

Against the Monarchy

(Appeal to all forward-looking men)

Anonymous

August 1899

The House of Savoy has cast aside the last remaining shreds of the mask it used to pose as the representative of the people's interests and aspirations, and is brazenly, brutally riding roughshod over those vestiges of freedom for which our forebears paid such a high price in martyrs and blood-letting.

In addition to the ghastly poverty afflicting the masses of the laboring folk, the growing idleness of the middle classes, the swift decline with which a nonsensical tax policy was damning every national pursuit, now today we have the violent eradication of any murmur of civil society. The arbitrariness and persecution that have been a distinguishing feature throughout its reign have swollen into a system of consistent, permanent tyranny reminiscent of the darkest days of foreign overlordship.

What is the way out of this situation, which, if it were to last, would reduce Italy to such a condition of abjection as to leave her forever incapable of raising herself up by her own efforts to the dignity of civil life ever again?

Any illusions about peaceful progress have by now been dispelled.

Parliament, which, under the current constitution, is the lawful means by which that tiny fraction of the people with access to political life should be able to enact its wishes, has shown itself to be powerless to guarantee, not just the people's interests, but even those of the class it represents. And it is condemned to obey the king's wishes and those of the royal cabal, or be dismissed like some impudent slave.

The most tentative, the most anodyne reforms are looked upon as subversive and their champions treated like malefactors. The very laws underpinning the constitution, and that were in any event made in the sole interests of the ruling class, are breached at will by the government when they do not suit enough the wishes of the reaction. With freedom of the press, of assembly, of association and to strike done away with, every civil means of articulating one's own opinion and asserting one's rights has been abolished. And in the meantime, the country is bled dry by a tax burden out of all proportion to its resources; the people are starved so that police and soldiers can be maintained, in turn enriching a gang of latifundists and politickers and the very well springs of production are sucked dry by inane stupid taxation arrangements.¹

¹ In order to reach as wide an audience as possible, the argument is framed in terms of "national" interests rather than "class" interests.

Is it not time that all of us who are not complicit in or beneficiaries of the tyranny and who refuse to resign ourselves to the current horrible state of affairs looked into what policy the circumstances commend and thought about acting upon it?

There is no need to drone on and on about the government arrangement that afflicts Italy and the circumstances to which she has been reduced.

Oppressive taxes, a customs arrangement designed to favor certain classes of privileged persons without a care for the damage caused to the mass of the citizenry and to the nation's output; pointless public works schemes carried out simply to line the pockets of contractors or favor the electoral interests of deputies in the pocket of the government, whilst, elsewhere, ventures of greater significance to public wealth and health are neglected; armaments on a colossal scale, pompous politics, alliances running counter to the nation's sympathies and interests but imposed by the interests of the dynasty... and all of it out of control, with no sense of proportion or thought for the future.

Outcome: record-breaking criminality and illiteracy; record-breaking emigration due to poverty; lower wages and higher prices for life's basic essentials than in any civilized country; rickety production and trade; land badly farmed or simply left fallow; three in every four towns without drinkable water, without sewerage, without schools; unemployment; hunger—hunger in a land where the soil is among the most fertile in the world and in a people renowned for their capacity to work and, alas, for the paucity of their needs!

And if Italy could be reduced to this when the people still had some measure of control left, what is to become of her now that the government acknowledges no restraints any more?

To be sure, the government's self-interest and that of the class that depends on the government ought to pause on a slippery slope at the foot of which universal ruination may wait. But it is a general feature of ruling classes that they stick to the wrong course all the more obstinately when threatened with ruination—and the Italian government is certainly showing no sign of wishing to be an exception to the rule. Besides, there is no denying that the Italian monarchy is by now so committed to the path of reaction that it could not turn back without hastening its own downfall; and it would not be reasonable to wait for it to be willing to commit deliberate suicide or perish before it has turned to extreme defensive measures.

Highs and lows in the reaction may well be still possible; maybe awareness of the danger and the House of Savoy's traditional wiliness will prompt it to try to throw dust in the people's eyes one more time; but the fact is that the monarchy now has only the sabre to rely upon and ultimately it will entrust its protection, and that of the class that has stood by it, to the sabre.

The thing is therefore to fight force with force; once again a popular insurrection looms as the means required to topple the tyranny.

But rising up is not enough; one must also win.

The kingdom's history is awash with popular revolts. Right from the start of the reign, from when the people, called upon to back the national movement in the name of freedom and the commonwealth, watched as the revolution was exploited by a pack of greedy speculators and as their conditions were made even worse than before, countless revolts have signalled their unhappiness and conviction that there was nothing to be hoped for, except from violence. But those revolts have been almost always small, sparked by poverty and the bullying of a local, government-backed *camorra*, and not out for radical, thoroughgoing changes. They have been easily crushed, with no discernible impact other than slaughter and ferocious persecution mounted by the authorities. And even when broader and more enlightened upheavals have shaken the country, the

absence of preparations, agreement, and a specified target have ensured that the government has easily stemmed them and exploited them as the pretext for fiercer reaction.

So, if there is the will to win, rather than face periodical and pointless slaughter, we must lay preparations appropriate for the force we are going to have to confront.

In Italy, as everywhere else, there are several parties that, while all honestly desirous of the general good, differ radically from one another both about the chief causes of society's woes and about the remedies that might end them.

Some are believers in the inviolability of lawfully acquired private property, and in the intrinsic fairness of profit and interest and these contend that democratic institutions that afford everyone access to property by means of work and economies are possible and desirable; whereas others see private ownership of the land and the means of production as the primary cause of all injustice and wretchedness.

Some believe that, with the monarchy abolished, we should look for society to be changed by laws passed by the representatives of the people, elected by universal suffrage; whereas others hold that any government is of necessity an instrument of oppression in the hands of some privileged class, and these want to see the arrangement of society be the direct handiwork of the freely associated workers.

Some believe in a harmony of interests between property owners and proletarians, whereas others are convinced that there is an irreconcilable antagonism between the two classes and thus that the propertied class must, of necessity, disappear, as all of its members are absorbed into the class of useful workers. And so on.

We need not enter here into which of the various contenders may be right, nor side with any given view. What we do wish to establish here is that everybody suffers from lack of freedom, that they all have a common foe in the Monarchy, and that as none of the parties are strong enough to overthrow it by themselves, there is a shared interest in joining forces in order to rid ourselves of this obstacle in the way of any progress and every improvement.

Not that we mean to suggest that the various parties abjure their own ideas, their own hopes, their own autonomous organization and amalgamate into one; and if we were to suggest any such thing we should most certainly go unheeded since the differences that divide them, one from another, are too serious and too fundamental.

Those who believe in the legitimacy of private ownership, and contend that the establishment of a government is useful and necessary could certainly not countenance expropriation and anarchy. Conversely, the opponents of property and governmentalism would refuse to recognize the acquired rights of owners and defer of their own free will to some new government.

Let each of them therefore remain who they are and let them get on with propaganda on behalf of their own ideas and their own side. But, no matter how great they may be, the differences separating the various parties should not stop them from coming together for a specific purpose, whenever there really is some interest they all share in common.

And what more pressing interest could there be than winning the essential conditions of freedom without which the people slide into brutishness and become incapable of reacting and where the parties have no means of spreading their ideas?

In face of the brutality of certain situations, all discussion is of necessity cut short: what is needed is action.

When a man falls into the water and is drowning, one does not stand around debating why he fell in and what needs to be done to prevent him from falling in again; what matters is getting him out of the water and preventing his death.

When a country is invaded by some savage horde that mistreats, pillages, and massacres the inhabitants, the priority above all else is to drive the invader out of the country, no matter the scale of the grievance that one part of the population may have against the other part or how different the interests of the various classes and the aspirations of the various parties may be.

This is the sort of situation in which Italy finds herself today: that of a country under military occupation, where, save for the *camorra* surrounding the government and supporting it as the spring of its life, all of the inhabitants, no matter to which class they may belong, are threatened and aggrieved in their property and in their freedom and subject to the most unbearable soldierly arrogance.

What party, being in no position to slay the enemy on its own, would doom itself and the entire people to the indefinite continuation of its current slavishness, rather than join with the other parties opposed to the monarchy and seek, through union, the power to win?

Besides, even if, due to some inexcusable sectarianism that would ultimately show its lack of confidence in the validity and practicability of its own program, one of them was to opt instead to let the status quo continue, rather than act in concert with the other parties, necessity would anyway impose union on anyone not content to remain a passive onlooker, and thus effectively let down his own ideas and his own party.

Given the circumstances in Italy and of her government, the fact is that, sooner or later, a fresh eruption of the people's wrath is on its way and it will be drowned in blood if, yet again, it has nothing but stones with which to answer rifles and cannons. The subversive parties, if they have learned anything at all from past experience and have some sense of their duty and their own interest, will throw themselves into the fray and afford the people the aid of resources and plans readied in advance. So, if the various revolutionary parties participate in the struggle and there is no one able, even if he could, to prevent others from helping and thus deny them whatever morsel of influence over the future course of the revolution will accrue to them from the part they played in the victory, would it not be a very grave mistake for each of them to act on their own without any agreement, and run the risk of thwarting each other, with the advantage going to the common enemy? Instead, should they not try, through concerted action, to ensure the sort of material victory that is the essential precondition for any transformation of the established order?

Afterwards, if everybody respects freedom, as they say they do, and affords anyone else the right and the means to spread and try out their own ideas, freedom will bring forth that which it can, and those methods and institutions that best cater for the material and moral conditions of the moment will carry the day. Otherwise, the downfall of the monarchy will still mean that the worst of our enemies has been dealt with—and the fighting will start all over, but in more humane and more civilised circumstances.

We are dealing here with a material issue that will prevail with all brute force over the economic and moral problems by which the country is exercised.

The government has its soldiers, cannons, rapid means of communication, and transport; it has a whole mighty organization ready for the task of repression; and it has demonstrated the extent to which it is ready and willing to deploy it.

The government has not hesitated to massacre citizens by the hundreds just to snuff out some agitation that came down to harmless demonstrations and minor disturbances easily assuaged by abolition of some levy or some other anodyne concessions.² What might the uniformed beasts in the king's service not be capable of, if they were threatened by some grave danger?

A city that rises up, in the hope that others might respond to its example, would probably be reduced to rubble before the news could reach the outside world. A populace out to make a vigorous display of its own unhappiness, but lacking appropriate weaponry, would be drowned in blood before its rebellion could get off the ground.

We must therefore strike with consensus, with force and with determination. Before the authorities can recover from their surprise, the people, or—to be more accurate—groups previously organized for action, will need to have seized as many army and government leaders as possible. Each rebel group, each unruly mob needs to have a sense that it is not on its own, so that, encouraged by the hope for victory, it sticks with the struggle and pursues it to the bitter end. Soldiers need to realize that they are confronted by a genuine revolution and to feel the temptation to desert and fraternise with the people, before the intoxication of bloodletting turns them into savages. Useful intelligence needs to be spread at speed and troop movements obstructed by every possible means. The troops must be attracted away from the places targeted for action by means of diversionary maneuvers, and rapid-fire rifles and cannons must be answered with bombs, mines, and arson. In short, there must be an appropriate response to the enemy's weapons of war, to a determined crackdown that will stop at nothing. A response must be made in the shape of action even more determined. This is war and so everything commended by the science of warfare but applied to the conditions of a risen people that has to face regulars equipped with the most up to date weaponry must be pressed into service.

But none of this can be improvised at a moment's notice: experience should have proved that to everybody. At the moment of truth, arms are in short supply unless they have been prepared in advance and unless the means of seizing them by force and by surprise have been looked into. Agreement on the allocation of roles in the erection of barricades, the bringing of fire-power to bear wherever required, and implementation of some battle-plan—these cannot be done at the drop of a hat, once the fighting is already under way. Synchronisation of insurrections in various places or at least such a swift spread of the conflagration as to prevent the government from marshalling its troops and snuffing out the various insurgent centers one at a time—this is not achievable unless the action groups have agreed beforehand to liaise with one another.

We invite all the enemies of the monarchy who are seriously determined to end it to engage with this work of practical preparation.

Let men of good will seek one another out and liaise in the preparation of the insurrection. Their several initiatives will meet and federate with one another, thereby accumulating the strength required to steer the next popular uprising to victory.

² The reference is to the bread riots of 1898.

The not so distant future will tell if we were mistaken in counting upon the Italian people's revolutionary energies.

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The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.

Translated from *Contro la Monarchia* ([London], 1899). This work was published as an anonymous pamphlet, presumably during Malatesta's short stay in London between his escape from Lampedusa Island at the end of April 1899 and his departure for America in early August.

The pamphlet's cover bore the false title *Aritmetica Elementale*, clearly in order to ease its circulation by deflecting police attention.

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