

A Bit Of Theory

Errico Malatesta

1892

Rebellion is rumbling on all sides. Here, it is the expression of an idea; there, the result of need; more often it is the consequence of a network of needs and ideas which reciprocally give rise to and re-enforce one another. It devotes its attention to the causes of social ills or it follows a side issue, it is conscious or instinctive, it is humane or brutal, generous or narrow and selfish, but it is steadily growing and spreading.

This is history in the making, and it is useless to waste one's time complaining of the course it takes, because this course has been laid out by all the evolution that went before.

But history is made by men, and since we do not wish to be mere passive and indifferent spectators of the historic tragedy, since we wish to co-operate with all our strength in bringing about the circumstances which seem to us the most favourable to our cause, we must have some standard to guide us in judging the events that occur, and especially in choosing the position that we will occupy in the struggle.

The end justifies the means. This maxim has been greatly slandered. As a matter of fact, it is the universal guide to conduct.

One might better express it thus: each end carries with it its own means. The morality or immorality lies in the end sought; there is no option as to the means.

Once one has decided upon the end in view, whether by choice or by necessity, the great problem of life is to find the means which, according to the circumstances, will lead most surely and economically to the desired end. The way in which this problem is solved determines, as far as human will can determine, whether a man or a party reaches the goal or not, is useful to the cause or—without meaning to—serves the opposite side. To have found the right means is the whole secret of the great men and great parties that have left their mark in history.

The object of the Jesuits is, for the mystics, the glory of God, and for the others the power of the Company of Jesus. They must, therefore, endeavour to degrade the masses, terrorise them, and keep them in submission. The object of the Jacobins and all authoritarian parties, who believe themselves to be in possession of absolute truth, is to force their ideas upon the common herd and to bind humanity upon the Procrustean bed of their beliefs.

With us it is otherwise; entirely different is our goal and very different, therefore, must be our means.

We are not fighting to put ourselves in the place of the exploiters and oppressors of to-day, nor are we fighting for the triumph of an abstract idea. We are not like that Italian patriot who said,

“What matters it if all the Italians die of hunger, provided Italy be great and glorious.” Neither do we resemble that comrade who admitted that he would not care if three-fourths of the human beings were massacred, provided Humanity was free and happy.

We wish men to be happy—all men, without exception. We wish every human being to be free to develop and live as happily as possible. And we believe that this freedom, this happiness, cannot be given to men by any man or any party; but that all men must, by their own efforts, discover the conditions of happiness and win them. We believe that only the most thorough application of the principle of solidarity can put an end to struggle, oppression, and exploitation; and that solidarity can come only as a result of a voluntary agreement, an intentional and spontaneous harmonizing of interests.

For us, therefore, everything that aims to destroy economic or political oppression, everything that helps to raise the moral and intellectual level of humanity, to make men conscious of their rights and their power and to get them to look after their interests themselves, everything that arouses hatred of oppression and promotes human brotherhood, brings us nearer to our goal and, therefore, is desirable—subject only to a quantitative calculation as to how to secure, with the resources available, the maximum useful result.

And, *per contra*, anything is undesirable, because opposed to our aim, which seeks to preserve the present state of things, or to sacrifice a man, against his will, to the triumph of a principle.

What we desire is the triumph of love and freedom. But does that mean that we refrain from using violent means? Not at all. The means we employ are those that circumstances make possible or necessary. It is true that we would prefer not to hurt a hair of anybody’s head; we would like to wipe away all tears and not to cause any to be shed. But the fact is that we have to make our fight in the world as it is, or else be condemned to be nothing but fruitless dreamers.

The day will come, we firmly believe, when it will be possible to work for men’s happiness without doing any harm either to oneself or to others. To-day this is not possible. Even the purest and gentlest of martyrs, one who, for the triumph of the right, would let himself be dragged to the scaffold without resistance, blessing his persecutors like the Christ of the legend, even such a one would still be doing much harm. Apart from the harm that he would be doing to himself—which, after all, counts for something—he would cause all those who love him to shed bitter tears.

The main problem always, therefore, in all the acts of our life, is to choose the lesser evil, to try to accomplish the largest possible total of good with the least possible harm.

Humanity drags painfully along under the weight of political and economic oppression. It is stupefied, degraded, killed—and not always slowly—by poverty, slavery, ignorance, and their consequences. For the maintenance of this state of things there exist powerful military and police organisations which meet any serious attempt at a change with prison, hanging, and massacre. There is no peaceful, legal way of getting out of this situation—and that is perfectly natural because the laws are made by the privileged class in order to protect their privileges. Against the physical force that blocks our way there is no appeal except to physical force—there can be no revolution except a violent one.

There is no doubt that the revolution will cause much misfortune, much suffering. But it might cause a hundred times more and it would still be a blessing compared to what we endure to-day.

It is a well-known fact that in a single battle more people are killed than in the bloodiest of revolutions. It is a well-known fact that millions of children of tender age die every year for lack of care, that millions of workers die prematurely of the disease of poverty, that the immense majority of people lead stunted, joyless, and hopeless lives, that even the richest and

most powerful are much less happy than they might be in a society of equals, and that this state of things has lasted from time immemorial. Without a revolution it would last indefinitely, whereas one single revolution which went right to the causes of the evil could put humanity for all time on the road to happiness.

So let the revolution come! Every day that it delays means an enormous mass of suffering inflicted on mankind. Let us work so that it shall come quickly and shall be the kind of revolution we must have in order to put an end to all oppression and exploitation.

It is through love of mankind that we are revolutionists; it is not our fault if history drives us to this painful necessity.

Therefore, for us and for all those who look at things as we do, each piece of propaganda or of direct action, whether by word or deed, whether done by a group or by an individual, is good when it helps to bring the revolution nearer and make it easier, when it helps to gain for the revolution the conscious co-operation of the masses and to give it that character of universal liberation without which we might, indeed, have a revolution, but not the revolution that we desire. And it is specially in connection with a revolution that we must keep in mind the principle of using the most economical means, because here the cost is figured up in human lives.

We know too well the terrible material and moral conditions in which the working class lives not to be able to understand the acts of hatred, vengeance, and even ferocity which may occur. We understand how there can be some of the oppressed who, having always been treated by the bourgeoisie with the most shameful cruelty, having always seen that anything is permitted to those who have the power, may say to themselves some fine day when they have the power, "Now we will do what the bourgeois used to do." We understand how it can happen in the fever of battle that some people, naturally kind-hearted but not prepared by long moral training—very difficult under present conditions—may lose sight of the goal to be reached and may regard violence as an end in itself and let themselves be swept along to savage excesses.¹

But it is one thing to understand and excuse, and another thing to recommend. Those are not the kind of deeds that we can accept, encourage, and imitate. We must, indeed, be resolute and energetic, but we must try never to go beyond what is absolutely necessary. We must be like the surgeon, who cuts when he must but avoids causing needless suffering. In a word, we should be guided by love for mankind, for all mankind.

We consider this love for mankind as the moral basis, the very seed of our social programme; we believe that only by conceiving of the revolution as the great human jubilee, as the liberation and fraternizing of all men, to whatever class or party they may have belonged—only in this way can our ideal be made real.

Brutal revolt will undoubtedly occur, and it may, indeed, help to give the last great blow which shall overthrow the present system; but if it is not steadied by revolutionists acting for an ideal, it will devour itself.

Hate does not create love: with hatred one cannot rebuild the world. And a revolution inspired by hate either would fail completely or else would lead to fresh oppression, which might, indeed, be called "anarchist," as the present Governments are called "liberal," but which would none the

¹ These words clearly refer to the deeds of François Koenigstein, known as Ravachol, a French anarchist who had carried out a series of dynamite attacks in the preceding months, as a result of which he was guillotined on 11 July 1892. Malatesta's article provoked a response in the same periodical from Émile Henry, who argued that nobody had the right to judge the deeds of a fellow anarchist. Henry himself died under the guillotine two years later, after throwing a bomb at the Café Terminus in Paris. (D. Turcato)

less be oppression and would not fail to bring about all the conditions that oppression inevitably produces.

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