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Errico Malatesta
On Collective Responsibility
10th July 1930

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This is a letter from Errico Malatesta to the anarchist group of the 18e Arrondissement in Paris, written in March or April 1930 and published in Paris in "Le Liberaire" No.252 on 19th April 1930. The letter confirms Malatesta's opinion on the concept of the "collective responsibility" of the organization. Both at the last congress of organized French anarchists and in the pages of "Le Liberaire" the issue was being hotly debated.

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On Collective Responsibility

Errico Malatesta

10th July 1930

I have seen a statement by the Group of the 18e where, in agreement with the Russians' "Platform" and with comrade Makhno, it is held that the "principle of collective responsibility" is the basis of every serious organization.

I have already, in my criticism of the "Platform" and in my reply to the open letter directed to me by Makhno, indicated my opinion on this supposed principle. But as there is some insistence on an idea or at least an expression which would seem to me to be more at home in a military barracks than among anarchist groups, I hope I will be permitted to say another few words on the question.

The comrades of the 18e say that "communist anarchists must work in such a way that their influence has the greatest probabilities for success and that this result will not come about unless their propaganda can develop collectively, permanently and homogeneously". I agree! But it seems that that is not the case; since those comrades complain that "in the name of the same organization, in every corner of France, the most diverse, and even contrary theories are spreading". That is most deplorable, but it simply means that that organization has no clear and precise programme which is understood

and accepted by all its members, and that within the party, confused by a common label, are men who do not have the same ideas and who should group together in separate organizations or remain unattached if they are unable to find others who think as they do.

If, as the comrades of the 18e say, the UACR (*Union Anarchiste Communiste Révolutionnaire*) does nothing to establish a programme which can be accepted by all its members and permit it to be able to act together in such situations as may present themselves, if, in other words, the UACR lacks knowledge, cohesion or agreement, its problem is this, and nothing will be remedied by proclaiming “collective responsibility” which, unless it means the blind submission of all to the will of some, is a moral absurdity in theory and general irresponsibility in practice.

But all this is perhaps only a question of words.

In my reply to Makhno I already said: “It may be that, by the term collective responsibility, you mean the agreement and solidarity that must exist among the members of an association. And if that is so, your expression would, in my opinion, amount to an improper use of language, and therefore, being only a question of words, we would be closer to understanding each other.”

And now, reading what the comrades of the 18e say, I find myself more or less in agreement with their way of conceiving the anarchist organisation (being very far from the authoritarian spirit which the “Platform” seemed to reveal) and I confirm my belief that behind the linguistic differences really lie identical positions.

But if this is the case, why persist in an expression which serves only to defy clarification of what was one of the causes of the misunderstanding provoked by the “Platform”? Why not speak as all do in such a way as to be understood and not create confusion?

Moral responsibility (and in our case we can talk of nothing but moral responsibility) is individual by its very nature. Only the spirit of domination, in its various political, military, ecclesiastical (etc.) guises, has been able to hold men responsible for what they have not done voluntarily.

If a number of men agree to do something and one of them allows the initiative to fail through not carrying out what he had promised, everyone will say that it was his fault and that therefore it is he who is responsible, not those who did what they were supposed to right up to the last.

Once again, let us talk as everyone talks. Let us try to be understood by everyone. We may perhaps find ourselves in less difficulty with our propaganda.

Errico Malatesta

March / April 1930