Errico Malatesta
Our Plans
Union Between Communists and Collectivists
30 November, 1889

The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader. Translated from "I nostri propositi. I. L'Unione tra comunisti e collettivisti," *L'Associazione* (London) 1, no. 4 (30 November 1889).

The controversy over communism versus collectivism as the best form of the future anarchist society had divided the anarchist movement for years, especially in Spain.

Our Plans

Union Between Communists and Collectivists

Errico Malatesta

30 November, 1889

Some friends of ours have passed comment on the proposal we have put, and which has been generally well received, that a party be formed embracing all revolutionary anarchist socialists, regardless of the matter of the economic arrangement any faction may advocate for the society of the future.[1] Said comments show, on the one hand, a degree of repugnance on the part of some communists to the notion of coming together with collectivists, and, on the other, a fear lest we are out to revive an organization such as those past ones that collapsed because they were a spent force and no longer suited to the times.

Allow us to explain ourselves briefly with regard to the two aspects of this matter; we promise to revisit the matter, if need be.

As we see it, the co-existence within the one party of anarchist-communists and anarchist-collectivists is the logical and necessary consequence of the anarchist idea and method.

[1] The proposal to which Malatesta refers was contained in the circular *Appello*, published in Italian in Nice in September 1889 and translated into Spanish by the Barcelona anarchist periodicals *La Revolución Social* of 29 September and *El Productor* of 2 October.

Doubts would never have arisen about this but for the emergence of a certain brand of "collectivists" who are neither anarchists nor revolutionaries and who to all intents ensure that socialism adds up to nothing more than the pointless and corruptive struggle to win seats in representative bodies; in Italy and France where the vast majority of anarchists are communists, they have ensured that the meaning that all of us in Italy invested in the word "collectivism" prior to '76 and to which most Spanish anarchists still subscribe, has been forgotten about.[2]

We could scarcely see eye to eye with the sort of collectivists that are today out to ensconce themselves among the lawmakers and promote political reforms and so-called social legislation within the parameters of the law and who, come the revolution, would be out to establish a "workers' state." If, on the other hand and as a friend of ours assumes, collectivism means the entire wealth of society, money included, being equally divided between people so that each person might then carry on buying and selling the way they do today, that would be such a nonsense that, assuming that any could be found, it would have only a few, superficial supporters who would certainly not represent any boon to or a hope for the revolution and it would be a waste of our time to bother ourselves much about them.

But the truth is that the old collectivism of the pre-1876 International is not dead and in all likelihood it is not going to die out until the practicalities of the free life have definitively proved it wrong, and the evolution that will ensue upon the downfall of bourgeois rule will have induced all to embrace a superior mode of social coexistence, entirely founded upon the sentiment of solidarity and greater common advantage. Such

[2] 1876 was the year when the Italian Internationalists, including Malatesta, claimed the inadequacy of collectivism and declared themselves in favor of communism, thus setting the controversy in motion.

anarchists in placing obstacles in the way of the bamboozlers and reactionaries and in ensuring that socialism triumphs.

One can have the most widely varying ideals when it comes to the re-making of society, but the method will always be the one that determines the goal achieved, since it is common knowledge that in sociology as in topography, one does not go wherever one *wishes*, but wherever the path one is on may lead.

For the formation of a party, it is necessary and sufficient that there should be a shared method. And the method, which is to say, the practical conduct that anarchist socialists mean to abide by, is shared by all, communists and collectivists alike.

That the authoritarians, the *electioneers*, and often the republicans are or are fond of styling themselves collectivists, is a matter of no importance to us and should engender neither confusion nor hybrid alliances within our ranks, since we are not saying that we are uniting with mere collectivists, but make it an essential precondition that they be *anarchists and revolutionaries* to boot.

It seems to us that the program we have put forward is such as to exclude absolutely every politicker, be he bourgeois or socialist. If there are some among our friends who find this inadequate, let them suggest whatever amendments or additions they see fit. We shall publish them and debate them and then it will be up to each of us to judge and to act upon his convictions.

collectivism is still subscribed to, as we have said, by the vast majority of the Spanish and, though knocked about by the logic of communism, it stands its ground and whilst there are, on the one hand, many defectors to the communist camp, on the other it is still making new recruits, and not just in Spain.

That collectivism—the one we ourselves subscribed to back in the days of Bakunin's propaganda and right up until 1876—means (we would remind any who may have forgotten this) violent expropriation effected directly by the people; the taking into common ownership of whatever there is, and then, reached by means of anarchy, which is to say, spontaneous evolution, the arrangement of a society wherein every person, having access from birth to all of the means of development civilization has to offer man and after receiving a comprehensive, integral physical and intellectual education, is guaranteed the raw materials and instruments of labor needed to be able to work freely with whichever partners he may choose and enjoy the full product of his labors.

We communists do not accept this program, and in forthcoming issues we shall spell out the reasons why as amply as we can since, whereas we mean to bring unity where division should not be found, we nevertheless are bound to publicize our ideals undiluted; but that is no reason for us to ignore the great affinity that exists between us and anarchist-collectivists and think that we are separated by an abyss when there are a thousand ties uniting us and making us brothers.

Let us take a look at what the differences and similarities are.

We both vigorously reject any alliance with bourgeois parties, any truck with elections and other legalitarian mumbo-jumbo. We are both out to make the revolution and we seek to do it by inciting the people to hatred and insurrection against the state and against property. We both seek expropriation by violence and the taking into common ownership not merely of raw materials and those instruments of labor not employed by the owner himself, but also of existing stocks of products

and the destruction of all registers and every material accoutrement of private ownership. We both reject the intrusion of any sort of constituent body, or any delegated body and are resolved to resort to force and, if need be, to more extreme measures in order to ensure that no new government, however disguised, grows out of the revolution. For the organization of the new society, we both look to the deployment of humanity's innate resources, to the free reconciliation of the interests and feelings of all. We both want everyone to be free to do as they think best, provided only that they afford the same freedom to others.

Our differences therefore reside not in what we mean to do now and on the day of the revolution, not in what we mean and are bound to do by force and which properly constitutes the program of a revolutionary party; but, rather, of what we anticipate should happen next, in respect of the manner in which we should prefer to produce and consume and in the goal towards which we reckon the new phase of civilization, on the threshold of which we stand, should lead us.

But are such differences, founded as they are mainly on theoretical opinions and forecasts, sufficient grounds to separate us and set us yapping at one another, perhaps on the very eve of the insurrection and when we are talking about folk who do and will continue to fight alongside us against the very same enemies and for the very same demands?

And from the point of view of communist propaganda too, is it right to alienate those who are better disposed than anybody else to embrace our ideas, in that they share our enthusiasms, our feelings and, for the most part, the very same scientific beliefs as us?

It is our belief that the collectivist arrangement would not live up to the notions of justice and solidarity that drive, not just us but the collectivists themselves; we believe that it could not be operated other than by means of a complicated machinery that would be a reproduction of the state under a different

name; we believe that it would, sooner or later, but inevitably, turn into communism or lapse back into bourgeois-ism. But, since a reversion to privilege and wage-slavery would be a moral impossibility on account of the moral revolution that would, of necessity, accompany the economic revolution, and specifically on account of anarchy, which is to say the absence of government, which is beyond question for us both, it strikes us that we have nothing to fear from an experiment, which we could not in any case prevent and which, let it be said, might in certain circumstances and in certain countries, help us surmount teething problems.

If anarchy means spontaneous evolution, if being anarchists means not believing that anyone is infallible and holding that only through freedom will humanity discover the solution to the problems that beset it and arrive at a general harmony and well-being, by what right and for what reason might we turn solutions we prefer and advocate into dogmas and impose them? And then again, using what means?

Were we an authoritarian party, which is to say, if we were out to become the government that might be conceivable. After taking power by means of revolution, we might introduce communism by decree and, if we were strong enough for it, there would be communism, though it would no longer stand for a harmonious society of free equals, but for a new form of slavery, which, in order to survive, would need an army, a police force, and the whole machinery the state has at its disposal for the purposes of corrupting, repressing, and enslaving.

Being anarchists, we are not going to have any means of ensuring the success of the solutions we propose other than propaganda and example, safe in the knowledge that they really will win through if they actually are the best.

So let us not look for enemies where there are naught but friends and let us not split the forces of the revolution, which will have only too sore a need for the support of all sincere