

Massimo Ortalli writes that Malatesta and Italian anarchists did not regard democracy and fascism as being on a par and that they were fully capable of spotting the substantive differences between the two power systems and therefore also the methods with which they needed to wage the struggle against the reaction. I confess that I have more than one doubt about this since my own belief is that Malatesta and the Italian anarchists, like the socialist movement generally, not only initially under-estimated the dangers of the fascist movement but indeed, over many years, failed to grasp the true totalitarian nature of the Mussolini regime which made it a phenomenon apart in qualitative and quantitative terms from any authoritarian type of government “after the style of Crispi”.

True, it is relatively easy for us to draw certain distinctions [‘relatively’ because a fair number of comrade still persist in placing democracy on a par with much worse political arrangements] whereas 80 years ago it was harder, if not nearly impossible (a few people, Francesco Saverio Merlino for one, had already reached certain conclusions long before the advent of fascism). In passing judgment on democracy, Malatesta could not (or perhaps would not) go as far as his comrade in so many battles and in this remained, rather more than Merlino, a man of his times, or rather, a revolutionary in the almost Bakuninist sense of the word, after having been such, pretty much an undiluted Bakuninist for much of his life. Nor, let me stress, was it yet easy to grasp certain differences democracy then was not as we know it today, when it has its limitations, to be sure, but also affords us a measure of freedom and the widespread affluence of advanced capitalism.

The liberal state of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was an authoritarian state, infinitely more a class state than it is today, in the sense that political powers were in fact the custodians of an economic order founded upon the division between a minority of property-owners and a vast majority of proletarians and peasants who lived in conditions of extreme poverty, if not penury. Only after the Great War did Giolitti try to turn the liberal state into a liberal democratic state but in this he failed; in the preceding years too, fascism, and therefore the Italian state, bore a much greater resemblance to its liberal predecessors than to today’s democracies. The introduction of universal male suffrage and other reforms devised by governments affected almost only the institutional side of things and did nothing to help make any meaningful improvements to the material conditions of the oppressed classes.

On the one hand, therefore, it was very hard to grasp the difference between the authoritarian state and the liberal state (because in actuality such differences were pretty derisory) and between the liberal state and the democratic state (because the democracies had not yet been consolidated). On the other, above all, mankind had not yet sampled the delights of totalitarianism, meaning that the propaganda ploy of treating all regimes as much of a muchness was not such a serious error, either from the ethical or from the political viewpoints.

With the communist seizure of power in Russia however, things changed and Luigi Fabbri’s famous 1919 letter shows that Malatesta, braving unpopularity, grasped, as few others were able to do, what was going on in the former tsarist empire. In the letter in question, and in successive ones, the Italian anarchist, applying and working through

Bakunin's analysis which pointed to marxism as the ideology of a new bureaucratic class on the rise, on that, once ensconced in power, would introduce the ghastliest conceivable despotism, affirmed that the Bolshevik regime was much more authoritarian than the liberal, in that it was "absolute government without constitutional boundaries", the "dictatorship of one party, or rather of the leaders of one party" which had supposedly consolidated "new interests taking shape" and was championing "a new privileged class against the masses". In Malatesta's eyes, the Bolsheviks in Russia had installed an out and out police regime and the new government's police "equalled and exceeded the tsarist regime's own in ferocity and in freedom-killing mania."

In his analysis of the Bolshevik phenomenon, the Italian anarchist thereby showed that he was far-sighted in his understanding of future developments in communism's totalitarian, freedom-killing and police state character. The communist state was a regime qualitatively different from any of its predecessors: never before in history had there been such a concentration of political and economic power, never had the government wielded such control over the individual. The Bolsheviks' was a dictatorship that rejected those formal "freedoms", constitutional norms and separations of powers that typified the liberal states and were so mocked and scorned by the revolutionary left. The communists in Russia were conjuring up a form of rule that repudiated such legal safeguards hindering the unfettered exercise of state power which liberalism and the bourgeois class had imposed upon the European monarchies in the 18th and 19th centuries in an effort to protect, to be sure, primarily their own class interests, but also protecting or, rather, laying the premises for state guarantee of the fundamental liberties of every citizen.

True, the liberal states persecuted, jailed and in some instances killed anarchists and revolutionaries, often availing of special legislation in order to step outside those boundaries (something that still occasionally happens today but not in any way comparable to in the past). In some countries, the liberal form of state were merely a mask behind which lurked a very illiberal authoritarianism, as in some, say Latin American countries, today, where there is a democratic face grafted on to a military or para-military content and where society is so divided along class lines that the few have it all whereas the majority has nothing at all, ensuring that, in objective terms, the outward democratic and liberal show is meaningless not to say bamboozling.

However, the power of liberal states and that of the autocratic ones as well, as in Russia, was hardly so widespread and pervasive as to prohibit utterly some form of propaganda, albeit clandestine, by libertarians and some form of autonomous civil society and life of the individual. Moreover there were countries where fundamental freedoms had been consolidated over centuries and the liberal state was quickly and without any great trauma on its way to becoming a democratic state. Britain was one such example, and it was no accident that many revolutionaries and anarchists found refuge there, Malatesta and Kropotkin among them.

Returning to Malatesta, it strikes me that in his analysis of fascism he was somewhat at odds with the stance he adopted vis a vis Bolshevism; consequently we ought to ponder his mistakes and those of his generation; what might, in Malatesta's own day, have been quite understandable, is no longer so today and the failure to think through certain lines of

reasoning means, in my view, that we are condemning ourselves to an unforgivable sterility and marginalisation. The fact is Malatesta, more than anyone else, understood during the Two Red Years (biennio rosso) that defeat for the workers' movement would deliver Italy up to disaster, that the state and the bosses would visit unprecedented repression upon the people's heads. Come the fascist backlash, he was amongst the first to denounce the seriousness of goon squad violence and to back armed resistance and seek long-term alliances in order to stop things from spiralling out of control. He called upon the parties of the left and upon the masses to react in a united way. When the fascists marched on Rome he took to the streets at the age of 70 to fight on the barricades. In short, Malatesta, did a lot, a hell of a lot. So what is our allegation against him? Certainly not that he created the climate of widespread violence that he very astutely pointed to as one of the factors that had in fact assisted the installation of fascism; he was so radical in his thinking and in his intentions, so measured in his poses that he never urged violence for violence's sake. Yet his contradictory thoughts in his later years on the matter of violence are among the most beautiful and touching pages he has left us, food, as I see it, for lengthy consideration.

Yet today we must acknowledge that the de-legitimisation of the liberal state, to which he too made his contribution, played a far from slender part in ensuring that from the Italian people there came no backlash in defence of the basic freedoms that the liberal state, for good or for ill, guaranteed. But can the meagre and in some cases non-existent popular backlash against the spread of fascist violence be explicable only in terms of a weariness produced by the failure of the revolutionary upheavals of the biennio rosso and of the government protection and support enjoyed by the fascist goon squads?

In my honest opinion, no and I hold that a certain kind of anarchist propaganda – from Malatesta himself sometimes – played a not insignificant part in the collapsing of liberal institutions. Had not Malatesta and the anarchists been harping on for decades about democratic freedoms being formal and bourgeois freedoms and about REAL freedom's being a very different thing altogether?

Ortalli argues that Malatesta and the anarchists of his day had a very clear concept of the lesser evil. Reading certain pages of Malatesta, I come away with rather the opposite opinion. In a 1922 article written a few weeks prior to the march on Rome, our comrade has this to say "No one will question our burning desire to see fascism routed and our firm determination to do whatever we are able to bring about that rout. But we do not want to see fascism brought low only to have its place taken by something worse, and consolidation of the state would be worse than fascism." "The fascists beat, burn, kill, trample upon every freedom and ride roughshod over the workers' dignity in the most outrageous manner. But, frankly, all of the harm that fascism has done over these past two years and which it will do for as long as the workers allow it to live, can it be compared at all to the evil that the state has done quietly and normally over countless years and which it will carry on doing for as long as it survives?"

Let me say it again it is always easy to pass judgment with the benefit of hindsight and in such cases above all one must take into account a countless range of factors; indeed, fascism initially introduced itself with a confused hotch-potch of a political programme and Mussolini's party seemed to be nothing more than a movement cobbled together by the

bourgeoisie and capitalists in order to repair the “bourgeois” order that the workers’ movement had attempted to unseat. Furthermore, the fascist party gave the impression of being little more than a rabble of thugs and scoundrels who would melt away after having indulged in a little wrecking and terrorism. Read, say, what Malatesta wrote right after the march on Rome “Aside from the would-be Napoleonic posturing, which are instead merely histrionics, if not the swaggering of a bandit chief, it is our belief that at bottom nothing will have changed, except that for a time there will have been greater police repression against subversives and workers. A fresh edition of Crispi and Pelloux.” Even after two years of Mussolini in power, many (Malatesta included) insisted that the fascist regime would not last.

In my view, however, Malatesta under-estimated both Mussolini and fascism, even if he realised right from the outset that there were many more similarities than differences between the fascists and the communists and that both movements aimed to introduce very similar styles of government. In the very last years of his life, and this indicates his exceptional intelligence and elasticity of mind, he intuitively realised that that fascism and communism were conjuring up an unprecedented type of power and a quite similar type of regime a state characterised by “economic centralisation, with relative political absolutism, which gradually, especially since the war, has come to be a sort of universal creed. This type of state was later described as totalitarian – the term itself is one of Mussolini’s devising – and, precisely because of its novelty, did not fit the traditional categories of political power; it represented, naturally, a category very firmly challenged up until recent times by marxist historiography and is denied even now by some of the dinosaurs of the marxist-leninist era.

As regards the problem of the lesser evil, I do not think that Malatesta’s opinions can be put down merely to errors in evaluation (regarding the strength of the fascist movement and its lifespan), so I do not regard them as merely tactical errors. Instead, I contend that they sprang from the effective inability of anarchists and of Malatesta himself to appreciate the worth of democratic and liberal freedoms. Read the articles written by Malatesta in the 1920s. True, they are more “refined” than the ones written earlier and more than once [for example in Pensiero e Volontà of 15 March 1924] does the Italian anarchist come to the point where he argues that, even at its worst, democracy is to be preferred over dictatorship at its best. But that was in 1924 and, as the saying goes, the die had already been cast. Not only that but Malatesta’s “acknowledgment” was a grudging one; there was still this tendency to place the two systems on a par with each other, because Malatesta regarded democracy and dictatorship almost exclusively as “formal” variants of the state essence; set beside anarchy, the differences between democracy and dictatorship seemed of little significance, indeed struck him as downright “superficial”. Look here at Malatesta’s article in Pensiero e Volontà of 6 May 1926 and reflect upon the following passage “I could dwell upon a demonstration, complete with arguments founded upon contemporary events, of how untrue it is that where there is government, which is to say, command, the majority can prevail, and how, in reality, every “democracy” has been, is, and must be nothing more than an “oligarchy”, government by a few, a dictatorship.” Thus, as far as Malatesta was concerned, even as late as in 1926, democracy was comparable with dictatorship.

Let us fight shy of looking upon the rejection by Malatesta and his contemporary anarchists (and of many anarchists even today) of the majority principle as a touchstone in political decision-making, in the name of the principle of “free agreement” which is hard to apply in much of public life even in a libertarian society, as Merlino had shown during the 19th century in the celebrated polemic which pitted him against Malatesta.

We shall confine ourselves to examining the Malatestian analysis of the relationship between democracy and dictatorship. How could Malatesta have argued, apart from the undoubted fact that even under democracy, properly assessed, it is minorities who rule, democracy is still better than dictatorship from a libertarian viewpoint?

In my view, he could have looked upon democracy and dictatorship not in comparison with the absolute good (anarchy) but rather seen them in terms of relative good (the substantive and real freedom made possible by institutional, ‘formal’ liberties). And it is in this light, indeed, that democracy and dictatorship and democracy and totalitarianism are radically different.

Democracy and dictatorship in fact differ not only in terms of the mechanisms whereby the ruling elites are selected, but above all by the basic freedoms enjoyed by citizens, by the freedom that quickens the underlying civil society and which exists and is feasible only insofar as boundaries and precise limits are set upon the powers of the state. In fact, let us, from the vantage point of the freedoms of individuals and of society, compare dictatorship, the totalitarian state and democracy. In the case of dictatorship, the freedom both of society and of the individual is minimal; in the case of the totalitarian state, both are non-existent because the political authorities completely gobble up society and regiment individuals, not merely imposing a physical discipline but also seeking to recruit their consciences; in the case of democracies, on the other hand, the freedom of civil society and of the individuals who make it up is generally considerable, albeit not always and not for everybody. Consequently the object should be to bolster and extend it, not write it off as delusory. As Pier Carlo Masini wrote in his introduction to the Luce Fabbri book we quoted earlier “It is one thing to denounce the illusions of democracy; it is quite another to write democracy off as an illusion.”

I believe that Malatesta and anarchism in general at that point in history, for a whole series of reasons which have only partly been touched upon, resisted democracy as an illusion and that, among other things, such propaganda, along with a host of other assuredly more important and telling factors, facilitated the installation of fascism. As I have already written elsewhere, Malatesta was unable to take the methodological approach he had devised – the distinction between judgment upon facts and judgment upon values – to its logical consequences, to the plainly anti-revolutionary conclusions that such a principle entailed in the political realm. In actuality, he had applied it to the realm of revolutionary politics, regarding revolution as the violent act whereby a broad progressive front of which anarchists would have to have been the forward lines, would have toppled the bourgeois state and introduced, not anarchy, which cannot be installed forcibly, but rather a more free regime in which the state and the capitalist system of production would have been abolished; on this footing of neutral freedom, according to Malatesta, everybody would have been able to

experiment with whatever social and economic formulas they chose, without detriment, of course, to the equal freedom of others to do likewise.

In short, Malatesta had understood that freedom, historically and politically speaking, precedes anarchy and that movement towards the “absolute” is feasible only if the “relative” has first been achieved. Yet he remained essentially a revolutionary, hostile to “bourgeois democracy” and he argued right to the end that democracy could not offer that neutral freedom, that field for free experimentation. The masses would instead have to conjure one into existence through insurrection.

True, some of his thinking gives grounds for thinking that maybe he would have developed his thought processes along the lines of looking upon democracy not just as a lesser evil but also as a relative good, on the basis of which to embark upon the task of building a libertarian society. But... let us leave it at that. In fact it would be neither useful nor proper to guess at Malatesta’s thoughts and try to discover what he might have said and might have done.

Malatesta lived a hundred years ago and I reckon that, where democracy is concerned, and this without turning into “electioneers” or renouncing the idea that the construction of a libertarian society must be achieved mainly outside of state institutions, we can and should move on from his thinking. Moreover, some of our comrades over the past fifty years have done just that so I am not writing about anything brand new or overly heretical.

I hold that the best way we can respect Malatesta’s thinking – as well as the thinking of anarchism generally – is, in my opinion, to develop better intuition, to remain faithful to the spirit whilst applying his method – which strikes me as still the best one available – to today’s reality. To be Malatestians in the sense of reiterating what Malatesta said in an historical context very different from today’s may in fact lead to the demise of his thinking or, worse, to its becoming a caricature, whereas I believe that our interests lie in keeping his teaching alive in a form which may prosper today.

In short, I believe that, for all its limitations and shortcomings, – (and any society, even the freest and most equal, even a libertarian society, would have its limitations and shortcomings too because freedom achieved historically cannot but be, like any living thing, relative, problematical and pluralist) – democracy can be said, arguably, to come close to that “neutral” free ground which Malatesta held to be the starting point for society’s onward march towards anarchy. For an anarchist, democracy cannot of course represent an end. It can represent, though, a forum for the comparison and clash of ideas, for the trade in options in which we can operate – without imposition or violence – to see our own emerge triumphant.

Even in the light of the totalitarian experiences of the last century, I believe that the best way of moving towards a stateless, classless society – a goal which I hold to be historically impossible in the literal and absolute sense, in that the absolute can never figure in human history – is to bolster and extend democratic freedoms, the rights of the individual in social, political and economic terms, areas in which they are gravely threatened by an oligarchic economic and financial power seeking always to cut itself loose from all political control (which is certainly one form of authoritarianism not to be under-estimated, as Massimo Ortalli is right to remind us and as today’s politics constantly remind us). Bolstering communal freedoms and autonomies, controlling ever more and ever better the exercise of power, working towards its decentralisation and at the same time towards the directest

possible democracy to replace the current form of representative democracy; to campaign for the rights of workers and consumers to be respected and expanded in every corner of the world and to strive so that democracy may begin to be implemented also in the economy, from which, to please the entrepreneurial class, it had always been ejected; to extend the rights of citizenship and political rights to those (such as immigrants) who do not enjoy them, to champion in each and every case the basic freedoms of the individual, of all individuals, regardless of skin colour, race or religion or political outlook.

These and many others are, as I see it, the struggles that we anarchists should be waging today – and which we are, in part, insofar as our resources allow, engaged in – in order to hasten the establishment of a possible anarchy which, as I see things, is merely a libertarian form of democracy. To push democracy in the direction of anarchy and not strive to bring democracy down. As Martin Buber and before him Gustav Landauer have said, the state is destroyed the moment that men establish between them relations other than of the statist variety. So we must first of all strive to ensure that men establish libertarian relations between themselves and free themselves of the state in their heads and in their actions; the overcoming of the state, in the sense of society's advancing along the road to anarchy, will be possible only once civil society is so strong, so structured along community lines and so democratically mature that it can dispense with centralised, hierarchical political power. Otherwise the revolution can only be a perilous leap in the dark that would risk society's landing short of democracy rather than beyond it, as Amadeo Bertolo has written and as we all shall see.

Francesco Berti

A Rivista Anarchica no.265

<http://www.arivista.org/?nr=265&pag=61.htm>

Trans. Paul Sharkey for the Kate Sharpley Library