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September 1924

The Anarchist Revolution: Polemical Articles 1924–1931, edited and introduced by Vernon Richards. Published by Freedom Press London 1995.

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Anarchy and Violence

Errico Malatesta

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Anarchy means non-violence, non-domination by human beings over human beings, non-imposition by force of will of one or more over others.

Anarchy can and must triumph only through a harmonisation of interests brought about by voluntary cooperation, love, respect, mutual tolerance, persuasion, example and mutual benefits of goodwill. Anarchy is a society of brothers and sisters living freely in solidarity with one another and which assures to all the maximum possible amount of freedom, the greatest posssible degree of development and benefit.

There are certainly other people, other parties, other schools as sincerely devoted to the general good as are the best among us. But what distinguishes the anarchists from all the others is precisely the horror of violence, the desire and the proposal to eliminate violence, material violence that is, from human affairs.

Thus, it could be said that the specific idea that distinguishes the anarchists from the rest is the abolition of the professional police and the exclusion from society of order imposed by brute force, whether legal or illegal.

But then, it may be asked, why in the present struggle against the political and social institutions which they deem to be oppressive, have the anarchists preached and practiced — as they continue to do, where they are able — the use of violent means, which are in clear contradiction with their ends? And this to the point at which many adversaries have honestly believed, and all adversaries of bad faith have claimed to believe, that the specific character of anarchism is, precisely, violence.

The question may seem an embarrassing one, but it can be answered in a few words. For two people to live in peace both must want peace; if one of the two insists on trying to force the other to work for him and serve him, while the other wishes to preserve human dignity and not be reduced to the role of abject slave, the latter, despite loving peace and harmony, will be forced to resist with all possible means.

Suppose, for example that you come into conflict with some Dumini-type gangster[1] and he is armed and you are unarmed; he is surrounded by a big gang and you are alone or with just a few companions; he is confident of going unpunished and you fear the eruption on the scene of the carabinieri, who will arrest and maltreat you and throw you into jail for an indefinite time … Then tell me if you could escape from your predicament by persuading the Dumini-type with good arguments to be just, good and gentle!

The source of the ills which have beset humanity — apart, of course, from those which originate in Nature's force majeure — is that people have failed to understand that agreement and cooperation are the best ways of procuring the greatest possible good; that the strongest and the most cunning have sought to suppress and exploit the rest, and when they managed to gain their advantage

[1] Dumini was an Italian fascist hitman responsible for a number of murders of anti-fascists — Editor.

they have sought to secure and perpetuate it by creating all kinds of permanent forces of coercion in their defence.

This is why the whole of history is fraught with bloody strife: arrogant bullying, injustices, ferocious oppression on one hand, rebellion on the other.

There is no cause to draw distinctions between sides: anyone, no matter who, who has desired emancipation or attempted to achieve emancipation, has had to oppose force with force, arms with arms.

But, while finding it necessary and right to use force to defend their own liberty, their own interests, their own class, their own country, every faction has, in the name of their own particular code of values, gone on to condemn violence when this is turned against them by others, who seek to defend *their* freedom, *their* interests, *their* class and *their* country.

Thus, those same people who, in Italy for instance, rightly glorify the wars of independence and erect statues of marble and bronze to Agesilao Milano, Felice Orsini, Guglielmo Oberdan, and those who raise their voices in passionate paens to Sofia Perovskaya and other martyrs of distant countries, have treated as criminals the anarchists when they set out to demand total liberty and equal justice for all and openly declare that so long as oppression and privilege are defended by the brute force of the bayonet, popular insurrection, the revolt of the individual and of the mass of the people, would continue to be the necessary means for bringing about their emancipation.

I remember that at the time of an anarchist attentat which caused something of a sensation, one leading light in the Socialist Party, newly returned from the Greco-Turkish war, proclaimed, with the backing of his comrades, that human life is always sacred and that not even the cause of liberty calls for an attack on human life. It seems that he made an exception of the lives of the Turks and the cause of Greek independence!

Illogicality or hypocrisy?

Yet anarchist violence is the only violence that can be justified, the only violence that is not criminal.

I speak, of course, of the violence which has truly anarchist characteristics, not of the various blind and irrational acts of violence attributed to anarchists or which have, indeed, been committed by real anarchists roused to by abominable persecution, or blinded through an irrational excess of feeling by the sight of social injustice and sorrow for others' sorrow.

Real anarchist violence ceases where the need for defence and liberation ceases. It is tempered by the awareness that individuals, taken in isolation, are hardly, if at all responsible for the positions which heredity or environment have bestowed on them. It is inspired not by hatred but love, and it is sacred because its goal is the liberation of all and not the substitution of one form of domination with another.

There has been in Italy a party which, with the most civilised aims in mind, did its utmost to extinguish any trust in the efficacy of violence in the mass of the people, and has rendered them powerless to put up any resistance to the advent of fascism. It strikes me that Turati [Italian Socialist Party leader] has more or less admitted and regretted the fact in his Paris speech in memory of Jaures [the assassinated leader of the French Socialists].

Anarchists are not hypocritical. Force must be countered with force – today against today's oppression, tomorrow against forms of oppression which might seek to replace today's.

We want liberty for all, for ourselves and our friends as well as for our adversaries and enemies. Freedom of thought and freedom to propagate our own point of view, freedom to work and organise our own lives in the way we want; not, of course, freedom — and let the communists not equivocate — not freedom to suppress freedom and to exploit the work of others.