

Review: The Anarchist Revolution

The Anarchist Revolution. Polemical Articles 1924–1931. Errico Malatesta. 124 pages. Freedom Press. £3.50

Anarchist Communist Federation

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This book, edited and introduced by Vernon Richards, gathers together articles translated in full for the first time and intended to supplement *Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* also published by Freedom Press. Malatesta was an Italian anarchist agitator active for more than 60 years. He was a leading light in both the Italian and international anarchist movement. These writings are important because they cover the period of fascist reaction in Italy for much of which Malatesta was under house arrest. In this period the soaring hopes of the Italian anarchists with the occupation of the factories in 1919 were to be dismally crushed in the following years. The “preventive counter-revolution” as another outstanding anarchist communist, Luigi Fabbri, a close associate of Malatesta, called the rise of Mussolini and Fascism, was to lay waste to the effervescent optimism of the Italian anarchists.

Malatesta always remained an anarchist communist throughout his long life as a revolutionary. He took an active part as a militant devoted to organisation in the *Unione Anarchica Italiana* (UAI) which was founded in 1920. The founding of this organisation did not mean the uniting of all anarchists in one body. A good part of the movement, including the anti-organisational current among the anarchist communists, with Luigi Galleani as their leading light, as well as the anarchist Individualists, took a critical attitude to the UAI, judging it as too ‘centralising’. In the face of these divisions, very characteristic of the Italian movement, with harsh arguments and fierce polemics, there were periodic efforts to at least find unity in action in the light of the setback of the revolution and the common foe of reaction and fascism.

Practical

This explains Malatesta’s articles in this collection on individualism where he attempts to persuade adherents of this current of the eminent logic of communism, at the same time underlining the possible bureaucratic and centralising dangers that could arise. Eminent pragmatist that he was, Malatesta never gave in to the vaunting optimism that afflicted Kropotkin. He is not afraid to realise that problems are bound to arise. Only at one time, in the light of the Bolshevik seizure of power in the name of ‘communism’ does he consider the label ‘associationist’ rather than ‘communist’. These doubts soon pass and he re-affirms his devotion to the concept of anarchist communism throughout the other essays that follow.

Similarly he addresses himself to the problem of the unions. Always critical of syndicalism, whether anarcho- or revolutionary, he says: “So what should the anarchists do when the workers’ organisation, faced with the inflow of a majority driven to it by their economic needs alone, ceases to be a revolutionary force and becomes involved in a balancing act between capital and labour and possibly even a factor in preserving the status quo”. However he fails to carry through these criticisms to their logical conclusions, and opts for “anarchists to remain in these organisations, as they are, to work within them and seek to push them forward to the best of their ability, ready to avail themselves, in critical moments of history, of the influence they may have gained, and to transform them swiftly from modest weapons of defence to powerful tools of attack”. This begs the question, whether the unions, syndicalist or otherwise, can be so used, and whether new forms of organisation, for example workers councils, would not arise in revolutionary times. It is easy being wise with hindsight, but we must remember that Malatesta was already armed with a critique of syndicalism and had supported the development of the factory councils.

In other articles, like those on science, Malatesta used the Italian experience which swept away the optimistic illusions of a rapid diffusion of libertarian ideas during and after the revolution. He thought that this showed that anarchists were destined to remain a minority for a long time, even in the case of a victory over the ruling class. He wanted to make a clean break with 'linear' and 'catastrophic' concepts of revolution. He came to the conclusion that the establishment of a libertarian society would be the result of a series of successive breaks and periods of gradual progress. This progress meant an adoption of a "practical programme that can be adapted to the various circumstances that may arise as society develops prior to, during and after the revolution" (On *Anarchist Revisionism*). Whilst not in the least abandoning the need for a revolutionary break with the old society, he saw that there would be periods of preparation, when anarchists would have to do their utmost to prepare the masses of the population through propaganda and education.

All of this raises a number of questions. Will this be the scenario for the establishment of an anarchist society, via a series of revolutionary changes? Will there be periods in between of relative stability? Or will the transition to anarchist communism involve one cataclysmic break? Malatesta was influenced by the thought that somehow Fascism would collapse, due to antagonisms between the different currents within it, or antagonism from sections of the ruling class that were supporting it for the time being, or as a result of a mass uprising or as combination of these factors. He must have envisaged the establishment of some 'left social' republic as a first stage after the fall of fascism. Certainly he refused to go into exile, like so many other anarchist militants, because he thought that Fascism would collapse in a short period of time. He failed to envisage the World War, and then the establishment of the "Historic Compromise" in Italy, a direct consequence of the Cold War.

Platform

Finally, the book contains a polemic between Malatesta and Nestor Makhno about the *Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists*. Makhno wrote this with other Russian and Ukrainian anarchists, advancing the need for a General Union of Anarchists and for collective responsibility and tactical and theoretical unity. This polemic was limited by the fact that Malatesta was under house arrest and received correspondence from Makhno up to a year after he had written. Malatesta quite correctly points out that a General Union was impossible, as opposing tendencies within anarchism could not long last within the same organisation, quoting the Platform itself on this question. Having got down to the fact that the Platformists meant a specific anarchist communist organisation, which they themselves should have made clear, Malatesta then delivers a number of criticisms about collective responsibility, majority decisions, and the Executive Committees as proposed by the Platform. In some ways this exchange appears to be a dialogue of people not really understanding what each other means. Malatesta criticises the concept of collective responsibility and then elaborates on something that seems to be exactly what the Platform means by collective responsibility. Now, I have always taken the expression Executive Committee as proposed by the platform to mean a co-ordinating body controlled by the membership, perfectly compatible with anarchist and revolutionary principles. However, the term is ambiguous and is inadequately explained. Should not have Malatesta got to the substance of what the Platform meant, rather than react in a knee-jerk way to the use of the term?

Makhno's clarity on the need to solve the problems of disorganisation are not adequately answered by Malatesta. Indeed, the general repression throughout Europe meant that the whole problem of organisation was not to be seriously debated again until the fifties.

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