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Capitalists and Thieves

Regarding the Tragedies in Houndsditch and
Sidney Street

Errico Malatesta

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(June 1912). Originally published as “Capitalistes et voleurs:
A propos des tragédies de Houndsditch et Sidney Street,” *Les
Temps Nouveaux* (Paris) 6, no. 23 (18 February 1911). The
English version is abridged. We have integrated it with an
original translation of the missing parts. According to Rudolf
Rocker, the first version to appear was actually the Yiddish
one published in London by *Der Arbeter Frait* on 27 January
1911. Though we have not been able to track down this
version, there is no doubt that it must have been itself a
translation from a Malatesta manuscript, which, in all
likelihood, was in French.

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In a backstreet in the City, there is an attempted robbery at
a jewellers shop and the thieves, startled by the police, shoot
their way out using their revolvers. Later, two of the robbers,
tracked down to a house in the East End, use their guns again
to defend themselves and perish in the exchange.¹

At bottom, nothing particularly out of the ordinary in to-
day’s society, except for the exceptional vigour of the fight the
robbers put up.

But these thieves were Russians, perhaps Russian refugees,
and maybe they also went to an Anarchist club on days of pub-
lic meetings, when they were open to everybody. And natu-
rally the capitalist press avails itself to declare war upon the
Anarchists. If one were to believe the bourgeois papers one

¹ The Houndsditch robbery occurred on 16 December 1910, and the so-
called “siege of Sidney Street” on 4 January 1911. The double outrage caused
enormous stir in Great Britain. Malatesta got marginally involved, as the
investigations revealed that an oxygen cylinder that had been used in the
robbery came from his workshop. However, he was able to prove that he
had no knowledge of the use the cylinder would be put to.

would think that anarchy, that dream of love and justice among men, is nothing but theft and assassination; and with these lies and calumnies they certainly succeed in turning away from us many people who would be with us if they only knew what we want.

Thus it will not be useless to state once more the position of Anarchists respecting the theory and practice of theft.

One of the fundamental points of Anarchism is the abolition of the monopoly of the land, raw material, and the instruments of production, and thereby the abolition of the exploitation of other people's labour by those who hold the means of production. Any appropriation of other people's labour, everything that serves to enable a man to live without giving to society his quota of production is, from the Anarchist and Socialist point of view, a theft.

The landlords, the capitalists have stolen from the people, by violence or by fraud, the land and all the means of production, and in consequence of this initial theft they are enabled, day by day, to take away from the workers the products of labour. But they were happy thieves, for they became strong: they made laws in order that they might justify their situation, and they have organised a whole system of repression to defend themselves against the claims of the workers as well as against those who would like to replace them by doing as they did themselves. And to-day their theft is called property, commerce, industry, etc., the name of "thief" being reserved, in common language, for those who would like to follow the example of the capitalists, but, because they arrived too late and in adverse circumstances, cannot do it without putting themselves in conflict with the law.

However, the difference of names currently used does not suffice to hide the moral and social character of the two situations. The capitalist is a thief who has succeeded either by his merits or by those of his ancestors; the thief is an aspiring capitalist who is but waiting to succeed to become a capitalist, in

fact, and live without working on the product of his theft, that is to say, on other people's labour.

As enemies of the capitalists, we cannot sympathise for the thief who aspires at becoming a capitalist. And being in favour of their expropriation by the people for the profit of all, we cannot, as Anarchists, have anything in common with an operation whose object is to get some wealth to pass from the hands of one owner into those of another.

I am speaking, of course, about the professional thief, the one who rejects work and casts around for ways of leading a parasitical existence on the back of other people's labours. A man denied the opportunity to work by society and who steals rather than starve to death and watch his children perish of starvation is something different. In his case, thievery (if such it can be called) is a rebellion against social injustice and may well become the most sacred of rights and the most imperious of duties. But the capitalist press avoids mentioning such cases, because if it did, it might have to indict the social order whose mission it is to champion.

To be sure, the professional thief is also in large part a victim of the social order. The example set by the higher-ups, the education bestowed, the repulsive conditions in which one is often obliged to work, readily explain why some men, who are morally no better than their contemporaries, when faced with a choice between being exploited or being exploiters, opt for exploiter and strive by any means open to them to become just that. But such extenuating circumstances might as readily apply to the capitalists: the essential sameness of the two callings could scarcely be better demonstrated.

Thus anarchist ideas cannot drive people to become thieves any more than to become capitalists. On the contrary, by giving to the discontented an ideal of superior life, and a hope of collective emancipation, they turn away, as far as possible in the present midst, from all these legal or illegal doings which

are but an adaptation to the capitalist system and tend towards perpetuating it.

Notwithstanding all this, the social midst being so strong and personal temperaments so different, there might possibly be amongst the Anarchists a few who go in for thieving as there are some who go in for commerce or industry; but in that case both are acting, not because of their Anarchist ideas, but in spite of these.