

The Monza Tragedy

Errico Malatesta

September 1900

Another act of bloodshed has come along to cast a pall over sensitive souls... and to remind the mighty that placing oneself above the people and riding roughshod over the great precept of equality and human solidarity is not without its risks.

Gaetano Bresci, worker and anarchist, has killed Humbert the king. Two men: one prematurely dead, the other condemned to a life of torments a thousand times worse than death! Two families plunged into grief!

Where does the blame lie?

Whenever we criticize established institutions and point out the unspeakable pain and countless deaths they cause, we never fail to caution that such institutions are harmful, not just to the broad proletarian masses thrust into poverty, ignorance, and all the other woes that spring from poverty and ignorance because of them, but also to the very privileged minority that suffers, physically and morally, from the tainted environment that it conjures up and that lives in constant fear of the people's wrath making it pay a high price for its privileges.

Whenever we look forward to redemptive revolution, we are always talking about the benefits for all men without distinction; and we mean that, regardless of the competing interests and party loyalties by which they are divided today, they should all set aside hatred and resentments and join as brothers in shared striving for the well-being of all.

And every time that capitalists and governments perpetrate some extraordinarily criminal act, every time that innocents are tortured, every time the savagery of the powerful erupts into bloodshed, we deplore that fact, not merely because of the pain it directly generates and for the trespass against our sense of fairness and mercy, but also on account of the legacy of hatred it leaves in its wake and the seed of vengeance it plants in the minds of the oppressed.

But our warnings go unheeded; on the contrary, they are used as a pretext for persecution.

And then, when the pent-up anger of protracted tortures bursts into a storm, when a man driven to despair or a generous soul moved by the suffering of his brethren and impatient for sluggish justice to arrive, raises an avenging arm and strikes at what he reckons is the cause of the woe, then the guilty parties, the ones responsible... are us.

It is always the lamb that gets the blame!

Nonsensical conspiracies are concocted, we are fingered as a threat to society; they pretend to believe—and maybe some actually do believe—that we are bloodthirsty criminals whose only choice should be between the penitentiary and the criminal asylum...

Besides, it is only natural that things should be so. In a land where the likes of Crispi, Rudini, Pelloux, and all those who have slaughtered and starved the people can live free, are powerful and are feted, there can be no place for the likes of us who protest and rebel against massacre and famishment!

But let us leave the incorrigible police personnel to one side; let us leave to one side the interested parties who lie in the full knowledge that they are lying; let us leave aside the cowards who turn on us in order to ward off any blows that might land also upon them—and let us reason for a moment with people of good faith and common sense.

For a start, let us bring things back into proportion.

A king has been killed; and since a king is, for all that, still a man, that fact is to be deplored. A queen has been made a widow; and since a queen is, for all that, still a woman, she has our sympathy in her loss.

But why all the brouhaha over the death of one man and over the tears of one woman when the fact that so many men are being killed on a daily basis and so many women left to weep because of wars, accidents at work, revolts crushed by gunshots, and thousands of crimes spawned by poverty, spirit of vengefulness, fanaticism, and alcoholism is accepted as natural?

Why such an outpouring of sentimentality over one particular misfortune when thousands and millions of human beings are perishing of starvation and malaria, to the indifference of those who might have the wherewithal to stop this?

Perhaps it is because, this time, the victims are not vulgar workers, not some nondescript man and woman, but a king and a queen? ... Actually, we take a greater interest in the case and our grief is more poignant, livelier, more authentic, when we are dealing with a miner crushed by a landslide while working and a widow left behind to perish of hunger with her little children!

Nevertheless, the sufferings of royals are human suffering too and are to be deplored. But lamentations are pointless if one does not look into the root causes and try to eliminate them.

Who is it that provokes the violence? Who is it that makes it necessary and inescapable?

The entire established social order is founded upon brute force harnessed for the purposes of a tiny minority that exploits and oppresses the vast majority; all of the education delivered to children boils down to an unrelenting paean to brute force; the whole atmosphere in which we live is an unbroken parade of violence, a continual incitement to violence.

The soldier, which is to say the murderer-by-profession, is revered. And most revered of all is the king, whose most distinguishing feature, historically, has been that he commands soldiers.

By brute force, the laborer is obliged to suffer the theft of the product of his labors; by brute force, weaker nations are robbed of their independence.

The kaiser of Germany urges his troops to give the Chinese no quarter; the British government treats Boers who refuse to bow to the foreign bully as rebels and puts their farms to the torch, hunts down housewives and even pursues non-combatants and re-enacts Spain's ghastly feats in Cuba; the Sultan has the Armenians slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands; and the American government massacres the Filipinos, having first cravenly betrayed them.

Capitalists send workers to their deaths in the mines, on the railways, in the paddy fields by refusing to make the necessary expenditure on safety at work. They summon in soldiers to intimidate and, if need be, gun down workers calling for better conditions.

Again we ask: from whom, therefore, comes the incitement, the provocation to violence? Who is it that makes violence look like the only way out of the existing state of affairs, the only means whereby one may not be eternally subjected to the violence of others?

And in Italy, things are worse than elsewhere. The people are perennially hungry; our lordlings are more cavalier than during the Middle Ages; the government competes with the property owners, bleeding the people in order to line the pockets of its favorites and squandering the rest on dynastic ventures; the police have the power of yea or nay over citizens' freedom, and every cry of protest, every stifled lament is strangled by gaolers and smothered in blood by soldiers.

The list of massacres here is a lengthy one: ranging from Pietrarsa to Conselice, Caltabiano, Sicily, etc.

The king's troops massacred the defenseless people just about two years ago; just days ago the king's troops afforded the landowners of Molinella the support of their bayonets and their conscript labor against famished, desperate workers.

Who is to blame for the rebellion, who is to blame for the revenge that erupts from time to time: the provocateur, the offender, or the man who denounces the offence and seeks to banish its cause?

But the king is not responsible, they say!

We certainly do not take the farce of constitutional shadow play seriously. The "liberal" newspapers, which now contend that the king is not accountable, were well aware, when it came to themselves, that above parliament and ministers there was a powerful influence, a "higher echelon," that the king's prosecutors would not countenance to be alluded to too bluntly. And the conservatives currently looking forward to a vigorous "new age" from the new king, indicate that they know that—in Italy at any rate—when it comes to identifying responsibility, the king is not the puppet they would have us believe. And besides, even if he does not do the harm directly, any man who fails to prevent it, though is able to do so, is still answerable for it—and the soldier-commanding king can always, at the least, stop his soldiers from opening fire on the defenseless populace. And is still responsible if, unable to prevent evil's being done, he allows it to be done in his name rather than abjure the benefits of his office.

True, if factors such as heredity, education, ethos are taken into account, the personal responsibility of the mighty is greatly attenuated and may well evaporate altogether. But then, if the king is not answerable for his actions and his omissions—for the people's being massacred in his name—and allegedly had to remain in the highest office in the land, why on earth should Bresci be held to account? Why on earth must Bresci pay with a lifetime of unspeakable suffering for one deed that, no matter how wrong-headed one might like to think it, no one can deny was prompted by altruistic intentions?

But this business of tracing responsibility is of mediocre interest to us.

We are not believers in the right to punish, we repudiate revenge as a barbaric notion; we do not mean to be either executioners or avengers. The calling of liberators and peacemakers strikes us as a holier, nobler, more productive calling.

We would gladly reach out our hand to kings, oppressors, and exploiters just as soon as they made up their minds to be again men like any others, equals surrounded by equals. But for as long as they persist in revelling in the existing order of things and defending it by the use of

force, thereby leading to torment, brutalization, and death from exhaustion for millions of human creatures, we need and are obliged to meet force with force.

Meet force with force!

Does that mean that we revel in melodramatic conspiracies and are always in the throes of or bent on stabbing some oppressor?

Nothing like that. As a matter of sentiment and principle, we abhor violence and always do whatever we can to avoid it; only the necessity of resisting evil through suitably effective means could induce us to have recourse to violence.

We know that such singular acts of violence, in the absence of sufficient preparation by the people, remain futile and indeed, by triggering backlashes against which one cannot stand, they generate incalculable injury to the very cause they were intended to serve.

We know that the essential, incontrovertibly purposeful act lies not in the physical killing of a king but in killing all kings—from courts, parliaments and factories—in the hearts and minds of people; meaning the eradication of belief in the authority principle worshipped by so many of the people.

We know that the less ripe revolution is, the bloodier and more uncertain it proves to be.

We know that, violence being the font of authority—indeed, at its core, one and the same as the authority principle—the more violent the revolution turns out to be, the greater the risk that it may spawn fresh forms of authority.

And so, before deploying the ultimate arguments of the oppressed, we strive to acquire that moral and material strength that is needed to minimize the violence needed to bring down the system of violence to which humanity is presently subjected.

Will we be left in peace to get on with our propaganda work and our organizing and preparations for revolution?

In Italy, they prevent us from speaking, writing, and associating. They ban workers from joining together to struggle peaceably, not just for emancipation but also for the slightest improvement in their uncivilized and inhumane living conditions. Prisons, *domicilio coatto*, and bloody repressions are the means deployed not just against us anarchists, but against anyone who dares to contemplate a more civilized state of affairs.

Is it any wonder if, having lost all hope of fighting successfully in their own cause, ardent spirits let themselves be swept up into acts of vengeful justice?

The police measures that always victimize the least dangerous; the zealous search for non-existing instigators, which looks grotesque to anyone with the slightest grasp of the spirit that prevails among anarchists; and the thousands of farcical extermination schemes advanced by dabblers in police work, all of these serve only to highlight the savagery lurking inside the heads of the ruling classes.

If a bloody revolt by the victims is to be utterly ruled out, there is no course of action except the abolition of oppression by means of social justice.

If eruptions are to be reduced and disarmed, there is no recourse other than to allow everybody freedom to propagandize and organize; for the disinherited, the oppressed, and the discontented

to be left the option of civilized campaigning; for them to be afforded the hope that, albeit piecemeal, they might secure their own emancipation by bloodless methods.

The government of Italy will have none of this; it will carry on with its repression... and it will carry on reaping what it sows.

While we deplore the short-sightedness of rulers who make the contest unnecessarily harsh, we shall carry on fighting for a society without violence, in which all will have bread, freedom, and science, and where love is the supreme law of existence.

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

Translated from “La tragedia di Monza,” *Cause ed Effetti, 1898–1900* (London), September 1900. This was a one-off publication that meant to provide an anarchist perspective on the killing of King Humbert I by the anarchist Gaetano Bresci, which occurred in Monza on 29 July 1900. The title translates as “causes and effects,” and the date range that follows provides the key to the title: 1898 was the year of the bread riots that tragically ended in May with the cannon shots by which the troops of general Bava Beccaris killed hundreds of workers in Milan. A few weeks later, King Humbert conferred a decoration to the general for his services rendered “to the institutions and to civilization.” That was the cause. Bresci’s bullets, by which he avowedly intended to avenge the Milan bloodshed, were the effect.

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