

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Organization

Errico Malatesta

Errico Malatesta
Organization
1897

The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by
Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.
Translated from “L’organizzazione,” parts 1–3, *L’Agitazione*
(Ancona) 1, nos. 13–15 (4, 11, and 18 June 1897).

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

1897

Contents

I	5
II	9
III	16

us strive for the greatest possible expansion of the conscious and organized forces of the proletariat. The rest will follow of itself.

I

For years now this has been a matter of great contention between anarchists. And, as is often the case when heat enters an argument and when insistence that one is in the right is injected into the search for the truth, or when arguments around theory are merely an attempt to vindicate practical behavior prompted by quite other motives, a great muddling of ideas and words is the result.

Incidentally, and just to get them out of the way, let us run through the straightforward semantic quibbles that have occasionally reached the utmost heights of absurdity, such as, say, “We are for harmonization, not organization”; “we are against association but are for agreement”; “we want no secretary and no treasurer, these being authoritarian features, but we put a comrade in charge of correspondence and another looks after our funds”—and let us get down to serious discussion.

Those who stake a claim to the title “anarchists,” with or without a range of adjectives, fall into two camps: the advocates and the opponents of organization.

If we cannot see eye to eye, let us at least understand each other.

And for a start, since there are three parts to the question, let us make a distinction between organization in the general sense, as the principle and condition of social living, today and in the society of the future; the organization of the anarchist party; and organization of popular forces, especially that of the laboring masses with an eye to standing up to government and capitalism.

The need for organization in social life—even the synonymy between organization and society, I would be tempted to say—is so self-evident that it is mind-boggling that it could ever have been questioned.

In order to appreciate this, we need to remember what the specific, characteristic calling of the anarchist movement is,

and how men and parties are liable to become consumed by the issue that most directly affects them, forgetting all related issues, paying greater heed to form than to substance, and, finally, viewing matters from one angle only and thereby losing any proper grasp upon reality.

The anarchist movement began life as a backlash against the spirit of authority that prevails in civil society, as well as in all parties and workers' organizations and has been gradually swollen by all of the revolts promoted against authoritarian and centralizing trends.

It is therefore only natural that many anarchists were just about mesmerized by this fight against authority, and that believing, having had an authoritarian education, that authority is the soul of social organization, combated and repudiated the latter as a means of combating the former.

And, in truth, the mesmerism has gone so far that it has them supporting some things that truly defy belief.

Cooperation and agreement of any sort were rejected, the argument being that association was the very antithesis of anarchy. The case was made that in the absence of accords, of reciprocal obligations, everything would fall spontaneously into place if each person was to do whatever crossed his mind without troubling to find out what his neighbor was doing; that anarchy means every man should be sufficient unto himself and do for himself in everything without trade-off or pooled effort; that the railways could operate very well without organization, indeed, that this was already happening over yonder in England(!); that the postal service was not necessary and that anyone in Paris wanting to write a letter to Petersburg... could take it there himself(!), and so on and so on.

But this is gibberish, you may say, and hardly deserving of mention.

Yes, but this sort of gibberish has been uttered, printed, and circulated; and accepted by much of the public as an authentic articulation of anarchist thinking; and still provides ammu-

party should still rely, in addition to its own strength, upon the sympathy of the masses and on sufficient preparation of public opinion.

Then what? The life of society accepts no interruptions. During the revolution—or insurrection, whatever we want to call it—and in its immediate aftermath, people have to eat and clothe themselves and travel around and publish and treat the sick, etc., and these things do not do themselves. At present the government and the capitalists have them done so as to extract profit from them; once we are rid of the government and the capitalists, the workers are going to have to do them all for everybody's benefit; otherwise, whether under those designations or something different, new governments and new capitalists will emerge.

And how could workers be expected to provide for pressing needs unless they were already used to coming together to deal jointly with their common interests and, to some extent, ready to embrace the legacy from the old society?

The day after the city's grain merchants and bakery bosses lose their property rights and thus have no further interest in catering for the market, there must be vital bread supplies available in the shops to feed the public. Who is going to see to that, if the bakery workers are not already associated and ready to manage without bosses, and if, pending the arrival of the revolution, it has not occurred to them to work out the city's needs and the means of meeting them?

We do not mean by that that we must wait until all workers are organized before the revolution can be made. That would be impossible, given the proletariat's circumstances; and, luckily, there is no need. But at the least there must be some nuclei around which the masses can rally once freed of the burden oppressing them. If it is utopian to want to make revolution once everybody is ready and once everybody sees eye to eye, it is even more utopian to seek to bring it about with nothing and no one. There is measure in all things. In the meantime, let

organization only to the extent and of the sort that suits its coming to power—electoral organization, if it looks to get there by lawful means, or military organization if, instead, it relies upon violent action.

But we anarchists are not out to *emancipate* the people; we want to see the people *emancipate themselves*. We do not believe in blessings from on high, imposed by force. We want to see a new social order emerge from within the people, and we want it to match the degree of development reached by men and for it to be able progress as men themselves make progress. So what matters to us is that every interest and every opinion encounters, in conscious organization, some scope for asserting itself and bringing its influence to bear upon collective life, in keeping with its importance.

We have made it our task to combat the existing organization of society and clear away the obstacles hampering the advent of a new society wherein everyone is assured of freedom and well-being. To which end we have come together as a party and are out to become as many and as mighty as we possibly can. But if there was nothing organized other than our party, if the workers were to be left isolated like so many units, indifferent to one another and linked only by the common bonds; if, besides being organized as a party, we were not organized alongside the workers in our capacities as workers ourselves, we would not be in a position to bring anything off, or, at best, would only be able to impose ourselves... in which case we would not have the triumph of anarchy, but our triumph. We might then very well call ourselves anarchists, but in actual fact we would be mere governors and as incapable of doing good as any other governor is.

Revolution is often spoken of, the belief being that the word represents the ironing out of every difficulty. But what should this revolution that we long for be and what could it be?

Established authorities toppled and property rights pronounced dead. Fine. A party could do as much... though that

tion for our bourgeois and non-bourgeois adversaries in search of an easy victory over us. Then again, such *gibberish* is not without its value, insofar as it is the logical outworking of certain premises and may serve as the acid test of the truthfulness or otherwise of those premises.

A few individuals of limited intellect but endowed with mightily logical turns of mind, once they have embraced some premises, draw every last consequence that flows from them and, if logic so dictates, can blithely arrive at the greatest nonsense and negate the most self-evident facts without flinching. There are others as well, better educated and more open-minded, who can always come up with some way of arriving at pretty reasonable conclusions, even should they have to ride roughshod over logic; and in the case of the latter, theoretical errors have little or no influence upon their actual behavior. But, all in all, and until such time as certain fundamental errors are shunned, there is still the threat of the die-hard syllogizers and of our having to start all over again.

The fundamental error of the anarchists opposed to organization is to believe that organization is impossible without authority—and, once that hypothesis has been accepted, they would rather give up any organization than accept a modicum of authority.

Now, that organization, meaning association for a specific purpose and adopting the forms and means required in order to achieve that purpose, is a fundamental pre-requisite of living in society strikes us as self-evident. The isolated man cannot live even the life of a brute: other than in the tropics and when the population is exceedingly sparse, he cannot even feed himself; and remains, without exception, incapable of achieving a standard of living any better than the beasts'. Obligated, therefore, to combine forces with other people, and actually finding himself united with them as a result of the prior evolution of the species, he must either defer to the will of others (be a slave), or impose his own will on others (be an author-

ity figure), or live in fraternal agreement with others for the sake of the greater good of all (be a partner). None can escape this need: and the most extravagant anti-organizers are not only subject to the overall organization of the society in which they live, but—even in purposeful acts in their own lives, and in their wrangles with organization—they come together and share the tasks and *organize* together with those of like mind and employ the means that society places at their disposal... provided, of course, that these are things genuinely wanted and enacted, rather than just vague, platonic aspirations and dreams dreamt.

Anarchy signifies *society organized without authority*, authority being understood as the ability to *impose* one's own wishes and not the inescapable and beneficial practice whereby the person who best understands and is most knowledgeable about the doing of something finds it easier to have his opinion heeded and, in that specific instance, serves as a guide for those less capable.

As we see it, authority is not only not a pre-requisite of social organization, but, far from fostering it, is a parasite upon it, hindering its evolution and siphoning off its advantages for the special benefit of one given class that exploits and oppresses the rest. As long as a harmony of interests exists within a community, as long as no one is inclined or equipped to exploit others, there is no trace of authority. Once internal strife comes along and the community is broken down into winners and losers, then authority arises, being naturally vested in the stronger, and helping to confirm, perpetuate, and magnify their victory.

That is what we believe and that is why we are anarchists; if, instead, we believed that organization without authority is unfeasible, we would rather be authoritarians, for we would prefer authority—which hobbles and stunts existence—to the disorganization that renders it impossible.

disorganizing them, while others have conceded that membership of existing resistance societies may be legitimate, but have looked upon attempts to organize new ones as bordering upon defection.

To those comrades it looked as if all of the forces marshalled for a less than radically revolutionary purpose were forces siphoned away from the revolution. Our view, by contrast, is that their approach would doom the anarchist movement to perpetual sterility, and experience has already vindicated us only too well.

Before one can carry out propaganda, one has to be in people's midst, and it is in the workers' associations that the working man encounters his fellows and especially those most inclined to understand and embrace our ideas. But even if it were feasible to carry out as much propaganda as one might like outside of the associations, this would not have any discernible impact on the laboring masses. Aside from a tiny number of individuals who are better educated and better equipped for abstract thinking and theoretical fervor, the working man cannot arrive at anarchy in one fell swoop. For him to become a bona fide anarchist rather than an anarchist in name only, he needs to start to be sensible of the fellowship that binds him to his comrades, to learn to cooperate with others in the defence of shared interests and, battling the bosses and the boss-supporting government, to appreciate that bosses and governments are useless parasites and that the workers could run the apparatus of society on their own. And, having understood that, he is an anarchist even though he may not use the title.

Besides, the fostering of all manner of popular organizations is the logical consequence of our fundamental ideas and should therefore be part and parcel of our program.

An authoritarian party out to take power, so as to impose its own ideas has an interest in the people remaining a formless mass incapable of doing for itself and therefore easily dominated. And, therefore, logically, it should want

III

We still have to talk about the organization of the laboring masses for the purposes of standing up to government and the bosses.

We have stated it before: in the absence of organization, be it free or imposed, there can be no society; in the absence of considered, deliberate organization, there can be neither freedom, nor guarantees that the interests of the component members of society will be respected. And anyone that fails to organize, fails to seek out the cooperation of others and volunteer his own cooperation on a reciprocal basis of fellowship, inescapably places himself in a condition of inferiority and plays the part of a thoughtless cog in the machinery of society that others operate according to their whims and to their own advantage.

The workers are exploited and oppressed because, being disorganized in everything having to do with safeguarding of their own interests, they are compelled by hunger or brute force to comply with the wishes of the rulers for whose benefit society is presently being run and must themselves supply the force (soldiers and capital) that helps hold them in subjection. Nor will they ever be able to emancipate themselves until such time as they look to unity for the moral, economic, and physical might needed to defeat the organized might of the oppressors.

There have been some anarchists—and a few of them are still around—who, while conceding the need for organization in the society of the future and the need to get organized today for propaganda and action purposes, are hostile to all organizations that do not have anarchy as their immediate objective and that do not espouse anarchist methods. And some of them have remained apart from all workers' organizations designed to stand up to and improve conditions in the current state of affairs, or have meddled in them with the express intention of

Besides, how things turn out for us is of little account. If it were true that the engineer and engine-driver and station-master simply had to be authorities, rather than partners performing certain tasks on everybody's behalf, the public would still rather defer to their authority than make the journey on foot. If there was no option but for the post-master to be an authority, anyone in his right mind would put up with the post-master's authority rather than deliver his own letters.

In which case... anarchy would be the stuff of some people's dreams, but could never become reality.

II

Accepting the possibility of there being a community organized in the absence of authority, that is, in the absence of coercion—and anarchists have to accept it, for anarchy would otherwise be meaningless—let us move on to deal with the anarchist party's own organization.

Here too organization strikes us as useful and necessary. If "party" means the ensemble of individuals who share a common purpose and strive to achieve that purpose, it is only natural that they should reach agreement, pool their resources, divide up the work, and adopt all measures that are thought likely to further that purpose and are the *raison d'être* of an organization. Staying isolated, with each individual acting or seeking to act on his own without entering into agreement with others, without making preparations, without marshalling the flabby strength of singletons into a mighty coalition, is tantamount to condemning oneself to impotence, to squandering one's own energies on trivial, ineffective acts and, very quickly, losing belief in one's purpose and lapsing into utter inaction.

But here again the thing strikes us as so self-evident that, rather than laboring direct proof, we shall try to answer the arguments of organization's adversaries.

Pride of place goes to the—so to speak—pre-emptive objection. “What is this talk of a party?” they say. “We’re no party, we have no program.” A paradox that is meant to indicate that ideas move on and are forever changing and that they refuse to accept any fixed program that might be fine for today but that will assuredly be obsolete tomorrow.

That would be perfectly fair if we were talking about academics questing after truth without a care for the practical applications. A mathematician, a chemist, a psychologist or a sociologist can claim not to have a program or to have none beyond the search for truth; they are out to discover, not to *do* something. But anarchy and socialism are not sciences; they are purposes, projects that anarchists and socialists mean to implement and that therefore have to be formulated as specific programs. The science and art of construction advance day by day; but an engineer wishing to build or indeed merely to demolish something, has to draw up his plans, assemble his equipment and operate as if science and art had ground to a halt at the point at which he found them when he embarked upon his task. It may very well be the case that he can find a use for new advances made in the course of the project without giving up on the core of his plan; and it may equally be that fresh discoveries made and new resources devised by the industry are such as to open his eyes to the need to drop everything and start all over again. But in starting over again, he will need to draw up a new plan based on what he knows and possesses at that point and he is not going to be able to devise and set about implementing some *amorphous* construction, with tools *not to hand*, just because, some time in the future, science might just come up with better forms and industry supply better tools!

By anarchist party we mean the ensemble of those who are out to help make anarchy a reality and who therefore need to set themselves a target to achieve and a path to follow; and we happily leave the lovers of absolute truth and unrelenting progress to their transcendental musings; never subjecting

reaction, it may be useful to suspend all correspondence and refrain from all gatherings; that will always be a set-back, but if the will to be organized survives, if the spirit of association endures, if the previous period of coordinated activities has widened one’s personal circle, nurtured sound friendships and conjured up a genuine commonality of ideas and actions among comrades, then the efforts of individuals, even isolated individuals, will have a contribution to make to the common purpose, and a means will soon be found of getting together again and repairing the damage done.

We are like an army at war and, depending on the terrain and the measures adopted by the enemy, we can fight in massive or in scattered formations. The essential thing is that we still think of ourselves as belonging to the same army, that we abide by all of the same guidelines and hold ourselves ready to form up again into compact columns when necessary and feasible.

Everything that we have said is directed at those comrades who are authentically against the organization as a principle. To those who resist organization only because they are reluctant to join or have been refused entry into a given organization and because they are out of sympathy with the individuals belonging to that organization, we say: set up another organization of your own, along with those who see eye to eye with you. We should certainly love it if we could all see eye to eye and bring all of anarchism’s forces together into one mighty phalanx; but we have no faith in the soundness of organizations built upon concessions and subterfuge and where there is no real agreement and sympathy between the members. Better dis-united than mis-united. But let us see to it that everyone bands together with his friends and that there are none who are isolated and no efforts going to waste.

If, then, an individual finds that none of the existing organizations encapsulates the essence of his ideas and methods and that he cannot express himself as an individual according to his beliefs, then he would be well advised to stay out of those organizations; but then, unless he wishes to remain idle and impotent, he must look around for others who think as he does and become the founder of some new organization.

Another objection, and the last one upon which we shall dwell, is that, being organized, we are more exposed to government persecution.

On the contrary, it seems to us that the more united we are, the more effectively we can defend ourselves. And actually every time we have been caught off guard by persecution while we were disorganized, it threw us into complete disarray and wiped out our preceding efforts; whereas when and where we were organized, it did us good rather than harm. And the same applies to the personal interests of individuals: the example of the recent persecutions that hit the isolated as much as they did the organized—and perhaps even worse—is enough. I am speaking, of course, of those, isolated and otherwise, who at least carry out individual propaganda. Those who do nothing and keep their beliefs well hidden are certainly in much less danger, but their usefulness to the cause is less as well.

In terms of persecution, the only thing to be achieved by being disorganized and preaching disorganization is to allow the government to deny us the right of association and pave the way for these monstrous criminal conspiracy trials that it would not dare mount against folk who loudly and openly assert their right to be and condition of being associated, or, if the government were to dare it, would backfire on it and benefit our propaganda.

Besides, it is only natural for organization to take whatever form circumstances commend and impose. The important point is not so much formal organization as the inclination to organize. There may be cases in which, due to the lingering

their notions to the test of action, they finish up doing nothing and discovering less.

The other objection is that organization creates leaders, authority figures. If that is true, if anarchists are incapable of coming together and reaching agreement with one another without deferring to some authority, that means that they are still far from being anarchists and that, before giving any thought to establishing anarchy in the world, they should spare a thought for equipping themselves to live anarchically. But the cure hardly lies in non-organization, but instead in expanding the consciousness of the individual members.

For sure, if an organization heaps all of the work and all of the responsibility upon a few shoulders, if it puts up with whatever those few do rather than put effort in and try to do better, those few will, albeit against their wishes, eventually substitute their own will for that of the community. If the members of an organization, all of them, do not make it their business to think, to try to understand, to seek explanations for that which they do not understand, and to always bring their critical faculties to bear on everything and everyone, and instead leave it up to the few to do the thinking for all, then those few are going to be the leaders, the directing intelligences.

But, let us say it again, the cure does not lie in non-organization. On the contrary: in small societies and in large, apart from brute force, which is out of the question in our case, the source and justification of authority lie in social disorganization. When a collective has needs and its members fail to organize themselves spontaneously, by themselves, in order to get by, someone, some authority figure pops up to cater for that need by deploying everyone's resources and directing them according to his whim. If the streets are not safe and the people cannot cope, a police force emerges that has itself maintained and paid for what few services it renders and it lords it and grows tyrannical; if there is a need for a product and the community fails to come to some arrangement

with faraway producers to trade in return for local produce, up pops the merchant who cashes in on the need of some to sell and of others to buy, and charges producers and consumers whatever price he likes.

Look at what has happened in our own ranks: the less organized we have been, the more we have been at the mercy of a few individuals. And that was only natural.

We feel the need to be in contact with comrades elsewhere, to receive and send news, but we cannot, each of us individually, correspond with every other comrade. If we were organized we might charge some comrades with handling our correspondence for us, change them if they are not to our satisfaction and keep abreast of developments without depending on somebody's good grace for our news. If we are disorganized on the other hand, there will be someone with the means and willingness to correspond who will take all intercourse into his own hands, passing on or not passing on news depending on his choice of subject or person and, if he is active and clever enough, will be able, unbeknownst to us, to steer the movement in whatever direction he wants without our (the bulk of the party's) having any means of control and without anyone's having the right to complain, since that person is acting on his own, with mandate from none and with no obligation to give an account of his actions to anyone.

We feel the need to have a newspaper. If we are organized we can raise the funds for its launch and get it going, put a few comrades in charge of running it and monitor its direction. The paper's editors will assuredly, to a greater or lesser degree, discernibly stamp their personality upon it, but they will still be folk selected by us, and whom we can change if we are not happy with them. If, on the other hand, we are disorganized, someone with enough get-up-and-go will launch the paper on his own accord; he will find among us his correspondents, distributors, and subscribers and will bend us to his purposes, without our knowledge or consent; and, as has often

been the case, we will accept and support that paper even if it is not to our liking, even if we find that it is damaging to the cause, because of our own inability to come up with one that offers a better representation of our thinking.

So, far from conjuring up authority, organization represents the only cure for it and the only means whereby each of us can get used to taking an active and thoughtful part in our collective endeavor and stop being passive tools in the hands of leaders.

If we do nothing at all and everybody remains perfectly idle then, to be sure, there will be no leaders and no flock, no order-givers and no order-followers, but that will be an end of propaganda, an end of the party and of arguments about organization as well... and that, let us hope, nobody will see as an ideal solution.

But an organization, they say, implies an obligation to coordinate one's own actions with those of others and thus infringes freedom and hobbles initiative. It seems to us that what actually snatches away freedom and renders enterprise impossible is the isolation that leaves one impotent. Freedom is not some abstract right, but the capability of doing something: this is as true in our own ranks as it is in society at large. It is in cooperation with his fellows that man finds the means of furthering his own activity and the power of his initiative.

To be sure, organization means coordinating resources for a common purpose and a duty upon the organized not to act contrary to that purpose. But where voluntary organizations are concerned, when those belonging to the same organization actually do share the same aim and are supportive of the same means, the mutual obligations upon them work to everybody's advantage. And if anyone sets aside any belief of his own for the sake of unity, it is because he finds it more beneficial to drop an idea that he could not in any case implement unaided, rather than deny himself the cooperation of others in matters he thinks are of more significance.