

Enrico Ferri on Socialist Tactics

What is the essence of the great and fertile innovations of the revolutionary method of Marx and Engels, as distinguished from Utopian sentimental Socialism, and from Anarchism? It consists solely in the substitution of the genetic method, the investigation of causes, for the old empirical, symptomatic method, in harmony with the scientific doctrine of transformation or natural evolution.

In medical practice, as is well known, up to the middle of the nineteenth century, before the clinical methods of observation and experiment were tried, diseases were diagnosed and treated only by their symptoms, their outward manifestations. The discoveries of Pasteur, for example, and his followers, of microbe germs that caused infectious diseases, led to the replacing of the symptomatic cures, which were powerless against such plagues as cholera and typhoid fever, by the elimination of the causes for the purpose of preventing disease. And surprising results were obtained in this way. It is infinitely better to build water-works for a city suffering from typhoid fever than to increase the number of physicians for the treatment of the diseased, or to open public dispensaries and reduce the price of medicines.

In the treatment of the infectious disease of exploitation and misery, Marx and Engels have, therefore, said: It is useless to continue that empirical and symptomatic treatment, that more or less modern and rational charity, these social reforms for the so-called “amelioration of the condition of the working class”, and the like. It is necessary to eliminate the causes of poverty, and these are in the last instance found in the monopolization of the means of production and distribution as private property, that reaches its climax in that period of civilisation which is characterised by bourgeois capitalism. Against this rising tide of economic slavery, human misery and injustice, little bourgeois reforms from “soup kitchens” to “charity balls”, from laws on “female and child labor” to “boards of arbitration” or “Sunday rest”, are useless as the use of Anarchist violence, individual or collective, against this or that capitalist, this or that “economic tyrant”, this or that “political tyrant”, is senseless.

The work of the revolutionary method is much more tedious, tiresome and complex. We must combat and eliminate the fundamental causes of poverty, instead of the more or less apparent symptoms. And as the elimination cannot be accomplished by one stroke of collective or individual violence, nor by social reform legislation, nor by a dictator’s decree, we must form a clear and energetic proletarian mind and redeem it from ignorance and servility. Ideas travel in human boots, and proletarian evolution does not proceed spontaneously, nor does it descend from the providential heavens of government action. It rather takes shape partly through the natural agency of economic and political phenomena and partly through the pressures of the proletarian mind itself which struggles by legal means for the realisation of its revolutionary aims.

These aims are called revolutionary and cannot be called otherwise. Not that they preach the building of barricades or personal assaults, but because they aim at the complete transformation of the foundations of society, instead of limiting, weakening and entangling themselves in reforms which leave the basis of private property untouched, and which the ruling classes have always granted, not for our benefit, but in their own interest, for the purpose of retarding the progress of the revolutionary ideal.

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