

On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

A Prophetic Letter to Luigi Fabbri

Errico Malatesta

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London, July 30, 1919
Dearest Fabbri,¹

(...) It seems to me that we are in perfect agreement on the matters with which you are currently so preoccupied, to wit, the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

By my reckoning, on this score the opinion of anarchists cannot be called into question, and in fact, well before the Bolshevik revolution, it never was queried by anyone. Anarchy means no government, and thus, all the more emphatically, no dictatorship, meaning an absolute government, uncontrolled and without constitutional restraints. But whenever the Bolshevik revolution broke out, it appears that our friends may have confused what constitutes a revolution against an existing government with what was implied by a new government which had just dominated the revolution in order to apply the brakes to it and steer it in the direction of its party political purposes. And so our friends have all but declared themselves Bolsheviks.

Now, the Bolsheviks are merely marxists who have remained honest, conscientious marxists, unlike their teachers and models, the likes of Guesde, Plekhanov, Hyndman, Scheidemann, Noske, etc.,² whose fate you know. We respect their sincerity, we admire their energy, but, just as we have never seen eye to eye with them in theoretical matters, so we could not align ourselves with them when they make the transition from theory to practice.

But perhaps the truth is simply this: our pro-Bolshevik friends take the expression “dictatorship of the proletariat” to mean simply the revolutionary action of the workers in taking possession of the land and the instruments of labor, and trying to build a society and organize a way of life in which there will be no place for a class that exploits and oppresses the producers.

¹ Luigi Fabbri (1877–1938), Italian anarchist writer and militant, author of *Dictatorship and Revolution*.

² Jules Guesde (1845–1922), social democrat leader, after having been an anarchist and then pioneer of marxism in France. Georgi Plekhanov (1856–1918), a Russian populist turned marxist in exile: pioneered marxism in Russia: mentor and collaborator of Lenin, before breaking with him in order to condemn the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. Henry Hyndman (1842–1921), founder of laborism, after having been a pioneer of marxism in England. Philip Schedidemann (1864–1935), German Social Democrat chancellor in 1919. Gustav Noske (1868–1946), right-wing Social Democrat, governor of Kid in 1918, joined the counter revolutionary council of people’s commissars at the start of 1919, then went on to become Army minister, organizing the repression of the post-war revolutionary movements.

Thus construed, the “dictatorship of the proletariat” would be the effective power of all workers trying to bring down capitalist society and would thus turn into Anarchy as soon as resistance from reactionaries would have ceased and no one can any longer seek to compel the masses by violence to obey and work for him. In which case, the discrepancy between us would be nothing more than a question of semantics. Dictatorship of the proletariat would signify the dictatorship of everybody, which is to say, it would be a dictatorship no longer, just as government by everybody is no longer a government in the authoritarian, historical and practical sense of the word.

But the real supporters of “dictatorship of the proletariat” do not take that line, as they are making quite plain in Russia. Of course, the proletariat has a hand in this, just as the people has a part to play in democratic regimes, that is to say, to conceal the reality of things. In reality, what we have is the dictatorship of one party, or rather, of one party’s leaders: a genuine dictatorship, with its decrees, its penal sanctions, its henchmen and, above all, its armed forces which are at present also deployed in the defense of the revolution against its external enemies, but which will tomorrow be used to impose the dictators’ will upon the workers, to apply a brake on revolution, to consolidate the new interests in the process of emerging and protect a new privileged class against the masses.

General Bonaparte was another one who helped defend the French Revolution against the European reaction, but in defending it, he strangled the life out of it. Lenin, Trotsky and their comrades are assuredly sincere revolutionaries (...) and they will not be turning traitors-but they are preparing the governmental structures which those who will come after them will utilize to exploit the Revolution and do it to death. They will be the first victims of their methods and I am afraid that the Revolution will go under with them.

History repeats itself: *mutatis mutandis*, it was Robespierre’s dictatorship that brought Robespierre to the guillotine and paved the way for Napoleon.

Such are my general thoughts on affairs in Russia. As for detailed news we have had, it is as yet too varied and too contradictory to merit risking an opinion. It may be, too, that lots of things that strike us as bad are the products of that situation, and, in Russia’s particular circumstances, there was no option but to do what they have done. We would do better to wait, especially as anything we will say cannot have any influence upon the course of events in Russia and might be misinterpreted in Italy and appear to echo the reaction’s partisan calumnies.

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