

from *Reflections on Violence*

by

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AND YET without leaving the present, without reasoning about this future, which seems for ever condemned to escape our reason, we should be unable to act at all. Experience shows that the *framing of a future, in some indeterminate time*, may, when it is done in a certain way, be very effective, and have very few inconveniences; this happens when the anticipations of the future take the form of those myths, which enclose with them all the strongest inclinations of a people, of a party or of a class, inclinations which recur to the mind with the insistence of instincts in all the circumstances of life; and which give an aspect of complete reality to the hopes of immediate action by which, more easily than by any other method, men can reform their desires, passions, and mental activity. We know, moreover, that these social myths in no way prevent a man profiting by the observations which he makes in the course of his life, and form no obstacle to the pursuit of his normal occupations.

The truth of this may be shown by numerous examples.

The first Christians expected the return of Christ and the total ruin of the pagan world, with the inauguration of the kingdom of the saints, at the end of the first generation. The catastrophe did not come to pass, but Christian thought profited so greatly from the apocalyptic myth that certain contemporary scholars maintain that the whole preaching of Christ referred solely to this one point. The hopes which Luther and Calvin had formed of the religious exaltation of Europe were by no means realised; these fathers of the Reformation very soon seemed men of a past era; for present-day Protestants they belong rather to the Middle Ages than to modern times, and the problems which troubled them most occupy very little place in contemporary Protestantism. Must we for that reason deny the immense result which came from their dreams of Christian renovation? It must be admitted that the real developments of the Revolution did not in any way resemble the enchanting pictures which created the enthusiasm of its first adepts; but without those pictures would the Revolution have been victorious? Many Utopias were mixed up with the Revolutionary myth, because it had been formed by a society passionately fond of imaginative literature, full of

confidence in the "science" and very little acquainted with the economic history of the past. These Utopias came to nothing; but it may be asked whether the Revolution was not a much more profound transformation than those dreamed of by the people who in the eighteenth century had invented social Utopias. In our own times Mazzini pursued what the wiseacres of his time called a mad chimera; but it can no longer be denied that, without Mazzini, Italy would never have become a great power, and that he did more for Italian unity than Cavour and all the politicians of his school.

A knowledge of what the myths contain in the way of details which will actually form part of the history of the future is then of small importance; they are not astrological almanacs; it is even possible that nothing which they contain will ever come to pass -- as was the case with the catastrophe expected by the first Christians. In our own daily life, are we not familiar with the fact that what actually happens is very different from our preconceived notion of it? And that does not prevent us from continuing to make resolutions. Psychologists say that there is heterogeneity between the ends in view and the ends actually realised: the slightest experience of life reveals this law to us, which Spencer transferred into nature, to extract therefrom his theory of the multiplication of effects.

The myth must be judged as a means of acting on the present; any attempt to discuss how far it can be taken literally as future history is devoid of sense. *It is the myth in its entirety which is alone important:* its parts are only of interest in so far as they bring out the main idea. No useful purpose is served, therefore, in arguing about the incidents which may occur in the course of a social war, and about the decisive conflicts which may give victory to the proletariat; even supposing the revolutionaries to have been wholly and entirely deluded in setting up this imaginary picture of the general strike, this picture may yet have been, in the course of the preparation for the Revolution, a great element of strength, if it has embraced all the aspirations of Socialism, and if it has given to the whole body of Revolutionary thought a precision and a rigidity which no other method of thought could have given.

To estimate, then, the significance of the idea of the general strike, all the methods of discussion which are current among politicians, sociologists, or people with pretensions to political science, must be abandoned. Everything which its opponents endeavour to establish may be conceded to them, without reducing in any way the value of the theory which they

think they have refuted. The question whether the general strike is a partial reality, or only a product of popular imagination, is of little importance. All that it is necessary to know is, whether the general strike contains everything that the Socialist doctrine expects of the revolutionary proletariat.

To solve this question we are no longer compelled to argue learnedly about the future; we are not obliged to indulge in lofty reflections about philosophy, history, or economics; we are not on the plane of theories, and we can remain on the level of observable facts. We have to question men who take a very active part in the real revolutionary movement amidst the proletariat, men who do not aspire to climb into the middle class and whose mind is not dominated by corporative prejudices. These men may be deceived about an infinite number of political, economical, or moral questions; but their testimony is decisive, sovereign, and irrefutable when it is a question of knowing what are the ideas which most powerfully move them and their comrades, which most appeal to them as being identical with their socialist conceptions, and thanks to which their reason, their hopes, and their way of looking at particular facts seem to make but one indivisible unity.

Thanks to these men, we know that the general strike is indeed what I have said: the *myth* in which Socialism is wholly comprised, i.e. a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by Socialism against modern society. Strikes have engendered in the proletariat the noblest, deepest, and most moving sentiments that they possess; the general strike groups them all in a co-ordinated picture, and, by bringing them together, gives to each one of them its maximum of intensity; appealing to their painful memories of particular conflicts, it colours with an intense life all the details of the composition presented to consciousness. We thus obtain that intuition of Socialism which language cannot give us with perfect clearness -- and we obtain it as a whole, perceived instantaneously. . . .

The professors of the *little science* are really difficult to satisfy. They assert very loudly that they will only admit into thought abstractions analogous to those used in the deductive sciences: as a matter of fact, this is a rule which is insufficient for purposes of action, for we do nothing great without the help of warmly-coloured and clearly-defined images, which absorb the whole of our attention; now, is it possible to find anything more satisfying from

their point of view than the general strike? But, reply the professors, we ought to rely only on those realities which are given by experience: is, then, the picture of the general strike made up of tendencies which were not obtained directly from observation of the revolutionary movement? Is it a work of pure reason, manufactured by indoor scientists attempting to solve the social problem according to the rules of logic? Is it something arbitrary? Is it not, on the contrary, a spontaneous product analogous to those others which students of history come across in periods of action? They insist, and say that man ought not to let himself be carried away by his impulses without submitting them to the control of his intelligence, whose rights are unchallenged; nobody dreams of disputing them; of course, this picture of the general strike must be tested, and that is what I have tried to do above; but the critical spirit does not consist in replacing *historical data* by the *charlatanism of a sham science*...

We are perfectly well aware that the historians of the future are bound to discover that we laboured under many illusions, because they will see behind them a finished world. We, on the other hand, must act, and nobody can tell us to-day what these historians will know; nobody can furnish us with the means of modifying our motor images in such a way as to avoid their criticisms.

Our situation resembles somewhat that of the physicists who work at huge calculations based on theories which are not destined to endure for ever. We have nowadays abandoned all hope of discovering a complete science of nature; the spectacle of modern scientific revolutions is not encouraging for scientists, and has no doubt led many people, naturally enough, to proclaim the bankruptcy of science, and yet we should be mad if we handed the management of industry over to sorcerers, mediums, and wonder-workers. The philosopher who *does not seek to make a practical application of his theories* may take up the point of view of the future historian of science, and then dispute the absolute character of present-day scientific theses; but he is as ignorant as the present-day physicist when he is asked how to correct the explanations given by the latter; must he therefore take refuge in scepticism?

Nowadays no philosophers worthy of consideration accept the sceptical position; their great aim, on the contrary, is to prove the legitimacy of a science which, however, makes no claim to know the real nature of things, and which confines itself to discovering relations

which can be utilised for practical ends. It is because sociology is in the hands of people who are incapable of any philosophic reasoning that it is possible for us to be attacked (in the name of the *little science*) for being content with methods founded on the laws that a really thorough psychological analysis reveals as fundamental in the genesis of action, and which are revealed to us in all great historical movements.

To proceed scientifically means, first of all, to know what forces exist in the world and then to take measures whereby we may utilise them, by reasoning from experience. That is why I say that, by accepting the idea of the general strike, although we know that it is a myth, we are proceeding exactly as a modern physicist does who has complete confidence in his science, although he knows that the future will look upon it as antiquated. It is we who really possess the scientific spirit, while our critics have lost touch both with modern science and modern philosophy; and having proved this, we are quite easy in our minds. . . .

Morality is not doomed to perish because the motive forces behind it will change; it is not destined to become a mere collection of precepts as long as it can still vivify itself by an alliance with an enthusiasm capable of conquering all the obstacles, prejudices, and the need of immediate enjoyment, which oppose its progress. But it is certain that this sovereign force will not be found along the paths which contemporary philosophers, the experts of social science, and the inventors of *far-reaching reforms* would make us go. There is only one force which can produce to-day that enthusiasm without whose co-operation no morality is possible, and that is the force resulting from the propaganda in favour of a general strike. The preceding explanations have shown that the idea of the general strike (constantly rejuvenated by the feelings roused by proletarian violence) produces an entirely epic state of mind, and at the same time bends all the energies of the mind to that condition necessary to the realisation of a workshop carried on by free men, eagerly seeking the betterment of the industry; we have thus recognised that there are great resemblances between the sentiments aroused by the idea of the general strike and those which are necessary to bring about a continued progress in methods of production. We have then the right to maintain that the modern world possesses that prime mover which is necessary to the creation of the ethics of the producers.

I stop here, because it seems to me that I have accomplished the task which I imposed

upon myself; I have, in fact, established that proletarian violence has an entirely different significance from that attributed to it by superficial scholars and by politicians. In the total ruin of institutions and of morals there remains something which is powerful, new, and intact, and it is that which constitutes, properly speaking, the soul of the revolutionary proletariat. Nor will this be swept away in the general decadence of moral values, if the workers have enough energy to bar the road to the middle-class corrupters, answering their advances with the plainest brutality.

I believe that I have brought an important contribution to discussions on socialism; these discussions must henceforth deal exclusively with the conditions which allow the development of specifically proletarian forces, that is to say, *with violence enlightened by the idea of the general strike*. All the old abstract dissertations on the Socialist *regime* of the future become useless; we pass to the domain of real history, to the interpretation of facts -- to the ethical evaluations of the revolutionary movement.

The bond which I pointed out in the beginning of this inquiry between Socialism and proletarian violence appears to us now in all its strength. It is to violence that Socialism owes those high ethical values by means of which it brings *salvation* to the modern world.