

## Great Anarchists

These short introductions delve into the anarchist canon to recover some of the distinctive ideas that historical anarchists advanced to address problems relevant to their circumstances. Although these contexts were special, many of the issues the anarchists wrestled with still plague our lives. Anarchists developed a body of writing about power, domination, injustice and exploitation, education, prisons and a lot more besides. Honing in on different facets of the anarchist canon is not just an interesting archaeological exercise. The persistence, development and adaptation of anarchist traditions depends on our surveying the historical landscape of ideas and drawing on the resources it contains. The theoretical toolbox that this small assortment of anarchists helped to construct is there to use, amend and adapt. Agitate, Educate, Organise!

### Errico Malatesta

Malatesta is the living link between the demise of the First International in 1871 and the struggle against European fascism which started some forty years later. After the ruckus between Marx and Bakunin catalysed the separate development of revolutionary socialist organisations, he joined both the anarchist Federalist International and its Italian section. Spending long stretches of time in exile, dodging arrest and escaping jail, he lived much of his life like the great white shark, permanently on the move. Though there were periods of settlement in Italy, Argentina and the UK, he travelled widely in Europe, equally in its northern regions and along its Mediterranean shore, and made trips to Egypt, the US and Cuba. Wherever he happened to be, he always played a prominent role in Italian anarchist politics, editing a series of highly influential newspapers. He also wrote one of the movement's best loved pamphlets. Malatesta was present at the key international gatherings of the period including the 1896 London meeting of the Second International, where he reportedly delivered a 'fiery speech' protesting the decision to eject anarchists from its congresses. In debates between organisationalists and individualists he sided with the former. Yet he stood in solidarity with his opponents to help frustrate police actions. A communist, he was pragmatic rather than doctrinaire and though he also advocated workers' self-organisation, he was cautious about syndicalism.

Malatesta was catapulted into public view in the UK in 1912, in the aftermath of the siege of Sidney Street. This was a stand-off in London's East End between a team of expropriators, several hundred police and 120 troops which sparked a moral panic about immigrants and calls for the habitual arming of the police. The troops had been deployed by Churchill, then Home Secretary, who was looking for fun and eager to demonstrate the government's resolve to kill criminal foreigners in front of a battalion of photo-journalists and Pathé news cameras. Malatesta's sale of a bottle of gas to one of the gang was enough to implicate him

in the botched raid, though his day-job as an electrician explained the transaction perfectly well.

His stature in the movement was demonstrated during the Release campaign organised to stop his threatened deportation after his arrest and trial. The Glasgow *Anarchist* reported that a crowd of 15,000 attended a meeting in Trafalgar Square in June 1912. Later giving his name to the London anarchist club that met variously in High Holborn and Fitzrovia in the 1950s, Malatesta is sometimes said to have been overshadowed by Kropotkin. The two had met in the 1870s and then worked with each other on-and-off until 1914 when Kropotkin came out in support of the war and Malatesta accused him of forgetting his principles. Max Nettlau, the historian of the nineteenth-century European movement, suggested that Kropotkin stole his thunder and that Malatesta's anarchism was always under-appreciated, even though his writings and political practice were 'precise and meticulous', *rational*, *realistic*.

It was well known that Malatesta had given up his inheritance and most of his money and that he earned his reputation with inspectors at the Yard as 'an anarchist of a very dangerous type' from tireless insurrectional activity. But it was not just his personal virtues or his internationalist commitment that make him a great anarchist. Malatesta was particularly alert to the power of propaganda. He started life as a propagandist by the deed and ended it under house arrest in Mussolini's Italy, the year before Hitler became German Chancellor in 1933. Fascists took the art of state propaganda to new heights of sophistication. But Sidney Street had been an object lesson in public relations, providing a glimpse into the everyday manipulations that were to come with mass televised and online broadcasting. Malatesta already understood that propaganda was a key part of advocacy and that anarchists should practice it in specific ways to counter corporate and state narratives and promote alternative messages.

### Propaganda by the deed

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, 'propaganda by the deed' was usually adopted either to denote revolutionary actions differentiated from publishing (called 'propaganda by the word'), or to describe a method of revolution. Suffragettes legitimised the first usage, organising around the slogan 'deeds not words'. However, in anarchist history it is more often associated with the wave of individual acts of violence which reached a peak in Europe in the late 1880s and early 1890s. The second meaning was filled out by leading Chinese and Japanese anarchists, amongst others, who advocated assassination as an effective counter to autocracy. The popular misconception, that propaganda by the deed represents the anarchists' terroristic penchant for killing, stems from the de-contextualised blurring of these usages: the revenge violence that was typically

directed against heads of state that sanctioned the torture, repression or execution of anarchists and the defence of tyrannicide as a spur to social transformation.

The decision to struggle for change by means of propaganda – especially propaganda by the deed - was taken by the Bakuninist Jura Federation in 1877 and it was advanced in critique of the Marxist plan to stand workers' candidates in elections. Malatesta had outlined his understanding of the concept the previous year, contrasting it to gradualism and peaceful activism – an approach to action recommended by a minority of socialists in Italy who he characterised as self-seeking and reactionary. While he avoided treating propaganda by the deed as a doctrine which had a fixed or specific content, he linked propagandistic acts firmly to insurrection. Malatesta's judgement of the political situation in Italy at that time was that anarchists should encourage insurrection because this offered 'the most effective and the only means' of re-energising internationalist struggle 'without deceiving or corrupting' ordinary people.

Malatesta's 1877 action at Benevento, near Naples, is easily and wrongly mocked as an instance of the chaotic and disastrous character of anarchist insurrection. Betrayed by spies, Malatesta was arrested by government troops while trying to incite rebellion in mountain villages. Social revolution was declared but there was no anarchist uprising. However, by the time he was arrested, some locals had burned tax, property and debt registers. He had successfully incited a propagandistic act which not only symbolised resistance to the injustices of ownership, but also entailed a collective refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the apparently natural, regulated order. The experience was fleeting yet Benevento was a lesson in anarchy and grand propaganda.

Reflecting on the action in the 1920s, Malatesta wrote that his insurrectionary strategy had 'had no probability of success': he had been part of a small band and they had just wanted to raise public awareness of anarchism. However he remained steadfast in his view that insurrection was an excellent form of anarchist propaganda. Insurrection was 'the most potent factor in the emancipation of the people'. It focussed attention on 'what the people are capable of wanting'. At that time, people had been 'unaware of the real reasons for their misery'. They had 'wanted very little' and so had 'achieved very little', too. Wondering what they might want from the next insurrection, Malatesta wrote that 'the answer ... depends on our propaganda and what efforts we put into it'. Given that Mussolini was preparing to stage the March on Rome, this assessment was undoubtedly optimistic. Nevertheless, Malatesta gave it a realist wrapping.

### Government and anarchist propaganda

In his essay 'Anarchy', Malatesta declared that the accepted defence of 'government' or 'the justiciary State' as the 'moderator in ... social struggle and impartial administrator of the

public interest' was a lie: 'an illusion, a utopia never achieved and never to be realised'. Government was always the tool of a faction. Whoever exercised control would use its machinery to advance their own interests, all the while doing their utmost to ensure that their rules and norms were internalised by everybody else. Propaganda was the art of getting others to accept a particular vision of reality and dismiss messages about alternatives as single-shot 'propaganda'. Anarchism's demonization and criminalisation was one measure of the strength of government propaganda. Malatesta's pamphlet 'Fra Contadini, A Dialogue On Anarchy' includes the following observation about the anarchist George: 'Father Anthony, who has studied and reads the newspapers, says you're all mad hooligans, that you don't want to work for a living and that instead of doing the workers any good you're preventing the landlords from doing the best they can for us'.

Malatesta's analysis resonated with Edward Bernays's view. Bernays was the guru of public relations who tailored his uncle Freud's teachings about desire to suit the management of emergent democracies. In the opening to his 1928 classic *Propaganda*, Bernays observed that the 'conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country'. The pithy version of the thesis defined propaganda as 'the executive arm of the invisible government'.

Anarchist propaganda could be differentiated from government propaganda because it was designed to construct a reality that supported alternative power structures – self-governing anarchy. Still, by Malatesta's reckoning, anarchist propaganda was still propaganda. Anarchists had to understand that the marginalised groups they identified with had little-to-no understanding of anarchist principles and were likely to oppose them. Karl Kautsky and later Lenin developed the equivalent position in Marxism. This was the idea that workers were unable to achieve class consciousness spontaneously or by their own efforts. Malatesta of course rejected the vanguardist strategy that Lenin proposed to close the gap between the elite and mass. He also rejected Lenin's tactical distinction between propagandists-as-writers and agitators-as-orators. At the same time, he criticised unnamed anarchists (Kropotkinites?) for devoting too much time to devising road maps for anarchy. Writing a year after Bernays, he argued:

The important thing is not the victory of our plans, our projects, our utopias, which in any case need the confirmation of experience and can be ... developed and adapted to the real moral and material conditions of the age and place. What matters most is that the people ... lose their sheeplike instincts and habits which thousands of years of slavery have instilled in them, and learn to think and act freely. And it is to this great work of moral liberation that the anarchist must specially dedicate themselves.

Anarchists were not planners but propagandists charged with demonstrating the 'uselessness and harmfulness of government, provoking and encouraging by propaganda and action, all kinds of individual and collective initiatives'. Malatesta tasked his comrades with "'pushing" the people to demand and to seize all the freedom they can and to make themselves responsible for providing their own needs without waiting for orders from any kind of authority.'

Anarchist propaganda was 'education for freedom'. It was about 'making people who are accustomed to obedience and passivity consciously aware of their real power and capabilities'. But it worked by the same logic as any other form.

One must encourage people to do things for themselves, or to think they are doing so by their own initiative and inspiration even when in fact their actions have been suggested by others, just as the good school teacher when he sets a problem his pupil cannot solve immediately, helps him in such a way that the pupil imagines that he has found the solution unaided, thus acquiring courage and confidence in his own abilities.

#### Anarchist Propaganda and the construction of alternative realities

Acknowledging the potential harms of propaganda was a good way to minimise or avoid them. If propaganda could not always be generated from below and was usually delivered from without, Malatesta's approach underscored a number of anarchist principles: show, don't tell; stand *with* not *for*; expose don't conceal.

There were no limits on the design of propagandistic acts, except the contexts within which anarchists operated. Malatesta appreciated that it was not always possible for activists to operate openly and that there were 'circumstances and actions which demand secrecy'. However, as a general rule, he believed that it was better to 'act in the full light of day' rather than covertly or conspiratorially. The 'best way to obtain a freedom', he argued, is to take it 'facing necessary risks'. Propaganda typically involved assertion: 'very often a freedom is lost, through one's own fault, either through not exercising it or using it timidly, giving the impression that one has not the right to be doing what one is doing.'

There was an ethics to anarchist propaganda, too. This undergirded the distinction between anarchist and government propaganda and differentiated genuinely propagandistic acts from erratic, anarchistic attacks. Anarchist propagandists may choose the same delivery methods as non-anarchists but they had to know their audiences to communicate effectively with them and ensure the clarity of the messages; they had to forge close relationships with the disadvantaged.

Isolated, sporadic propaganda which is often a way of easing a troubled conscience or is simply an outlet for someone who has a passion for argument, serves little or no purpose. In the conditions of unawareness and misery in which the masses live, and with so many forces against us, such propaganda is forgotten and lost before its effect can grow and bear fruit. The soil is too ungrateful for seeds sown haphazardly to germinate and make roots.

Malatesta's rejection of anarchist individualism sprang from this concern. Individualism meant gestural politics. Countering government propaganda required 'continuity of effort, patience, coordination and adaptability to different surroundings and circumstances': clear-sightedness, organisation and flexibility.