Errico Malatesta
The Tragic Bandits
1913

Retrieved on March 3rd, 2009 from www.marxists.org
From La Société Nouvelle, 19th year, No. 2, August 1913.
Translated by Mitch Abidor.

The Tragic Bandits

Errico Malatesta

1913

It would seem that it's late in the day to still talk about it, but the subject nevertheless remains current, since we're dealing with acts and discussions that have occurred over and again in the past and that, alas, will repeat themselves in the future as well. For as long as the determining causes have not disappeared.

A few individuals stole, and in order to steal, killed; they killed at random, without discernment anyone who stood between them and the money they were after. Killed men unknown to them, workers, victims like themselves and even more than themselves of a bad social organization.

At heart there was nothing in this but the ordinary: they were the bitter fruit that ripen on the tree of privilege in the normal course of events. When all of social life is stained with fraud and violence, and when he who is born poor is condemned to all kinds of sufferings and humiliations; when money is something indispensable for the satisfaction of our needs and respect for our personality, and when for so many people it is impossible to obtain through honest and dignified labor, there is no reason to be surprised if from time to time a few unfortunates burst forth who, tired of the yoke and taking inspiration from bourgeois morality,

but not able to appropriate the labor of others under the protection of the gendarmes, illegally steal under the nose of the latter. Since in order to steal they can't organize military expeditions or sell poison in the guise of food, they murder directly with revolvers or daggers.

But the "bandits" called themselves anarchists and that gave an importance and a symbolic meaning to exploits that were far from having them on their own.

The bourgeoisie takes advantage of the impression produced on the public by such acts in order to denigrate anarchism and to consolidate its own power. The police, who are often the secret instigators of these exploits, use them to magnify their own importance and to satisfy their persecutory and murderous instincts in order to recover the cost of spilled blood in solid coin and promotions. What is more, since anarchism was being spoken of a number of our comrades felt themselves obliged not to deny what called itself anarchist. Many, fascinated by the colorfulness of the adventure, admiring the courage of the protagonists, saw in this nothing but an act of rebellion against the law, forgetting to examine the why and the how.

But it seems to me that in order to determine our conduct, and to counsel that of others, it is important to examine things calmly, to judge them in accordance with our aspirations and to not grant aesthetic impressions more value than they have in reality.

To be sure these men were courageous, and courage (which is perhaps nothing else than good physical health) is without any fear of contradiction a marvelous quality. But it can be used in the service of evil as well as good. We have seen courageous men among martyrs for liberty as well as among the most odious tyrants. It can be found in revolutionaries as it can be found among *camorrists*, soldiers and policemen. Normally we correctly qualify as heroes those who risk their lives for the good and we treat as violent individuals or, in the most serious cases, as unfeeling and blood-thirsty brutes, those who use their courage to do ill.

I will not deny the colorfulness of these episodes and even, in a certain sense, their aesthetic beauty. But the admiring poets of the "*beau geste*" should take the trouble to reflect a little.

An automobile going at full speed, driven by men armed with Brownings who spread terror and death in their path is more modern but no more colorful than a brigand in a feathered hat armed with a blunderbuss who assaults and robs a caravan of travelers, or the feudal baron, dressed in steel and seated on an iron-clad charger demanding his due from a commoner, and it's not worth any more. If the Italian government had had something other than operetta generals and ignorant and thieving chiefs it would perhaps have succeeded in pulling off a beautiful military operation on Libya, but would the war have been any less criminal or morally hideous for all that?

Nevertheless these bandits weren't, or at least were not all, vulgar criminals.

Among these "thieves" there were disoriented idealists; among these "assassins" there were heroic natures that in other circumstances, or inspired by other ideas, could have affirmed themselves as such. What is certain for whoever knew them is that these individuals were preoccupied with ideas and that, if they reacted with ferocity against their environment and sought with a beautiful frenzy to satisfy their passions and their needs, it was largely under the influence of a special concept of life and struggle.

But are these anarchist ideas?

Can these ideas, even if we grant words their widest meaning, be confused with anarchism or are they, on the contrary, in flagrant contradiction with it?

That is the question.

* * *

An anarchist is, by definition, one who doesn't want to be oppressed or oppressor, who wants the maximum amount of wellbe-

ing, the greatest amount of freedom, the most complete blossoming of all humans.

His ideas, his wishes all draw their origins form the feeling of sympathy, from respect for all beings, a feeling that must be strong enough to bring him to want the happiness of others as much as his own, and to renounce personal advantages the obtaining of which demand the sacrifice of others. If this weren't the case why would he be the enemy of oppression and why wouldn't he seek to be an oppressor?

The anarchist knows that the individual cannot live outside of society. That on the contrary, as a human being he only exists because he bears, summed up in him, the results of the labors of countless past generations, and because he benefits throughout his life from the collaboration of his contemporaries.

He also knows that the activity of each directly or indirectly influences the life of all, and thus recognizes the great law of solidarity that reigns in society as well as in nature. And since he wants liberty for all he must wish that the activity of that necessary solidarity, instead of being unconsciously and involuntarily imposed and accepted, instead of being left to chance and exploited for the profit of some and to the detriment of others, become conscious and voluntary and manifest itself in equal advantages for all.

Either be the oppressed or the oppressor, or cooperate for the greater good of all: there are no other alternatives. And the anarchists are naturally — and could not be otherwise — for free and consensual cooperation.

So let's not "philosophize" and talk about egoism, altruism and other puzzles. We will gladly agree: we are egoists. All of us seek our own satisfaction, but he is an anarchist who will find his greatest satisfaction in fighting for the good of all, for the coming of a society within which he will feel a brother among his brothers, amidst men who are healthy, intelligent, learned and happy. He who can live satisfied among slaves and who can draw a profit from the work of slaves is not, and cannot be, an anarchist.

exploiter: a avaricious, hard, prideful boss. And he doesn't deny it at all, but has the habit of justifying his conduct in a way that is quite original for a boss:

"My workers," he argues, "deserve the treatment I make them suffer, since they submit to it. They have the personalities of slaves, and they are the supporters of the bourgeois regime, etc. etc."

This is exactly the language of those who call themselves anarchists but who feel neither sympathy for nor solidarity with the oppressed. The conclusion would be that their true friends are the bosses and their enemies the mass of the disinherited.

Well then, what are they doing blathering on about emancipation and anarchism? Let them go with the bourgeoisie and leave us in peace.

* * *

I've said enough and I have to conclude.

I will conclude by giving some advice to those who want to "live their lives" and don't care about the lives of others.

Theft and murder are dangerous means and, in general, not very profitable. On that path you only succeed in passing your life in prison or leaving your head on the guillotine — especially if you have the impudence to attract the attention of the police by calling yourself an anarchist and frequenting anarchists.

It's hardly a profitable affair.

When you are intelligent, energetic and unscrupulous it is easy to make your way among the bourgeoisie.

Let them strive then through legal theft and murder to become bourgeois. They'll do much better, and if it is true that they have intellectual sympathies for anarchism they will spare themselves the displeasure of harming the cause that is dear to them — intellectually.

There are strong, intelligent, passionate individuals, prey to great material or intellectual needs who, placed in the ranks of the oppressed, want at whatever the cost to free themselves and, in order to do this, have no hesitation about becoming oppressors. These individuals, finding themselves blocked by current society, come to hate and despise all societies and, realizing that it would be absurd to want to live outside the collectivity, want to make all men submit to their will, to the satisfying of their passions. Sometimes, when they are somewhat enamored of literature, they call themselves "Supermen." Unscrupulous, they want to "live their lives." Mocking the revolution and all hopes for the future, they want to enjoy the moment at whatever price and with contempt for all. They would sacrifice all of humanity for one hour — and some have literally said this — of "intense life."

They are rebels, but not anarchists. They have the mentality, the sentiments of bourgeois manqués, and if they manage to succeed they become actual bourgeois, and not the least terrible among them.

In the course of the struggle it sometimes occurs that we find them at our side, but we can't, we shouldn't, nor do we want to confuse ourselves with them. And they know this full well.

* * *

But many among them love to call themselves anarchists. Which is true, and deplorable.

Of course we can't prevent people from taking whatever name they like, and for our part we can't abandon the name that sums up our ideas and that belongs to us, logically and historically. What we can do is make sure there is no confusion about this, or at least the least amount of confusion possible.

Nevertheless, we must try to find out how it is that individuals with aspirations so contrary to ours have been able to appropriate a name that is the negation of their ideas, of their sentiments.

I alluded above to the fishy maneuvers of the police, and it would be easy for me to prove how certain aberrations for which they have attempted to blame the anarchists had as their place of origin the police's dens of iniquity: Andrieux, Goron and their ilk.

At the moment when anarchism began to manifest itself and obtain importance in France the police had the brilliant idea, worthy of the cagiest of Jesuits, to fight the movement from within. With this end in mind they sent agents provocateurs among the anarchists who put on ultra-revolutionary airs and ably travestied anarchist ideas, made them grotesque and something diametrically opposed to what they are in reality. They founded papers paid for by the police, provoked insane and criminal acts so as to put them on display and qualified as anarchist, compromised naïve and sincere young people who they soon after turned in and, with the complicity of the bourgeois press, they succeeded in persuading a part of the public that anarchism was what they represented. And the French comrades have good reason to believe that the same police maneuvers are still being carried out and aren't foreign to the events with which we are dealing in this article. Sometimes the events exceed the intentions of the provocateurs, but whatever the case, the police profit from them all the same.

We must add to these police influences others that are less disgusting but no less harmful. At a time when striking attentats attracted the attention of the public to anarchist ideas writers of talent, professionals of the pen always on the lookout for a fashionable subject and the sensational paradox, set themselves to doing anarchism. And since they were bourgeois in mentality and education, with bourgeois ambitions, they made anarchism something fit to give imaginative young girls and blasé old ladies a sensual shiver, but which had nothing to do with the emancipating movement of the masses that anarchism can provoke… They were men of talent, who wrote well, often advancing things that no one understood and…they were admired. At a certain moment wasn't it said in Italy that Gabriele D'Annunzio had become a socialist?

After a while these "intellectuals" returned to the bourgeois bosom to taste there the price of the notoriety acquired, showing themselves to be what they had never ceased being: publicity-seeking literary adventurers. But the harm had been done.

* * *

In summary, none of this would have caused great harm if there only existed people with clear ideas, clearly knowing what they want and acting in consequence. But along with them how many are there with confused ideas, their souls uncertain, ceaselessly going from one extreme to the other.

This is how it is with those who call and believe themselves to be anarchists but who glory in the evil acts they commit (and which are often excusable because of necessity or their environment) by saying that the bourgeoisie act the same, and even worse. This is true, but why then think yourself other and better than them?

They condemn the bourgeois because he robs the worker of a good part of his labor, but have nothing to say if one of their own robs from that worker the little the bourgeois left him.

They are indignant when the boss, in order to increase his profits, makes a man work in unhealthy conditions, but are full of indulgence for he will stab that man in order to rob a few *sous*.

They have nothing but contempt for the usurer who extorts a few francs in interest from a poor devil for the ten francs he loaned him, but find it estimable that one of them takes ten francs from him out of ten (that he didn't loan him) by passing off a false coin.

Since they are poor in spirit they believe themselves to be naturally superior beings and affect a profound contempt for the "stupefied masses," arrogating to themselves the right to do harm to workers, the poor, and the unfortunate because they "don't rebel and are thus the supporters of current society." I know a capitalist who, when sitting in a café, takes pleasure in calling himself socialist, or even anarchist, but who in his factory is no less of an