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Some Thoughts on the Post-Revolutionary Property System

Errico Malatesta

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Our opponents, the beneficiaries and defenders of the current social system, are in the habit of justifying the right to private property by stating that property is the condition and guarantee of liberty.

And we agree with them. Do we not say repeatedly that poverty is slavery?

But then, why do we oppose them?

The reason is clear: in reality the property that they defend is capitalist property, namely property that allows its owners to live from the work of others and which therefore depends on the existence of a class of the disinherited and dispossessed, forced to sell their labour to the property owners for a wage below its real value.

Indeed, in all countries of the modern world the majority of the population must live by seeking work from those with a monopoly of the land and means of labour and when they obtain it they receive a wage that is always below its value and

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often barely sufficient to ward off starvation. This means that workers are subjected to a kind of slavery which, though it may vary in degree of harshness, always means social inferiority, material penury and moral degradation, and is the primary cause of all the ills that beset today's social order.

To bring freedom to all, to allow everyone, in full freedom, to gain the maximum degree of moral and material development, and enjoy all the benefits that nature and labour can bestow, everyone must have their own property; everyone, that is, must have the right to that piece of land and those raw materials and tools and equipment that are needed to work and produce without exploitation and oppression. And since we cannot expect the propertied classes to spontaneously surrender the privileges they have usurped, the workers will have to expropriate that property and it must become the property of all.

This has to be the task of the next revolution and to it we must lend our best efforts. But since social life cannot allow for interruptions, we must at the same time give consideration to the practical means of using the assets we would by then hold in common, and the ways of ensuring that all members of society enjoy equal rights.

The property system will therefore be the problem that arises at the very same moment that we proceed with expropriation.

Naturally we cannot claim or hope to pass at one fell swoop from the current system to other perfect and definitive systems. During the moment of revolution, when the first priority is to act quickly and to immediately fulfill the most urgent needs, everything possible will be done, depending on the will of those involved and the actual conditions which are determined and circumscribed by them. But it is essential that: from the very beginning there is an idea of what needs to be done to propel things as far as possible towards that end.

Should property be individually or collectively owned? And should the collective owner of undivided assets be the local group, the operational group, the ideological affinity group, the

family group — or shall it involve all the members of the whole nation and, beyond that, of all mankind?

What will the forms of production and exchange be? Will the victorious system be *communism* (producers' associations and free consumption for all) or *collectivism* (production in common and distribution of goods according to the labour of the individual) or *individualism* (to each the individual means of production and possession of the product of their own labour), or some other compound form which individual interests and social instincts, illuminated by experience, might suggest?

Probably all possible forms of ownership, use of the means of production and all forms of distribution will be experimented with simultaneously, in the same or other locations, and they will be merged together and adapted in various ways until practical experience identifies the best form or forms.

In the meantime, as I have already mentioned above, the need not to interrupt production and the impossibility of suspending consumption of basic necessities will ensure that little by little, as expropriation takes place, agreement will be reached on the way to continue running social life. Whatever is possible will be done, and so long as everything is done to prevent the establishment and consolidation of new privileges there will be time to find better solutions.

But what is the solution that seems best to me and which is the one to aim for?

I call myself a communist because communism seems to me the ideal target for humanity, as people's love for one another grows and large-scale production frees them from fear of hunger, and thereby destroys the main obstacle to solidarity. But, really, more than the practical forms of economic organisation, which must necessarily be adapted to circumstance and will be under continual development, the important thing

is the spirit which moves these organisations and the methods with which they are set up. ^ ^at is important, in my opinion, is that they are guided by the spirit of justice and a desire for the good of all, and that they are always created freely and on a voluntary basis.

All forms of organisation, if there really is freedom and a spirit of solidarity, aim at the same goal — human emancipation and progress — and will end by agreeing with one another and merging. But if, on the other hand, there is a lack of freedom and goodwill to all, then there is no form of organisation that will not breed injustice, exploitation and despotism.

Let us briefly look at the main systems which have been proposed as a solution to the problem.

As regards anarchist aspirations, the two basic systems in contention are: *individualism* (by which I mean individualism as a means of distribution of wealth and I will not struggle with abstruse philosophical concepts which, in this context, are irrelevant) and *communism*.

Collectivism, about which little is said nowadays, is an intermediate system which brings together the merits and the defects of the two above-mentioned systems and, perhaps, precisely because it is a halfway house, will be widely applied, at least during the transition between the old and the new society. But I will not deal specifically with this because the same objections can be made of it as are made of individualism and communism.

Complete individualism would seem to consist in dividing between all individuals all land and all other wealth in proportions that are virtually equal and equivalent, in such a way that all persons, from the outset of their lives, are supplied with equal means, and each individual can rise to the heights that their faculties and activities permit. In order to preserve this

tional ability, to provide for the satisfaction of immediate needs and to prepare for the future, destroying privileges and harmful institutions and at the same time making the useful institutions, which today exclusively or mainly serve the ruling classes, work for the benefit of all.

The special mission for the anarchists is to be on guard for liberty against the aspirants to power and against the possible despotism of the majority.

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rupt bureaucracy, general misery and, finally, a more or less complete return to the same conditions of oppression and exploitation that the revolution was meant to abolish.

The Russian experience must not have taken place in vain.

To conclude, it seems to me that no system can be viable and truly liberate humanity from atavistic bondage, if it is not the result of free development.

If there is to be a society in which people live together on a free and cooperative basis for the greater good of all and no longer convents and despotisms, held together by religious superstition or brute force, human societies cannot be the artificial creation of one person or sect. They must be the result of the competing or conflicting needs and desires of all members of society who, through repeated trial and error, find the institutions which, at a given moment, are the best ones possible, and develop and change them according to changing circumstances and desires.

Communism, individualism, collectivism or any other imaginable system may be preferred and its triumph worked for through propaganda and example. But, at the risk of sure disaster, what must always guard against is the claim that one's own system is the only and infallible system, good for all, and in all places and for all time; and that victory can be won in other ways than by persuasion, based on the evidence of the facts.

What is important, and indispensable, indeed the essential departure point, is to ensure that every person has the means to be free.

When the government, which defends the proprietors and the landowners, is defeated, or at any rate rendered powerless, it will be up to everybody, and especially those among the populace who have the spirit of initiative and organisa-

equality from the outset the concept of heredity would be abolished and periodically there would be fresh divisions of land and wealth to keep pace with changes in the population figures.

This system would clearly not be economically viable; that is, it would not be conducive to the best use of wealth. Even if it could be applied in small and primitive agrarian communities it would certainly be impossible in an extensive collective and advanced agrarian-industrial civilisation, in which a considerable portion of the population would not be in direct touch with the land and equipment for producing material goods, but would be carrying out useful and essential services for all. Moreover, how can the land be divided with at least relative justice, given that the value of various different areas of land differs so much according to productivity, health of the soil and position? And how can one divide up the great industrial enterprises which, to operate, depend on the labour of a great number of workers, working simultaneously? And how to fix the value of things and trade without at the same time falling back on the evils of competition and hoarding?

It is quite true that advances in chemistry and engineering tend towards an equalling out of productivity and fertility of different areas of land; that the development of means of transport — the motor car and the aeroplane — will tend to spread benefits far more widely; that the electric motor is a decentralising factor in industry and enables isolated individuals and small groups to do machine work; that science may, in all countries, discover or synthesise the raw materials needed for production. And then, when these and other advances come about, ease and abundance of production will cease to be the overriding economic problem it is today and growth in human solidarity will render useless and repugnant any minute and hairsplitting calculations as to what one or the other person is entitled to.

But these are things that will happen in a more or less distant future, while here I have been dealing with today [1929] and the near future. And today a social organisation based on individual ownership of the means of production, maintaining and creating antagonisms and rivalries between producers and a conflict of interests between producers and consumers, would always be under threat from the possible advent of authority, a government that would re-establish the privileges that had been overthrown. In any case it could not exist, not even provisionally, unless it were moderated and strengthened by all kinds of voluntary associations and cooperatives.

The primary dilemma for the revolution always remains: whether to organise voluntarily to the advantage of all, or to be organised under the power of a government to the advantage of the ruling class.

Let us now turn to communism.

Theoretically, so far as human relations are concerned, communism seems the ideal system to replace struggle by solidarity, to make the best possible use of natural energy and human labour and of humanity one great family of brothers and sisters whose purpose is to help and love one another.

But is this practicable in the moral and material condition in which humanity now finds itself? And what are its boundaries?

Universal communism — a single community of all human beings — is an aspiration, an ideal goal towards which to move, but certainly it could not now take on a concrete form of economic organisation; nor probably could it do so for a long time to come: the longer term will be the concern of our descendants.

At present one can think only of a multiplicity of communities made up of neighbouring and kindred populations, who would have a number of different relationships between one

another, whether communist or commercial; and even within these limits there is always the problem of a possible conflict between communism and liberty. Because unless there is a residual sentiment, propelling people towards a conscious and desired solidarity which would induce us to fight for and put into practice the greatest possible degree of communism, I believe that total communism — especially if extended over a vast area of territory — would be as impossible and antilibertarian today as complete individualism would be economically unviable and impossible.

To organise a communist society on the grand scale, the whole of economic life — means of production, exchange and consumption — would have to be radically transformed. And this could only be done gradually, as objective circumstances permit, and to the extent that the majority of the population understand the advantages and know how to provide for themselves. If, on the other hand, this could be done at one stroke, at the wishes and through the excessive power of one party, the masses, used to obeying and serving, would accept the new form of life as a new law, imposed by a new government, and would wait for a supreme power to impose on all how to produce and to control consumption. And the new power, not knowing and not able to satisfy immensely varied and often contradictory needs and desires, and not wanting to declare itself a useless bystander by leaving to the interested parties the freedom to do as they wanted and could, would reconstitute a State, founded, like all States, on military and police power; and this, if it managed to last, would only substitute new and more fanatical bosses for the old ones. On the pretext (and indeed with the honest and sincere intention of regenerating the world with a new Gospel) that single rule must be imposed on all, all liberties suppressed and all free initiative made impossible. In consequence, discouragement and paralysis of production would set in; clandestine and fraudulent commercial practices would take over; there would be an arrogant and cor-