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The Duties of the Present Hour

Errico Malatesta

August 1894

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The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey. *Liberty* (London) 1, no. 8 (August 1894). This little-known and almost forgotten article marks in fact a turning point in Malatesta's ideas. Written only six months after the preceding article, it expresses the same urge to "go to the people." Yet, while the earlier article's theme is still the indeterminacy of collective action, expressed by references to the French revolution as we already find in the 1889 articles for *L'Associazione*, the present work's novel references to economic and legal resistance foreshadow concepts that are fully developed in the 1897–8 articles for *L'Agitazione*.

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Reaction is let loose upon us from all sides. The bourgeoisie, infuriated by the fear of losing her privileges, will use all means of repression to suppress not only the Anarchist and Socialist, but every progressive movement.

It is quite certain that they will not be able to prevent these outrages which served as the pretext of this present reaction; on the contrary, the measures which bar all other outlets to the active temper of some seem expressly calculated to provoke and multiply them.

But, unfortunately, it is not quite certain that they may not succeed in hampering our propaganda by rendering the circulation of our press very difficult, by imprisoning a great number of our comrades, and by leaving no other means of revolutionary activity open to us than secret meetings, which may be very useful for the actual execution of actions determined on, but which cannot make an idea enter into the mass of the proletariat.

We would be wrong to console ourselves with the old illusion that persecutions are *always* useful to the development of

the ideas which are persecuted. This is wrong, as almost all generalizations are. Persecutions may help or hinder the triumph of a cause, according to the relation existing between the power of persecution and the power of resistance of the persecuted; and past history contains examples of persecutions which stopped and destroyed a movement as well as of others which brought about a revolution.

Hence we must face, without weakness or illusion, the situation into which the *bourgeoisie* has placed us to-day and study the means to resist the storm and to derive from it the greatest possible profit for our cause.

There are comrades who expect the triumph of our ideas from the multiplication of acts of individual violence. Well, we may differ in our opinions on the moral value and the practical effect of individual acts in general, and of each act in particular, and there are in fact on this subject among Anarchists various divergent and even directly opposed currents of opinion; but one thing is certain, namely, that with a number of bombs and a number of blows of the knife, a society like bourgeois society cannot be overthrown, being based, as it is, on an enormous mass of private interests and prejudices, and sustained, more than it is by the force of arms, by the inertia of the masses and their habits of submission.

Other things are necessary to bring about a revolution, and specially the Anarchist revolution. It is necessary that the people be conscious of their rights and their strength; it is necessary that they be ready to fight and ready to take the conduct of their affairs into their own hands. It must be the constant preoccupation of the revolutionists, the point towards which all their activity must aim, to bring about this state of mind among the masses. The brilliant acts of a few individuals may help in this work, but cannot replace it; and in reality, they are only useful if they are the result of a collective movement of spirit of the masses and if being accomplished under such

martyrs, we are to-day nearly strangers to the great popular commotions which agitate Europe and America, and we find ourselves in a situation which permits the governments to foster, without plainly appearing absurd, hopes to suppress us by some police measures.

Let us reconsider our position.

To-day, that which always ought to have been our duty, which was the logical outcome of our ideas, the condition which our conception of the revolution and reorganization of society imposes on us, namely, to live among the people and to win them over to our ideas by actively taking part in their struggles and sufferings, to-day this has become an absolute necessity imposed upon us by the situation which we have to live under. Our ordinary means of propaganda—the press, meetings, groups of more or less convinced adherents of our ideas—at any rate for a certain time, will become more and more difficult to be used. It is only in working-men's associations, strikes, collective revolt where we can find a waste field for exercising our influence and propagating our ideas. But if we want to succeed, let us remember that people do not become Anarchists in a single day, by hearing some violent speeches, and let us above all avoid falling into the error common to many comrades, who refuse to associate with working men who are not already perfect Anarchists, whilst it is absolutely necessary to associate with them in order to make them become Anarchists.

circumstances that the masses understand them, sympathise with, and profit by them.

Woe to us, woe to our cause if we remain in inactivity, waiting from time to time for men like Caserio and Vaillant, Pallas and Berkman to sacrifice their lives for the cause and be admired for their bravery! Who expects the emancipation of mankind to come, not from the persistent and harmonious cooperation of all men of progress, but from the accidental or providential happening of some acts of heroism, is not better advised than one who expects it from the intervention of an ingenious legislator or of a victorious general.

After all, in any case, but a very limited number of individuals do really commit acts of this kind. And the others? What are we doing, we, the great majority of Anarchists, who throw no bombs and kill no tyrants? Must we content ourselves with praising the dead and wait with equanimity of conscience for others to come forward to get killed? It is important that we should agree as to the line of conduct fitted for the bulk of Anarchists: which would not prevent individuals of exceptional energy and devotion bringing to the struggle their personal audacity and sacrifice.

What have we to do in the present situation?

Before all, in my opinion, we must as much as possible resist the laws; I might almost say we must ignore them.

The degree of freedom, as well as the degree of exploitation under which we live, is not at all, or only in a small measure, dependent upon the letter of the law: it depends before all upon the resistance offered to the laws. One can be relatively free, notwithstanding the existence of draconian laws, provided custom is opposed to the government making use of them; while, on the other side, in spite of all guarantees granted by laws, one may be at the mercy of all the violence of the police, if they feel, that they can, without being punished, make short work of the liberty of the citizens.

In Italy, the government used to dissolve, from time to time, such associations as they considered dangerous to the monarchical institutions. Protests, and cries of indignation were raised and, what is most important, the dissolved societies were forthwith reconstituted: and the government could not but let this pass, and its aims to suppress the right of association of its opponents were continually frustrated. After having several times used this method against the International Workingmen's Association (which, in Italy, was from the beginning Anarchist) and not succeeding in making it disappear, the government hit upon prosecuting its members as persons affiliated to an association of criminals. But it was impossible to prosecute all. From time to time arrests were made, sentences passed; the accused openly vindicated their ideas and the right to associate for their propagation; the sections of the International continued their work, and in the end, whilst a number of individuals suffered personally—and those who fight against the existing order of things must expect to suffer—the aims of the government were frustrated and the propaganda profited by it ever so much. But then Anarchists began to say that to form associations meant giving an opportunity for prosecution of associations of criminals to the government; they caused the dissolution of the existing association, combated all efforts to reorganize it... and, in this way, voluntarily renounced the right of association. This did not, of course, prevent a single condemnation; on the contrary, at present Anarchists are accused of forming criminal associations if perchance they meet each other in a café—they may even not know one another—simply because they are Anarchists.

The results of the new laws which are being forged against us will depend to a large degree, upon our own attitude. If we offer energetic resistance, they will at once appear to public opinion as a shameless violation of all human right and will be condemned to speedy extinction or to remain a dead letter. If,

on the contrary, we accommodate ourselves to them, they will rank with contemporary political customs, which will, later on, have the disastrous result of giving fresh importance to the struggle for political liberties (of speaking, writing, meeting, combining, and associating) and be the cause more or less of losing sight of the social question.

We are to be prevented from expressing our ideas: let us do so none the less and that more than ever. They want to proscribe the very name of Anarchist: let us shout aloud that we are Anarchists. The right of association is to be denied us: let us associate as we can, and proclaim that we are associated, and mean to be. This kind of action, I am quite aware, is not without difficulty in the state things are in at present, and can only be pursued within the limits and in the way which commonsense will dictate to everybody according to the different circumstances they live under. But let us always remember that the oppression of governments has no other limits than the resistance offered to it.

Those Socialists who imagine to escape the reaction by severing their cause from that of the Anarchists, not only give proof of a narrowness of view which is incompatible with aims of radical reorganisation of the social system, but they betray stupidly their proper interest. If we should be crushed, their turn would come very soon.

But before all we must go among the people: this is the way of salvation for our cause.

Whilst our ideas oblige us to put all our hopes in the masses, because we do not believe in the possibility of imposing the good by force and we do not want to be commanded, we have despised and neglected all manifestations of popular life; we contented ourselves with simply preaching abstract theories or with acts of individual revolt, and we have become isolated. Hence the want of success of what I will call, the first period of the Anarchist movement. After more than twenty years of propaganda and struggle, after so much devotion and so many