Carlo Cafiero
Revolutionary Practice
1972

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We all agree on the need for revolutionary propaganda, but one must distinguish the abstract propaganda of the idea, which is made through books, newspapers and speeches, from the real propaganda of deeds which, though requiring the cooperation of the written and spoken word, is essentially different from the former, both at its root — since it is founded on the actual position in which the people find themselves — and throughout its development — since its essential manifestation is the deed, the material action that is alone able to provoke other deeds. In the case of the former, the idea is foremost, the cause, and the deed is an accessory, the consequence; in the latter case, however, the deed is foremost, the cause, and the idea is only the consequence. The two systems are diametrically opposed.

"The smoke of Paris forms the ideas of the universe!" exclaimed the poet one day,[1] unaware of the extent to which on this occasion he was prophetic. The serious, sensible Anglo-Saxon critic heartily laughed at this Gallic paradox between one mug of beer and another; but the laughter froze on his lips

[1] Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, Paris 1862.

when, appalled, he descried the heroic city as it threw down the bronzes of its barbaric glories with its own hands, having first sublimely sacrificed itself in the flames for a new idea, the herald of a new civilization among the peoples of the world.

The events of the Commune implanted militant socialism in every civilized land, and the long-awaited, distant goal of the propagandist was reached in an instant by the brilliant flash of events.

What would the International be today without the Commune? What nihilism would have been without terror, Christianity without the bloodshed of Golgotha: three more obscure sects on the face of the earth.

In Italy the attempts that have been made serve as an introduction to the study of Marx' book; after the events at Benevento, one bookseller in Naples was forced to find many more copies in order to satisfy the demand; and we do not know if abridging that work in Italian did more to publicize it than by participating in the various attempts.

Not only, then, are ideas born from deeds, they also need deeds in order to develop, to the point that they can inspire other deeds.

Notwithstanding this, the cooperation of the written and spoken word is still necessary along with deeds, as we have already said. Recounting deeds, examining them, criticizing them, establishing the links between them and demonstrating the connection or inspirational concept that lies behind them — is a means which is necessary if they are to be of value. Apart from this, examining social conditions, criticizing them and formulating the aspirations of the people all require the use of the spoken and written word, just as action requires the use of arms. But all the speaking and writing by revolutionary propagandists must always have a deed as its point of departure and another deed as the point to aim at; and one must always go from one point to the next by the mundane path of the concrete,

But while we do admit that among the masses there may be some timorous people, capable of being frightened by our words, let us hurry to frighten them today with our sayings if we want them tomorrow, when it comes to our doings, to be not afraid of us but with us, together striking fear into the common enemy.

Diminishing, reducing or limiting one's programme means parleying, compromising with the enemy, furling one's flag, deceiving the people, reneging on the revolution. Indeed, with these programmes the people are duped by failing to mention either the short-term or final ends of our revolution, hiding the forthright final ideal from them, as well as the first real step that must be made towards it: these programmes are only half measures, with no beginning and no end.

We have already delineated the ultimate end of our revolution: We will now deal with its beginning, or immediate end.

With regard to propaganda, we shall conclude by saying that ours is a propaganda of action assisted by the spoken word and by writing: it is the propaganda of deeds that are connected, analyzed and synthesized by writings and the spoken word.

> severs the nerve ends of the revolution and kills it."[2]

Moderation is limitation, reduction, diminution, transaction.

> "Moderation gives no defence to those who dare; public opinion is ready to favour he who directs his attacks with greater boldness, who is thus free, frank, passionate in his words."[3]

This maxim of Pisacane's is quite correct, since we see every day how all the moderation of those socialists who demand it or those practical, sensible men, leads only to alienating the trust and esteem of every revolutionary, without gaining that of the wealthy. With their *minimum* programmes, the product of their lack of trust, they do not frighten the supporters of the present order any more than us, but they render themselves incomprehensible and distasteful to the people, who cannot find in them the true expression of their aspirations.

There are some who, though willing to use our means, would prefer to reject our words so as not to frighten the masses; those masses of whom, judging from what has thus far been said and written by socialists, they have understood and retained only that little that they found frightening.

For example, regarding what has been written on property, we by no means wish to attribute Proudhon with being the greatest of those who have dealt with the subject; but in his book there is an expression which, without possessing any great scientific value, has had the merit of frightening all the wealthy of the earth for the same reason as it has been accepted and retained by the people. Property is theft! How far abroad this cry has travelled! How much thought it has provoked among the people! How much action it has inspired!

[2] Editor's note: C. Pisacane, op.cit., pp. 142–143.

[3] Editor's note: C. Pisacane, op.cit., pp. 73–74.

without allowing oneself to deviate into erudition, sophistry or the cowardice of hypocrisy.

The suffering man always understands the words, deeds and even the smallest gesture of one who suffers like him better than any other. If one wretch beholds other infuriated wretches picking up stones, he will straight away say: "They are going to stone their bosses!". But no, some doctrinaire, sophist or hypocrite is bound to appear and tell us that they do not want to hurt anyone, and demonstrate with their A + B = C that those wretches with their stones can have no other intention than that of enriching the civilized world with some new architectural monument. Think how many strange interpretations of the Commune we have been given by erudition, sophistry and hypocrisy. Instead, those who suffer, those whom that sudden flash and the echo of that name struck from afar, simple and straightforward in their opinions, had only one word for it: Communism. Thus was the Commune interpreted by some Calabrian peasants, who had overheard the terrified exclamations from the mouths of their bosses: thus we ourselves have heard it explained so many times by men of the people from southern Italy. The people's interpretation is always the truest in such cases, because the people, sure in their feelings, do not let themselves be turned aside by facts or characters of secondary importance, whom the doctrinaires, the sophists or the sanctimonious consider of primary importance, but immediately recognize the true primary agent, the true driving force. In the event that was the Commune, the crossfire of cannon, the elections, the federalist principle, and so on, are all accessory factors that cannot sway the people's opinion, which sees only other oppressed people rising up against their oppressors in order to emancipate themselves, and explains the event with a word that, in their opinion, expresses the true means of emancipation.

In the same manner, the people admire the nihilists and hold them in esteem as the best revolutionaries because they want

to destroy everything; then along come the doctrinaires, the sophists or the sanctimonious, who begin a long philological, philosophical and historical dissertation: they speak of the Executive Committee, the popular party, the various clubs, and so on, and so forth, and after discriminating, distinguishing, dividing and subdividing everything, conclude by proving to us, with the usual A + B = C, that there are no more nihilists. In the meantime the people, who have looked on open-mouthed without understanding a word, hear the explosion of the bomb that kills the emperor and cry out as one: Long live the nihilists! And they are right, their judgement is much more correct than that of the doctrinaires, the sophists or the sanctimonious. The people see only a deed: in Russia there is an enormous mass of oppressed people who suffer all the ills in the world one can suffer; they call the rebels against this oppression nihilists, and like true nihilists they act by taking up arms against and killing their oppressors: so long live the nihilists, indeed!

The people may at times be wrong as far as form is concerned. But the doctrinaires, sophists and sanctimonious are always wrong as far as their very ideas are concerned. The former express, in an incorrect form, an opinion that is much more correct than the latter's, albeit in a correct form. The most precise thought according to philology, philosophy and history, can sometimes be absolutely false, because the truth is often found in the intrinsic and not in the extrinsic — in other words it is found not in what has been, but in what should have been, not in the material, evident triumph, but in the moral or hidden triumph.

But in such cases, how shall we recognize the revolutionary truth in order to propagate it?

By following the people's feelings and thoughts, which become our feelings and thoughts; by following, carefully and without interruption, the courses of the only professor of revolutionary philosophy: the people. We will thus be able to speak their language and formulate their aspirations in order to carry

out effective propaganda with the spoken and written word. In other words, whoever speaks or writes for revolutionary propaganda must consider himself no more nor less like the workings of a fountain, whose purpose is to spurt the water that is fed to it by the people as high as possible, water which is destined to return to the people themselves.

If this is the water, then it can truly be called a *fons mirabilis*, one which will quench the thirst of the youth who seek ideals and at whom this written or spoken propaganda is principally directed. The popular masses, if indeed they can read and have the time and the desire to read, do not in general allow themselves to be swayed by words, only by deeds.

> "The propaganda we spoke about develops among a significant number of youths the knowledge of the rights that Nature accords every man; and as soon as the people hurry to rise up, scourged by their sorrows, unsure of where to direct their attacks and how to shade their desires, these youths will become orators of circumstance and will not take long to make the people understand what the doctrinaires could never hope to do in a century of calm and a thousand volumes. It is not required of these orators to have a profound knowledge of doctrine at this stage, but strength of character which will enable them not to retreat in the face of the unknown consequences of the principles that they proclaim. Woe if they draw near to the contemptible ranks of the so-called moderates! Descending to even the smallest transaction is to repudiate the revolution. When the aim is not the triumph of a sect or of one class of citizens, any moderation, whatever it may be,