



Politics or Ethics?

november 2013

So technique killed ethics. Because in front of any issue, human beings do not ask themselves what is most *right*, but what *works*. They no longer asks themselves this because at this point, in our world dominated in all its aspects by technique, it is given for granted that what is *right is what works*. Ideas become instruments to evaluate not for their meaning but for their way of being used, for their functionality, for their efficiency. All of this, as it has already been mentioned before, is certainly one of the consequences of the intrusion into all aspects of our lives of technique. However, it would be a mistake to think that this phenomenon only emerged in the last few decades, through the infestation of computers and cell phones, plasma screens and three dimensional images.

What else would politics be if not technique applied to the transformative actions of social relationships? Do we really think that even in the distant past these same logics were not applied? Do we really think that the political weight infests only the ruling class, men and women thirsty with power, and not anyone who is ready to reach compromises with ethics? To think again about these consoling certainties it is enough to look back at the difference – at the end of the Nineteenth century, within the anarchist movement, and while faced with the same situation – between the behavior of

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an Errico Malatesta and that of a Luigi Galleani. The first, the most famous exponent of the anarchist Party, while the second was the most vivid supporter of an informal and autonomous anarchy.

During the struggles for bread in 1898, those which then brought the massacre in Milan by the hands of Bava Beccaris, Malatesta was arrested from January on and prosecuted with other comrades at the end of April. In that occasion his self defense, as he had already done during trials in Benevento in 1878 and in Rome in 1884, and as he will again in Milan in 1921, was particularly cautious, non provocative, leaning towards making clear the “true thought” of anarchists but also aiming to receive a softer sentence for him and his co-accused. So he began by stating his trust in the sense of Justice of the Courts, then continuing by countering the accusation of being the “leader of anarchist”, of pursuing the destruction of the family and society, and of having incited the bread revolt.

In regards to this, since in the moment he was talking – the 28th of April 1898 – the revolt was already spreading in all of Italy, Malatesta made clear that during his rallies he had clearly specified that “not by looting a villa and stealing an oven can the social question be solved... bread is expensive, not because the mayor is a scoundrel, not because Rudini [the prime minister at the time] is a malefactor, but for a whole complexity of social causes that cannot be solved if not through the organization of the masses”.

Then, to cast an even more amicable and uplifting light on himself, he thanked the prosecution: “The prosecution gave me a very high honor, an honor that if it had been made seriously would have been enough compensation for the three years of prison that you want to give me, he said that since I went to Ancona the murders and the robberies decreased and there were no more bombs launched. But if this had been true, please lock me up, you will send me to prison with a halo of glory”.

It was not only this that gave Malatesta his “halo of glory”, who continued defending anarchists also from the accusation of inciting hate: “ask those mothers who would come thank us, when their

sons became anarchists and stopped getting drunk, and would become more affectionate sons and harder workers.” Those anarchists, what great folks! Where they arrive, robberies and attacks diminish, the wild kids get their heads straight, they curb their excesses, they give honor to their mother and father and go to work! Perhaps convinced of these words the Court made its decision. The sentence was exceptionally mild. Malatesta got away with seven months of imprisonment, partially already served, the other accused with six months and one absolution.

Just four years before, in 1894, in Genova the big trial against Luigi Galleani, Eugenio Pellaco and other 33 defendants took place, with the accusation of “criminal association”. The arrests were made between December 1893 and the beginning of January 1894, and the court case began in May, in a very tense atmosphere. Galleani, considered the “head” of the gang and questioned first, proudly declared being a revolutionary anarchist, of not believing in legal means, and of always having made propaganda of his ideas. An ex-law student, therefore aware of the court proceedings, and also great public speaker, Galleani was able to dominate the discussion claiming his own anarchism (“I am not here other than to defend my own idea, an idea that has put me here on the dock as a malefactor, taking little care of the sentence that you bourgeois judges will inflict on my person and on my comrades”) while embarrassing the main witness of the prosecution, the ex-mayor of Genova, to the point of being more times silenced by the presiding judge and by the public prosecutor. In the end, faced with multiple attempts to silence him, Galleani raised his voice: “I cannot help but observing that I expected all this: I knew that in your role of bourgeois judges, you could not do more or less of that which you do; I expected that the public prosecutor would be afraid of the truth, that he would prohibited me to talk because he knew that I would have concluded with saying that here, where I sit, him with the judges should have sat, because the present society really deserves the name of a society of malefactors of which, consciously or not, you belong to”. The

audience present exploded in an ovation and the presiding judge had the court cleared out.

Galleani, defended by Pietro Gori, was condemned to 3 years of imprisonment, aggravated by a sixth spent in isolation, plus 2 years of surveillance, Pellaco to 16 months, and the others to lesser sentences. After the three years of imprisonment, Galleani was put under house arrest with the maximum sentence: five years.

Different style, different bill to pay.

Malatesta's court statement worked. But was it right? The one of Galleani was right, but did it work? Was Malatesta wise? Was Galleani dumb? Was Malatesta a coward? Was Galleani brave? Neither one nor the other. In the end both did in that courtroom what they were doing also on the outside. The first one ended up putting aside his own ideas for the tactical necessities of the moment, just like a smart politician would do. The second outspokenly expressed his own thoughts, like those immune to any political calculations would do. Politics or ethics?

We are certain that Errico Malatesta was satisfied of the outcome. But we are also certain that Luigi Galleani did not regret his choices.

It is not about a strategic choice, but a life choice.