

Electoral Struggle and Direct Struggle

Errico Malatesta

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The fundamental reason for which we refuse to delegate to others or, given the case, accept legislative roles ourselves, and for which we preach abstention from voting in political and local elections, is the fact that we do not acknowledge that anybody has the right to make laws, and we want the agreement required for the smooth functioning of society to derive, not from the imposition of the few over the many and not even the many over the few, but from the free consent of all those concerned. Consequently, we consider any methods that lead the people to believe that progress consists in a change of governing individuals, and revolution in a change of government form, to be dangerous, and directly counter to our purposes.

But this reason, of course, only holds true for anarchists.

Others, those who believe in the right of majorities and in the parliamentary system, are right to want people to get used to abandoning their interests to the luck of the ballot box. Besides, the bulk of the dissatisfied public has no interest in matters of principle, they do not think about distant consequences and side-effects, and look only at the direct practical results.

By electing good deputies and good council members one can obtain a reduction in taxes, an increase in freedom, laws favoring the workers, etc.—say those who are interested only in immediate improvements.

Through elections one might perhaps transform society gradually and peacefully, or, if that cannot be done due to the government's contrary violence, one can, at any rate, draw closer and facilitate socialism's triumph, using these elections to make propaganda and agitation, conquering those freedoms that are the necessary tools for educating the people and getting them used to participating in public life, and preparing our people to exercise public office—say the democratic socialists, who aspire to “conquer public powers,” which is to say to enter government.

And here and there, when the reaction is most pressing, some anarchists, who want to act and don't know where to find the means of doing so, or who are weary of the struggle and looking for an honorable way to withdraw, come out to say: “There is no need to be exclusivist, we need to know how to adapt to circumstances. So, in times when persecution denies us the possibility of any sort of activity, it is good to vote—not so much to send anyone to the legislature, but as a way of protesting, on behalf of the convicted and persecuted, to find an opportunity to make propaganda, to let it be known that we are alive and assert ourselves as a party.”

And so from an issue of principle, which it fundamentally is, the issue of elections is presented as a mere tactical issue.

Well then, let us leave principles aside, let us for a moment disregard the final goal we pursue and consider the issue as a purely tactical one, in view of the improvements that can be immediately obtained, and the gains propaganda can make.

We maintain that electoral tactics are an obstacle to potential improvements, and damaging to propaganda and agitation.

In assessing the results of their method, the electionists make two mistakes which are at the root of persistent illusions. First, they mistake effect for cause, and attribute to the effectiveness of the electoral struggle and the parliamentary system what little good (oh, how little it is!) at rare times (oh, how rarely!) is done by elected bodies, while this is really the effect of popular pressure, to which the rulers concede what little they think is necessary to calm the people, anesthetize their energy and prevent them from demanding more. Second, they compare what is done in the electoral struggle with what would happen if nothing were done; while instead they should compare the results obtained from the fight at the ballot box against those obtained when other methods are followed, and with what might be achieved if all effort used to send representatives to power, from whom they expect reforms or proposed reforms, were employed in the fight to directly achieve what is desired.

The whole of history, the whole of contemporary experience is a confutation of these errors; and if they have taken root in the consciousness of so many men of good will it is because they suit the intellectual laziness of the public, which loves to stop at the first appearance of things, and because the desire for honors and power has induced so many socialists, even though they fight sincerely for the good of all, to more or less unwittingly misrepresent the facts and misdirect the minds of their friends and followers.

Abstract reasoning alone would be enough to prove our argument.

The government—this much is obvious—only possesses whatever power it draws from the people. If the mass of the people is unaware, passive, submissive, the government will absolutely do as it pleases in its own interest and in that of the ruling class, and will use the people themselves, transformed into soldiers, to keep the recalcitrant down. If the masses start making demands and showing a willingness to assert themselves, then the government, if it is clever and has foresight, will yield bit by bit to avoid the worst; and if it is stupidly stubborn, or if the demands are such as to make the matter a life-or-death issue for the government and for the class upon which it relies, it will resist until it has been overthrown by revolution. In any event, it may well be able to exploit the strength of the community for the benefit of one class, but it cannot do a thing for the people that the people do not do for themselves.

The illusion that the government does good for the people is perhaps a little less stupid but nevertheless akin to the illusion of the worker who, receiving from his employer a small part of what he has himself produced, thinks that the employer is putting food on his table.

The fact that the government in question is a representative one does not affect our argument. Even supposing (and we have often shown this to be false) that it genuinely does represent the “will of the people,” in order to make any reform whatsoever, this would need to exist and be strong enough to overcome any resistance. So, why wait for the deputies to ensure that this will triumphs, through a thousand legal impediments and thousands of delaying formalities? Why do not people implement that will directly, by simply doing what they want and are strong enough to do?

Now, let us remember a few facts.

It is a proven and generally accepted truth, even by the most parliamentary of socialists, that parliaments are actually nothing more than registry offices; that when it comes to social reforms, all they do is legalize what has become or is becoming enshrined in custom. If they want to do something else, their resolutions remain unenforced, because they have no strength.

There is much talk about labor protection laws. Yet everybody knows that these laws usually pass only when the people force them, which is to say when there is no need for them. And if a few times they have passed before the workers were strong enough to demand them, it was merely to silence the opposition, divert public attention away from the political mess behind the scenes, and make them think that the government looks out for the people's interests: and rest assured that they are then left unenforced. As evidence the Italian law on child labor.¹ In England itself, where labor protection laws were extracted from the bourgeoisie by force, often extremely violent, of organized workers, they are not really enforced other than for those trades that stand ever-ready to fight to defend themselves.

And what of freedom?

Which freedom has not been forcefully extracted? Which freedom has survived if the people were not ready to rush to arms to defend it?

The whole history of the parliamentary age (not to mention more ancient times) is an alternation of progress and reaction: whenever the people have risen up or threatened to rise up, when they have agitated vigorously and directly, progress has been made; when they have placed their trust in the work of elected leaders they have more or less slowly lost what they had achieved.

What reform, what act of justice has really been achieved through parliamentary action?

In France there has been a republic with universal suffrage for nearly thirty years. But when justice was sought for Dreyfus, when they sought to defend themselves against the menace of clericalism, they were forced to resort to direct popular action. Parliament was, and would still be, on the side of the general staff and the clericalists.

Let us look at what is happening in Barcelona. The issue involves the bourgeoisie, but the method can still be used by the workers. The businessmen and industrialists find that the tax burden is too heavy. Instead of thinking to appoint members of parliament, who would then not have been able to do anything because they would have been a tiny minority in the Cortes, they simply refused to pay. The government threatened the debtors with seizure, but they persisted with their refusal to pay; and seizing the things of so many people became impossible. The government proclaimed a state of siege, said that refusal to pay taxes constituted rebellion, and put a few people in prison. The taxpayers held firm, the prisoners received the population's applause; and the government had to stop the arrests and seek another gimmick. It tried closing a few shops, but all the stores immediately closed in protest; and the government was more embarrassed than ever. How will this end? Probably with a compromise, because neither the government nor the bourgeoisie are interested in pushing matters too far: but it is clear they will achieve more with this resistance than they would have with a hundred years of elections.

¹ The law on child labor, which set the minimum working age at nine years old, was approved in February 1886. Remarking upon an incident that had occurred in Turin, *La Stampa* of September 26, 1899 observed: "That law does indeed exist: but, it seems, it is not always enforced." And *Avanti!* of September 29, in the article "Contro la legge: Il lavoro delle donne e dei fanciulli" (Against the law: Female and child labor), stressed: "This is a law that, though it has been around for many years, can be regarded as stillborn; since it was never or hardly ever enforced, as can be deduced from the official statistics." — Ed.

To be sure, until the revolution has swept aside all the current authoritarian organization, there are lots of things that cannot be done without passing through the government's mechanisms. In order to abolish a liberticidal law, until it can be abolished by force, we must look to parliament. To feed poor children in the schools, until wealth can be taken into common ownership, we must rely upon the municipality that has or can find the resources. But parliaments and municipal councils will pass measures favoring the people only when the people force them to do so; they will abolish harmful laws and regulations only when the people refuse to obey them. And it is not a good war tactic to send our friends into their ranks, as they will serve as shields from attacks.

If those socialists who were elected as deputies had instead remained among the people, to preach direct popular action, their action would have been more effective, even on parliament itself, without the party having to suffer parliamentarianism's corrupting influence. The part they now play in parliament, would have been performed by radicals, and there would not have been any need for them to transform into radicals and republicans.

But what if the reaction does not allow us to agitate through means other than elections!—they say.

Oh how did they manage when there was no right to vote? How did they manage to win that right? And what would they do if the government were to take it away?

The truth is that the illusion of doing something by electoral means and of doing it without danger and with little effort, prevents us from finding the right methods to resist the reaction.

Let this be considered by those anarchists—fortunately very few in number—who are inclined to go out and vote... because “there is nothing better to do.”

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