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The Economic Question

Errico Malatesta

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29 June 1884

The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by
Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.
Translated from "Questione economica," *La Questione Sociale*
(Florence) 1, no. 13 (29 June 1884).

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Meanwhile, the word is that the political question and the economic question march hand in hand, and that there are governments that can also “foster the spread of socialist ideas.”

So say the republicans; so writes Costa in *L’Avanti!*

The republicans need to admit that they have no understanding whatever of current social problems and that they still cling to the old litany of *God, Homeland, Liberty, and Family*. But Costa purports to be still a socialist yet reneges upon Socialism’s greatest conquest, its most precious discovery, its first and last word?!!

Artfully done though it may be, the *travesty of the socialist programme* is no less complete in Costa’s programme. We need to look to our real principles and the sacred source of socialism; that is where we need to return and be baptized again if we are serious about recovering from the leprosy of *politicism* that dampens our ardor and saps our strength.

a non-governing government, or the mere *distribution and performance of work and distribution of goods*, such an *un-government* is only feasible once the economic problem has been resolved through collective ownership of the land and workers joining forces. The political problem too can be traced back to the economic one.

Punishment and War

Now we can speak of punishment—another problem that defies resolution without a *turn of the key*, economic reasoning.

Crime is either rebelliousness on the part of the oppressed against the oppressor, or the child of poverty, or is sired by poverty by way of ignorance. Owen has explained this very well: *the solution to the economic problem is also the solution to the problem of crime*.

The issue of *war* can also be broken down like this: equality of circumstances between the classes leads to equality of circumstances between peoples, and that equality of peoples leads to an end to wars. Today these are waged, as Leopardi had it, in pursuit of *sugar or cinnamon*; for a trading pre-eminence, for industrial exploitation; as witness Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco.

The Republicans, Costa, and Us

We could keep this up for some time. All problems confronting Science and modern Life are connected in the same fashion: *the economic question*. A real Gordian knot that we need to cut through with the sword of...³

³ The sentence is probably left incomplete to avoid censorship or legal proceedings.

The greatest discovery of this century was made by the International when it proclaimed that the economic question is fundamental in Sociology, and that other matters—political, religious, etc.—are merely its reflections, perhaps even the shadows it casts.

Indeed, in the past, lacking this key, all political problems (in the broadest sense, encompassing everything related to the existence of society) were insoluble, indeed, unfathomable.

In Greece, for instance, in order to deliver the greatest well-being to the people, they sought the best government, or “the government of the most.” But in the end, it turned out that *government is always government by the few* and not by the best either *but by scoundrels*—whether monarchist, aristocratic, or democratic, it was still despotic or, to use a modern term, *the business of the haves*.

Rome came closer to the truth, when it looked for the phoenix of social well-being in *equality of circumstance for all citizens of the State*. The agrarian laws that were proclaimed twenty-seven centuries ago from atop the Campidoglio, plus the social and slave wars show that there was some vague inkling of the truth: that *economic circumstances are the real yardstick of the civil and political status* of a man or a class. But having an inkling is one thing and understanding and announcing it is quite another; the first being a glimmer and the other a light. The vagueness of the idea was mirrored in the vagueness of the set of demands that went by the name of “primitive Christianity”; and the weak sunbeams were soon swallowed up by the darkness of the Middle Ages.

There, too, the struggles for political power flared up: the *economic question* resurfaced timidly in the Communes, but fed into petty internecine strife and was not the banner of widespread social upheaval. Democracies, aristocracies, tyrannies—here again we have the terms designed to solve the enigma. And centuries more of experience, right up until our own day, up until the French revolution, up until 1860,

up until almost today, have borne out the principle that: *all established governments, founded as they are upon inequalities of circumstances, are despotic and monopolise the national wealth; that the political question cannot be resolved, nor any other issue of interest to society, unless there is a resolution of the economic question.*

This truth is the big advance on the present century and the compendium, the quintessence of theoretical and practical socialism, the key to the resolution of all the problems that tax our brains and torment our hearts; it has burst forth from three sources simultaneously: from the workers' painful experiences of the freest forms of government; from study of the relations between Capital and Labor, which is to say, Economics; and finally from the brand new *positive* approach of the Social Sciences. Therefore it represents the hinge of Science and modern history; it had brought a far-reaching revolution of ideas, and lays the groundwork for a no less grandiose one in the realm of facts.

Let us get used to *expressing* all social problems that may crop up as the *economic question* and reducing them to this formula:

Economic inequality is the source of all moral, intellectual, political, etc. inequalities.

In other words, let us try to *talk with precision*, for, as Condorcet says, Science is a well-made language, and we shall be on the right road.

We offer a few examples:

The Emancipation of Woman

Woman's emancipation is a topic that has been debated over and over again to the point of exhaustion, seriously and for a laugh, with varying degrees of success, albeit with no outcome, not even a theoretical one. Some argue that woman is born

The army and the police and the bench are the *hand* of Government and of the ruling class, ready to lash out and command obedience from any who might rebel.

The fact that, in order to cling on, the Government needs so much support and all this expense is really very telling. But that is the way things are: Governments *cost a packet* and for every *one* pocketed by the Minister, or Banker or Deputy, the poor tax-payer coughs up a *thousand* because he has to pay the tax-collector, the civil servant, the copper and the executioner, and all the rest as well.

Lest we go on too long, let us conclude with this quotation from Proudhon: "Analysis and the facts," he said, "demonstrate: that the tax of assessment, the tax upon monopoly, instead of being paid by those who possess, is paid almost entirely by those who do not possess; that the tax of *quotite*, separating the producer from the consumer, falls solely upon the latter ... finally, that the army, the courts, the police, the schools, the hospitals, the almshouses, the houses of refuge and correction, public functions, religion itself, all that society creates for the protection, emancipation, and relief of the proletaire, paid for in the first place and sustained by the proletaire, is then turned against the proletaire or wasted as far as he is concerned; so that the proletariat, which at first labored only for the class that devours it—that of the capitalist—must labor also for the class that flogs it—that of the nonproducers."²

This is where our analysis of the functions of Government, which is to say the *political system* through the prism of the *economic question*, takes us.

Government by all, an administration-government, a government free of extortion, ambushes, injustices, privileges, with some made wealthy and others impoverished,

² The passage is taken from *System of Economical Contradictions: or the Philosophy of Misery*, chapter 7, section 1. We have used Benjamin Tucker's translation of 1888.

danapalus? A few bankers, deputies, a few officials. Otherwise we can only lament the general pauperism.

A Minister is in fact a deputy on a glorious stipend, who can call upon a few million in unforeseen and extra-ordinary expenses, who can give out or take away jobs, who can negotiate with the Stock Exchange and win, who creams off a percentage from every big State contract, and finally, upon stepping down from his post, becomes a wealthy property-owner.

The deputy in the Chamber is a potential Minister, a key figure in the conclusion of big deals. Take the railway contracts, say: the Company will make billions at the nation's expense, but every deputy has his own *share portfolio*; so, by voting for the Contracts, he *lines his pockets*, meaning that he *turns that Nation to his personal profit*. So, no matter how scandalous they may be, the Contracts will be passed; just the way the Tobacco Regulations, the laws on the National Bank passed and so on and so on! Every one of these laws, we note, saw billions siphoned off.

And the deputy has a foothold in the Civil Service, can expedite matters and advance his own profession at the expense of others (one need only think of the deputies who are lawyers), and, as in the case of provincial and town councillors, can come up with a way of *making a living despite not lifting a finger*. Puzzling! Yet this is the fact of the matter.

Then again, *in his constituency*, the deputy is a king in octodecimo; he can appoint and dismiss prefects, allocate posts, fix the city budget, buy up public and private assets, build himself a castle. All hail the new feudal lord!

We have pretty much stated what civil servants are: the clientele of ministers and deputies and of the State generally. They are many and they noisily chant homilies and hymns to the King and Homeland. They are the State's *political electoral army*.

inferior to man, like the slave to the master; others want to see her become his equal. Physiology, history, anthropology, etc. have been invoked by one and all, and nothing has come of it all.

If, instead, it had been said that, "The matter is an entirely economic one. With feudalism gone, with there being no more dowries and estates; with withdrawal into a convent no longer an option; with property so jeopardized that *in order to survive everyone has to rely upon his own resources*—that is, upon his labors, if he is a worker, or his industry, if he is a capitalist—by what right is a woman to be told: you are barred from labor and from industry, you are barred from life and are a burnt offering to some old prejudice, or rather to some *law governing the allocation of functions within the family* that is better suited to other times, other institutions, other circumstances?" If it had been put like that, and if the conclusion drawn from that was that *woman today should go out to work, choosing, as any man does, whatever work she had the greatest aptitude for*, would a genuine solution to the problem not have been arrived at? Would that solution not hit the nail on the head? Does *the women's problem not lead back to the men's problem*, that is, to the question of labor—which should be incumbent upon us all and should be shared by everyone—which is to say, to the *economic question*?

Let us stress, however, that today the *economic question* can be resolved only theoretically; *work by all and for all* is still an aspiration of Science and Humanity; in practice we have *competition*, which is to say, *civil war* between workers, man versus woman, adult versus child, and capitalist versus all. *One man's meat is another man's poison; your death is my life*. Hence, the resistance to the *economic emancipation* of womankind; hence the *current impossibility* of any such emancipation. *The emancipation of woman, as of man, can only come about in a new social order.*

Religious Matters

We come now to an equally important matter: the religious question. Contrary to what it might appear, this too is an *economic question*, and it is precisely because of its not having been examined from that angle that the apostles of Freethought have failed thus far. Their theories have made no inroads among the masses, and despite the wrangles between State and Church—which they could and should have turned to their advantage—and the modern Sciences’ *general consent* in favor of Freethought, they have not managed to *snatch* a single soul away from the Satan in the Vatican, nor wrested as much as one yard of ground from the rule of Pope and cardinals. The religious question is, as we have stated, an economic one. In actual fact, a religion has two component parts: theory and organization. The philosophical and moral truths that make up a religion’s theory are not up for debate; they may be the *truth* or they may well be *errors*, but since the *truth*, like any human matter, is forever bettering itself, that which is *true* at one point in time, or that which is suited to the thinking and expression of a given time, no longer suits in a different one. The Roman Church itself has had to adopt a different language between one century and another and, like it or not, an encyclical today is written differently from a Bull from the first or second Christian eras. So it is not the theory that makes up the Church, but the organization.

The organization of the Church, and of every church from every age, is a perfect fit for that of Governments. We have the same hierarchy, the same *top-to-bottom* descending order—at the top, the power, the wealth, the enormous stipends; down below, debasement, passive obedience, meager lives and meager stipends. The difference between Church and State lies solely in the *way they extract from the people what is needed to feed and sustain their hierarchy*. They both extract it from the people, one by means of *lesser coercion* than the other; one

economic circumstances—that is the worm in the bud of every freedom.

Government

We come now to dwell somewhat upon Government.

Be it absolute, constitutional, or republican, it is always an East India Company; one class commands, the other obeys; one enjoys a life of leisure on the exertions of other people, and the other is whipped from pillar to post, without so much as a crust of bread to call their own. Here too, behind the semblance of a *political question*, under the veil of unusual verses, there is nothing, and nothing lurks but the *economic question* of working versus not working, eating versus starving to death.

Government consists in levying taxes from the people and sharing the proceeds around the members of the ruling class.

We know that every tax hits the poor man; the land tax is paid by the tenant, the farmer, the consumer; indirect taxes are paid by the consumer. And the poorer one is, the more one pays; thus the poor man uses more salt and pays the same levy on poor quality wine as the rich man pays on better quality wines, etc. In short—all the economists concede as much—*the poorer one gets, the heavier the tax take*. Furthermore, being deputies, civil servants, etc., the ruling class enjoys certain privileges such as, say, reduced rail fares, free use of the trams, etc.; whereas the poor man pays more than anyone else.

Now, if one adds up the levies that the State demands year after year, the Public Purse, the assets stripped from private owners, the pious works it administers, its Private account, and the Banks it operates or runs, the sums would number in the billions. And then we are surprised by people starving to death!

This is what it demands; let us have a look at how it shares it! Let us take a look around us: who lives like Croesus or like Sar-

monies he has saved up, without employing a single worker. Most of the workers could not survive a week, very few of them a month, and hardly any of them a year without work. In the long run, the employer can no more do without the worker than the worker without the employer, but the employer's is not so pressing a need." Besides, the bosses use the weapons at their disposal in order to break or corrupt the working man. Workers' unions are faced by employers' unions; and the victory goes to the deepest pockets. Mill himself says that "when it comes to sorting out major issues, small assets do not do the job" and it requires large ones if the socio-economic question is to be resolved.

Political liberty and universal suffrage

Freedom of the press, of assembly, of association, and all the political freedoms in the world—Universal Suffrage included—cannot do the trick. The facts show as much: but what is the reason for this? Those with no understanding of social issues shrug their shoulders and say that the fault lies in those who do not know how to make use of them. No, the fault lies with them as they persist in gazing at the moon in the bottom of the well. *Freedom between less than equals is the consecration of the whim of the one at the top.* As long as it suits his purpose, the latter will exercise freedom, only to renege upon it as soon as it serves the purposes of his adversaries. Universal Suffrage is a snare; it may be the People that do the electing, but the person elected is the boss, the Sovereign. *No matter what class they may be drawn from, the deputies make up a discrete class, which is the class of those who live off the backs of the People.* Their interests fly in the face of those of the people from whom they receive their mandates. Hence the talk of disloyalty, betrayal, etc. Empty verbiage: to date, every deputy has turned traitor, and every one of them will! *Inequality of*

by means of superstition, the other through the use of force. In other words, Government and Church, meaning the ruling and dominant classes, have adopted the following rationale: The people, they have said to themselves, can be divested of their possessions in two ways; either through threats or through persuasion, or rather, through the threat of earthly punishments or the terror of other-worldly punishments. These two means cannot be used by the same power at the same time. So the Church said to the State: Let us divide the task; you can enjoy the *dominion of force, leaving the safer, quieter dominion of fraud to me*; as for you, O people, *render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and to Christ that which is Christ's*, and never weary of giving. Besides, the Church has always told the State: I shall unfailingly uphold your rights through my preaching and my excommunications, my encyclicals, in short, my *moral arsenal*; and, if need be, you will put my enemies—Albigensians, Arnalds of Brescia, Giordano Brunos, and such like—to the stake. Ours is a redoubtable partnership.

They have said this and they have delivered. The Church has usurped half of the world, the other half has been seized by the State. An anecdote recounted by Washington Irving in his biography of George Washington comes to mind: Irving speaks of certain native American tribes torn between the English (who they described as their "fathers") and the French (who nominated themselves their "brothers"). One day these poor natives sent the message to representatives of the two powers that went something like this: It is all very well your being *fathers and brothers*; but the moment either of you tries to take half of our land, what is left to us who are doomed to live surrounded by "fathers" and "brothers"? Which is where the People stand today where Church and State are concerned. Of course, once Church and State had seized everything, they finished up squabbling between themselves about who should have the lion's share. The Church argued that the State was indebted to it for the obedience of the populace, and this was the

truth. The State argued that the Church was obliged to it for its tolerance and for its occasional *armed favors*, and this was very true. Here again the knot linking Church and State could not be unravelled, it involved *tithes, patronage, cardinals' caps*, etc., until they both realized that, just like the stomach and the limbs, they needed each other, and so they patched things up, so as to carry on their old tricks at the people's expense.

And note too that the soil is not the only thing that they have pretty much carved up between them. *The Church has a system of levies very much like the State's*. From birth to death, it is forever pestering you for pennies; pennies being a figure of speech, for in fact its levies are pretty substantial. It is hard to believe what the Church levies voluntarily from the faithful under a hundred different names—*Mass charges, alms, funeral charges, death duties, parish funds, St Peter's pence, etc.* The Church is made up of the faithful, their offerings and vows. On the proceeds of all these *voluntary levies*, which we pay to the Clergy, they live a life of idleness and keep their... housekeepers. They charge us millions even for the making of saints; and the lifestyles of Monsignors and Cardinals are known to all. The Church has this going for it: that it manages to *milk the poorest people*; in its view, there is not a pauper, bankrupt, or beggar exempt from contributing. It *usurps the pauper's alms*; and marries the utmost arrogance to the basest degradation; it is a brazen mendicant, the most irksome and repugnant sort of human being.

In short, Church policy can be summed up by the Archbishop of Seus's famous dictum: *The Clergy's contribution is prayer*, so it makes a living out of praying. The Church is the *class of those who have ducked out of their labor obligations in order to devote themselves to God*; as if the believers' God, having sentenced all to labor, has made an exception for this one class.

The religious question therefore also boils down to the *issue of labor*, or the *economic question*. The labors of the priest are

on a par with those of the usurer, the stock-broker, the collector of State taxes; the priest being nothing but a collector of ecclesiastical taxes. In any case, any man can serve as his own priest. The class comprised of those who *dodge work using the pretext of prayer*, is the one that needs abolishing: let the workers who labor so mightily give some thought to this: that, for want of the time to pray, they are in danger of going to hell.

Education

Education is talked about. The Palermo Congress did well to declare: *he who does not have enough to live on, is in no position to go to school*.¹ Then again, the *struggle for survival* means that every new student, every educated worker, harms the rest. Reserved for the would-be ruling class, education has to be a monopoly; how else, other than a little difference in cleverness, without politics, laws, and official Science, etc., being shrouded in secrecy, can millions of workers be held at bay?

We shall be instructed, and that instruction will reflect our callings and we shall help one another to understand and investigate once the *economic question* has been answered. We are always around.

Right to Combine

Strikes, or the right to *combine*. The question is this: how is it that workers, who are the majority, cannot bring the bosses to obedience, using their own weapons against them, and thus grappling with them on the economic terrain? From Mill comes the answer:

“A property-owner, landlord, manufacturing boss, and merchant can, generally speaking, survive for a year or two on

¹ A Universal Workers' Congress had taken place in Palermo in 1882, on the occasion of the sixth centennial of the Sicilian Vespers movement.