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Errico Malatesta
“Idealism” and “Materialism”
1924

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It has been noted thousands of times that men, before arriving at the truth, or at least as much relative truth as is attainable at various junctures in their intellectual and social development, are wont to fall into the most widely varying errors in looking at things, now from one side and now from the other, thereby lurching from one exaggeration to its opposite.

I wish to examine here a phenomenon of this sort, which is of great interest to the whole of contemporary social life.

A few years ago everybody was a “materialist.” Invoking a “science” that was the harnessing of the general principles derived from a positive knowledge that was all too incomplete, it was expected to explain the whole of human psychology and the entire eventful history of humanity in terms of basic material needs alone. The “economic factor” explained all: past, present, and future. Every manifestation of thought and sentiment, every vagary in life, love as well as hate, passions good and bad, the condition of women, ambition, jealousy, racial pride, any sort of relations between individuals and peoples, war and peace, mass submissiveness or rebelliousness, sundry forms of family and society, political regimes, religion, morality, literature, art, science...

all of these were merely the outworkings of the prevalent mode of production and distribution of wealth and of the instruments of labor in each epoch. And those with a broader, less simplistic notion of human nature and history were looked upon within the conservative and subversive ranks alike as throwbacks bereft of "science."

Naturally, this outlook influenced the practical behavior of parties and tended to lead to the sacrificing of every nobler ideal to material interests, economic issues, no matter how petty and insignificant these latter might be.

Today, the fashion has changed. These days everybody is an "idealist": everybody affects to sneer at the "belly," and treats man as if he were pure spirit, eating, dressing, and meeting physiological needs being matters of no significance to him, matters not to be heeded, lest a moral decline set in.

I have no intention of concerning myself here with the sinister quirks that turn "idealism" into sheer hypocrisy and a weapon of deception; the capitalist who commends a sense of duty and spirit of sacrifice to his workers so that he may blithely slash their wages and boost his own profits; the "patriot" who, enthused by love of country and the national spirit, devours his own homeland and, given the chance, the homelands of others; or the soldier who, for the greater glory and honor of the flag, exploits the vanquished and oppresses them and rides roughshod over them.

I talk about honest folk: especially those of our comrades who, having seen that the fight for economic betterment ended up consuming the entire energy of the workers' organizations until all revolutionary potential there was spent, and now witnessing so much of the proletariat allowing itself to be stripped of any vestige of freedom and, albeit reluctantly, kissing the rod that smites them in the vain hope that they might be guaranteed employment and decent pay, are showing a tendency to jettison in disgust all economic concerns and struggles and to confine, or, if your prefer,

raise our entire activity to the realms of education and revolutionary struggle proper.

The main problem, the basic need is the need for freedom, they argue; and freedom can only be won and retained through wearisome struggles and cruel sacrifices. It therefore falls to revolutionaries to pay no mind to petty matters relating to economic improvements, to oppose the selfishness that prevails among the masses, to spread the spirit of sacrifice and, instead of promising pie-in-the-sky, to imbue the crowd with a sacred pride in suffering on behalf of a noble cause.

Entirely agree—but let us not get carried away.

Freedom, full and complete freedom, is certainly the essential prize, because it represents the enshrinement of human dignity and is the only means whereby social problems can and ought to be resolved to the benefit of all. But freedom is a hollow word unless it is wedded to ability, which is to say, to the means whereby one can freely carry on his own activity.

The maxim “whoever is poor is a slave” is still true, though equally true is that other maxim that “whoever is a slave is or is made poor, and thus loses all of the best characteristics of the human being.”

Material needs, the satisfaction of physiological needs, are indeed lesser and even contemptible matters, but they are the basic pre-requisite for any higher moral and intellectual existence. Man is prompted by myriad factors of the most varied sorts and these shape the course of history, but... He has to eat. “First live, and then philosophize.”

To our aesthetic sensibilities, a bit of canvas, some oil, and a little colored earth are mean things when set alongside a Raphael painting; but without those relatively worthless materials, Raphael would never have been able to set down his dream of beauty.

I suspect that the “idealists” are all folk who eat on a daily basis and who can still be reasonably sure of eating the following day; and this is only natural, because in order to be able to think, to be

able to aspire to loftier matters, a basic minimum, no matter how low, of material comfort is required. There have been and are men equal to the greatest heights of sacrifice and suffering, men who can blithely look hunger and torture in the face and carry on fighting heroically for their cause amid the most horrific suffering; but these are men who have grown up in relatively favorable circumstances and who have managed to store up a quantum of latent energy, which then comes into play as the need arises. That is the general rule, at any rate.

For many a long year I have dallied with workers' organizations, revolutionary groups, and educational associations and I have always noticed that the greatest activists, the greatest enthusiasts were those who were in the least straitened circumstances and who were attracted, not so much by their own needs, but by a desire to contribute to the doing of good and to feel ennobled by an ideal. The true, the greatest wretches, the ones who might appear to have the most personal and immediate interest in a change in things were either absent or played a passive role. I remember how tough and fruitless our propaganda work turned out to be in certain locations around Italy thirty or forty years ago when the farm-workers and much of the urban worker population were living in genuinely brutish conditions, which I should like to think are now a thing of the past, albeit the fears of their making a come-back may not be without foundation. Just as I have seen hunger-inspired popular unrest stilled at a stroke by the opening a few "cookhouses" and the distribution of a little cash.

From all of which, my deduction is that pride of place goes to the idea, which must activate the will, but certain conditions are required for the idea to be able to emerge and make an impact.

Thus our old program, that announced that moral, political, and economic emancipation could not be disentangled one from another, and that the masses need to be placed in such material conditions as may allow for the outworking of ideal needs, stands confirmed.

Fight for wholesale emancipation and, while waiting and preparing for the day on which that will be feasible, wrest from government and capitalists all political and economic improvements that might improve the conditions of our struggle and boost the numbers of conscious fighters. So, wrest them by means that imply no acknowledgment of the existing arrangements and which pave the way to the future.

Spread the sense of duty and the spirit of sacrifice; but bear in mind that example is the best form of propaganda and that one can not ask of others that which we ourselves do not do.