

Errico Malatesta

Democracy and Anarchy

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The rampant dictatorial governments in Italy, Spain and Russia, which arouse such envy and longing among the more reactionary and timid parties across the world, are supplying dispossessed 'democracy' with a sort of new virginity. Thus we see the creatures of the old regimes, well-accustomed to the wicked art of politics, responsible for repression and massacres of working people, re-emerging — where they do not lack the courage — and presenting themselves as men of progress, seeking to capture the near future in the name of liberation. And, given the situation, they could even succeed.

There is something to be said for the criticisms made of democracy by dictatorial regimes, and the way they expose the vices and lies of democracy. And I remember that anarchist, Hermann Sandomirski, a Bolshevik fellowtraveller with whom we had bittersweet contact at the time of the Geneva conference, and who is now trying to couple Lenin with Bakunin, no less; I say I remember Sandomirski who in order to defend the Russian regime dragged out his Kropotkin to demonstrate that democracy is not the best imaginable form of social structure. His method of reasoning, as a Russian, put me in mind and I think I told him so — of the reasoning made by some of his compatriots when, in response to the indignation of the civilised world at the Tsar's stripping, flogging and hanging of women, they argued that if men and women were to have equal rights they should also accept equal responsibilities. Those supporters of prison and the scaffold remembered the rights of women only when they could serve as a pretext for new outrages ! Thus dictatorships oppose democratic governments only when they discover that there is a form of government which leaves even greater room for despotism and tyranny for those who manage to seize power.

For me there is no doubt that the worst of democracies is always preferable, if only from the educational point of view, than the best of dictatorships. Of course democracy, so-called government of the people, is a lie; but the lie always slightly binds the liar and limits the extent of his arbitrary power. Of course the 'sovereign people' is a clown of a sovereign, a slave with a papier-maché crown and sceptre.

But to believe oneself free, even when one is not, is always better than to know oneself to be a slave, and to accept slavery as something just and inevitable.

Democracy is a lie, it is oppression and is in reality, oligarchy; that is, government by the few to the advantage of a privileged class. But we can still fight it in the name of freedom and equality, unlike those who have replaced it or want to replace it with something worse.

We are not democrats for, among other reasons, democracy sooner or later leads to war and dictatorship. Just as we are not supporters of dictatorships, among other things, because dictatorship arouses a desire for democracy, provokes a return to democracy, and thus tends to perpetuate a vicious circle in which human society oscillates between open and brutal tyranny and a the and lying freedom.

So, we declare war on dictatorship and war on democracy. But what do we put in their place?

Not all democrats are like those described above — hypocrites who are more or less aware that in the name of the people they wish to dominate the people and exploit and oppress them.

There are many, especially among the young republicans, who have a serious belief in democracy and see it as the means of obtaining full and complete freedom of development for all. These are the young people we should like to disabuse, persuade not to mistake an abstraction, ‘the people’, for the living reality, which is men and women with all their different needs, passions and often contradictory aspirations.

It is not the intention here to repeat our critique of the parliament system and all the means thought up to have deputies who really do represent the will of the people; a critique which, after fifty years anarchist propaganda is at last accepted and even repeated by those writers who most affect to despise our ideas (e.g. Political Science Senator Gaetano Mosca).

We will limit ourselves to inviting our young friends to use greater precision of language, in the conviction that once the phrases are dissected they themselves will see how vacuous they are.

‘Government of the people’ no, because this presupposes what could never happen — complete unanimity of will of all the individuals that make up the people.

It would be closer to the truth to say, ‘government of the majority of the people.’ This implies a minority that must either rebel or submit to the will of others.

But it is never the case that the representatives of the majority of people are all of the same mind on all questions; it is therefore necessary to have recourse again to the majority system and thus we will get closer still to the truth with ‘government of the majority of the elected by the majority of the electors.’

Which is already beginning to bear a strong resemblance to minority government.

And if one then takes into account the way in which elections are held, how the political parties and parliamentary groupings are formed and how laws are drawn up and voted and applied, it is easy to understand what has already been proved by universal historical experience: even in the most democratic of democracies it is always a small minority that rules and imposes its will and interests by force.

Therefore, those who really want ‘government of the people’ in the sense that each can assert his or her own will, ideas and needs, must ensure that no-one, majority or minority, can rule over others; in other words, they must abolish government, meaning any coercive organisation, and replace it with the free organisation of those with common interests and aims.

This would be very simple if every group and individual could live in isolation and on their own, in their own way, supporting themselves independently of the rest, supplying their own material and moral needs.

But this is not possible, and if it were, it would not be desirable because it would mean the decline of humanity into barbarism and savagery.

If they are determined to defend their own autonomy, their own liberty, every individual or group must therefore understand the ties of solidarity that bind them to the rest of humanity, and possess a fairly developed sense of sympathy and love for their fellows, so as to know how voluntarily to make those sacrifices essential to life in a society that brings the greatest possible benefits on every given occasion.

But above all it must be made impossible for some to impose themselves on, and sponge off, the vast majority by material force.

Let us abolish the gendarme, the man armed in the service of the despot, and in one way or another we shall reach free agreement, because without such agreement, free or forced, it is not possible to live.

But even free agreement will always benefit most those who are intellectually and technically prepared. We therefore recommend to our friends and those who truly wish the good of all, to study the most urgent problems, those that will require a practical solution the very day that the people shake off the yoke that oppresses them.

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