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Camillo Berneri

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## Regarding our critiques of Bolshevism

Camillo Berneri

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The communists and Veronese-Muscovite syndicalists<sup>1</sup> accuse us of carrying out the work of the counterrevolution because we criticize Bolshevik policies at the very moment when the Russian revolution needs all the solidarity it can muster from Western vanguard parties, as it finds itself threatened by the reactionary politics of the Entente and plunged into the enormous calamity of famine.

Do we deserve such reproaches? I think not. Our critique of the Bolshevik government does not in the least imply a lack of solidarity with revolutionary Russia, and differs profoundly from the campaign orchestrated by the reactionary and social-reformist press. To criticize the criteria and methods of the Russian communist party, to shed light on the errors and the horrors of the Bolshevik government – that we regard as our duty

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<sup>1</sup> Berneri is referring to a tendency within the Unione Sindacale Italiana (USI) that favored an alliance with the communists. Headed by Nicola Vecchi, who later turned to fascism, this tendency published the periodical *L'Internazionale* in Verona and polemicized harshly against the majority of the USI, who eventually disowned it.

and our right, because in the failure of state-worshipping Bolshevism we see the best confirmation of our libertarian theories. Moreover, it has to be noted that when Russia represented the sacred land of freedom and justice for the Italian proletariat, when the mirage of the Russian myth and its revolutionary fascination held their sway over the entire world, we fell silent, except for a few isolated voices, because the Russian revolution was a magnificent event that had to be accepted as it was, *en bloc*, if one did not want to diminish its impact on those countries that, like our own, seemed to be ready to follow the example that arrived from the East.

But two events broke our voluntary silence: the revelations by Serrati, Colombino, Nofri, Pozzani and others,<sup>2</sup> and – above all – the systematic importation of the whole of the Russian Bolshevik literature; the aping of all the tactical criteria and

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<sup>2</sup> From Giovanni Sabbatucci's *Partiti e culture politiche nell'Italia unita* (Rome: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 2014):

“Some members of the delegation [to the 2<sup>nd</sup> congress of the Comintern] – above all the union and cooperative leaders from the reformist faction (D'Aragona, Colombino, Nofri, Pozzani), but also exponents of the intransigent wing such as Vacirca and Dugoni – were taken aback by the backwardness of the country, by the destruction of the productive system, by the disorganization of the state apparatus, and by a widespread climate of passivity among the popular masses that sharply contrasted with the enthusiastic tone of the descriptions appearing until then in the socialist press. Their impressions, spreading at first through journalistic indiscretions and later, in some cases, presented in public reports, would give rise to lively polemics that probably provoked some concern even among the socialist base.

“Serrati himself, prejudiced more than sympathetic, drew conclusions from his visit that were anything but optimistic regarding the real conditions in revolutionary Russia and the time it would need for the construction of “real” socialist society. [...] Serrati admitted that the Bolsheviks had committed extremely grave errors, above all in the management of the industrial apparatus; that they constituted a “tiniest minority in the face of an enormous passive majority”, and expected, quoting Lenin himself, that it would take fifty or even a hundred years to bring the revolution to completion.”

slavish imitation of all the programmatic points of Lenin and his comrades. We found ourselves in a position that required us not to stay silent any longer about what had already been revealed in the socialist press, and to oppose ourselves to the Jacobin propaganda that was spreading among the masses, undermining what we took to be the correct revolutionary line. All of this was further joined by the anti-anarchist reaction of the Moscow government and by the conviction that the politics of the Russian Bolsheviks led to a revolutionary ebb in Russia and in the West.

The communists were wrong to slander us as petty bourgeois and anti-revolutionaries, and have been wrong to persist in their hostile attitude. But while they have been wrong in the sense that our program and the entire history of our movement refute their accusations in the most absolute manner, they have been right to the extent that it is natural for them to think of themselves as more revolutionary than us, to the extreme left of us. That much is legitimate, and more than natural.

Given that our critiques of Bolshevik policies are the grounds for the friction between us and the communists, and jeopardize the revolutionary alliance that in fact exists between us and them, I think it opportune to discuss our attitude in the face of Bolshevik policies to see if there are any errors or excesses on our part. I think one can speak more of excesses than of errors.

Regarding the agrarian policy of the Bolsheviks, for example, there has been a tendency to fall into exaggerations. It is indisputable that their policy of requisitions has been foolish; it is indisputable that their policy of provisioning the countryside has been insufficient; it is indisputable that their attempt to nationalize the land by means of useless decrees and a uniform program to that effect has been a colossal error. But to proceed from this to affirmations that the Russian peasants are communists by nature, and that if only the revolution had been given free rein, we would have in Russia a rural communism

in the Kropotkinian sense, is something different entirely. The same holds with regard to the nationalization of industry, the establishment of an army, the bureaucracy, and so on. The anarchist critique of Bolshevik policies is marked by excesses owing to the inadequate knowledge of Russian economic, social, and psychological conditions.

We have not always known how to distinguish what was the programmatic tendency of the Bolshevik leaders and what was a contingent necessity; what could have been achieved if an autonomist and federalist line had been followed instead, and what could not have been achieved even if this line had prevailed.

The same excessive valuation of popular action that is characteristic of Kropotkin's anarchism has manifested itself in the critique of Bolshevik policies. That is, the Russian proletariat has been thought of as more capable of communist achievements than it really was. Another error consists in not taking into account the fact that between the outbreak of the revolution and the current regime there was a long enough period of political and social forces freely playing themselves out, during which the anarchist movement exhausted itself and the parties of the left proved not to be up to the task.

It is useless to philosophize about what the Russian revolution could have been. It is what it is, and in criticizing its current paralysis, one must take account of the fact that realities stronger than any theoretical principles contribute to the regressive policies of the Bolshevik government.

The peasants have taken possession of the land that is *de jure* nationalized but *de facto* subdivided among petty proprietors who constitute the future rural bourgeoisie.

The exchange of products, more or less clandestine, is ubiquitous and enriches a whole category of new profiteers. The bureaucracy is in the process of constituting itself into a new class of the privileged few. It is in this whole system of economic and social recourses that one must seek the reason be-

hind the new policy of the Bolsheviks,<sup>3</sup> which has contributed to creating the new situation but has not been its only determining factor.

*The development of every revolution is such as the people making it is capable of.* The Russian economy was primitive. The Czarist regime shows just how primitive and retrograde was the political life of Russia as well. *Thus it is not possible to judge by Western criteria a revolution that belongs more in Asia than in Europe.*

I do not mean to justify all Bolshevik policies with this. On the contrary, I think it necessary to criticize the Bolshevik regime, because it is this regime that the Italian communists look up to as a model to imitate; however, I think it equally necessary to base our critique on more solid foundations. And to do so, one must observe the Russian revolution with a historical eye more than with a political eye.

This attempt at objectivity, which does not exclude criticism, but rather renders it sharper and fairer, will also help us get rid of many theoretical apriorisms that threaten to make our movement rigid and to place out of its reach the exact understanding of modern life, which presents new aspects; aspects that are not always such as to reconcile the reality of things and men with the ideologies of classical anarchism.

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<sup>3</sup> I.e., the New Economic Policy (NEP) instituted in March 1921.