

Science and Social Reform

Errico Malatesta

1913

The great scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century and the victorious criticism which science made against the lies and the errors of religions, had the effect upon progressive spirits, of making them enthusiastic admirers if not intelligent and patient cultivators, of science. These progressives exaggerated the importance of science by attributing to it the power to solve and understand everything; they made of science a new religion.

Social reformers of every kind that is, of every kind which, by whatever means and ends, wished to modify the existing social order believed themselves obliged to found their aspirations upon Science. Similarly, the conservatives also, when they saw that religious faith was vacillating and that it was no longer sufficient to keep the people in subjection, sought to justify the existing regime by means of science. It was verily a state of intellectual intoxication (not yet vanished) which caused the loss of a clear concept of nature and of the methods and scope of science, and it was to the utter detriment of scientific truth and social action.

Hardly anyone was saved; and if we anarchists were saved from the ridiculousness of calling ourselves scientific anarchists, it was perhaps only because the adjective "scientific" had already been taken and rendered antipathetic by Marxian socialism. In fact, many of our Comrades (and among them some of the most deserving and illustrious) actually maintained that Anarchism is a deduction consolidated with scientific truths, and, furthermore, that it is nothing but the application of the mechanical conception of the universe to human interests.¹

Meanwhile, the fact that they remain anarchists even while science progresses and changes, demonstrates the fallacy of their scientific-ism and demonstrates likewise, that their anarchism is derived from their sentiments and not from their scientific convictions. But, in spite of their professed objectivism, in practice they will not admit facts or accept theories which seem to contradict their anarchical aspirations. And, if they had not had the opportunity to pursue scientific studies, or science did not exist and human knowledge had remained in the state in which it was centuries ago,² they would probably be anarchists just the same because, being good and sensible men, they would suffer because of human sorrows and would want to find a remedy and because, being proud and just men, they would rebel against oppression and would want complete liberty for themselves and for all. In addition they recognize the quality of conscious anarchism in that

¹ The implicit but obvious reference is to the theories of Peter Kropotkin.

² The words from "science did" to "knowledge had" were missing from the English version. They have been added on the basis of the Italian original.

immense majority of Comrades who do not know science, and, when they do propaganda work, they do just as we do, that is, they seek to awaken in men the sentiments of personal dignity and love of others; they strive to excite the passion for liberty and justice; they speak of general well-being and of human brotherhood; they bring to light the social ills and they arouse the desire to destroy them; and they do not wait until the people have studied mathematics, astronomy, and chemistry.

The study of the sciences is an excellent thing and we will speak later of those things which they serve. But to pretend that anarchism (and the same holds true for socialism or any other human aspiration) is a scientific deduction and especially, therefore, a consequence of one of those vast cosmogonical hypotheses in which philosophy takes such great delight, is a thing which is false per se and is pernicious because of the consequent effect it can have upon the intellectual development of individuals and upon their capacity as combatants.

The idea of a personal god, creator of all things, which is the oldest, the most ingenuous, and the most grossly absurd of these hypotheses, has done immense harm because it has accustomed people to believing without understanding and, by suffocating the spirit of examination, it has made intellectual slaves, well prepared to support political and economic slavery.

But do not scientific hypotheses do the same when they are presented as firm facts and as motives for actions, to those who know little or nothing of science and who are therefore in no position to judge? Some vague notions of scientific facts, more or less true, and the knowledge of a few strange words, are not enough to make of a man a scientist or even one who knows what he is talking about or who can choose from among the things that he is told.

For the public in general Moses and Haeckel are equally mythical figures and the belief in the monism of the one rather than in the genesis of the other just because it happens to be in style in the present environment, does not make one any the less ignorant, any the less superstitious, or any the less religious.³ And to speak to the unbelievers of atoms, ions, and electrons (which are only hypotheses for explaining and binding certain categories of fact—convenient hypotheses useful to the ends of scientific research, but, nevertheless, only hypotheses, simple mental concepts, and not at all positive discoveries, pace friend Cassisa)⁴—to speak, I say, without adequate preparation, of mysterious and incomprehensible things to one who does not understand, is the same as to speak of god and of angels. It means the teaching of words as things and the accustoming of the mind to contenting itself with affirmations which it can neither understand, nor prove, nor define.

This would be only a change in religion because it would still be a religion in the sense of blind submission to a revealed truth, which can be neither controlled nor comprehended. If it were true that anarchy is a scientific truth, then there would be no real anarchists except the very few scientists who would call themselves such; all we others would constitute a non-conscious herd which would blindly follow a few holy men who had been initiated into the reasons for faith!

Nor is there any difference in the moral deductions or in the social applications which can be obtained out of the various cosmogonical theories. The priests had God say the things which

³ Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919) was a German scientist who promoted and popularized Darwin's theories. His philosophical monism proposed the unity of organic and physical nature, including social phenomena and mental processes.

⁴ In the article "L'Anarchia è atea" (Anarchy is atheistic), which appeared in the previous issue of *Volontà*, the anarchist Gian Salvatore Cassisa had taken issue with Malatesta on religion and science. Taking a strongly positivistic stance, he had maintained that Anarchy was the synthesis of a new "scientific civilization."

were convenient to them and they used him as a medium for justifying and strengthening the dominion of the victors.

However, in the course of history there was no lack of rebels who, in the name of God, preached justice and equality. It is said that everything occurs by the will of God and that, therefore, we must accept with resignation our own position. But it can also be said that rebellion is holy since it does occur and hence must be willed by God. It can also be said that, if God is the common father, we are all brothers and ought, therefore, to be equal. In sum, this idea may be turned in any manner, to suit any taste—for example, we know that Mazzini invented God of goodness, of love, and of progress, who was entirely different from the ferocious God of Pius IX.

Bakunin used to say that, if God exists, men can have neither liberty nor dignity. Another might say—and many, in fact, have said it—that if all is matter, if everything is subject to natural laws, the will is an illusion, liberty a chimera and man nothing but an automaton.

So it is that, if the convictions and the moral aspirations are based upon the mobile foundations of philosophic hypotheses, they are always uncertain and mutable. Like the catholic who, basing his conduct upon belief in God, is left without any moral criterion as soon as his faith is shaken, so the anarchist, if he were really an anarchist because of scientific convictions, would have to continually consult the latest bulletins of the Academy of Science in order to determine whether he can continue to be an anarchist.

Cassisa furnishes an example of how, by means of philosophy, the simplest and most evident things can be confounded. According to him, “the principle of property is based upon the false belief in creation from nothing.” I, truly, do not understand what he wants to say: but it seems to me that if, before having a revolution and expropriating the holders of social wealth, we must first attend to nothing but the question of the origin of the world, then the capitalists may sleep in tranquility! Oh, isn’t it much more simple, much more comprehensible, to say that, however the world may have been formed, it is here and ought to serve the needs of all, and to incite the workers to take it and to work it on their own account, and to no longer permit themselves to be despoiled by those who, by violence or fraud, have made themselves the owners?

If then, from the clouds of philosophy, we descend to the more solid domain of the positive sciences and of the so-called social sciences, we find here, too, that they can serve to defend the most diverse political regimes, the most contradictory social aspirations. From the immense heap of more or less established facts, each one chooses those which support his own position, and each one formulates theories which in reality, become programs, desires, and objectives which he proposes and which he, deluding himself as well as others, calls scientific truths. In the interpretation of the facts of natural history, in anthropology, in the philosophy of history, in political economy, and in every phase of sociology, at every turning of a page we come upon dubious affirmations which say “it is” when they should say “it ought to be” or, better, “I wish it were.” The result is that scientific, objective, and impartial investigation suffers; the social struggle passes from the ardent field of passion and interest which are its very own, to degenerate itself in the chattering of the academicians and the pedants.

Science gathers facts, classifies them, and, when it finds that these facts are necessary and that they necessarily reproduce themselves every time the same conditions are set up, formulates natural laws. The latter are, for this reason, nothing but affirmations that under given conditions

certain definite phenomena occur. But this does not tell man what to desire, whether he should love or hate, be good or bad, just or unjust. Goodness, justice, and right are concepts which science ignores completely.

Science tends to delimit the field between fatalism and free will. The more science advances the more powerful does man become because he learns what are the necessary conditions which he must fulfill in order to be able to execute his will. But this will, executed or not, remains an extra scientific force with its own origins and its own tendencies.

Toxology teaches us the physiology of poisons, but it does not tell us whether we should use the acquired knowledge to poison or to cure people. Mechanics discovers the laws of equilibrium and of the resistance of materials, it teaches us to build bridges, steamships, and aeroplanes, but it does not tell us whether it is better to build the bridge where it may serve the greed of a proprietor, or where it may serve the interests of all; it does not tell us whether ships and planes should be used to carry soldiers and to hurl bombs upon the people or to spread throughout the world, civility, well-being, and brotherhood. Science is a weapon that can serve for good or for evil; but it ignores completely the idea of good or evil.

So then, we are not anarchists, because sciences tell us to be: we are, instead, anarchists because, among other reasons, we want everyone to be able to enjoy the advantages and the joys that science can procure for us.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Errico Malatesta
Science and Social Reform
1913

The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.

Man! (San Francisco) 3, no. 2 [*recte* 3] (March 1935), translated by Eli J. Boche. Originally published as “Scienza e riforma sociale,” *Volontà* (Ancona) 1, no. 29 (27 December 1913).

theanarchistlibrary.org