

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Republic and Revolution

Errico Malatesta

Errico Malatesta
Republic and Revolution
June 1924

The Anarchist Revolution: Polemical Articles 1924–1931, edited
and introduced by Vernon Richards. Published by Freedom
Press London 1995.

theanarchistlibrary.org

June 1924

to harden our anarchism in dogma, nor impose it by force. It will be what it can be, and will develop as people and institutions grow more supportive of complete liberty and justice. The republicans, on the other hand, seek to make laws which, by definition, would be obligatory for all and must therefore necessarily be imposed on the recalcitrants by material force. If the republicans renounce the *gendannes*, then agreement can soon be reached.

It is possible — even certain — that the next movement will lead to the establishment of a republic. But this will be a ‘social’ republic only if the social reforms are carried out beforehand and only to the extent that they have been carried out. And it will be ‘federalist’ only if the unity of the state has firstly been broken up and the autonomy of the regions and communes has been set in motion. The forces of reaction, to which all governments tend, will be proportionately less effective the more radical the reforms carried out in the revolutionary period.

If, however, as it seems, the republicans intend to begin with the Constituent Assembly and only then proceed to carry out reforms through the agency of that Assembly, the antifascist movement would be of little use.

Even so, we shall take part, but only to work within the masses, outside and if necessary against the Constituent Assembly, to draw the maximum possible advantage for our ideas in favour of freedom and justice.

Revolution is the creation of new institutions, new groupings, new social relations. *Revolution* is the destruction of privilege and monopoly, a new spirit of justice, solidarity and freedom which must renew the whole of social life, raise the moral level and the material conditions of the masses by calling upon them to provide for their own future through their direct and conscious action. *Revolution* is the organisation of all public services by those who work within them in their own interests, as well as in those of the wider public. *Revolution* is the destruction of all coercive bonds, and is the autonomy of groups, communes and regions. *Revolution* is the free federation, brought about by solidarity, by individual and collective interests and by the needs of production and defence. *Revolution* is the establishment of a myriad free groupings based on the ideas, desires, needs and tastes of all and every individual. *Revolution* is the formation and dissolution of thousands of representative, neighbourhood, communal, regional and national bodies which, lacking any kind of legislative power, serve to make them known and harmonise the wishes and interests of the people near and far, and act through propagation of information, advice and example. *Revolution* is freedom proved in the crucible of events — and lasts as long as freedom lasts, that is, until such time as others, profiting from the weariness that overtakes the masses, the inevitable disappointments that follow upon exaggerated hopes, possible mistakes and human error, succeed in creating a power which, backed by an army of conscripts and mercenaries, makes laws and blocks any forward movement — and reaction sets in.

To my question, ‘How do you know in what direction your republic will go?’ Ansaldi counters by asking, ‘How do you know in what direction your anarchism will go?’ And he’s right. There are too many and complicated historical factors, too great a factor of uncertainty in the human will for anyone to be able seriously to predict the future. But the difference between us and the republicans is that we seek neither

Contents

Thoughts on Republic and Revolution	5
Further Thoughts on Republic and Revolution	10

in the comedy. But even in these circumstances it is a deception to maintain that the elections would be free. Unfortunately we are a violent people and the recent experiences of war and fascism have exacerbated, to the point of paroxysm, all our worst instincts. Even if our leaders, the most well-known and popular of men, sincerely wished for the liberty of the individual, force, fraud and violence would exert yet greater influence over the choice of deputies than the informed and free will of the majority.

But remember that, offsetting and overwhelming the revolutionary forces of the cities and regions that I shall call subversive, are the countless *Vendees*¹ of Italy, where the elections would be subject to the economic and moral pressure of the bosses and priests, backed up by the violence of those elements which are always ready for a bit of bloodletting on behalf of anyone who cares to pay for it.

Then what to do? Make of the Italian Constituent Assembly a carbon copy of the French Convention of 1792–93, when the rival parties guillotined one another and prepared the way for a Bonaparte? Or imitate the ‘rural’ Assembly of 1871 which began with the massacre of the Communards and continued as symbol and shield of bourgeois clerical reaction?

But, it will be asked, if you don’t want the Constituent Assembly, what do you want?

Revolution. And by revolution we don’t mean the insurrectionary phase alone, which would be indispensable, save in the highly unlikely eventuality that the regime, collapsing from within, falls of its own accord. But insurrection would be sterile if it were not followed by the liberation of the people and would serve merely to replace one state of violence by another.

¹ A western region of France which, during the Revolution and early Napoleonic period, was home to the forces of royalist insurrection – Editor.

True enough, it is not probable that a Constituent Assembly set up upon the fall of fascism would vote for a monarchy. The mass of the people are tired of change and the bourgeoisie needs order and peace which, in the circumstances, are more likely to prevail under a republic, bolstered by all the illusions that new regimes carry with them, rather than the hard-won fight for restoration of a monarchy. On the other hand, it is most probable — almost certain — that the Constituent Assembly, being what it would inevitably be in present moral and economical times in Italy — that is, made up of a majority of conservatives and clericals, landowners and lawyers, representing the great industrial interests of the land — would give us a conservative and clerical republic like the republic of France on the fall of the Second Empire and which, after more than fifty years, is still a centralising and capitalist republic.

Apart from the right of the majority, which we do not recognise, to impose its will, by force, on the minority; apart from the consideration that no electoral mechanism can succeed in electing a chamber that would express the will of the majority — even if such a thing as a majority with one common will existed — there always remains the fact that under a capitalist regime, when society is divided between rich and poor, bosses and workers whose ration of daily bread depends on the whim of those bosses, there cannot be such a thing as a free election. Then: also remains the fact that under a centralised regime the more developed regions exploit the less developed ones, while the latter regions, more heavily populated, hamper progress and tend to be a drag on reform.

‘The free vote of the people,’ says Albatrelli. But can he really believe what he says?

In some of the bigger cities and in some of the more progressive regions the conservatives would be eclipsed and the mass of the people, in a state of revolutionary ferment, would vote in a majority of socialists, republicans and communists — and even anarchists, should the latter allow themselves to take part

Thoughts on Republic and Revolution

Our avowed intention to take part in any revolutionary movement aimed at gaining greater liberty and justice, together with recent statements by certain comrades — whose real ideas have possibly been distorted by the haste with which newspaper articles are written — have convinced some people, unfamiliar with our ideas, that we would accept, albeit on a provisional basis, a so-called ‘social’ and ‘federated’ republic. There are even some people who send us republican propaganda articles, in the confident belief that they will be published, for all the world as though we were a republican periodical!

It would not seem necessary to waste words on this subject, given that the anarchists have never allowed of misunderstandings about their relations with the republicans. But it is useful to return to the subject because the danger of confusion is always greater when there is the wish to advance from propaganda to deeds and when, therefore, one’s own work must be coordinated with that of the other participants in the struggle. And it is surely very hard to distinguish in practice between the point where useful cooperation in the struggle against the common enemy comes to an end and a merger begins which would lead the weaker parties to surrender their own specific objectives.

It is a matter of urgency that we understand one another on the question of the republic, because the regime which emerges from the direction in which Italy is more or less rapidly heading will very probably be a republican one. And it seems to us that if we support a republic we shall be betraying not only our anarchist purposes but also those same libertarian and egalitarian ideals which the majority of republican workers — and those

young people who, while themselves privileged, are motivated by a need for justice which unites them with the workers — intend to pursue by republican means. —

We said above that the regime which, in Italy, will replace the present institutions will probably be a republican one. But what form of political conspiracy might follow immediately on the heels of those institutions that gave us fascism and whose fate has become inextricably bound up with it?

We do not wish to predict how much longer fascism will last, especially as wishful thinking could give us too much hope. Nevertheless we have reason to believe that Italy will not be increasingly driven back to medieval barbarisms and that sooner or later she will shake off the yoke that burdens her. But then?

People only bestir themselves for what is immediately obtainable, and basically they are right. Man cannot live by self-denial alone, and if there is nothing new to set up there is an inevitable tendency to fall back on the old ways.

It does not seem possible to us that there will be a return to pre-war conditions and the days of anti-fascism — and certainly we should do our best to avoid such a thing happening.

Anarchy is still not understood by the vast majority of people and we cannot reasonably expect that they will wish and know how to organise their own lives on a social level, on the basis of free agreement, without awaiting their leaders' orders and submitting to commands of whatever kind. Except for a small minority with anarchist ideas, the people, used to being governed, only overthrow one government to replace it with another from which they hope for better things.

If one excludes, therefore, as undesirable a return to the hypocrisy of constitutional monarchy, which would lead us to a new fascism as soon as the monarchy and bourgeoisie felt themselves to be in imminent danger; and excluding anarchy as being inapplicable in the near future, we see only the possibility of communist dictatorship or a republic.

(the legislative body elected by universal suffrage) immediately after the fall of the present regime and submit to their being set up by majority vote?

Another republican writer, Paolo Albatrelli, again in *La Voce*, clearly says yes. But what does Ansaldi say? What do the 'social and federalist' republicans say?

'Our republic,' says Albatrelli, 'must spring from the direct will of the people ... If the majority of the Italian people is with us, we do not intend to resort to any violence against them. We do, however, desire that they be allowed a free vote and do not come under any pressure or violence from an executive power devoid of scruples and morality.'

Does this, therefore, mean that if the Constituent Assembly voted for a monarchy the republicans would submit and that the whole movement would have served for nothing more than to save and to supply a new virginity to this monarchy that fascism is now dragging with it into the gutter?

And what about the preconditions of an anti-monarchist position? Albatrelli suggests that the party 'jealously retains it in its specific programme and does not present it to any possible opposition as a bill to be settled in advance.' But are the anti-monarchist preconditions not based on the conviction that the institution of monarchy is opposed to any real political and social progress and that until it is abolished there will be no guarantee of liberty or possibility of a wide general education of the mass of the people? Does it mean nothing to Albatrelli that fifty years of republican, socialist and anarchist propaganda have resulted in ... fascism? Where we are concerned, the anti-monarchist preconditions should be accompanied by anticapitalist ones. But the republicans, who ascribe prime importance to political form, should at the least insist on ... a republic. Otherwise their republicanism reduces to no more than the assertion of a far-off ideal, a vague 'potential' which could even be accepted by Mussolini and Victor Emanuel.

from all available forces. To push the revolution as far forward as possible, not only in terms of destruction but above all in terms of reconstruction, and to remain opposed to any embryonic government, ignoring it or fighting it to the best of our ability.

We shall no more recognise the republican Constituent Assembly than the monarchist parliament. If the people want such an assembly, so be it; in fact we could find ourselves alongside the republicans in resisting any attempts at restoration of the monarchy. But we ask, we demand, complete freedom for those who think as we do, to live outside state protection and oppression and to spread our ideas by word and deed.

We are revolutionaries, yes, but above all we are anarchists.

Further Thoughts on Republic and Revolution

In the *Voce Repubblicana*, our friend Carlo Francesco Ansaldi comments on our discussions about the immediate future, and in particular my article 'Republic and Revolution,' which appeared in the last issue of that periodical. He expresses what basically are aspirations and desires that approximate and even perhaps blend with ours, but it seems to me that he runs away from the heart of the matter — the way in which, in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the existing institutions, we set up the new social structures and decide on the source of the constituent power. In our current discussions it is not really a question of the point of arrival — since on this we can all perhaps agree, Ansaldi included — but of the ways and means by which we put our ideals into practice.

Do the republicans, and especially those, Ansaldi again included, who describe themselves as 'social,' 'federalists' or 'syndicalists,' intend convening the 'Constituent Assembly'

It seems to us that a communist dictatorship has little chance of even short-term success: there are few communists; their authoritarianism would not go down well in a movement which would, above all, be an explosion of the need for liberty — either because their programme would meet with practical difficulties, or because of the unpleasant results of the Russian experiment, which is leading the country towards capitalism and militarism.

There remains the Republic, which would have the support of the republicans in the strict sense of the word, the social democrats, the industrial workers anxious for change but without specific ideas on the future, and also the mass of the bourgeoisie which rushes to support any government that seems able to guarantee 'order' — which, for them, means no more than the protection of their own privileged economic status.

But what is a Republic?

The republicans — or that proportion of them who sincerely wish for a radical change in the social institutions and are thus closer to us — do not appear to understand what a republic is.

They say 'their' republic is not like any of the others, that 'their' republic will be organised on a social basis and with a federal structure — that is, it will expropriate, or at least heavily tax the capitalists, give land to the peasants, encourage the transfer of the means of production to workers' associations, respect rights and freedoms, all individual, corporate and local groupings, etc.

Now language like this can be either anarchist or authoritarian: anarchist if such fine things can be achieved through the agency of the more enlightened minorities which, overthrowing or resisting the government, carry them out where and when it is possible to do so, and certainly by propaganda and by the deed; authoritarian if, on the other hand, it means taking over power by force and imposing their programme by force. But what such language is not, is republican.

A republic is a democratic government, indeed the only real form of democracy, if by this one means a government of the majority of the people ruling through their freely elected representatives. A republican can thus say what his wishes are, what are the criteria that would guide him as a voter, what the proposals he would make or approve were he elected a deputy. But what he cannot say is what kind of republic the parliament (or constituent assembly, if you prefer) that is called upon to prepare the new constitution and the laws that will follow, will come up with. A republic remains a republic, even if, governed by reactionaries, it merely consolidates and even worsens existing structures.

There would no longer be a king and royally appointed senate and this would certainly be progress. But progress of very small practical account. Today the predominating and determining force behind all government is finance and royal power counts only as a tool in the hands of the financiers, who well know how to jettison it without reducing their baleful influence.

Anyway, do 'social' republicans really want the abolition of capitalism, namely the rights and the opportunities to make a profit out of the labour of others through the monopoly of the means of production? But then why don't they rid themselves of that ambiguous term and call themselves socialists outright?

To us it seems that while they aim to improve the conditions of the poorer classes and to reduce exploitation, they are happy to preserve the right of the owners to make others work for their benefit and thus leave the way open to all those evils that arise from capitalist property rights.

As for their federalism, what does it come down to? Do they acknowledge the right of the regions and the municipalities to leave the federation and independently choose those groupings that best suit their individual needs? Do they acknowledge that members of the federation have the right to refuse any participation in military or financial affairs when they see fit? We

fear they do not, because this would leave as basis for national unity only the good will of the federated regions; a thing which hardly seems characteristic of the traditions and spirit of the republicans.

In reality it is but a question of a forced federation, like Switzerland, the USA or Germany, which continues to leave the federated regions subject to centralised power, and there is therefore little to choose between them and the centralised states.

If that is so, how and why could we agree with republicans in any kind of movement?

We could join with the republicans on the question of revolution, just as we could join with the communists on that of the expropriation of the bourgeoisie, so long as they act in a revolutionary manner, without having first set up their State, their Dictatorship. But this does not mean we would ourselves become republicans or communists.

There is a need to make a clear distinction between the revolutionary act, which overthrows as much as it can of the old regime, replacing it with new institutions, and governments that follow to halt revolution and suppress as much as they can of the revolutionary conquests.

History teaches us that whatever progress is made by revolution occurs in the period when popular activity is at its height, when either a recognised government does not yet exist or is too weak to openly set itself against the revolution. Then, once government is established reaction invariably sets in, serving the interests of the old and new privileged classes, and seizes from the masses everything it possibly can seize back from them.

Thus our task is to make, or help to make, the revolution, taking advantage of all the occasions that come our way and