

Questions of Tactics

Errico Malatesta

1931

The present uncertain, tormented and unstable political and social situation in Europe and the world [1931], which gives rise to all sorts of hopes and fears, makes it more urgent than ever to be prepared for the upheavals which, sooner or later, but inevitably, will come. And this revives discussion — which is in any case always topical — as to how we can adapt our idealistic aspirations to the situation prevailing in various countries at the present time, and how to pass from the preaching of ideals to their practical application.

Since it is natural in a movement like ours, which does not recognise the authority either of persons or of texts and which is entirely founded on free criticism, there are a number of different opinions and many the tactics to follow.

Thus, some devote their whole activity to perfecting and preaching the ideal, without paying much attention to whether they are being understood or followed, and whether the ideals in question can be realised in view of the current state of popular opinion and existing material resources. These comrades, more or less explicitly and in degrees that vary from individual to individual, restrict the role of the anarchists to demolition of the present institutions of repression today and to guarding against the establishment of new governments and new privileges tomorrow. But they ignore all the rest, which just happens to be the serious, unavoidable and unpostponable problem of social reorganisation along libertarian lines.

They believe that, as far as the problems of reconstruction are concerned, everything will sort itself out, spontaneously, without advance preparation and planning, thanks to some mythical creative capacity of the masses, or by virtue of a supposed natural law according to which, as soon as state violence and capitalist privilege were eliminated, the people would all become good and intelligent, conflicts of interest would vanish and prosperity, peace and harmony would reign supreme in the world.

Others, motivated above all by the desire to be, or to appear to be, practical are concerned with the perceived difficulties inherent in the aftermath of the revolution and aware of the need to win over the hearts and minds of the greater part of the public, or at least to overcome hostility, caused by ignorance, for our proposals, wish to set out a programme, a complete plan of social reorganisation which would respond to all problems and satisfy those who (to use a phrase; borrowed from the English) they refer to as 'the man in the street.' Any man, that is, who has no particular party line or fixed idea and makes up his mind according to the passions and interests of the moment.

For my part, I believe both attitudes have their good and bad points, and that if it were not for an unfortunate tendency to exaggeration and dogmatism, they could complement one another, adjusting our conduct to the demands of the ideal goal and the needs of the situation and thus bringing about the greatest practical effectiveness, while remaining utterly faithful to our programme of true liberty and justice.

To neglect all the problems of reconstruction or to pre-arrange complete and uniform plans are both errors, excesses which, by different routes, would lead to our defeat as anarchists and to the victory of new or old authoritarian regimes. The truth lies in the middle.

It is absurd to believe that, once the government has been destroyed and the capitalists expropriated, 'things will look after themselves' without the intervention of those who already have an idea on what has to be done and who immediately set about doing it. Perhaps this could happen – and indeed it would be better if it were so – if there was time to wait for people, for everyone, to find a way, by trial and experience, of satisfying their own needs and tastes in agreement with the needs and tastes of others. But social life as the life of individuals does not permit of interruption. The immediate aftermath of the revolution, indeed on the very same day of the insurrection, there will be the need to supply food and other urgent needs of the population, and therefore to ensure the continued production of basics (bread, etc.), the running of the main public services (water, transport, electricity, etc.) and uninterrupted exchange between city and countryside.

Later the greatest difficulties will disappear. Labour, organised by those who do the real work, will become easy and attractive; high productivity will render superfluous any sort of calculation of the relation between products made and products consumed and everyone will literally be able to take what they want from the pile. The monstrous urban conglomerations will melt away, the population will be spread out rationally over the country and every area, every grouping, while conserving and adding to the commodities supplied by the big industrial undertakings and yet remaining linked to human society as a whole through a sense of sympathy and solidarity, will in general be self-sufficient, not afflicted by the oppressive and costly complications of economic life now.

But these and a thousand other beautiful things which come to mind are the concern of the future, while we, here and now, need to think how to live in today's world, in the situation that history has handed down to us and which revolution, that is an act of violence, cannot radically change overnight by waving a magic wand. And since, for better or worse, we need to live, if we do not know how and cannot do what needs to be done, others with different aims will do it instead, with results quite contrary to those we are striving for.

We must not neglect the 'man in the street,' who after all represents the majority of the population in all countries and without whose involvement emancipation is out of the question; but neither is there any need to rely too heavily on his intelligence and initiative.

The ordinary man, the 'man in the street,' has many excellent qualities; he has immense potential, which gives the certain hope that he will one day become the ideal humanity upon which we have set our sights. But meanwhile he has one serious defect, which largely explains the emergence and persistence of tyranny: he does not like to think. And even when he makes attempts at emancipation he is always more inclined to follow those who spare him the effort of thinking and who take over for him the responsibility for organising, directing ... and commanding. So long as his habits are not overly disrupted he is satisfied if others do the thinking for him and tell him what to do, even if he is left with nothing but the obligation to work and obey.

This weakness, this tendency of the herd to wait for and follow orders has been the bane of many a revolution and remains the danger for the revolutions in the near future.

If the crowd does not look to itself, and right away, people of good will, capable of initiative and decision-making, must necessarily do things for them. And it is in this, in the means of providing for the urgent necessities, that we must clearly be distinguishable from the authoritarian parties.

The authoritarians mean to resolve the question by setting themselves up in government and imposing their programme by force. They may even be in good faith and believe sincerely that they do the good of all, but in fact they would succeed only in creating a new privileged class concerned with maintaining the new government and, in effect, substituting one tyranny for another.

Certainly the anarchists must strive to make the transition from the state of servitude to one of freedom as unlaborious as possible providing the public with as many practical and immediately applicable ideas as possible; but they must beware of encouraging that intellectual inertia and that above-lamented tendency of obeying and leaving it to others to act.

To truly succeed as an emancipating force, for the free initiative of all and everyone, the revolution must develop freely in a thousand different ways, corresponding to the thousand different moral and material conditions in which the people now find themselves. And we must put forward and carry out as far as we can those ways of life that best correspond to our ideals. But above all we must make a special effort to awaken in the mass of the people a spirit of initiative and the habit of doing things for themselves.

We must also avoid appearing to be in command by acting through words and deeds as comrades among comrades. We must remind ourselves that if we are too zealous in forcing the pace in our direction to implement our plans, we run the risk of clipping the wings of the revolution and of ourselves assuming, more or less unwittingly, that function of government that we deplore so much in others.

And as a government we would not be worth any more than the others. Perhaps we might even be more dangerous to freedom, because, so strongly convinced as we are of being right and doing good, we could tend, like real fanatics, to hold all who do not think or act like us to be counter-revolutionaries and enemies of the public good.

If, then, what the others do is not what we would want, it does not matter, so long as the liberty of all is safeguarded.

What really matters is that the people do what they want. For the only assured conquests are what the people do with their own efforts. The only definitive reforms are those which are demanded and imposed by the popular conscience.

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