

On Revolution

Carlo Pisacane

1857

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The first European revolution of 1848 broke out in Sicily. It quickly spread throughout the Italian peninsula, then divided into a patchwork of kingdoms, principalities and Austrian protectorates. Carlo Pisacane (1818–1857) fought for the short lived republic in Rome and led republican troops in its defence when French troops lay siege to the city in 1849 to restore the Pope to his Holy See. Pisacane then went into exile, returning to Calabria in 1857 as part of a revolutionary expedition against the kingdom of Naples, where he was killed in action. He was an anti-authoritarian socialist and all early advocate of “propaganda by the deed.” The first excerpt that follows is from his work, *On Revolution* (posthumously published in 1858). The second is from his “Political Testament,” written shortly before his death. Both selections have been translated by Paul Sharkey.

On Revolution

NATURE, HAVING BESTOWED ALL men with the same organs, the same sensations and the same needs, has declared them equal and thereby granted them equal title to the enjoyment of the goods that she produces. Likewise, having made every man capable of making provision for his own livelihood, she has declared him independent and free.

Needs are the only natural limits upon freedom and independence, so, if men are furnished with the means of supplying those needs, their freedom and independence are all the more complete. Man enters into association wherever he can readily meet his needs, or extend the realm in which his talents can be exercised and where he may secure greater freedom and independence; any social tie that tends to trespass against those two human attributes has not been willingly embraced because it flies in the face of nature and of the purpose that society has set itself, and has only been endured perforce; it cannot be the effect of free association, but is rather of conquest or of error. It follows that any contract which one of the parties is obliged to accept or uphold through hunger or force is a blatant trespass against the laws of Nature: any contract ought in fact to be declared null and void unless it enjoys the most free consensus of the two contracting parties. From these eternal, irresistible laws which ought to underpin the social contract, the following principles follow, which encapsulate the entire economic revolution.

1. Every individual has a right to enjoy all of the material assets available to society and thereby to the full exercise of his physical and moral faculties .
2. The chief object of the social contract is to guarantee absolute freedom to every individual.
3. Absolute independence of life. or complete self-ownership :
 - a. Abolition of man’s exploitation of his fellow-man.
 - b. Any contract not enjoying the whole-hearted consensus of the contracting parties is null and void.
 - c. Access to the material wherewithal essential for work, by means of which each man can look to his own livelihood.

d. The fruits of one's own labours are sacred and inviolable ...

On pain of the most grave evils, the laws of nature prohibit us from commanding obedience from our equal. A people which, for the sake of an easier life, delegates its own sovereignty, is akin to someone who ties up his legs and arms in order to run faster. From these truths the following principles emerge which follow from the ones established earlier:

4. Hierarchy, authority and blatant trespasses against the laws of nature, are abolished. The pyramid – God, king, their betters and the plebs – must be broadened at the base.
5. Since every Italian must be free and independent, each and every one of his fellows must be so too. Since hierarchy between individuals is nonsense, the same goes for hierarchy between communes. The individual commune cannot but be a free association of individuals and the nation a free association of communes...

The nation... does not have the right to confer the power to impose laws upon one man or a small number of men; that act is an act of sovereignty and sovereignty may not be delegated... On the very same grounds upon which sovereignty may not be abdicated or transferred, so the law-maker's and congress's term of office will be indeterminable; they are to step down as soon as the nation so decides; since it is the wishes of the mandator that should be binding upon the mandatory, it follows that every deputy must be subject to recall by his electors at every moment. It is nonsense for a government or an assembly to be imposed for a set term, just as it is nonsense for an individual to be hog-tied by one vote. That would be tantamount to declaring the wishes and determinations of a single instance the arbiter and tyrant over any wishes that may progressively emerge in future. Hence the principles which follow:

6. Laws cannot be imposed, but may be proposed to the nation.
7. Mandatories are at all times subject to recall by their mandators...

Two conditions must be met if the nation's sovereignty is to be undiminished, should some of the citizenry have to shoulder an undertaking affecting the whole of society, namely: that the task to be undertaken and the ranks to be adopted are the result of the national will, which in fact follows from principles 6 and 7 above; and that the distribution of the various functions among the group of citizen operatives should be handled by the citizens themselves. For the nation to nominate the leaders who should oversee things would be a manifest trespass against free association. From which the following principles follow:

8. No official may be appointed other than by the people and will at all times be subject to recall by the people.
9. Any band of citizens ... assigned to carry out some special mission, is entitled to divvy up the various roles among themselves and choose their own leaders...

Written laws are norms and nothing more; the decisions of the people take precedence over any law. The people can elect some citizens from among its number and appoint them as judges, but the latter's verdicts will always be overruled by the collective will, the last say of which in every dispute must be acknowledged as an inalienable right inherent in its

very nature, its very sovereignty. Thus it will never again be the case that punishments are inflicted which are at odds with public opinion and with the times; and it will come to pass that laws will reflect the changes and shifts in mores. The latter will never be locked in bitter and bloody struggle with the former. Therefore:

10. The people's verdict overrules any law, any magistrate. Anybody who feels that he has been misjudged can appeal to the people.

And so, on the basis of two very simple and incontrovertible truths: Man was created free and independent and his needs are the only limitations set upon those attributes; in order to break free of these limitations and achieve ever wider scope for his activities, man enters into association, but society cannot, without failing in its mission, make the slightest trespass against man's attributes—we are led to the enunciation of ten fundamental principles, the failure to scrupulously observe a single one of which would constitute an infringement of freedom and independence.

Political Testament

My political principles are sufficiently well known; I believe in socialism, but a socialism different from the French systems, which are all pretty much based on the monarchist, despotic idea which prevails in that nation... The socialism of which I speak can be summed up in these two words: freedom and association...

I am convinced that railroads, electrical telegraphs, machinery, industrial advances, in short, everything that expands and smooths the way for trade, is destined inevitably to impoverish the masses... All of these means increase output, but accumulate it in a small number of hands, from which it follows that much trumpeted progress ends up being nothing but decadence. If such supposed advances are to be regarded as a step forward, it will be in the sense that the poor man's wretchedness is increased until inevitably he is provoked into a terrible revolution, which, by altering the social order, will place in the service of all that which currently profits only some...

Ideas spring from deeds and not the other way around; the people will not be free until it is educated but it will be well educated once free. The only thing for a citizen to do to be of service to his country is to patiently wait for the day when he can cooperate in a material revolution; as I see it, conspiracies, plots and attempted uprisings are the succession of deeds whereby Italy proceeds towards her goal of unity. The use of the bayonet in Milan has produced a more effective propaganda than a thousand books penned by doctrinaires who are the real blight upon our country and the entire world.

There are some who say: the revolution must be made by the country. This there is no denying. But the country is made up of individuals and if we were quietly to wait for the day of revolution to come instead of plotting to bring it about, revolution would never break out. On the other hand, if everybody were to say: the revolution must be made by the country and I, being an infinitesimal part of the country, have my infinitesimal portion of duty to do and were to do it, the revolution would be carried out immediately and would be invincible because of its scale.

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Introduction by Robert Graham.

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