

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Errico Malatesta
On 'Anarchist Revisionism'
May 1924

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

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

On 'Anarchist Revisionism'

Errico Malatesta

May 1924

A comrade writes: 'After *your act of contrition in No. 3*¹ it is your duty to tell us openly what the practical means are for carrying out the revolution. Only then can we discuss it.'

Another asks me to 'unbutton'; many others await for as it were a magic formula to resolve all the difficulties.

Strange mentality for anarchists!

Let me begin by saying that I have made no 'act of contrition.' I could easily document that what I am saying now I have been saying for years; and if now I place more emphasis on it and others pay more attention to it than before. It is because the times are riper, in that experience has persuaded many, who formerly luxuriated in that blessed Kropotkinian optimism — which I used to call 'atheist providentialism' — to descend from the clouds and look at things as they are — so different from how we would like them to be.

But let us leave these recollections of personal interest behind us and come to the general and contemporary problem.

We, of this review, like our comrades from other anarchist publications, make no claim to have prepared some pre-packaged, in-

¹ See 'Further Thoughts on Anarchism and the Labour Movement,' p. 31 of *The Anarchist Revolution*.

fallible and universal solution to all problems that come to mind. But, recognising the need for a practical programme that can be adapted to the various circumstances that may arise as society develops prior to, during and after the revolution, we have invited all comrades with ideas to present and proposals to make to take part in the drawing up of such a programme. Those, therefore, who feel that everything has so far gone well and that we should continue as we have been doing, need only defend their point of view, while those who, like us, think we need to prepare intellectually and materially for the practical task which awaits the anarchists, rather than wait passively upon our words should try to make their own contribution to the discussion where it interests them.

For my part, I believe there is no 'single solution' to social problems, but a thousand different and varying ones, just as the life of a society, in time and space, is diverse and changeable.

Basically all institutions, all projects, all utopias, would be equally good for resolving the problem, if that problem is defined as satisfying a people who all have the same desires and opinions and are all living in the same conditions. But such unanimity of thought and identity of conditions are impossible and, to tell the truth, would not even be desirable. And therefore in our present behaviour and in our projects for the future we must bear in mind that we do not live, nor shall we live tomorrow in a world populated exclusively by anarchists. On the contrary, we are and shall be for a long time a relatively small minority. To isolate ourselves is not, on the whole, possible, and even if it were it would be detrimental to the mission we have set ourselves. We must therefore find a way of living among non-anarchists in the most anarchic fashion possible and to the best possible advantage for our propaganda and the realisation of our ideas.

depriving it as far as possible of its exploitative and profiteering nature.

It is time to have done with that rhetoric — because that is all it is, rhetoric — which seeks to summarise the whole anarchist programme in one word: ‘Destroy!’

Yes, let us destroy, or seek to destroy every tyranny, every privilege. But let us remember that government and capitalism are merely the superstructures which tend to restrict the benefits of civilisation to a small number of individuals, and to abolish them there is no need to renounce any of the fruits of the human mind and of human labour. It is much more a question of what we need to keep than what we need to destroy.

As for ourselves, we must not destroy what we cannot replace with something better. And in the meantime we must work in all areas of life for the benefit of all, ourselves included — refusing, of course, to accept or perform any coercive function.

We want to make the revolution because we believe in the need for radical change and this, owing to the resistance of the powers-that-be, cannot be brought about peacefully. We believe in a need for change in the prevailing political and social order because we want to create a new social environment which would enable that moral and material elevation of the people that propaganda and education are helpless to create under present circumstances. But we cannot make the revolution exclusively ‘ours’ because we are a small minority, because we lack the consent of the mass of the people and because, even if we were able, we would not wish to contradict our own ends and impose our will by force.

To escape from the vicious circle we must therefore content ourselves with a revolution that is as much ‘ours’ as possible, favouring and taking part, both morally and materially, in every movement directed towards justice and liberty and, when the insurrection has triumphed, ensure that the pace of the revolution is maintained, advancing towards ever greater freedom and justice. This does not mean ‘hanging on’ to the other parties, but spurring them forward, so that the people are able to choose between a range of options. We could be abandoned and betrayed, as has happened on other occasions. But we have to take that risk if we do not want to remain ineffectual and renounce the opportunity for our ideas and actions to have an influence on the course of history.

Another observation. Many anarchists, including some among the best known, and I would add among the most eminent, who — whether because they really believe it or because they think it useful for propaganda — have spread about the idea that the quantity of goods produced and in the warehouses of the landowners and proprietors is so great that all that would be required would be to draw freely from those stocks. These would amply satisfy the needs and desires of all, and some time would pass before we were obliged to worry over problems of work and production. And naturally, they found people who were willing to accept the idea. Unfortunately, people tend to avoid exertion and danger. Like the

democratic socialists who found widespread support by persuading people that all they needed to do to emancipate themselves was to slip a piece of paper in the ballot box and entrust their fate to others, so certain anarchists have won others over by telling them that one day of epic struggle — without effort, or with only the minimum of effort — will suffice to be able to enjoy a paradise of abundance and liberty.

Now precisely the opposite is true. The capitalists go into production to sell at a profit; they therefore cease production when they realise that they are getting diminishing or no returns. They generally find a greater advantage in keeping the market relatively short of goods, and this is proved by the fact that a bad harvest is enough for products to really run short or disappear altogether. So that it can be said that the worst harm done by the capitalist system is not so much the army of parasites it feeds as the obstacles it presents to the production of useful things. The ragged and the hungry are dazed when they pass stores crammed with goods of all kinds. But try to distribute those riches among the needy and see how little there actually is for each person!

Socialism, in the widest sense of the term, the aspiration to socialism, involves a problem of distribution, in that it is the spectacle of the misery of the workers when confronted with the affluence and luxury of the parasites and the moral revolt against patent social injustice that has driven the victims and all generous people to seek and imagine better means of living together in society. But the bringing about of socialism — whether anarchist or authoritarian, mutualist or individualist — is predominantly a problem of production. If there are no goods there is no point finding a better means of distributing them and if people are reduced to quarrel over a crust of bread, feelings of love and solidarity the great danger of giving way to a brutal struggle for survival.

Today, fortunately, the means of production abound. Engineering, chemistry, agriculture, etc., have increased a hundredfold the productive power of human labour. But it is necessary to work and

to work usefully it is necessary to know: know how the work must be done and how labour can be economically organised.

If the anarchists want to act effectively among the various parties they must deepen their understanding of the field of expertise to which they feel most suited, and make a study of all the theoretical and practical problems of useful activity.

Another point. We no longer live at a time or in a country when a family could be content with a piece of land, a spade, a handful of seeds, a cow and a few hens. Today our needs have multiplied and become enormously complex. The unequal natural distribution of raw materials forces any agglomeration of men and women to have international relations. The very density of the human population makes it not only a miserable thing but utterly impossible to live a hermit's life — supposing there are many so inclined.

We need to import from all over the world; we want schools, railways, postal and telegraph services, theatres, public sanitation, books, newspapers, etc.

Al this, the achievement of civilisation, may work well or badly; it works mainly for the benefit of the privileged classes. But it works and its benefits can, relatively easily, be extended to all, once the monopoly of wealth and power were to be abolished.

Do we want to destroy it?

Or are we in a position to organise it from the outset in a better way?

Especially at an economic level, social life does not permit of interruption. We need to eat every day; every day we must feed the children, the sick, the helpless; and there are also those who, after having been hard at it all day, want to spend the evening at the cinema. To supply all these unpostponable needs — forget about the cinema — there is a whole commercial organisation which may work badly, but somehow fulfills its task. This must clearly be used,