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Propaganda By The Deed

Paul Brousse

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OF WHAT DO THE MASSES CONSIST? Of peasants, workers, most of the time toiling eleven and twelve hours per day. They make their way home worn out from fatigue and have little inclination to read socialist pamphlets or newspapers: they sleep, they go for a stroll or devote their evenings to the family.

Well, what if there is a way of grabbing these people's attention, of showing them what they cannot read, of teaching them socialism by means of actions and making them see, feel, touch? When one resorts to that line of reasoning one is on the trail that leads, beside theoretical propaganda, to propaganda by the deed.

Propaganda by the deed is a mighty means of rousing the popular consciousness. Let us take an example. Prior to the Paris Commune, who in France was conversant with the principle of communal autonomy? No one. Yet Proudhon had written magnificent books. Who read those books? A handful of literati. But once the idea was brought out into the open air, in the heart of the capital, onto the steps of the City Hall, when it took on flesh and life, it shook the peasant in his cottage, the worker at his fireside, and peasants and workers alike had to reflect on this huge question mark posted in the public square.

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Now that idea made inroads. In France, right around the world, for or against, everybody has picked his side.

Once attention has been aroused, it needs to be given sustenance. So the deed must contain at least one lesson.

Take for example the 18 March 1877 demonstration in Berne.

The Swiss bourgeoisie nurtures in the mind of the Swiss workingman a prejudice that he enjoys every possible freedom. We never weary of repeating to him: "No serious public freedom without economic equality. And what is it that underpins inequality? The State!" The people has little grasp of such abstractions; but offer it a tangible fact and it gets the point. Show it the article in the constitution allowing him to bring out the red flag, then bring out that flag: the State and the police will attack him; defend him: crowds will show up for the ensuing meeting; a few words of plain talk, and the people get the point. 18 March 1877 was a practical demonstration laid on for Swiss working folk in the public square, that they do not, as they thought they did, enjoy freedom.

Our friends from Benevento went one better. They did not bother to demonstrate just one self-evident fact to the people. They took over two small communes, and there, by burning the archives, they showed the people how much respect they should have for property. They handed tax monies back to the people and the weapons that had been confiscated from them; in so doing they showed the people the sort of contempt they should have for government. Is it not possible that the people said to itself: "We should be a lot happier if what these good young fellows want were some day to come to pass!" From that to helping them is but a step and a step easily taken.

We could go further.

Just once take over a commune, introduce collective ownership there, organize the trades bodies and production, district groups and consumption; let the instruments of production be placed in the hands of the workers, let the workers and their families move into salubrious accommodation and the idlers

be tossed into the streets; if attacked, fight back, defend oneself, and if one loses, what matter? The idea will have been launched, not on paper, not in a newspaper, not on a chart; no longer will it be sculpted in marble, carved in stone nor cast in bronze: having sprung to life, it will march, in flesh and blood, at the head of the people.

And the people will salute it as it goes on its way.