

# **Errico Malatesta and Revolutionary Violence**

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# Contents

<b>Introductory note</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Errico Malatesta and Revolutionary Violence</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Notes for the Conference on Malatesta</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Spoken intervention</b>	<b>21</b>

# Introductory note

This talk of mine at the anarchist conference on Malatesta in Naples, December 2003, is a perfect example of how any attempt to justify or condemn the concept of revolutionary violence is a failure from the outset. Revolutionary violence has no need of my justification and cannot be affected by any kind of condemnation, even if it comes from the ranks of the anarchists themselves.

Pacifism is also basically a non-issue and does not deserve to be refuted in too many words.

My effort did not, nor does it here, intend to provide arguments supporting revolutionary violence. It just wanted, and still does, to make a contribution to the revolutionary ideas and activity of Errico Malatesta. Many unwarranted things have been said about this anarchist who all too often has been enlisted under the banner of whatever side or even party. Like all true revolutionaries, Malatesta did not bother to sort through his papers, he addressed problems as they occurred in reality, always ready to look for evidence in the social conflict rather than in a theoretical syllogism.

The social war continues, revolutionary violence is only the most immediately perceptible expression of its operativity, not the only or, in some respects, even the most important one.

I commend these pages to the attention of the reader. Make good use of them, but don't expect of them what they cannot give.

The most important appointment is always on the barricades.

Alfredo M. Bonanno  
Trieste, November 26, 2008

# Errico Malatesta and Revolutionary Violence

I am not a historian, so I shall not talk like a historian. My interest in Malatesta goes back more than thirty years when I edited the annotated edition of *Anarchy*.<sup>1</sup> The reading of the best known writings of Malatesta and the anthology edited by Richards<sup>1</sup> had attracted my attention. To my amazement I found myself faced with an anarchist who did not use the accommodating common sense of those who want to make themselves understood by the masses on the one hand, or the flamboyant language of those who feel the influence of the literary and philosophical avant-garde without admitting it on the other. Malatesta gave me the impression of being a man who was well-informed, but without any arrogant intention to impress the listener. But it was his language that impressed me most of all. Simple and effective. Its quiet yet compelling reason. In the face of a Galleani that filled my head with an affected din or a Schicchi that made use of rhetorical effects that I could do without, Malatesta appeared to be a practical man, a revolutionary who wanted to destroy but also to build, who possessed considerable knowledge but did not want to show it off when there was no need for it.

Upon closer reading of his writings I found myself reflecting upon the processes that lead to the construction of a leader. Nothing in Malatesta calls for this unfortunate designation, yet the behaviour of his comrades, far more than that his opponents, put him in this uncomfortable armour. I remember reading somewhere of an Italian Lenin, but my recollection might not be exact so I do not want to stress the unfortunate comparison. However, I must point out that even in the poster drawn up to publicise this conference it is written of Malatesta that 'he was one of the most famous revolutionaries of his time', as if that could be of any interest to those who want to approach his work today (but also then). Fame is stuff of power, it is constructed and used by it. Our task—or so it seems to me—when approaching a comrade, whoever he is, who has 'done' or 'thought' (interesting the difference, if any) more or less than many others, is certainly not to start off from his fame, which we should leave to the muddled articles of newspapers or history books aimed at asserting the supremacy of the victors, or to the police files. The fact is that many people, I am not saying all, want a leader. Feeling the old herd instinct that has still not been completely erased, they submit to the judgment of someone who sees farther than they do, only to jump on him as soon as the wind changes. It is almost certain that the revolution will not be made until revolutionaries exist.

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<sup>1</sup> *Malatesta, His Life and Ideas*, compiled and edited by Vernon Richards, Freedom Press, London 1984. The extracts published here can be found in this volume, along with many other of Malatesta's writings.

The following reflections are dictated by a few passages in Malatesta's writings. I chose these passages out of convenience as I wanted to consider the ones that were clearest concerning the need for revolutionary violence, the characteristics of this particular kind of violence and its ethical foundations. Being questions of great importance, many people will doubtless point to the illegitimacy of the method. What is the point—I hear them say—of extrapolating some of Malatesta's thoughts, taking them out of their historical and editorial or linguistic context, to look at them as though they could live independently, isolated gems capable of shining without additional supports or mounts. The fact is that I have always felt that this objection and the method at the root of it are only reasonable if we are faced with a thinker who elaborates his thought organically and progressively and limits himself to that, leaving all he that has to say (and do) wrapped in his theoretical work.

But for a revolutionary the question is different. When Malatesta wrote something he had a precise point of reference, which we can roughly say was the revolutionary anarchist movement of his time. He was not writing in order to deepen his thought or to make it more complete and comprehensive. He did not claim to start from what he had said elsewhere (in a given setting within the historical process) in order to reach something that he would say later (also fixed in the short or medium term). His every thought was received directly and immediately by the comrades listening to him, reading him or were in some way aware of him. And this thought acted upon the consciousness of these comrades, who took the ideas and used them within their own vision of life in order to enable them to act, make them blood of their blood, motor of their desires, soul of the projects they had in course. Nobody wondered how these ideas were linked to what Malatesta had said in some of his other writings or speeches or articles, and so on.

When Camille Desmoulins gets up on a chair and ignites the streets of Paris against the monarchy it is his words at that moment that have an effect on the crowd, inciting the conquest and destruction of the Bastille, not what he said on a hundred other occasions or what he was to say later. When Saint-Just said the words 'Louis against us' it is precisely these three words that mark the end of the king and the monarchy, not the theories of the Jacobins on the moral destiny of the bourgeois revolution. I understand that not everybody will agree with this approach, but it is necessary to think carefully about it so as not to reduce an opportunity like this meeting to an empty, pointless debate on historically dated judgments or to vaguely consider it an instrument for giving lessons about life. We anarchists do not need the revolutionaries of the past, least of all Malatesta, to speak to us through the massive totality of their ideas. Let the professional historians, lovers of detail and prepared to die drowning in them, take care of this aspect. Let the single word resound in our hearts with the same vibrancy with which it resonated in the hearts of those who wrote or listened to it. Let our desires (and needs) of the present time be our interpreters, not the cultural blanket that usually serves to provide an alibi and extinguish enthusiasm.

What we want from Malatesta and many other comrades like him is a spark, a sudden illumination, an opportunity to think before we act, a small addition. We are not asking him to think in place of us, to build us a complete project in all its parts. We do not expect the past to be the key to understanding the present. Historical contribution is important of course but that is not all we lack. Often the more this contribution grows, the more data, documen-

tation and reflections we accumulate, the more the moment of action is put off indefinitely. The enemy against whom we need to fight is there before our eyes, manufacturing and designing today's conditions of exploitation and those of the future, it does not stop to justify the exploitation of the past, and only attends university lecture theatres in order to strike us better and make us incapable of understanding the new repressive models. If we were to seek an answer from Malatesta concerning all the elements with which the new power is taking shape, we would find nothing usable.

But we can ask for something, and this something takes the form of an ethical consideration. That is why I have chosen the concept of violence in Malatesta to discuss with you in the simplest but also the clearest possible way.

Anarchists are against violence. This is a well known fact. The idea at the centre of anarchism is the elimination of violence from society, the organization of social relations based on individuals' free will, without the intervention of the gendarme. So we are enemies of capital which, relying on police protection, forces the workers to let themselves be exploited by those who hold the means of production, or even to remain idle and starve when the bosses have no incentive to exploit them. We are enemies of the State, therefore, which is the coercive, i.e. violent, organization of society. But if a gentleman says that he believes it is stupid and cruel to argue with blows and that it is unfair and evil to force one to do the will of another at gunpoint, it is perhaps reasonable to infer that this gentleman will let himself get beaten and submit to the will of others without resorting to the most extreme means of defence? ... Violence is only justifiable when it is necessary to defend oneself and others against violence. Where need ends crime begins ... The slave is always in a state of legitimate self-defence and so his violence against the boss, against the oppressor, is always morally justifiable and should only be adjusted by the criterion of utility and economy of human effort and human suffering. ('Umanità Nova', August 25, 1921).

At first Malatesta seemed to limit the justification of the use of violence to the realm of defence. The only violence that is justifiable is that with which one defends oneself against an injustice. But he later adds: he who finds himself in a constant state of self-defence, i.e. the exploited, is always justified in attacking those who exploit, taking into account the 'utility' of this attack and the human suffering that it inevitably causes. So, he is not speaking of 'violence' in abstract terms, as often happens among comrades, unfortunately,—fuelling much of the misunderstanding concerning pacifism—but is speaking of the class condition in which nearly all those who are morally entitled to use violence find themselves. The fact that this use of violence comes up against a sentence sanctioned by the laws in force is of no interest to the anarchist. There remains the practical assessment, the utility of the action and the suffering that it might cause. Malatesta is not a follower of Mach, however, given his philosophical culture and given that the concepts of Empirio-criticism were not foreign to the Italian cultural climate of the twenties, he may have borne this reference in mind. But this is of a more practical utility, not the general one suggested by Economic philosophy. Unfortunately, no action undertaken by the exploited, either individually or collectively, can give any

guarantee of its usefulness before it takes place. This—and Malatesta says the same elsewhere when he says that he prefers those who act too much to those who wait and end up doing nothing—has only one explanation. Violent action must fulfil all the logical conditions for it to be ethically founded, but it cannot foresee all the consequences that might arise from it. The logical conditions are, first of all, the personal and collective situation of those who rise up violently against the class enemy, then the clearest possible identification of this enemy, the choice of means to be used and the study of what is required in order to minimize human suffering, which was the second of Malatesta's concerns. One expects all this of he or she who acts, and this could be considered the broad non-specific meaning of 'utility'. In fact, only by respecting these conditions to the end, by choosing means and objectives well, paying attention to details that could lead to an excess of suffering due to negligence or superficiality, can the action be seen as a response to repression and exploitation and need no further justification, which is always unpleasant and often incomprehensible to people. It is significant that certain actions of attack need to be explained. Those who carry them out are aware of this themselves and offer an explanation in what is commonly referred to as a 'claim'. Unfortunately, apart from a few exemplary cases, these claims are nearly always incomprehensible to most people, give no illumination concerning the action and show the lack of clarity in the ideas of those who wrote them, and other things as well. Lightness of stroke is hardly ever present in these documents, which confirms the fact that the action is incapable of speaking for itself. This difficulty concerning action that I am talking about here is due to an analytical defect in choosing the objective, the means to achieving it, etc.; in a word, it shows an ethical shortcoming. Someone who sees what needs to be done clearly does not have such far-sighted acuteness of vision by chance, they have it because they have considered all the possibilities that it was humanly possible to evaluate. Things can go wrong even then, but that is a risk we must run if we want to act.

There are certainly other people, other parties, other schools as sincerely devoted to the general good as the best of us. But what distinguishes anarchists from all the others is precisely their horror of violence, their desire and intention to eliminate violence, i.e. material force, from human relations.

One could therefore say that the specific idea that distinguishes anarchists is the abolition of the gendarme, the exclusion from social factors of the rule imposed by brute force, whether legal or illegal. But then, you might ask, why have anarchists in the present struggle against political and social institutions, which they consider oppressive, advocated and practiced, and continue to advocate and practice when they can, the use of violent means in clear contradiction with their aims? So much so that, at certain times, many opponents in good faith, and all who are in bad faith have believed, or have claimed to believe, that the specific nature of anarchism is precisely violence? The question may seem embarrassing, but it can be answered in a few words. In order for two people to live in peace it is necessary that both parties desire peace, because if one insists upon using force to oblige the other to work for him and serve him, then the

other, if he wants to retain his dignity as a man and not be reduced to abject slavery, he will be obliged, in spite of all his love for peace and good agreement, to resist force with adequate means. ('Pensiero e Volontà', 1 September 1924).

Again Malatesta leads us away from the theoretical controversy about violence or non-violence. Anarchists are for the elimination of brute force in social relations, but under the present conditions of the struggle they advocate and practice the use of violent means when they can. This did not just happen in Malatesta's time, it is still happening today. Anarchists still advocate the use of violence to attack the enemy that oppresses and represses us. For two people to live in peace they must both be willing to respect peace. At the present time power has perfected the ideological and propagandistic apparatus through which it spreads the idea of peace, whereas in reality it practices and prepares for war. The present day is far less clear than Malatesta's time and we need to make every effort to analyse the mechanisms of camouflage that keep us under control, count us, file, manage and suffocate us. The oppressor that talks of peace is not necessarily a peacemaker. Anarchists are aware of this, but it is not always easy for them to take the next step, violent attack. Malatesta rightly speaks of 'man's dignity', which is what drives many people to rebel, and the response is sometimes so uncontrolled that it turns out to be almost incomprehensible. But we must not stop at the surface, we need to look at the facts and also attacks that do not get to the bone but simply scratch the surface. Unable to strike through and through, many attacks limit themselves to striking symbols. It is not always easy to seek the 'appropriate' means that Malatesta was talking about, often the blood goes to the head before the brain responds to the questions. Why condemn expressions of violence that only attack the symbols of power? Because they could become an end in themselves and re-enter the vast areas of recuperation that power tends with care. But they might even go beyond that. Steer clear of those who make hasty judgements.

The struggle against government is resolved, ultimately, in physical and material battle. The government makes the law. It must therefore have a material force (army and police) to enforce it, because otherwise only those who wanted to would obey and it would no longer be a law but a mere proposal that everyone is free to accept or reject. And governments have this power and use it to fortify their laws with force and domination in the interests of the privileged classes, oppressing and exploiting the workers. The limit of government oppression is the force with which the people show they are able to oppose it.

Conflict may be open or latent, but there is always conflict, because the government does not pay attention to discontent and popular resistance unless it feels the danger of insurrection. When the people meekly submit to the law, or protest is weak and platonic, the government does what it likes regardless of the needs of the people; when protest gets lively, insistent, threatening, the government, according to how enlightened it is, either gives way or represses. But you always come back to insurrection, because if the government does not give way,



the people end up rebelling and if the government does give way the people gain confidence and demand more and more, until the incompatibility between freedom and authority becomes evident and violent conflict erupts.

It is therefore necessary to prepare morally and materially for the outbreak of violent struggle so that when this does happen victory goes to the people. (Programme Anarchica, Bologna, July 1920. 'Umanita Nova' 12 August 1920.)

The clash, Malatesta points out, is something physical, concrete, material. It is more than an exchange of ideas, it is more than simply knowing the interpretations of life that constitute the foundation of anarchist and libertarian culture. This starting point is certainly important, it spreads a non-violent, pluralist concept that is opposed to authority and power, but it is only the prelude to something that lies beyond it. The project of power is to impose its own conditions and it does not stop at appearances. It shows concretely how anyone that refuses to accept the rules is considered an 'outlaw' and strikes them with more or less serious penalties that are capable of instilling fear and convincing people to obey. The response of the oppressed might be strong or not so strong, more or less organized, and in the second case many variations oppose themselves to the changes that power produces in both oppression and control, as well as in the partial freedoms that it is still forced to grant. In his time, Malatesta believed that the movement towards insurrection was an almost inevitable process caused by the contradiction between what power is prepared to provide and what the oppressed are prepared to put up with.

This analysis suffered from a vision of social contradictions that had been borrowed from marxist hegelianism. Now we see much more clearly that things are not so. Capital's resilience is always unpredictable. At the present time it relies on the new technologies and a form of power that manages the contradictions more easily, yet it does not seem that this is worse than any other form, or that it is insurmountable. The insurrectional movement is certainly fuelled by the radical incompatibility between authority and freedom, but in order for it to realise itself there must be a practical preparation that could start from partial, sometimes minimal, contradictory conditions which could certainly be remedied by the enemy, but it is possible for insurrectional moments to start from them and proceed towards revolution. Between the lines, Malatesta focuses on the preparation of the uprising and divides it into two aspects: the ethical and the material.

Now, there is no doubt that if the first is the result of a growing revolutionary consciousness, the second cannot be other than providing the insurrection with a practice that is born and acquired in the daily struggle over time and not by waiting for an improbable apocalyptic confrontation. We must rid the field of the iconography that sees the insurrection as a matter of barricades and huge fighting masses ready for the final showdown. Even small local movements can have insurrectional connotations, intermediate struggles, if the conditions in which they arise take the form of autonomy from political forces, permanent conflict and attack.

This revolution must necessarily be violent, even though violence is in itself a bad thing. It must be violent because it would be folly to put one's hopes in the

privileged admitting to the damage and injustice of their privileges and deciding to give them up voluntarily. It must be violent because transitional revolutionary violence is the only way to end the greater, perpetual violence under which the great mass of people are enslaved. ('Umanità Nova', 12 August 1920).

The road to freedom cannot be travelled in a horse and carriage, one must realize that it is a bloody and difficult path that is capable of upsetting the dreams of those who, although longing for justice and equality, hope that these goddesses will descend from Olympus without causing too much of a stir. Malatesta is a revolutionary and has no reason to fuel such illusions. He is aware that violence is painful, but he is also aware that it is necessary. This is not the precise point that we want to draw attention to today, however. The point in question is the concept of 'transitional violence', i.e. a radical and extreme response that is limited in time, to the rule of the governors who want to govern for ever. This suggests the possibility of a 'transition'. With the abolition of exploitation the means of production will pass from the hands of the few exploiters into the hands of all. Unfortunately, we are no longer in a social condition that is clear-cut and seemingly (but only apparently) easy to understand any more. The current conditions would not allow a direct revolutionary use of the means of production, it will no longer be possible to use the latter in a different way once their expropriation has taken place. The new technologies make it highly unlikely that anything useful could be done with the resources that capital has accumulated at the present time. The level of destruction that is required today is certainly far greater and more far-reaching than it was in Malatesta's time. There are many difficulties involved in uprooting habits and influences and such a process could require incredible efforts of re-education and struggle. New forms of management and centralized administration could have aspects and be camouflaged in such a way that they cannot simply be exposed all in one go, implying a 'transitory' use of violence for a very long time. Awareness of this difficult path gives rise to many doubts and leaves space for the politically correct thoughts of those who are waiting for everything to adjust slowly without taking things too far. An effective struggle against the current form of ideological and cultural incorporation is a violent process that is long overdue.

Our souls are also embittered by this need for violent struggle. We who preach love and are struggling to reach a social condition where harmony and love between people are possible, suffer more than anybody by the need to defend ourselves with violence against the violence of the ruling classes. However, to renounce liberatory violence when it is the only way to put an end to the unremitting suffering of the great mass of people and the untold carnage that afflict mankind, would make us responsible for the hatred that we deplore and the evils that stem from it. ('Umanità Nova', 27 April 1920).

It is precisely the need for its application that is the ethical authorisation for the use of revolutionary violence. This need stems from the danger that billions of men and women are faced with through oppression and exploitation. If it were no more than an abstract

choice between peace and violence, anarchists, being supporters of love and universal brotherhood, would choose peace first. But that is not a real choice.

Like all those who are motivated by a desire to end the hatred that torments humanity, they are forced to choose violence. Needless to say, the supporters of oppression, both those who exercise it directly and those who benefit by it, find it difficult to agree with this conclusion. Indeed, the more we move towards a society that administers power through social peace, the more subtle is the ideological discourse where the oppressors talk about peace and brotherhood to those who want to free themselves from oppression and intolerance and accuse them of violence (in this regard the spurious concept of 'terrorism' has been coined).

Thanks to the pressure exerted upon the formation of current public opinion many people (the great mass of people) seriously believe that they are tolerant, even those that participate in exploitation and repression directly. The society in which we live, and the one that is looming over the next few decades even more, can hardly be defined by the rigid class divisions of Malatesta's time. Yet, despite the increased difficulties, you can say for sure that somewhere the enemy continues to build its paradigms of power, and its millions of servants continue to make it possible for these paradigms to be applied. By striking these plots and the men that realise them one extracts oneself from the responsibility that falls upon those who, by not attacking, are complicit in the realization of the projects of power. But because this responsibility derives from inaction, from letting things carry on as they are, i.e. from not getting to the bottom of the consequences of action that is by nature violent, whyever should this ethical consideration be considered self-evident? This is an important question. Indeed, it could well be that one considers one's own way of not participating, of abstaining (let's say limiting oneself to not voting) is sufficient to cut the umbilical cord of that responsibility. In that case we are facing a positive action designed at interfering with the repressive or controlling mechanism that is acting upon us. I think that people should only feel responsible for what they are aware of (not be judged so by someone else). If someone is really convinced that it is sufficient not to vote (for example) to absolve their crime in respect to participatory institutions, then it is right that, in good faith, they consider themselves absolved from any liability. But as soon as a person is informed about the reality that we all host, can they reach the same conclusions without laughing in their own faces? The more knowledge one gains of the society in which one lives, the more documentation and updates, then the more one's heart rebels against the palliatives that the thinking mind had found to silence its conscience. Only, often our everyday interests, family, career, money, etc., cast a veil them over them, and efforts to remove this veil are rarely able to reveal the dazzling illumination that it conceals. So we end up convincing ourselves that the only ones responsible for exploitation and oppression are the exploiters and oppressors; we look the other way and carry on with our afternoon nap.

We are against violence on principle and so we would like the social struggle, for as long as it exists, to be as humane as possible. But that does not mean that we will not struggle energetically and radically, on the contrary we believe that half measures can actually end up drawing out the struggle indefinitely, can make

it sterile and produce far more violence than which we would like to avoid. Nor does it mean that we limit the right of defence to resisting material and imminent attack. For us, the oppressed are always in a condition of self-defence and have every right to rebel without waiting to be shot at, and we know very well that attack is often the most effective means of defence. But here there is also a matter of feelings—and for me feelings count more than all reasoning. ('Fede', 28 October 1923).

As said earlier, it might seem that in considering these reflections I am trying to promote a personal predilection for violence. The oppressed—and these are Malatesta's exact words—precisely because he always finds himself in a state of legitimate self-defence, is morally entitled to rebel without repression having been taken to the extreme and making the situation in which he is living intolerable. This is an important point. It sheds considerable light on the rebel's decision to attack the enemy that represses him. It is not essential for him to find himself drowning or to be under fire. So, what is required? The answer is obvious: he must make the consciousness of the situation he finds himself in his own, that is, he must acquire the ability to read between the ideological lines that power puts into act in order to swindle us, even before it oppresses or suppresses us. So, the more this awareness develops the more it penetrates the lines of the repressor of the moment and the more rebellion is triggered, even under conditions of apparent repressive tolerance. On the other hand, we have often noted how a revolutionary consciousness that aims to attack the enemy whose repressive action it was that brought it to light in the first place, often fails to accomplish this attack and sooner or later ends up biting its tail. This can sometimes lead to a muscular extremism that sees the whole thing as a question of military strength. Those who fall into this ambiguous terrain are accepting precisely the element that tends to be preferred by power as the field of the clash. Extending violent intervention under conditions that are not revolutionary leads to enclosing the world within which the rebel acts and an increase in the specialisation of his interventions. These two developments are quickly picked up by power, which knows very well how to react. The intensification of violent actions carried out by a minority of rebels does not necessarily correspond to a growing process of rebellion, which is linked to other conditions that are mostly of an economic nature, which the specific rebellion can underline but not promote. This may result in the progressive isolation of the rebellion, where the need for self-recognition presents itself. In other words, actions of attack are intensified in order for one to be able to continue to exist as an insurgent entity with a certain degree of revolutionary consciousness and a project that is more or less specified in detail. In continuing along this road one goes right off the mark, completely loses touch with reality and the specialist approach tends to develop in a militaristic direction. If the oppressed is always right to rebel, the revolutionary consciousness that is required for this rebellion to become a reality must accompany him thoroughly, which means that it must also indicate the significance of the actions that he undertakes.

Anarchists are not hypocrites. Force must be rejected with force: today against the oppression of today, tomorrow against that which might replace that of today. ('Pensiero e Volontà', 1 September 1924).

Malatesta does not illude himself that anarchists will make the revolution alone, or that the next revolution will be the final one, the social one, the anarchist one. He knows that it will almost certainly be necessary to come back and fight against the oppressors of the future. We now know that this perspective is quite probable, because many people are under the illusion that they will be able to use the productive forces of capital—in a different way of course—something that we strongly doubt. It follows that many so-called revolutionaries, their repressive vocation brought to the fore, will try to manage public affairs on behalf of their own interests and ideologies.

The struggle against them will simply be a continuation of what came before, just as fierce and difficult. Given this perspective, many anarchists have come to the conclusion that, being more or less a voice in the wilderness, they might as well dedicate themselves to the task of acting as Cassandra. Why dirty their hands with the destructive attacks that need to be carried out as from now and not put off until tomorrow, if sooner or later they will have to take up the critical analysis of the results achieved and put the pieces of the organisation of the preceding struggle together yet again. In other words, the revolution, not plausibly going to be the right one (here we are reasoning wholesale) it is necessary to stay in waiting to mark the (inevitable) mistakes of others with the red and black pencil. If this applies to the 'revolution', think about partial struggles, so-called 'intermediate struggles', think of each single insurrection that cannot but start at some point in the class struggle.

[Concerning the Diana events] I said that those murderers are also saints and heroes; and those of my friends who protest against my statement do so in homage to those whom they call real saints and heroes who, apparently, never make mistakes.

I can only confirm what I said ...

Enough of splitting hairs.

What is important is to avoid confusing the act with the intentions, and in condemning the bad act not forget to do justice to the good intentions. And not only out of respect for the truth, or out of compassion, but also for reasons of propaganda, for the practical effects that our judgement can lead to.

There are, and, so long as the present conditions and the environment of violence in which we live last, there always will be generous men, rebels who are extremely sensitive but lack sufficient powers of reflection, who in certain circumstances get carried away by their passions and strike blindly. If we do not openly recognize their good intentions, if we do not make a distinction between error and malice, we lose all moral influence over them and abandon them to their blind impulses. If, instead, we pay tribute to their goodness, their courage and spirit of sacrifice, we can reach their minds through their hearts and ensure that the valuable storehouses of energy that they embody be used for the cause in an intelligent, good and useful way, in the interests of the cause. ('Umanità Nova', 24 December 1921).

The rebel rises up and, directing the blow against the enemy, kills innocents. It happened in 1921 at the Diana Theatre<sup>2</sup> but I am now thinking of Gianfranco Bertoli's<sup>3</sup> attack on the police headquarters in Via Fatebenefratelli in Milan, and the dead that his bomb ripped apart on the pavement. Malatesta's discourse is calm but firm, it is a responsible discourse without giving vent to hysteria. It draws attention to the comrades who carried out the act, he knows them, knows they are good comrades and that they made a mistake. He knows that it is possible to make a mistake. Bertoli threw his bomb into the entrance of the Milan police headquarters, but a policeman kicked it back out and it exploded in the midst of the people that were queuing to go inside for administrative practices. At that time—not knowing Bertoli and analyzing his autobiography published in 'Gente' magazine—I myself said that his action was condemnable because in no way could the characteristics of a Stirnerite individualist, as he seemed to be declaring himself, be identified in the story of his life. I was only able to correct my mistake thirty years later when I began corresponding with him and got to know him better and see the qualities of the comrade that did not come through in the autobiographical sketch of thirty years before.

Malatesta has the appropriate knowledge, he is aware that Mariani, Aguggini and the others are known and trusted comrades, so he realises that it is a question of a regrettable error, and deals with this sensitive question. He laments and grieves for the dead but he also laments and grieves for the fate of his comrades, for the responsibility that they brought upon themselves and which, moreover, they were ready to pay for before so-called justice. What counts, he says, are the intentions. But weren't these intentions the depths of hell?

Of course, that is exactly the line of bourgeois morality, always ready to jump on the effect, to look at results and put its judgement on the economic scales. Sometimes we even find this moral tint among anarchists, for example when they ask, concerning Mariani and Bertoli: 'Who can benefit from this type of action?'. Only the repression. That is the answer. And from that moment on this conclusion spreads like wildfire. It is always the repression to take advantage of any action that had intended to attack the enemy by wanting to make him feel the not exactly friendly gesture of the rebel a little closer to his skin. How many declarations of extraneity regularly present themselves concerning some action that goes beyond

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<sup>2</sup> On March 23 1921 a powerful bomb intended to kill the Milan Police Chief, Gasti, exploded outside the Diana Theatre in Milan. 21 people were killed and over 150 injured. The bombing was carried out by a number of anarchists motivated by the unfair detention of the three anarchist comrades editors of *Umanità Nova*, Borghi, Malatesta and Quaglino. Among those accused were Giuseppe Mariani & Giuseppe Boldrini who got life sentences, & Ettore Aguggini (who died in prison); also implicated were Ugo Fedeli, Pietro Bruzzi, & Francesco Ghezzi (editors of "*L'Individualista*").

<sup>3</sup> In 1973, Gianfranco Bertoli threw a grenade into the courtyard of the Milan police headquarters on the anniversary of the killing of police superintendent Luigi Calabresi, responsible for the murder of anarchist comrade Giuseppe Pinelli. A policeman kicked the bomb out on to the pavement where people were queuing up for administrative purposes. Four were killed, 45 injured. Bertoli immediately declared himself an anarchist individualist, follower of Max Stirner. His act was condemned by the Italian anarchist movement as a whole and there were rumours that he had collaborated with the Italian secret services in the 1950s. In 1975 he was sentenced to life imprisonment. Accepting his blame for the attack, during his imprisonment, he collaborated with *A/Rivista Anarchica*, which published his articles on the prison situation. A number of collections of his articles were also published. The correspondence referred to here was published by Edizioni Anarchismo after his death in 2000, a volume of 480 pages entitled *Gianfranco Bertoli, Alfredo Bonanno, Carteggio 1998–2000*.

the boundaries of opinionist orthodoxy. We are not interested in counting them. Of course, they are certainly a sign of political shrewdness, but also of ethical short-sightedness. Malatesta, on the other hand, takes the risk of descending into hell and talks of intentions. He knows that this does not absolve the murderers from (moral) responsibility,—because here it is a question of murderers—but he also knows that keeping quiet, or worse still, jumping on the bandwagon of banal reprimand, would deny the propagandistic principle of militant anarchism, all the efforts we make every day to convince people of the need to rebel and attack the enemy that oppresses and exploits us.

McKinley, head of the North American oligarchy, instrument and defender of the capitalist giants, betrayer of the Cubans and the Philipinos, the man who authorized the massacre of the strikers of Hazleton, the torture of the miners in Idaho and the thousands of infamies committed every day against the workers in the 'model republic', the man who incarnated the militaristic, expansionist and imperialist policies which the fat American bourgeoisie have adopted, has fallen foul of an anarchist's revolver.

What do you want us to grieve for, if not for the fate in store for the generous-hearted man who, opportunely or inopportunely, with good or bad tactics, offered himself as a sacrifice to the cause of equality and freedom? We are saying again, as always: because violence is all around us, we are calmly continuing to struggle so that this dreadful need to respond to violence with violence will end, hoping that the day will soon come when the conflict of interests and passions between men will be solved by human and civil means. We hold back our tears and our flowers for other victims, not the men who, putting themselves at the head of the exploiting and oppressing classes, face the responsibility and risks of their position. Yet there have been anarchists who have found it convenient and well to condemn the oppressed who rebelled, without a word of condemnation for the oppressor who has paid the price for the crimes he committed or allowed to be committed! Is this an unhealthy desire to gain the approval of the adversary, or is it badly construed 'tactics' to gain freedom to propagate their ideas by voluntarily giving up the right to express the genuine, profound feelings of the soul, even to the point of falsifying these feelings by pretending to be other than what one is? I do so with regret, but I must express the pain and outrage that the rash words that 'L'Agitazione' devoted to the attack in Buffalo caused me and many friends that I had the opportunity to see these days. 'Czolgosz is irresponsible'—but do they know him?—'His act is a common crime that has none of the characteristics required for such an act to be considered political!' I believe that no public prosecutor, monarchist or Republican, would dare say as much. Perhaps there are some personal reasons or grievances for condemning Czolgosz? ... Already, it is improper to speak of a crime in such cases. The law does, but the law is made against us, against the oppressed, and cannot serve as a criterion in our judgments. These are acts of war, and if war is a crime, it concerns those who are on the side of injustice and oppression. The English

invaders of the Transvaal are the criminals, not the Boers when they defended their freedom, even if their defence had no hope of success.

'Czolgosz's act ('L'Agitazione' might reply) did nothing for the cause of the workers or the revolution; McKinley was succeeded by his equal, Roosevelt and everything remains unchanged, except that the situation for the anarchists has become a little more difficult than before.' It may be that 'L'Agitazione' are right; indeed, in the American environment, as far as I know, things are probably like that.

This means that in war there are moves that you get right and there are wrong moves, there are careful combatants and those who get carried away with enthusiasm and become an easy target for the enemy, possibly even jeopardizing the position of their comrades. This means that each one must advise, defend and put into practice the tactics that he believes are more likely to achieve victory in the shortest time and with least possible sacrifice; but that cannot alter the fundamental obvious fact that those who fight, well or badly, against the common enemy and towards the same goal, is our friend and has a right, not to our unconditional approval, but to our heartfelt sympathy.

Whether the combat unit is a collectivity or a single individual cannot change the moral aspect of the matter. An armed insurrection carried out inopportunistly can cause real or apparent damage to the social war we are fighting, as does an individual attack that antagonises popular feelings, but if the insurrection is carried out to conquer freedom, no anarchist would deny it their sympathy; above all, no one will dare deny the defeated rebels their particular socio-political character. Why should it be any different if the insurrectionist is a single individual?

'L'Agitazione' has said that strikers are always right, and it said well, although it is clear that not all strikes are advisable, because a failed strike could, in certain circumstances, lead to discouragement and disperse the workers' strength. Why should what is true in the case of the economic struggle against the bosses not be so in the political struggle against the rulers, who with the gun of the soldier and the handcuffs of the police want to enslave us to them and the capitalists? This is not a discussion about tactics. If that were so, I would say that generally speaking I prefer collective action to individual action, because collective action requires fairly common average qualities, which are easy to find, whereas we cannot count on heroism, which is exceptional and of a sporadic nature requiring individual sacrifice. Here it is a matter of a higher order: it is a question of the revolutionary spirit, of the almost instinctive feeling of hatred of oppression, without which any program, no matter how libertarian the stated proposals are, remains dead letters; it is a question of that combative spirit, without which even anarchists become domesticated and end up, in one way or another, in the quagmire of legalitarianism ... It is foolish, in order to save a life, to destroy the very reason for living. What is the point of revolutionary organisations if you let the



revolutionary spirit die? What is the point of freedom of propaganda, if you no longer propagate your ideas ...? ('L'Agitazione', 22 September 1901)

In response to Luigi Fabbri, who had defined the killing of the U.S. President an unspeakable and badly prepared act of recklessness, Malatesta is mainly concerned to assert the legitimacy of any attack against the oppressor. It is precisely the anarchist attacker that he is thinking about, not the repressive consequences that would inevitably be unleashed by the act in question. He does not distance himself, he sides with the rebels immediately. He supports violence so that violence will come to an end as soon as possible, in order for the need to respond to violence with violence to disappear. He complains that anarchists are even capable of insulting the oppressed one who rebels, defining this attitude as an unhealthy desire to get the enemy's approval. This is something that we should stop and think about. Nothing can be shared with the enemy in the class war, no rules, no honours of war. Perhaps the repression brought about through the use of lies, disinformation and slander is even more ferocious than the material kind. The enemy attacks by putting itself 'beyond the law' (in advance) and 'beyond logic' (later). It declares that any rebellion against constituted authority goes against laws that were made to guarantee social life and that it finds it incomprehensible, impossible, that there be people around who do not share the best of all possible worlds, at least the only world that can be improved through reform. The fact is that the logic of rebellion does not belong to the enemy, it is something that is completely incomprehensible to it, and we need to see this. We cannot attack power and expect it to approve of the rules of this attack, because attack follows rules that are different from those that support the processes of oppressive violence. If we convince ourselves of that we will come to realize that our actions against power are 'illogical'. It does not make sense—it does not make sense for the logic of power and the self-righteous ones that are fed by it—for Czolgosz to shoot McKinley, if any McKinley whatsoever can always be replaced by another Roosevelt. What hurts is that many comrades also think this way very often. What sense is there in bringing down a pylon, or twelve hundred pylons (as have been felled in Italy over the past fifteen years) if the Enel electricity company simply goes ahead and erects new ones fast? What is the point of busying oneself with what amounts to be little more than 'bursting the balloon of a policeman's child'? It is necessary to accept a logic that is different to that of power and the bosses in order to understand the possible validity of small attacks spread throughout the country. But accepting a different logic is often at odds with our most intimate way of being, with our way of thinking. We are what we think and we think what we are. We can certainly think of something that we would never do or be, but that thought does not dwell long in our minds, just as Saturday night's fantasies fade away at first light on Monday morning. Malatesta talks about wise and not so wise combatants, those who hold back their enthusiasm and those who are swept away by it, but he does not see that this assessment is made with a measure that is not our own.

When we act in order to get as close to the enemy as possible in order to disturb its sense of security, calculations of convenience, tactical assessment, technical knowledge and theoretical study can assist us, accompany us and light up the way. But the last stretch, that where the soul rises up from the final details and draws everything into the instant

where you pass through the moral fracture, must be made alone. Here each one is alone with their ethical conviction, their revolutionary consciousness, their desire to put an end to oppression and exploitation. So what if the action turns out to be a superficial gesture, something that the logic of blinding non-contradictoriness considers a 'mishandled careless act'. We carried out that action. We took the responsibility, not just for the action but for all the relative evaluations, tactics, etc.. And we decided to carry it out.

All said and done, our action is our self.

Alfredo M. Bonanno

Trieste-Catania, November 2003

# Notes for the Conference on Malatesta

I'm not a historian

An informed man of understanding

'One of the most famous revolutionaries of his time'

The need for leaders

The question of violence: A blanket that everyone pulls in their own direction

Completeness of thought and theoretical contribution of a revolutionary

Limitations of an argument like mine

Let the single word resound here, once again

The past can not enable us to understand the present (historicist illusion)

The new repressive models need new analysis

But we can ask something of Malatesta

First piece (read)

The slave is always in a state of self-defence, is entitled to attack

Practical assessment: the utility of violent action

Economism is a stranger to the revolutionary

There can be absolutely no guarantee a priori

Action must comply with all of its logical premises

The need for an a posteriori explanation is nearly always an indication of approximation

Second piece (read)

If one wants to preserve one's dignity as men and women

The new repression and the function of information

The third piece (read)

Inevitable process towards insurrection (Malatesta's thesis) now the problem is different

Moral preparation for insurrection

Concrete preparations for insurrection

Fourth piece (read)

Concept of transitional violence

Disappearance of the traditional theory of transition

Non usability of the means of production

Fifth piece (read)

The necessity of violence is its ethical authorization

To refuse to attack is to become responsible for exploitation

Convincing oneself of the insufficiency of abstentionism and the growth of revolutionary consciousness

Sixth piece (read)

The feelings and decision of the rebel to attack

Going into social conditions and the moral split  
Detachment of attacks from reality  
Self-gratification  
Seventh piece (read)  
The violent struggle does not solve all problems, it is not a matter of faith and there are no miraculous illusions  
Continuation of the struggle beyond the resolute event of the revolution  
Incompleteness of the results of the struggle  
Eighth piece (read)  
Considering the true intentions of the rebel is what counts  
To ask, 'who can benefit' is a question that accepts the logic of power  
Ninth piece (read)  
The ethical self-evidence of rebellion  
The logic of the exploited and the exploiter  
Logic and language  
Absolute extraneity and error of claiming to share our ideas with our opponent  
The geometric efficiency of power and its substitutes and small actions spread over the territory  
Shrewdness concerning the logic of power  
The recklessness of the attack, extent and splendor of an unconscious misdirection  
Convenience, tactics and Sensibility  
Our action, after all, is our self.

# Spoken intervention

I brought some printed copies of my talk because ... can you hear all right ... I brought these copies because what I will say is a little different from what I wrote, as my talk is off the cuff, although it will be in the same spirit and similar to some of the written passages. It's well then that those interested can also have the original text. So we made these copies.

I am not a historian, so I will not speak as a historian. I am someone that is curious about life, curious about reality. I'll talk about some aspects of life and reality that interest everybody, I think, including anarchists. I shall mention some of these topics to reflect upon certain of Malatesta's words.

Malatesta was a famous revolutionary. We are reminded by the comrade organizers in the text of the programme. 'A famous revolutionary'. What does this mean? He is famous because the other side, the enemy, makes him famous. An anarchist is not famous because other anarchists follow him, listen to him, are interested in his actions, but because of the media, as well outlined by the comrade before me with the rather general term 'press'. However it is not just the press, all the organizational tools of power revolve around his activity and deform it, rendering it other, monstrously other. So, that person becomes famous.

So much for the enemy. We obviously cannot take up the enemy's suggestions. For me, Malatesta was not a famous comrade, he was not the greatest revolutionary of his time, he was and is a comrade of mine, who belongs to me, who at times, when I experienced doubts, suffering, when I found myself alone inside the walls of a prison, reading his pages—like the pages of Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, for example—was a great help to me. These pages, his words, are important to me because I have carried them in my heart, not because they gave me a programmatic suggestion, or because they came from a man that power and the press have called 'a great man'.

This as far as power is concerned. But we are also guilty of making comrades 'famous', of making comrades 'well known', turning the deforming spotlight on to them in the same way that power does. We also construct leaders. It is we, comrades, that make leaders of those from whom we expect indications when we should be finding these indications ourselves, inside us, in our reading but mainly in our gaining consciousness.

It has also just been said that my choosing to talk about the concept of revolutionary violence is one that attracts attention, so makes the talk more attractive. Well, believe me, this is just a coincidence.

For the thirty and more years that I have been interested in Malatesta, from the time that I edited the annotated edition of *Anarchy*, I have been particularly interested in this aspect, as Malatesta was almost forced to deal with the problem of revolutionary violence throughout his activity.

Of course, you must give me some credit because I am going to carry out an incision into the whole body of Malatesta's thought, for reasons of both space and time, and out of personal interest. My reading of Malatesta will be one of convenience, so it is easy to criticize anybody that makes such a choice. Of course, if we had a comprehensive idea of Malatesta's thought, we would not be able to cut out small fragments, put them on the dissecting table and hold forth about them. But, with all the limitations that it entails, this operation could turn out to be quite useful if we let the words of Malatesta resound in here and they make sense to us, if they move something inside us that makes them come alive, not remain ghosts of something that is over and done with, that died with the death of poor Malatesta.

Plus, when I read a passage from Malatesta I am not looking at a stage in a philosopher of action, more or less—a lot could be said on that subject but this is not the place to do so. I am not facing a piece written by a philosopher and so I have to refer to what's behind it, to the theoretical foundation of the passage in order to understand it. When reading these passages of Malatesta we must put ourselves in the situation of those who read them at the time that they were written. How did they sound in the hearts and minds of the comrades who read them then. Because the work of the revolutionary, so also of Malatesta, is just that: to talk to comrades in a given context at the moment that it is necessary for action that the matter be revealed in its complexity and clarified, and also to move the listener, not to simply indoctrinate him or try to indoctrinate him.

Then, as I said, not only am I not a historian, I'm not a historicist either. I do not think that history, including Malatesta's works, can educate us. The prophetic aspect of history does not interest me. I do not think that all of Malatesta's writings can become a point of reference for us today. They can be an opportunity for reading, an accident along the way, they can push us to reflect, become something actual, they cannot be a constant point of reference. We are neither Christians who read the Bible in a certain way, nor Marxists who read Marx in a certain way. I don't think so.

So, let me read the first passage of Malatesta. He is writing in 1921. Look at all these writings, most of them are written around the twenties, so we are quite far from the time of Ravachol.

Anarchists are against violence. This is a well known fact. The idea at the centre of anarchism is the elimination of violence from society, the organization of social relations based on individuals' free will, without the intervention of the gendarme. So we are enemies of capital which, relying on police protection, forces the workers to let themselves be exploited by those who hold the means of production, or even to remain idle and starve when the bosses have no incentive to exploit them. We are enemies of the State, therefore, which is the coercive, i.e. violent, organization of society. But if a gentleman says that he believes it is stupid and cruel to argue with blows and that it is unfair and evil to force one to do the will of another at gunpoint, it is perhaps reasonable to infer that this gentleman will let himself get beaten and submit to the will of others without resorting to the most extreme means of defence? ... Violence is only justifiable

when it is necessary to defend oneself and others against violence. Where need ends crime begins ... The slave is always in a state of legitimate self-defence and so his violence against the boss, against the oppressor, is always morally justifiable and should only be adjusted by the criterion of utility and economy of human effort and human suffering. ('Umanità Nova', August 25, 1921).

The slave is always in a state of legitimate self-defence, he is always entitled to attack. Always. This adverb opens up an immense discourse. However, Malatesta narrows down this vast subject and suggests, at least in this passage, that the ethical legitimacy of any action of attack against the class enemy is in some way regulated by the practical values of utility. Action must be useful, that is, it should contribute to alleviating repression, to alleviating dominion, or at least it must make the enemy side understand that one is not entirely helpless.

Malatesta, despite being a very knowledgeable man from the philosophical point of view was not, contrary to what many think, a follower of economic theories. He is not because he is a voluntarist, because, as we shall see later, he leaves a great deal of space to human emotion, the heart, and sometimes much less to the brain, to theory. Economism is based on Mach's theory which states that nature always takes the shortest route, so by extrapolating this philosophical and scientific argument and placing it in social reality action should also take the shortest route, i.e. obtain the best results with the least possible effort. This is not Malatesta's point of view. Does he suggest utility then? He suggests it to reduce what we talked about earlier, which if left to itself would leave open a door without limits.

It is clear, moreover, that Malatesta is aware that there can be no guarantee in advance. If one sets to action and decides to get back at those who are continually making us suffer, we can evaluate each aspect of this decision, strategic, tactical, practical, technical, all the consequences, but we cannot guarantee in absolute that it will not result in a chaotic situation with unpredictable consequences, even increase suffering or increase repression. Exactly the opposite of what one originally thought might happen.

If we see many instances of attack passing before our eyes, we can see that, although they start off with good intentions they often come to questionable conclusions and need an explanation, what commonly goes by the name of 'communique', an explanatory comment. We can be sure that the more an explanation is needed, the less the action of attack on the enemy is successful, so we can say that this action has had some problems in its implementation. Malatesta asks himself the same questions and it is in this sense that we should read the phrases concerning economy and the use of human force to attack.

The second step would be this:

There are certainly other people, other parties, other schools as sincerely devoted to the general good as the best of us. But what distinguishes anarchists from all the others is precisely their horror of violence, their desire and intention to eliminate violence, i.e. material force, from human relations.

One could therefore say that the specific idea that distinguishes anarchists is the abolition of the gendarme, the exclusion from social factors of the rule im-

posed by brute force, whether legal or illegal. But then, you might ask, why have anarchists in the present struggle against political and social institutions, which they consider oppressive, advocated and practiced, and continue to advocate and practice when they can, the use of violent means in clear contradiction with their aims? So much so that, at certain times, many opponents in good faith, and all who are in bad faith have believed, or have claimed to believe, that the specific nature of anarchism is precisely violence? The question may seem embarrassing, but it can be answered in a few words. In order for two people to live in peace it is necessary that both parties desire peace, because if one insists upon using force to oblige the other to work for him and serve him, then the other, if he wants to retain his dignity as a man and not be reduced to abject slavery, he will be obliged, in spite of all his love for peace and good agreement, to resist force with adequate means. ('Pensiero e Volontà', 1 September 1924).

Here we should—in my opinion, of course, since the reading can be done in many ways and I do it my way—it is necessary to emphasize the concept of 'dignity', very important. After all, what makes us aware of our condition as exploited and oppressed? Are we driven by physical suffering, hunger? Very rarely now. Certainly not here. Of course these are very powerful springs that push the most backward strata of social reality to find outlets in ways that could hardly be summed up as anarchist revolutionary consciousness. But what do conscious anarchists, having internalized this kind of sickness called revolutionary consciousness, appeal if not to their wounded dignity, to their dignity as human beings? Whatever can push an anarchist to attack the enemy that offends us far from the privilege of sharing any of what they have put us in, and which basically we tolerate because we cannot do anything else?

The new repression is different from that of the past. Malatesta would say there is no need to start shooting in order to rise up and attack, but here it is not a question of guns. The new repression is quite different. It involves us, draws us into consensus, it makes us share a social reality that we should reject but cannot, which a thousand ties, aspects, from work, family, a moral view of life and the world we live in, force us to accept. It is becoming more and more difficult to react against this condition because it is increasingly distant and remote, this ethical assessment of ourselves and our life, our outlook on life is ever more inscrutable.

And those who move to attack or even simply express their dissent are immediately placed under a very precise, increasingly detailed beam of the repressive spotlight. Think how the concept of terrorism has developed over the last thirty years in ever more evanescent and obscure ways that are further and further from the actual meaning of this word, this concept, how all that has been developing. Think, I heard that in some high school, I don't know, some kids wrote a sentence on the blackboard on the Nassyria question, and were immediately filed, interrogated by the police, and so on. Think about what an absurd level repression has reached.

The comrades on trial—or rather those of us on trial, because I am also there—in the third degree [of the 'Marini trial'] in the Supreme Court, have been sentenced to life imprisonment



and thirty years, not to mention my six-year sentence which is trivial compared to theirs. These are comrades who are under powerful spotlights. As soon as they move they trigger both the preventive aspects of repression and those that follow. Think about how many of us are constantly finding police microphones in our homes, how many of us are continually forced look for and remove these objects, only to find them again. Think about how many of us have trials going on at this moment, or if not trials, have investigative procedures piling up in the various attorneys' offices. Not because they did some kind of revolutionary action, but because we are, permit me the immodesty, carriers of a revolutionary concept that disturbs, probably, I imagine, due to its potential, certainly not its operational effectiveness. Because of its potential in that it implies that we are able to suggest the selforganisation of the revolutionary masses which is what, after all, from a repressive point of view, certainly disturbs the sleep of power.

But back to our beloved Malatesta. In the third piece that we read he writes:

The struggle against government is resolved, ultimately, in physical and material battle. The government makes the law. It must therefore have a material force (army and police) to enforce it, because otherwise only those who wanted to would obey and it would no longer be a law but a mere proposal that everyone is free to accept or reject. And governments have this power and use it to fortify their laws with force and domination in the interests of the privileged classes, oppressing and exploiting the workers. The limit of government oppression is the force with which the people show they are able to oppose it.

Conflict may be open or latent, but there is always conflict, because the government does not pay attention to discontent and popular resistance unless it feels the danger of insurrection. When the people meekly submit to the law, or protest is weak and platonic, the government does what it likes regardless of the needs of the people; when protest gets lively, insistent, threatening, the government, according to how enlightened it is, either gives way or represses. But you always come back to insurrection, because if the government does not give way, the people end up rebelling and if the government does give way the people gain confidence and demand more and more, until the incompatibility between freedom and authority becomes evident and violent conflict erupts.

It is therefore necessary to prepare morally and materially for the outbreak of violent struggle so that when this does happen victory goes to the people. (Programme Anarchica, Bologna, July 1920. 'Umanita Nova' 12 August 1920.)

I do not agree with the substance of Malatesta's discourse because it contains a mechanism that I do not like. There is the mechanism of inevitability, as though something in the process of confrontation were mechanically designed to move towards the final confrontation. I do not believe so, but what I like in Malatesta's thought is that, despite the persistence of the archaeological residual so to speak—which for its time was not even

that—of a mechanism reminiscent of the old Hegelian and Marxist structures of the movement, there is something more important, there is the voluntarily determined act, which puts the preparatory process under careful scrutiny. Look, contrary to one's impressions, to one's convictions, even I, at least within certain limits, believe that we are not living in a tragic moment of stasis but that within these silent waters of acquiescence there is always something moving. Something is evolving, not because of the mechanism Malatesta mentions, but in a chaotic, unpredictable way, and this something might in reality, in an albeit restricted but not anatomically separate way, take the form of popular insurgency. Think of the little hints such as the incredibly significant movement that there has been recently in Basilicata, and other cases such as the wildcat strike in Milan. Little things, but they are significant all the same. Think about how fragile this monstrous governing State construction that oppresses us can be. I remember—sorry if I speak of my memories, but I am old so you need to have a little patience—when I was picked up by the police during the struggles of Comiso [1982–1983], I was taken before the Prefect of Ragusa, and he said, 'Well, lads, (we were young at the time) what do you want to do with the military base, do you really want to destroy it?' I replied: 'Actually we'd like to go inside and smash everything.' He said, 'If you come with the people, you can do it, if you're alone I do not recommend it.' A man of government, a man of the system, the prefect, was giving me clear indications, essential for the State and power. You cannot face—the days of Scelba in the sixties were long gone—you cannot face the people in revolt with machine guns if they are simply demonstrating. The people. Hooded comrades can be dealt with with truncheons and even the odd bullet, that is a fairly widespread practice. The police are constantly on our backs and I remember a few days after the events in Genoa in 2001, a policeman who was raiding my home in Trieste saying: 'What a great time we had in Genoa'. For them it's like going to stir up trouble at the football stadium. But not when masses of people are involved, when there are children, and so on. Just think, with regard to enforcement actions, how these are brought to the attention of public opinion. Think of the effect that a repressive undertaking at mass level would have on public opinion. We are governed through the formation of opinion, through the management of information. Something that Berlusconi (no, not Berlusconi, because Berlusconi doesn't understand anything), but from his collaborators down, know very well.

In my opinion, it is always good to prepare for insurrection as something that is possible. Study methods, specifically, Malatesta suggests. This does not mean going on the barricades, as if to say right, let's make this insurrection, it is not about that. It would not be an insurrection in that case, it would only be a manifestation of desire, a gesture of hatred, rage, whatever you like, because the cup is so full that it overflows, this is all fine but the thing would still be limited. The preparation is of a moral order—Malatesta said—and is actually concrete. Give yourself instruments for thinking and acting, this is what Malatesta tells us.

We go to the fourth piece.

This revolution must necessarily be violent, even though violence is in itself a bad thing. It must be violent because it would be folly to put one's hopes in the privileged admitting to the damage and injustice of their privileges and deciding to give them up voluntarily. It must be violent because transitional revolutionary

violence is the only way to end the greater, perpetual violence under which the great mass of people are enslaved. ('Umanità Nova', 12 August 1920).

Even here I must confess that there is a concept that I don't agree with, the concept of transience. Here we are within the main body—in my opinion, perhaps the Malatestian specialists will give me a telling off—of Malatesta's thought. The idea of transition is important for Malatesta. The revolutionary process is one that arises and puts us in a state of transition between the old society of oppression and the new free society of the future. The mechanisms involved in this argument, which Malatesta drew from the philosophical-scientific ideas of the time, the scientific mechanism of the nineteenth century, in short many things that there is no need to discuss now of course, are important in order to understand why he speaks of a 'transitory' phase. Not transitory in the sense of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Let's beware, there is no question of a situation in which anarchists take and hold power, even for a transitional period, and obviously we cannot accuse Malatesta of such a spurious concept so full of tragic meaning—but despite all this he insists on talking about transience. We now know how society is based on a number of these transitory movements, where nothing definitive exists.

So violence does not guarantee anything. It is not that the concept of revolution, having these violent features, is able to solve the problem of the oppressive management of society and transform it into something autonomously free. We are not looking at a guarantee, I believe that nothing is certain. In fact, when the spring that triggers the participation of each of us goes off, putting our lives at stake, there is nothing certain about what awaits us. One thing clear, guys, is that we are anarchists, we could never be monarchists or like Berlusconi. Anarchism is a different way of being, it is not a different opinion, it is a radically different conviction. We are anarchists because we are different, different because we have become conscious, because different feelings beat in our hearts. Our analysis will be illuminated by this heartbeat, this continuous synchronism that tells us: 'Look, you're in the wrong society, and if you don't do something so that this society becomes something different, even vaguely so, even in part, if you don't do something in that sense, you're shit.' And mark my words, this is said by each one of you, just as I constantly say it to myself, and that's the spring, the offended dignity that compels us to act. Malatesta knew that very well.

I don't know if that is right or wrong in itself. But what are we talking about? We are talking about the fact that the revolutionary process can be summed up as the transitional phase in the redistribution of the means of production. I don't know if this is the most important phase of the revolution. I don't know because, from what I can understand of economy, the means of production as they have been transformed during the course of capitalist management that we are all in up to the eyes, are irretrievably lost to us. The future has no use for such means of production. That is my conviction, which is questionable given that it deserves much more going into. From the eighties onwards capital has been transforming itself with the addition of IT processes in such a way that it cannot be used. So, in my opinion, the only road is to begin to destroy it. This is obviously just my own opinion and might not be worth much.

Let's talk about the fifth piece.

Our souls are also embittered by this need for violent struggle. We who preach love and are struggling to reach a social condition where harmony and love between people are possible, suffer more than anybody by the need to defend ourselves with violence against the violence of the ruling classes. However, to renounce liberatory violence when it is the only way to put an end to the unremitting suffering of the great mass of people and the untold carnage that afflict mankind, would make us responsible for the hatred that we deplore and the evils that stem from it. ('Umanità Nova', 27 April 1920).

Jointly responsible. Here is a glimpse of another main concept, not only for Malatesta in his time, but also for us today, the concept of shared responsibility.

Everybody is responsible for their own actions. What does shared responsibility mean? Does it mean that I criticize the behaviour of a comrade, if I see him acting foolishly, and tell him off? Is this the concept of shared responsibility? Is it perhaps a suggestion that I spend my life looking at what others are doing and not what I do myself, in my daily misery? Is this the concept of shared responsibility? Certainly not, my friends, because each person is responsible for what he or she does. So, if a comrade feels that his abstention in the elections is an effective and efficient way of acting against the class enemy, he alone can assess the merits of this choice, of this opinion of his. It cannot be that someone says to him, 'No, look, that's too circumscribed, you are limited, electoral abstention is only a small manifestation of dissent, it is not sufficient for us to be able to talk about revolutionary action.' This concept seems strange, but it is extremely important because it is very common in the movement to look into the plate of the diner sitting next to us. I have often been accused of having blasted left and right, with this one or that one. But if someone has been offended by my reprimands, had he seen them for what they actually are he would realize that it was always said from the start: 'All of the work done by comrades as they decide is extremely important, including the work of information and clarification, anything'. The only thing that I do not agree with is that for this work to be put in a better light and seem more important, they distance themselves—you'll see that Malatesta will say the same thing in a moment—and feel the need to say 'We are this but we're not that'. That's what made me explode, often recklessly of course because the passions cannot be entirely checked, we are human beings, we are not machines. Everybody is free to carry out their revolutionary task as they think best but they are not, in my opinion, free to point at what someone else is doing, and say: 'No, you don't do that kind of stuff, that is not anarchist.' For often, with that seemingly innocent statement you are giving the policeman a shortcut to the main street of repression.

Another piece of Malatesta, which is 1923.

We are against violence on principle and so we would like the social struggle, for as long as it exists, to be as humane as possible. But that does not mean that we will not struggle energetically and radically, on the contrary we believe that half measures can actually end up drawing out the struggle indefinitely, can make it sterile and produce far more violence than which we would like to avoid. Nor does it mean that we limit the right of defence to resisting material and imminent

attack. For us, the oppressed are always in a condition of self-defence and have every right to rebel without waiting to be shot at, and we know very well that attack is often the most effective means of defence. But here there is also a matter of feelings—and for me feelings count more than all reasoning. ('Fede', 28 October 1923).

Malatesta talks, and this speaks for itself. How many arguments are fully developed then collapse before the fact that those who expressed them lack that total participation in their own lives. The involvement of the heart that makes one's ideas meaningful, drawing into them the light of humanity that should be present in any theoretical development if we want it to be more than a mere academic exercise.

When it comes to it, in order to act there is a threshold to overcome. Let's be clear about it, this is something that I feel physically. We are surrounded by thresholds. If I reach out my hand to touch my sister's bare breast I feel that there is something wrong, and this is a 'threshold'. If I reach out my hand to take an object that is lying on the counter of a jeweller's shop, if—as has happened to me personally, I was convicted of armed robbery, so I know very well what it means—I enter a jeweller's shop with a revolver in my hand, I have to pass a threshold, not the threshold of the jeweller's shop, but a psychological threshold inside me. I mean, I have to overcome a moral split.

Basically, we have interiorised rigid schema. If I sit down in my seat at the cinema and my arm touches the person sitting next to me I apologize immediately because I feel I have gone beyond a barrier without meaning to, a threshold that we introjected a long time ago, hundreds of years ago, that forbids me to touch the unknown body of the person next to me, and if I do so I must obviously apologize. These thresholds around us also prevent us from actually bringing about what we say in words in our daily lives, of realizing what we say we are convinced of. If we do not go beyond this threshold—of course I'm not making a speech inciting you to theft, robbery or incest—we remain prisoners of the tiny little things in our everyday life. I'm referring in particular to the precise threshold that separates what we say from what we actually are, that separates what we are convinced of from what we actually do, wanting to be from being, a relationship that made Hegel split his sides with laughter. One is what one is, a tautological banality that can be very difficult to understand. We are what we are and wanting to be something else constantly catches us out. We should not be anything other than what we are. I'm saying become aware and finally become anarchists, because we are anarchists, but only if we are able to become such. I am only an anarchist if I am capable of becoming one, if I strive constantly to become an anarchist, not because I am an anarchist once and for all and that's that, as though one day somebody had given me an anarchist licence.

We are nearly finished, don't worry.

Now a quick pass Malatesta, 1924.

Anarchists are not hypocrites. Force must be rejected with force: today against the oppression of today, tomorrow against that which might replace that of today. ('Pensiero e Volontà', 1 September 1924).

And this is really important because it means that the violent struggle does not end with the revolution. The anarchists' struggle does not end with the revolution. Anarchists are not certain that we are going towards a free society where we will finally all be brothers and in which there would no longer be any point in the word anarchism or anarchy, because in a free society, where all are free, what would be the point of defining oneself anarchist.

But rather, I think we will always need to call ourselves anarchists and act as anarchists, because the so-called free society will always need anarchists, as it must always be pushed towards an improvement that it will not achieve by itself.

Another piece on the Diana affair. This is the bomb that some anarchists placed in a room next to the Diana theatre, causing the collapse of a wall and the deaths of several people.

[Concerning the Diana events] I said that those murderers are also saints and heroes; and those of my friends who protest against my statement do so in homage to those whom they call real saints and heroes who, apparently, never make mistakes.

I can only confirm what I said ...

Enough of splitting hairs.

What is important is to avoid confusing the act with the intentions, and in condemning the bad act not forget to do justice to the good intentions. And not only out of respect for the truth, or out of compassion, but also for reasons of propaganda, for the practical effects that our judgement can lead to.

There are, and, so long as the present conditions and the environment of violence in which we live last, there always will be generous men, rebels who are extremely sensitive but lack sufficient powers of reflection, who in certain circumstances get carried away by their passions and strike blindly. If we do not openly recognize their good intentions, if we do not make a distinction between error and malice, we lose all moral influence over them and abandon them to their blind impulses. If, instead, we pay tribute to their goodness, their courage and spirit of sacrifice, we can reach their minds through their hearts and ensure that the valuable storehouses of energy that they embody be used for the cause in an intelligent, good and useful way, in the interests of the cause. ('Umanità Nova', 24 December 1921).

It was a very delicate question. Think, even Malatesta's companion had been involved in this incident. Malatesta manifests great composure here, without exposing anyone, without shouting at anyone. An isolated man. Having been imprisoned in San Vittore—I have seen the cells where Malatesta was held, because they still make the prisoners pass in front of these now abandoned holes, located in the old part of the prison, a sort of initiatory step to terrorize them. They are very low cells similar to those used by the Inquisition in Sicily and were called 'dammusi'. Malatesta was a prisoner in one of these cells and despite his age and his health condition due to a hunger strike, he was able to find the intellectual and

moral poise to not jump up with a conviction and take a distance from those undoubtedly very serious events. Think of some of our own misunderstandings not too long ago, following the action of Gianfranco Bertoli against the police headquarters in Milan, in 1973. During the inauguration of a monument to police superintendent Calabresi, the slayer of Pinelli, this comrade, Gianfranco Bertoli, threw a bomb into the courtyard of the police headquarters, the bomb is kicked back by a policeman and kills four or five people, wounding thirty. At the time a fierce debate broke out and I also intervened, not to condemn the action, but speaking of Bertoli and saying that what he said about himself as decided by his lawyer, and published in a sort of memorial by the weekly magazine 'Gente', fascist moreover, was not consistent with, was contrary to the concept of 'Stirnerite anarchist'. That was enough for me at the time, and I am making amends now, here in public, for having judged the action of a comrade and not tried to understand him, something that Malatesta on the other hand did with far greater capacity and revolutionary intelligence than me. I must also add that he knew Mariani and the others, whereas I did not know Bertoli, and this might be an excuse, but it is not enough. Later, having got to know him by letter and having carried on a correspondence with him for almost two years I realized that I was faced with a weak person who gave me the great gift of showing me that it is not only strength that one needs in order to rise up and attack power, even individually, but that a weak person can also do it.

Now, if you'll allow me, I shall read this last piece by Malatesta, and we're done.

This piece is important because it is Malatesta's reply to an article published in 'L'Agitazione' by Fabbri. Fabbri's article made quite a ferocious critique, very ferocious in fact, of the action of the anarchist Czolgosz who had killed McKinley, president of the United States, with two pistol shots.

McKinley, head of the North American oligarchy, instrument and defender of the capitalist giants, betrayer of the Cubans and the Philipinos, the man who authorized the massacre of the strikers of Hazleton, the torture of the miners in Idaho and the thousands of infamies committed every day against the workers in the 'model republic', the man who incarnated the militaristic, expansionist and imperialist policies which the fat American bourgeoisie have adopted, has fallen foul of an anarchist's revolver.

What do you want us to grieve for, if not for the fate in store for the generous-hearted man who, opportunely or inopportunely, with good or bad tactics, offered himself as a sacrifice to the cause of equality and freedom? We are saying again, as always: because violence is all around us, we are calmly continuing to struggle so that this dreadful need to respond to violence with violence will end, hoping that the day will soon come when the conflict of interests and passions between men will be solved by human and civil means. We hold back our tears and our flowers for other victims, not the men who, putting themselves at the head of the exploiting and oppressing classes, face the responsibility and risks of their position. Yet there have been anarchists who have found it convenient and well to condemn the oppressed who rebelled, without a word of condemnation for the oppressor who has paid the price for the crimes he committed or

allowed to be committed! Is this an unhealthy desire to gain the approval of the adversary, or is it badly construed 'tactics' to gain freedom to propagate their ideas by voluntarily giving up the right to express the genuine, profound feelings of the soul, even to the point of falsifying these feelings by pretending to be other than what one is? I do so with regret, but I must express the pain and outrage that the rash words that 'L'Agitazione' devoted to the attack in Buffalo caused me and many friends that I had the opportunity to see these days. 'Czolgosz is irresponsible'—but do they know him?—'His act is a common crime that has none of the characteristics required for such an act to be considered political!' I believe that no public prosecutor, monarchist or Republican, would dare say as much. Perhaps there are some personal reasons or grievances for condemning Czolgosz? ... Already, it is improper to speak of a crime in such cases. The law does, but the law is made against us, against the oppressed, and cannot serve as a criterion in our judgments. These are acts of war, and if war is a crime, it concerns those who are on the side of injustice and oppression. The English invaders of the Transvaal are the criminals, not the Boers when they defended their freedom, even if their defence had no hope of success.

'Czolgosz's act ('L'Agitazione' might reply) did nothing for the cause of the workers or the revolution; McKinley was succeeded by his equal, Roosevelt and everything remains unchanged, except that the situation for the anarchists has become a little more difficult than before.' It may be that 'L'Agitazione' are right; indeed, in the American environment, as far as I know, things are probably like that.

This means that in war there are moves that you get right and there are wrong moves, there are careful combatants and those who get carried away with enthusiasm and become an easy target for the enemy, possibly even jeopardizing the position of their comrades. This means that each one must advise, defend and put into practice the tactics that he believes are more likely to achieve victory in the shortest time and with least possible sacrifice; but that cannot alter the fundamental obvious fact that those who fight, well or badly, against the common enemy and towards the same goal, is our friend and has a right, not to our unconditional approval, but to our heartfelt sympathy.

Whether the combat unit is a collectivity or a single individual cannot change the moral aspect of the matter. An armed insurrection carried out inopportunistly can cause real or apparent damage to the social war we are fighting, as does an individual attack that antagonises popular feelings, but if the insurrection is carried out to conquer freedom, no anarchist would deny it their sympathy; above all, no one will dare deny the defeated rebels their particular socio-political character. Why should it be any different if the insurrectionist is a single individual?

'L'Agitazione' has said that strikers are always right, and it said well, although it is clear that not all strikes are advisable, because a failed strike could, in certain



circumstances, lead to discouragement and disperse the workers' strength. Why should what is true in the case of the economic struggle against the bosses not be so in the political struggle against the rulers, who with the gun of the soldier and the handcuffs of the police want to enslave us to them and the capitalists? This is not a discussion about tactics. If that were so, I would say that generally speaking I prefer collective action to individual action, because collective action requires fairly common average qualities, which are easy to find, whereas we cannot count on heroism, which is exceptional and of a sporadic nature requiring individual sacrifice. Here it is a matter of a higher order: it is a question of the revolutionary spirit, of the almost instinctive feeling of hatred of oppression, without which any program, no matter how libertarian the stated proposals are, remains dead letters; it is a question of that combative spirit, without which even anarchists become domesticated and end up, in one way or another, in the quagmire of legalitarianism ... It is foolish, in order to save a life, to destroy the very reason for living. What is the point of revolutionary organisations if you let the revolutionary spirit die? What is the point of freedom of propaganda, if you no longer propagate your ideas ...? ('L'Agitazione', 22 September 1901)

I can't find words to end fittingly after reading these lines by Malatesta. I see in them a radical contribution to the fact that we cannot share anything with our enemy. We live in a reality where we share almost everything with our enemy, we share so much and so deeply that we even speak the same language. Language embodies all of us and makes us similar to the enemy that oppresses us because we are obliged to think the same way. That is, when we look at a newspaper that talks about what we are doing, or more often what the editor imagines we are about to do, and we try to find some content, meaning, whatever it is, we are on the wrong track because the enemy cannot speak of us in a way that is not congenial to him, that is not meaningful to him and for him.

In my opinion we should start realising that we need a different logic. You cannot be a revolutionary and talk and think like a policeman. Words have their limit. It is not true that we manage to say everything that we think in words. Often, through words, we are capable of hiding what we are thinking in the most occult way. These are not my words, they are the words of Nietzsche, with which he managed to give us an important indication on this point that is so subtle as to really open up the way of the future. The future will be always more marked by a contrast of the management not only of actions, therefore news, but also concepts of what we manage to understand of reality. And for as long as we claim to use words, as long as we claim that the word translates our thoughts objectively and this claim remains identical to that of our oppressor, we are on the wrong track.

Here Malatesta gives us a small indication. Of course this happened a century ago, but he gives this indication saying, 'There can be no acceptance of what power says'. Let's be careful, because if we want power to like us, if we want to muzzle what we say, what we are doing, so that power gives us some space and allows us to continue this saying and doing, we are on the wrong track.

What does this concept mean then? And this very meeting is no exception, what I am saying now does not escape this rule. I am talking. Why did I prefer to talk to you and not read out my written intervention? Because in the written intervention I illude myself that I have managed to write something that I agree with, in a sense. But how much have I hidden of what I actually could have said and not wanted to say? This danger is reduced through the spoken word because there is reciprocal communicativity, impulse, a feeling that we try to pass from the one to the other when we shake hands, when we embrace each other. And this is the most meaningful moment of the great anarchically valid tension between comrades that makes us feel close, far beyond what we are able to write or theorise on a piece of paper.

I'd like to leave you here and thank you for your attention.

find each other.



Alfredo M. Bonanno  
Errico Malatesta and Revolutionary Violence  
December 2003

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