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Love and anarchy

Errico Malatesta

At first, it may seem strange that the question of love and all its related issues are of great concern to a large number of men and women, while there are other, more urgent, if not more important, problems that should command the full attention and activity of those seeking ways to remedy the ills that plague humanity.

Every day we encounter people crushed under the weight of current institutions; people forced to eat poorly and threatened at every moment with falling into the deepest misery due to lack of work or illness; people who find themselves unable to raise their children properly, who often die without the necessary care; people condemned to spend their lives without being masters of themselves for a single day, always at the mercy of employers or the police. People for whom the right to have a family and the right to love is a bloody irony, yet they do not accept the means we propose to them to escape political and economic slavery unless we first explain to them how, in a libertarian society, the need for love will be satisfied and how we understand the organization of the family. And naturally, this concern is magnified and leads to neglect and even disdain for other problems in people who have resolved, particularly the problem of hunger and who are in a normal po-

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sition to satisfy their most pressing needs because they live in an environment of relative well-being.

This fact is explained by the immense place that love occupies in the moral and material life of man, since it is in the home, in the family, that man spends the greatest and best part of his life. And it is also explained by a tendency toward the ideal that seizes the human spirit as soon as it opens to consciousness.

As long as man unconsciously endures suffering, without seeking a remedy or rebelling, he lives like beasts, accepting life as he finds it.

But as soon as he begins to think and understand that his ills are not due to insurmountable natural disasters, but to human causes that men can destroy, he immediately experiences a need for perfection and desires, ideally at least, to enjoy a society in which absolute harmony reigns and in which pain has completely and forever disappeared.

This tendency is very useful, since it drives us forward, but it also becomes harmful if, under the pretext that perfection cannot be achieved and that it is impossible to eliminate all dangers and defects, it advises us to neglect possible achievements in order to continue in the current state.

Now, and let us say this immediately, we have no solution to remedy the evils that come from love, for they cannot be destroyed by social reforms, not even by a change of morals. They are determined by deep, we might say physiological, human feelings, and are not modifiable, when they are, except through a slow evolution and in a way we cannot foresee.

We want freedom; we want men and women to be able to love and unite freely for no other reason than love, without any legal, economic, or physical violence.

But freedom, even though it is the only solution we can and should offer, does not radically resolve the problem, given that love, to be satisfied, requires two freedoms that agree and often do not agree at all; and given also that the freedom to do what one wants

is a meaningless phrase when one does not know how to want something.

It is very easy to say: "When a man and a woman love each other, they unite, and when they cease to love each other, they separate." But it would be necessary, for this principle to become a general and sure rule of happiness, that both love and cease to love each other at the same time. What if one loves and is not loved? What if one still loves and the other no longer loves them and tries to satisfy a new passion? What if one loves several people at the same time who cannot adapt to this promiscuity?

"I'm ugly," a friend once told us. "What will I do if no one wants to love me?" The question is laughable, but it also gives us a glimpse of true tragedies.

And another, concerned with the same problem, told us: "Nowadays, if I can't find love, I buy it, even if I have to economize my bread. What will I do when there are no women for sale?" The question is horrible, for it reveals the desire of human beings forced by hunger to prostitute themselves; but it is also terrible... and terribly human.

Some say that the remedy could be found in the radical abolition of the family; the abolition of the more or less stable sexual partnership, reducing love to a mere physical act, or better yet, transforming it, with sexual union in tow, into a feeling similar to friendship, one that recognizes the multiplicity, the variety, the contemporaneity of affections.

And children?... Children of all.

Can the family be abolished? Is it desirable that it be?

Let us observe first of all that, despite the regime of oppression and lies that has prevailed and still prevails in the family, the family has been and continues to be the greatest factor of human development, for it is in the family that the normal human being sacrifices himself for humanity and does good for the sake of good, desiring no compensation other than the love of his partner and children.

But, we are told, once questions of self-interest are eliminated, all human beings will be brothers and will love one another.

Certainly, they will not hate one another; it is true that the feeling of sympathy and solidarity would greatly develop, and that the common interest of humankind would become an important factor in determining each person's conduct.

But this is not yet love. Loving everyone is very similar to loving no one.

We can, perhaps, help, but we cannot mourn over every misfortune, for our entire life would be spent in tears, and yet the tears of sympathy are the sweetest consolation for a suffering heart. The statistics of deaths and births may offer us interesting data to understand the needs of society; but they say nothing to our hearts. It is materially impossible for us to grieve for each death and rejoice at each birth.

And if we do not love someone more intensely than others; if there is not a single being for whom we are not particularly willing to sacrifice ourselves; if we do not know any other love than this moderate, vague, almost theoretical love that we can feel for everyone, would life not be less rich, less fruitful, less beautiful? Would human nature not be diminished in its most beautiful impulses? Would we not be deprived of the deepest joys? Would we not be more unhappy?

For the rest, love is what it is. When one loves strongly, one feels the need for contact, for the exclusive possession of the loved one.

Jealousy, understood in the best sense of the word, seems to be, and generally is, one and the same with love. The fact may be regrettable, but it cannot be changed at will, not even at the will of the one who personally suffers it.

For us, love is a passion that naturally engenders tragedies. These tragedies would certainly not translate into violent and brutal acts if man had a sense of respect for the freedom of others, if he had sufficient self-control to understand that one evil cannot

be remedied by a greater one, and if public opinion were not, as it is today, so indulgent toward crimes of passion; but the tragedies would not be any less painful for this.

As long as people have the feelings they have—and a change in the economic and political system of society does not seem to us sufficient to completely modify them—love will produce, at the same time as great joys, great sorrows. These can be diminished or attenuated by eliminating all the causes that can be eliminated, but their complete destruction is impossible.

Is this a reason not to accept our ideas and to want to remain in the current state? This would be like someone who, unable to buy luxurious clothes, prefers to go naked, or who, unable to eat partridges every day, renounces bread, or like a doctor who, given the impotence of current science in the face of certain diseases, refuses to cure those that are curable.

Let us eliminate the exploitation of man by man, combat the brutal pretensions of the male who believes himself to be the owner of the female, combat religious, social, and sexual prejudices, ensure well-being and freedom for all—men, women, and children—and spread education, and then we can rightly rejoice if no evils remain other than those of love.

In any case, those unhappy in love will be able to seek other pleasures, for it will not be as it is today, when love and alcohol constitute the only consolations for the majority of humanity.