

AT THE CAFÉ

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ERRI  
LATESTA

CONVERSATIONS ON ANARCHISM

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BY ERICO MALATESTA

FREEDOM PRESS

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Malatesta began writing the series of dialogues that make up *At the Café: Conversations on Anarchism* in March 1897, while he was in hiding in Ancona and busy with the production of the periodical *L'Agitazione*. Luigi Fabbri, in his account of this period, written to introduce the 1922 edition of the full set of dialogues (*Bologna, Edizioni di Volontà*), edited by Malatesta (*Reprint, Torino, Sargraf, 1967*), gives us a beguiling picture of Malatesta, clean-shaven as a disguise, coming and going about the city, pipe in mouth, smiling impudently at his friends, who, for the sake of his safety, wished him elsewhere.

The idea of the dialogues was suggested to him by the fact that he often frequented a café that was not usually the haunt of subversives such as himself. Indeed, one of the regulars, who was a member of the police, used to engage Malatesta in conversation without, of course, as Fabbri notes, any idea that a real prize lay within his grasp. Anarchism would almost certainly been one of the topics of conversation since the anarchists of the city constantly bombarded their fellow townspeople with a barrage of propaganda that occasioned frequent trials.

The form that the dialogues were to take was drawn then from an actual venue and from Malatesta's own experience. It resulted in a literary device excellently well suited to his particular genius, which is his ability to render complex ideas into straightforward language and to make them directly accessible. The dialogue form also allowed Malatesta to debate the ideas of his opponents,

while subjecting his own anarchist views to a critical scrutiny aimed at communicating to his readers their political import and their practical applicability. Indeed one of the strengths of the dialogues is the absence of straw men. The inquisition of anarchism is searching and genuine, often highlighting what its opponents would regard as points of weakness and vulnerability. It makes Malatesta's spirited defence all the more impressive.

Towards the end of 1897 Malatesta was identified and discovered by the Ancona police. He was arrested and then released. Immediately he began a round of lectures, abandoning both his journal and the unfinished dialogues. In 1898 he was placed under house arrest and in March 1899 he fled abroad, once more becoming a refugee. The dialogues remained interrupted at number ten, and in this form they were published, both in journals and as a pamphlet.

The chief propagandists of the first ten dialogues are Malatesta's alter ego, Giorgio, an anarchist, Prospero, a wealthy member of the bourgeoisie, Cesare, a shopkeeper and Ambrogio, a magistrate. Malatesta is thus able to reflect a range of political positions and views drawn from a wide spectrum of society. If Prospero speaks for wealth and privilege, Cesare speaks for the smaller property owners and the middle classes. He shows an awareness of social problems and appears amenable to persuasion by Giorgio, but he also exhibits a concern that any solution must not be allowed to disrupt the existing social order. Ambrogio is the

voice of the law and the liberal state and of accepted ideas on rights and justice. He is also, as Giorgio's chief opponent, the one who expresses common sense views about human nature and human behaviour. His views contain a liberal expression of rights theory, tempered by what he would claim as recognition of the limits imposed on liberty by the inescapable dictates of reality. The result is a broad canvas on which Malatesta is able, in responding to the various viewpoints and in answering the numerous criticisms that Giorgio's views elicit, to paint a skilfully drawn and detailed picture of an anarchist view of the world.

In a relatively short space Malatesta introduces us to all of the basic doctrines of communist anarchism and considers one by one many of the major objections to his position. After setting the scene, it is private property and property rights that become the focus of attention. In Dialogues Two, Three and Four it is argued that the causes of poverty are located in the nature of the property system and its associated class structure and a forceful attack is mounted on the right to private property and the capitalist system, with incidental discussions of Malthus and free trade. At the same time the notions of a complete change in the property regime and the creation of a society without government are introduced. The origin of property and property rights are considered in Dialogue Five, and Giorgio maintains that property rights must be abolished if exploitation is to be avoided. In Dialogue Six the case for common ownership is made and the idea of communism introduced. This discussion of communism continues in Dialogue Seven with opposition to it as a tyrannical and oppressive system being strongly maintained by Ambrogio in the name of abstract liberty. Giorgio counters with a depiction of anarchist society as a voluntary, complex federation of associations, and in the process contrasts the anarchist form of free communism with that of the authoritarian school. Dialogue Eight moves the focus to the question of government and the state and how a society can function in their absence. In the process there is an extended critique of parliamentarianism and representation, and a defence of anarchism as a

social order maintained by free agreement and voluntary delegation. The argument continues into the next Dialogue (Dialogue Nine) where the objections to a society without government are again rehearsed and Giorgio further develops a form of Kropotkin's argument about the universality of mutual aid, an idea first introduced in Dialogue Six. Discourse Ten strikes out in a new direction, focussing on sex, love and the family. In covering many issues related to feminism any inherent basis for gender inequality is persuasively dismissed.

It was 15 years later, in 1913, that Malatesta returned to the dialogues. At this time he had once more established himself in Ancona and had begun the publication of his new journal *Volontà*. In this new publication he republished the original ten dialogues, in an edited and corrected form, and added four more. Initially, in Dialogues Eleven and Twelve, it is once again Cesare, Prospero and Ambrogio who are Giorgio's interlocutors. The issue of criminality is raised in Dialogue Eleven. How do we deal with criminals in the absence of government, law, courts or prisons? Giorgio answers that the issue must be dealt with communally. From here the discussion moves on to a contrast between mental and manual labour and the old chestnut of who is to do the jobs that nobody wants to do. Won't everyone want to be a poet? The usual answer is provided, that is a voluntary rotation of tasks and the development of multiple skills by community members. Dialogue Twelve investigates the need for revolution, and a case is made for the sad necessity of a violent revolution, since the existing order is maintained by violence and the privileged classes will not surrender their hold on power unless it is shaken loose.

In Dialogue Thirteen we meet a new character, Vincenzo, a young Republican, and a discussion ensues regarding the merits and limitations of a republican approach to change. Its chief defect is identified as a reliance on government and on systems of democratic representation. Republicanism is not, it is argued, as radical as its supporters believe since it remains prey to the evils of the

existing political system. The last dialogue of this new series (Dialogue Fourteen) returns to the theme of revolution. What Giorgio emphasises is that anarchism in its desire to remove the state and government is a new factor in history and proposes changes quite different and more profound than previous revolutions which aimed simply at changing the political regime.

Once more the dialogues were to be interrupted by political events. In June 1914, as the storm clouds of World War I gathered, serious popular risings broke out in the Marches and Romagna, in what became known as Red Week. Malatesta was involved in these popular struggles and, as a result, was forced to take refuge in London. Six years passed and Malatesta returned to Italy, establishing himself in Milan, where he edited the Newspaper *Umanità Nova*. He was too busy, Fabbri notes, to give his attention to the old dialogues, and he did not intend to add to them. However, Fabbri informs us that someone or other who spent a fortnight with him as a guest persuaded him to continue with the project. The mysterious guest must, one would think, have been Fabbri himself. The result was a further three dialogues, a continuation rather than a conclusion, since there is no obvious point of closure.

In these last three essays some old topics are revisited and some new themes, of contemporary significance, receive attention. Dialogue Fifteen introduces Gino, a worker, and canvasses the fears of ordinary people about a lack of civil order in the proposed stateless society and the perceived need for police. Police, Malatesta argues through Giorgio, breed criminals, just as he had argued earlier in *Anarchy* that the *louvreterie* (wolf catchers) breed wolves, since without wolves or criminals the survival of the respective bodies of officials would be in jeopardy (London, 1974: 33–34). Social defence, he asserts, is a community responsibility. The fact that this issue was already discussed in Dialogue Eleven is an indication of its importance to Malatesta. In Dialogue Sixteen we meet Pippo, a crippled war veteran, who opens up the questions

of nationalism and patriotism. The points Malatesta makes here echo Lenin's call for class solidarity in the face of the divisive and destructive nationalism of the First World War. Giorgio makes it clear that in his view patriotism is simply a device by which the bourgeoisie recruits working class support for the existing property regime, and the territorial ambitions of those who benefit from it. Finally, in Dialogue Seventeen, Luigi, a socialist, enters and a discussion ensues that aims at distinguishing anarchism from both parliamentary and authoritarian socialism, but with the key focus on the inevitable failure of the parliamentary path and of any form of what Eduard Bernstein had called evolutionary socialism. The need for a revolutionary change is underlined.

Work on the dialogues in their present form was completed by October 1920. On 16 October Malatesta was arrested and placed in the prison of San Vittore. There was an extensive police search of his apartments for arms and explosives, but the manuscript of the dialogues remained undiscovered or ignored. They were published as a set, with Fabbri's introduction, in 1922.

These dialogues of Malatesta represent not just a major contribution to anarchist political theory, but a significant historical document. Written over a period of 23 years they are a commentary on turbulent times and vital historical events, covering as they do an epoch distinguished in particular by left-wing agitation and organisation across Europe. During the time spanned by these ruminations on anarchism the world witnessed the Second International, the rise of Bolshevism, the First World War, the birth of Fascism and the Russian Revolutions, both of 1904 and 1917. Without any direct allusion to any of these events the dialogues engage in a lively debate with many of the issues that they raise. In a real sense Malatesta has crafted anarchist theory into a running commentary on his times. It is a work of intelligence, style and real artistry.

Paul Nursey-Bray

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# ONE

PROSPERO [*A plump member of the bourgeoisie, full of political economy and other sciences*]: But of course... of course... we know all about it. There are people suffering from hunger, women prostituting themselves, children dying from a lack of care. You always say the same thing... in the end you become boring. Allow me to savour my gelati in peace... Certainly, there are a thousand evils in our society, hunger, ignorance, war, crime, plague, terrible mishaps ... so what? Why is it your concern?

MICHELE [*A student who keeps company with socialists and anarchists*]: I beg your pardon? Why is it my concern? You have a comfortable home, a well-provisioned table, servants at your command; for you everything is fine. And as long as you and yours are all right, even if the world around you collapses, nothing matters. Really, if you only had a little heart...

PROSPERO: Enough, enough... don't sermonise... Stop raging, young man. You think I am insensible, indifferent to the misfortunes of others. On the contrary, my heart bleeds, (waiter, bring me a cognac and a cigar), my heart bleeds; but the great social problems are not resolved by sentiment.

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The laws of nature are immutable and neither great speeches, nor mawkish sentimentality can do anything about it. The wise person accepts fate, and gets the best out of life that he can, without running after pointless dreams.

MICHELE: Ah? So we are dealing with natural laws?... And what if the poor got it into their heads to correct these... laws of nature. I have heard speeches hardly supportive of these superior laws.

PROSPERO: Of course, of course. We well know the people with whom you associate. On my behalf, tell those scoundrel socialists and anarchists, who you have chosen to be your preferred company, that for them, and for those who would try to put in practice their wicked theories, we have good soldiers and excellent *carabinieri*.

MICHELE: Oh! If you are going to bring in the soldiers and the *carabinieri*, I won't talk anymore. It is like proposing a fist fight to demonstrate my opinions are in error. However, don't rely on brute force if you have no other arguments. Tomorrow you may find yourself in the weakest position; what then?



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PROSPERO: What then? Well, if that misfortune should come about, there would be great disorder, an explosion of evil passions, massacres, looting... and then it would all return to how it was before. Maybe a few poor people would have become enriched, some rich people would have fallen into poverty, but overall nothing would have changed, because the world cannot change. Bring me, just bring me one of these anarchist agitators of yours and you will see how I will tan his hide. They are good at filling the heads of people like you with tall stories because your heads are empty; but you'll see whether they will be able to maintain their absurdities with me.

MICHELE: All right. I will bring a friend of mine who holds socialist and anarchist principles and I will promote your discussion with him with pleasure. In the meantime discuss matters with me, for while I still don't have well developed opinions, I clearly see that society as it is organized today, is a thing contrary to good sense and decency. Come now, you are so fat and flourishing that a bit of excitement will not do you any harm. It will help your digestion.

PROSPERO: Come on, then; let's have a discussion. But, you ought to know that it would be better if you studied instead of spitting out opinions about matters that are the province of others more learned and wiser. I believe I can give you 20 years?

MICHELE: This does not prove that you have studied more, and if I have to judge you from what you have been saying, I doubt that, even if you have studied a lot, you have gained much from it.

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PROSPERO: Young man, young man, really! Let's have some respect.

MICHELE: All right, I respect you. But don't throw my age in my face, as if in fact you were raising an objection to me with the police. Arguments are not old or young, they are good or bad; that's all.

PROSPERO: Well, well, let's get on with what you have to say?

MICHELE: I must say that I cannot understand why the peasants that hoe, sow and harvest have neither sufficient bread, nor wine or meat; why bricklayers that build houses don't have a roof for shelter, why shoemakers have worn shoes. In other words, why is it that those who work, that produce everything, lack basic necessities; while those who don't do anything revel in abundance. I cannot understand why there are people that lack bread, when there is much uncultivated land and a lot of people who would be extremely happy to be able to cultivate it; why are there so many bricklayers out of work while there are lots of people who need houses; why many shoemakers, dressmakers etc... are without work, while the majority of the population lacks shoes, clothes and all the necessities of civil life. Could you please tell me which is the natural law that explains and justifies these absurdities?

PROSPERO: Nothing could be more clear and simple.

To produce, human labour is not enough, you need land, materials, tools, premises, machinery and you also need the

means to survive while waiting for the product to be made and delivered to the market: in a word, you need capital. Your peasants, your workers, have only their physical labour; as a consequence they cannot work if such is not the wish of those who own land and capital. And since we are few in number and have enough even if, for a while, we leave our land uncultivated and our capital inoperative, while the workers are many and are always constrained by immediate needs, it follows that they must work whenever and however we wish and on whatever terms that suit us. And when we no longer need their labour and calculate that there is no gain from making them work, they are forced to remain idle even when they have the greatest need for the very things they could produce.

Are you content now? Could I explain it more clearly that this?

MICHELE: Certainly, this is what one calls speaking frankly, there is no question about that.

But, by what right does land belong only to a few? How is it that capital is found in a few hands, specifically in the hands of those who do not work?

PROSPERO: Yes, yes, I know what you are saying to me, and I even know the more or less lame arguments with which others would oppose you; the right of the owners derives from the improvement they bring to the land, from savings by means of which labour is transformed into capital, etc. But let me be even more frank. Things are as they are as the result of historical facts, the product of hundreds of years of human history. The whole of human existence has been, is,

and will always be, a continuous struggle. There are those who have fared well and those who have fared badly. What can I do about it? So much the worse for some, so much the better for others. Woe to the conquered! This is the grand law of nature against which no revolt is possible.

What would you like? Should I deprive myself of all I have so I can rot in poverty, while someone else stuffs themselves on my money?

MICHELE: I do not exactly want that. But I'm thinking: what if the workers profiting from their numbers and basing themselves on your theory that life is a struggle and that rights derive from facts, get the idea into their heads of creating a new "historic fact", by taking away your land and capital and inaugurating new rights?

PROSPERO: Ah! Certainly, that would complicate matters.

But... we shall continue on another occasion. Now I have to go to the theatre.

Good evening to you all.

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# TWO

AMBROGIO [*Magistrate*]: Listen, Signor Prospero, now that it is just between ourselves, all good conservatives. The other evening when you were talking to that empty head, Michele, I did not want to intervene; but, do you think that was the way to defend our institutions?

It very nearly seemed that you were the anarchist!

PROSPERO: Well, I never! Why is that?

AMBROGIO: Because, what you were saying in essence is that all of the present social organisation is founded on force, thereby providing arguments for those who would like to destroy it with force. But what about the supreme principles which govern civil societies, rights, morality, religion, don't they count for anything?

PROSPERO: Of course, you always have a mouth full of rights. It is a bad habit that comes from your profession.

If tomorrow the governments should decree, let's suppose, collectivism, you would condemn the supporters of private property with the same impassiveness with which today you condemn the anarchists... and always in the name of the supreme principles of eternal and immutable rights!

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You see, it is only a question of names. You say rights, I say force; but, then, what really counts are the blessed carabinieri, and whoever has them on their side is right.

AMBROGIO: Come, now, Signor Prospero! It seems impossible that your love of sophism must always stifle your conservative instincts.

You don't understand how many bad effects follow from the sight of a person such as yourself, one of the elders of the town, providing arguments for the worst enemies of order.

Believe me ~ we should stop this bad habit of squabbling among ourselves, at least in public; let's all unite to defend our institutions which because of the wickedness of the times are receiving some brutal blows ...and to look after our endangered interests.

PROSPERO: Let's unite, by all means; but if some strong measures are not taken, if you don't stop using liberal doctrines we will not resolve anything.

AMBROGIO: Oh! Yes, certainly. We need severe laws to be strictly applied.

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But it is not enough. Force alone cannot keep a people subjected for long, particularly in this day and age. It is necessary to oppose propaganda with propaganda, there is a need to persuade people that we are right.

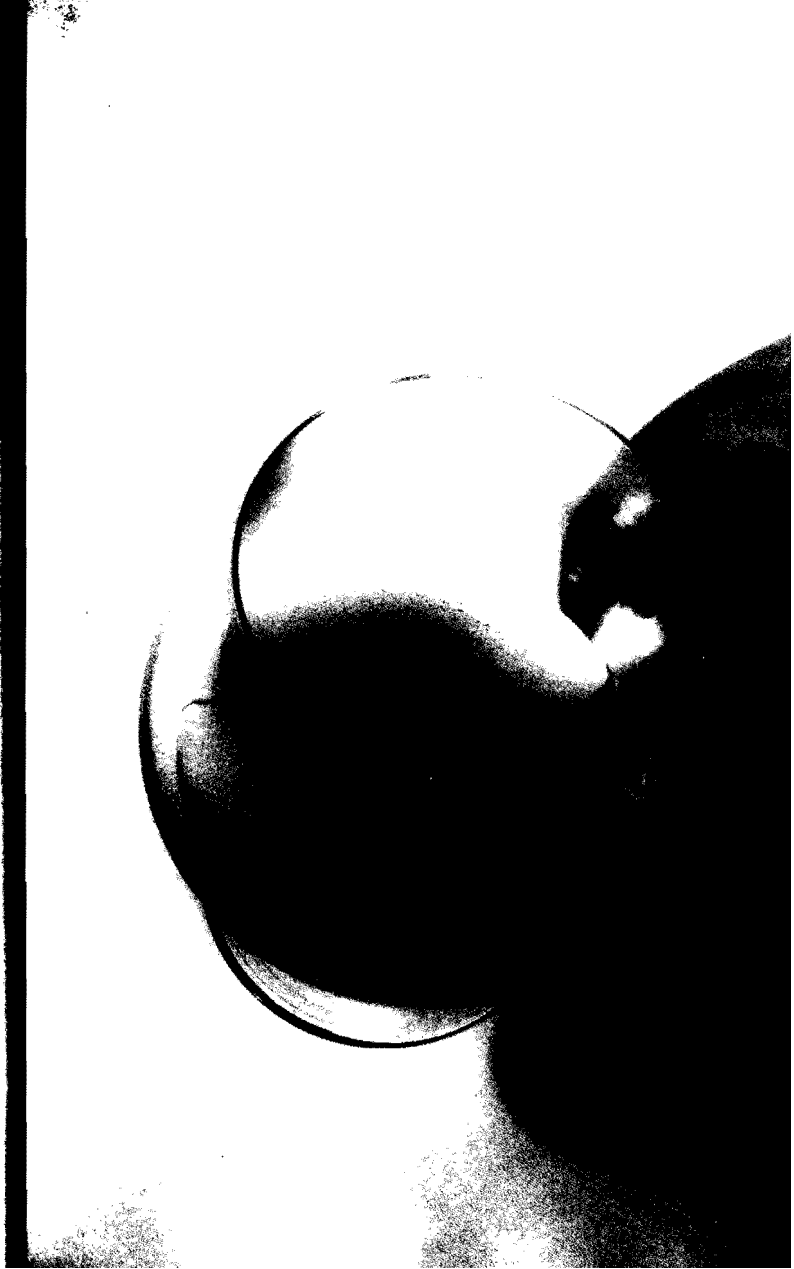
PROSPERO: You really are kidding yourself! My poor friend, in our common interest, I beg you, be careful of propaganda. It is subversive stuff even if it is carried out by conservatives; and your propaganda would always turn to the advantage of socialists, anarchists or whatever else they call themselves.

Go and persuade someone that is hungry that it is just that they don't eat, the more so when it is they who produce the food! So long as they don't think about it and continue to bless God and the boss for what little they receive, it's all right. But, from the moment they start to reflect on their position it's over: they will become an enemy with whom you will never be reconciled. Not on your life! We must avoid propaganda at all cost, stifle the printing press, with or without or perhaps, even against the law.

AMBROGIO: That's right, that's right.

PROSPERO: Prevent all meetings, dismantle all associations, send to jail all those who think...

CESARE [*shopkeeper*]: Easy, easy, don't let passion sweep you away. Remember that other governments, in more favourable times, adopted the measures that you are suggesting... and it precipitated their own downfall.



AMBROGIO: Hush, hush! Here comes Michele with an anarchist whom I sentenced last year to six months jail for a subversive manifesto. Actually, between ourselves, the manifesto was done in such a way that the law couldn't touch it, but, what can you do? The criminal intention was there... and, after all, society must be defended!

MICHELE: Good evening, Gentlemen. May I introduce to you an anarchist friend of mine who has accepted the challenge thrown down the other evening by Signor. Prospero.

PROSPERO: But, what challenge, what challenge?! We were only having a discussion among friends to pass the time.

However, you were explaining to us what anarchism is, which is something we have never been able to understand.

GIORGIO [*Anarchist*]: I am not a teacher of anarchism and I have not come to give a course on the subject; but I can, when needed, defend my ideas. Besides, there is a gentleman here (referring to the magistrate, Ambrogio, in an ironic tone) who ought to know more about it than I. He has condemned many people for anarchism; and since he is for a certainty a man of conscience, he would not have done so without first of all making a profound study of the arguments involved.

CESARE: Come, come, let's not get personal... and since we must speak of anarchism, let's start on the subject immediately.

**You see**, I also recognise that things are going badly and **that remedies** need to be found. But we don't need to **become** utopian, and above all we must avoid violence. **Certainly**, the government should take the workers' cause more to heart: it should provide work for the unemployed; **protect the** national industries, encourage commerce. But...

GIORGIO: How many things you would like this poor government to do! But the government does not want to become concerned for the interests of the workers, and it's understandable.

CESARE: How can it be understandable? Up to now, really, the government has shown a lack of capacity and perhaps little desire to remedy the ills of the country; but, tomorrow, enlightened and conscientious ministers might do what hasn't been done up to now.

GIORGIO: No, my dear sir, it is not a question of one ministry or another. It is a question of government in general; of all governments, those of today, like those of yesterday, and those of tomorrow. The government emanates from proprietors, it needs the support of proprietors to sustain itself, its members are themselves proprietors; how can it therefore serve the interest of workers?

On the other hand the government, even if it wanted to, could not resolve the social question because this is the product of general factors, that cannot be removed by a government and which in fact themselves determine the nature and the direction of government. In order to resolve the social

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question we must radically change the whole system which the government has the appointed mission of defending.

You talk about giving work to the unemployed. But, what can the government do if there is no work? Must it make people do useless work, and then who would pay them? Should it gear production to provide for the unsatisfied needs of the people? But, then, the proprietors would find themselves unable to sell the products which they expropriate from workers, as a matter of fact they would have to cease to be proprietors, since, the government in order to provide work for the people would take away from them the land and the capital which they have monopolised.

This would be social revolution, the liquidation of all of the past, and you well know that if this is not carried out by the workers, peasants and the underprivileged, the government will certainly never do it.

Protect industry and commerce you say: but the government is able, at the most, to favour one industrial class to the detriment of another, to favour the traders of one region at the expense of those of another, and so, in total, nothing would be gained, only a bit of favouritism, a bit of injustice and more unproductive expenditure. As far as a government which protects all, it is an absurd idea because governments do not produce anything and therefore can only transfer the wealth produced by others.

CESARE: But what then? If the government does not want, and is not able, to do anything, what remedy is there? Even if you make the revolution you will need to create another

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government; and since you say that all governments are the same, after the revolution everything will be the same as before.

GIORGIO: You would be right if our revolution produced simply a change of government. But we want the complete transformation of the property regime, of the system of production and exchange; and as far as the government is concerned, a useless, harmful and parasitic organ, we don't want one at all. We believe that while there is a government, in other words a body superimposed on society, and provided with the means to impose forcibly its own will, there will not be real emancipation, there will be no peace among people.

You know that I am an anarchist and anarchy means society without government.

CESARE: But what do you mean? A society without government! How would you be able to live? Who would make the law? Who would execute it?

GIORGIO: I see that you don't have any idea of what we want. In order to avoid time wasting digressions you must allow me to explain, briefly, but methodically, our programme; and then we can discuss matters to our mutual benefit.

But now it is late; we will continue next time.

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# THREE

CESARE: So tonight you will explain how we can live without government?

GIORGIO: I will do my best. But, first of all we must give some consideration to how things are in society as it is and whether it is really necessary to change its composition.

Looking at the society in which we live, the first phenomena that strike us are the poverty that afflicts the masses, the uncertainty of tomorrow which, more or less, weighs on everybody, the relentless struggle of everybody fighting everybody in order to conquer hunger...

AMBROGIO: But, my dear sir, you could go on talking for some time about these social evils; unfortunately, there are plenty of examples available. But, this does not serve any purpose, and it doesn't demonstrate that we would be better off by making everything topsy-turvy. It's not only poverty that afflicts humanity; there are also plagues, cholera, earthquakes... and it would be odd if you wished to direct the revolution against these scourges.

Evil is in the nature of things...

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GIORGIO: But in fact I want to demonstrate to you that poverty depends on the present mode of social organisation, and that in a more egalitarian and rationally organised society it must disappear.

When we do not know the causes of an evil and we don't have solutions, well, there is not much we can do about it; but as soon as the solution is found, it becomes everybody's concern and duty to put it into practice.

AMBROGIO: Here is your mistake: poverty results from causes superior to human will and human law. Poverty results from the meanness of nature which does not supply sufficient products to meet human desires.

Have a look at animals, where you cannot blame *capitalist infamy* nor *tyrannical government*; they must fight for food and often die of hunger.

When the cupboard's bare, the cupboard's bare. The truth is that there are too many people in the world. If people were able to control themselves and did not have children unless they could maintain them... Have you read Malthus?

GIORGIO: Yes, a little; but it's all the same if I hadn't read his work. What I know, without needing to read any part of it, is that you must have some nerve, I must say to maintain such things!

Poverty results from meanness of nature, you say, even though you are aware that there is uncultivated land...

AMBROGIO: If there is uncultivated land it means that it cannot be cultivated, that it cannot produce enough to pay for the costs involved.

GIORGIO: You believe that?

Try an experiment and give it to the peasants and you will see what gardens they'll create. But, you are not serious? Why, much of this land was cultivated in times when the art of agriculture was in its infancy and chemistry and agricultural technology hardly existed! Don't you know that today even stones can be transformed into fertile land? Don't you know that agronomists, even the less visionary ones, have calculated that a territory like Italy, if rationally cultivated could easily maintain in plenty a population of one hundred million?

The real reason why land is left uncultivated, and why cultivated land produces only a small proportion of its full potential, given the adoption of less primitive methods of cultivation, is because the proprietors do not have any interest in increasing its production.

They are not bothered about the welfare of the people; they produce in order to sell, and they know that when there is a

lot of goods the prices are reduced and profit decreases and may end up being, in total, less than when goods are scarce and can be sold at prices which suit them.

Not that this only happens in relation to agricultural products. In every branch of human activity it is the same. For instance: in every city the poor are forced to live in infected hovels, crowded together without any regard for hygiene or morals, in conditions in which it is impossible to keep clean and achieve a human existence. Why does this happen? Perhaps because there are no houses? But why aren't sound, comfortable and beautiful houses built for everybody?

The stones, bricks, lime, steel, timber, all the materials needed for construction exist in abundance; as do the unemployed bricklayers, carpenters, and architects who ask for nothing more than to work; why, then, is there so much idle capacity when it could be utilised to everybody's advantage.

The reason is simple, and it is that, if there were a lot of houses, the rents would go down. The proprietors of the houses already built, who are the same people who have the means to build others, don't really have any desire to see their rents decrease just to win the approval of the poor.

CESARE: There is some truth in what you are saying; but you are deceiving yourself about the explanation for the painful things that are afflicting our country.

The cause of the land being badly cultivated or left idle, of business running aground, and of poverty in general is the lack of *élan* in the bourgeoisie. Capitalists are either fearful



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or ignorant, and don't want or don't know how to develop industries; the landowners don't know how to break with their grandfathers' methods and don't want to be bothered; traders don't know how to find new outlets and the government with its fiscal policy and its stupid customs policy instead of encouraging private initiatives, obstructs and suffocates them in their infancy. Have a look at France, England and Germany.

GIORGIO: That our bourgeoisie is indolent and ignorant I don't doubt, but its inferiority only supplies the explanation for why it is beaten by the bourgeoisie of other countries in the struggle to conquer the world market: it does not in any way supply the reason for people's poverty. And the clear evidence is that poverty, the lack of work and all the rest of the social evils exist in countries where the bourgeoisie is more active and more intelligent, as much as they do in Italy; actually, those evils are generally more intense in countries where industry is more developed, unless the workers have been able, through organisation, resistance or rebellion, to acquire better living conditions.

Capitalism is the same everywhere. In order to survive and prosper it needs a permanent situation of partial scarcity: it needs it to maintain its prices and to create hungry masses to work under any conditions.

You see, in fact, when production is in full swing in a country it is never to give producers the means to increase consumption, but always for sales to an external market. If the domestic consumption increases it occurs only when the workers have been able to profit from these circumstances to demand an increase in their wages and as a consequence



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have been enabled to buy more goods. But then, when for one reason or another the external market for which they produce does not buy anymore, crisis comes, work stops, wages decline and dire poverty begins to cause havoc again. And yet, in this same country where the great majority lacks everything, it would be so much more reasonable to work for their own consumption! But, then, what would the capitalists gain out of that!

AMBROGIO: So, you think it is all the fault of capitalism?

GIORGIO: Yes of course; or more generally it's due to the fact that a few individuals have hoarded the land and all the instruments of production and can impose their will on the workers, in such a fashion that instead of producing to satisfy people's needs and with these needs in view, production is geared towards making a profit for the employers.

All the justifications you think up to preserve bourgeois privileges are completely erroneous, or so many lies. A little while ago you were saying that the cause of poverty is the scarcity of products. On another occasion, confronting the problems of the unemployed, you would have said that the warehouses are full, that the goods cannot be sold, and that the proprietors cannot create employment in order to throw goods away.

In fact this typifies the absurdity of the system: we die of hunger because the warehouses are full and there is no need to cultivate land, or rather, the landowners don't need their land cultivated; shoemakers don't work and thus walk about in worn out shoes because there are too many shoes.. and so it goes...

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AMBROGIO: So it is the capitalists who should die of hunger?

GIORGIO: Oh! Certainly not. They should simply work like everybody else. It might seem harsh to you, but you don't understand: when one eats well work is no longer threatening. I can show you in fact you that it is a need and a fulfilment of human nature. But be fair, tomorrow I have to go to work and it is already very late.

Until next time.

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# FOUR

CESARE: I like arguing with you. You have a certain way of putting things that makes you appear correct... and, indeed, I am not saying that you are completely in the wrong.

There are certainly some absurdities, real or apparent, in the present social order. For example, I find it difficult to understand the customs policy. While here people are dying of hunger or associated diseases because they lack sufficient bread of good quality, the government makes it difficult to import grain from America, where they have more than they need and would like nothing better than to sell it to us. It's like being hungry but not wishing to eat!

However...

GIORGIO: Yes indeed, but the government is not hungry; and neither are the large wheat growers of Italy, in whose interests the government places the duty on wheat. If those who are hungry were free to act, you would see that they would not reject the wheat!

CESARE: I know that and I understand that with these sorts of arguments you make the common people, who only see

things in broad terms and from one point of view, disaffected. But in order to avoid mistakes we must look at all sides of the question, as I was on the point of doing when you interrupted me.

It is true that the proprietors' interests greatly influence the imposition of an import tax. But on the other hand, if there was open entry, the Americans, who can produce wheat and meat in more favourable conditions than ours, would end up supplying the whole of our market: and what would our farmers do then? The proprietors would be ruined, but the workers would fare even worse. Bread would sell for small amounts of money. But if there was no way of earning that money you would still die of hunger. And, then the Americans, whether the goods are dear or cheap, want to get paid, and if in Italy we don't produce, with what are we going to pay?

You could say to me that in Italy we could cultivate those products suited to our soil and climate and then exchange them abroad: wine for instance, oranges, flowers and the like. But what if the things that we are capable of producing on favourable terms are not wanted by others, either because they have no use for them or because they produce them themselves? Not to mention that to change the produc-

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tion regime you need capital, knowledge and above all time: what would we eat in the meantime?

GIORGIO: Perfect! You have put your finger on it. Free trade cannot solve the question of poverty any more than protectionism. Free trade is good for consumers and harms the producers, and vice versa, protectionism is good for the protected producers but does harm to consumers; and since workers are at the same time both consumers and producers, in the end it is always the same thing.

And it will always be the same until the capitalist system is abolished.

If workers worked for themselves, and not for the owner's profits, then each country would be able to produce sufficient for its own needs, and they would only have to come to an agreement with other countries to distribute productive work according to the soil quality, climate, the availability of resources, the inclinations of the inhabitants etc. in order that all men should enjoy the best of everything with the minimum possible effort.

CESARE: Yes, but these are only pipe dreams.

GIORGIO: They may be dreams today; but when the people have understood how they could improve life, the dream would soon be transformed into reality. The only stumbling blocks are the egoism of some and the ignorance of others.

CESARE: There are other obstacles, my friend. You think that once the proprietors are thrown out you would wallow in gold...

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GIORGIO: That is not what I'm saying. On the contrary, I think that to overcome this condition of scarcity in which capitalism maintains us, and to organise production largely to satisfy the needs of all, you need to do a lot of work; but it is not even the willingness to work that people lack, it is the possibility. We are complaining about the present system not so much because we have to maintain some idlers: even though this certainly does not please us – but, because it is these idlers that regulate work and prevent us from working in good conditions and producing an abundance for all.

CESARE: You exaggerate. It is true that often proprietors don't employ people in order to speculate on the scarcity of products, but more often it is because they themselves lack capital.

Land and raw materials are not enough for production. You need, as you know, tools, machinery, premises, the means to pay the workers while they work, in a word, capital; and this only accumulates slowly. How many ventures fail to get off the ground, or, having got off the ground, fail due to a shortage of capital! Can you imagine the effect then if, as you desire, a social revolution came about? With the destruction of capital, and the great disorder that would follow it, a general impoverishment would result.

GIORGIO: This is another error, or another lie from the defenders of the present order: the shortage of capital.

Capital may be lacking in this or that undertaking because it has been cornered by others; but if we take society as a whole, you'll find that there is a great quantity of inactive capital, just as there is a great quantity of uncultivated land.

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Don't you see how many machines are rusting, how many factories remain closed, how many houses there are without tenants.

There is a need for food to nourish workers while they work; but really workers must eat even if they are unemployed. They eat little and badly, but they remain alive and are ready to work as soon as an employer has need of them. So, it is not because there is a lack of the means of subsistence that workers don't work; and if they could work on their own account, they would adapt themselves, where it was really necessary, to work while living just as they do when they are unemployed, because they would know that with this temporary sacrifice they could then finally escape from the social condition of poverty and subjection.

Imagine, and this is something that has been witnessed many times, that an earthquake destroys a city ruining an entire district. In a little time the city is reconstructed in a form more beautiful than before and not a trace of the disaster remains. Because in such a case it is in the interests of proprietors and capitalists to employ people, the means are quickly found, and in the blink of an eye an entire city is reconstructed, where before they had continually asserted that they lacked the means to build a few "workers' houses".

As far as the destruction of capital that would take place at the time of the revolution, it is to be hoped that as part of a conscious movement that has as its aim the common ownership of social wealth, the people would not want to destroy what is to become their own. In any case it would not be as bad as an earthquake!

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No – there will certainly be difficulties before things work out for the best; but, I can only see two serious obstacles, which must be overcome before we can begin: people's lack of consciousness and... the *carabinieri*.

AMBROGIO: But, tell me a little more; you talk of capital, work, production, consumption etc.; but you never talk of rights, justice, morals and religion?

The issues of how to best utilise land and capital are very important; but more important still are the moral questions. I also would like everybody to live well, but if in order to reach this utopia we have to violate moral laws, if we have to repudiate the eternal principles of right, upon which every civil society should be founded, then I would infinitely prefer that the sufferings of today went on forever!

And then, just think that there must also be a supreme will that regulates the world. The world did not come into being on its own and there must be *something beyond it* – I am not saying God, Paradise, Hell, because you would be quite capable of not believing in them – there must be *something beyond* this world that explains everything and where one finds compensation for the apparent injustices down here.

Do you think you can violate this pre-established harmony of the universe? You are not able to do so. We cannot do other than yield to it.

For once stop inciting the masses, stop giving rise to fanciful hopes in the souls of the least fortunate, stop blowing on the fire that is unfortunately smouldering beneath the ashes.



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Would you, or other modern barbarians, wish to destroy in a terrible social cataclysm the civilization that is the glory of our ancestors and ourselves? If you want to do something worthwhile, if you want to relieve as much as possible the suffering of the poor, tell them to resign themselves to their fate, because true happiness lies in being contented. After all, everyone carries their own cross; every class has its own tribulations and duties, and it is not always those who live among riches that are the most happy.

GIORGIO: Come, my dear magistrate, leave aside the declarations about "grand principles" and the conventional indignation; we are not in court here, and, for the moment, you do not have to pronounce any sentence on me.

How would one guess, from hearing you talk, that you are not one of the underprivileged! And how useful is the resignation of the poor... for those who live off them.

First of all, I beg you, leave aside the transcendental and religious arguments, in which even you don't believe. Of mysteries of the Universe I know nothing, and you know no more; so it is pointless to bring them into the discussion. For the rest, be aware that the belief in a supreme maker, in God the creator and father of humanity would not be a secure weapon for you. If the priests, who have always been and remain in the service of the wealthy, deduce from it that it is the duty of the poor to resign themselves to their fate, others can deduce (and in the course of history have so deduced) the right to justice and equality. If God is our common father then we are all related. God cannot want some of his chil-

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dren to exploit and martyr the others; and the rich, the rulers would be so many Cains cursed by the Father.

But, let's drop it.

AMBROGIO: Well then, let's forget about religion if you wish since so much of it would be pointless to you. But you would acknowledge rights, morals, a superior justice!

GIORGIO: Listen: if it is true that rights, justice and morals may require and sanction oppression and unhappiness, even of only one human being, I would immediately say to you, that rights, justice and morals are only lies, infamous weapons forged to defend the privileged; and such they are when they mean what you mean by them.

Rights, justice, morals should aim at the maximum possible good for all, or else they are synonyms for arrogant behaviour and injustice. And, it is certainly true that this conception of them answers to the necessities of existence and the development of human social cooperation, that has formed and persisted in the human conscience and continually gains in strength, in spite of all the opposition from those who up to now have dominated the world. You yourself could not defend, other than with pitiful sophism, the present social institutions with your interpretation of abstract principles of morality and justice.

AMBROGIO: You really are very presumptuous. It is not enough to deny, as it seems to me you do, the right to property, but you maintain that we are incapable of defending it with our own principles...

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Giorgio: Yes, precisely: If you wish I will demonstrate it to you next time.

# FIVE

GIORGIO: Well then, my dear magistrate, if I am not mistaken, we were talking about the right to property.

AMBROGIO: Indeed. I am really curious to hear how you would defend, in the name of justice and morals, your proposals for despoliation and robbery.

A society in which no-one is secure in their possessions would no longer be a society, but a horde of wild beasts ready to devour each other.

GIORGIO: Doesn't it seem to you that this is precisely the case with today's society?

You are accusing us of despoliation and robbery; but on the contrary, isn't it the proprietors who continually despoil the workers and rob them of the fruits of their labour?

AMBROGIO: Proprietors use their goods in ways they believe for the best, and they have the right to do so, in the same way the workers freely dispose of their labour. Owners and workers contract freely for the price of work, and when the contract is respected no one can complain.

Charity can relieve acute troubles, unmerited troubles, but rights must remain untouchable.

GIORGIO: But you are speaking of a free contract! The worker who does not work cannot eat, and his liberty resembles that of a traveller, assaulted by thieves, who gives up his purse for fear of losing his life.

AMBROGIO: All right; but you cannot use this to negate the right of each person to dispose of their property as they see fit.

GIORGIO: Their property, their property! But doesn't this come about because the landowners are able to claim that the land and its produce as theirs and the capitalists are able to claim as theirs the instruments of labour and other capital created by human activity?

AMBROGIO: The law recognizes their right to it.

GIORGIO: Ah! If it is only the law, then even a street assassin could claim the right to assassinate and to rob: he would only have to formulate a few articles of law that recognised these rights. On the other hand, this is precisely what the dominant class has accomplished: it has created laws to legitimize the usurpations that it has already perpetrated, and has made them a means of new appropriations.



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