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The Anarchist Revolution

Errico Malatesta

The revolution is the creation of new living institutions, new groupings, new social relationships; it is the destruction of privileges and monopolies; it is the new spirit of justice, of brotherhood, of freedom which must renew the whole of social life, raise the moral level and the material conditions of the masses by calling on them to provide, through their direct and conscientious action, for their own futures. Revolution is the organization of all public services by those who work in them in their own interest as well as the public's; Revolution is the destruction of all coercive ties; it is the autonomy of groups, of communes, of regions; Revolution is the free federation brought about by desire for brotherhood, by individual and collective interests, by the needs of production and defense; Revolution is the constitution of innumerable free groupings based on ideas, wishes, and tastes of all kinds that exist among the people; Revolution is the forming and disbanding of thousands of representative, district, communal, regional, national bodies which, without having any legislative power, serve to make known and to coordinate the desires and interests of people near and far and which act through information, advice and example. Revolution is freedom proved in the crucible of facts — and lasts so long as free-

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Retrieved on March 4th, 2009 from dwardmac.pitzer.edu

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dom lasts, that is until others, taking advantage of the weariness that overtakes the masses, of the inevitable disappointments that follow exaggerated hopes, of the probable errors and human faults, succeed in constituting a power, which supported by an army of conscripts or mercenaries, lays down the law, arrests the movement at the point it has reached, and then begins the reaction.

The great majority of anarchists, if I am not mistaken, hold the view that human perfectibility and anarchy would not be achieved even in a few thousand years, if first one did not create by the revolution, made by a conscious majority, the necessary environment for freedom and well being. For this reason we want to make the revolution as soon as possible, and to do so we need to take advantage of all positive forces and every favorable situation which arises.

The task of the conscious minority is to profit from every situation to change the environment in a way that will make possible the education of the whole people.

And since the environment today, which obliges most people to live in misery, is maintained by violence, we advocate and prepare for violence. That is why we are revolutionaries, and not because we are desperate men thirsting for revenge and filled with hate.

We are revolutionaries because we believe that only the revolution, the violent revolution, can solve the ills we face. We believe further-more that the revolution is an act of will — the will of individuals and of the masses; that it needs for its success certain objective conditions, but that does not happen of necessity, inevitably, through the single action of economic and political forces.

Our task is to be revolutionary not only in the philosophical meaning of the word but also in the popular and insurrectionalist sense; and I can say this to clearly distinguish between my views and those of others who call themselves revolutionaries, but who interpret the world so as not to have to bring in the face of violence, the insurrection which must open the way to revolutionary achievements.

If we are unable to overthrow capitalism, we shall have to demand for ourselves and for all who want it, the right of free access to the necessary means of production to maintain an independent existence.

Advise when we have suggestions to offer; teach if we know more than others; set the example for a life based on free agreement between men; defend even with force if necessary and possible, our autonomy against any government provocation... but command, govern or rule — *never!*

In this way we shall not achieve anarchy, which cannot be imposed against the will of the people, but at least we shall be preparing the way for it. We do not have to wait indefinitely for the state to wither away or for our rulers to become part of the people and to give up their power over us if we can talk them out of their position.

Anarchy cannot be achieved until after the revolution which will sweep away the first material obstacles. It is clear then that our efforts must in the first instance be directed to making the revolution and in such a way that it is in the direction of anarchy. We have to provoke the revolution with all the means at our disposal and act in it as anarchists, by opposing the constitution of any authoritarian regime and putting into operation as much as we can of our program. Anarchists will have to take advantage of the increased freedom that we would have won. We will have to be morally and technically prepared to realize within the limits of our numbers, those forms of social life and cooperation which they consider best and most suitable for paving the way for the future.

We do not want to wait for the masses to become anarchist before making the revolution, since we are convinced that they will never become anarchist if the institutions which keep them enslaved are not first destroyed. And since we need the support of the masses to build up a force of sufficient strength and to achieve our specific task of radical change of society by the direct action of the masses, we must get closer to them, accept them as they are, and from within their ranks seek to push them forward as much as possible. That is of course, if we really intend to work for the practical achievement of our ideals, and are not content with preaching in the desert for the simple satisfaction of our intellectual pride.

We don't take revolution as synonymous with progress, with an historic view of life. In that sense all kinds of people are revolutionary. When one introduced the centuries into the argument, everyone will agree with everything he says. But when we speak of revolution, when the masses speak of revolution, as when one refers to it in history, one simply means the insurrection triumphant. Insurrections will be necessary as long as there are power groups which use their material force to exact obedience from the masses. And it is only too clear that there will be many more insurrections before the people win that minimum of indispensable conditions for free and peaceful development, when humanity will be able to advance

towards its noblest objectives without cruel struggles and useless suffering.

By revolution we do not mean just the insurrection, but we must avoid replacing one state of coercion by another. We must clearly distinguish between the revolutionary act which destroys as much as it can of the old regime and puts in its place new institutions, and government which comes afterwards to halt the revolution and suppress as many of the revolutionary conquests as it can.

History teaches us that all advances that are the result of revolutions were secured in the period of popular enthusiasm, when either a recognized government did not exist or was too weak to make a stand against the revolution. But once the government was formed, so reaction started which served the interest of the old and the new privileged classes and took back from the people all that it could.

Our task then is to make, and to help others make, the revolution by taking advantage of every opportunity and all available forces: advancing the revolution as much as possible in its constructive as well as destructive role, and always remaining opposed to the formation of any government, either ignoring it or combating it to the limits of our capacities.

We will no more recognize as republican constitution than we would a parliamentary monarchy. We cannot stop it if the people want it; we might even occasionally be with them in fighting attempts to bring about a restoration of a monarchy; but we will want and will demand complete freedom for those who think as we do and who wish to live outside the tutelage and oppression of the government; to propagate their ideas by word and deed. Revolutionaries yes, but above all anarchists.

1. Destruction of all concentrations of political power is the first duty of oppressed people.
2. Any organization of an allegedly provisional revolutionary political power to achieve this destruction cannot be other

I would be unable to accept the view that all past revolutions though they were not anarchist revolutions were useless, nor that future ones which will still not be anarchist revolutions will be useless. I believe that the complete triumph of anarchy will come by evolution, gradually, rather than by violent revolution: when an earlier or several earlier revolutions will have destroyed the major military and economic obstacles which are opposed to the spiritual and material development of the people, and which are opposed to increasing production to the level of needs and desires.

In any case, if we take into account our sparse numbers and the prevalent attitude among most people, and if we do not wish to confuse our wishes with reality, we must expect that the next revolution will not be anarchist one, and therefore what is more pressing, is to think of what we can and must do in a revolution in which we will be a relatively small and badly armed minority. But we must beware of ourselves becoming less anarchist merely because the people are not ready for anarchy. If they want a government, it is unlikely that we will be able to prevent a new government being formed, but this is no reason for our not trying to persuade the people that government is useless and harmful or of preventing the government from also imposing on us and others like us who don't want it. We will have to exert ourselves to ensure that social life and especially economic standards improve without the intervention of government, and thus we must be as ready as possible to deal with the practical problems of production and distribution, remembering that those most suited to organize work are those who now do it. If we are unable to prevent the constitution of a new government, if we are unable to destroy it immediately, we should in either case refuse to support it in any shape or form. We should reject military conscription and refuse to pay taxes. Disobedience on principle, resistance to the bitter end against every imposition by the authorities, and an absolute refusal to accept any position of command.

people, all people, should lose their sheep like instincts and habits with which their minds have been inculcated by an age-long slavery, and that they should learn to think and act freely. It is to this task of liberation that anarchists must devote their attention.

Once the government has been overthrown, or at least neutralized, it will be the task of the people, and especially of those among them who have initiative and organizing ability, to provide for the satisfaction of immediate needs and to prepare for the future by destroying privileges and harmful institutions and in the meantime seeing to it that those useful institutions which today serve the ruling class either exclusively or primarily, shall operate in favor of all equally.

Anarchists have the job of being the militant custodians of liberty against all aspirants to power and against the possible tyranny of the majority.

We are agreed in thinking that apart from the problem of assuring victory against the material forces of the adversary there is also the problem of giving life to the revolution after victory.

We are in agreement that a revolution which were to result in chaos would not be a vital revolution.

But one must not exaggerate, it should not be thought that we must, and can find a perfect solution for every possible problem. One should not want to foresee and determine too much, because instead of preparing for anarchy we might find ourselves indulging in unattainable dreams or ever becoming authoritarians, and consciously or otherwise, proposing to act like a government which in the name of freedom and the popular will subject people to its domination. The fact is that one cannot educate the people if they are not in a position, or obliged by necessity, to act for themselves, and that the revolutionary organization the people, useful and necessary as it is, cannot be stretched indefinitely: at a certain point if it does not erupt in revolutionary action, either the government strangles it or the organization itself degenerates and breaks up — and one has to start all over again from the beginning.

than one trick more, and would be as dangerous to the people as are all present governments.

3. In refusing every compromise for the achievement of the revolution, workers of the world must establish solidarity in revolutionary action outside the framework of bourgeois politicians.

These anarchist principles which were formulated under the inspiration of Bakunin at the Congress of St. Imier, 1872, continue to point a good direction for us today. Those who have tried to act in contradiction to them have disappeared, because however defined, government, dictatorship and parliament can only lead the people back to slavery. All experience so far bears this out. Needless to say, for the delegates of St. Imier as for us and all anarchists, the abolition of political power is not possible without the simultaneous destruction of economic privilege.

There is a need for a revolution to eliminate the material forces which exist to defend privilege and to prevent every real social progress. This conviction has led many to believe that the only important thing is the insurrection, and to overlook what has to be done to prevent an insurrection from remaining a sterile act of violence against which an act of reactionary violence would be the eventual reply. For those who believe this, all the practical questions of organization, of how to make provisions for the distribution of food, are idle questions: for them these are matters which will solve themselves, or will be solved by those who come after us. Yet the conclusion we come to is this: Social reorganization is something we must all think about right now, and as the old is destroyed we shall have a more human and just society as well as one more receptive to future advances. The alternative is that “the leaders” will think about these problems, and we shall have a new government, which will do exactly as all previous governments have done, in making the people pay for the scant and poor services they render,

by taking away their freedom and allowing them to be oppressed by every kind of parasite and exploiter.

In order to abolish the police and all the harmful social institutions we must know what to put in their place, not in a more or less distant future but immediately, the very day we start demolishing. One only destroys, effectively and permanently, that which one replaces by something else; and to put off to a later date the solution of problems which present themselves with the urgency of necessity, would be to give time to the institutions one is intending to abolish to recover from the shock and reassert themselves, perhaps under other names, but certainly with the same structure.

Our solutions may be accepted by a sufficiently large section of the population and we shall have achieved anarchy, or taken a step towards anarchy; or they may not be understood or accepted and then our efforts will serve as propaganda and place before the public at large the program for a not distant future. But in any case we must have our solutions provisional, subject to correction and revision in the light of practice, but we must have our solutions if we do not wish to submit passively to those solutions imposed by others, and limit ourselves to the unprofitable role of useless and impotent grumblers.

I believe that we anarchists, convinced of the validity of our program, must make special efforts to acquire a predominating influence in order to be able to swing the movement towards the realization of our ideals; but we must acquire this influence by being more active and more effective than the others. Only in this way will it be worth acquiring. Today we must examine thoroughly, develop and propagate our ideas and coordinate our efforts for common action. We must act inside the popular movements to prevent them from limiting themselves to, and being corrupted by, the exclusive demand for the small improvements possible under the capitalist system, and seek to make it serve for the preparation of the complete and radical change of our society. We must work among the mass of unorganized, and possibly unorganizable, people to awaken in

them the spirit of revolt and the desire and hope for a free and happy existence. We must initiate and support every possible kind of movement which tends to weaken the power of the government and of the capitalists and to raise the moral level and material conditions of the people. We must get ready and prepare, morally and materially, for the revolutionary act which has to open the way to the future.

And tomorrow, in the revolution, we must play an active part in the necessary physical struggle, seeking to make it as radical as possible, in order to destroy all the repressive forces of the government and to induce the people to take possession of the land, homes, transport, factories, mines, and of all existing goods, and organize themselves so that there is a just distribution immediately of food products. At the same time we must arrange for the exchange of goods between communities and regions and continue to intensify production and all those services which are of use to the people.

We must, in every way possible, and in accord with local conditions and possibilities, encourage action by associations, cooperatives, groups of volunteers — in order to prevent the emergence of new authoritarian groups, new governments, combating them with violence if necessary, but above all by rendering them useless.

And if there were not sufficient support among the people to prevent the reconstitution of government, its authoritarian institutions and its organs of repression, we should refuse to cooperate or recognize it, and rebel against its demands, claiming full autonomy for ourselves and for all dissident minorities. We should remain in a state of open rebellion if possible, and prepare the way to convert present defeat into a future success.

I do not think that what matters is the triumph of our plans, our projects and our utopias, which in any case will need the confirmation of practice and experiment, and may as a result have to be modified, developed or adapted to the true moral and material conditions of time and place. What matters most of all is that the