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Let's Demolish – and then?

Errico Malatesta

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1926

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mentioned, entrust the guilty party to the custody and care of the asylum, its doors kept ever open to public scrutiny. And in any case ensure that protection against criminals must never be allowed to become a profession and serve as a pretext for the establishment of permanent tribunals and armed groups, which would soon become the tools of tyranny.

But really this question of crime is only a side issue, despite the fact that it is the first to surface when one talks to someone for the first time about the uselessness and harmfulness of government. No-one would, surely, claim that a few violent lechers or bloody ruffians can halt the course of revolution!

What matters, what is most urgent and vital, is the organisation of material life, that is, the satisfaction of basic needs and the work that must be done to provide for those needs. Since what we won't succeed in doing ourselves and in getting done by our methods will inevitably be done by others with authoritarian methods.

Anarchy can only come about when we will know how to live without authority, and then only to the degree in which we succeed in managing without authority.

But that does not mean, as Carrone thinks or believes I believe, that 'in the event of a revolution we must help the party with most affinities to us in the hope that they will be less reactionary during our work in replacing evil with good.'

We can have relations of cooperation with non-anarchist parties so long as we have a common enemy to fight and could not do it alone. But from the moment a party takes power and becomes the government, our relationship can only be that between enemies.

Obviously so long as governments exist we are concerned with the least oppressive, in other words with a minimum of government.

But freedom, even relative freedom, is not gained from a government by helping it. It is only gained by making a government sense the danger of being too oppressive.

from tie received blow and to re-impose themselves once more, perhaps under other names but certainly the same in essence.

Our solutions will be accepted by a sufficiently large section of the population and we shall have created anarchy, or at least made a step towards it. Or it may be that they will not have been understood and accepted and in that case our work will serve as propaganda, and will be placed before the general public as the programme for the near future. But in any case, we must have our solutions: provisional solutions, no doubt; ones that can be revised and modified in the light of experience, but necessary if we do not wish to endure passively the solutions of others, limiting ourselves to the hardly useful role of grumblers who are both incapable and impotent.

On the subject of gendarmes, I offered the case of the *satyr* and spoke of the need to ensure that he could no longer do any harm.

Carrone seems to favour *lynching*. This is a primitive and savage solution, repugnant to the modern mind, but it is a solution; and it would always be better than to trust innocently that after the revolution such things will no longer happen, or than to hold onto the straw of entrusting the problem to posterity ... Except for the fact that there would be, as in similar cases (including recently in Rome and elsewhere) there always has been, an angry and emotional crowd which, not knowing who to kill, hurls itself on any poor devils, pointed out by women made hysterical by anger and fear. Then, calmer people would call on the police, on the intervention of any professional police force ... which in turn would molest many innocents while, usually, failing to find the guilty party.

So what needs to be done?

We need to persuade people that public security, the individual's right to safety and freedom, must be available to *all*; that everyone must be on the alert, everyone must black-list the bully and intervene in defence of the weak — themselves become judges and, in extreme cases, like the one above-

Let's Demolish — and then?

In No. 9 of *Pensiero e Volonta* I wrote a review of Galleani's¹ Book, *La Fine dell'Anarchismo*? Benigno Bianchi replies:

'I hope you will not mind if I write to bring to your attention a sentence that would give rise to regrettable misunderstandings. I refer to the second paragraph of Galleani's words quoted in your article.

In the passage in question Galleani spoke of the need to clear the decks for posterity, of prejudices, privileges, churches, prisons, barracks, brothels, etc. It is therefore necessary to destroy, not to construct.

You honestly reply that 'it would be ridiculous, and fatal, to want to destroy all unhygienic ovens, all anti-economic mills, all backward cultures, leaving to posterity the task of seeking better means of growing wheat, grinding flour and baking bread.'

Oh, Errico, yes indeed, baking bread, in one form or another is indispensable, as is growing wheat and grinding it, and wanting to destroy the means of doing so, and of destroying other similar processes would be worse than ridiculous, it would be madness!

These things will be renewed, reformed, perfected; but there is no way I would wish to renew and perfect prisons, churches, barracks and brothels, nor

¹ Luigi Galleani (1861–1931). In a review of *The End of Anarchism?* Malatesta described it 'in substance [as] a clear, serene, eloquent exposition of *communist anarchism* in the Kropotkinian interpretation which personally I find too optimistic, too simplistic and too trusting in the *natural harmonies*' - Editor.

yet the monopolies and privileges of which Galleani spoke.

It seems to me that the comparison does not hold and therefore that the whole thrust of the article is lost.

Such polemical distortions ill befit the seriousness of the Review and the authority of your writing.’

Naturally I do not in the least mind comrade Bianchi’s comments. On the contrary, I thank him for giving me the opportunity to return to a question which I consider of vital importance for the development and success of our movement.

Let us leave Galleani aside. If I have misinterpreted him, then he is the best person to tell me so and I am always ready to make amends. Let us, rather, discuss the argument in itself.

My reference to bread strikes Bianchi as a polemical distortion. To me, on the other hand, it is fitting. I am in the habit — I don’t know if it’s a virtue or a fault — of always looking for the simplest, most obvious examples, because these don’t permit of rhetorical tricks and plainly reveal the kernel of the question.

It is essential, says Bianchi, to have the means of making bread; it would therefore be madness to think of destroying rather than perfecting those means. But bread is not the only indispensable item. Indeed, I believe it would be very difficult to find any present institution, including the worst of them — even prisons, brothels, barracks, privileges and monopolies — that does not respond, directly or indirectly, to a social need and that it would be possible to truly destroy and for ever unless it was replaced by something that better satisfies the need that generated it in the first place.

Do not ask, a comrade said, what we should substitute for cholera. It is an evil, and evil has to be eliminated, not replaced. This is true. But the trouble is that cholera persists and returns

Postscript to Let’s Demolish — and then?

My article ‘Let’s Demolish — and then?’ has left some comrades, bewildered perhaps because it shook old ways of looking at things, or rather perhaps because I did not sufficiently develop my line of thought and was not clear.

I shall now try to make myself clearer.

Comrade Salvatore Carrone comes to the conclusion, no less, than that, after or during the revolution, I would like to retain, *provisionally*, the gendarmes, the courts, the prisons and the whole repressive apparatus of the State; and he raises his voice in a cry of alarm against this way of understanding revolution, which would condemn us to a vicious circle: the reaction provoked by the revolution and the revolution which leads to a new reactionary regime. And, rightly, he observes that:

‘the revolution can be guided by sincere, sensible men, anxious to work for the general well being, but gradually they would be infiltrated by murky elements who, with a vast network of acolytes throughout the land, would surround the good elements and inevitably drive them out; or these, to gain power, would betray the revolution, having recourse precisely to the gendarme and the courts, with all their accessories.’

I quite agree, and have never said anything to the contrary.

I say that to abolish the gendarmerie, and baleful social institutions of whatever kind, we need to know what we want to replace them with — not in a more or less distant future but now, the very same day the demolition work begins. You cannot really destroy, and permanently, without having what we put in its place. To postpone to a later date the solution to the urgent problems that arise would be to give a breathing space to those same institutions that we want to abolish, to recover

we would have all died of starvation as a result of the grain shortage. There were even those who said there could be no revolution because Italy did not produce rubber! Concerned with the basic question of food and convinced that the grain shortage could be made good by using all the available arable land for the cultivation of plants and fast-growing nutritional grains, I asked our comrade, Dr G. Rossi, an experienced agronomist, to write a series of articles on practical concepts of agriculture, directed precisely at the goal we had in mind. Rossi kindly did so. His articles were obviously very useful, but also practical, and did not therefore please everyone. One comrade, annoyed that I had rejected some poem or short story of his — I no longer recall exactly what — said brusquely: ‘Yes, you prefer *Umanira Nova* to be about ploughs, chick-peas, beans, cabbages and stupid like that!’

And another comrade, who then had pretensions of being some sort of super-anarchist, unwittingly expressed the logical consequences of this kind of mentality. Finding himself with his back to the wall in just such a discussion as this, he said to me: ‘But these are matters that don’t concern me. Providing bread and so on is the responsibility of the leaders.’

The conclusion, indeed, is this: either we all apply our minds to thinking about social reorganisation, and right away, at the very same moment that the old structures are being swept away, and we shall have a more humane and more just society, open to future advances; or we shall leave such matters to the ‘leaders’ and we shall have a new government; and this will do exactly what governments have always done — make the masses pay for the limited and bad services it provides, taking away their freedom while allowing the parasites and the privileged of all stripes the freedom to exploit them by every means.

unless conditions of improved hygiene have replaced those that first allowed the disease to gain a foothold and spread.

Bread is a need, yes. But the question of bread is more complicated than those who live in a small farming centre and produce wheat for their own families might suppose. Providing bread for all is a problem that involves an entire social organisation: type of land ownership, method of working the land, means of exchange, transport systems, importation of grain, should the amount produced at home not be enough, means of distribution to the various centres of population, and thereafter to the individual consumers. In other words, it means that solutions must be found to the questions of ownership, value, currency, trade, etc.

Present day production and distribution of bread are exploitative and humiliating for the workers; the consumers are robbed and a whole army of parasites benefits at the expense of both producers and consumers. We, on the other hand, want bread to be produced and distributed for the greater benefit of all, without draining energy and materials, without oppression and parasitism and with fairness and efficiency. And we must seek the means of realising this goal, or as great an approximation to it as we can manage. Our descendants will certainly do better than us; but we must do as we know and can — and do it at once, the very same day as the crisis breaks, because if there were an interruption in rail services, or the milling and baking bosses began manoeuvring and concealing the bread, the urban centres would not receive it (nor would they receive other basic necessities); the revolution would be lost and the forces of reaction would triumph under the guise of restoration of the monarchy or under the form of dictatorship.

By all means let us destroy the monopolies. But when they are not to do with shirt buttons or lipstick for the ladies, the big monopolies (water, electricity, coal, road, rail and sea transport, etc) they are the response to a necessary public service, and such monopolies cannot be destroyed without bringing about

their swift return — unless, in the act of dismantling them the service itself is not continued, possibly with more efficiency than before.

By all means let us destroy the gaols — those dismal regions of suffering and corruption, where brutalised screws end up worse than those they guard. But in the case of, say, some *satyr* who rapes and tortures the little bodies of children, there has to be some means of preventing him from doing harm if he is not to make other victims before falling to lynch violence. Shall we leave such a problem to our descendants? Surely not. We must concern ourselves with it now, because these things are happening now. Let us hope that in the future the advances of science and the changed social scene will make such monsters impossible.

Let us destroy the brothels, those vile dens of human shame — shame more for those who live outside them than within. By all means. But the brothels will remain, either publicly or in secret, so long as there are women who cannot find a decent job or gainful employment. Labour needs to be organised in such a way that there is a place for all; consumption must be organised in such a way that everyone can satisfy their own needs.

Of course, let us abolish the *gendarme*, that man who protects all privilege by force and is the living symbol of the State. But to be able to abolish for good, and not see reappear under another name and in a different guise, we have to know how to live without him — that is, without violence, without oppression, without injustice, without privilege.

Yes, let us abolish ignorance. But obviously we need first to teach and educate, and before even this, to create the social conditions that would permit everyone to avail themselves of education and training.

‘To leave to posterity a land without privileges, without churches, without tribunals, without brothels, without barracks, without ignorance, with out stupid fears.’ Yes, this is

our dream, and we fight to bring it about. But this means bequeathing to future generations a new social organisation, new and better moral and material conditions. You cannot clear the decks and leave them bare if people are living on them. You cannot destroy evil without substituting good, or at least something that is less bad.

This does not mean imposing nothing on our descendants. It is to be hoped, I repeat, that they will do better than us. But we must do here and now what we know and can, for our own benefit and hand down to future generations something more than fine words and vague aspirations.

There is a state of mind which, despite much propaganda to the contrary, persists in a number of comrades and which, to my view, should be changed as a matter of urgency.

The conviction, which I share, is the need for a revolution to eliminate those: material forces which defend privilege and obstruct any real social progress, has meant that many have dwelt exclusively on the act of insurrection, without considering what needs to be done to prevent an insurrection becoming a sterile act of violence to which a further act of revolutionary violence responds. For these comrades all practical questions — means of organisation, method of supplying our daily bread, are idle questions for now: matters, they say, that will resolve themselves or be resolved by future generations.

I remember an episode in 1920, when I was editor of *Umanita Nova*.² It was the period when the socialists were trying to impede the revolution, and unfortunately they succeeded. They said that if an insurrection took place the lines of communication with abroad would be severed and

² The daily anarchist paper *Umanita Nova* (New Humanity) was banned in 1922 by Mussolini’s fascists. Since the end of World War Two it has been published weekly — Editor.