While the Carnage Lasts

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Since we cannot, now, do anything better, let us discuss.

But let us discuss calmly, decently, without raising ill-founded suspicions about the motives of the contradictors. By discussing in this way, if we cannot agree, we will at least be able to clarify the nature and limits of the disagreement. And this will be useful for when the time comes – and it will certainly come – when it will be possible to act effectively and we will find ourselves united, on the terrain of other unequivocal facts, with many with whom we are today in sharp opposition on the fact of the European war.

And let us begin by eliminating polemical devices and rhetorical flights, which may serve to confuse or irritate people, but prove nothing.

Those revolutionaries who believe it is useful to participate in the war in favour of the Franco-Anglo-Russian alliance lavish on us, who, faithful to the ideas and tactics we defended before the war, are not neutral but enemies of the two belligerent parties, the qualifications of fossils, dogmatists, Dominicans [the Catholic Order of Preachers]. We could respond by treating the others as turncoats and we would be equal. Equal in the ability to insult, and equal in the lack of serious reasoning; for the fact of having changed one's opinion or not is not enough to prove that one is right or wrong. What would our contradictors, who remain adamant opponents of religious obscurantism, say if they were called fossils and Muslims by those who, disoriented by the war, felt the atavistic mysticism bubbling up in them and started flirting with priests?

Likewise, those who, carried away by the fever of war, have variously modified the ideas they professed before, like to call themselves rebels, heretics, iconoclasts, scorners of the misconceived majorities, and give themselves the air of progressive people who, under the stimulus of great contemporary events, have taken a step forward towards new intellectual horizons. This attitude is always sympathetic to revolutionaries, but in the present case it does not answer the truth. Even if they were right in denying their old convictions, they would still be wrong in believing themselves to be innovators. They have placed themselves in opposition to the respective parties, which are but small minorities: but to pay homage to the beliefs, respects and atavistic sentiments that unfortunately still guide the vast majority of the people. They rebelled against socialist and anarchist 'formulas', but to return to ideas and states of mind that they believed they had surpassed. In essence, they recognise that they were wrong – and those who recognise and confess their mistakes are highly respected for their ability to correct themselves and for their sincerity, but would hardly claim to be heretics and rebels.

An opinion is right or wrong in itself, regardless of whether it is new or old, and whether it is held by a large or small number of individuals. Let us therefore discuss in themselves the arguments that separate us from the interventionists.

As for the vulgar insults and filthy language in which some of the polemicists of one camp and the other are engaged, allow us to disregard them. It only proves the bad taste and bad manners of those who use it, and would not even deserve to be noticed were it not for the trail of resentment it leaves behind.

Our interventionist friends (I'm speaking of the friends, i.e. those who see in the intervention in favour of France and England a necessity of defence against German despotism and a means of overthrowing militarism and creating an environment of freedom favourable to struggles for social revolution, and not warmongers who aim at substituting one imperialism for another and who are as odious to us as the despots of Berlin and Vienna), our interventionist friends therefore seem not to understand the real reasons for our equal hostility to the two fighting parties. And they believe that we, blind and deaf to all the reasons why the world is moving along a path that does not correspond exactly to any ideal programme, sacrifice reality to 'formulas', and, not being able to do anarchy directly and immediately, prefer to remain inert. This is a strange judgment indeed when it is made by those who know us and know how we have always fought every fatalistic and numbing philosophy, whether from the socialist or anarchist camp.

They claim that we are as hostile to the governments of France and England as we are to those of Germany and Austria, because we believe that all governments are equal; and they endeavour to prove to us that while it is true that all governments are bad, it is also true that they are not all bad to an equal degree.

This is an old question which, despite the inaccuracies of current language, should by now be clear to those who are aware of anarchist ideas and tactics.

We know perfectly well that there is a difference; and there is no need to make much effort to persuade ourselves that it is better to be put in prison than to be hanged, and that to be in prison one year is better than ten. The reason for the difference, more than in the form of government, lies in the general economic and moral conditions of society, in the state of public opinion, in the resistance that the governed know how to oppose the intrusiveness and arbitrariness of authority; but certainly the forms, which are the consequence of the struggles of past generations, also have their importance insofar as they are a more or less powerful obstacle in contemporary struggles. And it is the task of the historian to objectively study the facts and their causes; it is his task to tell us, for example, that at a given time in France people were freer than in Germany, that in a given country under the republic people were less coerced than under the monarchy.

But our task, that of those of us who fight for integral liberty and who know that all governments must by their law of life oppose liberty, is to try to overthrow the government and not to improve it – convinced, moreover, that even from the point of view of reform, this is the best means of forcing the government to make concessions, and it is the only one that allows us to profit from concessions without paralysing the struggle and without compromising the future.

In practice, for us the worst government is always the one we are under, the one we fight most directly against.

When the Cossacks of Italy assassinate demonstrators, we call for revolt against them and against the government they serve; and we don't think that in Russia under similar circumstances they would have killed a greater number of people.

On this single condition, to always look forward, to always aspire to the best, it is possible to be revolutionary and progressive; otherwise one would always have to be content with everything, because one always finds a place where one is worse off than at home, or a time when one was worse off than now. It would be the state of mind of that old woman who, having broken her leg, thanked God that she had not broken both of them. And it is also the state of mind of all sincere conservatives, who renounce the best for fear of the worst, and do not want to walk towards the future for fear that the past will return.

It is therefore not true that we ignore the graduations and relativity of human affairs. We are always ready to contribute to everything that in our opinion constitutes progress, to everything that comes close to our ideal of justice, freedom and human solidarity. But we do not wish, for the sake of mendacious words, to close our eyes to the evidence and place ourselves at the side of those who are the born enemies of freedom and justice. We don't want, to come to the concrete case, on the faith of official speeches, to support the governments of France and England, which are not only quite liberal, but under the pretext of overthrowing the tyrants of Berlin and Vienna, would like to put us at the service of the Russian despot.

I understand the generous impatience, the need for activity, the ardent hope that veiled the intellect of some of our comrades and I admire those who volunteered to risk their lives, because it is always admirable when one sacrifices himself for a cause he believes to be good. But the respect and admiration I feel for them does not prevent me from regretting the groundlessness of the hopes of some and the futility and harm of the sacrifice of others.

What can the victory of one side or the other produce in the present war? What could be so important that revolutionaries would join the most reactionary elements in their respective countries, free thinkers would fraternise with priests, socialists and trade unionists would put class antagonisms on hold, anti-militarists would demand that a government call the citizens to arms and force them to go to war, anarchists would collaborate with the State?

They say that this war will solve the question of nationalities.

We are cosmopolitans. For us the question of so-called national independence only matters as a question of freedom. We would like every human group to be able to live in the conditions it prefers and to be free to unite and break away from other groups as it pleases; therefore we consider the question of nationality to be outdated on the ideal terrain, just as it is being outdated on the factual terrain due to the internationalisation of economic interests, culture and personal and class relations.

But we understand that in countries where the government and the main oppressors are of foreign nationality, the question of freedom and economic emancipation presents itself under the guise of nationalist struggle, and we therefore sympathise with national insurrections as with any insurrection against the oppressors. In that case, as in all others, we are with the people against

the government. Even when it seems to us that it is not worth fighting a struggle that would result in a simple change of masters, we bow before the will of those concerned. Thus, if Trento and Trieste really felt the need to exchange the stick of the Habsburgs against the shackles of the House of Savoy, we would be happy if they succeeded, if only to hear no more about it and to see so many fine energies devoted to more profitable struggles.

Therefore, although we would be sad that the various national problems are resolved by governmental resolutions and not by the people, we recognise that it would be a good thing to resolve, as it were, issues that obstruct the path to progress and distract so many people from the real struggles for human emancipation.

But the fact is that in this war a question of nationality may have been the spark that ignited the incendiary material that had been prepared for a long time and for other purposes; it may have been a pretext and a means of enthusing the naive and diverting public attention from the reasons and aims of the war; but certainly the national independence of peoples is the last thought of those who direct the war and decide on peace.

One rightly cries out against infamous Austria, which forces subject peoples to fight in defence of their oppressors. But why is it silent when France forces the Algerians and other peoples she holds under her yoke to be killed for her? Or when England leads the Indians to slaughter?

Who then would think of freeing the independent nations? Perhaps England, which is already taking advantage of the opportunity to seize Cyprus, Egypt and all that it can? Perhaps Serbia, which wants to annex everything that has any connection with Serbian nationality, but holds on to Macedonia even at the risk of being attacked from behind? Perhaps Russia, which wherever it sets foot, in Galicia and Bukovina, suppresses even that little bit of autonomy that Austria granted, proscribes the country's language, massacres the Jews and persecutes the schismatic Uniates [members of Eastern churches that are in union with the Roman Catholic church]? Perhaps France, which in the same days that it celebrated the victory of the Marne against the German invaders, massacred the Moroccan 'rebels' and set fire to their villages?

I would understand the enthusiasm of socialists and anarchists for a struggle that, while not our struggle, had some character of generosity and sincerity. I would have understood the enthusiasm if France and England (I'm not even talking about Russia), called to the conscience of the law by German arrogance, had declared the peoples subject to them independent and then had invoked their help in the struggle against German hegemony and for the national independence of all peoples. But go and talk about such a project to government men, to Sir Eduardo Grey, to Lord Kitchener, to Poincaré, and you will be lucky if they do not put you in an asylum.

They say the Anglo-Franco-Russians are fighting for civilisation.

But while they rightly stigmatise the horrors committed in Belgium and France by the German army, they keep silent or excuse, and sometimes exalt, the equal or worse horrors committed by the Russians not only in the invaded countries but also in Russian Poland. And with their propaganda of blind hatred, not only against the leaders of German and Austro-Hungarian policy, which would be justified, but against an entire people, an entire race, they are creating in the Anglo-French treaties such a state of mind that one trembles at the thought of what would happen if they ever succeeded in setting foot in Germany.

They say this is a war for freedom and that Russia itself will become liberal… after the war. In the meantime, not to speak of Russia, where the persecution of the advanced parties and the oppression of the subjected nationalities are more severe than ever, we see that France and England are rapidly becoming Russified by the suppression of all freedom and the right to criticism, by the development of the militarist spirit, by the increase of clerical power.

Thus the public becomes accustomed to obedience and silence, and the way remains open for all reactionary comebacks.

Despite the evidence of the facts, many well-meaning people, and among them some of our comrades, continue to believe that this is a war of freedom, a war which will lead to the disappearance, or at least to a great decrease in militarism, and to an arrangement of Europe in accordance with the aspirations of the various peoples, so that international peace will be ensured forever, or for a very long time, and the progressive elements of the respective countries will be able to devote themselves to the conquest of liberty and justice for all, without fear of the interruptions and retrogressions caused by wars. And they make plans as to what the next congress will have to decide, and they imagine that their wishes and votes will influence the deliberations of the heads of state and their generals and diplomats.

It is a generous but foolish (pardon the word) illusion.

The forthcoming Peace Congress will be, as all such congresses have been, a market place in which the powerful will dispose of the peoples as if they were herds of cattle.

In international affairs, as in the internal political affairs of the various states, the only limit to the arrogance of the rulers is the resistance of the people. And the people have so far allowed themselves to be led meekly to the slaughter, and so too has that fraction of the people, who, boasting a class-consciousness and professing an ideal of justice, have a duty to set an example and guide the masses.

The war had to be prevented at any cost.

Instead, the German social democrats, who had the greatest duty because they were the strongest and because their government took the initiative for the attack, cowardly betrayed the International, they almost unanimously put themselves at the service of the Kaiser.

The French and Belgian socialists knew nothing better than to imitate the Germans and to solidarise with the governments and the bourgeoisie of their countries.

And so it came to pass that an aim diametrically opposed to that which socialism and the International had set itself was achieved. Instead of uniting the proletarians of all countries in the struggle against their oppressors, there has been a return to hatreds of race and nationality and the struggle for emancipation has been abandoned.

Now it would be necessary for the armed proletarians of the various fighting armies to fraternise among themselves and turn the weapons they have in their hands against the oppressors.

But can this be hoped for, when the socialists and syndicalists of the belligerent countries have hastened, almost all of them, to forget socialism, trade unionism, class struggle, international fraternity, in order to show themselves to be good subjects, good soldiers, good patriots?

I am perhaps too pessimistic. It may well be that good comes from the excess of evil. It could be that the weariness, the disgust of war and the great miseries, which war produces, lead to an insurrection that would completely change the state of things.

Already, there are some symptoms of resipiscence and the revolutionaries should be on the alert to take advantage of the opportunities that might arise.

But in that case don't let the warmongers come and tell us that war is good. Something good would then have been derived from it, but only because there are those who have been, or are becoming, opponents of war.

And this applies to Italy too. Without the European war that changed the course of events, the expedition to Libya with its disastrous consequences was about to have a good effect as it was one of the factors that had put the [Italian] monarchy on the brink of ruin. But this was because the subversives of Italy, although they had failed to prevent it, had remained irreducibly hostile to it. For if they had followed the advice of those few (there were a few even then) who said: "since we cannot make revolution, let us make war", they would have accepted responsibility for the monarchy's faults and would have had no authority to speak to the people when the war was over.

Errico Malatesta, London, 26th March 1915

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