

“What I know about Errico Malatesta” was part of an exhibition entirely devoted to this key figure in Italian anarchism, which took place in December 2001 at the Juliane Wellerdiek Gallery in Berlin. I began to confront anarchist thought, and Malatesta's work in particular, because I realised that there were several overlaps between his approach to a new blueprint for society and my own persistently unstable idea of art, the process of making and the ongoing self analysis involved. In trying to describe a new type of social structure it seems to me that Malatesta adopted an essentially creative approach. An approach, like mine as an artist, based on research, on doubt, on the importance attached to error and its necessary contribution to genuinely free experiment.

This abridged text contains the last two chapters of the original version, combined with the biography of Malatesta. Anyone who is interested in obtaining a free copy of the complete text can request it via the following e-mail address: [andrea-crociani@galerie-wellerdiek.de](mailto:andrea-crociani@galerie-wellerdiek.de)

Extract from the text “What I know about Errico Malatesta” by Andrea Crociani

### *The Swindle of Democracy*

For Malatesta, democracy, advanced as “government by all the people” is a swindle, because the only way that a government can really be “by all the people” is if the people are always in agreement on every political choice and this is self-evidently impossible. Therefore, it would be better explained as a form of control or domination by one part of the population over another. It makes little difference whether the control is carried out by the majority or the minority. In either case, it entails imposing choices on one part of the people. Democracy was therefore considered by Malatesta and the anarchists to be a system that does not guarantee the expression of the full freedom of every individual: “*Government of the people*” no, because this presupposes something that can never be achieved: i.e. the unanimity of will of all the individuals who make up the people. Therefore, you get closer to the truth by saying: *Government by the majority of the people*. This already presupposes a minority that will rebel or submit to the will of others. But representatives of the majority in power are never all of the same mind on every question, therefore you still need to resort to a system of majority and consequently we get closer to the truth by saying: *Government of the majority of those elected by a majority of the electors*. This definition already begins to resemble strongly government by the minority. [...] Even in the case of the most democratic of democracies, a small minority always dominates and imposes its will and interests by force. [...] Therefore, whoever truly wants “government by the people” in the sense that each person's will, ideas and needs can be made to count, must act in such a way that no-one, whether majority or minority, can dominate others. This means you must want the abolition of government, that is, of any coercive organisation and its replacement by the free association of those who have interests and aims in common”<sup>1</sup>.

Democracy can never fulfil the will of the whole collectivity because the collectivity is not homogenous. Men have different needs, aspirations and values which the democratic regime cannot meet or only partially. In this context, minorities do not count, they have no voice and are subject to the will the majority imposes on them by force (through the police and bureaucracy). Therefore, for Malatesta, democracy is an imperfect approximation that delegates power to the strongest political class, which, in turn, is an expression of the strongest socio-economic class. As a result, in this context, fundamental values of liberty and equality are expressed only partially and cannot develop their full potential. Certainly, there is no doubt that “the worst of democracies is always preferable to the best of dictatorships. Certainly, democracy as the so-called “government by the people” is a lie, but the lie always constrains the liar a bit, limiting the arbitrary exercise of power; certainly the “sovereign people” is sovereign of a farce, a slave with a papier mâché sceptre and crown, but believing yourself free even without being so is always worth more than knowing you are a slave and accepting slavery as a legitimate and unavoidable fact”<sup>2</sup>. Then, once you have arrived in power, there is the problem of remaining there, of inevitably resorting to the usual strategies of favouring the most powerful classes, of patronage, suppression of the opposition, small bluffs of reform to quell opposition, empty speeches to save face, control of the media, unnatural alliances... In this system, where the goal is by necessity to stay in power, the free, honest and disinterested discussion of collective problems cannot be guaranteed.

Naturally Malatesta does not refuse that main expression of democracy which is the vote, even though he does draw a distinction in this regard, between “the political vote which serves to appoint the political bosses and the vote as a means of expressing your own opinion forthrightly”. The idea of “direct democracy” advanced by anarchists means that in some circumstances it is necessary to vote, and therefore, to follow the will of the majority. What is meant is a vote by the population about a specific problem that needs resolving and not a vote to delegate your own power to a political representative. In any case, the vote should never be considered as a permanent rule of conduct because, wherever possible, any kind of oppression should be discouraged, even if it is approved by the majority. On this point Giampietro Berti, in his book “Il pensiero anarchico” wrote: “Even though situations arise in which minorities have to concede to majorities, there is no need to elevate this juxtaposition to a sacred law because majorities are not always in the right and neither, for that matter, are minorities. It is necessary to underline the voluntary nature of the minority’s act in yielding to the majority and therefore not rely fatalistically on coercion. Malatesta is the prisoner of a radically optimistic anthropological premise that insists on the *moral character* of the divergence between anarchism and democracy, and which is reconciled through a different ethical conception of society. One where the members of a free society, recognising the virtue and impossibility of acting otherwise, spontaneously yield to the will of the many”<sup>3</sup>. An authoritarian society is maintained by coercion, the anarchic society by freely arrived-at agreement: “What for example would happen, if it were a question of building a railway, there would undoubtedly be thousands of different opinions that would change day-in day-out: but if you want to build the railway, you have to decide. Otherwise you would have to modify the route, move the stations and change the rolling stock every day. Since it is a question of choosing, it is better that the many are satisfied, rather than the few, apart naturally from giving the few all the liberty and means possible to argue their case and try out their ideas with the aim of becoming the majority. Therefore, in all those cases which do not allow for several simultaneous options, or where differences of opinion are not so important that it is worth splitting over and forming separate factions or where the duty of solidarity calls for unity, it is reasonable, just and necessary for the minority to cede to the majority”<sup>4</sup>.

### *Anarchy and Freedom*

Freedom is the main aim and guiding spirit of anarchy, its founding principle being to hold human dignity in the highest and most sacred regard. For Malatesta, anarchy can be summed up in the phrase “freedom for all”: not a theoretical, fictional, approximate freedom, but complete freedom expressed through the absence of any form of coercion of person against person, and through the existence of all those material conditions which enable each person to be his own master without any external constraints, to be free to seek maximum enjoyment and wellbeing through available means without any other limit than the equal freedom of all. Freedom and wellbeing cannot be conferred by a person or a party or a government but rather everyone must discover for themselves the conditions for achieving them. They must create them even if each individual is different from every other and often the needs they are seeking to meet are different. People must be totally free, only respect for the next person determines the necessary limits to their will. The absence of rules in reality means the possibility of choosing and deciding your own rules, in accordance with your own conscience and the contingencies of your particular situation. As we have said, it is certainly a slow and complex process because it aims to develop human consciousness and awaken critical faculties, that in a totalitarian or democratic regime are anaesthetised by the habit of blind obedience to rules, which are often pointless, partial and superficial. Under these regimes, people do not have the opportunity to fully develop a critical spirit through trial and error, which is the only means to really learn at one’s own expense which path to follow. In a democracy, error is considered a punishable offence.

It seems that democracy cannot make people into mature human beings. It acts rather like bad parents who impose rules on their children without explaining why and without giving them the opportunity to freely engage in their own experience, and even searching for eventual alternative solutions. It leaves no space for experimentation, when, on the contrary, the curiosity of the human spirit should always be supported and stimulated in every way. Furthermore, for anarchism there is not one single truth, but an attempt at continual improvement that can lead in a number of directions. “The general will” is not and cannot be judged as the truth. It cannot be seen as the better path to follow simply because the majority have declared it. For anarchism it is fundamental to guarantee plurality of developmental paths and social alternatives in a logic of

continual experimentation in search of the best solution. However such a guarantee cannot be secured in a social structure that determines its development in binary terms of black and white; you can, you can't, good and bad, applying a totally simplistic approach. Anarchy seeks to bring other factors into play, enlarging human interest in the search for various modes of co-existence, stimulating a critical spirit and imagination, not repressing the need to experiment. It aims to avoid creating the fear of making mistakes that an authoritarian family instils in its children. Making mistakes is an integral and fundamental part of the process of learning. Undoubtedly, this is a difficult process because it seeks to avoid being banal without simplifying things that are, on the contrary, manifestly complex and it refuses to treat people as immature. As Malatesta put it: "I never said that anarchy, especially in the early stages, would be Arcadia or Eldorado. Unfortunately there will be enough trouble and difficulties inherent in human imperfection and discord but probably the evils will be less than they would be in any authoritarian regime and that is enough to make me an anarchist"<sup>5</sup>.

It is obvious that freedom must be guaranteed for all, including those who think differently and those who do not agree with anarchy. This is what Malatesta said about an episode that took place in a little town in Umbria in 1897 when a Catholic circle was celebrating its constitution with a religious procession and was broken up through a fist fight and being beaten up with sticks by a group of anticlericalists, some anarchists among them: "One understands that liberals do this kind of thing. By now centuries of experience have shown what the class that triumphed with the French Revolution of 1789 means by liberty. It began its reign by massacring prisoners and mass guillotining of nobles and common people, realists and communists alike. It has always defended itself with unheard-of brutality when it has seen or believed it has seen its own purse threatened and now it has arrived at the point of re-establishing and reviving the glories of the Inquisition. But it seems that part of the anarchists also assent to the violence against the clerics and this fills me with shame and disdain. [...] They who do not respect the freedom of others which they claim for themselves, are not anarchists. They are either a hypocrite or unaware, who, while hating and despising cops, act like cops against others the moment they become aware of their force and the occasion presents itself. [...] Anarchists, know how to act as free people. Counter physical violence where necessary with physical resistance, but counter propaganda with propaganda and nothing other than propaganda. Otherwise people will believe, and not without reason, that when we become strong, we will be tyrants like all the others and that anarchy will remain empty words. Just as the word liberty, of which the bourgeoisie, before its victory, proclaimed to be the defenders, has remained empty"<sup>6</sup>. "The opponent can be mistaken, can be totally wrong, their propaganda can be damaging but they have the right to complete freedom all the same, because otherwise who would judge what truth is allowed and what error is banned?"<sup>7</sup>.

On the same point Luigi Fabbri, in his text on Malatesta, recalls an episode thus: "While fascist violence was hotting up and destroying liberty in Italy, he was asked "Do you therefore recognise the freedom of the fascists?". He [Malatesta] replied: "Certainly, on condition that by freedom we mean true freedom, the same that we claim for ourselves and for everyone (freedom of the press, of speech, meeting and association, etc.), and not the so-called freedom to sack, burn down, beat up and kill that constitutes a disgraceful arbitrary power, a use of force and a violation of all liberties"<sup>8</sup>.

Anarchy cannot accept a single, irrefutable truth but it seeks to maintain a social structure open to many truths that it recognises and gives equal weight to on a single level, that are taken simply as some, but not the only, solutions. As always with anarchy it is the facts which determine choices. "We anarchists can say *our own brand of anarchy*, in fact every anarchist can say *my anarchy* since an anarchist does not recognise any rules of life other than those approved of by their own conscience"<sup>9</sup>. "It is not a question of being right or wrong: it is a question of freedom, freedom for everyone in so far as it does not violate the equal freedom of others. No-one can judge for sure who is right and who is wrong, who is nearer the truth and which path leads to the greater good of each and everyone. Freedom is the only means through experience to arrive at what is true and best, and it is not freedom if there is no freedom to be mistaken"<sup>10</sup>. The freedom to try out different choices is the only way of arriving at the best one, of getting as close as possible to the truth. What is important is to have the opportunity to realise your own ideas without denying other people the same opportunity: "We are for freedom not only when it benefits us, but also when it hurts us. Only in this way can freedom exist"<sup>11</sup>.

What are the specific forms and ways in which this victory of freedom and love can be realised "no-one can say for sure" because "there are no magic formulae capable of solving difficulties, more universal and infallible doctrines which apply to all people and all cases"<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, no-one can predict the future with

certainty and how an anarchic society effectively could come about, because anarchic society must remain sensitive to every contingency and not present itself as a series of rigid and inviolable rules that aim to be valid at all costs in every situation and every moment.

### *Biographical Note*

Errico Malatesta was born in Santa Maria Capua Vetere (Caserta) on the 14 December 1853 in a family of small traders - his father had a leather factory. Early in his life, in 1864, the family moved to Naples. On 25 March 1868 at the age of fourteen, Errico Malatesta was arrested for the first time. The warrant for his arrest was issued because of a subversive “threatening and insolent” letter signed by him sent to King Vittorio Emanuele II in Florence, the former capital. This arrest, followed by his immediate release due to his youthfulness, was the first in a long series that followed Malatesta throughout his long life, adding up to more than 10 years imprisonment and 35 years (almost half his life) in exile.

He enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine in Naples but never graduated. He learnt a trade as an electrical engineer, a trade which he fell back on all his life at various times of economic hardship. From the time of his very early youth, following the example of his older brother Aniello, he moved in patriotic republican circles led by Giuseppe Mazzini. When he had barely reached eighteen, he embraced the anarchic ideal that he would keep to all his life. In this regard, Malatesta wrote: “I studied and saw that the republic had always been a government like all the others or worse, and that in a republic or monarchy, there is poverty and they machine-gun down the people when they try to throw off their yoke. [...] I looked at modern countries and saw that those in which there is a republic are not doing any better than those in which there is monarchy. In America, there is a republic and with such an expansion of free land, with a superabundance of production, there are still people dying of hunger. There is the republic and despite liberty and equality being written into the Constitution, those who are poor do not have human dignity and the cavalry disperse workers who ask for bread and land with blows of staffs and sabres. [...] I say: in America just like in Rome or Greece, you can see that the republic is compatible with slavery. There is the republic of Switzerland and there is poverty and the Protestant and Catholic priests dominate and you cannot live in the city without a residence permit. [...] There is a republic in France and it began life massacring 50,000 Parisians and continued by subjugating itself to priests and sending its soldiers wherever workers raised their heads above the parapet, to force them to submit to the bosses and meekly put up with their poverty. Therefore, I say to myself, the republic is not what I dreamed of; therefore, the vague aspiration for a shared life is other, quite other than this reality. My older comrades, those who I considered as my mentors, were right when they said that existing republics were not the true republic and that the republic in Italy would bring justice, liberty, wellbeing, equality; but I knew that the same things were said in France before the revolution triumphed; [...] I wanted to see clearly”<sup>13</sup>.

As a result, Malatesta left the Mazzinian republican movement and joined the Socialist International. Soon misunderstandings arose between the Italian wing of the International and the Marxist General Council in London, the programmatic heart of the movement. The misunderstandings derived mainly from the different approach to socialist doctrine: the authoritarian Marxist one and the libertarian Italian one. The official split between the two positions came to a head at the Congress of Rimini in 1872, where all relations with the General Council were broken off for good and the Italian Federation of the International Association of Workers was formed, among whose founders was Malatesta. Therefore, in Italy, socialism essentially was born anarchic.

The new movement sought to consolidate itself, taking shape and establishing its own identity independently of the General Council in London. Under this aegis, the “First International Federalist Congress” was also organised in 1872, as an anti-authoritarian expression of the International. On this occasion, for the first time, the principles of anarchy were officially formulated, inspired by the organiser of the event, Michail Bakunin. The congress was organised in Switzerland at Saint-Imier, and Malatesta was invited as representative of the Neapolitan Workers' Federation, which was also one of anti-authoritarian wings of the International. Bakunin met him for the first time: “In Naples Bakunin was a kind of myth. [...] Inevitably you heard spoken of, Bakunin had become for me a legendary figure; It was my ardent desire, almost obsession to get to know him, to get close to him, to bathe in his reflected glory”<sup>14</sup>. Malatesta had health problems all his life, especially in the respiratory tract. When he met Bakunin for the first time on this occasion, Malatesta at nineteen years of age was so ill that he was coughing up blood. He arrived at Bakunin's

house in Zurich and was immediately put to bed. Malatesta recalled: "I departed for Switzerland with Cafiero. I wasn't very well in that period, I was coughing up blood and I was judged to be consumptive, or already then or soon after I had lost my parents, a sister and a brother from chest disease. As we were going round the Gothard Pass at night (then there was no tunnel and you had to skirt the snow-covered mountain carefully), I had a cold and arrived in Zurich, at the house where Bakunin was staying that evening with a cough and high temperature. After the initial welcome, Bakunin settled me in a little bed and invited me, almost forced me, to lie down and covered me with all the blankets and overcoats that he could put together, gave me boiling hot tea and recommended I keep still and try and sleep. And he did all this with a care and motherly tenderness that went to my heart. While I was turned over under the covers and everyone thought I was sleeping, I gathered that Bakunin was saying lovely things about me in a soft voice and then he added melancholically "Shame that he is so ill. We will lose him soon... he only has six months". I paid no attention to this sad forecast because it seemed to me impossible that I could die [...]; I thought that it would almost be a criminal act to die when there was so much to do for humanity, but I felt happy for the high opinion of this man and I promised myself to do everything to merit it"<sup>15</sup>.

Their relationship intensified over the years, through a very close correspondence and various meetings, even if Malatesta then went off on his own path, judging Bakunin too Marxist. But the respect, affection and deep esteem always remained until 1926, fifty years after their first meeting, when the septuagenarian Malatesta wrote: "...even just thinking about him, gives my heart a glow and fills it with youthful enthusiasm. Because this was above all Bakunin's great gift - to instil faith, the will to action and sacrifice in all those who dared to get close to him. He himself used to say that you needed to have the devil in your blood (*le diable au corps*); and he really had it, in his blood and in his spirit, the mythological rebel Satan, who doesn't know gods or bosses and never stops from struggling against everything that impedes thought and action"<sup>16</sup>.

During the Saint Imier Congress the split with the Marxist part of the International was once again underlined: they clearly declared that it was not the conquest of political power that was the first duty of the proletariat, as the General Council in London insisted, but "the destruction of all political power". The Saint Imier Congress can be considered as the official moment of birth of the anarchist movement.

In 1877, Malatesta was one of the main protagonists, together with the Italian Cafiero and the Russian Stepniak of the "Banda del Matese", an armed group of about thirty anarchists who, in April 1877, tried to incite peasants to rise up and begin the social revolution. The main aim lay in "the propaganda of the act" which meant disseminating anarchic principles through actions to attract the attention of public opinion and the popular masses. The group went over the mountains of Central Italy between Benevento and Campobasso, abolishing flour tax in a number of small communes, sabotaging the means of calculating it, restoring the tax revenues and burning land registers. They were caught by a massive mobilisation of the army and imprisoned.

In 1878, Malatesta began his continual travelling to escape arrest, weaving new relationships and organising the anarchist movement internationally. Travelling was a feature of the whole of his life. He participated in anarchist movements in Egypt, Syria, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Romania, Spain and England, suffering continual arrests and expulsions during these moves. In 1881, he organised the first International Anarchist Congress in London, with Kropotkin. In 1872, he returned to Italy clandestinely, where he founded the weekly paper "La Questione Sociale" (The Social Question), the first serious anarchist journal in Italy. In 1885, to escape from a three year jail sentence for "criminal conspiracy", he moved to Argentina where he remained for five years during which time, apart from setting up the first workers' organisations, he also went gold-prospecting in Patagonia with other comrades to finance other anarchist activity. In 1889, he returned to Europe where he founded a new paper "L'Associazione" (The Association) during a stay in Nice. In 1890, he was one of the promoters of the Anarchist Congress in Capolago in Switzerland, which was convened with the aim of setting up an organised anarchist movement. His activities as a revolutionary proceeded between Italy, where thanks to an amnesty granted by the Italian government he could return freely, and London. He founded another new paper, "L'Agitazione" (Agitation) in Ancona where he had settled. In 1899, after some disturbances, he was arrested, accused of "criminal conspiracy" and sentenced to 6 months in prison and 5 years exile on an island penal colony. He was confined on the island of Lampedusa from where he fled at the end of that year, hiding out in Tunisia, then in London, the United States and Cuba. From 1900-1913 Malatesta stayed in London where he made a living doing small jobs as an engineer, electrician, bicycle-repair man and ice-cream vendor. He set up numerous newspapers, the most important of which were "Cause ed effetti" (Causes and Effects, 1900), "L'internazionale" (The International,

1900) and “La rivoluzione sociale” (The Social Revolution, 1902). In 1912, in a case of defamation, Malatesta was sentenced to three months in prison and deportation. A strong campaign was waged by the radical press for his freedom and a mass demonstration in Trafalgar Square enabled his release.

Between 1913 and 1914, having returned to Italy, he contributed to the development of a great organisational and propaganda action that culminated in the greatest revolutionary attempt to have occurred in Italy since Unification: *la settimana rossa* (Red Week), an event in which Malatesta and the anarchists played a role at the highest level, both in the preparatory stages and in its development. The events were as follows: 7 June 1914 in Ancona while people were filing out of a rally addressed by Malatesta, the police opened fire, killing an anarchist, two republicans and injuring fourteen. This was the start of Red Week. A series of general strikes and demonstrations followed that brought into being autonomous communities that tried to reorganise society on anti-authoritarian socialist lines. The frictions within the insurrectionist movement and the declaration of the end of the general strike by the reformist trade unions aided the subsequent police repression with the consequent restoration of order. The failure of this insurrectionist impulse and the consequent repression forced Malatesta again to hide in London. In 1914, before returning to London, he met Benito Mussolini, then director of the Socialist daily “L'Avanti!” (Forward!).

With the outbreak of the First World War, Malatesta with the great majority of the anarchist movement declared himself non-interventionist. One of the few discordant voices was that of Kropotkin, who declared himself openly in favour of intervention. Malatesta attacked the position taken by Kropotkin, declaring that you could “never take up arms on behalf of the bosses, but only in the struggle for social revolution”. This episode was one of the main reasons for the split between the two protagonists of the anarchist movement.

In 1919, Malatesta returned to Italy for good. He landed at Genoa where he was welcomed by an enthusiastic crowd. He helped found and edit “Umanità Nova” (New Humanity), the basic anarchist daily which reached 50,000 distribution. He built up the *Unione Anarchica Italiana* (Italian Anarchist Union) to more than 30,000 members. This was the period which Malatesta considered to be the most productive and significant as far as his writings and theoretical positions were concerned. In 1920, during the II Congress of the *Unione Anarchica Italiana* in Bologna, Malatesta edited and presented the Anarchist Programme that was unanimously approved by the Congress. Today the various factions of the Italian anarchist movement still consider this document to be their foundation stone. Here is a summary of its salient points:

1. Abolition of private property in land, raw materials and means of labour, so that no-one has the means to live by exploiting the labour of others and everyone, having the means to produce and live may be truly independent and able to associate freely with others in the common interest and in accordance with their own inclinations.

2. Abolition of government and every power that makes laws and imposes them on others. Thus abolition of monarchies, republics, parliaments, armies, police forces, judiciaries and any other institution with coercive means at its disposal.

3. The organisation of social life through free associations and federations of producers and consumers, set up and adapted in accordance with the will of their members, guided by knowledge and experience and free of every imposition that does not derive from natural necessity, to which everyone, won over by the very feeling of unavoidable necessity, will willingly submit.

4. Guarantee of the means of living, development and welfare for children and for all those who are unable to provide for themselves.

5. War against all religions and lies, even if they hide under the cloak of science. Scientific education for all to the highest grade.

6. War against national rivalries and prejudices. Abolition of borders, fraternity between all peoples.

7. Reconstruction of the family in a way that will lead to the practice of love, free of any legal compulsion, economic or physical oppression and religious prejudice.

Malatesta travelled round Italy seeking to unify all these political forces, including those in conflict, who could somehow come to a common agreement in the struggle against fascist advance. The attempt failed, obviously, helped in this also by the growing Italian Communist Party that tried, as then happened in the Spanish Civil War, to destroy all the left forces not allied to it. In 1921, the Milanese headquarters of “Umanità Nova” was devastated by the Fascists and in 1922, the year of Mussolini's March on Rome and his subsequent rise to power, the newspaper was forced to close permanently. In 1924, Malatesta founded and edited the fortnightly “Pensiero e Volontà” (Thought and Will), another fundamental paper for the development of his ideas and for anarchism in general. It was a journal with a cultural and theoretical bent, in the attempt to escape Fascist censorship. Even today it stands out as one of the best anarchist journals ever published. It was forcibly closed down in 1926.

With the permanent advent of the Fascist dictatorship, in 1925-26 Malatesta was forced to suffer the constraints imposed by the new regime. He spent the last six years of his life under house arrest in his home in Rome with two policemen on guard day and night outside his front door, ready to arrest anyone who came to visit him. He died on 22 July 1932 from the bronchial problems which had plagued him all his life.

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Reference notes

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