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# The Revolutionary Anarchist-Socialism of Errico Malatesta

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Was Malatesta a "gradualist"? Unquestionably he continued to believe in the goal of a revolution of the workers and all oppressed—through popular insurrection and armed struggle. In this sense he was a revolutionist and not at all a gradualist. However, he believed that the struggle could take a long time. He believed that once the repressive agencies of the state were overthrown there would come an extended time of experimentation and pluralism. The liberated people would gradually build the institutions of a free society, from the bottom up. In that sense, he was a post-revolutionary gradualist.

Overall, by the time covered by this volume, Errico Malatesta had developed a strategic approach of great value. Carrying on the work of Bakunin, Kropotkin, and many others, he proposed a two-sided revolutionary strategy. He wanted anarchists to support and participate in every popular struggle for betterment, whether minor or major. This especially meant the labor movement, but also struggles for increased political freedom (against the monarchy and then fascism), for the independence of oppressed nations (such as Cuba), and every other effort for improving the lives of the people. He was for working in alliance with every political tendency, however non-anarchist, which would fight for even limited gains. However, he insisted that socialist-anarchists must not dissolve themselves in these struggles but should fight as revolutionary anarchists. He wanted them to form specific political federations, to put out their own propaganda, to raise their own programs, and to keep in mind their vision of a free society and the goal of a popular revolution. "*A socialist should know that the only way of correcting the people's mistakes is to always say what one believes to be the truth.*" (166) This was true then and remains true now.

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evolve into communist anarchism. In this sense, and in only this sense, he believed, "*Anarchism is necessarily gradualist*." (2014; 270)

## Conclusions

Of course Malatesta was not perfect. Although residing in the U.S. he had virtually nothing to say about white supremacy. Occasionally he mentioned the split between African-Americans and white workers as an example, among others, of the divide-and-rule approach of the capitalists—true but not sufficient. Of course, his experience of the U.S. was quite limited.

He says little or nothing about the oppression of women. Early on in the U.S., he proposed an anarchist program which included, "*Reconstruction of the family*" (45) as well as guaranteed social support for children. It did not go beyond this. He wrote one essay "On the Problem of Love." (196—200) It is, in fact, a discussion of the problems of heterosexual love. Despite one phrase about the need to "*destroy the brutal claims of the male to dominate over the female*," (199) there is no further mention of the oppression of women. Unlike the issues around U.S. racism, he should have had more to say. However, in the socialist-anarchist organization with which he worked in Patterson, a number of women formed their own Gruppo Emancipazione della Donna. This says something positive about the grouping.

I think Malatesta was mistaken in saying that he was against "democracy," when his actual opinion was the support of a self-managing society, that is, a radical democracy. Also, in my opinion he was mistaken in his blanket condemnation of Marxism. He was certainly correct to reject Marxists' electoralism and statism as well as its nonmoral determinism. Yet I think that there are aspects of Marx's Marxism which can be useful to revolutionary anarchists, such as historical materialism and the analysis of how capitalism works.

## After the Revolution

Malatesta's view of a post-revolutionary period was based on several factors. For one, he doubted that all the revolutionary people would have been converted to anarchist-socialism before a successful insurrection. Even immediately after a revolution, he expected anarchists to actually be a minority. The revolution would probably be made through a united front of differing organizations and tendencies. Further, he expected that there would be a need to rapidly get the economy going—to feed, clothe, and shelter the working population. The old system of production and distribution could not be immediately torn down without something to take its place. At the same time, the old state would have been dissolved. Without the forces of state repression over everyone, it would become possible for the people to experiment in re-organizing society in a free and pluralistic manner.

To return to the essay, "Towards Anarchy:" Malatesta declared that a violent revolution was necessary—but once accomplished, a different approach would become possible. "*The right of force having disappeared, the means of production being placed under the management of whomever wants to produce, the rest must be the fruit of peaceful evolution….*" (169) As he was to explain later (in 1925), "*After the revolution—that is after the fall of those in power and the final triumph of the forces of insurrection? This is where gradualism becomes particularly relevant.*" (2014; "Gradualism"; chap. 71; 472)

Malatesta did not lay out a blueprint for a new society but neither did he leave it at some general principles. Rather he expected that people would organize themselves in different ways, using different methods, trying out alternate ways of producing goods, providing housing, educating children, governing themselves (without government), protecting themselves (without police), and overall creating an experimental, pluralistic, and decentralized, new society. (See Price 2006.) Over time he expected these approaches to



Errico Malatesta (1853—1932) was a younger comrade and friend of Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, who were among the "founders" of revolutionary anarchism. He may be seen as continuing their theory and practice where they left off—after Bakunin died and after Kropotkin betrayed anarchist principles to support the imperialist Allies in World War I. He was of a generation which included significant anarchist figures, including Emma Goldman, Luigi Fabbri, Pierre Monatte, and Nester Makhno, among others. Living through World War I, the Russian revolution, and the rise of fascism, he made important contributions—which remain valuable for anarchists today. These were expressed in his direct, plain-spoken, style, a model of clarity.

Malatesta's overall views may be evaluated in **His Life and Ideas** (1984). This is a selection of passages from various essays (chosen by V. Richards). Arranged thematically, the book covers the major topics of his anarchism. The more recent (and larger) **Method of Freedom** (2014) is a selection by D. Turcato of the major writings of his life, arranged chronologically. Turcato has written a biography and an assessment of Malatesta's ideas, **Making Sense of Anarchism** (2015). Finally, **The Complete Works**, being organized by Turcato, aims at a ten volume collection of Malatesta's work, covering his 60 years of political activity. It is an important undertaking and a major contribution to anarchism.

The latest volume in this series (as of this writing) is **Volume 4** (2019). It has a useful introduction by Nunzio Pernicone, the specialist on Italian anarchism. It covers about eight months in 1988—1900 when Malatesta resided in the United States, after escaping from an Italian prison island. He came to the U.S. to be the main editor of a journal, **La Questione Sociale**. This was based in Paterson, N.J., a center of Italian working class migrant life and of left-wing Italian activity. Traveling up and down the Eastern seaboard, he gave lectures on anarchism in Italian and Spanish, and spent a week doing the same in Cuba. He had planned to stay longer, but events drew him back to Europe, immediately to Britain.

Malatesta's speeches and essays of this period were only a fraction of his lifelong production. Yet they covered the major themes of his anarchist perspective. Many are written in debate with two other Italian political groupings: the "anti-organizationalists" and the "democratic socialists". The "*anti-organizzatori/individualisti"* were led by Guiseppe Ciancabilla. There are some similar anarchists today who object to the "anti-organizational" label, because, they point out, they are for local collectives, journals, info shops, loose networks, cooperatives, and so on. Be that as it may, Pernicone writes, "*Ciancabilla was adamantly opposed to labor unions and virtually any form of activity that involved even a modicum of organization—anarchist federations, congresses, cooperatives, mutual aid societies, formalized programs, permanent committees, etc. He rejected them all as harbingers of authoritarianism.* " (2019; xiii—xiv) Ciancabilla declared, *"Every organization—even if it proclaims itself anarchist—can only prove authoritarian….Therefore our struggle must be a constant one against the principle itself of organization…*" (xxiii)

In contrast, **self-organization from below**—for mass movements as well as for specific anarchist groupings—was central to Malatesta's politics. He believed that anarchists would be most effective if they voluntarily organized themselves around an agreed-upon perspective, which he referred to as the *"revolutionary anarchist-socialist program."* (43) With this program, they should form self-managed anarchist federations. "*Those who want the same thing and intend to bring it about using the same methods, should unite…in order to educate and help each other in the common work, [and] to coordinate into a common cause various initiatives….*"[64] Such an organization, with autonomy for members and locals, would improve their ability to develop their theory and coordinate their practice. This includes their capacity to effectively participate in broader organizations (labor unions, community associations, anti-war movements, etc.).



tive democracy, not anarchy. But—at the time—they supported a violent revolution against Italy's archaic monarchy. To this end, Malatesta was for working with them, without giving up the anarchist goal or the self-organization of the anarchists. "*Ready to rise up against the monarchy alongside anybody who is ready to rise up, we remain anarchist-socialists as always….We are anti-monarchist but we are also anti-republican.*" (96)

This became the later anarchist strategy in fighting the rise of fascism. (See Malatesta 2014; "United Proletarian Front"; chap. 57.) The anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists proposed to fight Mussolini's Fascist goons in coalition with the Socialists and Communists as well as the radical republicans. In towns where they did this, they were successful in driving out the Fascists. But the Socialists made a "non-aggression pact" with the Fascists (which the Fascists ignored) and the Communists (then led by the super-sectarian Amadeo Bordiga) broke off all alliances which they did not rule. So a fighting alliance was not formed and the Fascists came to power.

During his brief tour of Cuba, Malatesta raised his attitude toward national liberation. This was not long after the Cuban War of Independence. Most Cuban anarchists had supported the war and many had fought in it. Malatesta expressed full agreement with this approach. He praised the *"brave Cuban workers, white and black,…[who had] fought for their country's freedom.*" (231) At the same time, he expressed the anarchist opposition to replacing the Spanish government with a new Cuban state. He advocated opposition to U.S. imperialism which sought to take the place of the Spanish empire. "*The anarchists, fighting against the existing government, do not do so to put another in its place….*" (233)

In brief, in all sorts of economic and political struggles, Malatesta was for maintaining the anarchist-socialist goal and building anarchist-socialist organizations, while fighting for every improvement for the people, no matter how limited. I would not regard this as a "gradualist" approach.

## Before the Revolution

During pre-revolutionary or non-revolutionary periods, Malatesta rejected all-or-none approaches. He came to oppose either demands for an immediate insurrection (whether the people were ready or not) or for incremental reforms with no revolutionary goal. "*We must seek to get all the people, or different sections of the people, to make demands…for…all the improvements and freedoms that it desires…; and in always propagating all aspects of our program, and always struggling for its complete realization, we must push the people to want always more and to increase its pressures, until it has achieved complete emancipation ….Whatever may be the practical results of the struggle for immediate gains, the greatest value lies in the struggle itself.*" (49—50)

As mentioned, Malatesta was a strong supporter of labor unions. He supported union struggles over big and small issues. "*Let us enter all the workers's associations, establish as many as we can, weave ever larger federations, support and organize strikes, and spread everywhere…the spirit of cooperation and solidarity between workers….*" (xix) He criticized anarchists who joined unions but did not go to union meetings or be part of union activities.

Sometimes he has been falsely seen as anti-union or anti-syndicalist. He criticized those anarcho-syndicalists whom he perceived as advocating the dissolution of the anarchist movement into the unions. Pointing to the limitations of the unions, he advocated that anarchist organizations maintain themselves and work inside and outside the unions. (See Malatesta 2014; chapter 45.)

In the fight against the Italian monarchy, he did not insist that nothing but anarchy would do as a goal. Instead, he proposed a "*revolutionary alliance*" of anarchists (and the union they influenced), of the social democrats (and their union), and also the radical wing of the anti-monarchist republicans. The goal of the social democrats and the republicans was a bourgeois representa-



For this reason, this approach is sometimes called (awkwardly) "dual-organizationalism."

This is distinct from the Leninist concept of the centralized vanguard party: the aim is not to build a machine which would take over the state and rule the people for their own good; it is to fight effectively to spur the workers on to act for themselves, to overthrow their bosses, and to prevent anyone else from taking over as new masters.

Malatesta is sometimes falsely portrayed as anti-organzational because, years later, he rejected a specific proposal for an anarchist federation laid out in the **"Platform"** developed by Makhno, Arshinov, and others.(See 2014, chap. 73.) Whatever the rights or wrongs of that specific exchange, it was a discussion between pro-organizational anarchists.

Malatesta also debated, in speeches and written essays, with Italian-American "democratic socialists" (social democrats—mostly Marxist state socialists). He resisted their claim to be the only "socialists," unlike the anarchists. Instead he insisted that his grouping was "anarchist-socialist," genuine socialists (which did not contradict his goal of libertarian communism). The difference was that the social democrats believed in creating socialism through their party taking over the state by means of elections. This meant winning elections in bourgeois-democratic countries with elected governments—such as France—or through first replacing undemocratic monarchies with parliaments—as in italy at the time. (This was written before the Russian revolution, so he did not yet raise anarchist opposition to non-parliamentary revolutions which might create a single-party dictatorship—the "dictatorship of the proletariat".) (See Malatesta 2014; "The Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Anarchy"; chap. 55.)

Malatesta did not want people to trust "representatives" to be political for the working people; he wanted the oppressed to learn to act collectively for themselves. He did not trust any form of the state, no matter how formally democratic, to work for the peo-

ple. Any government would serve the rich and powerful against the poor and oppressed (he used the U.S.A. as an example). Whatever good a government may do (such as labor laws) is only due to pressure from below; when the popular pressure recedes, the "good laws" will no longer be enforced. "*We must do what we can to prevent the fallacy from taking root that a good parliament might be possible, which would be just as harmful as the theory that there might be such a thing as a good king.*" (xxi)

"*Electionists…compare what is done in the electoral struggle with what would happen if nothing were done; while instead they should compare the results obtained when other methods are followed and with what might be achieved if all effort used to send representatives to power…were employed in the fight to directly achieve what is desired.*" (179)

In the abstract, he did not accept "democracy," defined as "majority rule." Malatesta advocated voluntary association through free agreement. However, he was flexible. "*When we are not all unanimous and this concerns opinions over which nobody wishes to sacrifice the existence of the group [such as the selection of a meeting date], we voluntarily, by tacit agreement, let the majority decide.*" (74)

## Was Malatesta a Gradualist?

Basing itself on Davide Turcato's interpretation, the back of the (2019) book states that Malatesta was "*laying the foundation of an original, gradualist vision of anarchism.*" In Malatesta (2014), Turcato writes that "*Malatesta's is a gradualist view of anarchy*" and refers to his *"anarchist gradualism."* (3, 4) If not literally wrong, this presentation of Malatesta as a "gradualist" is misleading. It implies that he ceased to be a revolutionary.

The "gradualist" interpretation is especially based on an 1899 essay, "Towards Anarchy." (167—170) Referring to the *"gradual modification of the new environment,"* Malatesta wrote, "*Anarchy cannot come but little by little—slowly but surely, growing in intensity and extension. Therefore the subject is not whether we accomplish anarchy today, tomorrow, or within ten centuries, but that we walk toward anarchy today, tomorrow, and always.*" (168)



Speaking of the goal of anarchy taking ten centuries certainly sounds gradualist, not to say reformist. However, what Malatesta is talking about is the full achievement of anarchy—of a classless, stateless, oppressionless society, which is completely cooperative, relying on the fully developed consciences of totally autonomous individuals. This may indeed take centuries.

But in the very same essay, Malatesta makes it clear that he believes that a revolution—or series of revolutions—will be necessary to begin the process of building an anarchist-socialist society. (Malatesta is advocating eventual mass, popular, uprisings, not minority coups—when the people want a new society and the rulers refuse to permit a peaceful change.) "*There is in every country a government which, with brutal force,…compels all to be subjected to exploitation.…It is for this reason that we want a violent revolution today and we shall want it always…Always we should remain firm in our resolution to take with force, as soon as it is possible, those means which the private owners, protected by the government, have stolen from the workers." (168-9)*

Malatesta rejected the social democrats' view that socialism could be voted in through peaceful, "democratic," elections. He also disagreed with those anarcho-syndicalists who thought that a revolution could be carried out nonviolently using only a general strike. Armed conflict with the core of the bosses' state would be eventually necessary, he argued. How then can we reconcile his revolutionism and his "gradualism"? This can only be done by examining Malatesta's views of anarchist activity before and after the desired revolution.