

Apropos of “Revisionism”

Errico Malatesta

1931

I have been passed a clipping from *Il Martello* containing a sort of open letter addressed to me by a comrade signing himself Pardaillan by way of a response to my recent article “Authoritarian Rehashes,” in which I targeted certain authoritarian tendencies evident within our camp.¹

I am always happy when I can find someone to contradict me because I am far from believing that I am always right and I hope that I can always learn something from the opposing case, so I am grateful to Pardaillan for having been so kind as to take my poor little piece under his notice. But I would have preferred greater clarity because, to be honest, I cannot quite fathom what motives prompted this comrade to answer me.

He says that in the past—and more specifically within movements in the immediate post-war years—better and more could be achieved. And who has any doubts about that? The same could always be said without fear of error, of any movement, even if one knows nothing about it and maybe especially if one knows nothing about it. But there is no point unless one identifies what those mistakes were, how they might have been avoided and, above all, what needs doing if there is to be no repetition. I readily confess that countless errors of action and omission have been made, albeit that, in specific instances, it might be the case that I regard as a merit that which others may see as a mistake and vice versa. But that was not the subject matter of the article in question.

Pardaillan insists on the necessity of *drafting a practical programme of short-term things to be done* in order to adapt anarchism to the real situation today and tomorrow, and I whole-heartedly agree. Of course, even on this score, and especially on this score, a distinction needs to be made between practical proposals that might actually lead towards the achievement of anarchy and those that, in order to secure a few real or imagined short term benefits might lead us to renege upon the libertarian nature of our programme and place us on a course leading to a goal opposed to our own goal. But that was not the subject matter of my article either.

In that article I confined myself to countering the notion articulated by some comrades that in the coming revolution we should force people to do as we want until such time as they are persuaded that we are right and will do unsolicited that which we will initially have forced them

¹ Malatesta’s earlier article “Rimasticature autoritarie” had first appeared in *Il Risveglio Anarchico* (Geneva) of 1 May and had been reprinted in *L’Adunata dei Refrattari* of 23 May. *Il Martello* was the anarchist periodical edited in New York by Carlo Tresca. Pardaillan was the pseudonym of R. Tavani.

into doing. Tantamount to setting ourselves up as a government and working a genuine miracle, that is, a government in a hurry to leave the scene and hell bent on making itself redundant.

Pardaillan says that this is not what the “revisionists” are after, or at any rate, not what he wants. Instead, he wants to *bring about a situation where it is not feasible for some to compel the rest*; which, let it be said, is anarchism summed up.

And after that?

If that is how things stand, we are in agreement and Pardaillan could have spared himself the chore of answering me. All I could say to him would be that he should carry on with his critique and his investigations, specify the mistakes he deplors and the cures he proposes and assist in the drafting of the practical program close to his heart. And do so without fear of being “excommunicated.” We have no pontiffs in our ranks to usher people into or ban them from entering what he terms the anarchist church; and there is no need for any. Anybody who no longer feels himself to be an anarchist withdraws voluntarily, with greater or lesser bluntness and elegance; and anybody who feels like an anarchist remains such even if he is alone in his opinion about the tactical interpretation of anarchism.

Yet do we really see eye to eye?

Despite every appearance, the tone of the letter, and the very fact that he felt impelled to reply to me make me suspect that there is no agreement, deep down. And so I should like to ask him to explain himself plainly on the matter of “government.”

It is not a matter of quibbling over the various meanings of the term government and of including either the rules according to which a home or an enterprise is run, or the agreement between the members of an association, or the modalities of social coexistence thrust upon us by necessity and voluntarily accepted, or the technical management of some task or social function, etc.

When anarchists say they want to abolish government, they are plainly talking about government in the historical and political sense of the word, as generally understood and accepted, to wit, a person or group of persons holding a monopoly and command over an armed force and who use it to impose its will upon the people; its will, naturally, mirrors ideas and interests of their own as well as those of a party or class.

Does Pardaillan reject such a government, regardless of its derivation and the persons who make it up?

Does he think that a government (in the aforementioned sense of the word) naturally tends—by virtue of the demands of its existence and the corruptive impact that power being more or less unaccountable, has upon men—tends, as I say, to curtail and suppress the freedom of all and to support or conjure up a privileged class with a common interest in shoring up the established order? Does he think that the difference between one government and another, that is, between the greater or lesser measure of freedom that it leaves the people, depends not so much on the kindness or criminality, cleverness or stupidity of those who govern as on the consciousness and resistance of the governed?

Or does he think, rather, that a government made up of “anarchists” would and could organise the life of society along egalitarian and libertarian lines, school the people in freedom and solidarity and set itself the target of making itself redundant as quickly as it can?

Does he think that in order to *bring about a situation where it is not feasible for some to compel the rest* we must begin by forcing folk to do what we want?

Does he think that we anarchists are that much better than everybody else and by nature so superior that we can withstand the corruptive influence of power and, forgive the vulgar comparison, get oak trees to bring forth figs? And also, is he not afraid that when there is a chance of taking up a position of command in anarchy's name, lots of politicians would call themselves "anarchists," just as they call themselves "socialists" when they have hopes of becoming deputies in socialism's name?

Does it not occur to him that we ought to act as anarchists at all times, even at the risk of being defeated, thereby renouncing a victory that might be our victory as individuals, but would be the defeat of our ideas?

I should like to have Pardaillan's answers to these and other similar questions that he himself can guess, not so much in order to establish who is right and who is wrong (in the final analysis events will decide that) but in order to see where we agree and disagree, so as to be able to debate usefully without beating about the bush.

And now, leaving the polemic with Pardaillan to one side, I should like to set out my opinion on the reason why some comrades, whose sincerity and ardent yearning for anarchy to succeed are beyond question, are led to expose the very foundations of anarchism to discussion.

The same sort of things befall every party in the wake of a set-back and there would be nothing odd if the same thing were to hit our ranks. But it seems to me that in our case this frantic quest for new paths is not so much the consequence of newer, bolder, and truer ideas as the effect of the persistence of old illusions that these comrades, for all their long experience, still hope to immediately turn into reality, just as we hoped back when the movement was just starting out.

Sixty or more years ago, we used to think that anarchy and communism could come about as the direct, immediate consequence of a successful insurrection. It is not, we used to say, a matter of achieving some day anarchy and communism, but of starting the social revolution with anarchy and communism. In our manifestoes we would repeat that on the very evening of the day on which the government forces will be routed, each can have his basic needs met and savor the benefits of the revolution without further delay.

In a nutshell, that was the notion that, after being embraced by Kropotkin later on, was popularized by him and well nigh fixed as anarchism's definitive program.

Our confidence, our all too juvenile cocksureness, were based on a number of mistakes.

For a start, bedazzled like most people by full grain stores and warehouses filled to overflowing with unsold goods, it was our belief that everything necessary for living was available in superabundance and that one had only to stretch out a hand and one would find anything he needed.

Besides, we were convinced that the people, eager for freedom and justice, also had the ability to self-organize spontaneously and to look to their own interests by themselves.

In our opinion, it would be enough to knock down the material obstacles, to wit, the armed forces that defended the property-owners, and everything else would take care of itself.

We were out, above all else, to perfect our ideal, deluding ourselves that the masses would fall in behind us, and actually believing that we were merely spokesmen for the deep-seated instincts of those masses.

We were few in number but had boundless confidence in the efficacy of propaganda. Our rationale for this was as naïve as could be: if, we reckoned, the propaganda made by ten of us has made our numbers increase to twenty within a month, now that there are twenty of us, give us another month and there will be forty and from forty up to eighty and so on and so on. Our numbers doubling on a monthly basis, it would not be long before we had strength enough to make the revolution.

The rapid organisation of trades bodies and the spirit of solidarity between the oppressed in their struggle for emancipation would iron out every difficulty. The International Working Men's Association (the First International), which was then thriving better than ever, seemed to be ready to replace the bourgeois organisation of society with its own.

Given that outlook, we were clearly bound to believe that anarchy would arise at once, spontaneously, through the determination and capabilities of the entire population or at any rate of the conscious, active segment of the population, once released from the brute force that held it in subjection.

But with the passage of time, study and, more so, harsh experience, showed us that many of our beliefs were wishful thinking generated by our hopes rather than corresponding to hard facts.

Indeed, we registered the fact that the goods available were, on account of the capitalist system of production, normally in short supply and were in any case so unequally distributed around the various agricultural and urban regions and localities that even a short-lived disruption of transportation and commerce would bring shortage and hunger to the most populous places.

And, what is worse, we were forced to take it on board that the masses were not possessed of the virtues with which we had been crediting them. One section of them, and in some areas the vast majority of them, stultified by poverty and religion, was a blind, unwitting instrument in the hands of the oppressors, for deployment against themselves and against any who dared rebel against oppression. The other section, which, being more evolved and blessed by environmental factors, was most accessible to our propaganda, was, as a rule, possessed neither of independence of mind, nor burning desire for freedom; having been inured to obedience, even in their aspirations and revolutionary attempts they craved guidance, direction and commands; having no spirit of enterprise, they waited for leaders to tell them what it was to do, rather than brave the effort and risk involved in thinking and acting freely, and either they remained inert, or were hobbled if their leaders were lazy, inept, or treacherous.

True, there were those among the masses who had what it takes to make good anarchists and it was up to propaganda to find them and shape them; but, unfortunately, propaganda was not as powerful as we, starry eyed after our first few swift successes, had thought. Facts showed us that in a given economic, political, and moral setting, a given number of individuals predisposed by special conditions could be converted, after which it was increasingly difficult and well nigh impossible to draw in fresh recruits until such time as fresh possibilities were opened up by the economic or political events that came along. After a certain point, numbers could only be expanded by whittling away at and tinkering with our programme; as witness the case of the democratic socialists who managed to rally impressive followings, but who had, in order to do so, been obliged to stop being genuinely socialists.

That being how things were, what were we to do? Withdraw from the struggle, become sceptic and apathetic, or give up on anarchy and join an authoritarian party?

Some did just that; but most of us, those whose minds harbored the “sacred fire,” were more than ever seized with the nobility and grandeur of the mission that anarchists had taken upon themselves. Such folk remained convinced that the aspiration to comprehensive freedom (what we might term the anarchist spirit) has always been behind all personal and social progress, whereas political and economic privileges (which are, after all, merely different facets of the same oppression), unless sufficiently harried by anarchism, tend to drive humanity backwards towards darkest barbarism. They realized that anarchy can only come about gradually, as the masses become able to conceive it and desire it; but will never come to pass unless driven forward by a more or less consciously anarchist minority operating in such a way as to create the appropriate climate.

Remaining anarchist and acting like anarchists in every possible circumstance continued to be the duty that we were choosing and embracing.

I stated above that, in my view, the so-called revisionists, being still under the sway of the primitive anarchism, are kidding themselves that they can bring communism and anarchy about in a single stroke; but since even they realise that the masses are not yet ready, engage in the nonsense of expecting to prepare them using authoritarian methods. They are rather mealy-mouthed about this and I reckon that they themselves are not entirely aware of it, but it seems to us that the facts are these: they would like to conjure up communism by putting freedom on the long finger and would like to school the people in freedom by means of tyranny.

It seems to me, and I reckon that this may be the view of nearly every anarchist by now, that the revolution cannot start out with communism, unless that communism would be, as in Russia, the communism of the monastery, barracks, and prison and worse than capitalism itself. It must do immediately whatever it can, but no more than it can. It would be enough to start by attacking political authority and economic privilege by every possible means; breaking up the army and all police corps; arming every single member of the population; commandeering all foodstuffs for the good of all and ensuring uninterrupted supply lines; and driving the masses, above all driving the masses into acting without waiting for orders from on high. And stressing that nothing should be destroyed unless there is something better to be put in its place. Then we can progress towards organising a voluntary communism or whatever other arrangements (most likely many and varied) for social living the workers might prefer in the light of experience.

If anarchists wanted to take the functions of government upon themselves alone (something they would not be strong enough to do, by the way) or, worse still, were out to join with the authoritarian parties in order to lay down laws and binding regulations, they would be simply betraying themselves and the revolution. In which case, rather than driving for anarchism by means of their propaganda and example, they would, willy-nilly, contribute to robbing the people of any gains made during the period of insurrection: ultimately, they would be doing that which all governments have always done.

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