
Anarchism is on the one hand,
often portrayed as a purely violent
movement and set of ideas and
anarchists are often accused of being
men and women of violence.

On the other hand, there is the
"fluffy" anarcho-pacifism of certain
sections of the contemporary
anarchist scene.

What do revolutionary anarchists
have to say on the matter?
Errico Malatesta explains.



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Anarchism and Violence by E. Malatesta

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Anarchist Communist Federation

The ACF is an organisation of revolutionary class struggle anarchists. We have members in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The ACF is part of a growing international movement.

If you want to get involved or simply want to know more, then write to ACF, 84b, Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX.

ORGANISE!

Quarterly magazine of the ACF. For a free sample copy, write to the address above.

Also available: As We See It.
Introduction to anarchism and the
ideas of the ACF (60p + S.A.E.).

Introduction

Anarchism and Violence is taken from a collection of extracts of the writings of Errico Malatesta; written between the turn of the century and the mid 1920s. The London group of the Anarchist Communist Federation has published it because basically, it's great propaganda which, though written a while back, still remains refreshing and relevant today.

The small anarchist "movement" in this country is very much a diverse mish-mash of often contradictory ideas and "scenes" with certain tendencies more akin to liberalism than libertarian socialism. Part of this liberal trend is "anarcho-pacifism" and in the broader alternative scene, the view that action should always be kept peaceful and "fluffy". Anarchist Communists would not dispute that non-violent direct action can at times be a useful tactic. Sometimes it is not necessary to use physical force and canny tactics can often get results.

It must not be forgotten however, that the state is not pacifist, capitalism is not a peaceful system, there are few, if any, pacifist politicians, the police and the army are not there for fun. To make a principle out of non-violence ultimately means that when it comes to the crunch, we will have to rely on this oppressive system to be nice to us.

Though we wouldn't necessarily agree with everything Malatesta ever said, without doubt he put forward many brilliant and far-sighted ideas (he's also clear and easy to read). We strongly recommend the book Malatesta: Life and Ideas edited by Vernon Richards (Freedom Press). This pamphlet is taken from it and the book is available from us for £5 plus 80p postage.

If you would like a copy of the book or want to know more about the ACF, then write to:

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Note: In the following text Malatesta refers to "man", "mankind", etc. Knowing Malatesta's ideas, this is not due to any sexism but the language of his time.



ANARCHISM AND VIOLENCE

ANARCHISTS ARE OPPOSED TO VIOLENCE; EVERYONE KNOWS that. The main plank of anarchism is the removal of violence from human relations. It is life based on the freedom of the individual, without the intervention of the *gendarme*. For this reason we are enemies of capitalism which depends on the protection of the *gendarme* to oblige workers to allow themselves to be exploited—or even to remain idle and go hungry when it is not in the interest of the bosses to exploit them. We are therefore enemies of the State which is the coercive, violent organisation of society.

But if a man of honour declares that he believes it stupid and barbarous to argue with a stick in his hand and that it is unjust and evil to oblige a person to obey the will of another at pistol point, is it, perhaps, reasonable to deduce that that gentleman intends to allow himself to be beaten up and be made to submit to the will of another without having recourse to more extreme means for his defence?

Violence is justifiable only when it is necessary to defend oneself and others from violence. It is where necessity ceases that crime begins.

The slave is always in a state of legitimate defence and

consequently, his violence against the boss, against the oppressor, is always morally justifiable, and must be controlled only by such considerations as that the best and most economical use is being made of human effort and human sufferings.¹

There are certainly other men, other parties and schools of thought which are as sincerely motivated by the general good as are the best among us. But what distinguishes the anarchists from all the others is in fact their horror of violence, their desire and intention to eliminate physical violence from human relations. . . . But why, then, it may be asked, have anarchists in the present struggle [against Fascism] advocated and used violence when it is in contradiction with their declared ends? So much so that many critics, some in good faith, and all who are in bad faith, have come to believe that the distinguishing characteristic of anarchism is, in fact, violence. The question may seem embarrassing, but it can be answered in a few words. For two people to live in peace they must both want peace; if one of them insists on using force to oblige the other to work for him and serve him, then the other, if he wishes to retain his dignity as a man and not be reduced to abject slavery, will be obliged, in spite of his love of peace, to resist force with adequate means.²

The struggle against government is, in the last analysis, physical, material.

Governments make the law. They must therefore dispose of the material forces (police and army) to impose the law, for otherwise only those who wanted to would obey it, and it would no longer be the law, but a simple series of suggestions which all would be free to accept or reject. Governments have this power, however, and use it through the law, to strengthen their power, as well as to serve the interests of the ruling classes, by oppressing and exploiting the workers.

The only limit to the oppression of government is the

¹ Umanità Nova August 25, 1921

² Pensiero e Volontà September 1, 1924

power with which the people show themselves capable of opposing it.

Conflict may be open or latent; but it always exists since the government does not pay attention to discontent and popular resistance except when it is faced with the danger of insurrection.

When the people meekly submit to the law, or their protests are feeble and confined to words, the government studies its own interests and ignores the needs of the people; when the protests are lively, insistent, threatening, the government, depending on whether it is more or less understanding, gives way or resorts to repression. But one always comes back to insurrection, for if the government does not give way, the people will end by rebelling; and if the government does give way, then the people gain confidence in themselves and make ever increasing demands, until such time as the incompatibility between freedom and authority becomes clear and the violent struggle is engaged.

It is therefore necessary to be prepared, morally and materially, so that when this does happen the people will emerge victorious.³

This revolution must of necessity be violent, even though violence is in itself an evil. It must be violent because it would be folly to hope that the privileged classes will recognise the injustice of, and harm caused by, their privileged status, and voluntarily renounce it. It must be violent because a transitional, revolutionary, violence is the only way to put an end to the far greater, and permanent, violence which keeps the majority of mankind in servitude.⁴

The bourgeoisie will not allow itself to be expropriated without a struggle, and one will always have to resort to the *coup de force*, to the violation of legal order by illegal means.⁵

³ Programma Anarchico, Bologna, July 1920

⁴ Umanità Nova August 12, 1920

⁵ Umanità Nova September 9, 1921

We too are deeply unhappy at this need for violent struggle. We who preach love, and who struggle to achieve a state of society in which agreement and love are possible among men, suffer more than anybody by the necessity with which we are confronted of having to defend ourselves with violence against the violence of the ruling classes. However, to renounce a liberating violence, when it is the only way to end the daily sufferings and the savage carnage which afflict mankind, would be to connive at the class antagonisms we deplore and at the evils which arise from them.⁶

We neither seek to impose anything by force nor do we wish to submit to a violent imposition.

We intend to use force against government, because it is by force that we are kept in subjection by government.

We intend to expropriate the owners of property because it is by force that they withhold the raw materials and wealth, which is the fruit of human labour, and use it to oblige others to work in their interest.

We shall resist with force whoever would wish by force, to retain or regain the means to impose his will and exploit the labour of others.

We would resist with force any "dictatorship" or "constituent" which attempted to impose itself on the masses in revolt. And we will fight the republic as we fight the monarchy, if by republic is meant a government, however it may have come to power, which makes laws and disposes of military and penal powers to oblige the people to obey.

With the exception of these cases, in which the use of force is justified as a defence against force, we are always against violence, and for self-determination.⁷

I have repeated a thousand times that I believe that not to "actively" resist evil, adequately and by every possible way is, in theory absurd, because it is in contradiction with the aim of avoiding and destroying evil, and in practice immoral.

⁶ Umanità Nova April 27, 1920

⁷ Umanità Nova May 9, 1920

because it is a denial of human solidarity and the duty that stems from it to defend the weak and the oppressed. I think that a regime which is born of violence and which continues to exist by violence cannot be overthrown except by a corresponding and proportionate violence, and that one is therefore either stupid or deceived in relying on legality where the oppressors can change the law to suit their own ends. But I believe that violence is, for us who aim at peace among men, and justice and freedom for all, an unpleasant necessity, which must cease the moment liberation is achieved—that is, at the point where defence and security are no longer threatened—or become a crime against humanity, and the harbinger of new oppression and injustice.*

We are on principle opposed to violence and for this reason wish that the social struggle should be conducted as humanely as possible. But this does not mean that we would wish it to be less determined, less thoroughgoing; indeed we are of the opinion that in the long run half measures only indefinitely prolong the struggle, neutralising it as well as encouraging more of the kind of violence which one wishes to avoid. Neither does it mean that we limit the right of self defence to resistance against actual or imminent attack. For us the oppressed are always in a state of legitimate defence and are fully justified in rising without waiting to be actually fired on; and we are fully aware of the fact that attack is often the best means of defence. . . .

Revenge, persistent hatred, cruelty to the vanquished when they have been overcome, are understandable reactions and can even be forgiven, in the heat of the struggle, in those whose dignity has been cruelly offended, and whose most intimate feelings have been outraged. But to condone ferocious anti-human feelings and raise them to the level of a principle, advocating them as a tactic for a movement, is both evil and counter-revolutionary.

For us revolution must not mean the substitution of one

* *Pensiero e Volontà* April 16, 1925

oppressor for another, of our domination for that of others. We want the material and spiritual elevation of man; the disappearance of every distinction between vanquished and conquerors; sincere brotherhood among all mankind—without which history would continue, as in the past, to be an alternation between oppression and rebellion, at the expense of real progress, and in the long term to the disadvantage of everybody, the conquerors no less than the vanquished.*

It is abundantly clear that violence is needed to resist the violence of the adversary, and we must advocate and prepare it, if we do not wish the present situation of slavery in disguise, in which most of humanity finds itself, to continue and worsen. But violence contains within itself the danger of transforming the revolution into a brutal struggle without the light of an ideal and without possibilities of a beneficial outcome; and for this reason one must stress the moral aims of the movement, and the need, and the duty, to contain violence within the limits of strict necessity.

We do not say that violence is good when we use it and harmful when others use it against us. We say that violence is justifiable, good and "moral", as well as a duty when it is used in one's own defence and that of others, against the demands of those who believe in violence; it is evil and "immoral" if it serves to violate the freedom of others.

We are not "pacifists" because peace is not possible unless it is desired by both sides.

We consider violence a necessity and a duty for defence, but only for defence. And we mean not only for defence against direct, sudden, physical attack, but against all those institutions which use force to keep the people in a state of servitude.

We are against fascism and we would wish that it were weakened by opposing to its violence a greater violence. And we are, above all, against government, which is permanent violence.¹⁰

⁹ *Fede!* October 28, 1923

¹⁰ *Umanità Nova* October 21, 1922

To my mind if violence is justifiable even beyond the needs of self-defence, then it is justified when it is used against us, and we would have no grounds for protest.¹¹

To the alleged incapacity of the people we do not offer a solution by putting ourselves in the place of the former oppressors. Only freedom or the struggle for freedom can be the school for freedom.

But, you will say, to start a revolution and bring it to its conclusion one needs a force which is also armed. And who denies this? But this armed force, or rather the numerous armed revolutionary groups, will be performing a revolutionary task if they serve to free the people and prevent the re-emergence of an authoritarian government. But they will be tools of reaction and destroy their own achievements if they are prepared to be used to impose a particular kind of social organisation or the programme of a particular party.¹²

Revolution being, by the necessity of things, violent action, tends to develop, rather than remove, the spirit of violence. But the revolution as conceived by anarchists is the least violent of all and seeks to halt all violence as soon as the need to use force to oppose that of the government and the bourgeoisie, ceases.

Anarchists recognise violence only as a means of legitimate defence; and if today they are in favour of violence it is because they maintain that slaves are always in a state of legitimate defence. But the anarchist ideal is for a society in which the factor of violence has been eliminated, and their ideal serves to restrain, correct and destroy the spirit of revenge which revolution, as a physical act, would tend to develop.

In any case, the remedy would never be the organisation and consolidation of violence in the hands of a government or dictatorship, which cannot be founded on anything but brute

¹¹ Il Risveglio December 20, 1922

¹² Fede! November 25, 1923

force and recognition of the authority of police—and military—forces.¹³

... An error, the opposite of the one which the terrorists make, threatens the anarchist movement. Partly as a reaction to the abuse of violence during recent years, partly as a result of the survival of Christian ideas, and above all, as a result of the mystical preachings of Tolstoy, which owe their popularity and prestige to the genius and high moral qualities of their author, anarchists are beginning to pay serious attention to the party of passive resistance, whose basic principle is that the individual must allow himself and others to be persecuted and despised rather than harm the aggressor. It is what has been called *passive anarchy*.

Since there are some, upset by my aversion to useless and harmful violence, who have been suggesting that I displayed tolstoyanism tendencies, I take the opportunity to declare that, in my opinion, this doctrine however sublimely altruistic it may appear to be, is, in fact the negation of instinct and social duties. A man may, if he is a very good ... christian, suffer every kind of provocation without defending himself with every weapon at his disposal, and still remain a moral man. But would he not, in practise, even unconsciously, be a supreme egoist were he to allow others to be persecuted without making any effort to defend them? If, for instance, he were to prefer that a class should be reduced to abject misery, that a people should be downtrodden by an invader, that a man's life or liberty should be abused, rather than bruise the flesh of the oppressor?

There can be cases where passive resistance is an effective weapon, and it would then obviously be the best of weapons, since it would be the most economic in human suffering. But more often than not, to profess passive resistance only serves to reassure the oppressors against their fear of rebellion, and thus it betrays the cause of the oppressed.

It is interesting to observe how both the *terrorists* and

¹³ Umanità Nova July 18, 1920

the *tsistoyans*, just because both are mystics, arrive at practical results which are more or less similar. The former would not hesitate to destroy half mankind so long as the idea triumphed; the latter would be prepared to let all mankind remain under the yoke of great suffering rather than violate a principle.

For myself, I would violate every principle in the world in order to save a man: which would in fact be a question of respecting principle, since, in my opinion, all moral and sociological principles are reduced to this one principle: the good of mankind, the good of all mankind.¹¹

¹¹ Anarchia (Numero Unico) August, 1896

Anarchist-Communist Federation

Aims and Principles

- 1 The Anarchist Communist Federation is an organisation of revolutionary class struggle anarchists. We aim for the abolition of all hierarchy, and work for the creation of a world-wide classless society: anarchist communism.
- 2 Capitalism is based on the exploitation of the working class by the ruling class. But inequality and exploitation are also expressed in terms of race, gender, sexuality, health, ability and age, and in these ways one section of the working class oppresses another. This divides us, causing a lack of class unity in struggle that benefits the ruling class. Oppressed groups are strengthened by autonomous action which challenges social and economic power relationships. To achieve our goal we must relinquish power over each other on a personal as well as a political level.
- 3 We believe that fighting racism and sexism is as important as other aspects of the class struggle. Anarchist communism cannot be achieved while racism and sexism still exist. In order to be effective in their struggle against their oppression both within society and within the working class, women and black people may at times need to organise independently. However, this should be as working class women and black people as cross-class movements hide real class differences and achieve little for them. Full emancipation cannot be achieved without the abolition of capitalism.
- 4 We are opposed to the ideology of national liberation movements which claims that there is some common interest between native bosses and the working class in face of foreign domination. We do support working class struggles against racism, genocide, ethnocide and political and economic colonialism. We oppose the creation of any new ruling class. We reject all forms of nationalism, as this only serves to redefine divisions in the international working class. The working class has no country and national boundaries must be eliminated. We seek to build an anarchist international to work with other libertarian revolutionaries throughout the world.
- 5 As well as exploiting and oppressing the majority of people, Capitalism threatens the world through war and the destruction of the environment.
- 6 It is not possible to abolish Capitalism without a revolution, which will arise out of class conflict. The ruling class must be completely overthrown to achieve anarchist communism. Because the ruling class will not relinquish power without the use of

armed force, this revolution will be a time of violence as well as liberation.

- 7 Unions by their very nature cannot become vehicles for the revolutionary transformation of society. They have to be accepted by capitalism in order to function and so cannot play a part in its overthrow. Trades unions divide the working class (between employed and unemployed, trade and craft, skilled and unskilled, etc). Even syndicalist unions are constrained by the fundamental nature of unionism. The union has to be able to control its membership in order to make deals with management. Their aim, through negotiation, is to achieve a fairer form of exploitation of the workforce. The interests of leaders and representatives will always be different from ours. The boss class is our enemy, and while we must fight for better conditions from it, we have to realise that reforms we may achieve today may be taken away tomorrow. Our ultimate aim must be the complete abolition of wage slavery. Working within the unions can never achieve this. However, we do not argue for people to leave unions until they are made irrelevant by the revolutionary event. The union is a common point of departure for many workers. Rank and file initiatives may strengthen us in the battle for anarchist communism. What's important is that we organise ourselves collectively, arguing for workers to control struggles themselves.
- 8 Genuine liberation can only come about through the revolutionary self activity of the working class on a mass scale. An anarchist communist society means not only co-operation between equals, but active involvement in the shaping and creating of that society during and after the revolution. In times of upheaval and struggle, people will need to create their own revolutionary organisations controlled by everyone in them. These autonomous organisations will be outside the control of political parties, and within them we will learn many important lessons of self-activity.
- 9 As anarchists we organise in all areas of life to try to advance the revolutionary process. We believe a strong anarchist organisation is necessary to help us to this end. Unlike other so-called socialists or communists we do not want power or control for our organisation. We recognise that the revolution can only be carried out directly by the working class. However, the revolution must be preceded by organisations able to convince people of the anarchist communist alternative and method. We participate in struggle as anarchist communists, and organise on a federative basis. We reject sectarianism and work for a united revolutionary anarchist movement.

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