

Interests and Ideals

Errico Malatesta

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In a recent article of mine and apropos of the impossibility, under capitalist rule, of reconciliation between the actual interests of individuals and the ideals of fairness for all, I closed by saying: “All things considered interest is always conservative; and only the ideal is revolutionary. And it is men who prize ideal over interest who can determine the success of the revolution.”¹

And I received, for saying that, some compliments, which I had not been expecting.

Few days ago, in a chance encounter, I bumped into a gentleman with whom I had previously been rather superficially acquainted. The moment he spotted me he reached out his hand with a grin and told me what a great pleasure it was for him to see me in good health.

I noticed that he was wearing a fascist badge and I was at something of a loss,² but he immediately relieved me of my embarrassment and started to say:

“Look, I’m a fascist but I love and respect you and I would be a revolutionary too, if only all revolutionaries were like you.”

And whilst I stared at him in wonder, none too sure of what to say, he went on briskly:

“Yes, yes, I read your piece on the economic struggle and I applaud your conclusions. Beyond the Ideal, there is nothing. Those socialist swine, who have taught workers to think only of their bellies, have been the ruination of Italy. They have derided and discredited all idealism, and now, for a little more money in the pay-packet, workers would condemn the country to ruination. Yes, you are right; there has to be a fight-back against this creeping materialism.” And who knows how much longer he might have continued in the same vein, had I not timidly slipped in a naïve question: “Using the cudgel?”

The fellow stopped for a moment, thrown, and I used the opportunity to say to him:

“Kindly let me know, what is your position in society?”

“I’m an industrialist,” he replied, “I have a large factory and employ about a thousand workers. Oh, if only you knew what sort of folk they are! They are never content, never displaying any enthusiasm, any love in their work...”

¹ The article in question, “La lotta economica in regime capitalistico” (The economic struggle under capitalist rule), had appeared in *Umanità Nova* of 21 October.

² By the time this article was published, fascists had been in power for little over than a month. In fact, this was the last issue of *Umanità Nova*. Its columns reported that the newspaper’s offices had been occupied by fascist squads.

“Whereas you,” I interrupted him, “make sacrifices for them; and, since they are Italians like you are, you decline any possible profits for the sake of your workers and the collective generally, thinking that the best way of making Italy great is to make Italians morally and materially better off. Ah, if only Italy had lots of capitalists like you!”

The fellow picked up on the irony and made to disagree: but I shrugged him off, saying:

“Listen, number me among the materialists as well and among the swine, but know that my idealism has nothing in common with your own.”

There was nothing to be gained by laboring the point. The idealism of which I speak is certainly not the false and lying “idealism” of the bourgeois who would love the workers to show contempt for their “bellies” so that they, the bourgeois, might comfortably grow fat; just like the interest that I describe as conservative is not the loftier interest of humanity, which is indistinguishable from the ideal.

Let me say it again: interest is conservative, and ideal, revolutionary. But that does not mean that interest, even though it be short term or petty or personal, is worthless, and that the revolutionary can and should live by ideals alone.

In order to be able and willing to improve, one must exist; in order to progress, one needs to conserve and consolidate the progress already achieved.

And since things are such that very often there is contradiction and incompatibility between short term, personal, material interests and the future, broader, moral interest that go to make up what we refer to as the ideal, the “revolutionary,” the man who is out to combat society’s woes, is always faced by the issue of how to reconcile today’s needs with the ambitions for the future and how and to what extent needs can be met in such a way as to help, or at any rate not hinder, the greatest and swiftest possible achievement of the ideal to which one aspires.

And a solution to this grave problem generally implies a fairly substantial sacrifice of one’s own well-being and one’s own peace of mind, so that it could be argued that, the greater the capacity for sacrifice, the better the “revolutionary,” the greater the intelligence with which his sacrifice is made, the more effective the revolutionary.

At the level of the individual, the sacrifice may extend to total renunciation, including even the loss of one’s own liberty and life; then we have martyrs who are like shining beacons lighting humanity’s path.

But when it comes to the collective, once a certain point has been reached, sacrifice is no longer feasible, nor would it be useful, nor desirable.

For the masses, sacrificing that minimum measure of wellbeing that has been achieved, un-resisting, willing renunciation of meager gains made at the cost of past personal or collective sacrifices, would be tantamount to a lurch backwards, a lapse back into brutishness, running counter to the ideal of human uplifting. Whereas the fight to protect, the fight to secure every improvement feasible at the time, helps to preserve or conjure up conditions favoring further progress, the emergence of further desires and fresh claims and to lay the groundwork for the great uprising in pursuit of comprehensive emancipation once and for all.

Which is why revolutionaries, especially anarchists, whom we see as the only really thorough-going revolutionaries, must take an active hand in the workers’ movement, be the first to take up battle stations and occupy the places of danger even when it comes to minor battles and minor

dangers relating to minor matters. They must inspire the workers to ever more ambitious demands and avoid that contemplative, ecstatic, and absolutist state of mind that ultimately leads to inertia and passive waiting for some future paradise that will never be reached other than by a path strewn with tribulations and ambushes. But, in grappling with the battles of today, the anarchists should never lose sight of the higher interests of the future; they must fight the tendency towards accommodation, which is typical of the masses, and those methods of struggle that signify acceptance of the status quo.

In conclusion: inside the unions, certainly, and in the forefront of them; but let it always be on behalf of the revolution and anarchy.

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