

Anarchism as a Way of Life

Malatesta's anarchism, prefiguration and the class struggle

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In 1925 the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta wrote that,

Anarchy is a form of living together in society; a society in which people live as brothers and sisters without being able to oppress or exploit others and in which everyone has at their disposal whatever means the civilisation of the time can supply in order for them to attain the greatest possible moral and material development. And Anarchism is the method of reaching anarchy, through freedom, without government – that is, without those authoritarian institutions that impose their will on others by force ... (Malatesta 1995, 52)

In this passage Malatesta distinguishes between anarchy as a goal and anarchism as a method of achieving this goal. One of the interesting features of Malatesta's theory is that he views anarchy itself as both a goal and an on-going process. He refers to anarchy as a "form of living together in society" which has to be continuously produced and reproduced over time, rather than a static unchanging utopia. This idea can be clearly seen in Malatesta's earlier writings. In 1891 he wrote that,

By the free association of all, a social organisation would arise through the spontaneous grouping of men according to their needs and sympathies, from the low to the high, from the simple to the complex, starting from the more immediate to arrive at the more distant and general interests. This organisation would have for its aim the greatest good and fullest liberty to all; it would embrace all humanity in one common brotherhood, and would be modified and improved as circumstances were modified and changed, according to the teachings of experience. This society of free men, this society of friends would be Anarchy. (Malatesta 2014, 128)

Since anarchy is a society which will be continuously modified and improved over time it follows that "Anarchy" is "above all, a method". This method is, according to Malatesta, "the free initiative of all", "free agreement" and "free association". (Malatesta 2014, 141, 142) These two claims come together in the view that,

Anarchy, in common with socialism, has as its basis, its point of departure, its essential environment, equality of conditions; its beacon is solidarity and freedom is its method. It is not perfection, it is not the absolute ideal which like the horizon recedes as fast as we approach it; but it is the way open to all progress and improvements for the benefit of everybody. (Quoted in Turcato 2012, 56. For a different translation see Malatesta 2014, 143)

What Malatesta means by this is as follows. Anarchy's point of departure is a stateless classless society in which the means of production are owned in common and no person has the institutionalised power to impose their will on others via force. This not only creates a situation in which people are no longer subject to domination and exploitation by the ruling classes. It, in addition to this, establishes the real possibility for all people to do and be a wide variety of different things since their ability to act is no longer limited by poverty, borders, government bureaucracy, having to work for a capitalist to survive etc. This equality of conditions is the social basis from which people can engage in an open-ended process of striving towards the goal

of universal human co-operation at a societal level and the formation of bonds of mutual support and love at the level of our day to day lives with friends, family, partners and so on.

People living under anarchy will move towards the goal of solidarity through the method of forming voluntary horizontal associations. These voluntary horizontal associations will then enter into free agreements with one another and establish a decentralised network capable of co-ordinating action over a large scale. Although violence may sometimes be necessary to defend spaces of co-operation from external attack or to overthrow the ruling classes, force cannot be used to establish co-operation among equals. If one tries to impose decisions on others through force then the result will not be solidarity but conflict, strife and relations of command and obedience. The achievement of genuine solidarity requires that people come to agreements which best suit everyone involved and must therefore be established voluntarily.

This process of striving for solidarity through the method of freedom will result in a wide variety of experiments in different forms of life. Through a process of trial-and-error people will over time establish new social structures and relations which do a superior job of maximising the equality, solidarity and freedom of humanity. These new social structures and relations will, in turn, lay the foundations from which future improvements can occur and so on and on. As Malatesta wrote in 1899, “Anarchist ideals are ... the experimental system brought from the field of research to that of social realisation”. (Malatesta 2014, 302)

Malatesta does not think that the establishment of anarchy will occur automatically or that humans naturally create anarchy. Anarchy only exists if it is consciously produced and reproduced by human action. As he wrote in 1897,

The belief in some natural law, whereby harmony is automatically established between men without any need for them to take conscious, deliberate action, is hollow and utterly refuted by the facts.

Even if the State and private property were to be done away with, harmony does not come to pass automatically, as if Nature busies herself with men’s blessings and misfortunes, but rather requires that men themselves create it. (Malatesta 2016, 81)

This exact point was repeated by Malatesta in 1925. He wrote, “Anarchy ... is a human aspiration which is not founded on any true or supposed natural law, and which may or may not come about depending on human will.” (Malatesta 1995, 46) If anarchy is a product of human will, then it follows that anarchy could be ended if humans choose to oppress others and establish relations of domination and subordination. This is a danger that Malatesta was aware of. He wrote in 1899 that, “if anyone in some future society sought to oppress someone else, the latter would have the right to resist them and to fight force with force”. Anarchy was therefore a society based on “freedom for all and in everything, with no limit other than the equal freedom of others: which does not mean ... that we embrace and wish to respect the ‘freedom’ to exploit, oppress, command, which is oppression and not freedom”. (Malatesta 2019, 148, 149).

A crucial aspect of reproducing anarchy as a social system is therefore ensuring that relations of domination and exploitation do not arise in the first place and that, if they do somehow arise, they are quickly defeated. Malatesta does not provide many details on how to do this because he thought this was a question which would be settled through large groups of people engaging in a process of experimentation with different forms of association. Modern anarchists can, however, look at anthropological evidence on how really existing stateless societies reproduce themselves.

They do not provide exact blueprints which we can follow like an instruction manual for creating a free society, but they can be useful sources of inspiration. It should, in addition to this, be kept in mind that some stateless societies are hierarchical in other ways, such as men oppressing women or adults oppressing children.

There is a tendency for people raised in societies with states to assume that the true or correct end point of human cultural evolution is the creation of a society with a state. Those who live in stateless societies are therefore viewed as inferior people who have failed to realise the best way of organising society. In response to this way of thinking, the anthropologist Pierre Clastres has suggested that stateless societies should not be viewed as societies without a state, but instead as societies against the state. That is to say, people do not live in stateless societies by chance. They have instead developed political philosophies about the kind of society they want to live in and consciously created social structures to ensure that a society without rulers is reproduced. Members of stateless societies have not failed to realise the possibility of a society in which a ruling minority imposes their will on everyone else through violence. They have instead deliberately chosen to create a different kind of society. (Clastres 1989, 189–218) Clastres writes, in what I consider to be outdated and problematic language, that,

primitive societies do not have a State because they refuse it, because they refuse the division of the social body into the dominating and the dominated. The politics of the Savages is, in fact, to constantly hinder the appearance of a separate organ of power, to prevent the fatal meeting between the institution of chieftainship and the exercise of power. In primitive society, there is no separate organ of power, because power is not separated from society: society, as a single totality, holds power in order to maintain its undivided being, to ward off the appearance in its breast of the inequality between masters and subjects, between chief and tribe... The refusal of inequality and the refusal of separate power are the same, constant concern of primitive societies. (Clastres 1994, 91)

This point has recently been made in much greater depth by the anthropologist Christopher Boehm. He argues that egalitarian stateless societies are “the product of human intentionality” and that “the immediate cause of egalitarianism is conscious, and that deliberate social control is directed at preventing the expression of hierarchical tendencies”. (Boehm 2001, 12, 60) One of the main ways egalitarian stateless societies achieve this is through the use of horizontal decision-making processes in which the group make collective decisions through consensus between all involved. (Boehm 2001, 31, 113) Any leaders which do exist lack the power to impose decisions on others through coercion and must instead persuade others to act in a certain way through oratory skill alone. This usually goes alongside a variety of behavioural expectations which the leader has to conform to in order to remain in their position, such as the leader being modest, in control of their emotions, good at resolving disputes and generous. The emphasis on generosity can be so strong that leaders are expected to share large amounts of their possessions with others, especially those in need. This often results in leaders possessing the smallest number of things in the entire group due to them having to give so many items away. (Boehm 2001, 69–72)

Egalitarian stateless societies have, in addition to this, developed various mechanisms to respond to what Boehm labels ‘upstartism’. Upstartism includes any behaviour which threatens the autonomy and equality of the group, such as bullying, being selfishly greedy, issuing orders,

taking on airs of superiority, engaging in acts of physical violence and so on. In order to implement the ethical values of the community, members of egalitarian stateless societies will respond to upstartism with a wide range of different social sanctions. This includes, but is not limited to, criticism, gossiping, public ridicule, ignoring what they say, ostracism, expulsion from the group and even, in some extreme cases, execution. Social sanctions are applied to all members of the group but leaders in particular. This is due to the fact that leaders are subject to a greater deal of public scrutiny and viewed as one of the main places where relations of domination and subordination could emerge. This, in turn, creates a situation where leaders will, in order to maintain their position and avoid being subject to sanctions, engage in the socially prescribed behaviour that is expected from them, such as sharing huge amounts of their belongings even if they would rather not do so. The system of sanctions therefore not only effectively counters acts of domination but also reproduces the horizontal structure of the group itself. (Boehm 2001, 3, 9–12, 43, 72–84)

The manner in which members of egalitarian stateless societies respond to upstartism can be subtle. Boehm gives the example of the !Kung, who have developed various ways of dealing with the problem of successful male hunters coming to think of themselves as superior to everyone else and, as a result, becoming more likely to engage in domination, especially murder. Firstly, large-game meat is shared equally among the group by the person who is credited with killing the animal. The credit for the kill does not go to the person who loosed the actual killing arrow, but instead to the owner of the first arrow to hit the animal. This will often not even be someone who went on the hunt due to the male hunters regularly trading arrows with one another. This social system ensures that credit for the hunt is randomized, unskilled or unlucky hunters are less likely to be envious of other hunters, every member of the group has access to protein, and the most skilled or lucky hunters are not able to easily use this fact to develop power and influence over others. (Boehm 2001, 46)

Secondly, the !Kung actively use humour and social etiquette to ensure that successful hunters do not put themselves on a pedestal. An unnamed member of the !Kung explains this as follows,

Say that a man has been hunting. He must not come home and announce like a braggart, 'I have killed a big one in the bush!' He must first sit down in silence until I or someone else comes up to his fire and asks, 'What did you see today?' He replies quietly, 'Ah, I'm no good for hunting. I saw nothing at all ... maybe just a tiny one.' Then I smile to myself because I now know he has killed something big.

Even after the hunter has deliberately acted as if they haven't been very successful, other members of the group will make jokes about them and express their disappointment. The unnamed member of the !Kung claims that when people go to collect the dead animal they will say things like,

You mean to say you have dragged us all the way out here to make us cart home your pile of bones? Oh, if I had known it was this thin I wouldn't have come. People, to think I gave up a nice day in the shade for this. At home we may be hungry but at least we have nice cool water to drink.

The conscious motivation behind this behaviour is explained by a healer as follows,

When a young man kills much meat, he comes to think of himself as a chief or a big man, and he thinks of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can't accept this.

We refuse one who boasts, for someday his pride will make him kill somebody. So we always speak of his meat as worthless. In this way we cool his heart and make him gentle. (Quoted in Boehm 2001, 45)

The !Kung have, in other words, intentionally developed a complex social system based on their political philosophy which ensures the reproduction of an egalitarian stateless society and actively prevents the rise of domination within their midst. It is important to note that Boehm's account of the !Kung draws upon research conducted in the 1960s and early 1970s. Their society has significantly changed since then. In 1975 the anthropologist Patricia Draper claimed that,

the great majority of !Kung-speaking people have abandoned their traditional hunting and gathering way of life and are now living in sedentary and semi-squatter status in or near the villages of Bantu pastoralists and European ranchers. A minority of !Kung, amounting to a few thousand, are still living by traditional hunting and gathering technique. (Draper 1975, 79)

Although people living in industrial societies do not have to develop social norms around successful hunters, we do have our equivalents. For example, successful influencers sometimes let the fame get to their head, come to think of themselves as superior to other people, and then treat others as inferior to them and engage in acts of domination. Think Jake Paul. It is of course the case that those of us currently living under the domination of capitalism, the state, patriarchy, racism, queerphobia, ableism etc are most likely a long way away from achieving anarchy at a societal level. We are not confronted with the problem of reproducing anarchy as a stateless classless society. We instead face the challenge of living under oppressive systems, whilst attempting to implement the methods of anarchism within both our intimate relationships with friends, family, partners etc and social movements aimed at the abolition of all systems of domination and exploitation.

In order to do so we must establish horizontal social relations which are, as far as is possible, the same as those that would constitute anarchy. In so doing we can simultaneously (a) construct the world as we wish it was during our struggle against the world as it is and (b) develop through a process of experimentation in the present the real methods of organisation, decision-making and association that people in the future could use to achieve the states of affairs that characterise anarchy. If, as Malatesta argued, "tomorrow can only grow out of today" (Malatesta 2014, 163) then we must build organisations based "upon the will and in the interest of all their members" not only "tomorrow in order to meet all of the needs of social life" but also "today for the purposes of propaganda and struggle". (Malatesta 2019, 63) We must, in other words, engage in prefigurative politics or, to use historical anarchist language, build "the embryo of the human society of the future". (Graham 2005, 98. For more on prefigurative politics see Raekstad and Gradin 2020)

The pockets of freedom we manage to create within class society are of course not anarchy. Anarchy is a social system in which all forms of class rule have been abolished and socialism has been achieved. Anarchy cannot therefore be said to exist just because a horizontal association has been built within the cage of capitalism and the state. (Malatesta 2016, 358–60) Although horizontal associations within class society are not anarchy, they are the means through which anarchy can be achieved. That is to say, horizontal associations should be organs of class struggle

which unite workers together in order to both win immediate improvements, such as higher wages or stopping the fossil fuel industry, and ultimately overthrow the ruling classes. Horizontal associations should, at the same time, be social structures which are constituted by forms of activity that develop their participants into the kinds of people who are both capable of, and driven to, establish and reproduce anarchy. For example, a group of workers form a tenant union, use direct action to prevent their landlord from evicting them, and at the same time learn how to make decisions within a general assembly. In changing the world, workers at the same time change themselves.

Given the insights of both historical anarchist theory and modern anthropology, a crucial aspect of laying the foundations from which anarchy could emerge in the future is establishing effective methods for maintaining the horizontality of a group. This includes at least,

- a. Deliberately structuring organisations so as to ensure that they are self-managed by their membership, such as making decisions through general assemblies in which everyone has a vote, co-ordinating action over a large scale via informal networks or formal federations, electing instantly recallable mandated delegates to perform specific tasks etc.
- b. Consciously developing a system of social sanctions which effectively and proportionally respond to situations where a member engages in what Boehm terms upstartism. This is especially necessary for when people attempt to establish themselves in positions of power at the top of an informal hierarchy or engage in an act of domination. One of the most important situations which a group must effectively respond to is when a member emotionally, physically or sexually abuses another person. It is, in addition to this, very important that any sanction system which is implemented is not itself a new form of domination disguised as mere opposition to the domination of others.

In summary, anarchy is a form of living together in society which must be consciously and intentionally produced and reproduced by human action. A crucial part of doing so is developing social structures and relations which maintain the horizontality of groups and prevent new forms of domination and exploitation from arising. Given modern anthropological evidence on how really existing stateless societies reproduce themselves, this will include developing social sanctions to respond to what Boehm terms upstartism. Although we do not currently live under anarchy, we must establish horizontal associations which engage in class struggle against the ruling classes and prefigure the methods of organisation, decision-making and association which would exist in a free society. This includes developing effective sanction systems which proportionally respond to behaviour that threatens the horizontality of the group. Doing so will, just like under anarchy, require a process of experimentation with different forms of life in order to figure out which solutions actually work and are compatible with anarchist goals and values.

In 1899 Malatesta wrote that “Anarchy cannot come but little by little – slowly, but surely, growing in intensity and extension. Therefore, the subject is not whether we accomplish Anarchy today, tomorrow or within ten centuries, but that we walk toward Anarchy today, tomorrow and always.” (Malatesta 2014, 300) Through the process of walking towards anarchy we must learn how to live as equals within a free horizontal association and in so doing become fit to establish a society with neither masters nor subjects. I am sure that we will make mistakes along the way, but these mistakes must be treated as opportunities to learn and develop, rather than reasons to abandon the march towards anarchy. In the words of the Spanish anarchist Isaac Puente,

Living in libertarian communism will be like learning to live. Its weak points and its failings will be shown up when it is introduced. If we were politicians we would paint a paradise brimful of perfections. Being human and being aware what human nature can be like, we trust that people will learn to walk the only way it is possible for them to learn: by walking. (Puentes 1932)

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