Malatesta–Henry debates
August-September 1892

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Anyways, I don't understand why, I, who desire, as much as any anarchist, the *autonomy of the individual and the development of his free initiative,* and who want the fullest freedom for all, should deprive myself from the freedom of telling my thought on all matters and to all people.

Others hold their own opinions. If they conflict with mine, I debate them, but I would never think for one second that they seek to impose those to me and that they have the pretension to set themselves up as a Grand Tribunal. Why assume in me such pretensions, which would not only be anti-anarchist but also stupid and ridiculous?

But who would judge the worth and usefulness of an action? Goddamn! each for themselves.

Anarchy doesn't mean that differences and struggles between opinions must cease, that we must abandon the notion of distinguishing good from evil or that we must renounce to the right to criticize, which is the basis of any conscious revolt. Anarchy means : no more governmental imposition; no more monopoly on initiative; no more penal sanction and that nobody possesses — in order to make their ideas prevail — more than the force derivating from the value of the idea itself.

It is through one's brain, helped by study and debate of ideas with others, that anyone must chose their path; and it is in free association with those who think alike that everyone must find the means to realize their thoughts.

Once again, why should I not, like anyone else, put my ideas in debate without being called authoritarian, pontiff or would be pontiff?

E. MALATESTA

In 1892, a series of events made headlines when a group of anarchists organized around Ravachol undertook a series of attacks targeting those responsible for the judicial persecution of the victims of the Clichy affair—a case of police violence against anarchists in France. The situation in France began to spiral into increasing violence, and Ravachol, arrested and then tried, was executed in early summer 1892. In August 1892, while he was being expelled to the United Kingdom, Malatesta published an article titled '*A Little Theory*' in *l'Endehors*, where he called for the establishment of criteria for the struggle, among other things. This position sparked intense debates within the anarchist movement, and Émile Henry responded a few days later in the same publication, accusing him of wanting to control anarchist struggles and of having an authoritarian mindset. The figure of Ravachol looms over their debates, serving as a central thread in their discussion, even though Malatesta defends himself against having attacked him. Malatesta replied to him; Henry would never respond—two months after this last article in *l'Endehors*, he was involved in the Carmaux-Bons Enfants bombing before going underground. It is important to emphasize that despite their theoretical oppositions during this episode, the two activists knew each other and may have interacted in London during Henry's exile after his attack. Malatesta was also seemingly connected to the illegalist circles formed around Henry, Luigi Parmeggiani, or Alessandro Marocco. The theoretical oppositions should not be overestimated in the relationships between the two activists in this context — and Malatesta could even be implicated in some propaganda of the deed attempts later on. It was deemed useful for the readers of TAL to approach these texts in a connected manner; alongside the Malatesta-Henry debates, an article from the press of the time

was included, which, although biased, provides interesting insights into the affair and an angry Malatesta reaction.

A Little Theory

l'Endehors, 26 August 1892

Revolt rumbles everywhere. Here it is the expression of an idea, and there the result of a need; most often it is the consequence of the intertwining of needs and ideas which mutually generate and reinforce each other. It fastens itself to the causes of evil or strikes close by, it is conscious or instinctive, it is humane or brutal, generous or narrowly selfish, but it always grows and extends itself.

It is history which advances: it is useless to take time to complain about the routes that it chooses, since these routes have been marked out by all previous evolution.

But history is made by men; and since we do not want to remain indifferent and passive spectators to the historic tragedy, since we want to contribute all our forces to determine the events which seem to us most favorable to our cause, we must have a criterion to guide us in the evaluation of the facts which are produced, and especially in choosing the place that we will occupy in the combat.

The end justifies the means: we have spoken much ill of that maxim. In reality, it is the universal guide of conduct.

One could say better: each end contains its means. It is necessary to seek morality in the end; the means is fatally determined.

The end that one proposes being given, by will or by necessity, the great problem of life is to find the means which, according to the circumstances, lead most certainly and most economically to the coveted end. The manner in which one resolves that problem depends, as much as it can depend on the human will, on whether an individual or a party reaches its

we should hate everything that is opposed to men being free and equal.

Thus, without straying into mysticism, we pose the problem in concrete terms, and we say: It is true that men are merely the products of institutions; but these institutions are abstract things which only exists as long as there are men of flesh and bone to embody them. There is thus only one way to strike at institutions; it is to strike the men; and we happily greet all the energetic acts of revolt against bourgeois society, for we do not lose sight of the fact that the Revolution will only be the resultant force of all these individual Rebellions.

Comrades, the matter would involve lengthy arguments, but I hope that these few lines will suffice to make the companions think, who are capable of letting themselves be influenced by a name like that of Malatesta.

To you and to Anarchy!

E. HENRY

Malatesta's Answer To Émile Henry

l'Endehors, 4 September 1892

Comrades of l'Endehors,

That companions hold differing opinions on the value and scope of certain actions is perfectly fine, they can be right or wrong, but they are right to express their ideas and to fight those they deem mistaken. But where they are wrong, in my opinion, is to repeat the old cliché of 'pontiffs and would be pontiffs'.

I said that we needed a criterion to guide us and that this criterion should be the good of men and the benefit of the cause. Is there any single anarchist who acts without knowing why, or who desires the suffering for men and the harm to the cause?

But who can determine when that limit has been crossed? Who can certify that one act is useful to the Revolution, while another harms it?

Must the Ravachols of the future, before risking their lives in the struggle, submit their projects for the acceptance of the Malatestas raised up as a Grand Tribunal, who will judge the appropriateness or inappropriateness of their actions?

On the contrary, we say this: When a man, in the present society, becomes a rebel conscious of his acts, — and Ravachol was such – it is because he has done in his own brain a process of deduction encompassing his entire life and analyzing the causes of his sufferings, and he alone can judge whether he is right or wrong to hate, and be wild, 'or even ferocious'.

We reckon, ourselves, that the actions of brutal revolt like those that have occurred and sparked the polemic between 'anarchists' and 'terrorists' – Merlino's style –, we reckon that those actions are precisely on target, for they awaken the masses, shake them with a violent whiplash, and show them the vulnerable side of the Bourgeoisie, all still trembling as the Rebel marched to the scaffold…

We fully understand that all the anarchists do not have the temperament of a Ravachol. Each of us has a physiognomy and specific aptitudes which differentiate us from our companions in struggle. Thus, we are not surprised to see some revolutionaries focus all their efforts on a given point, for example, like the companions Merlino and Malatesto, on the grouping of the proletarians in well organized associations.

But we do not recognize their right to say: 'Our propaganda alone is good; apart from ours, there is no salvation'. That is an old remnant of authoritarianism that we do not wish to bear, and we will be quick to separate our cause from that of those pontiffs or would-be pontiffs.

Moreover, companion Malatesta tells us that hate does not engender love. We would reply to him that it is love which engenders hate: The more we love liberty and equality, the more

own end, whether it will be useful to its cause or serve, without wishing to, the enemy cause. To have found the good means, that is the whole secret of the great men and great parties, who have left their marks on history.

The end of the Jesuits is, for the mystics, the glory of God; for the others, the power of the Society. Thus they must try to daze the masses, to terrorize them, to make them submit.

The aim of the Jacobins and of all the authoritarian parties, who believe themselves in possession of the absolute truth, is to impose their ideas on the mass of the lay people. They must for that attempt to seize power, to subjugate the masses and to fix humanity on the procustean bed of their conceptions.

As for us, it is another thing: our aim is much different, thus our means must be very different.

We do not fight to put ourselves in the place of the exploiters and oppressors of today, and do not struggle for the triumph of an abstraction. We are not like that Italian patriot who said: "What matter if all Italians faint with hunger, provided that Italy be great and glorious!" Nor, no more, like that comrade who admitted that it would be equal to him to massacre three-quarters of the people, provided that Humanity be free and happy.

We want good fortune for individuals, for everyone, without exception. We desire that each human being be able to develop themselves and live as happily as possible. And we believe that liberty and good fortune cannot be given to men by men or by a party, but that everyone must by themselves discover the conditions of their own freedom and conquer them. We believe that only the most complete application of the principle of solidarity can destroy struggle, oppression and exploitation and that solidarity can only be the result of free agreement, the spontaneous and intentional harmonization of interests.

For us, everything that seeks to destroy economic and political oppression, all that which serves to raise the moral and

intellectual level of human beings, to give them the consciousness of their rights and of their forces and to persuade them to do their business by themselves, all that provokes hatred against oppression and love between people, brings us closer to our aim and as a consequence is good — subject only to a quantitative calculation in order to obtain from the given forces the maximum of useful effect. And to the contrary is evil, because it is in contradiction with that aim, all that which tends to sacrifice, against his will, a man to the triumph of a principle.

We desire the triumph of liberty and love.

But do we renounce for that the use of violent means? Not in the least. Our means are those that circumstances allow us and impose on us.

Certainly we don't want to harm a hair on anyone's head; we would like to dry all the tears and not to make any more be shed. But we must struggle in the world such as it is, or else remain sterile dreamers.

The day will come, we firmly believe, in which it will be possible to produce good for people without making evil for anyone. Today it is not possible. Even the purest and sweetest of the martyrs, those who are dragged to the scaffold for the triumph of good, without resistance, by blessing their persecutors like the Christ of legend, still make good from evil. Apart from the evil that they do to themselves, which must count for something, they causes all those who love them to shed bitter tears.

It is a question then, always, in all the acts of life, of choosing the least evil, of trying to make the least evil for the largest amount of human good.

Humanity drags painfully under the weight of political and economic oppression; it is brutalized, degenerated, killed (and not always slowly) by poverty, slavery, ignorance and their results.

For the defense of that state of things exist powerful military and police organizations, which respond by prison, the

Comrades of l'Endehors,

I read in your last issue an article by companion Malatesta, entitled 'A Little Theory'.

I would be grateful if you would kindly publish these few lines of personal reflections on the subject.

Comp. Malatesta, after having elaborated upon the imminence and the necessity of a violent revolution, and considering the role of the anarchists to contribute to its imminent arrival, said that 'every act of propaganda or of achievement, by word or by deed, individual or collective, is good *when it serves to approach and facilitate* the Revolution…'

Then, speaking of acts of revolt inspired by hatred resulting from the long suffering of the proletariat, Malatesta says he understands and forgives those acts, but that: 'But it is one thing to understand and to pardon these acts, and another to claim them as our own. These are not acts that we can *accept*, encourage, and imitate. We must be resolute and energetic, but we must try never to pass beyond the *limit marked by necessity*. We must do as the surgeon who cuts when *he must*, but avoids inflicting unnecessary suffering'

I would point out to companion Malatesta that this part of his article is, to say the least, strange coming from an anarchist.

Indeed, what do the anarchists want? The autonomy of the individual and the development of his free initiative, which alone can assure him happiness; and if he becomes communist, it is through simple deduction, for he understands that it is only in the happiness of all, free and autonomous like him, that he will find his own.

And yet, what does Malatesta want? To restrict that initiative, to undermine that autonomy, by declaring that the acts of a man — as sincere and convinced as he may be, — are not to be accepted, nor claimed, when they surpass *the limit marked by necessity*.

Monsieur the editor,

Your London correspondent sought to address an article I published in *l'Endehors* of 21 August, but interpreted it in a way that distorts my meaning. I am unable to enter into lengthy explanations because you would deny me the space so I refer those interested in the matter to the article itself.

However, you will permit me to say that there is nothing new in seeing an anarchist seek love for humanity; this love has always been the motive of our companions, and it alone explaines the spirit of devotion and sacrifice that animates them.

In that article, I spoke neither of Ravachol nor of any specific individual or event, because a man and an event are always too complex to allow a summary or absolute judgement. I only talked about the general criterion which, in my opinion, must guide us in our judgments and actions.

There is nothing in my article that would be in contradiction with the decisions of the Capolago Congress, to which I adhered then, and still adhere now.

I didn't say that the term anarchist is a simple conventional label, except in a conditional sense and in a sense that applies to all words in all languages. But this doesn't prevent *anarchy* from truly mean *society without government and exploitation* nor does it change the fact that anarchists are those who fight to destroy governments, expropriate the holders of the wealth of all and establish a society based on freedom and solidarity.

I trust that your commitment to properly informing your readers will lead you to publish these lines.

Agree my salutations,

E. MALATESTA

Comrades Of l'Endehors

l'Endehors, 29 August 1892

scaffold, and the massacre of every serious attempt at change. There are no peaceful, legal means, by which to depart from this situation, and that is natural because the law is made expressly by the privileged to defend privileges. Against the physical force which blocks our road, there is only violent revolution.

Obviously, the revolution will produce many misfortunes, many sufferings; but if it produced one hundred times more of them, it would still be a blessing relative to what one endures today.

We know that in a single great battle more people are killed than in the bloodiest of revolutions; we know the millions of children who die at an early age each year from lack of care; we know the millions of proletarians who die prematurely from the evil of poverty; we know the meager life, without joy and without hope, that the immense majority of people lead; we know that even the richest and most powerful are much less happy than they could be in a society of equals; and we know that that state of things has lasted since time immemorial. It will endure indefinitely without the revolution, while a single revolution, which resolutely attacked the causes of evil, could put humanity forever on the road to happiness.

Thus, let the revolution come; each day that it is delayed is an enormous mass of sufferings inflicted on us. Let us labor so that it comes quickly and is such as is necessary to put an end to all oppression and all exploitation.

It is from the love of humanity that we are revolutionaries: it is not our fault if history has forced on us this distressing necessity.

Thus for us, the anarchists, or at least (since in the end the words are only conventions) for those among the anarchists who see things like us, every act of propaganda or of achievement, by word or by deed, individual or collective, is good when it serves to approach and facilitate the revolution, when it serves to insure to the revolution the conscious support of

the masses and to give it that character of universal liberation, without which one could well have a revolution, but not the revolution that we desire. And it is especially with regard to revolution that we must take account of the principle of the most economical means, since here the expense is summed up in human lives.

We know too well the dreadful material and moral conditions in which the proletariat finds itself to not understand the acts of hate, of vengeance, even of ferocity which can be produced. We understand that there are some oppressed who, having always been treated by the bourgeois with the most shameful hardness, having always seen that everything was permitted to the strongest, one bright day, when they find themselves for a moment the strongest, say: "Let us also do as the bourgeois do." We understand that it can happen that in the fever of battle some natures — originally generous, but not prepared by a long moral exercise, very difficult in present conditions — lose sight of the end to be attained, take violence for the end in itself and allow themselves to be led to savage transports.

But it is one thing to understand and to pardon these acts, and another to claim them as our own. These are not acts that we can accept, encourage, and imitate. We must be resolute and energetic, but we must try never to pass beyond the limit marked by necessity. We must do as the surgeon who cuts when he must, but avoids inflicting unnecessary suffering: in a word, we must be inspired by the sentiment of love for people, for all people.

It appears to us that the sentiment of love is the moral source, the soul of our program: it appears to us that only by conceiving the revolution as the grand human jubilee, as the liberation and fraternization of all, no matter what class or what party they have belonged to, can our ideal be realized.

Brutal revolt will certainly be produced, and it could even serve to give the great helping hand which must shake the current system; but if it does not find the counterweight in revolutionaries who act for an ideal, it will devour itself.

Hate does not produce love; we will not renew the world by hate. And the revolution of hate will either fail completely, or else result in a new oppression, which could be called anarchist, as one calls the present governments liberal, but which will not be less an oppression and will not fail to produce the effects which produce all oppression.

The Anarchists

L'Éclair, 23 August 1892

(From our special correspondent)

London, 23 August — The well known Italian anarchist, Malatesta, has just issued a public statement in which, while affirming his revolutionary beliefs, repudiates the individual acts such as those committed by Ravachol.

Malatesta preaches love of humanity, even towards the men 'hostile to anarchy'. He says that the term 'anarchist' is only a conventional label.

This declaration provoked a profound impression within anarchist circles, where it is considered as contrary to the resolutions of the Capolago Congress. Many believe that it will provoke a complete schism within the party.

Meanwhile, people just distributed in London, in French, a manifesto doing the apology of Ravachol and his actions.

Correspondance

L'Éclair, 30 August 1892

We receive the following letter:
112, High street, Islington. N, London, 25 August 1892