

Bourgeois Seepage Into Socialist Doctrine

Errico Malatesta

16 May 1905

For some time now, in order to justify the path of surrender upon which they have embarked, the reformist socialists have begun tinkering, not merely with socialism's tactics but also with its theories. And so, little by little, a number of essentially bourgeois ideas and even moral, political, and economic prejudices have been seeping into socialist doctrine.

Just how serious this situation is can readily be understood if we think that this is nowadays evident, not just among the more moderate factions of the democratic socialist party, but other factions, which brag of being more revolutionary and uncompromising, are also being blighted.

For instance, even Arturo Labriola, the celebrated Italian socialist intransigent, a while ago—so the newspapers reported—argued in a talk he gave that “the issue requiring urgent resolution is not the issue of wealth distribution, but that of the rational organisation of production.”

This is so wrong, that we would do well to dwell upon it, because it compromises the very foundations of the socialist doctrine, and conclusions that can logically be deduced from it are anything but socialist.

Ever since Malthus, conservatives of every hue have argued that poverty derives, not from the unfair distribution of wealth, but from limited productivity or inadequate human industry.

In terms of its historical origins and very essence, socialism is a rebuttal of this contention; it amounts to an emphatic assertion that the social question is primarily an issue of social justice, a distribution issue. But ever since socialists began negotiating with power and with the propertied classes—that is, ever since they stopped being socialists—they have, albeit in a slightly more modern form, begun to embrace the conservative argument.

If the thesis backed by Labriola were true, it would then be untrue that the antagonism between bosses and workers is irreconcilable, since the solution to it would be the shared interest that bosses and wage earners have in boosting the quantum of goods; that is, socialism would be wrong, at least as a means of solving the social question. And actually, we have already heard Turati argue that during strikes the workers must take care not to ruin the boss and his industry; and, before Turati, Ferri held that socialists should help the bourgeois enrich themselves; and the whole spectrum of Italian democratic socialism's most distinguished representatives thunder

in our ears about Italian proletarians' supposed interest in being ruled by a wealthy, civilized, "modern" bourgeoisie.

This new message from the socialists, which tends to induce the conscious proletariat to turn away from the straight and narrow of class struggle and herd it down the blind alleys of bourgeois reformism, is especially dangerous in that it takes as its premise a genuine fact, that current production is not equal to meeting everyone's needs, even to a limited extent, and, having stunned the public with a demonstration of this fact, it takes just a slight sophist stratagem to turn effect into cause and, without seeming to, to draw the mistaken conclusions that served their purposes.

We need to lift the veil off the system.

It is a fact that production as a whole, especially production of basic necessities, is meager and inadequate and almost laughably small compared with what it should and could be.

The starveling passing stores bulging with grocery supplies, the destitute watching the lengths to which shopkeepers go to sell off goods surplus to public demand may well believe that there is a universal abundance of supply, and that all that is missing is the wherewithal to buy them. Some anarchists, bedazzled by the more or less mystifying statistics and perhaps also at having a stunning argument in their propaganda arsenal—one readily understood by the ignorant masses—have been able to contend that actual output is far in excess of all reasonable need and that the people have merely to assume possession of it all, and we can all live in the land of plenty. And the recurrent crises of so-called over-production (meaning that work is in short supply because the bosses cannot find a market for the goods they have stockpiled) help embed such superficial impressions in the public mind.

But a little more cool-headed analysis soon makes it clear that any such alleged sea of wealth simply has to be a delusion.

The goods that most of the population consumes are not enough to satisfy their basic needs; the vast majority of people are little and poorly fed, poorly clothed, poorly housed, poorly off in everything; indeed lots of them perish of hunger and cold. If enough is really being churned out to meet everyone's needs, and since the majority under-consumes, where on earth would the yearly surplus production be stockpiled? And by what unimaginable aberration would capitalists who produce for the market and for profit persist in producing that which they cannot sell?

Because of inter-capitalist competition and the mutual ignorance of the quantity of goods the others might be able to put on the market at any given point, because of the speculator mind-set, the greed for gain and mistakes in forward planning, it can be and very often is the case that, especially in the manufacturing industries where output potential is more elastic, production exceeds demand at a certain point; but then along comes the crisis and work is suspended for a time in order for balance to be restored—and usually, in the long run, production does not outstrip demand. It is demand that dictates output and not the other way around.

Besides, in regard to foodstuffs, these being the most vital necessities, one has only to look at the ghastly consequences visited upon a farming region by a failed harvest, and one will see that, even eating as poorly as is normally the case, barely enough is being produced to survive from one year to the next.

If the sum of the wealth produced annually, over half of which goes to a tiny number of capitalists, were to be equally shared between all, it would bring little improvement in the conditions of the working man; indeed, his share would be increased, not in terms of necessities but rather of thousands of virtually useless, if not positively harmful gewgaws. As to bread, meat, hous-

ing, clothing and other basic necessities, the fraction over-consumed or squandered by the rich would, if shared out around the countless masses, make no discernible difference.

Therefore production is falling short and needs boosting: on that we agree.

But how come more is not being produced right now? Why is so much land left untilled or poorly worked? How come so many machines are inoperative? Why are so many workers out of jobs? How come homes are not being built for everybody, clothes not being made for everybody, etc. when there is plenty of materials for doing so, plus men able and eager to put those materials to use?

The reason is obvious and should not come as a surprise to any self-styled socialist. It is because the means of production—the soil, raw materials, instruments of labor—are not in the hands of those who need what they can produce, but are privately owned by a small number of people who use them to put other folk to work for them, and then only as much and in the manner that suits their own interests.

Today, man has no entitlement to any share in production on the basis of his manhood alone; he eats and he lives only because the capitalist, the owner of the means of production, has an interest in putting him to work in order to exploit him.

Now, the capitalist has no interest in production being increased beyond a certain point; indeed his interest lies in preserving a relative shortage. To put that another way, he is all for production as long as the product can be sold for more than its cost to him and he steps up production as long as the increase in his profits can keep pace. But once he sees that in order to sell his goods he might have to cut his prices too much, and that a glut would lead to an overall decrease in profits, he stops production and often—and there are thousands examples of this—destroys some of the stock of products available in order to force up the value of the rest.

So, if we want to see production grow to the extent that it can fully meet everyone's needs, it needs to be tailored to the needs that require satisfying, rather than the private profits of the few. Everybody must have an entitlement to enjoy products; everybody needs to have an entitlement to use the means of production.

If somebody suffering from hunger had the right to bread, we would need to see to it that there is bread enough to fill us all; and the land would be put to work, and outmoded methods replaced by more productive farming methods. On the other hand, if, as is the case at present, existing assets in the form of means of the production and stockpiled goods belong to a special class of people, and that class, being blessed with everything, can have the hungry, who are too noisy, arrested at gunpoint, production will keep stopping at the line set by capitalist interests.

In conclusion, the reason for meager output today is limited distribution; and if we would destroy the effect, we need to remove the cause.

In order to produce enough for everyone, it is necessary for everyone to have a right to consume enough.

Thereby proving the socialist thesis that the poverty question is primarily a distribution problem.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Errico Malatesta
Bourgeois Seepage Into Socialist Doctrine
16 May 1905

The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.
Translated from “Infiltrazioni borghesi nella dottrina socialista,” *Il Pensiero* (Rome) 3, no. 10 (16 May 1905).

theanarchistlibrary.org