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Errico Malatesta
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(Apropos of an Interview)
14 October 1897

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Anarchism's Evolution

(Apropos of an Interview)

Errico Malatesta

14 October 1897

An interview I had with my friend Ciancabilla, which was published by him in *Avanti!*, has drawn some comment, which I was not expecting.¹

Not having been able to get my hands on the edition of *Avanti!* in which the interview was published, since it has been impounded, how my words were reported I cannot tell; but the esteem in which I hold Ciancabilla gives me every confidence that he has not at all misrepresented my thinking.

How comes it that commentators have drawn inferences from it, which I, as the principal concerned, emphatically reject?

I am not talking about the correspondent from *Il Resto del Carlino* who finds that my thinking "comes very close to that of the

¹ The interview appeared in the *Avanti!* of 3 October 1897, under the title "L'evoluzione dell'anarchismo: Un'intervista con Errico Malatesta." The interviewer, Giuseppe Ciancabilla, was at the time a socialist, but shortly thereafter he went over to the anarchist camp, embracing anti-organizationist ideas. He later emigrated to the United States. When Malatesta, in 1899–1900, sojourned in that country, a drawn-out controversy arose between the two, which started on theoretical-tactical ground, but later became bitterly personal.

legalitarian socialists.” He is a bourgeois journalist and therefore cannot place much store by the distinctions between socialists, and may well have no grasp of them. We socialists of every persuasion all want to end the bourgeoisie’s domination, and naturally we are all the same as far as the bourgeois are concerned. The same way as atheists, Protestants, Jews, and anybody else who contests the Pope’s authority are all the same as far as Catholic priests are concerned.

I can only hope that the day is near when today’s bourgeois, stripped of the privileges that mar their judgment today, will be able, in practical terms, to scrutinize and level-headedly gauge the differences between the various methods advocated for implementing socialism.

Given that it is socialist and an authoritative source for socialists, *Avanti!* deserves fuller consideration when it finds in what I told Ciancabilla an unmistakable indication of “anarchism’s evolving in the direction of Marxist socialism.”²

Claiming that we are moving in their direction is a long-established ploy of the democratic socialists (when they are trying to treat us with kid gloves rather than reiterating with Liebknecht that we are “the favorite sons of the bourgeoisie and governments of all countries”). For instance, I remember that a few years ago, the lawyer Balducci from Forlì—seizing on the occasion of the publication of a private letter of mine by a friend, in which I advocated organization of the toiling masses—wrote that I had “watered down my wine” and congratulated me on this, as if this was new ground for me, although, ever since 1871, I have not exactly been one of the lesser-known advocates of the International in Italy and was out of the country precisely on account of my having been convicted of membership in the International.

² This concept, already expressed in an introductory editorial note to the interview, and clearly reflected by the interview’s title, was then restated in a further commentary in *Avanti!* the next day.

Let us be clear: in my estimation there is nothing that is anything but honourable about *evolving*, provided that that evolution is the fruit of genuine conviction.

The fact is that, on account of the corruption of politickers and the huge influence that self-seeking and class interests wield over politics, that which in a scientist would be deemed a sign of cretinous pig-headedness—never having shifted in one’s opinions—is widely regarded as a point of honor.

But I have too much moral courage not to articulate my changes of mind, because of deference to some pointless, ridiculous reputation for immutability, even if these changes, as is alleged in this instance, set me at odds with my friends and with myself. And I have too much pride to be stopped for a single moment longer by the notion that others might think that I was motivated by cowardice or playing the odds.

The shift in opinion, however, has to have actually occurred and it needs to have been as claimed.

Now anarchists certainly have evolved, and I along with them, and the likelihood is that they will carry on evolving as long as they remain a living party capable of harnessing the lessons of science and experience, and adapting to the variables in life. But I utterly deny that we have evolved or are evolving in the direction of “Marxist socialism.” And I believe, rather, that one of the most remarkable and most widespread features of our evolution is that we have rid ourselves of Marxist prejudices, which, at the beginning of our movement, we embraced too lightly and have been the source of our gravest mistakes.

Avanti! has probably succumbed to an illusion.

If it really believes what it has said time and time again about anarchism—that anarchism is the very opposite of socialism—and if it carries on sitting in judgment of us on the basis of the misrepresentations and calumnies with which the German marxists, aping the example set by Marx in his dealings with Bakunin, disgraced themselves, then the fact is that, every time it may deign to

read something we have written or listen to one of our speeches, it will be pleasantly surprised to discover an “evolution” in anarchism pointing in the direction of socialism, which it seems is almost synonymous with Marxism as far as *Avanti!* is concerned.

But anyone with even a superficial grasp of our ideas and history knows that, since its inception, anarchism has been merely the outworking and integration of the socialist idea and thus could not and cannot evolve *towards* socialism, which is to say towards itself.

The very mistakes, hare-brained schemes, crimes ventilated and committed by anarchists are proof of anarchism’s substantially socialist nature, just as an organism’s pathology assists a better understanding of its physiological features and functions.

What was there in what I said to Ciancabilla that could justify *Avanti!*’s conclusion?

We certainly have many ideas that we hold in common with democratic socialists and, above all, we share a sentiment that prompts and incites us to fight for the advent of a society of free equals... albeit that we are of a mind that the logic of their preferred system leads to the negation of freedom and equality.

As the essential cornerstone of our program we have the abolition of private property and the organization of production for the benefit of all and achieved through the cooperation of all—which is, or ought to be, the cornerstone of any sort of socialism. And by our reckoning, given that the workers are the main casualties of the existing society and those with the most direct interest in its changing, and given that the matter is to establish a society in which all are workers, the new revolution simply has to be, chiefly, the handiwork of the organized working class, conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism between its interests and those of the bourgeois class—the formulation, propagation, and conversion of that notion into the driving force behind all modern socialism being Marx’s greatest achievement.

influence of Marx’s economic fatalism? And isn’t the authoritarian spirit, which still lingered within us, the spirit by which Marxists are prompted and which lingers, unaltered, through all their own, not always forward-looking, evolutions?

No: allow me to dispel *Avanti!*’s illusions: we are not about to turn into marxists. Rather we look forward to marxists, refreshed through contact with the spirit of the people, going to turn, if not into anarchists, then at least into liberals, in the good sense of the term.

this interpretation neglected the influence that workers’ resistance could have and did have on the workings of that “law.”

entire politico-social order, and imbued with that old prejudice that the revolution becomes easier the more wretched the people are—we gazed with indifference, if not hostility, upon strikes and kindred worker struggles, and looked to the organization of the working class almost exclusively for recruits for the armed insurrection:—which, on the one hand, left us open to unnecessary persecutions that were forever interrupting and unravelling our efforts, which thus never had long to mature and were always stalled in the launch stages, and, on the other, eventually alienated from us the most forward-looking workers who, having managed through digging in their heels to extract a few improvements from the bosses, looked upon the results they achieved as a refutation of what we went preaching.

And I told him how these days we look to the labour movement for the basis of our strength and an assurance that the coming revolution may well prove to be socialist and anarchist, and how we rejoice at any improvement the workers manage to win, in that it boosts the working class's consciousness of its strength, triggering further demands and fresh claims, and brings us closer to the crunch point where the bourgeois have nothing left to give unless they renounce their privileges and where violent conflict becomes inevitable.

All of this and much more that I could have told him certainly signals an evolution in our thinking and practice, but, far from representing some “evolution in the direction of marxism,” it is the result of our jettisoning what little marxism we had embraced.

Indeed, was our old tactic not, perhaps, the logical outcome of the strict and unilateral interpretation of the *law of wages* devised by the marxist school of thought?⁵ Was it not a mirror image of the

⁵ As Malatesta explains elsewhere, the conclusion that anarchists drew from the law of wages was that, “given private property, wages must be necessarily limited to the bare minimum needed by the worker to live and reproduce,” and no workers' effort could increase the amount of goods allocated to the proletariat or decrease the amount of working hours at the capitalists' service. For Malatesta,

But *Avanti!* would be hard pressed to talk about evolution in all of this since we are talking here about purposes and convictions that are part and parcel of anarchism and anarchists have always peddled them—and were doing so many years before there were ever Marxists in Italy.

So in order to find out if we actually have evolved in the direction of democratic socialism, which *Avanti!* very questionably terms *marxist socialism*, we would need to investigate the differences that divide, and have always divided us from the democratic socialists.

We need not enter into a discussion of Marx's economic and historical theories, which appear to me (albeit that I am scarcely qualified to say) partly wrong and partly to consist simply of the articulation in abstruse language of truths (made to ring strange and esoteric) that are clear, plain, and commonplace, if a more common parlance is used. The democratic socialists have long since stopped paying them any heed in their practical programme and, unless I am mistaken, are also about to drop them from their science too.

What matters to us, as party men, is what parties do and mean to do—rather than the theoretical notions by which they have been inspired or with which they seek, after the event, to explain away and justify their actions.

Right now, therefore, we are at odds with and in a fight with the democratic socialists because they are out to change the present society by means of laws and by carrying over into the future society the government, the State that they claim will become the organ of everybody's interests. Whereas we want society to be changed through the people's own efforts and we want the complete destruction of the machinery of State, which, we say, will always be an agency of oppression and exploitation and will tend, by its very nature, to establish a society founded on privilege and class warfare.

We may be right, we may be wrong, but where is the suggestion, seen by *Avanti!*, that we are flirting with its authoritarian conception of socialism?

Avanti!'s party being an authoritarian party, it logically has its sights set on "capturing public office."

Have we perhaps stopped directing our efforts into the purpose of rendering public office, which is to say, government, redundant and doing away with it? Or have we maybe begun putting our faith in this nonsense about *taking possession of the government, the better to dismantle it*, that a number of unduly naïve... or unduly crafty socialists prattle about?

Quite the opposite. No one delving deeply into a study of anarchism will have any difficulty understanding that in the movement's early days there was a strong residue of Jacobinism and authoritarianism within us, a residue that I will not make so bold as to say we have destroyed utterly, but which has definitely been and still is on the wane. Once upon a time, it was a commonly held view in our ranks that the revolution had to be authoritarian as a matter of necessity and there was more than one of us caught in the curious contradiction of wanting to see "Anarchy achieved by force." Whereas, these days, the general belief among anarchists is that anarchy cannot be delivered by authority, but must arise from on-going struggle against all and any imposition, whether in slowly evolving times or in tempestuously revolutionary periods and that our purpose should be to see to it that the revolution itself is, right from the very outset, the implementation of anarchist ideas and methods.

The *Avanti!*'s party is a parliamentary party, both in terms of its aims for the future and its present tactics; whereas we are against parliamentarism both as a form of re-cast society and as a current method of struggle, so much so that we regard anarchist socialism and anti-parliamentary socialism as synonymous, or thereabouts.

Has *Avanti!* perhaps spotted some lessening of the aversion to parliamentarism that has always been a distinguishing feature of our party? Have we, perhaps, stopped committing a sizable part of our efforts to ridding workers' minds of the new-born belief in parliaments and parliamentary means that the democratic socialists

are out to plant there? Has abstentionism maybe been dropped as the almost material badge by which we recognize our comrades?

Quite the opposite. When our movement started up, several of us still entertained the notion of participation in administrative elections and later from our ranks came the initiative of running Cipriani as a candidate, which we backed.³ Today, we are all of one mind in regarding administrative elections every bit as pernicious as political ones and perhaps even more so, and we also repudiate protest candidacies, to avoid any misunderstanding.

So where is the evolution in the direction of Marxist socialism?

In keeping with my belief that a party of the future such as ours must bring an on-going and stringent critique to bear on itself and should not be afraid to confess its errors and sins in public, I told Ciancabilla about some of the factors that reduced the anarchist party to such a state of isolation and disintegration as to render it unable to offer any resistance to Crispi's reaction and to inspire any stirring of sympathy in the public.⁴

I told him how the youthful illusion (which we inherited from Mazzinianism) of imminent revolution achievable through the efforts of the few without due preparation in the masses had left us alienated from any long and patient work to prepare and organize the people.

I told him how, in the belief that no improvement could be extracted in the absence of prior radical transformation of the

³ Amilcare Cipriani was a popular Italian revolutionary. In 1882 he was convicted to twenty-five years in jail for an episode that occurred fifteen years before. A widespread campaign for his liberation arose. One of the initiatives was Cipriani's "protest candidacy," which aimed at getting him out of jail by electing him to Parliament. In 1884, Malatesta supported the initiative, linking it to his campaign against Andrea Costa's legalitarian turn. From the columns of his periodical, *La Questione Sociale*, he urged Costa to resign from Parliament to yield his seat to Cipriani.

⁴ Francesco Crispi was the prime minister who undertook the harsh repression that followed the Sicilian Fasci movement and the Carrara uprising in 1894. On these events, see the article "Let Us Go to the People."