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August 30, 2014

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Read this book.

Perhaps I need to write more? For those who do not know, Errico Malatesta (1853–1932) was one of anarchism's greatest activists and thinkers for over 60 years. He joined the First International in 1871 and became an anarchist after meeting Bakunin in 1872. He spent most of his life in exile from Italy, helping to build unions in Argentina in the late 1880s and taking an active part during the two Red Years after the war when Italy was on the verge of revolution (the authorities saw the threat and imprisoned him and other leading anarchists before a jury dismissed all charges). Playing a key role in numerous debates within the movement – on using elections, participation in the labour movement, the nature of social revolution, syndicalism and Platformism (to name just a few), he saw the rise and failure of the Second International, then the Third before spending the last years of his life under house arrest in Mussolini's Italy.

The length of Malatesta's activism within the movement is matched by the quality of his thought and this is why all anar-

chists will benefit from reading him. Before *The Method of Freedom*, we had his classic pamphlet *Anarchy*, Vernon Richard's *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* (a selection of snippets grouped by theme) and *The Anarchist Revolution* (articles from the 1920s) as well as a few articles translated here and there. Anyone reading these works would have quickly realised how important and useful Malatesta's ideas were. Deeply realistic, with a firm grasp on the here and now as well as principles, he avoided the extremism that often befalls anarchists (violent propaganda or pacifism; distaining the labour movement or being submerged in it; simplistic/romantic notions of revolution or refornism). He did not take his wishes for reality but instead looked to the situation as it was and applied his principles to make anarchism relevant and practical.

The breadth of material this work makes available is impressive and gives for the first time a clear picture of Malatesta's ideas. Organised in chronological order, it shows us how his ideas developed and changed while, at the same time, the core principles which were there from the start. His practical nature comes to the fore, the notion that anarchism is a realistic theory that not only *was* able to be applied now but also *had* to be because of its libertarian nature:

> "our duty [was], which was the logical outcome of our ideas, the condition which our conception of revolution and re-organisation of society imposes on us, namely, to live among the people and to win them over to our ideas by actively taking part in their struggles and sufferings" (179)

This did not mean ignoring the Anarchist movement. Far from it for he entered into numerous debates on a host of subjects – all as relevant to anarchism today as is what he had to say.

His discussion of organisation predates by decades the issues raised by Jo Freeman in *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, namely

that "non-organisation culminates in an authority which, being unmonitored and unaccountable, is no less of a real authority for all that" and so "foundering in dis-organisation" it naturally happens that the few "impose their thinking and their will" onto the "bulk of the party". (103) As to what seems the perennial democracy debate, he presents simple common sense by correctly suggesting that minorities "defer voluntarily whenever necessary and the feeling of solidarity require it". To those who asked "what if the minority refuses to give away?" Malatesta responded: "What if the majority makes to abuse its strength?" (214) For those who argue anarchism *is* democracy and also include minority rights, rather than refute Malatesta's position they accept it – but use different words. Perhaps we can sum it up as anarchists support majority decision-making but not majority rule and move onto more fruitful things? Like applying our ideas in the class struggle?

Here Malatesta makes such obvious points that it is slightly embarrassing that he felt the need to actually put pen to paper to advocate them. He lamented that by "simply preaching abstract theories" in the 1880s "we have become isolated" (178) and argued that anarchism could become relevant "only in working-men's associations, strikes, collective revolt". (179) In this he simply reminded anarchists of the ideas of the libertarian-wing of the First International, when he joined the movement, which he summarised in 1884 as being "[s]trikes, resistance societies, labor organizations" and "encouraging workers to band together and resist the bosses" as the means of "struggling against all the economic, political, religious, judicial, and pseudo-scientifically moral institutions of bourgeois society". (58)

The Method of Freedom, then, adds to the growing pile of books that refute the notion, popular with some academics and Marxists, that anarchists in France turned to syndicalism only after the failure of "propaganda by the deed" in the mid-1890s (syndicalism then spreading to the rest of the world and displacing communist-anarchism). Malatesta, like Kropotkin, advocated anarchist

involvement in the labour movement from the start: although it is true he stressed this far more after his union organising in South America and the example of the 1889 London Dock Strike. This was part and parcel of the role of anarchists to encourage the spirit of resistance:

> "the better the people's material and moral conditions are and the more it has become aware of its own strength and inured to and skilled in struggle, through resistance and relentless struggles for improved conditions, the better equipped the people is for revolution." (257)

Looking at neo-liberal Britain, with its staggeringly low levels of collective struggle in the face of the unremitting ConDem onslaught against working class people, his comments that the individualism of capitalism results in "a constant tendency in the direction of growing tyranny by the few and slavishness for the many" and only the "resistance from the people is the only boundary set upon the bullying of the bosses and rules" seem all to sadly relevant. As is his conclusion: "there is no resistance because the spirit of cooperation, of association is missing". (229)

This applied within the movement itself, with Malatesta pointing out that with nothing practical to do, many "[u]nable to bear such idleness" turn to electoral politics "just for something to do" and "then, bit by bit, abandon the revolutionary route altogether". (70) People "who might have all of the making of an anarchist… prefer – making the best of a bad situation – to sign on with the social democrats and other politickers". (103) How true: today we see some turning to Bookchin's flawed "Libertarian Municipalism" as if the germs of reformism did not exist in the local state as much as in Parliament.

Anarchists, then, had to use tactics which "will bring us into direct and unbroken contact with the masses" as the masses "are

All in all, though, there is little to complain about with this work and much to be excited about. In a way, I have been waiting for this book since I first read *Anarchy* and *Errico Malatesta: Life and Ideas* when I was a teenager (over 25 years ago now!) and Davide Turcato has not disappointed. He must be congratulated for producing such an excellent book, a work that enriches anarchism immensely, will be read with benefit by all – anarchists and non-anarchists, new and experienced libertarian militants alike – and wets the appetite for the *Collected Works*.

As I wrote at the start: Read this book.

The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader
Errico Malatesta
Davide Turcato (Editor)
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led to big demands by way of small requests and small revolts". (76–7) "Popular movements begin how they *can"* (166) and so:

> "If we wait to plunge into the fray until the people mount the Anarchist Communist colours, we shall run great risk of remaining eternal dreamers… leaving a free field… to our adversaries who are the enemies, conscious or unconscious, of the true interests of the people." (167)

Talking of flags, I had discovered when working on *An Anarchist FAQ*'s "Symbols of Anarchy" appendix that anarchists were raising the black-and-red flag during the 1877 propaganda uprisings in Italy but did not know what it looked like. Now I do: "The flag adopted by the International is red, framed in black." (65)

Anarchist involvement in the trade union movement was, then, championed by Malatesta who, ironically, is sometimes represented as anti-syndicalist. In realty, on his return to Europe he helped – like Kropotkin – win the debate within the movement to return to its syndicalist strategies from Bakunin's time. The picture of Malatesta the anti-syndicalist (rather than the syndicalist-plus) has been pained by those who misunderstand his critiques of those who turned means into ends as opposition to the shared means (class organisation and struggle).

What is the difference, then, between (revolutionary/communist) anarchism and (pure) syndicalism? Simply an awareness that unions are not inherently revolutionary and need anarchists to organise to influence them towards revolutionary aims and tactics. Hence Malatesta's constant argument that anarchists had to organise *as anarchists* to work within – and outwith – the unions. Equally, while unions were an important aspect of anarchist activity he rightly rejected the idea that building unions *automatically* created anarchism or that syndicalism made anarchism redundant. As can be seen from the texts in *The Method of Freedom*, he spent

much time over many decades arguing against those who thought that syndicalism was sufficient in itself, recognising that a union needed to organise all workers to be effective and could not, therefore, be confused with an organisation of anarchists. Both had their role to play and his conclusion was that the First International failed because it did not recognise this (a mistake he was keen to avoid repeating).

Similarly, while he viewed the general strike as a good means of starting a revolution it was a mistake – as some syndicalists did – to equate the two. His support of this tactic, again, predates the rise of syndicalism in France and so we find him in 1890 arguing that while the "general strike is preached and this is all to the good" it should not be confused with the revolution: "It would only be a splendid opportunity for making the Revolution, but nothing more." It had to be "transformed" into revolution, "down the road to expropriation and armed attack" before lack of food and other goods "erode[d] the strikers' morale. (107)

This brings forth another key aspect of Malatesta's commonsense politics – revolutions are complex and difficult things, as is getting to a situation where one is possible. Thus we find him refuting those comrades who thought that all we had to do was take what we needed from warehouses overflowing with goods immediately after a revolution. In reality, firms produced what they thought they could sell at a profit and so stopped long before warehouses were full of piles of goods gathering dust or rotting away.

As well as bursting the unrealistic dreams of certain anarchists on social revolution, he also skilfully destroyed Lenin's explanation of the necessity of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" as self-contradictory nonsense for "a minority that has to win over the majority after it has seized power" cannot be the proletariat as that "is obviously the majority". (407) Like all serious anarchists, he was well aware that libertarian communism cannot be created over-night and so urged anarchists *now* to think through the practical issues involved not only in achieving a revolution but also

the inevitably imperfect immediate aftermath when people start to slowly create the social institutions and relationships of a free society (needless to say, this – just like the necessity of defending a revolution – had nothing in common with Marxist notions of "the dictatorship of the proletariat"). Much of his work in the 1920s reflects this perspective, inspired by the failure of the near revolution in Italy he had returned from London exile to take part in.

What comes out clearly from all his articles is that Anarchism, for him, was not about utopias produced by revolutions which springs from nowhere but rather a set of principles which could and must be applied today in such a way as to bring the hoped for social revolution closer. That perspective should be the default position within the movement and so newcomers to anarchism will discover a thinker who will show them anarchism as a practical idea while experienced anarchists will benefit from the wealth of ideas Malatesta give the movement.

Needless to say, along with many newly translated articles and such essential works as *Anarchy*, *An Anarchist Programme* and *Towards Anarchy*, the book includes his polemics against Kropotkin's support for the Allies in 1914 (*Anarchists Have Forgotten their Principles* and *Pro-Government Anarchists*) as well as his *Peter Kropotkin: Recollections and Criticisms By One of His Old Friends*. My one real complaint is that while it is of interest to read the 1891 translation of *Anarchy*, I hope that a new translation is planned for the appropriate volume of the *Collected Works* as it is dated to modern eyes. In addition, while this collection is broken up into sections corresponding, in the main, to the volumes of the planned *Collected Works* there are no articles from Malatesta's time in South America (1885 to 1889). This is unfortunate as this time – with his active participation in a movement serious about organising unions – played a critical part in the advocacy of syndicalist tactics when he returned to Europe in 1889. Happily, the relevant volume of the *Collected Works* will have material from this period.