

A Little Theory

Errico Malatesta

Revolt rumbles everywhere. Here it is the expression of an idea, and there the result of a need; most often it is the consequence of the intertwining of needs and ideas which mutually generate and reinforce each other. It fastens itself to the causes of evil or strikes close by, it is conscious or instinctive, it is humane or brutal, generous or narrowly selfish, but it always grows and extends itself.

It is history which advances: it is useless to take time to complain about the routes that it chooses, since these routes have been marked out by all previous evolution.

But history is made by men; and since we do not want to remain indifferent and passive spectators to the historic tragedy, since we want to contribute all our forces to determine the events which seem to us most favorable to our cause, we must have a criterion to guide us in the evaluation of the facts which are produced, and especially in choosing the place that we will occupy in the combat.

The end justifies the means: we have spoken much ill of that maxim. In reality, it is the universal guide of conduct.

One could say better: each end contains its means. It is necessary to seek morality in the end; the means is fatally determined.

The end that one proposes being given, by will or by necessity, the great problem of life is to find the means which, according to the circumstances, lead most certainly and most economically to the coveted end. The manner in which one resolves that problem depends, as much as it can depend on the human will, on whether an individual or a party reaches its own end, whether it will be useful to its cause or serve, without wishing to, the enemy cause. To have found the good means, that is the whole secret of the great men and great parties, who have left their marks on history.

The end of the Jesuits is, for the mystics, the glory of God; for the others, the power of the Society. Thus they must try to daze the masses, to terrorize them, to make them submit.

The aim of the Jacobins and of all the authoritarian parties, who believe themselves in possession of the absolute truth, is to impose their ideas on the mass of the lay people. They must for that attempt to seize power, to subjugate the masses and to fix humanity on the procustean bed of their conceptions.

As for us, it is another thing: our aim is much different, thus our means must be very different.

We do not fight to put ourselves in the place of the exploiters and oppressors of today, and do not struggle for the triumph of an abstraction. We are not like that Italian patriot who said: "What matter if all Italians faint with hunger, provided that Italy be great and glorious!" Nor, no more, like that comrade who admitted that it would be equal to him to massacre three-quarters of the people, provided that Humanity be free and happy.

We want good fortune for individuals, for everyone, without exception. We desire that each human being be able to develop themselves and live as happily as possible. And we believe that liberty and good fortune cannot be given to men by men or by a party, but that everyone must by themselves discover the conditions of their own freedom and conquer them. We believe that only the most complete application of the principle of solidarity can destroy struggle, oppression and exploitation and that solidarity can only be the result of free agreement, the spontaneous and intentional harmonization of interests.

For us, everything that seeks to destroy economic and political oppression, all that which serves to raise the moral and intellectual level of human beings, to give them the consciousness of their rights and of their forces and to persuade them to do their business by themselves, all that provokes hatred against oppression and love between people, brings us closer to our aim and as a consequence is good – subject only to a quantitative calculation in order to obtain from the given forces the maximum of useful effect. And to the contrary is evil, because it is in contradiction with that aim, all that which tends to sacrifice, against his will, a man to the triumph of a principle.

We desire the triumph of liberty and love.

But do we renounce for that the use of violent means? Not in the least. Our means are those that circumstances allow us and impose on us.

Certainly we don't want to harm a hair on anyone's head; we would like to dry all the tears and not to make any more be shed. But we must struggle in the world such as it is, or else remain sterile dreamers.

The day will come, we firmly believe, in which it will be possible to produce good for people without making evil for anyone. Today it is not possible. Even the purest and sweetest of the martyrs, those who are dragged to the scaffold for the triumph of good, without resistance, by blessing their persecutors like the Christ of legend, still make good from evil. Apart from the evil that they do to themselves, which must count for something, they causes all those who love them to shed bitter tears.

It is a question then, always, in all the acts of life, of choosing the least evil, of trying to make the least evil for the largest amount of human good.

Humanity drags painfully under the weight of political and economic oppression; it is brutalized, degenerated, killed (and not always slowly) by poverty, slavery, ignorance and their results.

For the defense of that state of things exist powerful military and police organizations, which respond by prison, the scaffold, and the massacre of every serious attempt at change. There are no peaceful, legal means, by which to depart from this situation, and that is natural because the law is made expressly by the privileged to defend privileges. Against the physical force which blocks our road, there is only violent revolution.

Obviously, the revolution will produce many misfortunes, many sufferings; but if it produced one hundred times more of them, it would still be a blessing relative to what one endures today.

We know that in a single great battle more people are killed than in the bloodiest of revolutions; we know the millions of children who die at an early age each year from lack of care; we know

the millions of proletarians who die prematurely from the evil of poverty; we know the meager life, without joy and without hope, that the immense majority of people lead; we know that even the richest and most powerful are much less happy than they could be in a society of equals; and we know that that state of things has lasted since time immemorial. It will endure indefinitely without the revolution, while a single revolution, which resolutely attacked the causes of evil, could put humanity forever on the road to happiness.

Thus, let the revolution come; each day that it is delayed is an enormous mass of sufferings inflicted on us. Let us labor so that it comes quickly and is such as is necessary to put an end to all oppression and all exploitation.

It is from the love of humanity that we are revolutionaries: it is not our fault if history has forced on us this distressing necessity.

Thus for us, the anarchists, or at least (since in the end the words are only conventions) for those among the anarchists who see things like us, every act of propaganda or of achievement, by word or by deed, individual or collective, is good when it serves to approach and facilitate the revolution, when it serves to insure to the revolution the conscious support of the masses and to give it that character of universal liberation, without which one could well have a revolution, but not the revolution that we desire. And it is especially with regard to revolution that we must take account of the principle of the most economical means, since here the expense is summed up in human lives.

We know too well the dreadful material and moral conditions in which the proletariat finds itself to not understand the acts of hate, of vengeance, even of ferocity which can be produced. We understand that there are some oppressed who, having always been treated by the bourgeois with the most shameful hardness, having always seen that everything was permitted to the strongest, one bright day, when they find themselves for a moment the strongest, say: "Let us also do as the bourgeois do." We understand that it can happen that in the fever of battle some natures — originally generous, but not prepared by a long moral exercise, very difficult in present conditions — lose sight of the end to be attained, take violence for the end in itself and allow themselves to be led to savage transports.

But it is one thing to understand and to pardon these acts, and another to claim them as our own. These are not acts that we can accept, encourage, and imitate. We must be resolute and energetic, but we must try never to pass beyond the limit marked by necessity. We must do as the surgeon who cuts when he must, but avoids inflicting unnecessary suffering: in a word, we must be inspired by the sentiment of love for people, for all people.

It appears to us that the sentiment of love is the moral source, the soul of our program: it appears to us that only by conceiving the revolution as the grand human jubilee, as the liberation and fraternization of all, no matter what class or what party they have belonged to, can our ideal be realized.

Brutal revolt will certainly be produced, and it could even serve to give the great helping hand which must shake the current system; but if it does not find the counterweight in revolutionaries who act for an ideal, it will devour itself.

Hate does not produce love; we will not renew the world by hate. And the revolution of hate will either fail completely, or else result in a new oppression, which could be called anarchist, as one calls the present governments liberal, but which will not be less an oppression and will not fail to produce the effects which produce all oppression.

Anarchist library
Anti-Copyright



Errico Malatesta
A Little Theory

libertarian-labyrinth.org

en.anarchistlibraries.net