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From a Matter of Tactics to a Matter of Principle

Errico Malatesta

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The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by
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Translated from Malatesta's note to the article "Da una questione di tattica a una questione di principii," by Francesco Saverio Merlino, *L'Agitazione* (Ancona) 1, no. 3 (28 March 1897). Merlino's article and Malatesta's response are part of a long debate that started with the respective letters to the newspaper *Il Messaggero* and ended only with Malatesta's arrest in January 1898. The matter of principle mentioned in the title is whether the majority principle can be consistent with anarchism.

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Merlino has some very fair things to say, things we ourselves would say; but by talking in generalities about the necessity of social living, he loses sight, or so it seems to us, of the dividing line between authoritarianism and anarchism and the rationale behind the difference. And so his entire argument could very well be used to argue the necessity of government and thus the impossibility of anarchy.

Let us straight away spell out the points of agreement between us, lest Merlino—or anyone else who might be inclined to engage us in argument—waste their time upbraiding us about ideas that are not ours and thereby finish up pushing at an open door.

We reckon that, in many cases, the minority, even though it might be sure that it is in the right, should defer to the majority, for otherwise life in society would be impossible—and any human life outside of society is impossible. And we know only too well that matters on which unanimity cannot be achieved and on which the minority needs to give way are not just mat-

ters of small consequence, but also, indeed especially, matters of vital importance to the collective economy.

We do not believe in the divine right of majorities, but neither do we hold that minorities always, as has been argued, stand for righteousness and progress. Galileo was right, despite all his contemporaries, but to this day there are some who maintain that the earth is flat and that the sun goes around it; but none will say that they are in the right merely because they have become the minority. Besides, whilst it is true that revolutionaries are always a minority, the exploiters and the goons are always minorities, too.

So, we agree with Merlino in accepting that there is no way that each man can do everything for himself, and that, even if it were possible, that would be extremely detrimental for everyone. Hence we agree to the division of labor, the delegation of roles and trusting others to represent our own views and interests.

And above all we reject as false and pernicious any notion of providentially or naturally ordained harmony within society, it being our belief that human society and the social individual himself are the products of a protracted and wearisome battle with nature, and that if man were to desist from exercising his conscious will and surrender to nature, he would soon lapse back into animality and brutish strife.

But—and here is the reason why we are anarchists—we want minorities to defer voluntarily whenever necessity and the feeling of solidarity require it. We want the division of labour not to divide men into classes, turning some into directors and chiefs, exempt from any sort of off-putting work, and condemning others to serve as society's beasts of burden. We want men, when they delegate a role to others—which is to say, allocate a given task to others—not to be abdicating their own sovereignty and, wherever a representative may be called for, that he may serve as the spokesman for those from whom he receives his mandate or the executor of their wishes, rather than

he turns his back on anarchy and looks to the ranks of his and our opponents for his supporters?

Merlino persists in talking about the propaganda activity that might be pursued by means of elections; but fails to consider what might happen if, repudiating electioneering, such activity was to be pursued in another theater more congruent with our principles and our purposes.

Merlino does not believe in capturing public office; but we cannot see any such capture being made, neither by ourselves nor by anyone else, not even if we were to believe it feasible. We are opposed to the principle of government and do not believe that anyone coming to government would then be in any hurry to surrender the power captured. The peoples who want freedom tear down the Bastilles; tyrants, on the other hand, wish to garrison and strengthen them, on the pretext of defending the people from its enemies. Hence it is not our wish that the people should get used to hoisting its friends, or alleged friends, into power and look to their rise to power for emancipation.

To us, abstentionism is a matter of tactics; but one of such importance that, when one forswears, it one finishes up forswearing one's principles as well. Because of the natural connection between means and ends.

Merlino is sorry that he cannot see eye to eye completely, neither with us nor with the democratic socialists; but he says that he cannot renege upon what he has said.

We are certainly not asking him to renege upon it and go against his beliefs and his conscience. But permit us to make this observation to him.

No matter how good it may be, a tactic only has value to the extent that it is embraced by those tasked with implementing it. Now, rightly or wrongly, we and every other anarchist want no truck with the tactic being put forward by Merlino. Would he not be better sticking with us, with whom he shares his ideals and his chief methods of struggle, instead of squandering his efforts on a venture that we are sure will get nowhere, unless

someone who makes laws and enforces acceptance of them. And we believe that any social arrangement that is not founded upon the free and considerate will of its members, leads to oppression and exploitation of the masses by a tiny minority.

Any authoritarian society survives through coercion. The anarchist society must be founded upon consent freely given. There, men must be acutely sensible and spontaneously accepting of the obligations of social living, and strive to orchestrate discordant interests and banish any source of internal strife; or at any rate, if conflicts do erupt, may they never be of such dimensions as to trigger the establishment of some moderating authority that would reduce everyone to the status of slave on the pretext of ensuring justice for all.

But what if the minority refuses to give way?, Merlino asks. What if the majority makes to abuse its strength?, we ask.

In both instances, plainly, anarchy is not a possibility.

For instance, we want no police. This naturally presupposes that our wives and children and we ourselves can proceed through the streets without being molested by anyone, or at any rate, that if anyone was to make to misuse his superior might against us we can look to our neighbors and passers-by for better protection than any hireling police force might offer. But on the other hand, what if gangs of blackguards roved the streets insulting and thrashing the weakest of them and what if the public were to gaze upon this spectacle with indifference? Then, naturally, the weak and those with a fondness for a quiet life would insist upon the establishment of a police force, and one would assuredly be raised. It might be argued that, in such circumstances, the police would be the lesser evil; but it certainly could not be argued that anarchy was achieved. The truth of the matter would be that with so many bullies on one side and so many cowards on the other, anarchy is not possible.

Therefore the anarchist has to have a lively sense of respect for the freedom and well-being of others, and ought to make such respect the over-arching purpose of his propaganda.

But, the objection will be raised, men these days are too selfish, too intolerant, too mischievous to respect other people's rights and defer voluntarily to the needs of society.

Actually, even in the most corrupt of men, we have always encountered something akin to a need to be held in good regard and to be loved and, in certain circumstances, such a capacity for sacrifice and such consideration for the needs of others as to give us hope that, once the on-going causes of the gravest antagonisms have been banished along with private ownership, it will not be hard to secure the freely given cooperation of each to the welfare of all.

Be that as it may, we anarchists are not the whole of mankind and we certainly cannot make the whole of human history on our own; but we can and should strive for the realization of our ideals by trying to banish strife and coercion from the life of society, insofar as this is feasible.

That said, Merlino is right to argue that parliamentarism cannot be banished entirely and that even in the society of our dreams there is going to be some trace of it left behind!

It is our belief that referring to the trading of services and distribution of social roles, without which there could be no society, as parliamentarism or a remnant of parliamentarism is an unreasonable tinkering with the accepted usage of the word and cannot help but cloud and confuse the issue.

Parliamentarism is a form of government; and government means legislative power, executive power, and judicial power; it means violence, coercion, forcible imposition of the will of the governors upon the governed.

An example will make our thinking plain.

The various states in Europe and around the world connect with one another, have their representatives to one another, organize international services, call congresses, explicitly or tacitly agree upon certain rights for the people, make peace or war without there being any world government, some legislative power making the laws for every state and an executive power imposing it upon them all.

These days, relations between the various states are still largely rooted in violence and in suspicion. Added to the lingering atavism of historic rivalries, racial and religious hatreds and the spirit of conquest, there is the economic rivalry generated by capitalism, so that the threat of war hangs over us every day and every day we watch as the bigger states do violence to the smaller.

But which of us would dare argue that, in order to rectify this state of affairs, every state would need to appoint representatives who, gathered together, would sort out between them and by majority vote the principles of international law and criminal sanctions to be used against transgressors, and little by little would lay down the law on every state-to-state issue; and be able to call upon a force to ensure that their decisions were abided by?

That would amount to parliamentarism applied to international relations; and, far from introducing harmony between the interests of the various states and banishing the causes of conflicts, the tendency would be for it to consolidate the ascendancy of the strongest and conjure up a new class of international exploiters and oppressors. Something of the sort already exists in germ in the "concert" of the great powers, and the freedom-murdering impact of that is there for us all to see.

And now, for a few more words about the issue of electoral abstentionism.