

Doing Good By Force

E. Malatesta

15 October 1894

Dear comrades of L'Idée,

In publishing my piece "*Devoir d'aujourd'hui*" in your 15 September 1894 issue, you made, in addition to a few other changes upon which I shall not dwell since they are of no account, one to which I must take exception on the grounds that it completely distorts my thinking and, indeed, strikes me as a negation of the very idea of anarchism, as I understand it at any rate.¹

Where I say that "our ideas oblige us to put all our hopes in the masses, because we do not believe in the possibility of imposing the good by force," you have added "for the time being at least." Meaning that, later, once we are the strongest, we shall impose *Good...* or whatever we take to be such, by force.

What, in that case, is the difference between us and the authoritarian parties?

We are anarchists because we hold that no one owns the absolute truth, nor is anyone blessed with infallibility; because we think that the sort of social arrangement that should best answer everyone's needs and sentiments, can only be the result—the always adjustable result—of the free play of all the interested parties; and because we believe that force renders brutish both the user and the target, whereas only through freedom and the responsibility that derives from it can men better themselves morally and intellectually to a point where they can no longer bear government.

Besides, if, as you seem to reckon, a day will come when we too could and would impose *our* ideas by force, what, precisely, are the ideas that are to be imposed? Mine, say, or the ideas of comrade A or comrade B!... For you will agree that there are no four anarchists who see completely eye to eye with one another; which is all very natural, by the way, and a sign of the party's vitality.

I thought the essential point upon which we were all agreed and that made anarchists of us was this principle; *no imposition and no force other than force of argument and example*. If I am wrong here, I cannot see that there is very much else to anarchism.

Now, if—perhaps on account of some lack of clarity on my part—you thought that I was referring to force as the means necessary to fend off the force of government, place all the means of production currently hogged by a few at bayonet-point at the disposal of all and open the way

¹ The article in question was a French translation of "The Duties of the Present Hour," included in the present collection.

to free social evolution with everyone's contribution, then again I take exception to the phrase "*for the time being at least*," which you have ascribed to me. It was not my intention in my article to turn to the issue of a recourse to arms; and it might well be that I am of the opinion that, in certain countries and in certain circumstances, right now might be the right time to ward off violence with violence.

I am relying, dear comrades, upon your sense of fairness and your love of truth in the publication of this letter. Like me, you will think that the best way for us to get acquainted with one another and achieve the greatest possible measure of agreement between us, is to leave each person the freedom to articulate his thoughts such as they are, without any sort of censorship.

Best wishes to you and to the cause,

E. Malatesta

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