

Tactical Matters

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Editor's note

The background to this article is a protracted controversy that had taken place in the columns of *La Révolte* from August to September 1892 between Malatesta and the Italian anti-organizationist Amilcare Pomati. This was part of a broader, heated debate on organization in which Malatesta and his friend Saverio Merlino engaged in the early 1890s. The main issue at stake—as already discussed in the previous article “Matters Revolutionary”—was whether anarchists should organize in any permanent, structured form. Anti-organizationists opposed the idea, and rejected organization in institutional forms such as parties, programs, and congresses. Thus, Pomati had argued that, “in the presence of a popular event or commotion, anarchists will always agree on the course of action to be taken, without any need for previous agreements.” The contrast had far-reaching ramifications, which involved such issues as participation in labor organizations. The anti-organizationists’ preoccupation was that anarchists would compromise and ultimately lose their anarchist identity in trade unions, becoming progressively involved in questions of palliative improvements that diverted them from their real focus. In general, anti-organizationists were critical not only of attempts at anarchist organizations, but also of tactical alliances with non-anarchist parties and of anarchist efforts to take a leading role in organized collective movements. On the basis of such premises, Pomati had claimed that Merlino and Malatesta’s “evolution towards the legalitarian parties was becoming every day more pronounced.” The present article was preceded by the following editor’s note: “Being eager to have done with the polemic between Pomati and Malatesta, relative to personal issues and which was threatening to turn nasty, we had picked out this portion of Malatesta’s response, asking that he expand upon it for us in his exposition of principles that we had promised he could discuss. We now publish that section and reply to it.” We have omitted the editor’s response to Malatesta’s article.

Questions de tactique

The point is the making of propaganda; getting our ideas across to the masses; pushing the workers into handling their affairs for themselves, weaning them away from politics and persuading them that only by means of expropriation and the abolition of political power can they emancipate themselves—the co-operators are no worse than anybody else when it comes to working among them at this task.

The point is that we are not content with the aristocratic delights of knowing or thinking that we know the truth. We want the revolution made by the people and for the people. We think that a revolution made by a party without the participation of the masses, even were it possible today, would lead only to the ascendancy of that party, which would not be an anarchist revolution at all.

So, insofar as it is possible today, we want to win the masses over to our ideas, and to that end, we must at all times be among the masses, fighting and suffering with them and for them.

When it was said by some comrade or other in *La Tribuna dell’Operaio* that we have to get into the workers’ associations and, in places where none exists, create some so as to spread our ideas *afterwards*, he was merely articulating a common-sense truth—a virtual banality. If we are out to band together the workers who are not anarchists, in order to target them with our propaganda,

plainly we cannot expect that they have become anarchists *before* banding them together. Pomati finds that he has never witnessed anarchists *going to such lengths*. I say, however, that for the past twenty years, ever since the days of the International, we have never thought nor spoken otherwise. And whilst there were times when we found ourselves remote from the masses and when we left the field free to the legalitarians, there were lots of reasons for that, especially persecution at the hands of government, which from time to time put us out of action, but it was never because of any deliberate decision on our part. Quite the opposite: we have always considered such periods as defeats for which revenge was due.

Let us understand one another properly. Inside anarchist groups, where we marshal our supporters and come to agreement on how to make our efforts more effective, we want only anarchists, we even want ourselves to hobnob only with anarchists whose thinking and sentiments are in harmony with our own, and to remain groups only for as long as such harmony obtains. But outside of our groups, when it comes to the making of propaganda and cashing in on popular upheavals, we strive to reach out in all directions and employ every useful means in order to rally the masses, school them in revolt, and afford ourselves the opportunity of preaching socialism and anarchy. I mean all means that do not run counter to the goal we have set ourselves—it goes without saying. For instance, we could not meddle in the business of political or religious factions, except to confront them and try to break them up; but we can and we should always try to organize the masses to resist capital and government. And wherever nothing else is achievable, wherever toil has them trapped in isolation and brutishness, we will be doing well, for want of an alternative, if we resort even to dancing and musical societies as a way of initiating the young into social life and finding ourselves an audience. We cannot confirm the delusions of those who reckon that they might be able to achieve emancipation through cooperatives or strikes; but we should be in among them if we mean to turn the setbacks suffered by co-operators to our advantage, or combat their tendency towards bourgeois-ification and if we mean to help nurture the seed of revolt to be found within every strike.

We contend that agreement, association, and organization represent one of the laws governing life and the key to strength—today as well as after the revolution. To which end we mean to organize ourselves as best we can with those of like mind. But we also want to see the masses organized, as widely as possible, as should anyone who sees in the revolution a purpose other than his personal or party ascendancy.

After all, tomorrow can only grow out of today—and if one seeks success tomorrow, the factors of success need to be prepared today.

Now I could not care less if the legalitarians say, when we preach organization, that we are not anarchists. They are acting like bourgeois who, having said, and perhaps even believed, that anarchists are savages and brutes, cry out, when confronted by a genuine anarchist (which is to say, a man of courage and common sense): “But this fellow is no anarchist!” Two or three years ago the Italian legalitarians, aping the Germans, saw fit to say that the anarchists were only bourgeois free-traders respectful of private ownership, competition in business, etc. When we replied that anarchists are the bitterest and most rational foes of bourgeois individualism, and are the only true socialists, the answer was that then we were not anarchists. Where does one go from there?

Besides, the thoughts I am expressing are not mine alone. They are the thoughts of the vast majority of anarchists. (Pomati admits as much since he expresses regret for their “lamentable impact” in Italy, above all, and in Spain) and, unless I am mistaken, they speak for the tendency

that predominates even among the editors of *La Révolte*. And it took all the wrath of the personalities of which certain “enemies of personalism” are possessed to lay at the door of a handful of individuals something that constitutes one of the major strands within the anarchist movement.

Ah, but we might just as easily tell them: Heal thyself of individuals.

Yours and for anarchy,
E. Malatesta

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The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.

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