebellion in them, plus an appreciation of their own strength, a feeling of solidarity towards their fellow oppressed, hatred for the oppressor, and had not a thousand revolts taught them the art of people’s warfare and had they not found in the yearned for victory a reason to ask themselves: what shall we do tomorrow?

² Though nominally revolutionary, *La Rivendicazione* was open to electoral tactics and rejected the sharp separation between revolutionary and parliamentary tactics that Malatesta had urged since the 1880s.

Or was this down to all the newspapers and pamphlets they were unable to read and the speeches that never reached their ears?

Propaganda and the idea are undoubtedly the mighty catalyst that will set the inert masses in motion and raise slaves to the status of men, but this only appears among them and only affects them in the form of actions.

Socialism has made enormous strides, to be sure: certainly, as Sandri states, the bourgeois who laughed at socialist ideas fifty-odd years ago quakes before them these days. But does he think that the partial revolts of which he is so unfairly dismissive had not some hand in this? Babeuf's conspiracy, the Lyon uprising; the June days; the communes of '71; the uprising in Spain; the troubles in Italy; the nihilists in Russia; the regicides in Germany, Italy, and Spain; the Chicago anarchists; and the thousands of outrages thanks to which nearly every country in the world has its socialist martyrs of whom to boast? And what of the countless revolts that show that the idea is getting somewhere and that the people are starting to wake up? Or does all that count for nothing in the progress of socialism and the fear instilled into the bourgeois?

The history of past revolutions provides quite splendid proof of what we contend. Every one of them was preceded, triggered, and determined by a number of revolts that had already prepared minds for the fray. The great French revolution would never have happened had the countryside, thoroughly worked upon by propagandists, not started torching the chateaux and hanging the *seigneurs* and had the people of Paris, provoked into riot, not committed the sublime folly of attacking the fortress of the Bastille with its picks; Italy would be a geographical term still, like Poland, had not Italian patriots left their bones strewn around the peninsula in a hundred heroic partial revolts.³

And the contemporary history of socialism, which we have all witnessed and been part of... Is that not a reminder to us that out of a riot in Montmartre grew the Paris Commune and out of the Commune came a whole splendid ferment of ideas, an entire period of frantic socialist activity? Does that not show us how every bold deed, every venture mounted in Europe, has its corresponding fresh impulse given to propaganda and a new stratum of the populace won over to the revolution?

On the other hand you agree that "the building work has come to an end," meaning the preparations and evolution are now finished and the revolution ripe. Do we need a moment or two now before making up our minds to begin it? And how should we go about that if not by means of revolts?

To be sure, whilst every revolt makes propaganda, it is only the few that have the good fortune to come in timely enough fashion to trigger a revolution. But who is to say what the right timing is? Balilla threw a stone and the Austrians were driven out of Genoa because the people rose up; Caporali threw a stone and they called him a madman and worse, because Naples did not stir.⁴ Had the Parisians been repelled by the Bastille's walls and massacred by the Royal Guard,

³ It is worth mentioning that the argument that "ideas spring from deeds and not the other way around" had already been made by Carlo Pisacane, a foremost figure of Italian *Risorgimento* and a forerunner of libertarian socialism, in his *Political Testament*, written in 1857 on the eve of the attempted uprising of Sapri, where Pisacane met his death.

⁴ Balilla is the nickname of the boy who, on 5 December 1746, sparked the insurrection that drove the Austrians out of Genoa, by throwing a stone at a group of soldiers. He went on to become one of the most popular figures of *Risorgimento*. Emilio Caporali was a young worker who attacked Prime Minister Francesco Crispi with a stone in Naples, on 13 September 1889. Malatesta commented on the episode in the first issue of *L'Associazione*, in the article "Bravo Caporali."

14 July would be a reminder to us of a mere revolt. Had the Bourbon ships sent Garibaldi and his thousand to a watery grave off Marsala, the victors of Calatafimi would be mourned today the way the vanquished of Sapri are.

So let us allow history to play out its course.

Nobody is asking to rise in revolt to anybody who does not want to or reckons he has better things to be doing; but if there are hardy souls eager to act, do not stand in their way. Do not pour water on the flames, now that the time has come to inflame minds and make ready for the great battle ahead.

In setting out our views alongside those of *Rivendicazione*, we have opted to ignore the truly inappropriate innuendo with which Sandri chose to adorn his article. This was lest we introduce into our argument a factor that was certainly unlikely to contribute towards the calm and level-headedness that ought to distinguish any discussion conducted with an eye to uncovering or spreading the truth. We shall do so now, not for our own sake, since the matter does not affect us, but rather to point the thing out to our friends in Romagna that, not being of the same mind as us and not supportive of our tactics, they nonetheless look sincerely to serious debate and mutual respect.⁵

“Be wary,” Sandri tells the proletarians, “of makeshift spokesmen who daze you with roars or with the whining voices of monotonous Jeremiahs, *voices and roars probably fortified by wine drawn from the cellars at police headquarters and from the sacristy.*”

What sort of talk is that? At whom is it directed?

We honestly do not know if, in these times, there is a statesman to be found who reckons that provoking revolts is the stuff of good government. It might have been the case once upon a time, in certain strange circumstances; but it cannot happen now, as there would be too many dangers in the people’s taking the thing seriously; in any case, spontaneous revolts are more frequent than any that even the minister keenest on police procedures could hope for.

Anyway, if the folks at *Rivendicazione* or anybody else have serious grounds for being suspicious of anyone, let them spell it out clearly and plainly, and name names and they will be doing the cause a service and us a service as well. If not, let them stop spreading distrust and casting aspersions, the above not being the only example; let us hope that these things are only there in order to fill some column inches.

That way nobody gets wronged, since it is common knowledge that there has scarcely ever been a revolutionary whose adversaries, especially his most moderate adversaries, have not accused of being a spy. The only practical outcome of this is that it sparks angry retorts, generates a damaging sensationalism and, above all, creates an opening for the real spies who will certainly not forget to keep their heads down.

Mazzini, Bakunin, Hoedel, the Chicago Martyrs were all called spies; the Communards were labelled Bonapartists by the Versaillese and we ourselves were called spies, or as good as, when we raised the banner of revolt against Mazzinian dogmatism. Thus, Terzaghi, who really was a

⁵ The city of Forli, where *La Rivendicazione* was published, is in the Romagna region.

spy, was able to tell innocents, with every appearance of veracity: they call me a spy because I am more of a revolutionary than they are.⁶

In conclusion: if you know of any spies in our midst, let us know, as we will do with you, no matter how relations between us might stand otherwise. Meanwhile, uphold your ideas just we uphold ours and fight us decently just as we will fight you decently whenever we think serves the cause: act according to the promptings of your conscience, just we are prompted by ours—but do not stoop to the sin of innuendo and insult to which you take such loud exception when others take against you.

⁶ Carlo Terzaghi was an Internationalist turned spy. Only days before this article was published, Malatesta had denounced, from the columns of *L'Associazione*, Terzaghi's latest attempt to infiltrate once again the anarchist ranks under a false name.

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