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Errico Malatesta
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1897

The Complete Works of Errico Malatesta, Volume III (Ed. Davide Turcato, transl. Paul Sharkey)
Translated by Paul Sharkey from “*Lo stato socialista*,” *L’Agitazione* (Ancona) 1, no. 10 (May 15, 1897).

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The goal of the democratic socialists is “to win public office.”

We shall not, on this occasion, be looking into whether this aim fits with their historic theories, according to which the economically dominant classes always, inevitably hold political power, from which it follows that economic emancipation should, of necessity, come before political emancipation. Neither shall we be debating whether, assuming that it is possible for political power to be won by a disinherited class, legal means can suffice for that task.

Right now we merely want to discuss whether such a capture of public office does or does not fit in with the socialist ideal of a society of free and equal, devoid of overlordship and class divisions.

The democratic socialists—especially the Italian ones, who, whether they like it or not, have been exposed more than others to the influence of anarchist thinking—are used to claiming, at least when they argue with us, that they, too, want to abolish the State—which is to say, the Government—and that in order to be in a position to do so they want to take it over. What does that mean? If they meant that, even as they capture it, they want to abolish the State, erase every lawful guarantee of “acquired rights,” disband

any armed governmental force, do away with all legislative powers, leave every locality, every association, and individual full and complete autonomy, and promote the organization of society from the bottom up through the free federation of producer and consumer groups, then the entire issue would boil down to this: that they express by certain words the same ideas that we express by other words. Saying *we want to storm the fortress and destroy it*, and saying *we want to seize that fortress to demolish it* means one and the same thing.

There would still remain between us and the democratic socialists a difference of opinion, no doubt of the utmost importance, about whether the participation in election contests and the entry of socialists into parliament aid or hinder the revolution; prepare people to a radical transformation of the present order or educate the people to accept a new tyranny after the revolution, but on the ultimate aim at any rate, we would entirely agree.

The fact is though that such declarations of intent to capture the State *in order to destroy it* are either damnable polemical devices or, if sincere, come from anarchists-in-the-making who think that they are still democrats.

The real democratic socialists have a very different notion of “winning public office.” At the London Congress, to cite only one recent, solemn occasion, they stated clearly that public office must be captured “so as to legislate and administer the new society.” In the most recent issue of *Critica Sociale*, we read that *it is a mistake to believe that on reaching power the socialist party will be able or willing to cut taxes and that instead, the State, through a progressive increase in taxation, will have to gradually absorb private wealth in order to implement the great reforms that socialism aims for (setting up funds for the elderly, the disabled, and against accidents, organizing schools fit for a civilized country, redeeming major capital, etc., etc.)*, thus moving in the direction of *the distant aim of perfect communism, when everything will be made a public service and private wealth and the wealth of society will be one and the same* (Giuseppe

No government has ever done anything of the sort and neither would a socialist government. And so, the day the people have force in their hands, if they are wise, they will prevent the establishment of any government.

by those who govern. Abolish government without abolishing private property, and the property owners will resurrect government.

When Friedrich Engels claimed, perhaps to fend off the anarchist critique, that once classes have disappeared, the State per se no longer has any reason to be and turns from government of men to administration of things, he was just playing on words. Whoever has dominion over things, has dominion over men; whoever governs production governs the producer; whoever controls consumption lords it over the consumer.

The question is this: either things are administered in accordance with agreements freely reached by those concerned, in which case we have anarchy, or they are administered in accordance with law made by the administrators, and we have Government, the State, which inevitably turns tyrannical.

It is not a question here of the good faith and good will of this man or of that, but of the necessity of situations and the general tendencies that men exhibit when they find themselves in certain circumstances.

Besides, if the good of all is really at stake, if there really is an intention to *administer things* in the interests of the administered, who better to do it than those who produce these things and are to consume these things?

What is the use of government?

The first act of a socialist government on achieving power should be this: *Considering that, being in government, we can achieve nothing good and would instead stymie action by the people by forcing them to wait for laws that we cannot frame without sacrificing the interests of some to the interests of others and everyone's interests to our own particular interests—We, the government, etc. hereby declare all authority abolished, invite all citizens to organize themselves in associations corresponding to their various needs, submit to the initiative of such associations, and bring the contribution of our personal efforts amid them.*

Bonzo, “Il Partito socialista e le imposte,”¹ in *Critica Sociale*, May 1, 1897).

So the democratic socialists are promising us nothing but a Government: a government complete with its whole retinue of revenue inspectors, its collectors, its bailiffs (for delinquent payers), its gendarmes and jailers (for anybody tempted to defenestrate the bailiff), its judges, its public assistance funds administrators, its school programs and its official tutors, its public debt agency to pay the interests on redeemed capital, etc., etc., plus, of course, its legislative body making laws and setting taxes and various ministries enforcing and administering the laws.

In doing this there may be differing modalities, differing degrees of centralizing tendencies, or more or less dictatorial or democratic methods and more or less abrupt or gradual processes, but in essence they are all in agreement, because that is the substance of their program.

Now we need to see if that government of which socialists dream holds out any guarantee of social justice: if it could or would do away with classes, banish all exploitation and oppression by man of his fellow man; whether, in short, it could and would lay the foundations for a truly socialist society.

The democratic socialists start from the principle that the State, the Government, is merely the political agent of the ruling class. In a capitalist society, they say, the State of necessity serves the interests of capitalists and guarantees their entitlement to exploit the workers. In a socialistic society, though, with private property abolished and class distinctions disappeared after the eradication of economic privilege, the State would represent everybody and turn into the impartial agent of the social interests of all members of society.

At this point a difficulty inevitably arises. If it is true that government is, of necessity, always the instrument of whoever owns

¹ “The Socialist Party and Taxes.”

the means of production, by what miracle could a socialist Government pop up in the middle of a capitalist system with the goal of abolishing capitalism? Will it be, as Marx and Blanqui wanted, through a dictatorship imposed by revolution, through a forcible act that revolutionarily decrees and imposes the confiscation of private property to the benefit of the State, as the representative of collective interests? Or will it be, as it seems all Marxists and many of the modern Blanquists want, by means of a socialist majority returned to Parliament under universal suffrage? Will there be an abrupt expropriation of the ruling class by the economically subjugated class, or will there be a gradual process whereby property owners and capitalists are forced to let all their privileges go little by little?

All this seems strangely at odds with the theory of “historical materialism,” which is basic dogma for Marxists. But in this article we have no intention of exploring such contradictions, nor of investigating what measure of truth there may be in the doctrine of historical materialism.

So let us imagine that by some means, power has passed into the hands of the socialists and that a socialist Government has been well and soundly established.

Would that mean the advent of Socialism’s triumph is at hand?

We think not.

If the institution of private property is the root of all the woes we know, it is not because such-and-such a tract of land is registered under the name of such-and-such a person, but because such registration entitles that person to use the land as it pleases him, and the use he makes of it is always bad, that is to say, to the detriment of his fellows. All religions, at their inception, have claimed that wealth is a burden that requires its owners to look out for the well-being of the poor and to act in a fatherly way towards them. And looking to the origins of civil law, we find that the landowner is bound by so many civic obligations as to be rather more the administrator of asset in the public interest than the owner in the

modern sense of the term. But such is man that when he can dominate and impose his wishes upon others, he uses and misuses his position to the point of reducing the others to slavery and abjection. And so the lord, who was supposed to be a father and protector to the poor, has always turned into a ferocious exploiter.

It has ever been thus and will ever be thus with rulers, too.

It will not do to say that when a government comes from the people it will serve the people’s interests; all powers have derived from the people, since only the people can confer the required strength, and they have all oppressed the people. It will not do to say that when there are no privileged classes any more, the government will merely be the agent of the collective will; rulers of themselves constitute a class and between them a class solidarity develops that is much more powerful than any existing in classes rooted in economic privileges.

True, these days the Government is the servant of the bourgeoisie, but that owes less to its being the Government than to its members being bourgeois; otherwise, being Government, it despises its master and deceives and robs him, like every servant. It was not to serve the bourgeoisie that Crispi robbed the banks or trampled all over the Constitution.

Anyone in power means to stay there, and no matter what the cost he intends to impose his will—and since wealth is a very effective instrument of power, the ruler, even if he personally does not abuse or steal, he promotes the rise of a class around him that owes to him its privileges and has a vested interest in his remaining in power. Ruling parties are to politics as property-owning classes are to economics.

Anarchists have said it thousands of times, and the whole of history bears out what they say: private property and political power are the two links in the chain that binds humanity and like the twin edges of an assassin’s blade. There is no way of breaking free of the one without breaking free of the other. Abolish private property without abolishing government, and the former will be resurrected