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Date Defended/Approved: January 23, 2009
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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the activity and writings of the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta in the period 1889–1900, during his residence in London, the headquarters of continental anarchism. Malatesta’s thought and action allows us to study the organization and tactics of a significant segment of Italian and international anarchism.

The key concern of the thesis is the rationality of anarchism, defined as coherence between desires, beliefs, and behaviour. I challenge not only the liberal and Marxist traditional historiographies of anarchism, but also more recent social history approaches. Each of these posits the irrationality of anarchism, cast as impossible aims, futile means, or absurd beliefs. In contrast, I regard rationality as a methodological principle of interpretation and a heuristic. By informing my account of Malatesta’s anarchism with an explanatory “principle of charity,” I seek to illustrate and contest the historiographic pitfalls surrounding anarchism.

In contrast to those historians who view unconcern for practical means, lack of organization, and spontaneism as standard features attributed to anarchism, I argue that the informal and opaque character of anarchist organization and the transnational dimension of the anarchist movement account for the sustainability of its action. I illustrate the continuity and change of Malatesta’s tactics according to circumstances and experience and show the evolution of Malatesta’s thought from an early anarchism inspired by the First International to a mature gradualist view. Through a critical comparison with twentieth century social science, I illustrate the coherence and sophistication of Malatesta’s system of beliefs.

Rather than being the endless repetition of necessarily doomed efforts, I conclude that Malatesta’s theoretical and tactical evolution can be likened to the method of trial and error, whereby tentative solutions were put to the test of experience and revised accordingly. In this sense, Malatesta’s efforts were his experiments with revolution.
Keywords: anarchism; Errico Malatesta; historiography; principle of charity; transnationalism.
Acknowledgments

I am sincerely grateful to my senior supervisor, Prof. Mark Leier, for his competent, patient, and good-humoured guidance throughout my entire graduate studies and thesis writing. I am also grateful to my other supervisors: Prof. David Laycock, for his friendly and prompt responsiveness whenever I had questions; Prof. Nadine Roth, for her help with my directed readings; and Prof. Paul Garfinkel, for accepting to sit on my examining committee. I would also like to thank my external examiner, Prof. Kirk Shaffer for his kind interest in my work, Prof. Derryl Maclean for his support, and Prof. Steve Collis for reading my thesis and making helpful comments. A special thank goes to the staff of the SFU Interlibrary Loans office, for fulfilling almost all my “challenging” requests.

In Europe, I would like to thank Prof. Giampietro Berti for his great hospitality, stimulating discussions, and help with research materials. In every archive and library I have found competence and courtesy, but I would like to especially acknowledge a few of those smaller institutions, sometimes single-handedly run by committed individuals, where professionalism is accompanied by an extra touch of warmth and passion: in Barcelona the Ateneu Enciclopedic Popular, where I have been initiated to “café con hielo”; in Switzerland the Centre Internationale de Recherches sur l’Anarchisme of Lausanne, unique in its trusting practice of mailing books overseas; in London the Islington Local History Centre; and in Italy the Biblioteca Libertaria Armando Borghi of Castelbolognese and the Biblioteca Franco Serantini of Pisa.
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List of Abbreviations

Depositories

ACS Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome
AGR Archives Générales du Royaume, Bruxelles
AN Archives Nationales, Paris
APP Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Paris
ASDMAE Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome
IISG Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam
MAE Archivo Historico, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Madrid
PRO Public Record Office, London
SBB Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv, Bern

Archival Collections

CPC Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, Casellario Politico Centrale
DAP Ministero di Grazia e Giustizia, Direzione Generale degli Affari Penali, delle Grazie e del Casellario, Divisione Affari Penali
DGPS Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, Divisione affari generali e riservati, Archivio generale, Categorie annuali
F/7 F/7, Police Générale
JBP Justiz, Bundesanwaltschaft, Polizeidienst
PDE Police des Etrangers, Dossiers individuels
Filing Nomenclature

b. Box / Busta

fs. Folder / Fascicolo

sf. Subfolder / Sottofascicolo
Chapter I

Introduction: Historiography, Anarchism, and Malatesta

This is a study of the writings and activity of the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta between 1889 and 1900. Through Malatesta’s life, it is also a study on the historiography of anarchism. How have historians made sense of anarchism? How are they to make sense of a movement whose theory and tactics seem to defy common sense in the eyes of most people? Is anarchism amenable to rational understanding, or should its interpretation be committed to sociological and psychological analyses of irrational motives? Malatesta is a good case study for several reasons. He was one of the most representative figures of international anarchism. Born in 1853, Malatesta’s militancy began in 1871, the year before the “official” birth of the anarchist movement at the Saint-Imier congress, and ended with his death in 1932, a few years before the Spanish Civil War, which for many marked the end of anarchism as a mass movement. Therefore, studying Malatesta’s thought and action also means studying the theory, organization, and tactics of a significant segment of Italian and international anarchism, over a full cycle of anarchist history. However, in the historiography of anarchism Malatesta tends to feature less prominently than others, such as Mikhail Bakunin, Petr Kropotkin, and even precursors of the anarchist movement, such as William Godwin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Max Stirner. The historians’ understanding of anarchism is generally based on the political philosophy of those thinkers. Yet Malatesta was an articulate and original thinker; his ideas often ran counter to received wisdom and stereotypical representations of anarchism. But even in the anarchist ranks, respect for him personally was greater than the degree to which his ideas were absorbed. In brief, Malatesta is both a representative and challenging acid test for the historians’ generalizations about anarchism.
The years covered by this work, from 1889 to 1900, coincide with those identified by Malatesta’s friend and biographer Luigi Fabbri as “the transition period from the anarchism of the First International to the one that was more characteristic of him, approximately right to the end of his life.” Indeed, the analysis of Malatesta’s evolution during these years allows one to grasp the key elements of his entire intellectual trajectory. Malatesta’s theoretical evolution went hand in hand with participation in struggles in Italy and elsewhere in Europe. Such struggles either had a direct insurreccional character or aimed, in the anarchists’ intentions, to set a revolutionary process in motion. The reference in the title to them as Malatesta’s “experiments with revolution” points to both their lack of success and the dynamic link between theory and practice in his anarchism. Such attempts were both reality checks of Malatesta’s tactical ideas and sources of further theoretical elaboration in search of more effective tactics.

Though Malatesta’s efforts were mainly, though not exclusively, focused on Italy, he resided in London for most of the period under consideration. The year 1889 was the beginning of a long exile in that city, which lasted, with short interruptions, until 1897. The closing year, 1900, marks Malatesta’s return to London for another long period of exile, thus symbolically closing a cycle of revolutionary experiments and theoretical evolution. This pattern of transnational militancy, whereby anarchist exiles remained thoroughly involved in the social struggle in their motherland, is a characteristic phenomenon that the present study focuses on in order to make sense of anarchism.

Much historiography of anarchism can be synthesized in one claim: anarchists were losers and necessarily so. Anarchism is described in turn as a dead, dying, or doomed ideology, depending on one’s chronological scope, and the historian’s task becomes to explain why it could not be otherwise.

1 Luigi Fabbri, El pensamiento de Malatesta (Barcelona: Solidaridad Obrera, 1935), 8. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
Marxist historiography has followed a pattern of analysis directly established by Marx himself. On the grounds of historical materialism, which linked the development of socialism to the degree of maturity of capitalist economy, Marx regarded anarchism as an antiquated form of sectarianism belonging to an early stage of the proletariat's development, overcome by the course of history. In 1871 Marx maintained that "the development of socialist sectarianism and that of the real working-class movement always stand in inverse ratio to each other." For him, sects were historically justified so long as the working class was not yet ripe for an independent historical movement: "As soon as it has attained this maturity all sects are essentially reactionary." The struggle in the International repeated what history had exhibited everywhere. Thus, he attributed Bakunin's following in Italy and Spain to the circumstance that "the real conditions for the workers' movement [were] as yet little developed" in those countries. The obvious implication was that anarchism was a thing of the past to be soon disposed of. 2

Marx's judgment, issued before anarchism was even born as a movement, has become the standard pattern of Marxist analyses of that movement's development during the next seventy years—a paradoxical circumstance, if one considers that an alleged cornerstone of Marxism is its being based on empirical observation, not on abstract theory. Within this pattern, anarchists have been condemned by virtue of origin. They have been attributed a range of class identities—petty-bourgeois, pre-industrial, or peasant—invariably placing them outside the march of history led by the industrial proletariat. Anarchism is always to be found on the losing side of a series of contrasts articulating that march: backward versus modern, rural versus urban, pre-political versus political. Most frequently, it has been characterized as a movement that could not outlive the development of a "modern," industrial proletariat, which could only find its political

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expression in a socialist party of Marxist type. Hence, the master narrative of orthodox Marxist historiography of anarchism has typically been about its “end,” “death,” or “liquidation,” as per Marx’s guidelines.

Italian anarchism is a good example. Richard Hostettter argues that anarchism thrived in pre-industrial Italy, and places its “ideological liquidation” between 1879 and 1882. For Elio Conti, who studies the origins of socialism in Florence, the Italian internationalist movement, which was markedly anarchist, died out in 1885. However, anarchism continued to endemically meander through the lowest classes. For Luciano Cafagna, who studies socialism in Rome from 1882 to 1891, when anarchists led the city’s labour movement, they sowed revolutionary ideas in the only form, intransigent and spontaneous, in which unprepared masses could accept them. Though 1891 ended that phase, anarchists “bequeathed many of their weaknesses to the Roman workers’ movement for a long time.” A footnote explains that the reference is to the aftermath of World War II. Franco Della Peruta, whose topic is socialism in Rome in 1872–7, places the liquidation of anarchism at 1877; anarchists were nearly inactive in Rome afterwards, until a revival in 1889–91. For Enzo Santarelli, Italy’s delayed development explains why a “cumbersome current of utopian socialism” could survive, and Errico Malatesta could be effective well beyond 1914. In brief, thus goes the Marxist pattern: whatever the period in question, after an ephemeral burst of activity anarchism succumbed to the march of history right at the end of that period, lingering afterwards for an indefinite time, even if it often exhibited a surprising vitality in its death struggle.3

The judgment of liberal historiography on anarchism as necessarily doomed is tinged with condescension. A first obituary was issued in 1911 by Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, who acknowledged that anarchism deserved sympathy, but claimed that its excesses foredoomed it to an unsuccessful ending, according to the law that “extremist theories never secure a triumph of any permanency.” Approximately half a century later, George Woodcock set the death of anarchism to 1939. The failure was irrevocable, he argued, for lost causes may be the best ones, but once lost they are never won again. Still, the anarchist idea lived on, because “ideas do not age.” In a similar spirit, Irving Louis Horowitz argued that criticizing anarchism for being politically impracticable did not do it justice. For him, “there can be no doubt that anarchism was foredoomed to failure,” for it was an absurd point of view. However, “its very absurdities and deficiencies” proceeded not only from the anarchist position, but also from the way of life in the twentieth century: “the anarchists are a romantic, absurd breed that cannot, thank goodness, come to terms with some of the oppressive excesses of civilization.” Finally, James Joll remarked in 1979 that the past hundred and fifty years illustrated the inconsistency of anarchism, and the impossibility of putting it into practice. Yet Joll too concedes that anarchism has provided a standing threat to bourgeois complacency, concluding: “There have been few periods in human history when we have needed this more than we do today.” In sum, and in contrast with Marxist historiography, which hastens to toll the bell for anarchism, liberal historiography wishes it a long life as a permanently unsuccessful movement.\footnote{Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, *The Anarchists: Their Faith and Their Record Including Sidelights on the Royal and Other Personages Who have Been Assassinated* (1911; reprint, New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1972), 299–300; George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (1962; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 443–7; Irving Louis Horowitz, ed., *The Anarchists* (New York: Dell, Laurel, 1964; reprint, 1970), 588–9, 603; James Joll, *The Anarchists*, 2d ed. (1979; reprint, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 257, James Joll, “Anarchism between Communism and Individualism,” in *Anarchici e anarchia nel mondo contemporaneo: Atti del convegno promosso dalla Fondazione Luigi Einaudi*, Torino, 5, 6 e 7 dicembre 1969 (Turin: Fondazione Luigi Einaudi, 1971), 284.
Obsolescence and irrationality as the fate of anarchism are combined in the influential analysis of Eric J. Hobsbawm, in *Primitive Rebels*, written in 1959. His interpretation originated with a 1928 book by Juan Díaz del Moral, who argued that Andalusian anarchism “had a completely primitive, infantile character,” as typical of “an imaginative, enthusiastic, and totally uneducated people.” Blind messianism was a symptom of such infantilism. Hobsbawm broadens the picture by discussing anarchism in the context of other social movements that shared commonalities with ancient and medieval ones, while occurring at times when “modern” labour and socialist movements already existed. Primitive rebel movements are arranged into an evolutionary model, ranging from social banditry and Mafia, both rural and reformist, to millenarianism, rural and revolutionary, and from mobs, urban and reformist, to labour sects, urban and potentially revolutionary. At the top of the evolutionary scale are revolutionary, political movements of urban workers. For Hobsbawm, a millenarian movement is characterized by: revolutionism, i.e. “a total rejection of the present, evil world; a standardized chiliastic “ideology”; and “a fundamental vagueness about the actual way in which the new society will be brought about.” Abstract revolutionism and unconcern for practical politics meant, for Hobsbawm, that anarchism be not only irrational, but also unchanging. As Jerome Mintz notes, in Hobsbawm’s book anarchist “attitudes and beliefs of 1903–5, 1918–20, 1933, and 1936 are lumped together or considered interchangeable.” In turn, this alleged immutability is Hobsbawm’s ground for extending his verdict from Andalusian anarchism to anarchism in general, and from the past to the future, branding classical anarchism as “a form of peasant movement almost incapable of effective adaptation to modern conditions.” Its history is one of unrelieved failure; “and unless some unforeseen historical changes occur, it is likely to go down in the books with the
Anabaptists and the rest of the prophets who, though not unarmed, did not know what to do with their arms, and were defeated for ever.”^5

By the end of the 1960s both the political and historiographical scenarios had changed drastically. Politically, the renewed prominence of anarchism in 1968 forced many historians to tone down the confidence of earlier claims. Joll acknowledged that anarchism was still a living tradition, and Woodcock admitted to being too hasty in pronouncing anarchism as moribund. Hobsbawm took notice that unforeseen historical changes do occur, calling the revival of anarchism in May 1968 “unexpected” and “surprising,” as well as “unjustified.” A renewed interest in anarchism generated a score of works that put this movement in a positive light, among which Peter Marshall’s *Demanding the Impossible* is the most comprehensive English-language history of anarchism, while Robert Graham’s anthology *Anarchism* extensively documents the diversity and sophistication of anarchist thought, including many authors outside of the restricted circle of “classical” thinkers.⁶

However, advocating anarchism does not automatically imply regarding its tradition as rational. Marshall’s scholarly and careful book passionately argues for the relevance of anarchism, striving to rectify misconceptions, such as its association with terrorism. Yet, driven by such preoccupations, his discussion of anarchist violence ends up corroborating a few pièces de résistance of the irrationalist stereotype. In an effort to downplay the anarchists’ use of violent tactics, Marshall remarks that “at its most violent their action

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has typically not gone much beyond throwing up barricades or entering a village armed
with rudimentary weapons,” just as the millenarian stereotype would have it. He holds
Bakunin responsible for “the violent and menacing shadow of anarchism,” arguing that
his “emphasis was more on destruction than innovation”—a myth debunked by Mark
Leier’s recent biography of Bakunin. Marshall draws a straight line between “propaganda
by the deed” as advocated by Malatesta and Carlo Cafiero and the individual deeds of the
1890s. Eventually, he shifts from historiography to a moral indictment involving much of
the anarchist tradition: “After their somewhat apocalyptic past, [anarchists] have come to
realize the ultimate folly of trying to realize peaceful ends through violent means.
Violence is undoubtedly the method of the ignorant and the weak, and the more
enlightened people become, the less they will resort to compulsion and coercion.”

In the 1960s, historiography changed with the advent of the “new social history,” in
the wake of E. P. Thompson pathbreaking The Making of the English Working Class. Historians embraced a bottom-up approach, emphasizing workers’ agency, and looking at
historical events from the workers’ own perspectives. Working-class culture and
traditions began receiving special attention as moral bases of resistance and factors in the
formation of class consciousness. In the history of anarchism, this new approach
produced a reaction to Hobsbawm’s millenarianism, through studies of workers’
communities that emphasized anarchist adaptability to changing conditions. A direct
response to Hobsbawm was Temma Kaplan’s Anarchists of Andalusia, in 1977. Kaplan,
a Marxist historian, sought to show that Andalusian anarchism was a rational, not a
millenarian, response to a specific social configuration, arguing for example that periodic
uprisings were linked to times of good harvest, when strikes could best succeed, and
therefore were a rational strategy, not a spontaneous explosion of rage.

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Social historians drew arguments from the study of community and working class traditions to qualify the allegiance of rank-and-file workers to the anarchist ideology. For example, Bruce C. Nelson’s 1988 book Beyond the Martyrs deals with the Haymarket affair, focusing not on “the trees” of the martyred leadership, but on “the forest” of the movement and its culture, which embedded the real movement’s ideology. He argues that the “Chicago idea” is best understood not as anarchist, but as the expression of a tradition of artisan republicanism, recast in socialist terms. While Chicago’s anarchism ended with Haymarket, Nelson concludes, the larger movement merged into the wider stream of American labour, thus constituting the real legacy of Haymarket. In Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens, John Lear provides a similar narrative for Mexico City urban workers around the Mexican revolution, when they were organized by the anarchist organization Casa del Obrero Mundial. Lear focuses on the working people’s struggle to have a role in national affairs, rooted in a long-held tradition of “popular” liberalism, on which anarchism acted as a catalyst. He emphasizes that workers’ militancy was aimed at invoking citizenship rights, not at overthrowing capitalism. Despite the dissolution of the Casa, he concludes, they emerged as key actors in the affairs of the nation.9

Insights from social history have also driven approaches that analyze anarchism in a broader cultural context. In a review essay of 1998, Sharif Gemie argued that traditional analyses of anarchism as either political philosophy or institution were too narrow, as they missed the movement’s relationship with “a wider, looser culture of support,” and called historians to focus on a milieu, or a political culture. In an earlier article, Gemie had also discussed the concept of “counter-community” as key to anarchist thought. Various works have appeared that go in this direction. An early example is a short but insightful essay of 1986 on Argentinean anarchism by Eva Golluscio de Montoya.

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Starting from the destruction of the state as the objective of anarchism, and direct action as its tactics, the author outlines the historical evolution and internal organization of anarchist groups, in order to understand the scope of their counter-cultural production, that is, cultural production by different channels than the official ones.¹⁰

Two book-length studies, by Kirwin R. Shaffer and Matthew Thomas, have appeared in 2005 about anarchism and counter-cultural politics in Cuba and Great Britain, respectively. Shaffer seeks to escape the traditional approach to anarchism as a branch of the labour movement and provide a broader picture of anarchism as engaged in political and cultural conflicts with the larger Cuban society, such as those involving health and education. He studies how anarchists acted in the struggles to define cubanidad, or Cubanness, and how, in creating their own counter-culture, they “Cubanized” anarchism, adapting it to fit the cultural, ethnic, and political realities on the island. Shaffer acknowledges that “most anarchists were realists who established schools, cultural events, and health institutes to improve their lives in the here and now.” However, he contrasts such realism to the anarchists’ “idealistic talk about a ‘social revolution.’” The contrast between realism and idealism, to which Shaffer merely alludes, becomes a central theme in Thomas’s book. Thomas challenges the charge of irrelevance against British anarchism. By analysing anarchist counter-cultures concerning sexual relations, pedagogy, alternative communes, and labour, Thomas illustrates their impact on a wider political culture. In the process, he outlines a contrast between pragmatist possibilism and purist impossibilism. He argues that anarchists were effective in the labour movement only when they compromised purism, thus representing an “indictment of anarchism as an ideology” by their acknowledgment that anarchism, in its purest sense, was incapable

of building a mass movement. In contrast, the failure of anarchist feminists and educators, who refused to reach beyond their sub-culture, "demonstrates the sectarian tendency to self-isolation that was a central feature of anarchist politics."\(^{11}\)

The move from the institutional to the cultural terrain is most marked in Richard D. Sonn’s *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France*. Sonn asks how an individualist philosophy could generate a mass movement, and finds the answer in the existence of an anarchist subculture, analogic and emotional rather than abstract and analytical, which interpreted the lower-class Parisian mentality and appealed to avant-garde artists. However, cultural ferment was in inverse relation to the anarchists’ capacity to organize and promote their aims. The subculture compensated for the weaknesses of a paradoxical movement replete with dichotomies, such as between pacifism and violence, insurrectionism and spontaneism, and individualism and collectivism. Similarly, in *Paris and the Anarchists* Alexander Varias addresses the relation between anarchism and Parisian culture. He argues that the strength of Parisian anarchism was its diversity, which enabled it to address cultural concerns central to Parisian life. Yet diversity was also its weakness, for Paris was a city of contrasts, which anarchism mirrored. Thus, Varias concludes that anarchism was destined to remain a divided and inconsistent subculture, though a recurring one, as 1968 demonstrated. While Sonn and Varias focus on how anarchism suited the aesthetics of French artistic avant-garde, Lily Litvak, in her book *Musa libertaria*, takes the reverse approach. She studies anarchist aesthetics through an array of mostly anonymous artists that contributed to the Spanish anarchist

press. In this way, she illustrates how Spanish anarchism utilized art as a means to further its goals.¹²

In their diversity, most approaches to anarchism inspired by social history and focusing on culture, such as those of Nelson, Lear, Thomas, Sonn, and Varias, share a common trait: they tend to emphasize the realism of anarchism, its ability to grapple with issues in the here and now, and ultimately its effectiveness. However, effectiveness is not gauged by the anarchists’ goals, but in contrast to them. The emphasis of Nelson and Lear on workers’ traditions implies that anarchism had an instrumental value for workers who embraced it but did not fully share its objectives. As Mark Leier remarks about Nelson’s book, “the effect is to retreat to a kind of Whiggism, to suggest that anarchism was important mainly for its function as a stepping stone to higher forms of political action and consciousness.”¹³ For the labour movements studied by these authors, as well as for the counter-cultures of Thomas, anarchist goals were ultimately a liability. As such, either they were practically, even if not nominally, disregarded by workers, or eventually turned into a cumbersome hindrance. Realism, flexibility, expediency, and effectiveness are considered incompatible with anarchist goals, which are looked upon as synonymous with stubbornness, purism, and impossibilism. Similarly, for Sonn and Varias, anarchist diversity, which enabled anarchists to grapple with current issues and be in tune with the culture of their times, was also the very reason that precluded them from successfully pursuing their anarchist ends.


Finally, the tendency to reassert anarchism by distancing from its past is most pronounced in the intellectual current variously known as poststructuralist, postmodern, or, more briefly, post-anarchism, which provides its own version of “classical” anarchism as necessarily doomed. This current levels a wholesale criticism against the anarchist tradition based on the theoretical liability of its alleged \textit{a priori} assumption of a unified human subject characterized by a benign essence. For example, Todd May regards anarchism as a forerunner of the poststructuralist “tactical” thought, by which he means a political philosophy based on multiplicity and diversity and positing no centre where power is to be located, in contrast to “strategic” political philosophy involving “a unitary analysis that aims toward a single goal.” For May, classical anarchism posed the foundation of tactical political philosophy, but it lacked the Foucauldian insight that power is not only suppressive but also productive. In turn, this negative view of power, May argues, explains the assumption of humanist naturalism, which furnished the needed justification for resistance to all forms of power. Thus anarchism, “which seemed to articulate an alternative to Marxism, not just by adopting another strategic standpoint but instead abandoning strategy altogether, turned against its own foundations.” For May, the move away from strategic to tactical political philosophy is completed successfully by poststructuralist anarchism, for which “history is to be understood as a more or less contingent intersection of practices,” such that “the effect of a single practice is not reducible to the goal of the actors engaging in that practice.” Accordingly, May advocates “social, personal, and political experimentation,” as proposed by Gilles Deleuze, the flourishing of many little narratives, as suggested by Jean-François Lyotard, and the adoption of ethical principles instead of humanist naturalism.

In contrast to both the charge that anarchism was doomed by its backwardness, and the counterargument that it was effectively in tune with the culture of its time, the postmodernist charge is that “classical” anarchism was doomed precisely by its being in tune with that culture: “That the anarchist *a priori* regarding power,” May argues, “is convergent with the nineteenth century’s general conception of the nature of power can be explained... as a politically significant failure that bars anarchism from completing the journey down the tactical path along which it traveled.” Similarly, Lewis Call argues that Bakunin’s worldview “should be read not, perhaps, as an all-out radical assault on the very foundations of modern political theory, but rather as a continuation of the emancipatory project inaugurated by the philosophes of the Enlightenment.” For Call, the problem with this humanist anarchism “is that its ontology and its epistemology are nearly indistinguishable from those of bourgeois political economy.” Likewise, “classical anarchism is haunted by a rationalist semiotics which seriously limits its radical potential,” since the rationalist linguistic structures it employed “are substantially equivalent to those of bourgeois science.” The standard references of such criticisms are Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin, while Malatesta is ignored by both May and Call. In fact, Malatesta was a strenuous opponent of the idea of a benign human nature, as well as of scientistic stances. Moreover, themes such as ethics, social indeterminacy, pluralism, and experimentalism loomed large in his thought. His case will show that “classical” anarchism resists the strait-jacket of hasty generalizations and that postmodernist cut-and-dried distinctions break down in the face of more thorough analyses.\(^\text{15}\)

From the perspective of rationality, in the sense of coherence between desires, beliefs, and behaviour, those who share Hobsbawm’s judgment of “monumental ineffectiveness,” and those who seek to rescue anarchism from that charge are two sides of the same irrationalist coin, epitomized by the shared notion of anarchism as a

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 75; Lewis Call, *Postmodern Anarchism* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002), 15–16.
necessary failure, or a permanently unsuccessful movement. The former emphasize the inadequacy and futility of anarchist means in the pursuit of the actors’ declared ends, pointing out that such high-sounding ends would require a much higher level of organization and mobilization than displayed in the cyclical, spontaneous, and ill-equipped outbursts of rage typical of anarchism. The latter point out the positive contribution of anarchists to social issues and the adaptability and effectiveness of their means. However, these are judged by a different yardstick than the actors’ stated goals, which in turn tend to be regarded as a dead letter, at best, or a dead weight, at worst. In either case, rational understanding of how anarchists selected their means in the light of their own ends is wanting. One way or another, anarchism is made sense of by introducing an element of oddity, inconsequence, or irrationality at some point of the process, whether in the form of impossible aims, futile means, or absurd beliefs.

From the perspective of rationality, it is irrelevant whether a movement’s positive contribution is appreciated, as Shaffer, Thomas, and others do, or whether—as Raymond Carr stated in a book review on Spanish anarchism significantly titled “All or Nothing”—a movement is regarded “as largely a disaster, both for the workers’ movement and for democracy in Spain.” The point here is not whether anarchism was a disaster, but rather that its assessment as a disaster is an evaluative statement that requires the assumption of a set of values or goals with respect to which it is established. Whose values and goals are to be chosen? Anarchism may have been a disaster for “democracy in Spain,” as Carr contends, but certainly anarchists did not intend to be beneficial to democracy, unless one intends the term broadly enough to include anarchy. And even with respect to workers, one needs to know what is good for them, in order to establish whether anarchism was a disaster, and what is good for them is not a matter that can be settled by historical analysis. In contrast, what is indeed relevant for the issue of rationality is Carr’s next claim, that anarchist militants, though “moving in their sincerity,” were “naïve to the
Likewise, the issue of rationality is distinct from that of effectiveness, even with respect to one’s own goals. Failure to achieve one’s goal does not necessarily imply irrationality. Situations may exist in which one acts rationally, but is ineffective for reasons outside of one’s control. Could not the majority be irrational? Rejecting a priori this option requires the assumption that rationality always be on the side of the majority, the strongest, and ultimately the winner. In the 1920s, Italian upholders of liberal democracy were indeed ineffective against Fascism. Nevertheless, it would be awkward to claim ipso facto that they were irrational. That anarchism was ineffective is a truism, given that it has not achieved its ends. However, it is one thing to attribute its ineffectiveness to exogenous factors or overpowering circumstances, and another to attribute it to endogenous factors, or inherent, inexorable flaws. As Hobsbawm’s assessment illustrates, the difference is that the latter stance implies stepping out of the past into the future, which is still unwritten, and therefore is not the historian’s department, notwithstanding the established habit of prophesying about anarchism.

At any rate, justified or not, the attribution of irrationality has a negative impact on how historians of anarchism go about their work. It is a shortcut that fosters facile explanations in lieu of making sense of one’s subject. Nothing is ever too odd or puzzling when irrationality is at hand as a suitable explanation. Contradictory evidence about one’s behaviour can always be reconciled without questioning it when irrational behaviour is a matter of course. In brief, the attribution of irrationality makes for poorer historiography, and anarchism has been victimized this way. An anecdote may help illustrate this point. In a voluminous study of Italy during World War I and Fascism, the authoritative Italian historian Nicola Tranfaglia analyzes the popular support that Mussolini’s colonial war in Ethiopia enjoyed in 1935. He remarks that illustrious

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members of Parliament, such as the philosopher Benedetto Croce, donated gold in support of the war, and even the anarchist Errico Malatesta and other former representatives of the extreme left supported the war, "thus radically modifying their judgment on the Fascist regime." At the crossroads between questioning or using the evidence of a chief figure of international anarchism awkwardly turned into a supporter of colonial war and Fascism, Tranfaglia briskly takes the latter path. Thus, Malatesta's new stance is exhibited as the latest instance of "a long political-cultural tradition," spectacularly corroborating Tranfaglia's thesis: "arousing the deepest feelings of the Italian people and identifying national honour with the redemption of its colonial inferiority was Mussolini's greatest success and the historical peak attained by his regime." Unfortunately, in 1935 Errico Malatesta had been dead for three years. Mussolini's supporter was a non-anarchist namesake. Tranfaglia's blunder is an extreme but exemplary case, as the inclination to accept anarchist oddity as plausible and unproblematic, rather than questioning it, is common, and has vitiated the historiography of anarchism, from the ground level of factual accuracy up to historical explanation.

Both because of the intrinsic characteristics of its theory and tactics, and because it was frequently forced underground, anarchism had resources of a different kind from those of other movements. Thus, one must take unconventional approaches to conventional problems in order to bring forth the analogies between anarchism and other radical left movements at the turn of the century, and rescue anarchism from its seeming oddity. For example, looking at foremost thinkers and influential books, as is usually done for other movements, to trace the history of ideas of anarchism may be misleading. As Gerald Brenan remarked, "the real history of the Anarchist movement is contained not in books, but in its daily press and in the memories of living Anarchists." A similar point was made as early as 1899 by Kropotkin, who remarked that socialistic literature had

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17 Nicola Tranfaglia, La prima guerra mondiale e il fascismo (Turin: UTET, 1995), 593.
never been rich in books, while its main force lay in pamphlets and newspapers. If one wants to understand how workers accept socialist ideals, he argued, “there remains nothing but to take collections of papers and read them all through…. Quite a new world of social relations and methods of thought and action is revealed by this reading, which gives an insight into what cannot be found anywhere else….”

The issue of organization is a case in point. The stereotype has it that anarchists flatly rejected organization and believed in spontaneity, which no doubt, in its unqualified form, is an awkward stance. Yet the question of organization represented the most fundamental issue that divided Italian anarchists. No reflection of this debate can be found in books, while the debate was uninterruptedly carried out for decades in the anarchist press. Likewise, on the practical side, if one were to study the collective action of Italian anarchism through its organizations in the quarter of a century before World War I, one would find very little to work on. A short-lived attempt at creating a party by Italian anarchists occurred in 1891. The next formal organization of national scope was formed in 1919. This does not mean that anarchists did not organize. Rather, it means that the historian has to look not only at traditional forms of organization, but also at an informal network of links among individual and group to understand the working of the movement.

At the same time, finding such evidence is not simple, and not always feasible. Historians have often had to circumvent, rather than tackle, the issue of organization. For example, Gemie motivates his counter-community approach by pointing out the puzzle of anarchist organization: membership seemed to fluctuate continually, soaring in times of social struggle and dropping dramatically in times of repression, while secrecy or semi-legality of anarchist organisations prevented them from generating historical sources that

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would help making sense of the puzzle. Likewise, George Richard Esenwein justifies his study on the ideological dimension of Spanish anarchism by the availability of sources, in contrast to the lack of reliable sources concerning anarchist activism.\textsuperscript{19}

The task of making sense of anarchism by taking seriously the anarchists' own perspective has a powerful tool in oral history. A fine example of its use is Paul Avrich's book \textit{Anarchist Voices}, based on painstaking work conducted over nearly thirty years, during which Avrich collected 180 interviews with anarchists all over America. The result is a collective biography of anarchism, narrated through the voices of its protagonists. Another relevant work is \textit{The Anarchists of Casas Viejas}, by Jerome R. Mintz. Written by an anthropologist, it is a study in ethnohistory that reconstructs the tragic anarchist uprising of 1933 in the Andalusian town of Casas Viejas. The book challenges the common perceptions of the uprising as a classic example of rural rebellion, utilizing primarily new oral data from uneducated and often illiterate narrators, which Mintz used to demythologize the events, re-examine widely accepted concepts, and consider the factors that led to misinterpretation. However, winning the confidence of the campesinos and overcoming the defensiveness of anarchosyndicalist protagonists was difficult, and initial accounts were evasive. Only a cross-check of accounts revealed attempts to mislead the researcher. Mintz's findings challenge in particular Hobsbawm's version, which explains "how anarchosyndicalists were presumed to act rather than what actually took place," in order to fit a preconceived model. Instead, Mintz shows, the uprising was a response to a call for a nationwide revolutionary strike hatched in Barcelona, whereby uprisings in the countryside were designed to divert military forces from the urban focal points of the insurrection.\textsuperscript{20}


Obviously, the tools of oral history are not available to the historian of anarchism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, many issues are similar to those pointed out by Mintz: the need to understand the actors’ perspective; the need to question deceitful appearances that fit standard pre-conceptions; and the difficulty to access anarchist sources, that would provide the ground for debunking myths. The relevance of such issues, especially the last one, is evident not only in the literature about anarchism in general, but also in the historiography around Malatesta.

Errico Malatesta is acknowledged to be one of the foremost anarchist thinkers and agitators, on a par with the likes of Bakunin and Kropotkin. Malatesta was connected to the major social upheavals in Italy between 1870 and 1930: the internationalist insurrectionist attempts of 1874 and 1877, the revolts of 1893–4 in Sicily and Lunigiana, the riots of 1898 against the rising cost of bread, the 1914 Red Week in Ancona, and the 1919–1920 biennio rosso, or red biennium. During his many years in exile, Malatesta contributed to the anarchist movements of several other countries that he visited and lived in, ranging from Argentina, Spain, United States, France, to England. However, historical work about him lags behind his importance. This is partly because not all his writings are easily accessible, spread as they are over many anarchist publications in at least four languages. Moreover, in his practical mindset, Malatesta always balked at writing his memoirs, and never wrote a book-length account of his ideas.

Malatesta’s propaganda pamphlets are his most widely known works. In particular, *Fra Contadini* (Between Peasants), *L’Anarchia* (Anarchy), and *Al Caffè* (At the Café), obtained an enormous popularity and were translated into many languages, serialized in anarchist periodicals, and produced as pamphlets. *Fra Contadini*, which plainly expounds the tenets of anarchism in the form of a dialogue between two peasants, was first published in 1884.\(^{21}\) An edition published in Paterson, New Jersey, twenty years later,

\[^{21}\text{Errico Malatesta, Propaganda socialista. Fra contadini (Florence: Tip. Toni, 1884).}\]

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bore the inscription “sixteenth Italian edition.” At least eleven more Italian editions were published before Malatesta’s death in 1932, and another nine after the Second World War. Translations exist in at least eighteen languages. The distribution of translations reflects the worldwide spread and composition of the anarchist movement. The pamphlet has been claimed to be “the most read book as an initiation to anarchism in the Hispanic areas.” Its history also reflects stories of emigration and exile, and witnesses the internationalist character of the anarchist movement, with two Chinese and one Armenian edition published in Paris, a Czech and a German edition in New York, a Russian edition in Baltimore, a Yiddish edition in London, and a Latvian edition in Buenos Aires. The history of the pamphlet also chronologically reflects the history of the anarchist movement, with periods of more intense editorial activity coinciding with periods of more acute social struggle, such as the aftermath of World War II in Italy, or the 1970s. The pamphlet’s ongoing fortune is witnessed by Internet editions in Italian, Spanish, French, and English. The pamphlet is a remarkable example of the vitality and continuity of anarchist counter-cultural production, in the sense of cultural production by different channels than the official ones, as defined by Golluscio de Montoya. Throughout its life span, this work has been edited and printed by anarchist groups and newspapers, translated and distributed through the anarchist international network, and handed down in this way from one generation of anarchists to the next. To this day, the pamphlet retains its militant character, while never entering official channels of cultural production, not even as an object of historical interest. For over a hundred and twenty years it has been only accessible through direct contact with the anarchist movement.

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22 Editorial note to Escritos, by Errico Malatesta (Madrid: Fundación Anselmo Lorenzo, 2002), 10.

23 As of 31 August 2007, these versions were respectively available at: www.ecn.org/contropotere/fracontadini.zip; www.cgt.es/descargas/SalaLectura/malatesta-entre-campesinos.pdf; kropot.free.fr/Malatesta-paysans.htm; and www.zabalaza.net/pdfs/varpams/between_peasants_em.pdf.
Malatesta’s pamphlets were propaganda vehicles directed to a large audience. From a theoretical point of view, his ideas are to be found in the numerous articles for periodicals. The most important sources are the periodicals he edited: the two *La Questione Sociale* of Florence and Buenos Aires, respectively in 1883–4 and 1885; *L’Associazione* of Nice–London, in 1889–90; *L’Agitazione* of Ancona, in 1897–8; *La Questione Sociale* of Paterson, New Jersey, in 1899–1900; *Volontà* of Ancona, in 1913–4; *Umanità Nova* of Milan–Rome, in 1920–2; and *Pensiero e Volontà* of Rome, in 1924–6. In addition, he edited short-lived periodicals or one-off publications, particularly in 1900–12. He also contributed to other periodicals in various languages, including *El Productor* (Barcelona) in 1891; the Parisian *La Révolte*, in the 1880s and 1890s, and *Les Temps Nouveaux*, in the 1900s; and several London periodicals, namely *The Commonweal*, *The Torch*, and *Liberty* in the 1890s, and *Freedom* in the 1900s. It can be conservatively estimated that Malatesta’s original contributions to the anarchist press exceed a thousand articles.

Malatesta’s articles were frequently re-published in Italy and in the countries of Italian immigration, particularly the United States and Argentina, by such periodicals as *Cronaca Sovversiva* of Barre, Vermont, *L’Adunata dei Refrattari* of New York, and *L’Avvenire* of Buenos Aires. They were also widely translated, particularly after the turn of the century. The atmosphere of the anarchist movement at that time is thus described by the historian Max Nettlau:

> For a long time the anarchist ideas were constantly discussed in many papers everywhere, and some of these... were published regularly for many years and became centers of discussion. There was besides a constant exchange of ideas from country to country by translations of questions of more than local interest. In this way every good pamphlet became very soon known internationally, and this sphere of intellectual exchange ranged from Portugal to China and New Zealand, and from Canada to Chile and Peru.  

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Malatesta had a leading role in those debates, and his articles in some of those long-lived papers, such as *Les Temps Nouveaux* and *Freedom*, were readily translated and usually made available in Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and other languages. In particular, his articles in *Freedom* during World War I had an enormous echo, at a time when Kropotkin and others were supporting the war against Germany. In general, as already noted for Malatesta’s pamphlets, the distribution and frequency of translations reflected the vitality of the movement in different linguistic areas, with French and Spanish at the top of the list.

The current availability of Malatesta’s articles lags behind his historical relevance. The editor of a recent collection thus justified the publication: “Why Malatesta? Because he seems to us the most cited anarchist author and, at the same time, the most unknown.” The most comprehensive collection in Italian is still the three-volume *Scritti*, started in 1934, two years after Malatesta’s death, as part of a planned nine-volume edition of Malatesta’s complete works. Unfortunately, the plan was abandoned after the death of its editor Luigi Fabbri in 1935. The three volumes exhaustively cover the last thirteen years of Malatesta’s life, to which the editor decided to give priority. Another extensive collection was edited by Cesare Zaccaria and Giovanna Berneri in two volumes, published respectively in 1947 and 1954. This collection complements the previous one, as it contains many articles that precede the period covered by Fabbri’s collection. Another valuable volume appeared in 1949, focusing on the debate on anarchism and democracy that took place in 1897 between Malatesta and Francesco Saverio Merlino. Several new collections appeared in the 1970s and in 1980s. Besides anthologies, largely overlapping with the two main collections mentioned above, two


26 Editorial note to *Escritos*, 9.
specific volumes are worth mentioning, as they extend the range of available materials: a
collection of anti-militarist articles and a volume, far from complete, of correspondence.
The most recent appearance is a collection of autobiographical excerpts gleaned from
those rare articles in which Malatesta included personal recollections. With the exception
of collections published in Spain and Argentina in the 1920s and 1930s, most material
available in other languages dates from the 1970s and 1980s. In English, an extensive
collection of excerpts, thematically arranged, was edited by Vernon Richards in 1965.
The book had considerable success, with reprints and translations in Italian, Dutch,
Spanish, and French. It has become the standard Malatesta source in English-speaking
countries, to the point that individual chapters get reprinted and presented as Malatesta’s
pamphlets, without any mention of sources, or of their being collections of excerpts. To
complement his anthology, in 1995 Richards edited a collection of twenty-five full
articles, titled *The Anarchist Revolution.*

The literature about Malatesta is mainly the work of anarchists, and as such it bears a
strongly militant character, rather than a scholarly one. A significant part of it is
constituted of biographical works. There are three full biographies of Malatesta, all by
close friends and comrades: Max Nettlau, Armando Borghi, and Luigi Fabbri. Nettlau is
the one most familiar with the London environment in which Malatesta spent most of his
time as an exile. Borghi is the youngest of the three, and his biography is most valuable
for the last period of Malatesta’s life. Fabbri was the closest friend and comrade of

Malatesta, the editor of his collected works, and perhaps the one who had the most thorough insider’s view into Malatesta’s life and activity, particularly for the several periods he spent in Italy after 1897. As a complement to his biography, Fabbri also published a volume on Malatesta’s thought. 28

This literature on Malatesta has been customarily criticized from a historiographical perspective for its hagiographical character. While a deep admiration for their subject undoubtedly emerges from these books, it is debatable whether this stands in the way of an unprejudiced understanding. Perhaps these books present not so much a distorted image, as an incomplete one. In these biographies there is a reticence about illegal deeds, which can be easily explained by the fact that their authors were militants, whose commitment to accuracy and completeness struggled with the preoccupation not to harm the movement with inappropriate revelations. For example, if Malatesta had had any involvement in Gaetano Bresci’s plans to kill King Humbert in 1900, as has been conjectured, no anarchist biographer would ever have revealed anything of it. By the same token, the occasional first-hand details found in such biographies are all the more valuable, as they provide clues to an insider’s knowledge which cannot be easily matched by other sources outside the movement. In addition to these major works, one can find in the anarchist press many short biographical articles by Malatesta’s friends and comrades, such as Luigi Galleani, Rudolph Rocker, and Guy Aldred, which provide different perspectives on Malatesta and shed light on specific periods of his life. There are also biographical accounts by non-anarchists, such as Max Nomad’s chapter in his book Rebels and Renegades, but these are usually of little use. Though written by Malatesta’s

contemporaries they are often based on second-hand information, thus challenging the notion itself of primary source.\textsuperscript{29}

The scholarly literature about Malatesta is predominantly in Italian. It appears that the language barrier, which was relatively negligible for the anarchist movement, composed of uneducated workers but strongly internationalist in character and largely made familiar with cross-cultural relationships by the widespread experience of exile, has been instead less surmountable in the educated world of scholars. Together with the unsystematic character of Malatesta's overall production and the scarce availability of his works, which by themselves hampered the study of his ideas, the language barrier helps explaining the additional gap between the literature in Italian and in other languages.

A renewed interest in Malatesta can be traced back to the 1970s, resulting in a number of scholarly works, ranging from biographical to theoretical. Notable biographical additions were two books by Paolo Finzi and the Japanese scholar Misato Toda, respectively dealing with the red biennium of 1919–20 and Malatesta's Internationalist period. As for studies of Malatesta's thought, a notable contribution is a 1972 book by Stefano Arcangeli, which provides an overview of Malatesta's anarchism in a series of thematically arranged chapters. However, the most important contribution on both accounts is a recent, comprehensive intellectual biography by Giampietro Berti, covering Malatesta's entire life. Obviously, in addition to monographs on Malatesta, any book on the history of Italian anarchism also deals to a large extent with him. In this respect, the work of Gino Cerrito and Pier Carlo Masini is especially worth mentioning.

Finally, outside of Italy, an extensive overview and interpretation of Malatesta’s thought can be found in a 1990 Spanish-language book by Angel J. Cappelletti.\(^{30}\)

Additional scholarly work can be found in unpublished theses. Among those in Italian, it is worth mentioning *Anarchismo e società aperta: Errico Malatesta tra epistemologia e politica (1919–1932)*, by Andrea Della Bella. It discusses methodological aspects of Malatesta’s anarchism, a theme which was dealt with by Ugo Fedeli in 1949, but which had not yet received the attention it deserves. An extensive search reveals no theses are recorded for either English or French, thus confirming the limited interest for Malatesta in those linguistic areas, possibly a consequence of the language barrier. A similar conclusion can be drawn from another source, the annotated bibliography *Anarchist Thinkers and Thought*, compiled by Paul Nursey-Bray in 1992. Its “Theses” section lists one hundred seventy works in English, none of which is about Malatesta. This strikingly contrasts with the fact that the section “Journals of Historical Significance,” covering 31 journals of all times and countries, lists six journals directed by Malatesta.\(^{31}\)

Further scholarly work on Malatesta can be found in journal articles, both in theoretically-oriented anarchist publications and academic journals, and in conference papers. A relevant collective source is a 1989 issue of the French journal *Itinéraire*, entirely devoted to Malatesta. Two conferences are also of interest, the first of which


took place in Milan in September 1982, on the fiftieth anniversary of Malatesta’s death, and the second in Naples in December 2003, on the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Malatesta’s birth. The proceedings of the latter have been published, while contributions to the former conference have separately appeared. Among individual journal articles it is worth mentioning Gianpiero Landi’s study of the relation between Malatesta and Merlino. As for Malatesta’s role in the international anarchist movement, two contributions are “Errico Malatesta y el anarquismo argentino,” by Gonzalo Zaragoza Ruvira, about Malatesta’s time in Argentina in 1885–9, and João Freire’s “Malatesta e o anarquismo português,” a revised edition of a paper presented at the 1982 conference in Milan. Finally, the scholarly literature of English-speaking countries is most notably represented by Carl Levy, who has discussed Malatesta’s London years in two articles, “Malatesta in Exile” and “Malatesta in London: The Era of Dynamite.” A further article by Levy analyzes Malatesta’s role in the red biennium in the light of Max Weber’s notion of charisma.

Despite this recent attention on Malatesta, the literature on him is wanting in several respects. Berti’s intellectual biography is the first and only systematic study of Malatesta thought, and no such work exists in English or any language other than Italian. There is a


need to do justice to the theoretical depth of Malatesta’s thought and to overcome the perception that his work is mainly of interest for anarchists, hence of little or no interest. In turn, expanding the knowledge of anarchist theory, as well as of its link to tactics, helps putting to the test facile generalizations about anarchism. Such generalizations are often drawn from a narrow empirical base, partly due to the tendency to take the easy route of privileging anarchist authors who had the time and inclination to write books, and had the good fortune of writing in languages that were more easily translated, because they were widely spoken. If one considers the association between linguistic spread and colonial expansion, the ironic conclusion is that the academic literature on anarchism reflects more the spread and geography of colonialism than that of anarchism. In contrast, an approach is required that follows anarchism on its own turf, even if this is a little rugged for the historian’s standard equipment.

The methodology of the present work comes from three diverse but converging sources. The first is the work in the methodology of social sciences of the French sociologist Raymond Boudon, with particular regard to his notion of rationality. Boudon’s “cognitivist theory of action” is based on Max Weber’s interpretive sociology, which assigns sociological analysis the goal of reconstructing individual behaviour so as to make it meaningful and not interpret it, except in the last resort, as the effect of irrational forces. For Boudon, observed behaviour is often irrational only in terms of the observer’s situation, whereas rationality or irrationality should be determined in relation to the actor’s behaviour. Thus, he rejects explanations in terms of “alienation,” “the weight of tradition,” “resistance to change,” “false consciousness,” etc. Boudon’s fundamental axiom is that behaviour is governed by reasons. He emphasizes that social actors are socially situated and discusses the example of the Luddite movement: “from their own viewpoint, the workers see the negative effect of mechanization on jobs whereas the observer from a distance perceives a positive effect.” Thus, Boudon introduces the notion of “subjective rationality”: reasons may be objectively debatable,
but nevertheless be perceived as good and compelling by actors. This idea shifts the focus of explaining behaviour and belief from finding causes to finding reasons. Boudon's model belongs to the family of rational theories of axiological beliefs, in contrast to "causalist" theories, according to which such beliefs would be produced in the mind of social subjects by biological, psychological, or social causes. Instead, rational theories suppose that subjects endorse such beliefs because they have strong reasons for doing so. Unlike preferences, reasons are not private but public, in the sense that as soon as an actor has the feeling that his beliefs are grounded on strong reasons, he also has the feeling that other people should accept these reasons as strong. In sum, Boudon defines axiological rationality "as a form of cognitive rationality characterized by the fact that it deals with arguments where at least one statement is axiological," since "an ought-statement cannot be exclusively derived from is-statements."34

Perhaps the best formulation of axiological rationality, of which Boudon seems to have been unaware, is due to Albert Einstein, who argues that scientific statements cannot produce ethical directives. However, "ethical directives can be made rational and coherent by logical thinking and empirical knowledge. If we can agree on some fundamental ethical propositions, then other ethical propositions can be derived from them.... Such ethical premises play a similar role in ethics to that played by axioms in mathematics."35 Then questions such as "why should not we lie?" become meaningful, and are addressed by tracing back the ethical directive in question to such basic premises.

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Thus, one might argue that lying destroys the confidence in the statements of other people, without which social co-operation, and consequently human life itself, is made impossible. The rule “thou shalt not lie” can thus be traced back to the demand: “human life shall be preserved.” Are ethical axioms arbitrary? For pure logic, Einstein argues, all axioms are arbitrary, including the axioms of ethics; but they are not arbitrary from a psychological and genetic point of view. Ethical axioms, Einstein concludes, are found and tested not very differently from the axioms of science: “Truth is what stands the test of experience.” In sum, the notion of axiological rationality implies that ought and is are both independent and interconnected; ethical directives are both axiomatic and amenable to argument. For the historian this means that fully understanding historical actors requires taking seriously their own axiological statements; at the same time the connection between such statements and the actors’ beliefs and behaviour is open for scrutiny.

Guidelines for such scrutiny come from my second methodological source. This is a theory of interpretation that originated in the philosophy of language and extended to social sciences and philosophy. Versions of it were most notably championed by Willard Van Orman Quine, Donald Davidson, Daniel Dennett, and Martin Hollis. The theory argues that a fundamental constraint for interpreting another person is to conceive of one as a rational agent. Therefore, interpretation has to proceed by necessity in a charitable manner. Rationality is not merely an empirical trait of an agent, but is constitutive for one’s agency. At the core of this theory is the methodological principle known as the “principle of charity.” Quine resorts to it in connection with his thesis of the “indeterminacy of translation”: translation manuals can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the available data, yet mutually incompatible. What criterion should one prefer? Quine asserts the maxim that “assertions startlingly false on the face of them are

36 Ibid.
likely to turn on hidden differences of language,” based on the common sense that “one’s interlocutor’s silliness, beyond a certain point, is less likely than bad translation.” The more absurd the imputed beliefs, the more suspicious a translation is.\(^{37}\)

Davidson’s starting point is that “neither language nor thinking can be fully explained in terms of the other, and neither has conceptual priority.” In analogy with Quine’s radical translation, Davidson discusses “radical interpretation,” in which “we must deliver simultaneously a theory of belief and a theory of meaning.” Attributing irrational thoughts and actions to an agent is possible, but it imposes a burden on such attributions. “If we see a man pulling on both ends of a piece of string, we may decide he is fighting against himself, that he wants to move the string in incompatible directions. Such an explanation would require elaborate backing. No problem arises if the explanation is that he wants to break the string.” Davidson’s key to the solution for simultaneously identifying the meanings, beliefs, and evaluative attitudes, or desires, of an agent is the principle of charity, or, in Davidson’s reformulation, a “policy of rational accommodation”: “This policy calls on us to fit our own propositions... to the other person’s words and attitudes in such a way as to render their speech and other behavior intelligible. This necessarily requires us to see others as much like ourselves in point of overall coherence and correctness.” Davidson emphasizes that his policy is not one of many possible successful policies. Rather, “it is the only policy available if we want to understand other people.” It expresses the fact that creatures with thoughts, values, and speech must be rational, are necessarily inhabitants of the same objective world as ourselves, and necessarily share their leading values with us. This is not a lucky accident, but “something built into the concepts of belief, desire, and meaning.”\(^{38}\)


My third source of inspiration is E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*. In that book, in contrast to various prevailing orthodoxies of the time, Thompson emphasizes “the agency of working people, the degree to which they contributed by conscious efforts, to the making of history,” and objects to a reading of history in the light of subsequent preoccupations, whose implication is that only the successful are remembered: “The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten.” In a well-known statement, Thompson claims to be “seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan... from the enormous condescension of posterity.” For Thompson, “their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience.” Moreover, “in some of the lost causes of the people of the Industrial Revolution we may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure.” In contrast to deterministic Marxist analyses of class consciousness, Thompson’s emphasis on agency leads him to maintain that “we can see a logic in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any law.” In particular, Thompson’s analysis of the illegal tradition of the Luddite movement, the “army of redressers,” offers hints for analogies with the anarchist movement of a century later. For Thompson, the ideals of Luddism “may never have been much more than ideals,” but “they had a powerful reality, none the less, in the notion of what ought to be.” Although “Luddism lingers in the popular mind as an uncouth, spontaneous affair of illiterate handworkers, blindly resisting machinery,” the machine-breakers “made the most realistic assessment of the short-term effects.” It was a quasi-insurrectionary movement characterized by a high degree of organization, striking not so much for its backwardness as for its growing maturity. Far from being “primitive,” it exhibited “discipline and self-restraint of a high order.” The preoccupation that generally runs through all Thompson’s work is to reinstate a vocabulary of agency and moral choice which, in Thompson’s opinion, got lost in Western capitalist ideology. Thompson examines “morality” and value systems, though not “in the supposedly classic
'liberal' way—as areas of 'free choice' divorced from economics—nor yet in one classic sociological or anthropological way, in which societies and economics are seen as dependent upon value systems” Rather, he examines “the dialectic of interaction, the dialectic between ‘economics’ and ‘values.’”

In attempting to make sense of anarchism, the present work will focus on explanations of a reason-giving sort rather than of a causal sort, along Boudon’s methodological lines. Furthermore, in accordance with his cognitivist theory of action, the emphasis will not only be on providing arguments of a consequential type relating anarchist ends and means, but also on illustrating the system of beliefs that comprised their cognitive rationality. The principle of charity provides the criterion that will guide the present work in search of “good” reasons. As Davidson explains, the process is that of constructing a viable theory of desires and beliefs from behaviour open to observation, i.e. actions undertaken, just as a theory of meaning and belief is constructed from linguistic behaviour, i.e. sentences held true. Davidson’s key insight is that, for any constellation of beliefs and desires that rationalizes an action or sample of actions, it is always possible to find a quite different constellation that will do as well. The only way for an observer to attribute desires, beliefs, and meanings to an actor, based on the latter’s actions and assertions, is to assume general agreement on beliefs. The method is not designed to eliminate disagreement. Rather, its purpose is to make meaningful disagreement possible. Thus Davidson puts the matter concisely: “all thinking creatures subscribe to my basic standards or norms of rationality.” Though this may sound authoritarian, it comes to no more than this: “it is a condition of having thoughts, judgments and intentions that the basic standards of rationality have application.” Adopting a principle of charity is not a matter of benevolence or leniency towards actors.

Rather, it proceeds from the acknowledgment that “each interpretation and attribution of attitude is a move within a holistic theory, a theory necessarily governed by concern for consistency and general coherence with the truth.” Accordingly, “charity is not an option, but a condition of having a workable theory”; “it is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters.”

Davidson’s guiding policy, according to which we should, as far as possible, assign to a speaker’s sentences “conditions of truth that actually obtain (in our own opinion) just when the speaker holds those sentences true,” seems to go very much in the same direction as Boudon’s urge to interpret individual behaviour patterns as meaningfully as possible, with irrationality as the last resort. Such notions as “primitive” or “pre-logical” mentality have no place in either theoretical framework. At the same time, both Boudon and Davidson emphasize the methodological, rather than ontological, character of their rationality assumption. Along the same lines is Karl Popper’s discussion of the “rationality principle,” to which Boudon acknowledges his indebtedness. For Popper the animating law of social models is the “rationality principle,” the principle of acting appropriately to the situation. This principle “has little or nothing to do with the empirical or psychological assertion that man always, or in the main, or in most cases, acts rationally.” In fact, Popper argues, the principle of adequacy of action is indeed false, yet it is an integral part of every testable social theory. Popper’s thesis is that “it is sound methodological policy to decide not to make the rationality principle accountable but the rest of the theory.” We learn more from the breakdown of our theory if we blame our situational model rather than the rationality principle. In order to understand the actors’ inadequate actions we must be able to see how and why the situation as they saw it, with their limited resources, led them to act as they did; that is to say, adequately for their

inadequate view of the situational structure. In contrast, attempting to replace the rationality principle by another one increases the arbitrariness of our model-building to the limit of capriciousness.41

However, much historiography of anarchism seems to have headed in the opposite direction from a policy of rational accommodation. In contrast to Davidson’s emphasis on the holistic interconnection of beliefs with desires and the world, and his methodological guideline of maximizing, or optimizing, consistency and general coherence with the truth, many of the analyses of anarchism previously illustrated utilize patterns of explanation which, at one point or another, introduce some form of detachment from empirical reality, internal inconsistency, or inconsequential beliefs. Absurdity, contradictions, inconsistencies, and practical impossibility are explicitly invoked by Horowitz and Joll. For Carr, anarchists approached self-destruction. The notion of a primitive mentality is central to the millenarian thesis, for which anarchists were largely unconcerned with empirical reality. As for authors who have a positive outlook on anarchism, they often do so at the price of divorcing the anarchists’ daily practice from their long-term ends, or by questioning the thoroughness of their anarchist beliefs. While charity, as Karsten Stueber remarks, is “a principle constraining the interpretive process globally and not locally,” in such books rationality is found locally, not globally, in the anarchists’ beliefs. Thus, for Nelson, Chicago anarchists are not best understood as anarchists; for Lear, Mexico City anarchists did not really aim at overthrowing capitalism; for Thomas, British anarchists were effective to the extent that they shed their typical anarchist impossibilism; for Sonn and Varias, the appeal of French anarchism stemmed from its very ineptitude. In many cases, lame accounts from the viewpoint of rational accommodation are complemented with causalist explanations in

terms of backwardness, alienation, radicalization, polarization, etc.. Charity, in the sense of a rigorous methodological approach aimed at adequate understanding, is largely lacking in the historiography of anarchism. When a professional historian as Perez Zagorin writes that “the disinterestedness and heroism of the best anarchist activists arouse our admiration, while at the same time their stupidity irritates and baffles us,” he expresses a widespread feeling that goes a long way in explaining the sub-standard quality of much historiography of anarchism. The more unproblematically such claims are made, the more they speak to the “monumental ineffectiveness” of the historiography they represent.42

It is worth emphasizing that a charitable approach steers clear of both relativism and dogmatic egocentrism on the part of the observer. Indeed, anarchists are to be understood on their own terms. Their actions are to be related to their own desires, beliefs, and their own perception of the world. Thus, Davidson emphasizes the requirement of consistency in interpreting an actor’s behaviour; and Boudon, as well as Popper, emphasize that the actor is situated. At the same time, however, interpreting an actor’s behaviour in his own terms can only mean accommodating as much as possible its interpretation to the observer’s own standard of rationality. This is how the link between the actor’s beliefs and desires and the world is retained. Making sense of anarchism in its own terms does not mean committing to a “linguistic turn,” whereby an alleged “non-referential conception of language” is applied to one’s subject, as Gareth Stedman Jones claims to have done in his study of Chartism, in order to free its politics from the “a priori assumptions of historians about its social meaning.” For Jones, his method meant “exploring the systematic relationship between terms and propositions within the

language rather than setting particular propositions into direct relation to a putative experiential reality of which they were assumed to be the expression.” Valuable and innovative as Jones’s study of Chartism is, its value does not lie in the method allegedly being used, which is simply untenable. Archeologists could have studied any number of inscriptions in the hieroglyphic language for any length of time in a non-referential manner, but it was only the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, a triscript in hieroglyphic, demotic, and Greek, that gave Jean-François Champollion the referential anchors enabling him to crack the code and find the key that made it possible for the texts of Ancient Egypt to be read again after fourteen centuries, thus opening the door to the entire Egyptian civilization. As Martin Hollis puts it, in describing the anthropologist’s work to understand native utterances, “to translate them into, let us say, English, he needs to relate some of them to the world, since, in relating an utterance to others he does not learn what it means, unless he already knows what the others mean. Ultimately, then, he needs a class of utterances whose situations of use he can specify,” that is, a bridgehead set of utterances “for which his specification and his informants’ coincide.”

Understanding anarchism in its own terms means that whenever we understand it in terms that look odd or irrational, it is our understanding that must first be questioned. The appearance of oddness or irrationality is likely evidence of our using a faulty translation manual, not of anarchists being irrational. This is the essence of the principle of charity. We must indeed understand the language of anarchism, and it is indeed useful, as Jones argues, to map out “successive languages of radicalism, liberalism, socialism, etc., both in relation to the political languages they replace and laterally in relation to rival political languages with which they are in conflict.” However, making sense of anarchism, as of any other movement, ultimately means interpreting it in terms that we understand. We need to find a translation manual. Translations must be based on the attribution of rationality, and thus they must form as coherent a whole as possible. At the same time
they must make sense to us: they must be interpreted in our own terms, which are indeed referential, as they relate to our own experience of the external world. 

The discussion has focused so far on how beliefs and evaluative attitudes are to be related to open behaviour, to which the observer has direct access. However, the historiography of anarchism presents further complications. This has to do with historiography in general, since the historian, dealing with the past, does not have the opportunity to directly interrogate actors; but it also has to do with anarchism in particular, since the behaviour of anarchists was hardly open and directly accessible even to contemporary observers. On this subject, E. P. Thompson’s discussion of sources with respect to the Luddite movement is particularly relevant and enlightening. Thompson calls Luddism “the opaque society,” and remarks that any attempts to explain its actions faces difficulties in the interpretation of the sources, which are unusually clouded by partisanship. First, there was the conscious partisanship of the authorities, which needed conspirators to justify the continuation of repressive legislation. In order to penetrate underground activities, authorities employed spies and informers on an unprecedented scale. The line between the spy and the agent provocateur was indistinct. The more alarmist the spy’s information was, the more lucrative his trade was. On the other hand, fabricated information might be eagerly accepted by the authorities, who propagated the myth that all reformers were foreign agents or conspirators. Non-governmental observers were also not in the best position to be well-informed about serious political underground organization. The key reason why sources about Luddism are clouded “is that workers

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intended them to be so.” For Thompson, “if there had been an underground in these years, by its very nature it would not have left written evidence.”

In many respects, anarchism presents the same opacity attributed by Thompson to Luddism: scarcity or unreliability of sources and deceptiveness of evidence are not accidental, but inherent to the nature of the movement itself. This point has been recognized, for example, in Gemie’s and Esenwein’s remarks about the puzzle of accounting for anarchist organization, or in Mintz’s direct experience about the anarchist actors’ intentional efforts to mislead observers, even decades after the events being investigated. Any study of anarchist action has to start by recognizing such inherent difficulties, which make the detection of continuity and sustained organization critical. In this context, an even stronger version of the principle of charity may be needed. Rather than just requiring that the interpretation of beliefs and evaluative attitudes be accommodated as rationally as possible to the available evidence, what may be required is to question that very evidence, when only irrationalist interpretations seem to be available. In brief, the methodological guideline followed here is that whenever anarchists appear to be irrational, it is appearance that should be questioned first. In this respect, anarchist rationality, instead of being an empirical assertion to be demonstrated, becomes not only a methodological principle of interpretation, but also a heuristic principle, to be used in attempting to pierce through the deceptive appearance of anarchist action. By using the principle of charity to probe what superficially appears simple and odd, one may discover a more complex and rational underlying reality.

By focusing on anarchist action in relation to the anarchists’ beliefs and evaluative attitudes, and on reason-giving rather than causalist explanations, this work will tend to look at anarchism from an internal perspective. The analysis of the broader social context in which anarchist action took place will be carried out to the extent required to make

sense of that action. Thus, it will be mainly an analysis in terms of the anarchists’ own perception of that context. Questions such as whether a given situation, for example the Fasci movement of 1893, was or was not an objectively revolutionary situation will not be addressed. In fact, I tend to regard such questions as unanswerable. With the exception of the extreme, trivial, and equally uninteresting claims that only situations that actually broke into a revolution, and better yet into a successful one, were truly revolutionary, or that, conversely, every situation is potentially revolutionary, its outcome depending on the aggregate intentions of all individual actors, any other claim implicitly involves a preliminary partition of the collectivity of actors into two parts, one active and one reactive. The assessment comes to hinge upon the decision of the active segment, given the disposition of the reactive one. Thus, there is no unique, objective evaluation. The assessment depends on how the partition is done, and at that point it turns into an assessment from the viewpoint of a specific group. Relatedly, the vexed question of anarchist effectiveness will not be addressed. As briefly discussed earlier, I regard issues of rationality as distinct from issues of effectiveness. My focus is on the former. A course of action may be rational, to the best of an actor’s knowledge, and not achieve its goal, for reasons outside of an actor’s control. Certainly, for each chosen course of action, it may be assumed that a more effective one may exist. Whether this kind of counterfactual argument may be meaningfully made for historical actors is an open question, though. In any case, if made at all, such arguments should be made not in hindsight, but with respect to the situation in which actors found themselves. In fact, this kind of argument was ordinarily made among anarchists. Despite stereotypes of anarchism as unchanging and impossibilist, debates about alternative tactics were a matter of course. The best the historian can do is to understand as best as possible the reasons in support of the various tactics, rather than evaluating them by the yardstick of effectiveness.

My justification for addressing the rationality of anarchism through the analysis of the individual case study of Malatesta is that there is asymmetry between arguments for
and against the irrationality of anarchism. In extreme simplification, I would argue that the claim about the irrationality of anarchists is implicitly that “all anarchist were irrational,” while the opposite claim is that “not all anarchist were irrational.” In terms of formal logic, the former claim is implicitly universally quantified, while the latter is quantified existentially. Under this assumption, evidence to the effect that some anarchists behaved rationally while others did not would not be inconclusive, but would rather corroborate the rationalist thesis. Nobody would argue that the behaviour of all anarchists can always be interpreted rationally, as probably nobody would make any such claim for any other social or political movement. In contrast, irrationalist analyses of anarchism tend to posit inherent flaws in anarchist doctrine or action, thus implying that anarchism is necessarily irrational. Evidence about the rationality of some anarchists, especially influential figures such as Malatesta, would simply put anarchism on a par with any other movement.

This work is both a historical tracing and a systematic analysis of Malatesta’s anarchism. The two tasks are asymmetrical, or rather orthogonal, for the former is strictly chronological, while the latter is thematic. In order to avoid repetition, as would arise from re-discussing the same set of themes for each relevant period or from having as many chronological series as relevant themes, I have striven to combine the two tasks and address them in parallel by discussing each theme only once, but placing its discussion in the earliest period where the theme had reached a relatively stable form in Malatesta’s thought, whether or not its most exhaustive expositions can be found in his writings of that period. For example, voluntarism has been a characteristic trait of anarchism since the First International and has remained such throughout Malatesta’s life, but his most comprehensive writings on the subject date from the 1910s, when they were prompted by internal debates in the anarchist movement rather than by controversies with Marxists.
Thus, the overall structure of the thesis is chronological, though it is not meant to be a biography of Malatesta, but a commentary to his biography. Each chapter’s sections concerning Malatesta’s action are interwoven with sections dealing with theoretical or tactical aspects that are historically related to the chapter’s main narrative. However, for the sake of completeness, thematic discussions may draw from Malatesta’s writings that range beyond the chapter’s chronological limits. By this approach, I strive to tie a logically structured, comprehensive discussion of Malatesta’s thought to a chronological illustration of his action, sacrificing a strictly chronological sequentiality in the references to Malatesta’s writings.

As a historical tracing, the present work focuses on the themes of change and continuity, with respect to both Malatesta’s action and thought. In the first respect, the objective is to trace the continuity of Malatesta’s action over time and its adjustment to changing circumstances, so as to refute stereotypes of anarchist action as spontaneous, immutable, and consequently locked in a vicious, cyclical pattern. In the second respect, the objective is to show how anarchist thought was both based on a coherent set of firm principles and evolving with experience. Special attention is placed on the relationship between Malatesta’s theory and tactics, which was far removed from the crude generalizations often believed to apply across the board to anarchism. Finally, the task of rational interpretation is to illuminate the mutual link between change in action and in belief in the pursuit of unchanging goals.

As a systematic analysis, the focus of the present work is to illustrate the axiological rationality of Malatesta’s anarchism. The task is not simply to show the coherence of Malatesta’s belief, for a coherent system of beliefs could be still based on absurd premises; nor is it to demonstrate the truth of Malatesta’s system of belief, for axiological rationality, as Boudon argues, deals with arguments that contain at least one “ought”-statement, and therefore are neither true nor false, though they have a cognitive content. The task is rather to illustrate the reasons upon which normative statements were
grounded. Why were anarchists anarchist? Why did they advocate direct action rather than parliamentarian means? Such questions will be addressed in the hope to find more rational reasons than chiliastic mentality, stubbornness, or purism in the pursuit of “all or nothing,” or plain stupidity. Malatesta’s ideas will be discussed in the broader context of debates that agitated the anarchist movement at large, such as the one about organization.

At the same time, in keeping with Davidson’s thesis that an actor’s beliefs can only be made sense of in terms of an observer’s own rationality, efforts will be made to relate Malatesta’s beliefs to present ideas in political theory and social sciences. Anarchist concepts often seem to run counter to standard categorizations in those fields. This is not the fault of anarchist inconsistency, but of those categorizations. Pairs of opposite concepts, such as individualism–holism, egoism–solidarity, free initiative–planning, and capitalism–socialism, are customarily clustered into two mutually exclusive blocs separated by a conceptual Berlin Wall. Anarchism has fallen through the cracks of such categorizations. Between the two paths of liberal democracy and state socialism, anarchism has been unanimously regarded as a dead end. The task of the present work is to make it plain how anarchists regarded it as an open road.

Because of the “holistic” character of rationality, which requires interpreting beliefs and desires upon the evidence of overt behaviour, and given my focus on an individual as a way into the theory and tactics of a movement, my approach tends to be interdisciplinary, drawing at the same time from the methods of intellectual history, biography, and the history of political movements. I also make frequent reference to concepts taken from the social sciences, for two reasons: the first is that rationality has been widely debated in such disciplines as sociology and anthropology, which provide part of the intellectual arsenal for addressing that theme; and the second is that I investigate not only anarchist collective action but also the anarchists’ own concepts about collective action, which are amenable to being illuminated by reference to comparable concepts in the social sciences.
While an account of desires and beliefs is required to provide a teleological explanation of actions undertaken, describing just what anarchist action consisted of is also a crucial and by no means trivial task, in consideration of its opacity. Thus, a considerable part of this work will be devoted to accounting for Malatesta’s action in the context of anarchist collective action, which in turn will be described in the context of broader social movements. In contrast to the stereotypical pattern that portrays anarchist collective action as unorganised, spontaneous, repetitive, and unchanging, I will strive to illustrate how anarchists organized, how they provided continuity to their action, and how their tactics adapted to situations. In accounting for anarchist collective action, three levels can be identified, which, for the sake of brevity, could be labeled “anarchist network,” “anarchist party,” and “anarchist mobilization.” Roughly speaking, I tend to use the notion of anarchist network to account for informal or underground organization, and that of anarchist party—which I take, somewhat provocatively, from Malatesta’s own usage—to account for organization in formal or public form. Anarchist mobilization accounts for the initiative of anarchists within larger social movements. The notion of anarchist network is important in detecting the continuity of anarchist organization where no obvious continuity exists, and the anarchist movement seemed to appear and disappear in the cycles of agitation and repression. The transnationalism of the Italian anarchist movement will be another theme running through this work in order to account for continuity, in contrast to analyses of national scope which are bound to take at face value the appearances and disappearances of the Italian anarchist movement in the homeland. Because of the international scope of Malatesta’s action, its account implies dealing with anarchist and social movements of various countries, besides Italy. For example, because of Malatesta’s affinity and strong ties with Spanish anarchism, Malatesta’s mobilization campaign of 1891–2 in that country will be discussed. Furthermore, the connections between the debate on organization among Italian anarchists, and the controversy about collectivism and communism in Spain will be illustrated. As for social movements, not
only agitations in Italy, such as the Sicilian Fasci of 1893 and the bread riots of 1898, will be discussed, but also agitations elsewhere in Europe, such as the London dockers' strike of 1889, and the campaign for universal suffrage in Belgium in 1893. In the end, the resulting picture will not merely be about the ideas and action of a prominent individual, but also about the current ideas and collective action of a significant segment of the international anarchist movement during the 1890s and beyond.

The rest of this work is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides the background against which later developments of Malatesta's anarchism are best appreciated. It briefly summarizes Malatesta's life and activity prior to 1889; it discusses the rise of anarchism as a movement within the International, outlining its contrast with Marxism, a theme that will run through this entire work; and it illustrates key themes in Malatesta's anarchism that remained constant throughout his life. Chapter 3 deals with Malatesta's return to Europe in 1889, and Chapter 4 describes the novel theoretical and tactical tenets that Malatesta put forward that same year and that would thereafter provide the original foundations for his anarchism. The next four chapters account for Malatesta's tactical and theoretical development during the following decade, in connection with the history of Italian and international anarchism. Each chapter covers one of four broad phases in Malatesta's evolution. Chapter 5 deals with the years 1890–2, during which Malatesta focused on arousing in agitations with immediate insurrectionary objectives. Chapter 6 discusses the biennium 1893–4 and Malatesta's involvement in popular movements that did not have an explicit anarchist content. Chapter 7 covers the years 1894–9, during which Malatesta advocated a longer-term revolutionary approach based on the anarchists' participation in the labour movement. Chapter 8 covers the years 1899–1900, when Malatesta linked the prospects of a gradual revolutionary process to the immediate overthrow of the Italian monarchy, in alliance with other revolutionary parties. Finally, chapter 9 departs from a historical narrative to attempt a comprehensive and charitable interpretation of Malatesta's system of beliefs, in critical comparison with relevant ideas.
developed in the social sciences of the twentieth century. The conclusions reassess the historians’ attribution of irrationality to anarchism in the light of Malatesta’s thought and action.
Errico Malatesta was born on 4 December 1853 in today’s Santa Maria Capua Vetere, the small town of Southern Italy occupying the site of the Roman Capua. At that time Southern Italy was still part of the Bourbon Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, which ended in 1860 after Garibaldi’s expedition of the Thousand and the Italian unification. When Errico was eleven, the Malatesta family moved to Naples. Here, at an early age, Malatesta became involved in republicanism, which had historically been the party of revolution in the Italy of Risorgimento. In the spring of 1871, under the influence of the Paris Commune, Malatesta turned from republicanism to socialism. At the time he was a medical student in Naples, but he soon abandoned medicine for revolution. In 1872 the Italian Federation of the International was founded at the Rimini conference of 4–6 August, and shortly thereafter the federalist International, of which the Italian section became a pillar, was founded at the Saint-Imier congress of 15–16 September, in which Malatesta took part, making Bakunin’s acquaintance. Malatesta soon became a leading figure of both the Italian Federation and the federalist International.

The revolutionary character of the Italian International was apparent from the insurrectionary attempts of 1874 and 1877. In August 1874, abortive attempts to spark an armed insurrection were made, especially in Bologna and Apulia. Malatesta was arrested and jailed in Trani. He remained there for several months, but at the trial he was acquitted. In April 1877 Malatesta and Carlo Cafiero were at the head of the “Matese gang,” a group of about thirty revolutionaries that penetrated the countryside around Benevento, in the south of Italy and seized three municipalities in succession. After gathering the population in the square they publicly burned the tax registers, distributed municipal funds, and made every effort to sway the peasants to social revolution. After a
few days of roaming the Matese countryside, nearly all the protagonists were arrested and jailed. However, they were acquitted at the Benevento trial of August 1878, as the charge of conspiracy was dismissed for lack of evidence. The Benevento uprising became one of the most popular and symbolic events of the anarchist movement of those years across Europe. It represented well the anarchist focus on propaganda by the deed and on immediate insurrectionary prospects. Malatesta’s characterization as “one of the Benevento revolutionaries,” remained up to 1889.

The following three years, up to the international socialist revolutionary congress of July 1881 in London, were years of exile wanderings across Europe and the Mediterranean Sea. In September 1878 Malatesta left Italy for Egypt, whence he was soon deported. He was embarked on a ship that took him to Beirut, Smirne, and Leghorn, finally landing him in Marseille. From France Malatesta reached Geneva, where he remained until April 1879, helping Peter Kropotkin with the editing of the first issues of Le Révolté. Expelled from Switzerland, Malatesta moved to Braila, in Rumania, and from there to Paris later that year. Arrested and expelled from France in November 1879, he spent the next few months moving clandestinely between Switzerland, France, Belgium, and England. In the summer of 1880 he was arrested again in Paris, where he served time for contravening the order of expulsion. In 1881 Malatesta moved to London, where he remained until the summer 1882, when he attempted an expedition to Egypt to contribute to an uprising against the European rulers.

By early 1883 Malatesta had finally returned to Italy, settling in Florence. However, in April 1883 a warrant of arrest against him was issued by the Rome Tribunal for distributing subversive handbills on the anniversary of the Paris Commune, and in May he was arrested and taken from Florence to Rome. He was released on parole in November. He returned to Florence, where he edited the anarchist periodical La Questione Sociale and devoted his energy to fighting the “possibilist” turn of his former comrade Andrea Costa, who had embraced electoral tactics while maintaining his faith in
revolutionary socialism. On 1 February 1884 Malatesta was convicted to a three-year detention by the Rome Tribunal for criminal association, but he appealed, thus being able to remain free. During the terrible cholera epidemic of 1884, when appeals for volunteer nurses were made in the hospitals, Malatesta and other anarchists rushed to Naples to treat the sick. Meanwhile the time was approaching for his appeal against the February sentence to be discussed. However, before that time came, Malatesta disappeared from Florence, fleeing to Argentina at the beginning of 1885.¹

In brief, Malatesta’s activity from 1871 to 1884 was centered on the project of the International. Even after the London congress of 1881, by which time the federalist International had practically ceased to exist, the ideal of the International remained alive in Malatesta’s mind, and in 1884 he tried to revive the organization through the pamphlet Programma e Organizzazione dell’Associazione Internazionale dei Lavoratori, which reprinted the constitutive act of the International, followed by an extensive discussion of the International’s objectives and tactics.² Hence, Malatesta’s formation and the political influences his anarchism underwent in the first thirteen years of his militancy are best seen in the context of the ideals and debates that animated the International. Moreover, Malatesta’s own analysis of the International’s demise provides evidence about the lessons he learned from that long experience that spurred his later evolution.

The foundation of anarchism as a movement rather than an intellectual current is summarized by two documents: the Preamble to the Provisional Rules of the International Workingmen’s Association, and the third resolution of the Saint-Imier Congress, on “the nature of the political action of the proletariat,” which respectively


² Programma e Organizzazione dell’Associazione Internazionale dei Lavoratori (Florence: Tipografia Toni, 1884).
illustrate the anarchists' socialist belief shared within the International, and their own interpretation of it. The Preamble's key claim was "that the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves; that the struggle for the emancipation of the working classes means, not a struggle for class privileges and monopolies, but for equal rights and duties, and the abolition of all class rule." The Preamble ended by declaring that the International members acknowledged "truth, justice, and morality, as the basis of their conduct towards each other, and towards all men, without regard to colour, creed, or nationality"; and that its founders held it "the duty of a man to claim the rights of a man and a citizen, not only for himself but for every man who does his duty. No rights without duties, no duties without rights." The final version of the Preamble and Provisional Rules was the work of Marx, who felt nevertheless "obliged to insert two sentences about 'duty' and 'right' and ditto about 'truth, morality, and justice' in the preamble to the rules" as a concession to the members that followed the Italian republican Giuseppe Mazzini.

Ironically, of all concepts comprising the statutes of the International, the Mazzinian phrases begrudgingly inserted by Marx were the ones that resonated most powerfully in the Italian organs of the International. Between 1872 and 1883, "No rights without duties, no duties without rights" was the most popular motto in that press, with five out of twenty-eight periodicals inserting it in their mastheads, while two sported the phrase "Truth, Justice, and Morality." Among these was La Campana, the organ of the Federazione Operaia Napoletana, which Malatesta helped to found. The federation's

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declaration of principles, signed by Malatesta as secretary, comprised seven articles, four of which were expressed in terms of rights and duties. Mazzinian republicanism is indeed a fundamental term of reference in discussing the beginning of the International in Italy: the two currents were linked by a double relationship of spiritual affinity and theoretical contrast. In 1922, on the fiftieth anniversary of Mazzini’s death, Malatesta wrote: “at the bottom of our heart... we were Mazzinian as Mazzini was internationalist.... The animating spirit was the same: love among men, brotherhood among peoples, justice and social solidarity, spirit of self-sacrifice, sense of duty.”

At the same time, in Italy the International arose from the moral and intellectual discomfort and dissatisfaction of the idealist Italian youth towards Mazzinian republicanism. The acknowledgement of the “social question” was the crucial theoretical break with Italian past revolutionary traditions: “The greatest discovery of the present century,” Malatesta wrote in 1884, “was made by the International when it proclaimed that the economic question is fundamental in Sociology....” By focusing on the social question, the internationalists transferred the notion of freedom from a formal to a material ground: for them, the issue of freedom was ultimately linked to the abolition of private ownership of the means of production. This perspective was concisely emphasized by the motto that Malatesta included in 1883 in the masthead of his La Questione Sociale: “Why do you speak of freedom? Whoever is poor, is a slave.” This and similar mottos eventually superseded the Mazzinian ones, which disappeared altogether from the press in the following decade. Still, republicanism is to be reckoned as a lasting cultural source of Italian anarchism. Luce Fabbri, the daughter of Luigi

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7 “Giuseppe Mazzini,” Umanità Nova (Rome), no. 60 (11 March 1922).

8 [Errico Malatesta], “Questione economica,” La Questione Sociale (Florence) 1, no. 13 (29 June 1884).
Fabbri, who came from republicanism as Malatesta, remarks that even in his father’s generation, which was next to Malatesta’s, many anarchists “brought much more of the liberal heritage of Italian Risorgimento than of Marx’s classist one to their ‘subversive’ work.”

The second seminal document that illustrates the foundation of anarchism is the third resolution of the Saint-Imier Congress, on “the nature of the political action of the proletariat,” which declared that “the destruction of every kind of political power is the first task of the proletariat,” that “the organization of political power… can be nothing but deception,” and that the proletarians of all lands “must establish, independently of bourgeois politics, the solidarity of revolutionary action.” These three principles were widely considered by the anarchists as the foundation of their movement. In an article published on the fiftieth anniversary of the Saint-Imier Congress, Malatesta quoted the third resolution and commented: “Anarchism was born. From individual thought of a few isolated men it became the collective principle of groups distributed all over the world.”

The principles expressed in the third resolution of the Saint-Imier Congress should not be seen in contrast to the Preamble of the International, but rather as its complement. They represented the Bakuninist response to Resolution IX, on the same topic of the political action of the proletariat, which the International had passed upon Marx’s initiative at the London Conference of 17–23 September 1871. Marx’s resolution claimed that “the proletariat can only act as a class by organizing its forces into an independent political party,” and that the conquest of political power is “the prime duty of the

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proletariat.” With this resolution, which gave the International a political direction clearly unacceptable to the anti-authoritarian side, the premises of the split were posed.12

By comparing the two resolutions one can appreciate the depth of the contrast between Marxists and anarchists: in the pursuit of the same goal, for Marxists “conquest of political power... becomes the prime duty of the proletariat,” while for anarchists “the destruction of every kind of political power is the first task of the proletariat.” The contrast between the two movements could not be stated more dramatically. The fact that the two antagonistic resolutions interpreted the same principles, and aimed to fulfill the same objective, led commentators to present the split between Marxists and anarchists as a controversy over tactics. The next fifty years would make clear that the split reflected a profound theoretical divide, as Marxism and anarchism branched in radically different directions from the common trunk of the workers’ movement and revolutionary socialism. The respective theoretical tenets that emerged in time as most fundamental and persistent appeared to be precisely in that area of seemingly tactical initial disagreement, that of political power, while the initial common goal, revolutionary socialism, progressively turned into a special case in either branch, and sometimes into a disposable objective, as socialist reformism and anarchist individualism respectively illustrate.

The difference of outlook on political power was also at the root of the divergence between Marxists and anarchists about how the International was to be organized. As Paul Thomas remarks, “the protagonists in the Marx–Bakunin dispute were agreed basically on one thing and one thing only: that the dispute itself mattered, since its outcome would affect the direction of future society.”13 This apparent explanation leads to a more fundamental question. The International was founded as a loosely-knit union of


workers' associations of different countries, to give a steadier ground to the economic struggle against capitalism.\textsuperscript{14} Given its initially broad-based, inclusive, and pragmatic approach, oriented to economic struggle, why did the International become the stage of an all-out theoretical antagonism between alternative conceptions of the proletarian revolution? Granted that for both opponents the outcome of their dispute would affect the direction of future society, why did that dispute take place within the International, whose initial objectives were so alien from the terms in which the dispute unfolded? The reason may be understandable for Marxists, who emphasized the link between economic and political struggles, and envisioned a disciplined and centralized organization of the working class. Marx must have deemed that the International, regardless of its initial goals, was a favorable terrain for putting his ideas in practice. Two months after the foundation of the International, he remarked to a correspondent: “Although I have been systematically refusing to participate in any way whatsoever in all the ‘organizations,’ etc. for years now, I accepted \textit{this time} because it concerns a matter by means of which it is possible to have a significant influence.”\textsuperscript{15} The answer may be less obvious for the anarchists, though. On this subject it is useful to consider the point of view of Malatesta, who was a direct witness and an actor of the events in the anarchist ranks.

In contrast with Marxist centralism, anarchists advocated the free federation of autonomous groups, and argued that working class emancipation was to happen from the bottom up. However, Malatesta argued some thirty years later, despite the libertarian nature of their project, and without being aware, in their pragmatic attitude anarchists shared one authoritarian trait with Marxists: they tended to attribute their own ideas to the mass of the associates, mistaking a more or less conscious assent for a full conversion. Therefore, one could see the International become mutualist, collectivist, gradualist, and centralized.

\textsuperscript{14} Stekloff, \textit{History of the First International}, 44, 50.

\textsuperscript{15} Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, London, 29 November 1864, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 42, p. 44.
communist, revolutionary, anarchist, through swift changes that were expressed in the congress resolutions and the press, but could not represent a real, simultaneous evolution of the membership. Both Marxists and anarchists tried to use the International for ideological purposes. The difference was that anarchists, relying chiefly on propaganda to gain converts for their cause, favored decentralization, autonomy of groups, and both individual and collective free initiative, while the Marxists, in their authoritarianism, tried to impose their ideas by way of more or less fictitious majorities, centralization, and discipline. But they each ultimately did the same: they all tried to force events rather than relying upon the force of events. As there was no distinction between organizations for economic struggle and for political and ideological struggle, the International was an all-encompassing organization that took on both functions. Consequently, Malatesta argued, the more advanced individuals were forced to either adapt to the backwardness of the mass, or keep progressing, as they actually did, with the illusion that the mass would follow and understand them. The most advanced elements investigated, discussed, uncovered the needs of the people, turned the vague ideas of the masses into concrete programmes, upheld socialism, upheld anarchy, foresaw the future and prepared for it—but in so doing they killed the association. For Malatesta what killed the International was not persecution, or personal controversies, or the way it was organized: it was that both Marxists and anarchists tried to impose their program on the International, and in this struggle for hegemony they prevented the International from a slower maturation that would have more appropriately created the right conditions for change, by uplifting the minds and building up the necessary momentum.  

Malatesta’s retrospective critique of the International, including the anarchist side, hints to the direction in which his anarchism developed in the 1890s. At the same time, 

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16 Un vecchio Internazionalista [Errico Malatesta], “La nuova Internazionale dei Lavoratori,” La Rivoluzione Sociale (London), no. 4 (15 November 1902); Errico Malatesta, “Dove mena il movimento operajo: Ricapitolando,” Volontà (Ancona) 2, no. 9 (28 February 1914).
the controversy in the International pointed to the fundamental differences between the two main brands of socialism. The central tenets of anarchism that the contrast with the Marxists brought to the fore stayed at the core of Malatesta's anarchism throughout his life and constituted the stable foundations upon which his ideas changed and evolved, notwithstanding that such evolution partly arose from his critique of the International. Themes such as coherence between ends and means and voluntarism, which were at the root of the anarchists' controversy with the Marxists, not only retained a central place in Malatesta's later elaboration, but received their fullest formulation in Malatesta's writings of years or even decades later. An outline of those formulations allows one to gauge the lasting heritage of the International in Malatesta's ideas and represents the most natural introduction to his anarchism, setting the conceptual backdrop of his later evolution.

One of the most contentious issues in the International and ever after was that of ends and means in collective action. A glimpse of this rift is provided by the Sonvillier circular, which the newly constituted anarchist Jura Federation sent to all federations of the International in November 1871, in reaction to the resolutions of the London Conference of September. In the circular the anarchists advocated that the organization adopted by the International be informed as much as possible by the same libertarian principles of the future society.17 This was in turn the application of a more general and pervasive principle advocated by the anarchist, that of coherence between ends and means, perhaps the most fundamental and universal principle of anarchist action: a non-authoritarian society could not be achieved by authoritarian means. In contrast, Marxists argued that during the period of struggle to overthrow the old society the proletariat

should employ means which would be discarded after liberation.¹⁸ For Marxists, by informing their action with abstract principles, anarchists gave up useful means of struggle that were available in the bourgeois society, ultimately limiting themselves, as the early Christians, “to pray and hope instead of fighting,” as Engels remarked. What was the anarchist rationale for advocating the principle of coherence between ends and means?

Malatesta provided a systematic discussion of the issue in the 1892 article “Un peu de théorie” (A little bit of theory), reprinted shortly thereafter in Italian with the explicit title “Fine e mezzi” (End and means).¹⁹ The article set off somewhat startlingly by subscribing to the popular saying that “the end justifies the means.” Malatesta claimed that this saying—usually associated with Niccolò Machiavelli, who advocated the priority of expediency over morality in politics—was the universal guide to conduct. However, he immediately explained that it would be better to say that “every end implies its means,” a phrase which resembled in turn the Kantian claim that “whoever wills the end also wills (insofar as reason has decisive influence on his actions) the indispensably necessary means to it that are within his power.”²⁰ Similarly, Malatesta maintained that “morality is contained in the aims: the means is inevitable,” further arguing that “the big problem of life is to find the means which, in the circumstances, leads to that end most surely and economically.” Each end must select its own appropriate means. In this light Machiavelli’s maxim is reconciled with the Kantian rule: if one’s end is to hold on to power, one has indeed to learn how not to be good, while trying to use moral means in

¹⁸ Karl Marx, “The Conspectus of Bakunin’s Book State and Anarchy,” in Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism, 152.

¹⁹ “Un peu de théorie,” L’En Dehors, 21 August 1892; “Fine e mezzi,” Tribuna dell’Operaio (Florence–Prato) 1, no. 8 (4 August [recte September] 1892).

holding on to power would be self-defeating. However, the anarchists’ end was different, hence their means must also be different.

In advocating the principle of coherence between ends and means, Malatesta emphasized that the requirement that the means be not in contradiction with the end did not have an unconditional value, but was rather a matter of expediency. One had to employ self-sustainable means, given the particular circumstances in which one had to operate. This point was related explicitly to the crucial issue of violence. For Malatesta, anarchists must in no way give up violent means, as this would be self-defeating: “we are forced to struggle in the world as we found it, on pain of remaining sterile dreamers, who leave untouched all the existing evils, and do good to no one, for fear of doing wrong to anyone.” As Marx and Engels in their criticism to the anarchists, Malatesta made a polemical reference to the Christian martyrs: “even the purest and sweetest martyr, who let himself be dragged to the scaffold for the triumph of good, without any resistance,... would do wrong.”

In the end, both Malatesta and the Marxists appealed to the same principle of expediency towards the same goal of emancipating the proletariat, both polemically rejecting the adherence of Christian martyrs to an absolute ethical principle. Thus, on what ground did they respectively accept and reject the principle of coherence between ends and means? In what sense could anarchists claim that informing their collective action to the same principles of the future society was more expedient than the Marxist alternative? After all, Marxists had the same end, the fullest self-development, well-being, and happiness of all human beings. Why were Marxist means less expedient? Malatesta claimed that “only the widest application of the principle of solidarity can put an end to the struggle, and therefore to oppression and exploitation among men.” Marxists would definitely agree on the role of solidarity in the struggle. The whole purpose of the International was to establish solidarity among workers. However, Marxists would object to the cause-effect relation implicit in the outlook on solidarity as
a principle, whose spread would end oppression and exploitation. For them the terms of
the relation were reversed: the abolition of oppression and exploitation would bring about
a society based on solidarity. Likewise, they would likely object to the idea of solidarity
as arising "from free agreement" and "from the spontaneous and deliberate
harmonization of interests," as Malatesta put it. They would rather claim that the
harmonization of interests, by no means free or deliberate, arose from the spread of
capitalist relations of production.

The key point was the role of knowledge. "The aim of the Jacobins," Malatesta
remarked, "and all authoritarian parties, who believe to be in possession of absolute truth,
is to impose their ideas on the ignorant masses. Therefore, even when they are sincere
and no aim of personal domination is involved, they must make every effort to seize
power, subject the masses, and fit humanity to the Procrustean bed of their concepts." For
Malatesta, the use of authoritarian means towards emancipatory ends was based on the
actors’ pretensions to hold superior knowledge, as was the case for Marxists, who
advocated political power as a means that would eventually be discarded. For the
anarchists, such presumption of knowledge was ill-founded, nor could authoritarian
means be discarded. This was the essence of their claim about the self-perpetuating
character of the state. Both arguments were developed at length by Bakunin in his
criticism of the Marxist theory of the state, and they were resumed and further articulated
by Malatesta.

In *God and the State*, of 1871, Bakunin rejected as pernicious the idea of government
by an intellectual elite based on scientific knowledge, even when this elite was animated
by the best of intentions. Bakunin’s first argument was the fallibility of science. Human
science is always and necessarily imperfect. Were we to try to force the practical life of
men into conformity with scientific findings, we should condemn society as well as
individuals to suffer martyrdom on a “Procrustean bed.” Secondly, Bakunin argued, a
society which obeyed legislation emanating from an intellectual elite, not because it
understood its rational character but because this legislation was imposed by the elite in the name of science, which the people venerated without comprehending it, would be a society not of men but of brutes. Thirdly, an intellectual elite invested with absolute sovereignty, even if it were composed of the most illustrious men, would infallibly and soon end in its own moral and intellectual corruption: “a scientific body to which has been confided the government of society would soon end by devoting itself no longer to science at all, but to quite another matter; and, as in the case of all established powers, that would be its own eternal perpetuation by rendering the society confided to its care ever more stupid and consequently more dependent upon the scientists’ authority.”

Similarly, Malatesta argued in *Anarchy*—first serialized in 1884 for *La Questione Sociale* of Florence and finally published as a pamphlet in 1891—that even if men of infinite knowledge and goodness existed, and even supposing, against all historical evidence, that governmental power were to rest in the hands of the ablest and kindest people, government office would not add to their power to do good, but it would instead paralyze and destroy that power, by reason of the necessity men in government have of dealing with so many matters they do not understand, and above all of wasting their energy keeping themselves in power, their friends happy, holding in check the malcontents, and subduing the rebels. Malatesta also rejected the Marxist claim that once the social conditions were changed the nature and the role of government would change, too. In a metaphorical reversal of Lamarckian evolutionary law, Malatesta claimed that “organ and function are inseparable terms. Take away from an organ its function and either the organ dies or the function is re-established. Put an army in a country in which there are neither reasons for, nor fear of, war, civil or external, and it will provoke war or, if it does not succeed in its intentions, it will collapse.” A government, that is a group of

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people empowered to use the collective power to oblige each individual to obey them, is already a privileged class, cut off from the people. As any constituted body would do, it will seek to extend its powers, to be beyond public control, to impose its own policies and to give priority to its special interests. In any case, even if a government wanted to, it could not please everybody, even if it did manage to please a few. It would have to defend itself against the malcontents, and would therefore need to get the support of one section of the people to do so. In sum, anarchists rejected the idea of social engineering as a means of emancipation as ill-conceived, because it over-estimates the power of scientific knowledge and creates a privileged elite. The self-interest of this elite, the high value the elite would attribute to its own leadership for the common good, and the unforeseen side-effects of its action upon society would all contribute to lead the elite to devote an ever-increasing amount of energies to repressive functions, and to self-supporting through the creation of a privileged class around itself. The government that Marxists foresaw as a means of emancipation to be discarded after the end was reached, would instead turn into a self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing end in itself. 22

The anarchists’ arguments are closely reminiscent of the “law of heterogony of ends,” formulated in 1897 by the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt, the founder of experimental psychology. The law states that the relation between actual effects and ideated ends “is such that secondary effects always arise that were not thought of in the first ideas of end. These new effects enter into new series of motives and thus modify the old ends or add new ones to them.” The phenomenon described by Wundt has been widely referred to in sociology as that of “the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action.” A related aspect of the law of the heterogony of ends is the process of displacement of goals, whereby means tend to become ends in themselves. This aspect

was emphasized by Hans Vaihinger, a philosopher often characterized as Neo-Kantian, who formulated Wundt’s same idea as early as 1872, though he left it unpublished, calling it the law of the preponderance of the means over the end. The two aspects of Wundt’s theory, the presence of non-purposed effects in purposive action, and the tendency of means to become end in themselves, are both present in the anarchist criticism to the foreshadowed Marxist state.²³

In sum, far from being a mere advocacy of an abstract dogma remote from empirical conditions, the principle of coherence between ends and means was grounded on sound reasons. These received a philosophical and scientific formulation in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and gained currency in the social sciences of the twentieth, especially in connection with the critique of the totalitarian socialist states that anarchists had foreseen. The principle of coherence between ends and means notably differed from the Marxist approach in three respects. Firstly, it assigned a more modest role to anarchists than Marxists attributed to themselves. As Malatesta stated, anarchists did not believe that freedom and happiness could be given to people by an individual or a party, but instead all men were themselves to discover the conditions of their freedom and happiness and conquer them. Secondly, it involved a more conservative and cautious outlook on science, as illustrated by the anarchists’ mistrust in the idea of social engineering as undertaken by intellectual elites. Thirdly, it exhibited greater methodological sophistication about the effects of purposive social action, in contrast to the unproblematic Marxist outlook on the benign outcome of a workers’ state. In brief,

from the perspective of the ultimate goal of the International, the full emancipation of the proletariat, the anarchist principle of coherence between ends and means actually stemmed from a more balanced and realistic outlook on the scope and conditions of effective social action than exhibited by Marxists, rather than being an expression of irrationalism and utopianism.

Another trait that sharply differentiated anarchists from Marxists since the First International was voluntarism. The contrast was most concisely summarized in Marx’s disparaging remark about Bakunin: “Will, not economic conditions, is the foundation of his social revolution.”24 How different standpoints on voluntarism translated into different tactics is illustrated by the discussion of the right of inheritance at the International’s Basle Conference of September 1869. The abolition of the right of inheritance was a chief programmatic point of Bakunin’s International Alliance of the Socialist Democracy, founded the previous year. The committee which had been appointed to report to the Basle conference on the question had adopted Bakunin’s outlook, and placed a resolution to this effect before the delegates. The General Council presented another report representing Marx’s view, arguing that the right of inheritance was not the cause, but the legal outcome of the existing economic system. The disappearance of the right of inheritance would be the natural result of a social change abolishing the private ownership of the means of production, but its abolition could never be the starting point of a social transformation. Bakunin agreed that, throughout history, a legal right had always come to confirm a fait accompli, but he retorted that, once established, legal rights subsequently turned into causes of further effects. The chain could be broken by starting to reverse such rights. In brief, the competing reports

stemmed from the same contrasting views on the relation between intentional action and material conditions that separated Marxists and anarchists on the issue of voluntarism.\textsuperscript{25}

Voluntarism was an important trait of Malatesta’s ideas since the First International, but it increasingly became a distinctive feature of his anarchism over time, differentiating him not only from the Marxists, but also from anarchists of other tendencies, and making him one of the most articulate and original representatives of the voluntarist strand that was always prominent in the anarchist movement. Though he probably never used this “ism,” references to \textit{volontà} (will) were frequent in his articles. However, voluntarism became an explicit theme in his writings after the turn of the century, as he felt the urge to contrast anarchist tendencies of Kropotkinian origin that he regarded as fatalist.

Though voluntarism was a central feature of Malatesta’s anarchism, one finds very few discussions of voluntarism as a philosophical theory in his writings, for he refrained from philosophical debates. When he made exceptions, it was to correct pragmatic errors proceeding from philosophical beliefs. Such was the case of his contribution to the debate on determinism and free will in an article of 1913. For Malatesta, the cornerstone of determinism was the principle of causality: “no effect without sufficient cause; no cause without its proportionate effect.” Its logical conclusion is that everything is a necessary concatenation of events, man is a conscious automaton, will is an illusion, and liberty is non-existent—a scientific conclusion that Malatesta likened to religious ones of Fate and Predestination. And it would be vain to seek to attenuate the meaning of the system and elude its consequences, trying to conciliate necessity with liberty: a “necessity” that is not always necessary and admits exceptions can no longer be called by that name.\textsuperscript{26}


\textsuperscript{26} “Libertà e fatalità: Determinismo e volontà,” \textit{Volontà} (Ancona) 1, no. 24 (22 November 1913), translated into English in “Liberty and Fatalism, Determinism and Will,” \textit{Man!} (S. Francisco) 3, no. 2 (February 1935): 162.
Though Malatesta did not reject determinism, he questioned its extension to human action, based on the pragmatic observation that such extension paralyzes the will and presents any effort as futile. In fact, he argued, determinists floundered about in continuous contradiction, denying responsibility while becoming indignant against the judge who punishes the irresponsible, “as if the judge were not himself determined and therefore also irresponsible!” However, Malatesta did not try to solve the philosophical dilemma, but rather suspended his judgment. The absolute free will of the spiritualists was contradicted by facts and was repugnant to the intellect. The negation of will and liberty by the mechanists was repugnant to common feelings: “intellect and sentiment are constituent parts of our egos and we know not how to subjugate one to the other.” However, “we want to live a conscious and creative life, and such a life demands, in the absence of positive concepts, certain necessary presuppositions which may be unconscious but which are always, nevertheless, in the soul of everyone. The most important of these presuppositions was the efficacy of the will. All that could usefully be sought are the conditions which limit or augment the power of the will.”

Thus, Malatesta accepted the existence of the will as an ineliminable fact, in its pre-theoretical, common-sense evidence and immediacy. Such unresolved dualism between intellect and sentiment, which combined scientific determinism and introspective evidence without reducing one to the other, remained a constant of his thought. Some eighteen years later, in a letter to Max Nettlau, Malatesta maintained that the will must be an active force, if it is anything more than a simple illusion of consciousness: “Does it exist, though? To claim this with certainty, one should be able to explain what it is and what all other things are, in a word one should be able to understand the Universe, which is beyond our faculties.” Malatesta reiterated that the belief in the efficacy of the will—i.e. that through one’s will one could effect things that would not happen otherwise—was

27 Ibid.
a necessary assumption of any intelligent activity. Then, in a follow-up letter he concluded: “we do not understand anything about the mysteries of the universe. Therefore we often have to act as if (als ob) we understood.” The redundant insertion of the German phrase was probably a reference to Hans Vaihinger’s Die Philosophie des als ob, where the “law of the preponderance of the means over the end” was expounded.\(^2\)

Certainly, Malatesta acknowledged, the individual will of men was in general a very weak factor in life and history, limited as it was by the ineluctable laws of nature and by the different and sometimes contrasting wills of other men. The remedies to such limitations were respectively science and association. It was the task of science to uncover the natural laws against which the will was powerless—that is, to distinguish what was necessary from what was free. And it was the task of men to try to agree amongst themselves for the highest good of everyone. Hence, the will, which was almost completely powerless in the isolated and ignorant man, acquired more and more force through the progress of science and association. Science seemed to limit freedom by showing what could not be done and by destroying fanciful desires and projects, but in reality it augmented people’s capability and effective freedom: “the man who ignores mechanics, physics, etc. can dream about voyages through the Milky Way, but he remains grounded to the solid surface of the earth; the engineer who has the knowledge, does not indulge in impossible dreams, but he finds the means to cross the sky by airplane or airship.” Likewise, association, even when it was free and voluntary, seemed to limit the autonomy of the individuals, but in reality it transformed a miserable savage into a man whose conditions of life improved every day through the advantages of cooperation.\(^2\)

\(^2\) Malatesta to Max Nettlau, Rome, 12 and 21 January 1931, Max Nettlau Papers, file no. 197, IISG; Vaihinger, Philosophy of 'As If', xliii, 15, 42–43.

\(^2\) Malatesta to Max Nettlau, Rome, 12 January 1931, Max Nettlau Papers, file no. 197, IISG.
Malatesta acknowledged the primacy of material needs, expressed by the phrase “live first, and then philosophize.” Most often those who struggled for an idea had grown up in relatively favourable conditions, accumulating a latent energy that could be released when the need came. The most active and keen members of revolutionary organizations were usually not so much motivated by their own needs as by the desire to feel ennobled by an ideal, Malatesta argued. In contrast, those in the most miserable conditions, who might seem most directly and immediately interested in social change, were often more passive or absent altogether.30 However, though severely constrained by material conditions, individual will was not determined by such conditions. Furthermore, to the extent that material conditions had a social rather than natural origin, they were themselves the outcome of the wills of other individuals, whose complex interplay made up social reality. This idea was at the root of both the weakness and the strength of individual will. Insofar as the interplay of wills was informed by contrast and competition, the individual was severely limited. However, insofar as competition was replaced by association, the individual will was empowered by its harmonization with the cooperating wills of other individuals. To the extent that individuals associated and established common goals, they determined the course of society. On the other hand, no social change could be expected to occur unless it was consciously willed. This was the essence of Malatesta’s voluntarism and one of the most characteristic traits of his anarchism.

Anarchists and Marxists agreed that purposive individual action was severely limited and unlikely to make a noticeable impact on society. However, Marx’s and Malatesta’s analyses diverged in describing social forces. From the acknowledgment of the isolation and powerlessness of each individual at the social level, Marx moved on to describe the relevant social forces as impersonal ones independent from any individual, and pertaining

30 "'Idealismo' e 'materialismo'," Pensiero e Volontà (Rome), no. 2 (15 January 1924).
to society as a whole.\textsuperscript{31} For Malatesta, though the laws of nature were indeed ineluctable extra-human factors, social forces were constituted by the wills of other people. While no individual will could appreciably influence the course of society, the development of society as a whole was still determined by the complex and ever-mutable interplay of the individual wills of all members of society. For Marx, the task of the social reformer was to understand the dynamic of society as a whole as best as possible: effectiveness came from knowledge. In contrast, anarchist voluntarism focused on the agency of the social actors. Rather than emphasizing how individual wills were constrained by the development of society as a whole, the anarchist voluntarist emphasized how society as a whole was determined by the interplay of the individual wills of social actors. Accordingly, the social reformer aimed to aggregate as many of those wills as possible towards the same goal. As wills were ever more united, material constraints, to the extent that they were social, disappeared. The voluntarist’s unity of goals replaced the Marxist’s knowledge, thus pointing again to diverging attitudes on the role of social knowledge in collective action.

Both themes of coherence between end and means and voluntarism pointed to contrasting views about goal-oriented action. Marxists shunned ideals and focused on the dynamics of capitalist economy as a guide to action. For Marx and Engels, communism was not “a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself,” but “the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.”\textsuperscript{32} In contrast, anarchy was indeed an ideal that informed all anarchists’ action. A similar contrast of views underpinned the respective views on class. Anarchists did share with Marxists the notions of class, proletariat, and class struggle. It was precisely the “social question,” and not the issue of the state, that precipitated the antagonism with Mazzinians

\textsuperscript{31} Karl Marx, “Preface to \textit{A Critique of Political Economy},” in \textit{Selected Writings}, 425–6.

\textsuperscript{32} Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” in Marx, \textit{Selected Writings}, 187.
in Italy, while, conversely, the issue of the state became central in the International, where the expropriation of capitalists was undisputed. However, the anarchists’ and Marxists’ respective notions of class differed significantly.

Malatesta’s own view on class underwent changes since he joined the First International as a young student. At that time Italian anarchists had an optimistic faith in the workers’ revolutionary virtues that was soon disappointed. But even then their belief was not in a class consciousness of a Marxist type; rather, as Malatesta recalled, they regarded “the worker’s condition as morally superior to any other social position” and held “a mystic faith in the people’s virtues, in its ability, and in its egalitarian and libertarian instincts.” Malatesta’s mature view on class was most clearly spelled out in 1921, half a century after he joined the International, in the article “Lotta di classe o odio tra le classi?” (Class struggle or class hatred?). Malatesta argued that history had turned the proletariat into the main instrument of the next social transformation, upon which “those who struggle for the creation of a society where all human beings are free and furnished with the means to exercise their freedom must mainly rely.” As the present chief cause of social evils was the monopoly of natural resources and capital, it was natural that “the chief actors of the necessary expropriation be those who, not owning anything, are most directly and obviously interested in the common ownership of the means of production.” Hence, anarchists directed their propaganda most specifically to proletarians. At the same time, and in contrast to the Italian anarchists’ early belief, Malatesta argued that proletarians “are very often prevented by the conditions in which they live from rising to the conception of a superior ideal through thought and study.”

33 Errico Malatesta, preface to Nettlau, Bakunin e l’Internazionale, xxv, xxvii.

Though Malatesta agreed with Marxists about class struggle as the battleground of human emancipation, he disagreed about the link between class antagonism and class consciousness. For Marxists, the social consciousness of men was determined by their social being, which, in turn, was mainly determined by economic factors. Accordingly, the formation of the proletariat as a compact whole, conscious of its common class interests, was mainly driven by the evolution of material conditions, which produced a polarization and homogenization of classes: “with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater mass, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalized, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labour, and nearly everywhere reduces wages to the same low level... the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes.”35

Malatesta’s outlook on the relationship between material conditions and consciousness was quite different, as we can gauge from the historical narrative whereby he explains the dynamics of social antagonisms and struggles, in the 1884 version of Anarchy. For Malatesta, man’s fundamental natural characteristic is the egoistic instinct of his own preservation, while the social instinct developed from the accumulated and communicated experience of generations, which “taught man that by uniting with other men their individual safety and well-being were enhanced.” Yet man also discovered that he could achieve the advantages of cooperation by obliging the weakest to work for him and preferring domination to association: “thus solidarity ended up in private property and government, that is in the exploitation of the labour of all by a privileged minority.” On the other hand, the oppressed did not accept their condition light-heartedly: “and all history is the struggle between the exploited and the exploiters, and the more or less

extensive forms of property and government represent nothing but the diverse outcomes of this struggle, with all its victories, its defeats, and its compromises."\textsuperscript{36}

Of course, the relevance of the passage does not rest in its historical truthfulness, but rather in its illustration of the motivations and forces that Malatesta regards as fundamental in social processes. In explaining social struggle Malatesta reaches a formula that closely resembles Marx’s and Engels’s claim that “the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles.” However, a fundamental difference exists: unlike Marx and Engels, Malatesta identifies the primary factors of social processes in human dispositions, rather than in definite modes of production which impose themselves on individuals. A telling illustration of this approach is the definition of “worker” that the Italian Federation arrived at, in an effort to determine who was entitled to join the International Workingmen’s Association. Replacing material conditions with human dispositions in a reversal of Marxist materialism, they concluded that “a worker is whoever works at the overthrow of the bourgeois order.”\textsuperscript{37}

Malatesta acknowledged that capitalist production created irreconcilably antagonistic interests. However, he rejected the idea that capitalist production also developed the conditions of its own overcoming, by creating the proletariat as a single, revolutionary subject. Instead, Malatesta tended to regard class consciousness formation not as the outcome of a material process, but rather as a consciously undertaken project. Shunning from any reliance on class polarization as determined by capitalist development, Malatesta emphasized that society could not be straightforwardly partitioned into exploited and exploiters. In the article “Giustizia per tutti” (Justice for all) of 1897, he argued that all individuals, consciously or not, could turn at different times into oppressed or oppressors, exploited or exploiters, depending on circumstances.

\textsuperscript{36} “L’Anarchia,” \textit{La Questione Sociale} (Florence) 1, no. 8 (4 May 1884).

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Programma e Organizzazione}, 59; Errico Malatesta, preface to Nettlau, \textit{Bakunin e l’Internazionale}, xxvi.
Hence, reducing the struggle against oppression and exploitation to the struggle of one segment of society against the other would be an oversimplification. Instead, human nature was to be respected in all individuals, by fighting them when they were oppressors and exploiters, and defending them when they were oppressed and exploited. For Malatesta, anarchist propaganda was especially addressed to workers, aiming at their organization as a class that struggled against capitalists and governments. However, it was also propaganda of solidarity addressed to everyone, with no distinction of class and social rank. 38

Malatesta also rejected economism, claiming instead that groups and institutions had interests that could not necessarily be reduced to those of their class, as determined by relations of production. In a letter addressed to the newspaper *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* in 1899 Malatesta denied that the bourgeoisie was a monolithic body struggling against the proletariat, and that government, army, magistrature, and churches had no other reason to exist than the defense of bourgeois interests. The bourgeoisie, he argued, was divided into fractions struggling against each other, and the various political, legal, military, and religious institutions not only defended the bourgeoisie against the proletariat, but also had their own interests, which they defended even at the cost of compromising bourgeois interests. This situation was both an advantage and a danger for workers: it split the enemy, but it might equally induce workers to forget that all bourgeois were enemies. The divisions in the bourgeoisie gave workers opportunities for alliances, provided that they avoided turning themselves into a footstool for the ambition of some fraction of the bourgeoisie. For Malatesta, the implication of social complexity was not the renunciation of class struggle, but on the contrary the effort to “prevent workers from losing contact with the Polar star of class struggle, amidst the complex conflicts of the present hour and the near future.” Malatesta rejected the factual claim that

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38 “Giustizia per tutti,” *L’Agitazione* (Ancona) 1, no. 40 (16 December 1897).
class struggle had an exclusive influence on the multiform historical events, but concluded that the interests of the working class, which ultimately amounted to the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production, should drive the struggle of the proletariat.  

In sum, given the complexity of social relationships and the absence of a clear-cut partition of society into exploiters and exploited, organization as a class becomes a guiding criterion for workers to hold on to in their struggle, in order to create that partition through conscious solidarity among workers. It is not so much daily experience that teaches workers that they have common interests. In fact the current social organization does the opposite, putting workers in competition with each other: “solidarity can be found in a future-oriented aspiration, in a concept of social life that negates the present society, and that does not necessarily arise from experience, but rather arises in some way in the minds of a minority, and must be preached and spread until it gathers sufficient support to be able to triumph.”

In addition to “class,” the concept of “the people” frequently appears in Malatesta’s writings. What does the latter concept denote, and how does it relate to the former? The dictionary definition of “the people,” in the sense relevant here, is “the mass of people in a country etc., not having special rank or position.” In the same spirit, Margaret Canovan noted in her book *Populism* that the notion of “the people” is one of those collective ideas that make sense only through an implied contrast with something else. The generic and negative character of the definition probably captures what is essential here about this concept. “People” has a broader connotation than “proletariat”: the latter implies a

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40 “Dove mena il movimento operajo.”

reference to the capitalist society, while the former covers every society in which governmental oppression exists. The appeal to the people expresses a universal egalitarian stance that encompasses all forms of oppression, of which capitalism represents a specific instance. In this respect, the appeal to the people implicitly claims the relevance of anarchism for all societies where some form of oppression exists, not just for those where workers’ exploitation is the main form of oppression.

On the other hand, a definition of the people in a negative form also covers a connotation of people as an unconscious, passive mass that has not arisen from its condition of subjection. In fact, consciousness seems to be the main characteristic that discriminates between “the people” and “class” in Malatesta’s writings. When Malatesta refers to the passive and submissive character of the masses, he tends to refer to them as “the people.” For example, in an article of 1902 where he discusses the delusory character of arbitration in labour disputes, he remarks that “the people is unfortunately the most credulous bird that one could imagine; it rushes most eagerly to any bait set by any fowler.” Conversely, references to the consciousness of the masses are usually made in terms of “class consciousness,” as in the following example: “It is our task, the task of socialists in general, to cultivate in the proletariat the consciousness of class antagonism, of the necessity of collective struggle....” Thus, Malatesta’s linguistic usage is another indication of his outlook on class as a project substantiated by human dispositions, rather than a fact determined by material conditions.

Notwithstanding their different connotations, in the context of bourgeois society the concepts of “proletariat” and “the people” arguably have the same denotation. If the bourgeois state is the defender of capitalist interests, the masses politically oppressed by the bourgeois state and those economically exploited by capitalism are by and large the

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42 “L’arbitrato,” La Rivoluzione Sociale (London), no. 5 (1 December 1902).

43 “L’anarchismo nel movimento operaio,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 30 (7 October 1897).
same, thus making “proletariat” and “the people” coterminous. A test bed of this hypothesis is represented by the manifestos authored or signed by Malatesta and directly addressed to the masses. Such documents show that the terms “people” and “workers” were freely, though not randomly, intermixed. For example an abstentionist manifesto of November 1890 was titled “The anarchist-socialist to the Italian People: Don’t Vote!” and addressed “workers and peasants”; a manifesto “To the people of Italy” of March 1894 contained four sections in the form of invocations, the first of which called upon the Italian workers, while the others called upon the people; and another abstentionist manifesto of November 1897, “The anarchist-socialist to the Italian workers on the elections,” repeatedly addressed workers, but ended with the following appeal: “No socialists in Parliament. Whoever wants to struggle for the people must remain among the people.”

However, “proletariat” and “the people” are not coterminous in every society. Their different connotations may yield different denotations in different contexts. A case in point is the dictatorship of the proletariat. If “proletariat” is contrasted to “bourgeoisie,” while “the people” is contrasted to “government,” or more generally to those “having special rank or position,” then the “proletarian” character of a party dictatorship can be argued for more easily than its “popular” character. While the class character of party dictatorship is a debatable issue, its coercive character makes it almost tautologically belong to the latter side of the people–government dichotomy. Hence, the concept of “the people,” always current in the anarchist language, made itself readily available to the anarchist criticism of Bolshevik dictatorship. Indeed, references to the masses in

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Malatesta’s articles of the 1920s about Bolshevik rule in Russia were most often made in terms of “the people.” Malatesta himself emphasized and justified his usage of the term in a controversy of 1921 with an Italian communist periodical: “the day the communists attempted to impose their tyranny upon the people, they would meet the opposition of all anarchists.... And I say people and not proletariat, because in my opinion the first act of a revolution must be the direct expropriation of the exploiting class by the proletarians and therefore the merge of all social classes, linked together by the common necessity of work.” In the last sentence one can still discern an echo of Bakunin’s “equalization of classes,” a most controversial concept in his arguments with Marx, for whom it was a voluntaristic oxymoron that failed to recognize that the abolition of classes would be a process, not a resolution.  

In sum, Malatesta’s notion of class was subsumed by a broader humanism. Most importantly, his emphasis on class consciousness as arising from a future-oriented aspiration and not necessarily from experience alone pointed again to his construing collective action as guided by values. This was also the essential trait of coherence between ends and means and voluntarism, in contrast to the Marxist emphasis on knowledge. Such prominence of values was signalled since the rise of the International by the Italian anarchists’ predilection for moral language, as witnessed by the popularity of the Mazzinian phrases reluctantly inserted by Marx in the statutes of the International.

The different roles respectively attributed by Marxists and anarchists to knowledge and values points to a deep theoretical divergence between the two camps, which contrasts with the view that the controversy was mainly tactical or even proceeded from a clash of personalities between Marx and Bakunin. A charitable interpretation of a rift that divided Marxists from anarchists for decades calls for more thorough explanations than

45 “Un ‘nemico della rivoluzione’ ai padroni della stessa,” Umanità Nova (Rome), no. 163 (20 October 1921); Marx to P. Lafargue in Paris, 19 April 1870, in Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism, 46.
ones based on contingent or temperamental factors. In fact, both Marxists and anarchists knew better than uncharitable interpretations imply. The standard charges of utopianism, individualism, and voluntarism that Marxists leveled against anarchists captured fundamental traits of anarchist theory: anarchist action was driven by ideals and values that were ultimately individual in nature and were intentionally chosen and pursued. Notwithstanding the misleading interpretations that Marxists gave to those ideas and the slanderous form that their attacks took, their disparaging attributions were perceptive and based on a substantially correct appraisal of anarchist theory.

The heritage of the First International for Malatesta’s anarchism was marked by both continuity and change. The fundamental traits of anarchism that emerged from the contrast with the Marxists were made explicit and fully developed in Malatesta’s theory and tactics from 1889 on. At the same time, such developments were based on Malatesta’s critique of the International. In retrospect, Malatesta argued that the contrast between Marxists and anarchists broke out because of differences and similarities alike, for the anarchists’ engagement in a struggle for hegemony stemmed from residual authoritarianism. He often claimed that anarchists “were still too Marxist” at that time. In outlining the errors that wrecked the International, Malatesta also hinted to the direction that his anarchism would take in the new cycle of struggles that began in 1889, when he returned from Argentina to Europe, and lasted a decade. How that cycle of struggle and the new direction of Malatesta’s anarchism shaped each other is the subject of the rest of this work.46

46 Preface to Nettlau, Bakunin e l’Internazionale, xxvi.
Chapter III

"One of the Most Notable Anarchist Rarities": The 1889 Return of "the Disappeared Malatesta" and the Mode of Operation of Italian Anarchism

In Malatesta’s return to Europe in 1889 one can see reflected paradigmatically several issues that have generally troubled the historiography of anarchism as a movement. When Max Nettlau met Malatesta for the first time that year, he thus described the encounter: “Right there, then, I finally had in front of my eyes, in the flesh, one of the most notable anarchist rarities, the disappeared Malatesta.” The perception of Malatesta’s stay in South America as a “disappearance” and his return to Europe as a “reappearance” is common in standard accounts, reflecting a more general tendency to describe the history of Italian anarchism as following a cyclical pattern of appearances and disappearances. Moreover, Malatesta’s decisions and movements, such as changes of residence, often seem to have a chance character in his biographies, conveying an image of anarchism as being at the mercy of events. At the same time, a more thorough account of the events reveals circumstances that illustrate how the Italian anarchist movement functioned, thus dispelling stereotypical images. Malatesta’s return to Europe, the establishment of L’Associazione in Nice, and its subsequent move to London illustrate a recurrent pattern of transnational organization, which involved five countries in the space of a year, Argentina, Spain, France, Italy, and England. A reconstruction of Malatesta’s life during that brief time span provides an introduction to key themes of the present work, illustrating by a concrete example the typical mode of operation of Italian anarchism during the next decade.

1 Nettlau, Vida de un anarquista, 146–7.
Malatesta had fled to Argentina in early 1885 to escape conviction in Italy. His stay in South America was initially planned to be short, as Malatesta himself wrote to Max Nettlau years later, but things turned out otherwise. The historian’s knowledge of Malatesta’s South American years is indeed spotty, but the available evidence is more than sufficient to show that he was by no means inactive. In 1885 he edited a new run of *La Questione Sociale* in Buenos Aires. In 1886 Malatesta and a few comrades made an unsuccessful attempt to prospect gold in Patagonia, which his stay in South America is best known for in romanticized accounts. In the following two years Malatesta made a powerful contribution to the foundation of the Argentinean labour movement, cooperating with Spanish anarchist immigrants in labour agitations. Through their meetings, regularly reported by the Spanish anarchist press, he kept in touch with the Spanish movement. As for his ongoing contacts with the Italian movements, evidence about them comes precisely from the events concerning his return to Europe.²

Describing Malatesta’s return to Europe in 1889 his biographer and friend Luigi Fabbri dryly relates that “in October 1889 Malatesta was already in Nice, where he started the publication of *L’Associazione.*” However, Fabbri continues, “he could not remain in Nice for long, due to the fact that he had been expelled from France ten years before. The police looked for him after he exposed in *L’Associazione* the old spy Terzaghi… However, Malatesta could easily take refuge in London before being caught,” continuing there the publication of the periodical. Nothing is said about Malatesta’s reasons for choosing Nice, his contacts, and his plans. Likewise, the move to London looks like a hasty remedy to a situation suddenly gone awry. However, such appearance of casualness was often the effect of the opacity of anarchist action. The

² Malatesta to Max Nettlau, Rome, 12 January 1931, Max Nettlau Papers, file no. 197, IISG; Gonzalo Zaragoza, *Anarquismo argentino, 1876–1902* (Madrid: Ediciones de la Torre, 1996), 98–105; *El Productor* (Barcelona), nos. 72 (23 December 1887), 101 (20 July 1888); *La Bandera Roja* (Madrid) 2, no. 18 (1 January 1889); *La Solidaridad* (Seville) 2, no. 29 (3 March 1889).
scarcity of sources is not accidental, but inherent to the nature of a movement that in most cases could not operate in broad daylight. Moreover, militant biographers as Fabbri shared such preoccupations and filtered their writing through a cautious reserve. However, by probing the appearance of fortuitousness of contemporary accounts, a different reality looms up, made of planning and organization sustained by a dense and steady web of militant contacts cast across the Atlantic Ocean.  

According to records of the Italian police, Malatesta disappeared from Buenos Aires on 22 June 1889. In contrast to the standard account that Malatesta settled right away in Nice, his first stop was Barcelona. El Productor of 19 July reported two recent meetings with him, in which “the most momentous subjects of militant socialism were discussed, especially those related to the communist and collectivist schools.” El Productor was a key organizational centre for Spanish anarchism and Malatesta’s stop in Barcelona was part of his web of contacts with the Spaniards. The cross-national mutual involvement in each other’s movements by anarchists of different nationalities was one of the characteristic aspects of anarchist transnationalism and a theme of the present work. As will be seen, Malatesta’s preoccupation with the Spanish anarchist controversy between collectivist and communist would be a key motive of his theoretical turn of 1889.

On this specific occasion, Malatesta may have been instrumental in bringing about the International Anarchist Meeting that took place in Paris on 1 and 8 September of that year, and which brought together notable figures of Italian, Spanish, and French anarchism, as well as German and British representatives. The idea of the congress had been launched by Italian anarchists in Paris the year before, and had been hesitantly entertained by various European groups. Eventually, La Révolte published a letter of 19

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3 Luigi Fabbri, Vida de Malatesta, 126–7.

July 1889 from Barcelona, expressing the Spanish anarchists’ intention to carry out the initiative: “We got news from certain groups from abroad that have our same desire and same regret that the date has not yet been set.” The date of the letter and the reference to groups from abroad suggests that the initiative was discussed during Malatesta’s visit. It was indeed this letter that set in motion the arrangement of the conference, which Malatesta attended.\(^5\)

What was Malatesta’s final destination upon his return to Europe? The question is important in order to assess the chance or planned character of his movements. All evidence indicates that London, not Nice, was Malatesta’s destination. A telegram of August 9 from the Italian ministry of Foreign Affairs to the London embassy reported that Malatesta was in Paris, possibly heading for London. A further note of August 15 reported that Malatesta had arrived there. As early as April 22, the same ministry had informed the London embassy that Malatesta and Francesco Pezzi had left America for London.\(^6\) That information was incorrect, but points to Malatesta’s early plans involving London. Further evidence of a protracted stay in London in August 1889 comes from the adventurous story of a passport in the name of Felice Vigliano, found on Malatesta upon his arrest in Switzerland two years later. A reader’s ticket of the British Museum issued on 27 August 1889, also in the name of Vigliano, was found on Malatesta along with the passport. However, at the time the ticket was issued, Vigliano was editing the periodical

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Il Socialista in Montevideo. Thus, someone else must have applied to the British Museum, and in all likelihood that was Malatesta. The comparison in Figure 1 between the signature on the British Museum’s register for temporary admission and samples of Malatesta’s handwriting reveals striking similarities even to an untrained eye. The most obvious explanation is that Vigliano never left South America, and Malatesta came in possession of his passport before leaving South America, holding on to it until his arrest of 1891. In brief, Malatesta’s return was carefully planned and arranged well ahead of time. Most importantly, far from being a makeshift solution to an emergency situation, London, the great capital of revolutionary exile, where Malatesta had already resided in 1881–2, was his destination of choice from the beginning. By establishing this point a different image, made of effective planning and organization, begins to replace the standard one made of spontaneity, lack of organization, and powerlessness in the face of events.⁷

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Upon his arrival in London, Malatesta was not alone and isolated, but could count on a network of militants. In addition to acquaintances from his previous stay, by the time Malatesta returned to Europe, Francesco Saverio Merlino, one of his co-defendants in the
Rome trial of 1884, was also in London, where he had fled after conviction, approximately at the same time that Malatesta escaped to Argentina. Merlino would be a chief contributor of *L'Associazione*, as well as Malatesta’s companion in all undertakings of the next years, until his arrest in Naples in January 1894.

Malatesta, Merlino, and Pezzi reached Nice in September 1889 to arrange the publication of *L'Associazione*, only a month before the first issue appeared. A telegram of September 11 from the Italian Consulate in Nice informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of their imminent arrival. How was the project of the periodical brought about, and why was Nice its place of publication? Addressing such questions helps dispel the impression of fortuitousness and isolation that surrounds Malatesta’s undertaking.  

Arrangement for a periodical had started in Nice well before Malatesta’s arrival, although it is not known whether Malatesta was involved. Most people involved in the project came—as Pezzi and his wife Luisa Minguzzi—from the Internationalist circles of 1876–84 in Florence, the city where Malatesta had been active in 1883–4. Among these were Giovanni Talchi, who had fled Florence for Nice years before; Giuseppe Cioci, a former editor of Malatesta’s *La Questione Sociale* in 1884, who arrived in Nice around May 1889; and the type-setter and printer Giuseppe Consorti, who arrived in June.  

A report of the Italian consul in Nice of 20 May 1889, informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Talchi’s projected publication of a socialist periodical by the title *La Questione Sociale*, to be printed clandestinely and smuggled in Italy.  

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8 Telegram from Italian Consulate to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nice, 11 September 1889, Polizia Internazionale, b. 3, fs. “Nizza, 1889, arrivo,” ASDMAE.


10 Italian consul Centurione to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nice, 20 May 1889, Polizia Internazionale, b. 3, fs. “Nizza, 1889, arrivo,” ASDMAE.
On 10 September the Italian Consulate in Nice reported the imminent publication of Talchi’s projected periodical, with the participation of Cioci and other Nice anarchists. The same report added that “the dangerous Malatesta, Merlino, and Pezzi, who landed in Marseille on their way from America, would appear to have come to this city for purposes of anarchist propaganda, joining the editor group of said periodical.” Ten days later, announcements started to appear in the anarchist press that L’Associazione would appear in Nice by October.\(^\text{11}\) The first issue did appear on 6 October, with the erroneous date 6 September. Most likely the error was intentional, in the hope of diverting police attention by looking obsolete.\(^\text{12}\) Both Cioci and Consorti were in the editing group. Another element of continuity was the periodical’s manager, Giacomo Faraut, who in 1887 had managed Lo Schiavo, an anarchist periodical edited in Nice by Malatesta’s friend Nicolò Converti.

In sum, there is a clear continuity between Talchi’s and Malatesta’s projects, though it is not clear at which point the latter’s involvement began. At any rate, it is evident that upon returning from South America Malatesta resumed his web of militant contacts from where he had left them before his departure, and that such links were instrumental in bringing about his editorial project. The “disappeared” Malatesta “reappeared” with a new project, in which the key comrades were the same of the early 1880s, who had never left Europe. The Nice location must also have been attractive to Malatesta for the purpose of smuggling the periodical in Italy, given its proximity to the Italian border. Thus, the project had been conceived and carried out across several foreign countries on both sides

\(^{11}\) Italian Consulate in Nice to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nice, 18 October 1889, Polizia Internazionale, b. 3, fs. “Nizza, 1889, arrivo,” ASDMAE, which quotes the report of 10 September; “Nelle Nostre File,” II Nuovo Combattiamo (Genoa) 2, no. 7 (21 September 1889): 3.

\(^{12}\) Cf. report of secret agent Calvo, London, 6 September 1892, Polizia Internazionale, b. 39, fs. “1892, arrivo,” ASDMAE, which provides the above explanation for a similar error of date in another anarchist publication involving Malatesta.
of the Atlantic Ocean, but its focus remained the struggle in the homeland. As will be seen, this was one of the most fundamental traits of Italian transnational anarchism.

That Malatesta lived in London, and not in Nice, from early August to early September, has the important implication that he directly witnessed an extraordinary event that had a profound influence on his outlook on strikes as revolutionary weapons. The Great Dock Strike took place in London from 14 August to 16 September 1889 and is generally acknowledged as the start of British “new unionism.” This episode illustrates another fundamental aspect of anarchist transnationalism, that is, the acquisition of a broad, first-hand experience of advanced capitalism and working-class struggles worldwide, in contrast to stereotypes of anarchist backwardness and detachment from empirical reality. The relevance of the Great Dock Strike for Malatesta was witnessed by the first issue of *L'Associazione*, which featured an article on the strike that provides Malatesta’s perception of the events. As a result of a short but active propaganda, the casual workers of the London docks, approximately numbering fifty thousand, organized into a union and went on strike, in contrast to the traditional belief that the uncertainty and competition inherent to their employment made them unsuitable for organization. The strikers’ main demands were an hourly pay of sixpence instead of fivepence a day, and the abolition of the sub-contracting system. As soon as the casuals’ strike was called, all other trades connected to the loading and unloading of cargos stopped work, some of them purely in sympathy. At the same time other trades outside the docks advanced grievances and struck, with the total number of strikers peaking at one hundred eighty thousand. The Gas workers offered to come out on strike, with the prospect, as *L’Associazione* put it, that London be “plunged into darkness at night” and the homes of the bourgeois be “exposed to great danger.” Analogous offers of support came from other workers. In brief, “an outburst of enthusiasm, an impulse of solidarity, and a re-
awakening of dignity were about to bring forth a general strike: the stoppage of production, transit, and public services in a city of five million people!"\(^{13}\)

Malatesta was impressed by the collective might and maturity displayed by the British workers. In the space of few weeks, and against anyone's expectation, the great mass of London and British labourers were putting their strength into the field, lining up in formidable, organized, and largely spontaneous ranks in unprecedented ways. The strikers' self-discipline and ability to get organized were also remarkable. Feeding a population of over half a million, managing donations and collections, keeping up correspondence, organizing meetings and demonstrations, and keeping watch against the bosses' attempts to employ scabs: "all this was done marvelously and spontaneously, by the work of volunteers." Above all, the strike illustrated the indeterminacy and open-endedness of collective action, presenting fertile ground for the revolutionary option: "those workers were not lacking a broad and often instinctive notion of their rights and social usefulness; nor did they lack the combativeness required to make a revolution; a vague desire of more radical measures arose in them...." The situation was tense and open to different outcomes: "the city was in a state of alarm; most of the food provision was at a standstill; a large number of factories were closed for lack of coal or raw materials; and irritation grew with discomfort." In sum, "a breath of social revolution blew through the streets of the great city."\(^{14}\)

The idea of a general strike got as far as a "No-Work" manifesto issued by the strike committee after two weeks of the strike, as workers faced a serious shortage of strike funds and with no settlement in sight. The manifesto called upon all London workers to come out on strike on 2 September. However, the call was withdrawn before the general strike could begin. Meanwhile, other developments brought the strike towards its

\(^{13}\) "A proposito di uno sciopero," \textit{L'Associazione} (Nice) 1, no. 1 (6 September \textit{recte} October] 1889.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
conclusion. Cardinal Manning, who had family connections with dock companies, undertook the role of mediator. Another portentous event was the unexpected arrival of unprecedented financial support for the strikers from Australian unions. With the further intervention of the London mayor negotiations began. The workers' demands were substantially accepted on 14 September, to be implemented as of November. The port of London was reopened on 16 September.\textsuperscript{15}

For Malatesta, in an open-ended situation such as the climax of the strike, the role of conscious minorities was crucial in tipping the scales in one or the other direction. Thus, he contrasted the actual behaviour of the strike leaders with a conjectural insurrectionary scenario. The strike leaders were indeed praiseworthy for their role in preparing the strike, but also inadequate to the position in which the circumstances had placed them. "In the face of a situation that went beyond their aspirations and their boldness, they lacked the courage to take on their incumbent responsibilities and push things forward," he wrote. "Nor did they have enough abnegation and intelligence to draw aside and let the masses take the initiative."

In contrast, if the general strike in London had been encouraged and not prevented, the situation would have become critical for the bourgeoisie, and revolution would have presented itself as a solution: "shut-down of factories, stoppage of railways, trains, streetcars, cabs, and carriages, interruption of public services, suspension of the provision system, nights without gas, hundreds of thousands of workers in the streets: what a situation for a group of people with ideas and a little courage!" Malatesta thus depicted how collective action might have taken an insurrectionary path:

If clear and plain propaganda for violent expropriation had been done earlier; if groups of daring people had started to take and distribute foodstuff, clothes, and all commodities that fill the stores but run short for proletarians; if other groups or isolated individuals had forcibly or

cunningly penetrated banks and government offices to set them on fire, while others had entered the houses of well-off people and used them for lodging women and children from the populace; if others had given the most greedy bourgeois what they deserve, and others had made powerless and inoffensive the government chiefs and those who could replace them in times of crisis, the police officers, the generals and high-ranking army officers, taking them by surprise in their sleep or when they left their homes—in brief, if few thousands of resolute revolutionaries had existed in London, which is so large, today this immense metropolis and the whole of England, Scotland and Ireland would be in a revolution.

Though such things, Malatesta concluded, were nearly impossible to bring about if they had to be planned and preordained by a central committee, yet they became easy “if revolutionaries—in agreement about end and means—take action by their own initiative in the direction that they see fit, as soon as there is an opportunity, together with those comrades that they need for accomplishing their task, and without awaiting anyone’s opinion or order.” Such scenario clearly illustrates the dynamic interplay envisaged by Malatesta between the spontaneous action of the people and the initiative of conscious minorities, both of which were necessary, but neither of which was sufficient for a revolution to be accomplished.

The positive implications of the Great Dock Strike and the tactics of new unionism for Malatesta can hardly be overestimated. He came to regard strikes as the most promising path to revolution, in contrast to any other means that anarchists had practiced or entertained until then. Plots and conspiracies, he argued, were unable to determine popular agitations sufficiently broad to stand a chance of victory. Conversely, purely spontaneous movements were seldom allowed by the authorities to last long enough to develop into general insurrections. Caught in this conundrum, anarchists tended to reach the conclusion that political movements initiated by the bourgeoisie and wars provided the best opportunities to attempt a social revolution. However, in addition to many other shortcomings, both wars and political movements had the drawback that their outbreak did not depend on the initiative of revolutionaries, and therefore reliance on them as revolutionary sparks eventually engendered inertia and fatalism. “Fortunately,” Malatesta concluded, “there are other ways by which a revolution can come, and it seems to us that
the most important among these are workers' agitations that manifest themselves in the form of strikes.... The most fruitful lesson of all was the huge dock labourers' strike, which recently occurred in London."16

The effect of the Great Dock Strike on Malatesta was strengthened by the internationalization of the dockers' struggle in the next months. Not only did the London dockers' strike enjoy international support, but dock workers in other countries followed in their footsteps. The most notable example was the strike of the Rotterdam dockers, which on 27 September 1889 was met by harsh police repression, after it had extended to about five thousand workers. The strike lasted until 10 October, when the workers' request of a salary increase was accepted. Malatesta commented upon the Rotterdam strike in the second issue of *L'Associazione*, reporting that during the strike Dutch socialist leaders, who had rushed to Rotterdam to defuse the tension and to offer their leadership to the workers, were met with hostility and rejected. The Rotterdam dockers, eager to banish any suspicion of socialism, got to the point of throwing out of a meeting a worker who had spoken in socialist terms, and of cheering the Orange reigning house. For Malatesta the strike was another lesson, which questioned the attitudes of conscious minorities to patronize the masses or, at the opposite extreme, to hold inflated expectations about the latter's revolutionary instincts.17

It is not clear where Malatesta resided after the periodical's launch of early October in Nice, but he seems to have soon returned to London. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the London embassy that a letter had been mailed by Pezzi on 8 October from Harrow, a London suburb; another note of 24 October informed that "the known Malatesta e Pezzi receive from Nice, under another name, many general delivery letters


at Harrow”; again on 26 October the Ministry confirmed that “from further intelligence it would appear that Malatesta remains in hiding in London”; and on the same day the consulate in Nice was informed that “Malatesta and Pezzi appear to be in London, where they keep in regular contact with Cioci in Nice.” According to the same note, L’Associazione was smuggled into Italy by Cioci’s partner, Leonilda Giacchetti. Finally, on an October Monday Malatesta made what Max Nettlau—who made his acquaintance on that occasion—recorded as his entrance on the London revolutionary scene:

I saw [Malatesta] for the first time on a Monday, after a session of the Socialist League Council in the League’s headquarters, in Great Queen Street, W.C. These sessions were attended by members, and visitors and delegations were also admitted. He and another Italian came in, and silently sat down in the back. I was sitting next to Victor Dave, who, I believe, had already seen him in the morning in the League’s office. He told me that that was Malatesta. I was deeply amazed. Through the old periodicals from 1872 to 1884 I kept memory of him as one of the few who had remained faithful to the movement through all those years, until he later disappeared, or rather, as I came to know, emigrated to South America. Some English comrades recalled him from the 1881 congress. However, to all the others, except for Dave, whose recollection spanned across the whole International, he was unknown, including William Morris, who cared little or nothing of the continental movements. Morris then made Malatesta’s acquaintance, although the scope of his action and his sphere of interests remained distant. That night I was introduced to Malatesta by Dave, as someone who had an antiquarian interest in anarchism. The situation was quite extraordinary. In everyone else’s eyes, including probably his own, Malatesta was then a young man of 35 years of age. Instead, for me he was one of the greatest antiques of the international anarchist movement that I could have met. ... Right there, then, I finally had in front of my eyes, in the flesh, one of the most notable anarchist rarities, the disappeared Malatesta.

Nettlau was then a young member of the Socialist League, still far from becoming the foremost historian of anarchism. His perception of Malatesta was probably common in

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18 Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to chargé d’affaires of Italian Embassy in London, 21, 24, and 26 October 1889, b. 39, fs. “1889, Ambasciatore Londra, partenza,” ASDMAE; Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Italian Consulate in Nice, 26 October 1889, Polizia Internazionale, b. 3, fs. “Nizza, 1889, partenza,” ASDMAE.

19 See note 1.
socialist circles acquainted only indirectly with the latter’s activity. That perception is significant for its characterization of the Italian anarchist as a “disappeared anarchist rarity,” which conjures up an image of Malatesta as a historical figure, associated with the experience of the extinct International, rather than an active militant. That perception was not unjustified, for Malatesta had been engaged in the struggle for eighteen years, a lifetime for many revolutionaries. Only by looking at Malatesta’s sixty-year militancy in hindsight that period can be regarded as a prologue. Given the perception expressed by Nettlau, its complement could only be surprise at the viability of Malatesta’s anarchist project in the years to come, the same surprise that historians exhibit at the “reappearances” of anarchism. Yet the very perception of Malatesta as a “disappeared anarchist rarity,” with its implicit emphasis on the gap between an irretrievable past and the present, eloquently speaks to the sustainability and adaptability to changing conditions of his anarchist project. It is for the historian to replace surprise with an understanding of the intellectual and material resources that made that project viable.

The last issue of _L’Associazione_ to come out of Nice was that of 27 October. The next one was published in London on 30 November. In the meantime Malatesta moved his London residence from Harrow to Fuhlam, into the same premises where _L’Associazione_ set office. On 7 November Malatesta wrote to Gustave Brocher, who also lived in London: “I no longer live in Harrow; I’ll give you my new address. I would be grateful if you could write me of any legal formalities that need to be fulfilled in order to set up a printing house and publish a periodical.”20 The message confirms that Malatesta had lived in London well before his “official” appearance of October 1889. Accordingly, the transfer of _L’Associazione_ should perhaps be seen not as a simultaneous change of residence and office, but rather as the reunion of the periodical’s office with Malatesta’s residence. Accordingly, the motives of the transfer of office may look different. Usually

20 _Epistolario_, 57.
they are identified with Malatesta’s personal safety after his denunciation of the spy Terzaghi. However, Malatesta was probably already back in London by the time the Terzaghi case was brought up. The real motives may have had more to do with the management of *L’Associazione*. Nice was attractive for the purpose of smuggling the paper into Italy. However, the plan encountered difficulties from the outset, as the first issue was seized at the border crossing. Apparently, even the printing process was harassed by the French police, with the result that the second issue had to be printed by hand. Therefore, the strongest reasons for printing in Nice may have failed soon, making the trouble of remote-editing useless. An explanation of this sort was given by *El Productor*: “The comrades who edit and manage our dear colleague *L’Associazione* were forced to establish their place of publication in London, in order to better guarantee the distribution of the issue.”

In sum, the case of *L’Associazione* illustrates the relevance of transnationalism as a mode of operation for the anarchist movement in Malatesta’s time. Militants were very mobile. They often had only a loose link to the place where they physically resided, while keeping strong ties to comrades in other countries. Such mobility was partly due to persecution. Anarchists were often persecuted as such, as best exemplified by the “criminal association” charges in Italy, and exile was often their ordinary status. Another relevant factor was emigration, a lot that befell anarchists as workers, and that they shared with Italian workers in general. Accordingly, transnational ties were denser along ethnic and linguistic lines, but they were by no means limited to those. In addition, anarchists were internationalist. The international anarchist network could be likened to the “many-headed hydra” described by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker in their

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book on the "hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic."\textsuperscript{22} The anarchist hydra of which Italians were part along with their ethnic network was even wider than that described by Linebaugh and Rediker. It had its origins in Italy, Spain, and France, and it was spread around the Atlantic Ocean, from continental Europe to South and North America, as well as to London as an exile centre. In addition, it extended throughout the Mediterranean, especially Egypt and Tunisia.

Another key factor in the establishment of \textit{L'Associazione} was the role that the anarchist network played in the events, though we lack knowledge of it, both because of the intrinsic difficulty of picturing an informal structure, and the opacity of anarchist action. The anarchist network allowed the exchange of information and the coordination of activity. In brief, it was a form of organization. A network may be defined as a set of nodes with links between them. In the anarchist network the nodes were individuals and small groups, and the links consisted of exchanges of information, including practical agreements for the action. What characterized this web of connected nodes was that there was no articulation of centre versus periphery, or top versus bottom. Moreover, there was no fixed direction of information, such as directives unidirectionally coming from the centre to the periphery, or from the top to the bottom. However, each node could be more or less densely linked with other nodes, and it could be argued that the most densely connected nodes included the leaders of the movement, though they were not limited to them, as there were comrades who could typically fulfill an effective liaison role by keeping a relatively low profile in the movement.

A formal organization has a fixed structure independent of individuals, with roles and functions filled by different people at different times. The individuals change but the structure remains the same. Thus, the continuity of the organization is most naturally

followed through its structure. In contrast, in a network there is no fixed configuration in which the nodes are arranged. The situation is the converse of a formal organization: the individuals may remain the same, but the configuration can keep changing. In other words, the nodes, that is the individuals, may be more persistent than any configuration. Therefore, while the search for organization in a formal sense may be elusive, continuity of action may be best studied through individuals and small groups, and their connections in the long term. This may bring up a strong level of sustained integration that could not easily be detected otherwise, as the arrangements that brought about *L'Associazione* illustrate.

The notion of network has been used only occasionally by historians in studying the anarchist movement. For example the British historian Carl Levy remarks: “While the anarchist movement rapidly assumed international dimensions, the Italian exiles always kept Italian problems foremost in their minds. But exile extended their horizons and created hidden organizational and financial mobilization networks, which explains to a great extent why the movement could suddenly snap back to life in Italy after years of torpidity.” The relevance of networks as anarchist means of organization has recently received increasing attention, especially with the spread of the Internet. Thus, an August 2000 report of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service about the spreading phenomenon of anti-globalization remarks that “the Internet has breathed new life into the anarchist philosophy, permitting communication and coordination without the need for a central source of command, and facilitating coordinated actions with minimal resources and bureaucracy.” While the Internet is indeed a wonder of our technological era, the use of networks as means of organization and communication has breathed life


into anarchism for long, though the carriers of information were migrant workers instead of fiber-optic cables. Moreover, the effectiveness of the Internet for organizing does not rest on ease of communication alone, but rather on its combination, at the present state of technology, with the difficulty of police surveillance, another key trait that the Internet shares with the nineteenth-century anarchist network.

Notwithstanding the relevance and the characteristic function of network organization in the anarchist movement, it should be stressed, however, that in Malatesta's specific case reliance on the anarchist network rather than on formal structures did not arise so much from theorization as from constraints. Malatesta was a strong advocate of organization, even in the form of a party. The theme of organization featured prominently in *L'Associazione*, as it would in Malatesta's all subsequent periodicals. However, in addition to the constraints coming from persecution and exile, Malatesta's resort to the anarchist network made a virtue of necessity, partly as a result of the opposition he encountered in the anarchist movement in his effort to build permanent organizational structures.

In sum, several important themes are foreshadowed by the three months separating Malatesta's return to Europe from his definitive settlement in London, all of which remained prominent in the following quarter of a century: Malatesta's relationship with the Spaniards; the founding of a periodical, a fundamental instrument of both propaganda and organization; Malatesta's focus on Italy, to which the choice of Nice may be related; London as his place of residence; and, finally, the relevance of the militant network he was part of. This was a period of intense evolution in Malatesta's theory and tactics, at a time when his public figure was still associated with the history of the International. The impact of the Great Dock Strike on that evolution shows that Malatesta's anarchism was not a fixed and unchangeable doctrine, but evolved under the influence of experience. Malatesta's experience of the Great Dock Strike also illustrates how the transnationalism of Italian anarchists brought them in contact with diverse aspects of capitalist
development, broadening their perspective and making them aware of the need for tactical flexibility. By the time the “anarchist rarity” Malatesta made his official reappearance in London, his anarchism had already undergone profound changes under the influence of events he had directly witnessed in that very city. Those changes were spelled out in the brief but intense run of Malatesta’s periodical L’Associazione.
Chapter IV
The Turning Point of L’Associazione (1889–90) and the Novel Cornerstones of Malatesta’s Anarchism

In the same way that the debate in the First International provides the best context to outline the fundamental themes that Malatesta shared with anarchism in general—or at least with broad sectors of it—in contrast with Marxism, the periodical L’Associazione gives the opportunity to illustrate the original themes of Malatesta’s own brand of anarchism, in contrast to both earlier anarchist theories and tactics in the International and to other currents of anarchism that developed from that same trunk. As Luigi Fabbri remarks, it was from 1889 that “Malatesta’s thought took on those ever clearer and more coherent character and directions that constitute a very different way of presenting and interpreting anarchism from those commonly accepted in the anarchist camp, especially outside of Italy, and mainly inspired by the theories of Bakunin and Kropotkin.”

L’Associazione was a short-lived periodical. After the first three issues published in Nice, only four more appeared in London. In January 1890 the publication was suspended due to financial difficulties, after one of the editors, Giuseppe Cioci, fled to the continent with the periodical’s funds. Despite its short life-span, L’Associazione marked a turning point in the evolution of Malatesta’s thought. He had been away from Europe for almost five years and had published almost nothing for the previous four years, having last edited La Questione Sociale in Buenos Aires in 1885. With the experience of the International now long gone, Malatesta’s new periodical was an opportunity to articulate his changed outlook on the revolutionary struggle.

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1 Luigi Fabbri, Malatesta: L’uomo e il pensiero (Naples: RL, 1951; reprint, Catania: Edizioni Anarchismo, 1979), 8.

2 Luigi Fabbri, Vida de Malatesta, 127.
L'Associazione was only a beginning, for after its demise Malatesta kept elaborating his new outlook in the international anarchist press. Nor did his ideas remain unchanged. Through the 1890s his tactics kept evolving, often with dramatic turns. However, L'Associazione was the juncture at which Malatesta introduced, sometimes inconspicuously, the theoretical ideas that were the cornerstones of his entire subsequent evolution.

Malatesta’s novel views concerned such themes as the pluralism of models for the anarchist society, anarchism as a method rather than as pursuit of a specific blueprint, the role of solidarity as an anarchist disposition, and the relation between conscious minorities and masses. The import and fertility of such ideas can be fully assessed in the light of Malatesta’s theoretical development of more than three decades later. At the same time, they are best discussed in connection with L'Associazione, to trace their source in that periodical’s articles and to lay the ground for understanding Malatesta’s later evolution. A similar argument holds for Malatesta’s tactics. These were characterized by great flexibility and pragmatism, which can be best appreciated by looking at their evolution over time. At the same time, such tactics were based on a set of coherent principles that proceeded from Malatesta’s outlook on conscious minorities and masses and are therefore best introduced in connection with that theme. The way in which those principles took concrete form will then be illustrated throughout the next chapters. Finally, at the core of Malatesta’s reformulation of anarchism was a methodological shift about the relation between individuals and social wholes, which had pervasive and long-term implications on his appraisal of collective action. Bringing forth the common methodological foundation of Malatesta’s novel ideas reveals their unity and conceptual interdependence.

Malatesta’s reflections on anarchist pluralism originated from a controversy among anarchists that had its roots in the First International, concerning communism and collectivism as models of an anarchist society. The two theories agreed on the common
ownership of the means of production but differed about distribution, which for
collectivism was to be done according to work performed, while for communism was to
be done according to needs, thus amounting to free consumption. The debate about which
model best realized the anarchist principles arose early in the anarchist movement and
Malatesta was among those responsible for it. Anarchism was born collectivist in the
federalist International, under the influence of Bakunin. However, in 1876 the Italian
Federation decided to give up collectivism for communism.\(^3\) The debate thus initiated
occupied the anarchist movement for years, especially in Spain. The onset of the
controversy occurred during Malatesta’s stay in South America. Malatesta’s
determination to overcome the controversy was already evident at that time, when he
stated that his communism was exactly the same as the collectivism of the Spanish
anarchists, the differences being more formal than substantial.\(^4\) Such claims attest that
Malatesta’s ideas of 1889 had roots in a long reflection. When he returned to Europe, his
views on the subject took not only a pluralist turn, but also a central role in his political
programme.

Such views were outlined in *Appello*, a declaration of principles printed out of Nice
in September 1889, before *L’Associazione* began publication, and promptly translated in
Spain by both the communist *La Revolución Social* and the collectivist *El Productor*. After discussing the pitfalls of both collectivism and communism, Malatesta argued that a
new moral consciousness would develop in the future society, such that men would find
wage labour repugnant, just as they presently found slavery repugnant. Therefore,
whatever its details, the organization of the future society would be communist at bottom:

\(^3\) Max Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, 1996; originally published as *La
Anarquia a través de los tiempos* [Barcelona: Guilda de Amigos del Libro and Editorial Maucci, 1935]),
138–9.

“Let’s be content,” Malatesta concluded, “with this fundamental, moral communism, which, all things considered, is more valuable than the material and formal one.”

Malatesta returned to the subject in the first issue of _L’Associazione_. After confirming his belief in communism as the only full solution to the social question, he added that it was nevertheless necessary to make a distinction between what needed to be done by way of revolution, that is immediately and forcibly, and what would be the result of the future evolution of the new society. The latter was to be left to the free wishes of everyone, which would spontaneously and gradually harmonize.

The argument was further developed in the article “I nostri propositi: I. L’Unione tra comunisti e collettivisti,” specifically devoted to the proposed union between communists and collectivists. A novel emphasis on “the anarchist method” was introduced. Malatesta expressed the key concept that the co-existence of collectivists and communists in the same party is a logical, necessary consequence of the anarchist idea and method: “If anarchy means spontaneous evolution; if being anarchist means believing that nobody is infallible and that only through freedom can humanity find the solution to its problems and reach harmony and general well-being, then by what right, by what logic could one elevate to the rank of dogma and impose the solutions that one prefers and advocates? And by what means, then?” If anarchists were an authoritarian party, that would be conceivable. Being an anarchist party, the only means to get one’s solutions to triumph were propaganda and example. Anarchists could hold the most diverse ideals about the reconstruction of society. However, what determined the attained end would always be the method, since one did not get where one wished, but rather where the taken path led. “To create a party it is necessary and sufficient to have the

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5 “Manifiesto anarquista,” _La Revolución Social_ (Barcelona) 1, no. 2 (29 September 1889); “Manifiesto anarquista,” _El Productor_ (Barcelona), no. 164 (2 October 1889).

6 “Programma,” _L’Associazione_ (Nice) 1, no. 1 (6 September [recte October] 1889).
same method. And the method, that is the practical line of conduct that the revolutionary anarchist socialists intend to follow, is common to all, be they communist or collectivist.”

In contrast to stereotypes of anarchism as a static and unchanging doctrine, the debate provides an example of ideas in evolution, from the novel advocacy of communism by the Italian anarchists in 1876, through the debate in Spain, to Malatesta’s pluralist solution. Most importantly, at the same time that there was a substantial continuity in Malatesta’s outlook on collectivism and communism, with his preference remaining for communism, a significant change of perspective occurred. This may best be detected by comparing Malatesta’s arguments of 1889 with those made on the same subject in his 1884 pamphlet Programma e Organizzazione dell’Associazione Internazionale dei Lavoratori, the last writing of his Internationalist period.

In the Programma Malatesta foresaw that after the revolution collectivism would be experimented with in some places and communism in others; and that errors, and possibly acts of abuse and injustice, would be committed. However, so long as no power was established to thwart the process of social experimentation, the method of trial and error would eventually yield the best solution, that is communism. Malatesta acknowledged that communism needed a high degree of moral development in people, which the revolutionary impetus might be insufficient to generate at once. Therefore, collectivism would be accepted somewhere as a transitory solution. However, collectivism carried with it the bourgeois spirit intrinsic to the principle of competition. It was “powerless in bringing about that revolution, that profound moral transformation of men, whereby nobody will do and wish anything that could damage others.” Hence, in

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8 See chapter 2, note 2.
order to prevent collectivism from generating a bourgeois spirit, it would be necessary for it to rapidly evolve towards communism in those places where it was transitorily accepted. In sum, though the *Programma* already contained elements of pluralism and experimentalism, collectivism was ultimately rejected as “incompatible with anarchy,” and it was recommended that the International “advocate communism everywhere.” That rejection was based on the negative moral effects of collectivism. Ultimately, in 1884 Malatesta’s focus was primarily on the configuration of society as a whole and on its effects on the moral dispositions of individuals.⁹

With respect to that assessment, a key change occurred in 1889 with the argument of “moral communism.” With this phrase, Malatesta meant the spirit of solidarity, that is the moral attitude that eventually would lead to communism. In other words, regardless of the contingent social arrangement in which that spirit manifested, its presence already provided a sufficient moral foundation for communism, even before communism was realized. In Malatesta’s argument of 1889, the presence of that spirit, or “moral communism,” was all that really mattered for the establishment of an anarchist society. In its presence, the controversy between collectivism and communism became secondary and derivative. Malatesta kept advocating communism and judging collectivism incompatible with anarchy. Yet the terms of the relation were now reversed. He no longer argued that there could not be anarchy where there was collectivism, but rather that there could not be collectivism where there was anarchy, that is, a society driven by solidarity. He no longer claimed that collectivism would be powerless to bring about a moral transformation, but rather that a moral transformation would prevent collectivism from bringing back privilege and wage labour. In brief, a methodological shift in Malatesta’s appraisal of social transformation had occurred. His focus was no longer on social configurations as causes and individual dispositions as effects; rather, individual

⁹ *Programma e Organizzazione*, 32–33, 57.
dispositions, such as "moral communism," were now the causes and social configurations the effects.

Malatesta's pluralist way out of the debate on collectivism and communism brought considerations of method to the foreground of anarchist theory. Method had been central to anarchism since its inception. After all, the split in the First International was over the method to achieve emancipation, or between the anarchist method of freedom and the Marxist political method. In the 1884 version of "L'Anarchia," Malatesta pointed out that the aim of a society based on solidarity was not sufficient to determine the programme of a party. Ideals may be abstract and distant enough for everyone to agree on them: "to be able to act, to be able to contribute to the realization of one's cherished ideas, one has to choose one's own path. In parties, as more generally in life, the questions of method are predominant. If the idea is the beacon, the method is the helm." Thus, Malatesta continued, "we are anarchist in our goal... but we are anarchist in our method too."\(^\text{10}\) After returning to Europe, Malatesta placed even greater emphasis on method. In 1884 he claimed that a specification of method was necessary to determine a party programme. In 1889 he claimed that it was sufficient.\(^\text{11}\)

This evolution is illuminated by comparing the original 1884 version of "L'Anarchia" with the final one of 1891. In the latter Malatesta provided a very general definition of anarchy, free of references to specific solutions to social problems, stressing instead that solutions cannot be provided in advance. At the outset, as in the previous version, anarchy was defined according to etymology, as "the condition of a people who live without a constituted authority, without government." Pages later, Malatesta described it as a "society of friends," in which the spontaneous grouping according to requirements and sympathies, bottom-up and from simple to complex, would give rise to

\(^{10}\) "L'Anarchia," *La Questione Sociale* (Florence) 1, no. 9 (11 May 1884).

\(^{11}\) See note 7.
a social organisation aimed at the greatest welfare and freedom of everyone, and would be modified according to circumstances and experience.\textsuperscript{12} Significantly, in the 1891 edition communism was never mentioned. Instead, to a hypothetical reader who asked how the anarchist society would be organized, Malatesta responded that those who expected detailed answers in advance, beyond what could be only personal opinions, lacked a real understanding of what anarchy was: “We are no more prophets than anyone else; and if we claimed to be able to give an official solution to all the problems that will arise in the course of the daily life of a future society, then what we meant by the abolition of government would be curious to say the least.... It is just as well that not having the stake or prisons with which to impose our bible, mankind would be free to laugh at us and at our pretensions with impunity!” Anarchists were indeed concerned with the problems of social life, for which they had solutions. However, these were no longer definite plans to be inscribed in the party programme, but individual and possibly transitory opinions, whose implementation depended on what experience and discussion would dictate.\textsuperscript{13}

Accordingly, a programme concerned with the very foundations of society “cannot do other than suggest a method.” For Malatesta, it was method that differentiated parties and determined their historical importance, not their abstract claims about pursuing the welfare of humanity. Therefore, “one must consider anarchy above all as a method.” The methods of non-anarchist parties could be reduced to two, “the authoritarian and the so-called liberal.” The former entrusted to a few the management of social life and led to the exploitation and oppression of the masses by the few. The latter relied on free individual enterprise and proclaimed the reduction of governmental functions to an absolute minimum. Anarchists offered a new method: “free initiative of all and free compact

\textsuperscript{12} Anarchy, 31.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 44–45.
when, private property having been abolished by revolutionary action, everybody has been put in a situation of equality to dispose of social wealth. This method, by not allowing access to the reconstitution of private property, must lead, via free association, to the complete victory of the principle of solidarity."

The more problems were put forward in order to counter anarchist ideas, Malatesta added, the more they turned into arguments in favour of those ideas, because the core of anarchism was precisely a superior method to solve social problems. This was the method of trial and error, by which the solutions could be found that best satisfied the dictates of science as well as everybody’s needs and wishes. In brief, anarchy was the only form of society which left open the way to achieving the greatest good for humanity, since it alone destroyed every class bent on keeping the masses oppressed and in poverty. Malatesta thus concluded his discussion of the anarchist method, “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 all improvements for the benefit of everybody.”

Malatesta’s apparently obvious and uncontroversial reference to solidarity as the “beacon of anarchy” was instead of crucial importance. It drew a line between different brands of anarchism, as is clear from a specific article devoted to the subject in L’Associazione in January 1890, under the title “La lotta per la vita: Egoismo e solidarietà” (The struggle for life: Egoism and solidarity). The article resumed an argument that Malatesta had already broached in the first draft of Anarchy, in 1884, where he had outlined history as a struggle between two fundamental human dispositions, egoism and solidity, and the corresponding principles of competition and cooperation.

14 Ibid., 45–46.
15 Ibid., 46–47.
In the article of 1890 that narrative was reiterated, and the concepts of egoism and solidarity were further discussed, in polemic with anarchists imbued with a positivistic spirit and influenced by Darwinian evolutionism, who attempted to construe anarchism on the basis of egoistic tendencies. Malatesta claimed that the ongoing controversy about egoism and solidarity was largely a question of words. To the extent that the feeling of sympathy towards others was an individual moral need, its satisfaction could be regarded as a form of egoism. However, it was a very different and superior form of egoism from the mere instinct of self-preservation and disregard of others which usually went by the same name. Therefore, it was convenient to have different names for them, “altruism” being the readily available name for the superior form of egoism. Even assuming self-interest as people’s sole motivation, Malatesta argued, the rise and development of solidarity could still be explained in a utilitarian fashion, along the lines already drawn in Anarchy. By associating amongst themselves, individuals and groups animated by altruism get the upper hand in the struggle for life, all the rest being equal. In sum, self-interest and moral sentiment head in the same direction: “If socialism and revolution have their material raison d’être in the proletarian’s impossibility of individually reaching his own emancipation, they also have their moral force and attraction in the will of socialists and revolutionaries to only seek their individual emancipation in the collective emancipation.”

Malatesta’s reference to “the will” points to the relevant implications of his emphasis on solidarity, which dovetailed with his voluntarism. Both became qualifying traits of Malatesta’s anarchism, in contrast with determinist tendencies that grew popular among anarchists, especially under the influence of Kropotkin, for whom anarchism was “a world-concept based upon a mechanical explanation of all phenomena,” both natural and social, and the anarchist conception was “not a Utopia, constructed on the a priori

16 “La lotta per la vita: Egoismo e solidarietà,” L’Associazione (London) 1, no. 7 (23 January 1890).
method, after a few desiderata have been taken as postulates,” but was derived “from an analysis of tendencies that are at work already.”17 Unlike the anarchists challenged in Malatesta’s article, Kropotkin emphasized mutual aid as an evolutionary factor. However, Malatesta’s target was not any specific evolutionary theory, but the scientistic tendency as such. Though Malatesta always refrained from directly attacking Kropotkin, he explained the depth of their divergence and the negative influence he attributed to Kropotkin’s theories in an article published towards the end of his life, years after Kropotkin’s death.

For Malatesta, Kropotkin’s mechanical conception of the universe was more paralysing than the Marxist fatalism Kropotkin criticized. Since all that happens has to happen, communist anarchism had necessarily to triumph. In Malatesta’s opinion, this took all incertitude away from Kropotkin and hid every difficulty. Undoubtedly Kropotkin’s influence as a propagandist was due considerably to how he showed the evolution to anarchism to be so simple, easy, and inevitable that his audience was seized by enthusiasm. However, his optimistic fatalism was, according to Malatesta, a form of wishful thinking. Kropotkin conceived Nature as a kind of Providence thanks to which harmony must reign in everything, human societies included. This led many Anarchists to repeat the phrase of Kropotkinian flavour: “Anarchy is natural order.” However, Malatesta countered, “one might ask how is it that if Nature’s law is really harmony, Nature has waited for Anarchists to come into existence, and still waits until they are victorious, before destroying the terrible and murderous disharmonies which at all times men have suffered.” Then he concluded: “would it not be nearer to truth to say that Anarchy is the struggle within human societies against the disharmonies of Nature?”18


The contrast with Kropotkin’s theories throws into relief the originality of Malatesta’s voluntarist appeal to solidarity, which also flies in the face of the claim, made current by postmodernist scholars of anarchism, that “classical anarchism” posited a universal benign human nature. Precisely because Malatesta did not posit any natural tendency towards anarchy he committed anarchism to a conscious choice between egoism and solidarity that confronted every individual. Natural harmony, the natural marriage of the good of each with that of all, was the invention of human laziness, which rather than struggling for an objective assumed its spontaneous fulfillment by natural law. How such ideas, clearly stated as early as 1890, were still at the core of Malatesta’s thought three decades later is illustrated by the article “La base morale dell’anarchismo” of 1922. Malatesta dropped therein any historical or sociological explanation as to how egoism and solidarity arose in society, but he confirmed his outlook on society as the outcome of the interplay between those two fundamental dispositions: “How the feeling arose which is expressed by the so-called moral precepts and which, as it develops, denies the existing morality and substitutes a higher morality, is a subject for research which may interest philosophers and sociologists, but it does not detract from the fact that it exists, independently of the explanations which may be advanced.” Whatever one’s explanation, the problem remained intact: “one must choose between love and hate, between brotherly co-operation and fratricidal struggle, between ‘altruism’ and ‘egoism’.”

Malatesta’s voluntarism and outlook on solidarity as a conscious choice did not mean that he regarded such choice as free from external constraints. On the contrary, he believed it was a choice that could only be made in favourable conditions. Though the advocacy and practice of solidarity and association were ultimately in the best interest of

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19 “La base morale dell’anarchismo,” *Umanità Nova* (Rome), no. 188 (16 September 1922); partly translated in *Life and Ideas*, 74–75.
the oppressed and exploited classes, still the spirit of solidarity characteristic of socialism was a moral force that could not be equated with the mere defense of material interests. Throughout his life, Malatesta frequently emphasized the discrepancy between the day-to-day defense of immediate material interests and a broader spirit of solidarity among workers. In August 1893, for example, a tragic episode occurred at Aigues-Mortes, in Provence, where thirty Italian workers were killed by French workers enraged by the competition that foreign labour was bringing in the local salt industry. A French anarchist periodical approved as natural the aggression against the “polenta-eaters,” guilty of lowering wage-rates. In contrast, Malatesta and Merlino called the aggression a crime. While the periodical conceded that “it would have been ‘more expedient’ for the workers of the two nationalities to ally against the bosses,” Malatesta and Merlino retorted that, on the contrary, “it is perhaps ‘more expedient’ to take it out on poor foreign workers than to revolt against the bosses.” However, this was also more reactionary and more detrimental to the workers’ cause.²⁰

The contrast between class solidarity and immediate interests in relation to foreign workers was addressed again ten years later with reference to Great Britain, where unemployment and poverty were rampant. Part of the mainstream press launched a campaign against “the foreign invasion,” and a similar sentiment spread among workers, who called for “good laws” against immigration. Malatesta regarded this viewpoint as mistaken; still, he understood it, remarking that “the damages that each individual suffers or could suffer from immigrant competition, in terms of lack of work or lower salaries, are immediate, direct, and readily palpable damages, while the general damages coming from disregarding solidarity among workers of all places of origin, and possibly from the artificial arrest of immigration flows, are a complex phenomenon, which cannot be easily

understood without intellectual effort.” For Malatesta, all the workers of the world had the same interests in the class struggle. However, he understood that such arguments could not easily find a way in the minds of hungry people. In times of crisis, when the alternative to even the most exploitative job may be starvation, “the economic science loses its rights, and it is no wonder—nor the object of blame—that those who are, or fear to become, unemployed overlook what might happen tomorrow, and look upon any new competitor with dislike, or even with hate.” Equally understandable was the fact that the capitalists encouraged the fratricidal war. What was inexcusable, though, was for socialist leaders to encourage such popular prejudices.  

In brief, Malatesta held realistic views on class consciousness formation, which he did not expect to arise necessarily from material interests. The same realism was at the core of his outlook on the relationship between conscious minorities and masses. This theme, brought into sharp relief by the dockers’ strike, was at the centre of Malatesta’s critique of the International and always remained a central theme of his anarchism. The knot of the matter was that conscious minorities could not substitute for the masses if a revolution was to be truly emancipatory, and at the same time the action of the masses could not be forthcoming at the will of the conscious minorities. The increasing recognition of the gap between conscious minorities and masses spurred much of Malatesta’s theoretical and tactical thinking. The International had been an association of both workers and revolutionaries in which, Malatesta argued, the conscious minorities either were forced to adapt to the backwardness of the mass, or fell under the illusion that the mass followed and understood them. In contrast, the first issue of L’Associazione featured the programme of a prospective anarchist party, the organization of a specific conscious minority. In turn, the acknowledgment of anarchism as a party implied that the question of how to act among workers presented itself in a new perspective. Malatesta’s

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21 “La guerra contro i lavoranti stranieri,” La Rivoluzione Sociale (London), no. 7 (27 January 1903).
discussion of the question was occasioned by the strike of the Rotterdam dockers, in which frictions between conscious minorities and masses had dramatically emerged. In his commentary to the strike Malatesta elaborated the theme of “going to the people,” claiming that in order to exert influence among the masses one had to live among them, not offering leadership, but preaching by example. Rather than caring about theoretical, abstract claims, “one must take the viewpoint of the mass, reach down to its starting point, and thence push it forward.” Malatesta’s polemical targets were the Dutch socialists who had rushed to the Rotterdam docks as outsiders to offer their leadership and preach moderation. In later years he would raise the same theme even more frequently against those anarchists who isolated themselves from the masses.

How then should propaganda and agitation be done among the masses? Malatesta’s response was informed by a realistic awareness of the limited degree of consciousness of the masses and an emphasis on the open-endedness and indeterminacy of collective action. For Malatesta, history showed that revolutions almost invariably start with moderate demands, more in the form of protests against abuses than of revolts against the essence of institutions, and often with displays of respect and devotion to the authorities. However, it is in action itself that revolts can radicalize: “a strike, if it can last and spread, can end up undermining the legitimacy itself of bosses; likewise, any attack on a town hall or a police station, can end up in open insurrection against the monarchy, even if it is made amidst shouts of ‘Long live the king! Long live the queen!’”

Propaganda and agitation should take into account such characteristics of collective action, he argued. In the anarchist press and any vehicle of propaganda that addressed the public in general, anarchists were to spell out their ideas and always state their whole programme loud and clear, without any concern about tailoring their message to specific people and circumstances. However, in the one-to-one propaganda and amidst popular unrest, in order to do useful work, the anarchist must adjust to the intelligence,
conditions, habits, and prejudices of the individuals and masses, to draw them as directly as possible to the socialist belief and action:

If one is afraid of naming things, let’s not mention names, when this is useful to do the things.

Who cares if the people shout “Long live the king!” if they are revolting against the king’s forces?

Who cares if they do not want to hear any talk of socialism, if they are attacking the bosses and taking back stuff from them?

The people of Paris, unaware of the irony, welcomed with cheers to the king every victory against the monarchy. Did this prevent Louis Capet from being beheaded?

Let’s take the people as they are, and let’s move forward with them: abandoning them just because they do not understand our formulas and our arguments in the abstract would be foolishness and betrayal at the same time. 22

This, however, should not turn into a pretext for abandoning the anarchist programme and both names and things. In certain circumstances, one could avoid mentioning socialism and anarchy, but only insofar as one was putting socialism and anarchy in practice. 23

Thus, Malatesta set a double task for anarchists: as an autonomous conscious minority, they should fully advocate their ideas; as a segment of the masses they should aim to be as flexible as possible in order to steer collective action in an emancipatory direction. How crucial this differentiation was is witnessed by Malatesta’s repeatedly resuming the theme in the next years, further sharpening the distinction between organization as anarchists and agitation among the masses. In the article “Questions de Tactique,” of October 1892, Malatesta reiterated the theme of “going to the people,” and elaborated on the twofold organizational task for anarchists. He quoted approvingly the apparently paradoxical opinion expressed by a comrade, who argued that anarchists must

22 “Un altro sciopero.”

23 Ibid.
enter workers' associations, or, where these do not exist, create them first and only afterwards spread anarchism in them. In their own groups, Malatesta argued, it made sense for anarchists to get together only with like-minded anarchists, and to remain together only as long as agreement lasted. On the other hand, outside of the anarchist groups, when it came to making propaganda and taking advantage of any popular movement, anarchists were to endeavour to make their presence felt wherever they could, and use any possible means to draw the masses together, to educate them to revolt, and to get an opportunity to preach socialism and anarchy, as long as such means did not contradict anarchist ends. 24

Two year later, in the article “Andiamo fra il popolo” (Let’s go to the people), Malatesta maintained that anarchists could not and did not want to wait for the masses to become fully anarchist before making a revolution. As long as the present economical and political social order existed, the vast majority of the population was condemned to ignorance and brutishness, and it was only capable of more or less blind rebellions. First the present order had to be overthrown, by making a revolution in whatever way one could, with the available forces. The anarchist could not expect to organize workers only after they became anarchists. How could they become anarchists, if they were left alone with the sense of impotence that came from their isolation? Anarchists were to organize amongst themselves, amongst people with firm beliefs and in full agreement; but around their groups they had to organize as many workers as possible in broad and open associations, accepting those workers for what they were, and getting them to progress as much as possible. 25

The theoretical distinction between workers’ associations for economic struggle and political organizations, already clear in the above articles, became increasingly sharp in

24 "Questions de tactique," La Révolte (Paris) 6, no. 3 (1–7 October 1892).

Malatesta’s writings, thus illustrating the fertility of his early distinctions of 1889. For him, that distinction was not only to be accepted as unavoidable, when a gap between conscious minorities and masses existed; it was also to be promoted as desirable, even in the favourable situations in which that gap was less perceptible. Thus, in the 1897 article “L’anarchismo nel movimento operajo” (Anarchism in the labour movement) Malatesta commented on the French union congress held in September 1897 in Toulouse, in which the French workers had expressed their leanings towards the positions of the anarchists. While rejoicing in the circumstance, Malatesta remarked: “Certainly the Toulouse congress was not an anarchist congress—and it is good that it was not. Anarchist congresses must be held by the anarchists, not by workers in general... except when the latter have already become anarchist, in which case anarchy would have triumphed.” Then, in clear contrast with the authoritarian spirit that he ascribed to both the Marxist and anarchist sides in the old International, he added: “We do not intend to impose our programme to the still unconvinced masses; even less we want to look strong by making workers vote declarations of principles that they do not fully accept, through sleights of hand and more or less clever maneuvers. We do not want our party to replace popular life; but we strive for that life to be broader, more conscious, and livelier, and for our party to exercise on it as much influence as comes naturally from the activity and intelligence that the party is able to put in its propaganda and action.”

In sum, the ideas that Malatesta began expressing in 1889 were informed by realism and pragmatism, in contrast to the stereotype of anarchism as impossibilist and unconcerned with empirical reality. Those ideas were based on a disenchanted outlook on the people and a rejection of inflated expectations about the people’s revolutionary instincts. Likewise, Malatesta rejected Marxist and anarchist theories alike that posited progressive historical tendencies. For him, these amounted to pernicious forms of wishful thinking.

26 “L’anarchismo nel movimento operajo.”
thinking. The complement of Malatesta’s realism was his voluntarism. His ideas were characterized by a dynamic relationship between the possible and the desirable, neither of which could be derived from the other. Human will was always limited, but the bounds of possibility could be indefinitely extended by science and association. The most concise expressions of such dynamic relationship between human goals and external constraints was Malatesta’s formula “one must aim at what one wants, doing what one can,” in which voluntarism and realism were intertwined.27 The same mutual dependence between the desirable and the possible, voluntarism and realism, was present in Malatesta’s tactical principles, which are summed up by five concepts: insurrectionism, coherence with ends, inclusiveness, “going to the people,” and anarchist autonomy. Such concepts, which were already clearly outlined in Malatesta’s discussion of conscious minorities and masses in L’Associazione, would remain the foundation of his tactics ever after.

Insurrection, or the violent overthrow of government, was the central concept in Malatesta’s tactics. For him insurrection was an inevitable step in a struggle for the expropriation of the means of production, which inevitably had to confront the force of government, the “gendarme” of privilege. Insurrection was the watershed of revolutionary tactics, the event that separated “before” from “after.” By removing the obstacle represented by the armed force of government and by enabling workers to take possession of the means of production, the insurrection opened up a whole new social scenario. As with most of his ideas, Malatesta’s outlook on the role of insurrection in the revolutionary process changed over time, on the ground of past experience and in response to changing conditions. In his early view, insurrection was largely identified with revolution. In time, he reached a more cautious outlook, according to which the insurrection required patient preparation, and it was to be regarded as a mere start, not as

27 “Ideale e realtà,” Pensiero e Volontà (Rome), no. 3 (1 February 1924).
the full accomplishment of the revolutionary process. However, this more realistic outlook on insurrection and revolution, rather than weakening Malatesta’s focus on insurrection, provided further motivation for advocating that a successful insurrection should happen as soon as possible. In brief, Malatesta was adamant in regarding insurrection as a key tactical objective. This aspect of his thought remained unchanged throughout his life, though his outlook on the overall revolutionary process did change.

While insurrection was the key objective, coherence between means and ends was the key principle that informed anarchist tactics. As discussed earlier, this principle is not to be intended as a form of ethical purism, but rather as a methodological principle that ensures the adequacy of the means to the intended end. In the section about pluralism we started to see how consideration of method acquired prominence in Malatesta’s views on the anarchist party. In the article “Questions révolutionnaires,” which appeared in _La Révolte_ of Paris few months after the demise of _L’Associazione_, Malatesta remarked again that “in social struggles, as well as in scientific research, it is method that counts most and determines the results; parties are constituted on the basis of what they want to do, not on the basis of what they desire or foresee.”

The principle of coherence between means and ends and the focus on method posited a direct link between current tactics and the outlook on future society, not in terms of a blueprint of society, but in terms of the method of collective action that characterized it. While revolution constituted a dramatic break in social life, there was no break or discontinuity in the anarchist method of collective action.

The complement to the principle of coherence between ends and means is what we might call the principle of inclusiveness. If, on the one hand, any struggle relevant to anarchists must be coherent with their ends, any struggle coherent with their ends must be relevant to anarchists, no matter how limited or partial it is. The combination of these

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28 “Questions révolutionnaires,” _La Révolte_ (Paris) 4, no. 4 (4–10 October 1890).
two principles, coherence and inclusiveness, was always present in Malatesta’s tactics, and was clearly expressed as early as his *Programma* of 1884, where he wrote: “the International, whose immediate goal is the simultaneous insurrection against political power, for its abolition, and against owners, for the common ownership of wealth, must choose those means that are instrumental to prepare the insurrection and to ensure its anti-authoritarian and anti-property character.” Then he condensed the tactics of the International in the following principle: “Everything that draws the socialist insurrection closer and makes it easier is good; everything that pushes it farther, or makes it more difficult, or alters its anarchist-socialist character is bad: this is the criterion that guides the International in its conduct.” The same concept was frequently repeated in later writings. For example, Malatesta wrote in *L’Associazione*: “Deeds perhaps insignificant in themselves but repeated frequently and widely are more useful than momentous ones undertaken once every so many years.”

Unlike coherence between ends and means, the advocacy of inclusiveness in anarchist struggles was more characteristic of Malatesta than of anarchism in general, and subjected him to polemics and misunderstandings by anarchists of different tendencies. The same can be said for another of Malatesta’s basic tactical tenets, the urge of “going to the people.” In “Questions révolutionnaires” Malatesta thus expressed his point in a short paragraph that well summarizes the tactical principles illustrated so far:

> We must mingle as much as possible with the popular life; we must encourage and push every movement that contains a seed of material or moral revolt and gets the people used to manage themselves their own matters and rely only on their own force. However, we must do this without ever losing sight of the following facts: that the revolution for the purposes of expropriating and collectively owning property and the demolition of power are the only salvation of the proletariat and of Humanity; and therefore anything is good or bad depending on whether it

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29 *Programma e Organizzazione*, 50; “La propaganda a fatti,” *L’Associazione* (Nice) 1, no. 2 (16 October 1889).
Malatesta advocated anarchist autonomy as a way out of the apparent conflict or contradiction between anarchist coherence and participation in every struggle. Anarchists should organize amongst themselves, he maintained, and claim their ideas and programmes in their entirety. At the same time, they should join or promote any collective action that was not inconsistent with their principles and objectives, even when these were not explicitly anarchist. This did not exclude that, whenever they had sufficient strength, suitable opportunities, and chances of success, they should also undertake initiatives on their own behalf. These could also be the deeds of small groups and individuals, when they had a good chance to be useful and effective. Explicitly anarchist and collective action was the ideal case. However, in the same way that Malatesta was inclusive with respect to collective initiatives that were not explicitly anarchist, he was also inclusive with respect to explicitly anarchist initiatives that were not collective. In contrast to the exclusiveness of other anarchists, who conceived collective action as a sum of individual actions of a purely anarchist type, and tended to despise mass movements, Malatesta’s advocacy of participation in mass movements, especially in the labour movement, did not imply ruling out individual or affinity group action.

These five tactical principles—insurrectionism, coherence with ends, inclusiveness, “going to the people,” and anarchist autonomy—account for much of the tactics that Malatesta advocated over time. They do not define a single tactic, but rather they provide the general boundaries of anarchist action; they define a space within which different tactics could be devised, depending on the specific context. Such principles are general enough as to make many tactics available within them, but also restrictive enough as to rule out all those deviations from anarchism that Malatesta criticized. The principles of

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30 See note 28.
insurrectionism and anarchist autonomy on the one hand, and inclusiveness and “going to
the people” on the other hand, placed different demands on the anarchist militants. While
each of those principles was individually shared by other anarchists, their coexistence
provided Malatesta’s approach to tactics with its original character of flexibility and
pragmatism. At the same time, Malatesta was aware of the exaggerations that a rigid
interpretation of one or the other principle could give rise to. Thus, in “Questions
révolutionnaires” he also remarked: “We must avoid two pitfalls: on the one hand, the
indifference to everyday life and struggles, which brings us farther from the people and
makes us stranger and incomprehensible to them; and on the other hand, letting ourselves
be absorbed by such struggles, giving them a greater importance than they have, and
ending up forgetting about the revolution.” The importance attributed to partial struggles,
which in other socialist and anarchist militants was accompanied with the tendency to
defer the revolution to a time when conditions would be ripe, was counterbalanced in
Malatesta by his voluntarism, which regarded revolution as an occurrence that had to be
not only awaited, but also prepared and consciously aimed for.

With the exception of insurrectionism, Malatesta’s tactical tenets did not advocate
specific tactics, but provided guidelines for choosing tactics. In their methodological
nature, those principles were consistent with Malatesta’s redefinition of anarchism as
method, whose importance for anarchist thought can hardly be over-emphasized. In the
transition from the 1884 version of “L’Anarchia” to that of 1891 one can discern at the
same time the continuity of themes and the novelty of the conclusions Malatesta
eventually reached. Anarchy was no longer defined, more or less statically, as a
blueprint, an ideal description of how a perfect society would be organized as a whole;
instead, it was dynamically described as a method defining an open-ended process, which
guaranteed that the best possible society be reached, without describing what its specific
traits would be. Such a method was the method of freedom; its pre-requisite was that
private ownership of the means of production and government be abolished; and the
driving force of social evolution was solidarity. The relationship between the solidarity of individuals and the organization of society as a whole had been inverted: it was no longer the case that the best organization of society ensured the solidarity of individuals, but rather the latter engendered, through free initiative, the best possible social organization. Ideas about specific solutions to social problems were still relevant, but they pertained to individuals, and as such they contributed to shape the new society, as long as they were inspired by the beacon of solidarity. In sum, the anarchist method became not only the essence of the anarchist party in the present, but also of the anarchist society in the future.

At the core of Malatesta's transition from defining anarchism in terms of blueprints of society to defining it in terms of method was an even more fundamental turn in his thought, which provides unity to the theme discussed so far. Concepts as collectivism and communism were inherently collective, while method was individually applicable. Correspondingly, the turn in question was a methodological shift from a holistic to an individualistic outlook on society. The terms "methodological holism" and "methodological individualism" belong to the philosophy of social science of the twentieth century. In a nutshell, the former explains the behaviour of individuals in terms of the influence and constraints that social wholes place on each of them; the latter explains social wholes as the end result of the complex interactions among actors. Though Malatesta never used such terms and cannot be claimed to be a forerunner of ideas advanced decades later, a methodological individualistic outlook is evident in his writings after 1889. For example, in the 1891 version of "L'Anarchia" he wrote:

The real being is man, the individual. Society or the collectivity—and the State or government which claims to represent it—if it is not a hollow abstraction must be made up of individuals. And it is in the organism of every individual that all thoughts and human actions inevitably have their origin, and from being individual they become collective thoughts and acts.

when they are or become accepted by many individuals. Social action, therefore, is neither the negation nor the complement of individual initiative, but is the resultant of initiatives, thoughts, and actions of all individuals who make up society; a resultant which, all other things being equal, is greater or smaller depending on whether individual forces are directed to a common objective or are divided or antagonistic. And if instead, as do the authoritarians, one means government action when one talks of social action, then this is still the resultant of individual forces, but only of those individuals who form the government or who by reason of their position can influence the policy of the government.32

Unlike the methodological individualism of the twentieth century, which is explanatory and descriptive, Malatesta’s methodological individualism also bore a prescriptive character, becoming the basis of his model of purposive social action. However, appraising society is equally required in the descriptive and prescriptive domains, therefore the extension of methodological concepts from one domain to the other is justified. The distinction between methodological and ethical individualism should also be emphasized, for Malatesta was not an individualist in the latter sense, as his advocacy of solidarity as the basis of socialism clearly shows.

Elements of methodological individualism already existed in a tradition of political thought that influenced Malatesta, thus suggesting that such stance was not a mere, contingent addition to Malatesta’s ideas, but rather it was logically connected to them. For example, Carlo Pisacane, who had a strong influence on Italian Internationalists, wrote in 1857 that there was no denying that the revolution had to be made by “the country.” However, he added, “the country is made up of individuals.... If everybody were to say: the revolution must be made by the country and I, being an infinitesimal part of the country, have my infinitesimal portion of duty to do and were to do it, the revolution would be carried out immediately and would be invincible because of its scale.”33

32 Anarchy, 36.

33 Carlo Pisacane, “Political Testament,” in Graham, 68.
Furthermore, opposite methodological attitudes were already implicit in the respective outlooks on human will held by Marxists and anarchists since the First International. Marxists focused on understanding the developmental laws of autonomous social processes. Instead, the voluntarist anarchists focused on the individual agencies of social actors and their interplay. Such a contrast, which readily lends itself to be described methodologically in terms of holism versus individualism, underlay the different ways in which collective goals were set. For the holists the object of the purposive action of proletarians was the “historical mission” assigned to them by the laws of social development. In contrast, the individualists emphasized that the goals of purposive action were chosen.

After 1889 Malatesta’s methodological individualist stance became explicit and pervaded every theme he dealt with in *L’Associazione*. For example, though he had always drawn a distinction between conscious minorities and masses, the new emphasis placed on the consciousness gap between minorities and masses signaled a re-orientation of his perspective on their mutual relationship. In the International the proletariat was held to be the revolutionary subject, and the International was meant to be the proletariat’s organization. A holistic assumption underlay such perspective, from which, as Malatesta later acknowledged, the tendency proceeded to overlook the gap between the proletarian masses and the conscious minority that actually formed the International. Malatesta’s novel acknowledgment of that gap went hand in hand with his rejection of any holistic assumption. The organization he advocated in 1889 was no longer the organization of the entire proletariat, but an anarchist party. The latter was made up of workers, but only claimed to represent itself, not the proletariat as a whole. It claimed autonomy at the same time that it re-asserted its aim to work among the masses and to “go to the people.” The distinction between anarchist and workers’ organizations was not an adjustment to a contingent consciousness gap between minorities and masses. Rather,
it took on a prescriptive character, as Malatesta made clear in 1897, remarking that “anarchist congresses must be held by the anarchists, not by workers in general.”

Malatesta’s methodological re-orientation was also evident in his new outlook on collectivism and communism. In 1884 he had maintained that collectivism was powerless to bring about people’s moral transformation. In contrast, in 1889 he maintained that people’s moral transformation would prevent collectivism from bringing back privilege and wage labour. On the subject of pluralism, too, Malatesta did not just take an instrumental stance for the sake of unity, but gave pluralism a prescriptive character. Dropping the collectivist–communist controversy was not just a tactical possibility, but also a necessity dictated by the anarchist method. Finally, by moving from a concept of anarchy as description of the optimal social organization, to that of anarchy as method, Malatesta fully resolved the concept of the anarchist society into individual dispositions and actions. The end result of the interaction among actors was left unspecified; but to the extent that the interaction was informed by anarchist dispositions, and therefore conducted by anarchist method, the result could only be an anarchist society.

Thus Malatesta’s novel views expressed in L’Associazione both represented a methodological shift and provided fertile ground for the continuing development of his ideas. It began to weaken a black-and-white outlook on society, according to which either a society was anarchist or it was not, either government and private property existed or they did not. The future society was no longer regarded as statically perfect, as “the absolute ideal which like the horizon recedes as fast as we approach it”; instead, it came to be regarded as a process, as “the way open to all progress and all improvements for the benefit of everybody.” As for the present society, methodological individualism opened the door to a more graded view of society. Government and private property might have a

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34 “L’anarchismo nel movimento operajo.”

35 See note 15.
greater or lesser strength, depending on the strength and intransigence of the opposition they encountered. Malatesta foreshadowed such a view in the final paragraphs of the 1891 version of *L’Anarchia*, where he argued for the value of anarchism in bringing about social progress, regardless of whether or not anarchy and socialism would triumph in the next revolution:

> In any case we will have on events the kind of influence which will reflect our numerical strength, our energy, our intelligence and our intransigence. Even if we are defeated, our work will not have been useless, for the greater our resolve to achieve the implementation of our programme in full, the less property, and less government will there be in the new society. And we will have performed a worthy task for, after all, human progress is measured by the extent government power and private property are reduced.\(^{36}\)

In this new appraisal of anarchism were the seeds of ideas that Malatesta would fully formulate in the 1920s. Those formulations were the result of decades of revolutionary experiences, struggles, and defeats, thus contrasting with the irrationalist stereotype of anarchism as unchanging and detached from reality. At the same time, that Malatesta’s ideas of the 1920s were rooted in his theoretical turn of 1889 speaks to the coherence of his anarchism, thus defying another side of the irrationalist stereotype, that of anarchism as contradictory and inconsequent. Both the tactical flexibility and the theoretical unity of Malatesta’s anarchism were well illustrated by his trajectory during the 1890s, beginning with the insurrectionist activity of 1890–2, to which the next chapter is devoted.

\(^{36}\) *Anarchy*, 53–54.
Chapter V

“Nobody Knows When the Times Are Ripe”: Anarchist Insurrectionism, 1890–92

For Malatesta, the early 1890s, following the end of *L’Associazione* in January 1890, were years of intense agitations with insurrectional objectives. The cycle of struggles of 1890–4, covered by the present and the next chapter, illustrates both the continuity and diversity of Malatesta’s anarchism.

Continuity is relevant in three respects. First is the continuity of Malatesta’s action over time, in contrast with the historiographical pattern of cyclical appearance and disappearances of anarchism. The historiographical problem is particularly acute for this cycle of struggles, which were largely forced underground by their insurrectionary objectives. Second is continuity in space, or the interconnection of anarchist struggles across national borders. Malatesta’s activity over five years involved as many countries: England, France, Italy, Spain, and Belgium. The neglect of the transnational and cross-national dimensions of anarchism is another historiographical shortcoming that has fostered interpretations in terms of appearances and disappearances. Third is the continuity of Malatesta’s thought, in terms of both interdependence between theory and tactics and solidity of theoretical foundations over time.

At the same time, the struggles of 1890–4 illustrate the diversity of Malatesta’s tactics, which both adjusted to different circumstances and changed in time, based on the lesson of experience. Among agitations with insurrectional objectives, a first differentiation, reflected in Malatesta’s tactics, can be made between anarchist autonomous initiatives and participation in ongoing agitations that did not have an explicit anarchist content. The agitations of 1890–2, centered on the First of May and its competing interpretations by socialists and anarchists, were examples of the former type.
The theoretical foundations of Malatesta’s insurrectionary tactics, on the basis of which his action in the early 1890s is best understood, were illustrated in a series of articles appeared in *L’Associazione*. In these articles Malatesta explained his positive outlook on successful and unsuccessful uprisings. His outlook was based on theoretical notions such as the indeterminacy of collective action and the precedence of deeds over ideas that were already implicit in the tactic of propaganda by the deed that Italian anarchists began advocating in the mid-1870s. In *L’Associazione* Malatesta reiterated his belief in propaganda by the deed, at the same time that he thoroughly reviewed this concept, in the light of past experiences and changed conditions.

Malatesta articulated his appreciation of uprisings as steps on the path of revolution in the article “La sommossa non é rivoluzione” (An uprising is not a revolution) of October 1889. This was Malatesta’s response to an article by the same title published in the Italian socialist revolutionary periodical *La Rivendicazione*, which claimed that “every partial uprising is an aborted revolution.” Malatesta retorted that uprisings played an immense role in provoking and preparing revolutions. For Malatesta, “it is always deeds that provoke ideas, which in turn act upon deeds, and so on.” He pointed to the history of past revolutions, which were all preceded, provoked, and determined by numerous uprisings that prepared people’s minds to the struggle: “The great French revolution would not have occurred if the countryside—worked up by a thorough propaganda—had not started to burn castles and hang masters, and if the people of Paris in tumult had not committed the sublime folly of attacking the Bastille with pikes.” The history of socialism itself provided further evidence with the Paris Commune, which arose from an uprising in Montmartre, and which in turn originated a splendid movement of ideas, and a whole period of feverish socialist activism. Revolutions had nowhere to start from than uprisings: “Certainly, while all uprisings make propaganda, only few have
the good fortune to arrive at the right time to determine a revolution. Yet who can say what is the right time?”

The key concept outlined here by Malatesta is the indeterminacy of collective action. No one can fully foresee the outcome of one’s intentional social action, nor is the outcome of collective action necessarily what its participants had initially envisioned. Similar ideas dotted Malatesta’s writings from 1889 on. Commenting upon the Rotterdam strike of September 1889 Malatesta had remarked that “history shows that revolutions start almost invariably with moderate demands, more in the form of protests against abuses than of revolts against the essence of institutions, and often with displays of respect and devotion to the authorities.” In 1894 he expressed the same concept, with reference to the French revolution and to the recent movement of the Sicilian Fasci: “Let us remember that the people of Paris started off by demanding bread to the king amidst applauds and tears of affection, yet—having received bullets instead of bread, as it was natural—after two years they beheaded him. And it was only yesterday that the Sicilian people were on the verge of making a revolution while cheering to the king and his whole family.” Similar ideas can still be found in Malatesta’s writings of two decades later. In 1914 a strike of the railway workers in Italy was creating serious difficulties to the government. In an article titled “È possibile la rivoluzione?” (Is revolution possible?) Malatesta started by claiming, “Naturally we do not know what could happen in the near future.” He then emphasized how a minor issue over salaries had escalated into a serious crisis, and pictured a hypothetical scenario, which really looks like a disguised call for action: “If really—people wonder—the railway workers refused to work; if ill-intentioned people made even a limited service impossible, sabotaging the rolling stock and the railway tracks; if the most conscious part of the proletariat supported the

1 “La sommossa non è rivoluzione,” L’Associazione (Nice) 1, no. 3 (27 October 1889).
2 “Un altro sciopero”; “Andiamo fra il popolo.”
movement with general strikes: what would the government do with its soldiers, even supposing that the latter failed to remember that they are forcefully enlisted proletarians, and that their fathers, brothers, and friends are among the strikers? How could the current order continue?” Malatesta argued that revolution would impose itself as a necessity, for it alone could ensure the continuation of social life. “Perhaps this will not happen today. Still, why could not it happen tomorrow?” After maintaining that nobody knows in advance when the times are really ripe and that the fateful hour could strike at any moment, Malatesta concluded: “Everybody keep ready for tomorrow... or for today.”3 Only a few weeks later the insurrectionary movement of the Red Week broke out, in which Malatesta had a leading role. In the light of this circumstance it would be problematic to determine whether Malatesta’s prediction should be read descriptively as that of a perceptive sociologist or prescriptively as that of an effective agitator.

Another key point raised by Malatesta’s argument about uprisings was the precedence of deeds over ideas. This concept had already been put forward by the federalist socialist Carlo Pisacane in 1857:

> The propaganda of the idea is a chimera; the education of the people is nonsense. Ideas result from deeds, and not the latter from the former; it is not the case that the people will be free once it is educated, but rather it will be educated once it is free. The only work a citizen can undertake to benefit his country is to contribute to the material revolution: conspiracies, plots, insurrectionary attempts, etc. constitute the trend of events through which Italy progresses towards its goal. The flash of Milano’s bayonet was a more effective propaganda than a thousand volumes written by those doctrinaires who are a real plague to ours as to any other country.4

The precedence of deeds over ideas meant that deeds themselves had a propaganda value, regardless of their victorious outcome, as the Paris Commune demonstrated. Therefore deeds were consciously undertaken by anarchists not only for their immediate effects, but

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3 “È possibile la rivoluzione?” Volontà (Ancona) 2, no. 16 (18 April 1914).

4 Carlo Pisacane, “Testamento politico,” quoted in “Pisacane e i Mazziniani,” La Questione Sociale (Florence) 1, no. 2 (29 December 1883). Agesilao Milano was a Calabrian soldier who made an attempt on the life of the king of Naples in 1856.
also as a form of propaganda, in order to build a revolutionary consciousness in the people. This was the idea of propaganda by the deed, which anarchists inherited directly from Pisacane and turned into a cornerstone of their tactics. The Benevento uprising of April 1877—in which Malatesta, Carlo Cafiero, and a group of about thirty revolutionaries roamed the countryside around Benevento, in the south of Italy, seizing municipalities, publicly burning tax registers, distributing municipal funds, and making every effort to sway the peasants to social revolution—was itself an instance of propaganda by the deed. Indeterminacy of collective action and precedence of deeds over ideas jointly provided the ground for Malatesta’s dynamic outlook on insurrection in two respects: the relationship between anarchist and popular collective action and the relationship between partial struggles and insurrection. In the first respect, one could not determine a priori where a successful insurrection would originate. Anarchist and popular collective action neither preceded nor necessarily followed each other. On the one hand, anarchists had the task of creating the opportunities for insurrectionary collective action. The First of May movement was a case in point. On the other hand, they were to seize any insurrectionary opportunity offered by popular movements, without shunning them when these did not have explicit anarchist content. As for the relationship between partial struggles and insurrection, Malatesta blurred the distinction between them. On the one hand, he refused to regard a failed uprising as simply an aborted revolution, since even a failed uprising might have propaganda value. On the other hand, he believed that insurrections could arise from open-ended initiatives that were not originally meant as insurrections. From these beliefs taken together, a continuum resulted that ranged from local revolts and attacks on property to fully-fledged insurrections.

Malatesta redefined propaganda by the deed in the two articles “A proposito di uno sciopero” and “La propaganda a fatti,” which appeared consecutively in the first two issues of L’Associazione, in October 1889. Malatesta’s increasing emphasis on “going to
the people” led him to a retrospective criticism of earlier tactics of the Italian Internationalists. The two articles were complementary. The first article, prompted by the London dockers’ strike, focused on the workplace and criticized the attitude of Internationalists towards strikes, which overlooked the strike as economic weapon, and neglected to attribute it its due importance as a factor of moral revolt. In contrast, Malatesta emphasized that “the masses get to advance broad demands by way of small complaints and small revolts.” The anarchists’ task was to join them and push them forward, to provoke and organize as many strikes as possible, striving to make them contagious. However, each strike should have its revolutionary mark; in each of them there should be people resolute enough “to castigate the bosses, and above all to attack property and show to the strikers how much easier it is to take than to demand.” These tactics would put anarchists in direct and continuous contact with the masses, provide opportunities to spread anarchist ideas, and to practice that propaganda by the deed that, Malatesta lamented, anarchists often preached but seldom practiced. In addition, a revolution arising from a wave of strikes would have the advantage of directly placing the question of human emancipation on its proper ground, the economic one. The second article focused on propaganda by the deed outside of the workplace, while retaining a strong anti-capitalist character. Malatesta argued that classical armed band warfare, as attempted in the Benevento uprising of 1877, was no longer suitable to the present conditions and aspirations of the anarchist party. The armed band, with its marked military character, was in conflict with the idea of a popular revolution, which required means at everyone’s reach. Malatesta proposed to replace armed bands with temporary flying squads, which would focus on direct attacks on private property, such as appropriating an employer’s cash funds or a farmer’s crop and distributing them to the workers, attacking landlords and tax collectors, etc. Such tactics would not only be more sustainable, but also accessible to everyone, and flexible enough to be applicable in nearly every circumstance. In both cases the redefinition of propaganda by the deed
pointed in the same twofold direction. First, it drew propaganda by the deed closer to the immediate interests and antagonistic feelings of the popular masses, by shifting focus from lofty ideals to everyday complaints, and from military action to the attack on private property. Second, it emphasized the inclusive character that Malatesta believed anarchist action should bear, by shifting focus from single sensational events to small-scale, diffuse actions.⁵

While insurrectionary goals should not prevent anarchists from joining or promoting all forms of small-scale struggle at any level, neither should the latter lead anarchists to lose sight of their ultimate goal. Malatesta did not expect that a successful insurrection would arise from a sheer multiplication of local acts of attack on property. Though he believed that mass insurrection would “come as a consequence of an incessant propaganda and of a huge number of individual and collective revolts,” he also claimed that such acts were to be carried out “waiting for the day in which we will be able to get to the streets with the popular masses to deal the final blow.” Coordination and preparation on a different scale were definitely required for an insurrection to be successful. This, in turn, did not mean that a popular insurrection could be planned as if anarchists could expect to turn the popular masses into a disciplined army at their disposal, waiting for the sign of revolt from their leaders. This is another aspect of Malatesta’s dynamic outlook on the relationship between anarchist and popular, or organized and spontaneous collective action. A successful insurrection could be neither fully planned nor fully spontaneous. Instead, it could only arise from a combination of anarchist planning and popular spontaneity.

Malatesta’s outlook on propaganda by the deed sheds light on the cyclic pattern of anarchist struggles, which historians of anarchism have often described in terms of repetition without progress or evolution. For example, E. J. Hobsbawm thus summarizes

⁵“A proposito di uno sciopero”; “La propaganda a fatti.”
sixty years of history of Andalusian anarchism within a paragraph: “The movement collapsed in the later 1870s... revived again in the later 1880s, to collapse again.... In 1892 there was another outburst.... In the early 1900s another revival occurred.... After another period of quiescence the greatest of the hitherto recorded mass movements was set off, it is said, by news of the Russian Revolution.... The Republic (1931–6) saw the last of the great revivals....” Similarly, Nunzio Pernicone writes about Italian anarchism in the 19th century: “As if the movement was locked in a vicious cycle of advance and retreat, every anarchist revival triggered or coincided with a new wave of government repression... that eradicated all that had been accomplished....” Evaluating insurrectionary initiatives merely by their failure and immediate outcome could be equated, in terms of parliamentary politics, to trivializing the history of an opposition party as a cyclical sequence of bids for power and electoral defeats.6

In contrast, by refusing to simply look upon partial uprisings simply as aborted revolutions, Malatesta tended to attribute to them a progressive role in preparing a revolution and bringing it nearer, though no one could foretell if and when a revolution was about to come. Uprisings had value regardless of whether they were successful, or even when a lasting success was simply out of the question from a merely tactical perspective. For Malatesta, partial uprisings, local revolts, and acts of propaganda by the deed were valuable in instilling a struggling habit and forming a revolutionary consciousness in workers. His appraisal of direct action was not based on anarchist dogmas, but on reasons drawn from the logic of collective action, such as the precedence of deeds over ideas and social indeterminacy, the latter of which has become a current theme in today's sociological literature.7 By emphasizing the open-endedness of partial

6 Hobsbawm, Primitive Rebels, 78–79; Pernicone, 7.

struggles and the progressive value of unsuccessful revolts, Malatesta inclusively looked upon the whole gamut of direct action as a continuum. Local revolts and failed uprisings were useful in their own right as acts of propaganda by the deed and steps towards the final insurrection.

For Malatesta, each revolt made sense in view of the ultimate insurrectionary goal, while no revolt needed to explicitly aim for that goal to make sense. Such continuity has been obliterated in stereotypical representations of anarchism. On the one hand, propaganda by the deed has been trivialized through identification with individual deeds, and preferentially the most senseless ones, such as bombings that most anarchists themselves disavowed. On the other hand, anarchist uprisings have been trivialized into an equally senseless all-or-nothing pursuit of a heaven-on-earth to be immediately realized. While Malatesta’s notion of propaganda by the deed bridged the gap between here-and-now direct action means and ultimate insurrectionary ends, stereotypical trivializations of anarchism have precisely severed that link, representing anarchist action as either aimless or aiming for the impossible. Unsurprisingly, the only explanations left open have been chiliastic mentality, purism, or stupidity.

Malatesta’s ideas about the indeterminacy of social action, the precedence of deeds over ideas, and the propaganda value of direct action are practically illustrated by his attitude towards the First of May movement, and by his action in the first three years of this annual event. The origin of the First of May was bound up with the eight-hour movement that started in America, escalating to the Haymarket affair of 1886 in Chicago. During a workers’ demonstration three days after a 1 May strike for the eight hour day, a bomb thrown from the crowd killed a policemen, leading to the hanging of four anarchist labour leaders held responsible for the bomb. In December 1888, a year after the execution, the American Federation of Labour decided to resume mass demonstrations for the eight hour day on 1 May 1890. The following year, one of two competing international socialist congresses held simultaneously in Paris, from which the Second
International was to arise, followed suit, deciding that mass demonstrations be organized in all countries for the same day. The First of May’s character of annual demonstration was eventually established by the Brussels international socialist congress of August 1891.8

In an essay on the First of May, which she interprets as a working-class ritual, or “the High Mass of the working class,” Michelle Perrot remarks: “Doing the same thing at the same time: this great principle of religious practice was now, by a stroke of genius, transferred to the labour movement, a new Moses leading the way to a new Promised Land.”9 However, the idea of “doing the same thing at the same time” was also, for Malatesta, the principle of effective revolutionary practice and collective action in general, the general strike being an example. The very characters that Perrot regards as ritual, especially the contrast between the paucity of instructions and the grandiose vision, constituted for Malatesta a promising basis for collective action, by making the demonstration amenable to different outcomes. Large masses of workers gathered together under an anti-capitalist banner in an ideologically highly charged context; at the same time, no immediate practical objectives were provided to the demonstrators. A great energy was being accumulated that could be released in different directions.

During the first years of the First of May, when the event had not crystallized into a ritualized tradition, Malatesta placed hope and invested great energy in the movement. In contrast to socialist parties, which aimed to channel the movement into institutional forms in support of legal demands, from the outset Malatesta interpreted the First of May as an opportunity for a less predictable and controllable escalation of class struggle


through direct action. Thus, at the end of April 1890 he traveled from London for Paris with the hope of taking part in a combative mass demonstration with momentous consequences. However, Malatesta’s hope did not materialize, and days later he returned to London.¹⁰

Malatesta’s attitude and expectations in Paris clearly emerge from his article “Les Leçons du 1ᵉʳ Mai,” written for La Révolte in the wake of the demonstration, which he regarded as a missed opportunity. Malatesta’s criticism focused on the anarchists’ lack of organization and their wrong attitude toward the masses. If anarchists felt that the demonstration would not or should not be peaceful, they should have got ready to set the masses in revolt, foreseen means of attack and defence, made plans, and distributed tasks. As for their attitude toward the masses, Malatesta argued that the uselessness of an eight-hour law could well be true in general, since the workers’ conquests were secured by resistance rather than laws, but emphasizing it as useless on the eve of the demonstration was a bad idea, as this boiled down to inviting workers not to demonstrate. In brief, Malatesta appreciated the eight-hour struggle, but advocated its move from the legislative terrain to collective direct action, where it was open to various outcomes, depending on workers’ participation and determination.¹¹

The article also hinted at what Malatesta thought anarchists could have done: attract part of the demonstrators to some unguarded uptown district of Paris, entrench themselves, erect barricades, and defend themselves. They might have remained in control for only few days, or even hours, but meanwhile expropriation might have started, showing to the masses what the triumphant revolution would bring them. Malatesta’s scenario is a clear example of his concept of propaganda by the deed: “Can you imagine,” he wrote, “what the effect would have been, in France and abroad, of the

¹⁰ Luigi Fabbri, Vida de Malatesta, 127–8.

news that Paris had risen up, and that the anarchists had been in control of Montmartre or Belleville?" More generally, Malatesta’s analysis of the Paris demonstration is an example of what he regarded as an effective relationship between conscious minorities and masses. The former were to organize amongst themselves and take a leading role, but they could do so only by “going to the people”: mingling with popular life, preaching by example, “taking the people as they were, and moving forward with them.”

The relation between conscious minorities and masses was made not only of demonstrative actions, but also of day-to-day organization work, as illustrated by another initiative addressed to French workers that Malatesta promoted in September 1890. After the strikes in the ports of London and Rotterdam the year before, considerations about the relevance of dock workers’ struggles across Europe induced Malatesta to regard French dock workers as a privileged target of his agitation efforts. In a letter of 24 September, he asked Gustave Brocher to revise the draft of an appeal in French addressed to dock workers. Malatesta’s hand-written draft, bearing the title “Aux ouvriers du Port de ...” and generically signed “Un groupe de travailleurs,” urged dock workers to organize on the workplace, reminding them in plain language that the cause of their exploitation was that “instead of loving each other like brothers, instead of uniting and agreeing on what should be done, as the workers of other countries have done, among which our fellow workers of Le Havre, we are jealous and hate each other like enemies. By remaining divided we will never have the force to remedy the ills that afflict us.” Then the flyer announced that a group of workers of the port had created an association to defend the workers’ interests and urged dockers to join it, issuing the battle-cry of the International: “The emancipation of workers must be undertaken by the workers themselves.” Workers were then invited to an upcoming meeting. The draft was meant for simultaneous distribution in different ports. The cover letter to Brocher contained a significant

12 Ibid.
recommendation: “Feel free to change it as you like, but please note: no socialism, revolution, anarchy, etc., since that, it seems, would frighten and turn away the workers to which it is addressed.” The recommendation was clearly prompted by the events of London and Rotterdam, where the strikers had rejected red flags and socialist language. The episode speaks to Malatesta’s pragmatism and to the mutual influence between his tactical evolution and practical experience. It also provides a concrete example of how he intended propaganda among workers, which was altogether different from the proselytizing effort aimed at making anarchists.13

Meanwhile Malatesta’s main focus was shifting to Italy, in a series of events that culminated with the First of May 1891. The start of this mobilization effort was a manifesto of November 1890, calling for workers to abstain from voting in the general elections in Italy. As Luigi Galleani recalled years later, the decision to issue the manifesto was taken “together with Errico Malatesta, Saverio Merlino, Paolo Schicchi, Augusto Norsa, Peppino Consorti, Galileo Palla and a number of other comrades exiled in France, Switzerland, and England.”14 The initiative must have originated in the very days around the First of May 1890, during Malatesta’s stay in Paris, where all the militants mentioned by Galleani had converged, scattering shortly thereafter in different directions: Merlino, convicted in connection with the First of May, left France in July, as Schicchi also did; Norsa was expelled during the very month of May; the same lot fell to Galleani after a four-month imprisonment, only to be arrested again in Switzerland in October.15 The manifesto was signed by seventy-five militants “on behalf of Anarchist

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13 Malatesta to Gustave Brocher, London, 24 September 1890, and “Aux ouvriers du Port de …,” Gustave Brocher Papers, IISG.


15 See respective entries in Antonioli, Dizionario biografico.
Groups and Federations.” 16 As Luigi Fabbri points out, these were militants living abroad, among whom the manifesto had been circulated between May and November. Thus the manifesto documents the role of transnational Italian anarchism for propaganda and mobilization in the motherland. Although no location was associated with the signatories, available biographical information for twenty-five of them—in addition to those already mentioned—illustrates their geographical spread: between 1890 and 1900 seven are found in London; four each in France, Switzerland, Tunisia, and Egypt; and two in the United States. In addition to “the best-known comrades of the time,” as Fabbri remarked, the majority were obscure figures. Yet in many instances their militancy had a sustained character. It was precisely their ability to remain inconspicuous that enabled them to effectively protract their militancy for a considerable stretch of time. To a significant degree, this kind of militancy provided the backbone of the transnational anarchist network, providing logistic support to propaganda and organization, and contributing to the continuity of the anarchist network over the next decade and beyond. 17

The key event of the organization effort that occupied Italian anarchism from mid-1890 on was a congress aimed at establishing a country-wide federation. Anarchists could neither afford to hold their congress on Italian soil nor let the government know about its time and place. Thus it was decided that the congress would take place in Tessin, a Swiss canton bordering with Italy. A public call was made for 11 January 1891 in Lugano, and socialists of all tendencies were invited. However, the date and place were only meant to deceive the authorities. On 7 January the news came instead that the congress had already taken place in the small town of Capolago. It lasted from 4 to 6 January 1891, with the participation of numerous delegates, including Malatesta,

17 Luigi Fabbri, Vida de Malatesta, 128.
Merlino, Pezzi, Pietro Gori, and Ettore Molinari. After the congress Malatesta returned unscathed to London.\footnote{Ibid., 129–130.}

The congress was the founding act of the Partito Socialista-anarchico-rivoluzionario. The relevance of the event has been emphasized by participants and historians alike. For the first time since the 1876 congress of the Italian Federation of the International in Florence Italian anarchists gathered together again on a national basis to establish a common programme and a common organization. For Merlino, the resolution marked a new phase of the anarchist movement in Italy: “anarchy, which certain opponents consider synonymous with chaos and disorganization, proves to be the organization that makes the greatest use of human resources while respecting individual freedom.”\footnote{Francesco S. Merlino, “Socialisme et anarchisme. Le congrès socialiste italien de ‘Capolago’ (Suisse),” La Société Nouvelle 7, March 1891 (translated into Italian in Socialismo anarchico, by Enzo Santarelli), 202 (page reference from Italian translation).} For the historian Nunzio Pernicone, “Capolago represented the highest point the movement had reached since the heyday of the International.” For the Marxist Enzo Santarelli the Capolago congress “certainly represents one of the most original and interesting initiatives of the anarchist socialists around the end of the century.” Santarelli’s comment implies a further element of novelty in the very fact that anarchists organized as a party, though such novelty is based on the false but often alleged contrast between anarchism and organization. Significantly, Santarelli adds that the party founded at Capolago seemed to foreshadow the socialist party that would be founded in Genoa the following year: “an evident sign” he concluded, “that the force of attraction and expansion of the class-based socialist movement is very strong in this period.”\footnote{Pernicone, 257; Santarelli, Socialismo anarchico, 74–75.} Instead, in the minds of the Capolago participants the programme of the new party recalled in
broad outline the old programme of the anarchist International approved at St-Imier in 1872, as explicitly stated in the Capolago congress proceedings.21

The congress placed great emphasis on the upcoming 1 May agitations, approving a resolution to join in the celebration, call workers to launch a general strike on 1 May, and call anarchists to carry out suitable propaganda.22 When 1 May arrived, the most notable incidents occurred in Rome, at the meeting in the piazza Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. The London Times described the events:

A meeting of workmen was held to-day in the Piazza Santa Croce. The proceedings passed off quietly, and the speeches delivered by the several leaders had been peaceful, when a workman named Vincenzo Landi mounted the platform, and, after proclaiming himself an Anarchist, called upon the assembly to attack the troops drawn up near the meeting. Then ensued a scene of terrible confusion, the mob pelting the soldiery with stones, and, the cavalry charging the mob, several shots were fired at the troops and many soldiers wounded. Several of the mob were also killed and wounded.23

The report represents a widespread perception of the events, as featuring an inflammable crowd ignited by the sudden appearance of an unknown individual coming out of the blue, who thus came to bear much of the responsibility for the events. Such accounts engender an obvious and odd contrast between the two highlights of Italian anarchism in 1891: on the one hand, the high-sounding formal propositions of the Capolago congress, seemingly a prelude to a country-wide, articulate mobilization effort aimed at 1 May; on the other hand, the unplanned, impromptu character born by the most notable 1 May occurrence. What is the historian to make of such a contrast?

21 “Congresso Socialista Rivoluzionario Italiano,” La Rivendicazione (Forli) 6, no. 2 (10 January 1891): 2.


It soon emerged that things were not exactly as they seemed. Venerio Landi—not Vincenzo, as The Times reported—was actually Galileo Palla, a prominent Italian anarchist and friend of Malatesta. Though the discovery dispelled the suspicion of Palla being an agent provocateur, the perception of the disturbances remained that of a spontaneous riot sparked off by his impromptu intervention. Anarchist sources tended to support this version, probably in an effort to avert legal charges and to emphasize the unadulterated popular spontaneous character of the events. Forty-five years later, a direct witness to the events, Aristide Ceccarelli, a young republican in 1891, still recalled Palla as “a tall and strong young man known by nobody.”

Most notably, many historians, especially Marxists, have characterized the Rome events as unplanned, backing the appearances described by The Times with underlying historical analyses, and attempting to link the Rome events to the Capolaggo resolutions. For example, Luciano Cafagna argues that those resolutions revealed insurrectionary intentions for the First of May, but that the increasing isolation of the Roman anarchists persuaded them that insurrection plans were nonsensical. Enzo Santarelli argues that congress leaders such as Cipriani and Malatesta rejected the insurrectionary idea, but were not able to control the barricadero tendencies within the movement. The contrast between “responsible leadership” and “anarchism” is also argued for by Renzo Del Carria, for whom anarchist leaders did not want to unleash the revolution “at a fixed date,” but were thwarted in their efforts by the anarchists’ inability to lead the Rome workers in revolt.

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All such interpretations reconcile the Capolago resolutions and the Rome events by attributing incoherence and inconsistency to an anarchist movement overwhelmed by events: the indecisiveness and change of mind of the Roman anarchists, the impossibility for “thinking anarchists” to tame blind individualism, or the powerlessness of “responsible leaders” before the chronic anarchist incapability to lead workers. In contrast to the attribution of irrationality, a charitable historian is to question superficial evidence so as to dissolve oddity, rather than integrating it in one’s explanations. We start from the end, by questioning the odd circumstance of a prominent figure such as Palla, who apparently took the gravest initiative in total isolation, unbeknownst to his comrades. Following Palla's movements will reveal a web of connections and underground activity, involving Malatesta himself, which will shed a very different light on the Rome events.

Indeed, Palla did not come out of nowhere. He left Paris for Italy nearly a month before the Rome demonstration. What was he up to during that period? On 12 April he attended the Milan international congress “for labour rights” at the Canobbiana theatre, a large convention in which trade unions and democratic and socialist organizations were represented, along with delegations from France, Germany, and Spain. Pietro Gori and Luigi Galleani spoke for the Italian anarchists. An energetic revolutionary speech was delivered by the Spanish anarchist representative, Fernandez, and another Capolago anarchist, Giovanni Bergamasco from Naples, was also in attendance. Clearly, such events were opportunities for militants to meet inconspicuously and lay out plans, as they


had done in Paris a year before. Even in Rome Palla was no stranger. He was there days before 1 May, meetings the socialist Cesare Ciuiri, the anarchist Pietro Calcagno, and Cipriani himself.\textsuperscript{28} In brief, the picture of Palla as "a tall and strong young man known by nobody" can not be accepted. Some historians, such as Giampietro Berti, have taken this path and rejected Palla’s sole responsibility, drawing a straight line connecting Capolago to the Rome events, regarded as "a nearly predictable outcome" of a considerable organizational effort. However, this interpretation raises its own questions.\textsuperscript{29}

One question concerns the propaganda activities emanating from Capolago. According to Galleani, the congress decided that Cipriani and he would undertake extensive propaganda tours from Piedmont to Sicily.\textsuperscript{30} Though little is known about Galleani’s tour in Northern Italy, information is available about Cipriani’s tour, which had a more official character.\textsuperscript{31} The tour started in March and lasted approximately six weeks, spent half in Sicily, and half between Naples and Rome, ending on 1 May with the piazza Santa Croce meeting. Throughout the tour, as well as in private correspondence, Cipriani’s preoccupation was not the promotion of insurrectionary movements, but their prevention.\textsuperscript{32} Upon arrival in Rome, Cipriani spoke in similar terms to the local anarchists, some of which insisted instead on direct action.\textsuperscript{33} Finally, 1 May

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{28 Report by the questor of Rome to the public prosecutor, 14 May 1891, DGPS, 1879–1903, b. 2, fs. “1 Maggio 1891,” ACS.}


\footnotetext{30 “È morto Cipriani,” \textit{Cronaca Sovversiva} (Lynn, Mass.) 16, no. 16 (20 April 1918).}

\footnotetext{31 The most detailed source is a report by the questor of Rome to the public prosecutor, 21 May 1891, DGPS, 1879–1903, b. 2, fs. “1 Maggio 1891,” ACS.}


\footnotetext{33 “Sentenza del 24 marzo 1892 contro Cipriani Amilcare ed altri 61,” 53, quoted in Cafagna, 768.}
\end{footnotes}
arrived, and Cipriani recommended caution again to the crowd in the square: “I say to you painfully: today we are not ready to fight, for if you dare to move you will be massacred...”34 The questor of Rome regarded Cipriani’s speech as “very violent” and “inciting to revolt,” and his recommendations as “a subterfuge to avoid a greater criminal liability.”35 However, unless one accepts this Machiavellian theory, the conjecture that his tour was part of insurrectionary plans was consistently contradicted by his attitude and actions.

Another question concerns Malatesta’s role. Unlike Palla, Malatesta is conspicuous for his absence in the events’ accounts. Yet if Palla had shared plans with anyone at all, it would have been his long-standing comrade Malatesta. Considering Malatesta’s militant outlook on the First of May, lack of contact between the two would be odd. Aside from Palla, Malatesta’s activity around 1 May looks incongruous. According to the Italian authorities, he left London in mid-April and spent time in France, to reach Italy only on 4 May. Such an account has been unproblematically taken at face value by most historians.36

Yet Malatesta had spelled out his intentions in a letter to Merlino of February 1891: “… if one wants to undertake serious organization and get anything accomplished, one must go to Italy; now, I intend to go myself as soon as I free myself from the jobs I have in hand, that is around the beginning of April...”37 In the light of this, it would be odd if Malatesta had left London only to keep away from Italy until after 1 May. According to

34 Report by the questor of Rome to the public prosecutor, 14 May 1891, DGPS, 1879–1903, b. 2, fs. “1 Maggio 1891,” ACS, quoted in Pernicone, 263.

35 Report by the questor of Rome to the public prosecutor, 14 May 1891, DGPS, 1879–1903, b. 2, fs. “1 Maggio 1891,” ACS.


the London Metropolitan Police, Malatesta stuck to his plans instead, as he was reported to have left in mid-April "en route for Italy, and supposedly for Rome, for the purpose of fomenting disturbances on the 1st of May." This is confirmed by Malatesta's biographers. Fabbri plainly states that "Malatesta had clandestinely arrived in Italy in April, and remained there for some time after the events." Likewise, Nettlau writes: "Malatesta went on a clandestine trip to Italy, before and after that First of May 1891—between April and the beginning of June."

Another clue as to Malatesta's whereabouts in those days comes unexpectedly from an interview by the historian Paul Avrich with a Spanish anarchist immigrant in the United States, eighty years later. Speaking about his old friend Pedro Esteve, Marcelino García noted incidentally: "In 1891 he met Errico Malatesta at a convention in Milan..." Given the timeline of Malatesta's movements in that year, the only possible convention in Milan they could have met was the meeting for labour rights of 12 April 1891. Of course, such indirect testimony after such a long time demands caution. Yet an 1891 report by the Italian Consul in Barcelona reveals that Fernandez, the fiery Spaniard who spoke at that convention, was no one else than Pedro Esteve. Malatesta's presence in Milan as early as 12 April 1891 would leave a three-week period completely unaccounted for, during which he could have carried out activity in Italy—a circumstance of great consequence in reconstructing the events leading to 1 May. What is


39 Luigi Fabbri, Vida de Malatesta, 130; Max Nettlau, "Prólogo," in Errico Malatesta, Socialismo y anarquía (Madrid: Ayuso, 1975), 22; first published as "En Memoria de Errico Malatesta, 4 dicembre 1853–22 julio 1932," parts 1–3, La Revista Blanca (Barcelona), nos. 222 (15 August 1932), 224 (15 September), 225 (1 October).

40 Avrich, Anarchist Voices, 391.

41 Italian Consul in Barcelona to Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, 28 April 1891, Polizia Internazionale, b. 46, fs. "Consolato Barcellona 1891, arrivo," ASDMAE.
more, Luigi Fabbri claims that on 1 May Malatesta was either in Rome or in Florence, the two cities where the most serious incidents occurred. Either way, Malatesta would have been at the heart of the agitations. A more coherent picture of consequent planning and opaque organization based on the anarchist network rather than on the official party structures begins to emerge.

Thus it is plausible that Malatesta had a role in Palla’s preparations. Further investigation on the activity of Malatesta and Merlino corroborates the hypothesis. The two had started insurrectionary preparation well before Capolago. In August 1890 Merlino undertook an extensive and successful tour in Sicily, aiming to organize and prepare groups for a possible armed insurrection. The questor of Rome reported on insurrectionary plans involving the Roman anarchists, including Malatesta’s help in London with a shipment of Sicily-bound weapons to Malta. From Sicily, Merlino eventually returned to the continent, with Capolago as final destination.42

Insurrectionary preparation did not stop there. Besides Galleani and Cipriani’s tours, a third tour was planned at the time of the Capolago congress, to be undertaken in Calabria by the Roman delegate Ettore Gnocchetti, so as to extend the work initiated in Sicily by Merlino.43 Though eventually the tour aborted, it provides evidence about plans and connections. It should be remarked that the letters of credentials, prepared by Merlino for Gnocchetti and addressed to Calabrian militants, made no mention of any mandate from the Capolago congress. The letters were all dated 6 January 1891, thus they were indeed written at the time of the congress. The decision to undertake the tour was likely taken there, too, though there is no evidence that it emanated from the


43 Gestri, 314–6. The original copies of the letters are in DGPS, 1879–1903, b. 2, fs. “1 Maggio 1891,” ACS.
congress, either. Again, this suggests that insurrectionary organization and planning proceeded on a separate track from official party initiatives.44

In fact, the question of what was actually decided at the Capolago congress is crucial, if one is to establish a link between those decisions and the events of 1 May. While Berti claims that the congress resolution “confirmed the intention to give an insurrectional character” to the demonstrations, one cannot find explicit signs of that in the resolution’s wording, which called only for a general strike and propaganda activity. Of course, one cannot expect an explicit call for insurrection in official party resolutions; and the resolution had no doubt a revolutionary tone. Still, one should distinguish generic revolutionary appeals from specific insurrectionary calls, on pain of reading a call for insurrection in every public statement issued by a revolutionary party—as the Italian authorities did in interpreting Cipriani’s speeches. The issue of public versus secret resolutions is crucial in discussing a movement’s opacity, and one needs to look beyond the congress public documents for evidence of planned undertakings. A report from Capolago published in Freedom tellingly revealed that in addition to the congress resolutions, “agreements of a practical nature were ratified that are not meant for publication,” and Fabbri explicitly states that “secret agreements were made” to the effect of giving an insurrectional character to the 1 May demonstrations. Was Gnocchetti’s tour part of such secret agreements? This would be consistent with the circumstance that his mandate was not issued by the congress.45 In turn, the continuity of his tour with Merlino’s, and the project’s extraneousness to the congress, suggest a different causal chain for the 1 May events, proceeding the groups around Malatesta and Merlino, and pre-dating the Capolago congress, in contrast to standard accounts that take that congress as their starting point.

44 Gestri, 310, 314.

That the Calabrian tour was entrusted to the Roman congress delegate leads us to the role played by the Roman anarchists. They had been in contact with Merlino and Malatesta since at least August 1890. After Capolago they immediately started building the new party’s local organizations.\(^46\) In addition, they were being entrusted by the congress to publish the prospective party organ, \textit{La Questione Sociale}.\(^47\) Their central national role is corroborated by a list of correspondents of the Roman Anarchist-Socialist Federation seized by the police, which covered the entire national territory.\(^48\) Contacts with Malatesta are attested by his correspondence throughout the months after Capolago.\(^49\) Finally, a Roman anarchist, Cesare Bedogni, was also present at the Canobbiana theatre meeting of 12 April.\(^50\) In brief, unity of intents, cooperation, and a dense web of contacts existed between Malatesta, Merlino and the Roman anarchists.

In the quest for insurrectionary plans through the smoke screen of anarchist opacity the focus has moved from Palla to Malatesta and Merlino, and from them to the Roman anarchists. In order to close the circle we must analyse the role of the Roman anarchists in the riots. In contrast to Cafagna’s thesis that they had given up insurrectionary plans by the time 1 May arrived, evidence speaks to a different frame of mind: for example, they called on workers to register at anarchist headquarters for the purpose of organizing

\(^{46}\) Report by the questor of Rome to the public prosecutor, 14 May 1891, DGPS, 1879–1903, b. 2, fs. “1 Maggio 1891,” ACS; Cafagna, 763–4; “Da Roma,” \textit{La Rivendicazione} (Forli) 6, no. 16 (25 April 1891): 3.


\(^{48}\) Gestri, 310, n. 3.


\(^{50}\) Report by the questor of Rome to the public prosecutor, 14 May 1891, DGPS, 1879–1903, b. 2, fs. “1 Maggio 1891”.
all forces for 1 May. Here, enrolling people were asked whether they had served in the army, and in what corps. In their conversations with Cipriani in Rome, Calcagno and other Roman anarchists still insisted on the call for insurrectionary action.\textsuperscript{51}

In his report on the demonstration, the police officer-in-chief reported that the anarchists “were greeted with prolonged applause, after they almost militarily wedged themselves into the thick crowd of the other associations to take possession of the area next to the speakers’ platform, in order to be ready for any immediate maneuver.” When Palla–Venerio Landi appeared on the platform, he addressed the crowd: “It is useless to keep wasting time with chatter. Revolutions were always made without discussions and meetings. Deeds are what it takes. It all comes to seizing the moment, and this can be tomorrow, today, or when you like.” Then, “at once hurling himself from the platform amidst the by-standers, he gave the signal of revolt by example.” It was utter confusion. “The officer-in-chief, realizing that the anarchists had surrounded the officers that stood closest to the platform to begin the fight, and thus persuaded that any delay could be fatal, gave order for the bugle blasts....” This was the signal of the police attack.\textsuperscript{52}

The meeting was over and the fight started, lasting for several hours, and including attempts to erect barricades, an assault on a prison during which a demonstrator was killed, and several attempts by groups of demonstrators to penetrate the city centre. As a result, Cipriani and numerous other anarchists were arrested.\textsuperscript{53} Police reports outline the tactical side of the anarchist presence in the square, as the audience that Palla addressed most immediately and that started the fight was not an angry mob, but rather a disciplined contingent of anarchist militants, who had intentionally taken the position they occupied.

\textsuperscript{51} Cafagna, 765–9.

\textsuperscript{52} Report by the questore of Rome to the Ministry of Interior, 6 May 1891, DGPS, 1879–1903, b. 2, fs. “1 Maggio 1891.”

\textsuperscript{53} Report by the questore of Rome to the public prosecutor, 14 May 1891, DGPS, 1879–1903, b. 2, fs. “1 Maggio 1891.”
Various tactical aspects of ensuing actions, however unsuccessful, were reminiscent of what Malatesta had earlier advocated for the 1890 Paris demonstration. In sum, a very different reality from the spontaneous riot reported by *The Times* emerges here, based on planning and organization by the Roman anarchists, who enjoyed the support of the workers in attendance. Their action was part of a wider insurrectionary project involving a significant part of the Italian anarchist movement, especially its transnational segment, with relevant figures such as Malatesta and Palla supporting that action, attending the demonstration, or being instrumental in carrying out the plan.

That the insurrectionary plan involved key participants in the Capolago congress, while proceeding on a separate and underground track, makes plausible an explanation that no previous account has even taken into consideration: that the disturbances were planned, but the plans were not made by the Capolago congress. This explanation resolves the apparent contradiction in the empirical evidence: if we admit that plans may have been made at Capolago, but not by the congress, then Fabbri’s claim about secret plans can be reconciled with Cipriani’s lack of support for any such plans. The key to resolving contradictions in the patent evidence lies in exploring the opaque circumstances, and in that way we are led to better historical explanations.

A significant congress component was represented by the Romagna socialist associations led by Germanico Piselli, the editor of the Forlì periodical *La Rivendicazione*. Their slogan was “neither unreasonably intransigent, nor absolutely legalitarian,” and they set themselves the task of bridging the gap between anarchists and revolutionary socialists who participated in elections. Considering their self-attributed role, it is questionable whether they would have subscribed to any insurrectionary plans. As a matter of fact, their position had already been announced in *La Rivendicazione* on the eve of the congress, by claiming that “the congress can only provide directions for the moment of the action, and unify its impulse and forces, but it cannot set the date and time for rising up by improvident and rash arrangements.” Weeks ahead of the First of May,
they eloquently called for demonstrations “disregarding stupid provocations that over-
zealous or ignorant government agents may try to throw amidst peaceful
demonstrations.”54

The debate on the First of May in the revolutionary press was asymmetrical. While
the advocates of peaceful demonstrations could openly express their viewpoint, the
supporters of insurrectionary initiatives could not. Hence, there are no open responses to
articles such as the one above that counseled caution. Still, the next issue of La
Rivendicazione contained a short article by Merlino celebrating the Paris Commune and
obliquely but unmistakably outlining the case for more militant action: “neither the
people nor the Bourgeoisie, at that time, were aware of the importance of the struggle. It
was only afterwards… that it was really felt that something exceptionally important had
happened in the world….” Merlino went on listing the reasons why the Paris Commune
did not succeed. Significantly, the final item in the list was that “it did not succeed
because 1871 is not 1891.” The message was clear: one did not know for sure when the
times were ripe for a revolution; at the same time, 1891 offered more favourable
conditions than 1871. Taken together, the two arguments denied that 1891 was unripe for
a successful insurrectionary movement: instead, a new Commune might indeed be
successful.55

Thus, apparent contradictions between words and deeds can be accounted for as
disagreements asymmetrically expressed, through overt propaganda on one side, and
cover covert activism on the other. Support for this interpretation comes from Max Nettlau,
who emphasized that lack of support for Malatesta’s insurrectionary project was a
relevant factor in 1891, though few historians seem to have heeded his remarks. Nettlau

54 N. Sandri, “Il congresso socialista,” La Rivendicazione (Forli) 6, no. 1 (3 January 1891); N. Sandri, “La
Festa del Lavoro,” La Rivendicazione (Forli) 6, no. 13 (4 April 1891).

identifies a generational gap at the root of the contrast between Malatesta’s optimism about the possibility of overthrowing the state and the pessimism of younger generations. In a self-fulfilling process, the latter’s criticism of insurrectionary projects engendered failures, used in turn as argument against Malatesta’s alleged chimeras of revolutionary possibilities. For Nettlau, “this was the deep tragedy of his efforts,” demonstrated both in the Capolago congress and in the preparations and plans for the First of May 1891, and possibly determined, in Nettlau’s opinion, by both the degeneration of revolutionary socialists and the anarchist lack of confidence in collective action and organization. 56

This contrast is further illustrated by the debate in the revolutionary press after the Rome events. Now that everything was over, both sides could more openly express the respective viewpoints. La Rivendicazione contrasted the nearly unanimous agreement on a peaceful demonstration with Palla’s act, likened to that of a cowardly deus ex machina. Malatesta responded by defending Palla as a person and providing a critical assessment of Palla’s initiative. He conceded that the opportuneness of Palla’s deed could be criticized, but his analysis quickly turned into a strong indictment of the inertia of Palla’s detractors, who “incessantly talk of revolution,” but “take little or no action.” Malatesta reaffirmed that no one could determine the right time to spark an insurrection, as Palla had also done from the platform of piazza Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. He concluded by wishing that “the events of Rome and Florence be a lesson,” and reiterating his call for action: “The time is right for us: if we are not able to act and win, it is our fault.” 57

In sum, the First of May riots in Rome were part of an insurrectionary project that had begun a year before and involved a continent-wide network of militants. This example shows that a historical focus on an individual, such as Malatesta, does not mean

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57 N. Sandri, “I fatti di Roma,” La Rivendicazione (Forli) 6, no. 18 (9 May 1891); Errico Malatesta, “Galileo Palla ed i fatti di Roma,” La Rivendicazione (Forli) 6, no. 20 (23 May 1891).
neglecting the movement’s collective dimension. On the contrary, systematically investigating the ramifications of an individual’s activity gives access to a network of militant and allows one to explore how anarchism collectively functioned. In a structure without a centre, any arbitrary individual is a reference point to which the structure can be anchored. The geographical and chronological scope of Malatesta’s militancy and his prominence in the movement made him one of the most densely connected nodes in the network, at the same time that his working-class life represented that of most anarchists. Both aspects benefit the study of the “forest” through one of its “trees.” By such an approach, the obstacles posed by opacity and transnationalism can be overcome. Appreciating such characteristics of anarchism allows the historian to avoid irrationalist interpretations by detecting continuity in time and space, even when such continuities are not immediately apparent.

At the same time, the historian should avoid the opposite pitfall of assuming continuity where continuity does not exist, as the attempts to reconcile evidence about the Capolago congress and the Rome riots illustrate. Regarding anarchism as an ideological monolith is a simplification that is bound to produce irrationalist interpretations, by attributing incoherence to the anarchist movement in the presence of mutually inconsistent behaviours. Things get only worse when the only differentiations introduced are biased ones between a minority of “thinking anarchists” or “responsible leaders” and a majority of “anarchists” tout court, assumed to be unthinking and irresponsible. In contrast, assuming anarchism to be capable of intellectual sophistication and fine-grained distinctions leads the historian to actively seek and become aware of theoretical and tactical differences, as existed at the Capolago congress, thus making the anarchists’ alleged ideological uniformity and irrationality vanish together. Undoubtedly the disagreements in the Italian anarchist movement of 1891 weakened its effectiveness. However, they made neither side irrational, thus showing that effectiveness and rationality are distinct questions.
After the events of 1 May 1891 Malatesta remained in Italy for some time, visiting northern Italy and part of the central regions, including the Tuscan city of Carrara, an anarchist stronghold for long thereafter. After leaving Italy, on his way through Switzerland, he made a stop in Lugano to meet the Italian anarchist Isaia Pacini. There the Swiss police, tipped off by an Italian spy, arrested him on 22 July 1891. Prosecuted for violation of an earlier expulsion, Malatesta was convicted and sentenced to forty-five days of detention, after which he was kept in jail, because the Italian government had requested his extradition in the meantime. The motivation was that the riots of 1 May, which the Italian authorities regarded as common crimes, allegedly originated from the Capolago congress, in which Malatesta had participated. However, the Swiss federal court refused the extradition. In mid-September, after serving his time, Malatesta returned to London. 58

Revolutionary agitation knew no interruption. As soon as the series of events connected to the First of May 1891 came to a conclusion, Malatesta directed his planning and organizing to the First of May of the next year, turning his attention to Spain. If the Italian movement was Malatesta’s primary concern, Spanish anarchism was the one with which he had the greatest affinity. Malatesta’s relationship with the Spaniards dated back to 1872, at the time of the First International. The key concepts of the International—collective action, organization, and reliance on the workers’ movement—remained the essence of that affinity. In October 1891 Malatesta expressed his optimism and hopes about Spain at a London anarchist conference, holding up Spain as an example of effective anarchist agitation among workers, and claiming “that anarchists were the life and soul of the labour movement in Spain.” 59 On 8 November Malatesta was in

58 Luigi Fabbri, *Vida de Malatesta*, 130–1.

Barcelona, to embark with Pedro Esteve on an extensive propaganda tour, promoted by the anarchist newspaper *El Productor*. The tour was the first of two trains of events that unfolded in Spain between November 1891 and January 1892. The second was the uprising that occurred in the Andalusian town of Jerez on 8 January 1892. As in the case of the Capolago congress and the Rome riots in Italy, historians have wondered about the respective internal connections in the two trains of events and about Malatesta’s role in each insurrectionary episode. While Malatesta was a protagonist of both the Capolago congress and the propaganda tour in Spain, I will argue that he stood in opposite relationships to the two subsequent episodes, being involved in the Rome riots, but extraneous to the Jerez uprising. However, beyond this asymmetry, there is a deeper similarity between the events of Italy and Spain. Through different circumstances in different countries, the two cases illustrate the same contrast between the appearance of anarchism, made of sensational but ephemeral outbursts of spontaneous revolt, and its reality, made of opaque but sustained and coherent organization and planning.

In order to probe the appearances, it is first necessary to investigate the goal of Esteve and Malatesta’s itinerant project. After a month spent touring in Catalonia, the “propaganda committee” comprising the two anarchists set out on a countrywide tour scheduled to touch Saragossa, Bilbao, Valladolid, Madrid, Córdoba, Granada, Málaga, Cadiz, Cartagena, Alicante, Alcoy, Valencia, and possibly Corunna. For Max Nettlau, “that propaganda tour was undoubtedly motivated by the objective of uniting anarchists toward some activity of a general character starting from 1 May 1892.” Nettlau’s claim is confirmed by Malatesta himself, who, in recalling the events of Spain in a letter to Nettlau of 1929, mentioned “the plans we had for 1 May 1893 [sic].” We get a sense of

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60 Nettlau, “Prólogo,” 24.

61 Malatesta to Max Nettlau, Rome, 12 January 1929, Max Nettlau Papers, file no. 197, IISG. The indication of year 1893 can undoubtedly be considered Malatesta’s typo, as the same mistake is found elsewhere in Malatesta’s recollections of the Spanish tour.
the project's far-reaching scope by considering its itinerary. The portion of the tour that actually took place covered in approximately a month only the first four of the planned main centres, Saragossa, Bilbao, Valladolid, and Madrid. If one considers that eight more main centres were scheduled, one can appreciate the proportions of the propaganda drive being undertaken. What could have been the “activity of a general character” Nettlau refers to? A letter that, according to Italian governmental sources, Malatesta sent to comrades in Italy before leaving Spain, made explicit reference to insurrectionary activity, stating “that the uprising of the Jerez anarchists was too hasty and therefore it could not achieve the results expected by the party; that the agitation should have taken place later, in six Spanish provinces simultaneously; that, however, the revolution is simply postponed.”62

Insurrectionary objectives were not a necessary corollary of anarchist tactics. A look at the tactics adopted by the Spanish anarchists for May Day of the two previous years shows that their ultimate revolutionary goal neither implied a commitment to violence nor a disregard for the palliative improvement of working conditions. Rather, they were committed to direct action means, within which there was room for different tactics. Looking at May Day 1892 in this context points to discontinuities as well as continuities with earlier tactics. Insurrectionary objectives were not simply associated with every First of May, but were the result of tactical considerations based on an assessment of changing conditions. If Spanish anarchists specifically made insurrectionary plans for the First of May 1892, Malatesta’s trip at that juncture acquires a sharper contour in the light of those plans.

In the month before 1 May 1890 El Productor enthusiastically focused its propaganda on the eight-hour issue. Indeed, this was “an episode of the war, but not the

object of the war.” However, the achievement of the final objective was presently out of question. No mention of insurrectionary activity was made, while great emphasis was placed on direct action, in the form of a general strike. The workers were to address not the state, but the bourgeoisie directly, and “demand the eight-hour day, and if this is refused to us, we refuse in turn to work.” Workers’ mobilization on May Day was extensive, with major general strikes in Catalonia and elsewhere. In Spain, as elsewhere in Europe, the degree of participation and combativeness displayed by the workers immediately made May Day a crucial date of anti-capitalist struggle.

The following year was spent organizing and preparing the general strike for May Day 1891. Numerous meetings were held, workers’ societies were organized, and new federations among workers’ societies were established. A country-wide trade union congress held in Madrid in March 1891 unanimously confirmed its commitment to the eight-hour struggle for the next May Day. Though important strikes occurred in many cities, the days before and after May Day were most notably marked by government repression. The following months provided the opportunity to re-assess the entire issue of May Day. In the article *El Movimiento de Mayo* a crucial question was posed: “What shall we do the next May Day?” A dilemma was posed: “two paths are presently available... one is to persevere in the pursuit of the eight hour; the other, recently emerged with great seriousness, is the threat of going bankrupt that hangs over several

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63 “La jornada de ocho horas,” *El Productor* (Barcelona) 4, no. 192 (4 April 1890); “La huelga general,” *El Productor* (Barcelona) 4, no. 194 (18 April 1890); “La Vispera” and “Huelga, no manifestación,” *El Productor* (Barcelona) 4, no. 197 (30 April 1890);

64 For a brief historical overview see “El 1º de Mayo—La jornada de ocho horas,” *El Productor* (Barcelona) 6, no. 296 (28 April 1892); for detailed reports from numerous localities see the entire issue of *El Productor* (Barcelona) 4, no. 198 (4 July 1890); on the Bilbao strike see Juan Pablo Fusi, *Política obrera en el País Vasco (1888–1923)* (Madrid: Turner, 1975), 81–94.

65 “El 1º de Mayo—La jornada de ocho horas,” *El Productor* (Barcelona) 6, no. 296 (28 April 1892); “El Congreso Amplio,” *El Productor* (Barcelona) 5, no. 226 (8 January 1891); “El Congreso Amplio celebrado en Madrid los días 22 al 25 Marzo” *El Productor* (Barcelona) 5, no. 238 (2 April 1891); reports in *El Productor* (Barcelona) 5, nos. 244–8 (7 May – 4 June 1891).
European States.” The forthcoming events would show which path to follow. In the former case, the general strike would be the only available means. In the latter case, “it will come to attempting plainly and simply the dissolution of the States, the expropriation of the bourgeoisie, and the return of the universal wealth to the proletariat.”

Evidence that the eventual answer was in the insurrectionary direction comes from an analysis of the speeches held during the propaganda tour. These represent an insightful source, because they provide a glimpse on themes that could hardly be openly discussed in the press. The eight-hour workday was mentioned only occasionally and marginally. Likewise, only a couple of references to May Day can be found. The theme that recurred most frequently in Pedro Esteve’s speeches was the need for organization. As for Malatesta, the most outstanding theme was insurrection. At a Barcelona meeting of 11 November he claimed that “when the bourgeoisie have bayonets, rifles, and many other powerful means to gun us down, it cannot be denied that the same means of defence cannot be disregarded by revolutionaries. The struggle of ideas is sufficient when we are not physically attacked, but when we are knocked down, it is only natural to defend ourselves.” Equally explicit references were made in other meetings, such as those in Manresa, Sabadell, Sallent, Palafrugell, and Madrid. Such references were not generic elements of the standard anarchist repertoire, nor were they dropped casually. In contrast to other standard themes, such as anti-republicanism, anti-parliamentarianism, the futility of reforms, and social revolution, that were used by all speakers, insurrection and expropriation were almost exclusively limited to Malatesta’s speeches, who tended to concentrate them in specific areas, especially Catalonia. In brief, references to


67 For meeting reports see columns “El 11 de Noviembre” and “Movimiento Obrero: Interior,” El Productor (Barcelona), nos. 273–281 (19 November 1891 – 14 January 1892); see also reports “Desde Logroño,” “Meeting en Zaragoza,” and “Desde Santander” in La Anarquía (Madrid), nos. 67–68 (18–24 December 1891) and no. 70 (8 January 1892), respectively.
insurrection were governed by careful planning. For the charitable historian, it is reasonable to assume that Malatesta’s speech planning was driven by a purpose; that such purpose was shared by the Spanish anarchists that entrusted him with the responsibility of a propaganda tour on their behalf; and that the initiative was part of broader plans laid out in the previous months. In sum, the changed attitude of Spanish anarchists towards the objective of the eight hour day, the references to an insurrectionary solution in their press, and the undertaking of a far-reaching propaganda tour in which the insurrectionary theme was prominent, all indicate that an insurrectionary project was in the wings.

The question about the relationship between the tour and its objectives can also be reversed: how was a speaking tour instrumental to the objective of an understanding for insurrectionary activity? Despite their inconspicuous characterization as “propaganda” tours, such tours often had organizational objectives. As Luigi Galleani recalled about the speaking tours entrusted to him and Cipriani at Capolago, their task was “to put out feelers, to test who the best comrades were as to seriousness and activism, to join them in a strong chain, providing that this web be put to good use at the first opportunity.”68 A decentralized network model of organization was at work. It was less conspicuous than centralized ones, when it came to coordination for insurrectionary objectives. For the same reasons, it was also historiographically more opaque. A striking contrast existed between the scale and ambitions of the Esteve–Malatesta tour, and its lack of prominence in the anarchist press, confined as it was to the small print of short reports in internal pages. Moreover, such reports were obviously limited to the public part of the tour. However, similarly to the Capolago congress, private understandings were possibly even more important than public statements, especially when insurrectionary projects were at stake.

68 “È morto Cipriani,” Cronaca Sovversiva (Lynn, Mass.) 16, no. 16 (20 April 1918).
In this respect, the Esteve–Malatesta tour really provided the opportunity to cast an organizational web that covered the entire Spanish territory. The tour’s scope can be appreciated from its itinerary, shown in Figure 2, which also includes the tour’s cancelled part. During the tour, Malatesta had contacts with chief representatives of Spanish anarchism, such as José Llunas, Teresa Claramunt, José Lopez Montenegro, Fernando Tárrida del Mármol, Adrián del Valle in Barcelona, and Vicente García in Bilbao. Besides establishing or strengthening contacts with existing groups and individuals, new nodes in the network were created. Reports mention the formation of various new anarchist groups or workers’ associations after the passage of Esteve and Malatesta. 69

Figure 2. The itinerary of the Esteve–Malatesta propaganda tour in Spain, 1891–2.

Source: Data from meeting announcements and reports in El Productor (Barcelona) and La Anarquía (Madrid); see note 67.

69 See note 67.
Unsurprisingly, the tour worried the Spanish government. A significant episode occurred in Valladolid on 26 December. Esteve and Malatesta were received in the premises of the local anarchist federation and given accommodation in its caretaker’s apartment. Soon thereafter the police surrounded the premises, barring access to anyone until the following day. The two guests were taken to the civil governor, but were soon released. However, the caretaker was charged for hosting a meeting aimed at conspiring against the government, though he was eventually acquitted.\footnote{“Misceláneas,” *El Productor* (Barcelona), no. 280 (7 January 1892); “Movimiento Obrero: Interior,” *El Productor* (Barcelona), nos. 281 (14 January 1892), 288 (3 March 1892), 302 (9 June 1892); “Noticias varias,” *La Anarquía* (Madrid) 3, no. 77 (Feb. 25, 1892).} The episode points to an underground sphere of activity that occurred in parallel with public meetings. Most importantly, it provides evidence of police preoccupations with the tour activities. In fact, the tour was interrupted shortly thereafter, in the wake of the Jerez uprising of 8 January 1892, to which we now turn to analyse its characteristics, Malatesta’s alleged role in it, and its impact on the propaganda tour.

The overall scenario can be summarized as follows. Between November 1891 and January 1892 two trains of events occurred in Spanish anarchism: on the one hand, a superficially quiet, but articulated and far-reaching organizational drive; on the other hand, a clamorous, but isolated and short-sighted uprising. There is evidence that the authorities let the latter initiative happen, and then blew the event out of all proportion, attributing to it the widest possible implications. One of the consequences was that the former initiative was suppressed as quietly as it was unfolding. The Jerez uprising went down in history as the anarchist highlight of this period, while the propaganda tour was relegated to a minor episode of biographical interest. The significance of the story is that the historiographical agenda of anarchism may end up being dictated not so much by the anarchists, as by their enemies. In contrast, what is relevant to the history of anarchism may not necessarily be under the light of the street lamp, but lie instead somewhere in the
surrounding darkness, as the historiographical debate about the rationality of the Jerez anarchists well illustrates.

George Woodcock characterizes the Jerez uprising as a paradigmatic example of anarchist oddity. He describes it as part of “a sudden upsurge of insurrection, bomb throwings, and assassinations” that characterized Spain as well as France. On this occasion, the country districts “sprang to life again” in one of those “periodical surges of enthusiasm” that were “characteristic of Andalusian anarchism”: “Four thousands peasants, armed with scythes and shouting ‘Long Live Anarchy!’ marched into Jerez and killed a few unpopular shopkeepers. After a night of sporadic fighting between the insurgents and the Civil Guard, a force of cavalry arrived and the rebellion was quickly crushed.” The result was that “four of the peasant leaders were executed and many others were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.” Woodcock packs in a few lines the whole inventory of anarchist irrationalism: spontaneity, cyclicity, chaos, futility of means, senseless violence, lack of plans or goals, and lack of impact, all of these together constituting the regional “character” of Andalusian anarchism. 71

E. J. Hobsbawm’s millenarian interpretation, as Woodcock’s account, emphasizes the spontaneity and ultimately the irrationality of the Jerez anarchists, characterized by an abysmal inadequacy of means to ends. Their revolutionary belief did not turn into an effort to understand conditions, to organize workers, and to plan agitations, but rather into a simple, spontaneous urge to rebel, with no knowledge of how the great change would come about. Hobsbawm’s analysis of the Jerez uprising extends to the history of Andalusian anarchism, Spanish anarchism, and ultimately, anarchism in general. In contrast, Temma Kaplan emphasizes the rationality of the Andalusian anarchists, their high level of organization, tactical sophistication, and effectiveness. Kaplan’s account has been criticized in turn by Antonio López Estudillo, for whom “the questionable and

71 Woodcock, 346.
excessively imaginative work of Temma Kaplan cannot be used as a reference, as it is riddled with epic assertions devoid of any foundation.” For López Estudillo the uprising arose in the context of contrasts between two currents of Spanish anarchism, one engaged in unionism, and the other comprising affinity groups advocating the urgency of revolutionary action.72

Fresh insight into the uprising can be gained by analyzing it in the broader context of Spanish anarchism, as López Estudillo does, especially by contrasting it with the ongoing organizational drive represented by the propaganda tour. In this context, the most prominent characteristic of the Jerez uprising was its isolation. The accounts of anarchist commentators such as Ricardo Mella, Fortunato Serantoni, and Pedro Vallina, almost unanimously emphasize its narrowness.73 The immediate reaction of anarchist newspapers such as El Productor and La Anarquía of Madrid reveals a complete lack of any information, which points to the insurgents’ isolation. El Corsario of Corunna even cast doubts on the conduct of the authorities, not in terms of their repressiveness, but of their permissiveness, given that the authorities had preventively made sixty arrests and knew about the insurrectional preparations, but did nothing to prevent the uprising. Pedro Vallina turned such doubts into explicit accusations, identifying Félix Grávalo Bonilla, an agitator appeared in Jerez few months before the uprising, as an agent provocateur.74


74 “Lo de Jerez,” El Productor (Barcelona), no. 281 (14 January 1892); “¿Que ha sido lo de Jerez?,” La Anarquía (Madrid) 3, no. 71 (15 January 1892); “Lo de Jerez,” El Corsario (Corunna) 3, no. 87 (24 January 1892).
There is a narrowness to the historians’ debate about the millenarianism of the Jerez insurgents, which comes from neglecting a larger context. Hobsbawm takes the uprising for what it appeared to be, a spontaneous, isolated rebellion, but he arbitrarily attributes such characters to anarchism in general. His generalization is unwarranted, especially considering that the Jerez uprising occurred at the same time of a wider initiative that conflicted with the former precisely on those issues of spontaneism and lack of organization that Hobsbawm considers anarchism’s universal features. Kaplan’s emphasis on rationality, organization, and planning is equally problematic and incongruous in the light of the Jerez insurgents’ isolation and lack of cooperation, if not open conflict, with a broader organizational effort simultaneously occurring across Spain. In her effort to refute Hobsbawm and to show the existence of a wide organizational network, Kaplan turns to an inflated account, just as the authorities of the time had done. Both Hobsbawm and Kaplan unquestioningly take the Jerez uprising to exhaustively represent what anarchists were up to in that area at that time, and then proceed to assessing the adequacy of anarchism to the given circumstances, with opposite conclusions. Ultimately, despite their diametrical divergence, the respective shortcomings have a common source, which is precisely their focus on Jerez. Neither scholar takes into accounts that there were alternative views and different options available within anarchism.

The same narrowness affects the debate about whether Malatesta was involved in the Jerez uprising. Simply because Malatesta was in Spain at that time, the question of his role in the uprising has naturally tended to turn up. Such discussions usually neglect to consider Malatesta’s own plans and those of the editors of El Productor who brought him to Spain. Malatesta’s link with the Jerez uprising is simply hypothesized on the ground of his presence in the country. However, recollections rendered by Pedro Esteve many years later vouch that no such involvement existed. The night of the uprising Malatesta was in Madrid, taking part in a public meeting with Esteve and others. Also, news from Jerez
came absolutely out of the blue. Moreover, Malatesta deemed the uprising untimely. As a matter of fact, not only the uprising was itself unsuccessful, but it also spoiled Esteve and Malatesta’s plans. If Malatesta had had contacts with the insurgents, most likely he would have advised them to change their course of action. Conversely, if the uprising had had insurrectionary objectives, coordination with Esteve and Malatesta would have been the most obvious course of action, given the commonality of objectives. In fact, Fermin Salvochea advised a group of Jerez anarchists to wait for Malatesta’s imminent arrival in Andalusia, in view of concerted action. Thus, in all likelihood Malatesta had no acquaintance of the uprising being hatched in Jerez, while the insurgents were acquainted with Esteve and Malatesta’s project. If any relation can be posited at all, it would seem to be one of conflict, rather than coordination. Accordingly, a possible interpretation would be along the lines suggested by López Estudillo, in terms of a tactical conflict between affinity groups and societarismo (unionism). Furthermore, agent provocateurs may have had a role. If police manipulation occurred, one could reasonably conjecture that undermining the tour’s organizational drive may have been an objective.

In sum, standard accounts of the events in Spain involving Malatesta have been fraught with the historian’s mental laziness, as in the case of Italy. The superficial and sensational appearance of Spanish anarchism has been unquestioningly put in the foreground, while the handy view of anarchism as an ideological monolith has left no room for distinctions and multiple narratives. As a result, what has remained in the background, such as Malatesta’s presence, has received consideration only to the extent that it fitted into that simplified picture, rather than on its own terms. A more complex

75 “Constatazione,” La Questione Sociale (Paterson) 7, n.s., no. 102 (Sep. 7, 1901). The article is unsigned, but it can certainly be attributed to Esteve. The writer claims to know the facts by direct knowledge, and Esteve was at the time the typesetter of La Questione Sociale.

76 Vallina, 34.

77 See note 72.
picture is also more rational. It presents anarchist insurrectionism not as an aimless and spontaneous outburst of rebellion, but as a conscious project based on the assessment of previous First of May experiences, on a change of tactical direction, and on plans carried out through sustained activity. Divisions, lack of coordination, and possibly police provocation undermined the project. Nevertheless, lack of effectiveness does not diminish the project’s rationality. Its opacity, which was the rational pre-requisite of its success, determined its erasure from the history of Spanish anarchism, the centre-stage being taken by a local and isolated revolt, usually interpreted in the most irrationalist terms.

More generally, the cycle of struggles connected with the First of May movement in which Malatesta was involved illustrate the continuity of anarchism. Preparations were carried out from one First of May to the next without interruption. Initiatives aiming at the First of May 1891 in Italy started at the very same time of the 1890 demonstration in Paris, and arrangements aimed at the First of May 1892 in Spain followed Malatesta’s release from prison that ensued from his presence in Italy in 1891. Continuity also had a spatial dimension, not only in terms of the transnationalism of Italian anarchism, but also of the links and cooperation between the anarchist movements of different countries. Malatesta focused on three different countries in three years. His link with Pedro Esteve was likely established weeks before the First of May 1891 in Milan, where the two had respectively converged from Barcelona and London. Anarchists were not generically prone to staging violent demonstrations in a repetitive and unchanging manner, whatever the circumstances. Direct action was undertaken only where and when conditions were deemed favourable. This was the case of Italy in 1891. Thus, as Maurice Dommanget relates, “outside of France, it is mainly in Italy that the First of May 1891 was characterized by violence.” The next year, after the insurrectionary project in Spain was foiled, Malatesta quietly spent the First of May speaking from an anarchist platform in
London, where an impressive workers’ demonstration took place in Hyde Park.\textsuperscript{78} Organization was a pre-condition of insurrectionary projects. The opening act of the agitations in Italy in 1891 was the foundation of an anarchist party, and Spain was the country where anarchists had the most prominent role in the organized labour movement, as Malatesta emphasized at a London meeting few days before heading for Barcelona.\textsuperscript{79}

Most importantly, the cycle of struggles of 1890–2 points to Malatesta’s continuity of thought, for those struggles illustrate the tactical principles he put forward in \textit{L’Associazione}. For Malatesta, the First of May movement provided a good opportunity to set in motion a revolutionary process by escalating class struggle. It was for anarchists to initiate such a process through autonomous initiatives, such as Malatesta advocated in Paris in 1890, promoted in Rome in 1891, and planned in Spain in 1892. The theme of anarchist autonomy was clearly reflected in those tactics. At the same time that anarchists were to act autonomously, their initiatives could not be self-sufficient and isolated. They were to “go to the people” and act among workers. The First of May agitations gave anarchists an excellent chance to do so, especially because they bore an anti-capitalist character from the outset. This is what made the eight-hour movement so promising for Malatesta. However, in 1892 his insurrectionary expectations about the First of May began waning, though he continued to warmly support anarchist participation in the movement. Thus, in an article for the \textit{Commonweal} of 1 May 1893 he argued that the First of May movement was “the more significant as being the direct work of the masses” and that it was “for revolutionists to save this movement... which it would be folly to give up.” However, he concluded the article by making clear that the First of May was not “the revolution day,” though it remained “a good opportunity for the propagation of

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\footnotetext[79]{See note 59.}
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our ideas, and for turning men's minds towards the social revolution.” Malatesta's language was still revolutionary, but not insurrectionary.80 As the First of May became more and more an “invented tradition,” Malatesta’s revolutionary hopes turned elsewhere. The two years following his return from Spain were still a period of intense insurrectionary agitation, but rather than focusing on anarchist autonomous initiatives, Malatesta directed his efforts to another side of his tactics and another way of “going to the people,” the anarchists’ participation in ongoing agitations that did not have an explicit anarchist content.

Chapter VI
“Popular Movements Begin How They Can”: Anarchism and Popular Unrest, 1892–94

Malatesta’s tactics and attitude toward collective movements in the years 1892–4 are best understood in their contrast with the tactics and attitudes of anarchist currents that criticized his ideas and gained momentum in those years. Such a comparison allows one to appreciate the specific characters of Malatesta’s anarchism; it shows that disagreements about participation in collective movements were connected to diverging views on a broader range of issues, thus illustrating the internal theoretical links both in Malatesta’s and in alternative versions of anarchism; and it partly explains the limited success of Malatesta’s initiatives in those years.

As Luigi Fabbri recalls, the early 1890s “marked the beginning of a period of long, ardent, and sometimes harsh polemics between Malatesta and the anarchists who dissented from him on a number of diverse issues: organization, syndicates, morals, individual deeds....”1 In Italy the controversy took the form of a contrast between organizationists and anti-organizationists. Aversion to and mistrust for organization by many anarchists dated back to the immediate aftermath of the First International and was clearly manifested at the London International congress of 1881. However, Fabbri remarks, while dislike for organization became a widespread tendency outside of Italy, it was especially among anarchists of Italian language that anti-organizationism developed into a theoretical and practical current. Many historians, such as Pier Carlo Masini, describe anti-organizationism as a form of individualism. Certainly, all anarchist individualists, in whatever sense of this very vague term, were opposed to organization, but the reverse did not hold. No doubt, anti-organizationists emphasized individual

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1 Luigi Fabbri, *Vida de Malatesta*, 132.
autonomy. In fact, the 1880s early opponents of organization used to call themselves “autonomists.” Moreover, a focus on individual autonomy was a trait that anti-organizationists shared with Malatesta’s opponents in the various controversies mentioned by Fabbri, which otherwise were waged from a diverse range of viewpoints. However, Italian anti-organizationists were alien from individualism in their working-class orientation and advocacy of anarchist communism. ²

The main issue at stake was whether anarchists should organize in any permanent, structured form. Anti-organizationists opposed the idea, and rejected organization in institutional forms such as parties, programmes, and congresses. As L’Ordine maintained in a 1893 article significantly addressed to “pseudo-anarchists,” for anti-organizationists organization was illogical, because “anarchy aims for the absolute autonomy of the individual, and organization constitutes the negation of it”; organization was useless, because “it adds nothing to the sum of individual activities and it almost always subtracts considerably from that sum”; and it was harmful, because “every organization presupposes one or more organizers and these fatally assert themselves as an authority, stifling individual initiative.”³ In a protracted controversy with Malatesta in the columns of La Révolte between August and September 1892, the anti-organizationist Amilcare Pomati argued that the role of anarchism was to be “that force, that moral power, that current of ideas that, outside every system, outside every rule or convention, is exerted and acts among the masses, with the variety and energy that the individuals who embody that force can give it…. In the presence of a popular event or commotion, anarchists will

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² Fabbri, Malatesta: L’uomo e il pensiero, 197–9; Pier Carlo Masini, Storia degli anarchici italiani: Da Bakunin a Malatesta (Milan: Rizzoli, 1969), 226.

³ “Una franca parola agli pseudo-anarchici,” L’Ordine (Turin) 2, no. 48 (23 December 1893).
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 labour 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, the pursuit of the anarchist ideal. In general, anti-organizationists were critical not only of attempts at anarchist organizations, but also of any tactical alliances with non-anarchist parties and of anarchists aiming to take a leading role in organized collective movements. Their arguments often pointed to the theme of the displacement of goals, and the tone of their polemics towards organizationists was akin to the tone that anarchists at large used towards the socialist advocates of parliamentarian tactics. Such controversies agitated Italian anarchism throughout the 1890s and beyond.

Anti-organizationist tendencies soon manifested themselves as attacks on Malatesta’s revolutionary project begun with the Capolago congress. For Malatesta’s biographer Armando Borghi, Capolago was “not so much a congress of theoretical debates, as an attempt to reach practical agreement for immediate action.” If the tendency to stretch the concept of anarchism so as to include simple antiparliamentarians such as Cipriani was a weakness of the party, another weakness was that the same concept was already too broad to be a solid basis for practical agreements. Malatesta aimed at combining insurrection and organization in the party’s tactics. The former

4 “Communications et correspondance,” La Révolte (Paris) 5, no. 50 (10–16 September 1892); 6, no. 1 (17–23 September 1892).
5 Eduardo Colombo, Los desconocidos y los olvidados: Historias y recuerdos del anarquismo en la Argentina (Montevideo: Nordan Comunidad, 1999), 24.
6 Borghi, 81.
element found obstacles in anti-parliamentarian socialists, but the latter element found obstacles in anti-organizationist anarchism. The focus on the First of May movement equally came under attack. Anarchists as Malatesta came to be disparagingly called "primomaggisti" (MayDayers) that allegedly advocated "revolution at a fixed date." Such criticisms implicitly emphasize the inherent link between Malatesta’s insurrectionism and organization, in contrast to the stereotype of anarchist insurrectionism as spontaneistic. Similar contrasts, of which the Jerez uprising was probably evidence, also undermined the insurrectionist project in Spain.

A measure of the anti-organizationist opposition to the Capolago tactics is given by Pomati’s controversy with Malatesta. For him, Merlino and Malatesta’s “evolution towards the legalitarian parties [was] becoming every day more pronounced.” The term “legalitarian” referred to parties that focused on parliamentarian tactics, regarding mass mobilization mainly as a support to electoral and legal struggles. In the ensuing debate, Malatesta acknowledged the existence of great differences among anarchists about tactics and perhaps even about the way of conceiving anarchy, and remarked: “I even believe that the error that we committed at Capolago consisted in failing to be fully aware of such differences, and in believing it possible to march all together, just because there was agreement on the general formulas.” For Malatesta, the main differences concerned the attitude towards the labour movement and the relative importance attributed to individual deeds versus collective movements.7

Nowhere was such contrast sharper than in the respective attitudes to movements that did not have an explicit anarchist content. Unlike anti-organizationists, Malatesta attributed great value to such movements, and in the years 1893–4 the insurrectionary opportunities to which he mainly turned his attention were popular movements that had

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7 "Mouvement Social. Italie," La Révolte (Paris) 5, no. 46 (13–19 August 1892); “Communications et correspondance," La Révolte (Paris) 5, no. 47 (20–26 August 1892); no. 48 (27 August–2 September 1892); no. 49 (3–9 September 1892); no. 50 (10–16 September 1892); 6, no. 1 (17–23 September 1892).
not been initiated by anarchists, but that nevertheless he urged anarchists to join. Malatesta’s attitude to such movements throws into relief another aspect of his tactics, their flexibility and open-minded inclination to take advantage of any opportunity. Malatesta reiterated this attitude in his article of 1 May 1893 in Commonweal, arguing that “popular movements begin how they can; nearly always they spring from some idea already transcended by contemporary thought.... If we wait to plunge into the fray until the people mount the Anarchist Communist colours... we shall see the tide of history flow at our feet while scarcely contributing anything toward determining its course...”

Inclusiveness rather than anarchist autonomy came to the forefront of Malatesta’s tactics in these years. Even when popular struggles had no anarchist goals, Malatesta believed, they could be potentially revolutionary, as a result not of the stated aims of the participants, but of the radicalizing logic of collective action. By the end of the 1892–4 cycle of struggles the contrast between Malatesta’s inclusiveness and anti-organizationist tendencies would only be sharper and the pitfalls warned against by the Commonweal article more acute, leading Malatesta to a thorough rethinking of the direction in which anarchism was to be taken.

The clearest example of Malatesta’s tactical attitude was an expedition he had just returned from when the Commonweal article was published. Though he was banned from Belgium by an order of expulsion of 1880, in mid-April 1893 Malatesta went to that country with Charles Malato, on the occasion of the political general strike for universal suffrage led by the Parti Ouvrier Belge, or POB. The expedition is relevant not for its practical outcome, which was non-existent, but because it helps shed light on the link between theory and practice in Malatesta’s tactics. The strike is an extreme example, as at first sight anarchist participation to a struggle for universal suffrage might look paradoxical. Yet by showing that Malatesta’s participation was grounded on theoretical

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8 “The First of May.”
principles, it helps dispel stereotypes of random, impromptu participation to any riot, or, conversely, charges of anarchist exclusivism.

The agitation for universal suffrage in Belgium had a long history. Though the lower classes had a significant role in the Belgian revolution of 1830 that brought independence to the country, the new electoral law gave them little representation. The Liberal Party’s electoral defeat of 1863 gave the signal for electoral reform agitation. Universal suffrage rapidly became the objective of the agitation. From this moment until the war of 1914, this demand would dominate Belgian political life, soon finding the working class rallying behind its banner. A turning point in working-class politics was the formation of the POB in April 1885. Universal suffrage soon became the party’s main focus. At the same time, advocacy of the general strike as a form of struggle became predominant. As Madeleine Rebérioux remarks, the POB worried about the anarchist tones of the Walloon movement, but the party’s links with the base and with the struggling unions prevented the POB from disavowing the call for a general strike.9

This dynamic between a cautious leadership and a militant base marked much of the struggle for universal suffrage leading to the events of April 1893. For example, in 1886 a strike started in the industrial area of Liège rapidly spread to other regions, turning into a spontaneous jacquerie. The military and judiciary repression was brutal, but the events drew public attention to the “social question.” For the first time the Throne speech announced a program of reforms, but the clerical government put in practice only a small number of them. From 1890 the agitation for universal suffrage intensified and extended. In April of that year eighty thousand demonstrators marched in Brussels, ending the demonstration with a collective solemn oath to be irreducible in their struggle for

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universal suffrage. In May 1892, three weeks into a general strike called by the POB that turned into an impressive display of strength and discipline, the Parliament decided that the revision of the electoral law would take place. However, no agreement could be reached in the Chamber. The situation was at a standstill. To get out of the deadlock, on 12 April 1893 the POB declared the immediate general strike.\(^9\)

In a long article published in 1897, Malatesta provided a retrospective outlook on the entire Belgian struggle for universal suffrage, which he personally witnessed in the days of April 1893. In the article, eloquently titled “Come si conquista quel... che si vuole” (How one obtains what... one wants), Malatesta remarked that it was through insurrection that Belgium obtained independence and the constitution in 1830. Likewise, the violent strikes of 1886 were “marked by the formation of armed bands, destruction of machinery, pillaging of workshops, and castles on fire.” The “order” was restored, repression was terrible, but the first “social laws,” Malatesta noted, dated from that year. In brief, the article emphasized the reforming power of direct action, in contrast to the ineffectiveness of legal struggles, as well as its revolutionary value in getting workers accustomed to obtain what they wanted by direct action, regardless of whether they were led by a parliamentarian party and were struggling for reformist aims.\(^11\)

In the days following the strike declaration the tension between workers and authorities rapidly escalated, with the strike extending from the capital to the provinces and clashes between police and demonstrators, including armed confrontations and an attack on the burgomaster of Brussels, while at the same time the leaders of the POB were showing a sense of responsibility by condemning the excesses of their followers. A leading article on the crisis in Belgium in the London Times of 18 April 1893 thus

\(^9\) Pierson, 87–107.

\(^{11}\) “Come si conquista quel... che si vuole,” parts 1 and 2, L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 5 (12 April 1897), and L’Agitatore Socialista Anarchico (Ancona), single issue (25 April 1897), in lieu of no. 7 of L’Agitazione.
opened: “Since the Commune of Paris was crushed by the Government of M. Thiers, so grave a crisis as that which now threatens Belgium has not arisen in Western Europe.” However, the article ended on a hopeful monarchist note, remarking “that, in the midst of these fierce strifes, the personal popularity of the King is unshaken.”

Such was the situation at the time of Malatesta’s trip to Belgium, and the apprehension of The Times about the agitations was the counterpoint to Malatesta’s expectations. The gravity of the situation and the sense of its open-endedness to dramatically different outcomes are palpable from the Times reports. In particular, there was a sense of a potentially revolutionary outcome, though no revolutionary goal had been formulated by the strikers. In this situation one sees a concrete instance of Malatesta’s oft-repeated concept that revolutions in history started almost invariably with moderate demands, more in the form of protests against abuses than of revolts against the essence of institutions. Even the reassuring remark of the Times columnist about the king’s popularity found a sinister match in Malatesta’s frequent references to the fate of Louis XVI in the French revolution, despite the cheers to the king from the Parisian revolutionary crowds. Historians may explain why the events had to unfold the way they did, but no such awareness was available to the actors.

Malatesta and Malato’s trip was recounted by the latter in his recollections Les Joyeusetés de l’Exil, though his account, reflecting the general style of the book, tends to dwell more on humorous digressions than on historical details. The whole expedition unfolded within the space of a week, approximately coinciding with the week of 12–18 April, during which the general strike itself unfolded. Together with Malatesta and Malato was another anarchist living in London, Louis Delorme. They joined a group of local anarchists, but the available human and material resources were inadequate for any

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12 The Times (London), no. 33,926 (15 April 1893): 7; no. 33,927 (17 April): 5; no. 33,928 (18 April): 5, 9.

13 See chapter 4, note 22.
initiative. Meanwhile, the agitations were timely and rapidly defused by the news of April 18 that the Chamber adopted a scheme of manhood suffrage and the POB leaders accepted the decision. As a French spy duly reported, on that day Malatesta, Malato, and Delorme were already back in London.

From Malatesta's anarchist point of view, the characteristics of struggles like the Belgian strike were inverse and complementary to those of the First of May. The First of May demonstrations were explicitly anti-capitalist, but they were undetermined as to their means, ranging from festive demonstrations to general strikes. Conversely, the agitation of Belgium used the right means, as it resorted to direct action and open revolt, but its declared goals were not shared by anarchists. In this respect, it could be likened more to the London Dock Strike than to the First of May. Like the Great Dock Strike, the Belgian agitation for universal suffrage coupled an impressive display of collective might by a determined and united working class with a great deal of restraint, encouraged by the leaders in view of non-revolutionary goals of limited scope. In such situations, characterized by the indeterminacy and open-endedness of collective action, the role of minorities in steering the agitations in one or another direction could be crucial.

Despite the non-insurrectionary outcome of the Belgian agitation, its success was a glaring confirmation of Malatesta's appraisal of the reforming power of direct action and even violence. This aspect was not lost on the bourgeois press either. For example, the Parisian *Temps* regretted that the extended franchise had been adopted "under mob pressure, for concessions that are extorted lose much of their grace, and the precedent may leave dangerous traces in a nation hitherto honourably distinguished by respect for law and order." At the same time, from an anarchist perspective, the agitation was a lost

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opportunity. According to the historian of Belgian anarchism Jan Moulaert, data on anarchist participation in the struggle are scarce, “but it is certain that one can hardly expect an orchestrated action that would depart from the anarchist tradition.” Anarchist participation may have been scarce, but whether or not an orchestrated action was to be expected is a different issue. Moulaert’s expectation recalls the stereotype of anarchism as necessarily doomed, while his reference to a single “anarchist tradition” is unwarranted. In contrast, Malato reports Malatesta to have regretfully commented during their fruitless attempt: “If instead of living aloof from the working masses, our friends had made an effort to penetrate them, talking with them in ordinary language of everyday interests and not of metaphysics, it would be us steering this movement today!” This comment provides the context to Malatesta’s remark of a few days later to the effect that anarchists would “see the tide of history flow at [their] feet” if they deferred acting until “the people mount the Anarchist Communist colours.”

In a similar vein, the outcome of the general strike was commented on in an anonymous article appeared in La Révolte of 3–10 May, eloquently titled “Sommes-nous a la hauteur des évenements?” (Are we equal to the events?), which analyzed the anarchists’ inadequacy in steering the events in a different direction. Max Nettlau attributes the article to Kropotkin, but adds that Malatesta’s impressions of the Belgian events, as he reported directly to Kropotkin, probably formed the article. According to the author, the Belgian movement had all the characteristics that a revolutionary movement could possibly have in its initial phase. It was a popular movement. Hundreds of thousands of people took part in it and took to the street. There was enthusiasm, especially in the beginning, and the mass of workers kept their promise: they had

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promised a general strike, and they nearly accomplished that, paying for their decision in hardships and blood. However, did the socialists, and especially the anarchists, keep their own promise? Did they throw themselves into the movement, resolve to instill broader ideas in it, and give it a more revolutionary character? In such a circumstance, even recriminations against the social democrats were futile. If the social democrats had lulled the masses to sleep, the anarchists had not done enough to wake them up, penetrating among them and mobilizing them toward wider goals than universal suffrage: “We have had our period of isolation, which was necessary for the elaboration of ideas. However, it is high time to return among the masses.” Anarchists had had their own martyrs, but they had not had popular agitators, who, “identifying themselves with the workers’ popular movements, would cross every town and every village of the whole country and would get to be recognized everywhere as brothers—as John Burns, unfortunately a social democrat, had done in England—living the same life and harboring the same hatred, but only carrying a broader revolutionary conception; ready to pay a personal price for their participation in the smallest strike or workers’ riot, no matter how negligible their results, so long as they are relevant for their participants; and thus loved and kept in high regard like better informed brothers.”

Malatesta’s theme of “going to the people” clearly resonates in these words.

Similar hopes, disappointments, and criticisms to those Malatesta manifested about the general strike in Belgium also characterized his involvement with the agitations that occurred in Italy in 1893–4, in connection with the Fasci movement in Sicily. If Malatesta’s involvement in the Belgian strike was episodic and his contribution null, he had a greater and more sustained role in Sicily. Moreover, it was not an individual role, but part of the collective involvement of the Italian anarchist movement. Hence, while the

Fasci movement shared with the Belgian strike the lack of a specific anarchist character, it provides the opportunity to assess not only the tactics that Malatesta advocated, but also those put in practice by the Italian anarchists. Moreover, coming two years after the Italian agitations of 1891, it provides the opportunity to test the historiographical assumption of Italian anarchism as cyclically disappearing and reappearing. Finally, assessing the outcome of anarchist participation in those agitations is crucial for understanding further developments in Malatesta’s tactics, for the events had a profound impact on him.

Malatesta’s direct involvement in Italian events ended with the Rome disturbances of 1 May 1891. On that same day, a federation of trade unions called Fascio dei lavoratori (Workers’ Fasces) was founded in the Sicilian city of Catania by Giuseppe De Felice Giuffrida. By the end of 1893 the Fasci movement—"fasci" being the plural for "fascio" (bundle), a term that symbolized the strength of union and bore no relation but etymological with the later Fascist movement—had developed into a mass movement, with one hundred eighty-one associations throughout the seven Sicilian districts—Palermo, Trapani, Messina, Catania, Syracuse, Caltanissetta, and Girgenti—with a membership that government sources estimated at approximately 300,000, and with De Felice, now a member of Parliament, as chief leader. Thus, the very same day that seemed to put an end to Malatesta and Merlino’s year-long organizational and insurrectionary effort, during which they devoted much attention to Sicily, also marked the beginning of a spectacular organizational growth on the island, which led to the dramatic events of 1893–4.

A hard-and-fast ideological map of the Fasci cannot be drawn. Ideological boundaries were blurred among the leaders themselves, as shown by the socialist

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unorthodoxy of De Felice, who stood by the inclusive principle of gathering all workers with no specific party characterization in contrast to the idea of creating a Marxist-type party in Sicily, and by anarchists as Petrina and Noè being elected as Fasci representatives in the town council of Messina.\textsuperscript{21} The political allegiance of the base was also far from definite. An 1893 breakdown of the Fasci by the socialist newspaper \textit{La Giustizia Sociale} shows that only a minority of them joined the socialist party. Moreover, Salvatore Romano laments that the task of creating disciplined socialist Fasci, as pursued by the orthodox Palermo leader Rosario Garibaldi Bosco, proved difficult, as many Fasci carried out activities of local scope, keeping only loose ties with the central committee, and neglecting to obey rules and instructions. While the Fasci were a growing working-class movement, they had no definite party affiliation, nor were their political leanings sharply defined.\textsuperscript{22}

The Fasci’s struggle started on the ground of economic demands, with the greatest unity of action in the 1893 peasant strikes. Another crucial aspect of the agitations concerned the reduction or abolition of taxes, a demand traditionally associated with riotous forms of struggle in Sicily. The agitations of 1893–4 were no exception. They started by the summer 1893 and peaked between October and December.\textsuperscript{23} Despite the methods employed, the Fasci historian Salvatore Romano argues that “the demonstration that took place at the cries of ‘Long live the King!’ and ‘Down with taxes!’ ending up in the destruction of custom-houses, clearly reveal that the intentions of the masses in agitation were non-revolutionary, aiming instead at the satisfaction of demands.”\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{22} Natale Musarra, introduction to Cerrito, \textit{I Fasci dei Lavoratori}, 20; Musarra, “Dati statistici,” 70–71; Romano, \textit{Storia dei Fasci siciliani}, 188.


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 461–3.
Nevertheless, their characteristics turned them into a riskier struggle for the Fasci leadership than the peasant strikes, which were kept within legal boundaries. Thus, the Fasci’s evolution spoke to Malatesta’s claim that “popular movements begin how they can” and nearly always “spring from some idea already transcended by contemporary thought.” Such movements could be potentially revolutionary, Malatesta believed, for revolt had its own logic that transcended the initial aims of the actors, as the escalation of the struggle in Sicily and the socialist leadership’s difficulty to control it showed.

In London, Malatesta, Merlino, and Cipriani started making preparations for agitations in Sicily in early 1893, well before the Fasci movement reached its onset, as their French associate Charles Malato recalled years later: “Since the first half of the year, Malatesta, Merlino, and I knew that a revolutionary situation would present itself in Sicily around August or September. Malatesta felt that certain field equipment (including firearms) would not be useless, and wished to purchase some Maxim machine-guns, to be sent to Italy disassembled and mixed with farming tools. Cipriani took several trips from Paris to London to confer with us.”

However, much of their activity in 1893–4 focused not so much on Sicily itself, as on the rest of Italy. Now that the fire was catching on in the island, their preoccupation was to spread the agitations to the rest of the country as a necessary condition for a successful insurrection. Thus, in February 1893 the Italian anarchist socialists in London printed the manifesto “Agli Operai Italiani” (To the Italian workers), to be sent to Italy. The manifesto addressed workers, but it touched upon themes such as hunger, the cost of foodstuff, and heavy duties, that struck traditionally sensitive popular chords. It also made a reference to the government’s plunders and massacres since the unification of Italy, thus striking the chord of the betrayed ideals of Risorgimento, still alive in many

minds. Non-anarchist motives were not only pragmatically accepted, but also actively appealed to.26

The Italian anarchists in London also sought to mobilize the transnational section of Italian anarchism. Around April 1893 the anarchist-socialist group *La Solidarietà* was formed in London, with the threefold goal of “propagating the anarchist-socialist principles among the Italian workers in London; getting in contact with the groups and comrades of both England and other countries to the end of constituting a federation of Italian anarchists residing abroad; and helping by all possible means and constantly the revolutionary propaganda in Italy and everywhere the activity of the group can be effectively carried out.” One of the first initiatives of the group was to issue a circular “To the Italian Workers Abroad,” in which they reiterated the necessity of “uniting, forming anarchist groups everywhere, actively corresponding between group and group and with the comrades of Italy.”27

A testimony of the anarchist activism linked to the Sicilian agitations comes from Antonio Labriola, “the most robust mind of the Italian socialist movement of that period,” according to Romano. In July 1893 Labriola wrote to Engels: “Here, in Italy, the so-called anarchists are beginning to take action once again. What they are, you already know. They are a mixture of all revolutionary passions. A secret circular from Malatesta urges them to remake the *Federations*, which were ruined by the famous trials of 1 May 1891.” Labriola dismissed “the illusion of a coming revolt in Sicily” and “the alleged


Sicilian agitation,” calling the Fasci “labors of fantasy.” However, his assessment changed dramatically in few months. In a letter to Engels of November he declared: “These Fasci are the second great mass movement after that of Rome in 1889–91, and the former is certainly rooted in more permanent causes.” In December, he enthusiastically wrote again to Engels: “How perceptive and swift these Sicilians are! Every authority is questioned, and the monarchy has no more strength. The proletariat is coming to the forestage.” Labriola’s change of attitude witnesses how perceptive Italian anarchists were in their early appreciation of the Fasci movement’s revolutionary potential.

The anarchists’ agitation on the continent was encouraged by a general atmosphere of revolt, which found an outlet in widespread popular agitations after the massacre of Aigues Mortes. Numerous anti-French and nationalist popular demonstrations took place, promoted by patriotic and student associations. As the demonstrations grew in number each day, they also changed in character, turning into clashes with the police and mass riots. The most serious incidents occurred on 20–25 August in Naples, where street clashes raged across the city for three days, ending only with the intervention of troops and two thousand arrests. Besides giving a measure of the popular discontent, such episodes of “spontaneous anarchy,” as Labriola called them, speak again to the social indeterminacy of collective action emphasized by Malatesta, corroborating his claim that “revolt has its own logic,” independent from self-proclaimed motivations, and despite initial “displays of respect and devotion to the authorities.”

Malatesta’s focus on the continent materialized in the manifesto ”Agli Anarchici d’Italia” (To the anarchists of Italy), issued from London in November 1893 by the


Gruppo La Solidarietà. The manifesto called upon “the audacious” to give the signal of revolt, “whatever choice the other parties may make.” The link between Sicily and the rest of Italy was emphasized: “once Sicily is defeated, it will be the turn of the continent.” On the other hand, the manifesto claimed, “if we want, we can win. Victory never looked as likely as now. It is up to us to make it certain.” The manifesto urged anarchists to organize revolutionary Fasci everywhere and “arouse such an agitation as to prevent the Government from sending whole regiments of soldiers to Sicily” Anarchists were urged to struggle beneath their own banner, without compromise, but also without intolerance, “which is always harmful, but outright disastrous at this moment.” In brief, the manifesto outlined the anarchist insurrectionary strategy of wearing down the army’s military power by extending the struggle to the whole country. The manifesto met with mixed reactions in Italy. In some places Malatesta’s call for tactical coalition was heeded, though his mistrust in other parties proved justified. Agreements with socialists and republicans took place, but they generally broke down at the moment of taking up arms. On the other hand, the manifesto’s urge to organize Fasci was not uncontroversially accepted. Anti-organizationist periodicals, such as Sempre Avanti of Leghorn and L’Ordine of Turin, had a different view and harshly criticized the “fascist regimentation” and “Sicilian Fasciocracy,” while supporting grass roots agitations.

While Malatesta’s tactics were opposed by part of the anarchist movement, they were in agreement with the revolutionary tactics of De Felice, who also believed that an insurrection on the island could not be successful unless a similar revolt broke out on the continent at the same time. Thus, a meeting of 7 November 1893 at the Fascio of Catania


32 Pernicone, 284; “Una franca parola agli pseudo-anarchici” and “Comunicati,” L’Ordine (Turin) 2, no. 48 (23 December 1893); “I Fasti della Fasciocracia Siciliana” and “Bava socialista,” L’Ordine (Turin) 3, no. 1 (6 January 1894).
resolved to send a propaganda committee to the continent. By then, a number of Fasci already existed on the continent in Apulia and Calabria, and more were formed between November and December in Naples, Rome, and all over the peninsula. As Romano sums up, “De Felice, with the direct support of the anarchists, cast a network of new Fasci in the peninsula, ready to back the Sicilian movement and come from the peninsula to the aid of the Fasci insurrection on the island.” In turn, the insurrectionary network being built in the homeland was firmly connected with anarchists abroad. After his release of early 1893 from the imprisonment for the 1891 riots, Cipriani had returned to Paris, from where he was in contact both with the London anarchists and with De Felice, Noè, Petrina, and others in Sicily. In November 1893 a French informer reported: “Malatesta has written to several comrades in Italy, especially in Sicily, for the organisation of armed bands. The anarchists of Northern Piedmont have responded to him very favourably.” On 16 December Cipriani met De Felice in Marseille.

In contrast to millenarian stereotypes, revolution was not simply preached or expected to happen spontaneously. It was actively planned and prepared through tactical alliances across ideological lines. The weapon to overcome the enemy forces was the extension of the struggle to the whole country.

At the time of De Felice’s meeting with Cipriani, repression had dramatically escalated in Sicily, after the resignation of prime minister Giovanni Giolitti and the coming to power of Francesco Crispi. During the month of December 1893 the armed

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34 Ibid., 399–402.
forces opened fire on demonstrators in various towns and villages of the island, killing and wounding tens of workers. In the first three days of January 1894 massacres of workers occurred on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{36} In contrast to the attitude of Malatesta and De Felice, the prevailing tendency of socialist newspapers at this juncture was to disavow the “socialist” character of the Fasci movement, notwithstanding that more than half of the over 100,000 members of the socialist party were in Sicily. This attitude was evident in a chilling advance eulogy appeared in \textit{Lotta di Classe} on 31 December 1893, at the climax of the Sicilian struggle:

\begin{quote}
By this time the chronicle of the events loses almost any relevance for Sicily. It is a revolution, the most spontaneous, natural, legitimate revolution: the revolution of a people that prefers to die by lead than by starvation. What makes it most solemnly tragic is the certainty of its destiny: it will be bloodily repressed by the armed force at the service of the bourgeoisie. The fraternal sympathy that we express to the rebels is, alas! but an advance eulogy of the victims. Although the socialist party has the right to be sensitive to the cry of pain of a whole proletariat, it realizes that its action will be null, or nearly so, in the face of a movement that does not proceed from a determined thought, and is not the expression of a clear and precise consciousness of its goal. The revolt of hunger is not the revolt of a party.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

The distance between the perspective of the socialist leadership and Malatesta’s could not be greater. For the latter, as he had written five years earlier, “any strike, if it can last and spread, can end up undermining the legitimacy itself of bosses; likewise, any attack on a town hall or a police station, can end up in open insurrection against the monarchy, even if it is made amidst shouts of ‘Long live the king! Long live the queen!’” His closing argument was: “Let’s take the people as they are, and let’s move forward with them: abandoning them just because they do not understand our formulas and our arguments in the abstract would be foolishness and betrayal at the same time.”\textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{38} “Un altro sciopero.”
For Lotta di Classe the Fasci movement was doomed, and hence it was to be left to its fate. For Malatesta its victory or defeat depended on whether the revolutionary forces, including socialists, would leave it to its fate or side with it. On 2 January 1894 Crispi was empowered to invest General Morra di Lavriano with full power to re-establish order. The following day a dramatic meeting of the Fasci central committee took place in Palermo, where De Felice made an impassioned appeal to take up arms. The insurrectionary option was rejected by the central committee. Instead, a manifesto was issued, containing demands to the government and a call for workers to regain their calm.39 On 4 January a state of siege was proclaimed in Sicily. The same day De Felice was arrested in Palermo. In the next fortnight other Fasci leaders were arrested, the Palermo Fascio was dissolved, mass arrests ensued, and approximately a thousand people were sent to domicilio coatto (internment) without trial. The prediction of Lotta di Classe had finally come true.40

In the following days, while socialists staged peaceful protest demonstrations, the initiative on the continent passed to the hands of the anarchists, though their action was sporadic.41 Demonstrations akin to those of Sicily for the abolition of octroi duties caused arrests in the Cosenza district, where Fasci had formed weeks before.42 In Milan and Rome clashes with the police occurred. Riots took place in the Apulian towns of Ruvo and Corato, where anarchists had a presence, with attacks on octroi guards, fire set


41 “Italy,” The Times (London), no. 34,157 (10 January 1894): 5.

42 Romano, Storia dei Fasci siciliani, 400.
to a town-hall, tax collection offices, and public registers, railway lines torn up, telegraph wires cut, and gendarmerie barracks assailed.43

However, the most serious uprising occurred on 13–16 January 1894 in the area around Carrara, a city in Lunigiana, the northernmost tip of Tuscany. Because of the city's strong anarchist presence, centered on the marble industry of the Apuan mountains, the uprising provides the opportunity to analyze the anarchists' mode of operation in the context of the ongoing agitations. Was the Carrara uprising an isolated initiative, as the Jerez uprising of two years before? Was it an impromptu reaction to the news from Sicily or was it planned? What was its goal? The most recurrent interpretation, sometimes from a sympathetic standpoint, has been that the insurrectionary outcome exceeded the leaders' intentions, who only meant to stage a protest demonstration. This interpretation, which exonerates anarchist leaders from responsibilities but also reinforces stereotypes of anarchist collective action as spontaneistic and reactive, has been challenged by Gino Vatteroni, who argues that the demonstration had insurrectionary goals.44

Vatteroni's detailed reconstruction starts from the months preceding the uprising, which recorded an increased organization effort in the Carrara area, practical agreements with the collectivist republicans, a series of meetings held by the visiting anarchist Luigi Molinari at the end of December 1893, and the appearance of numerous placards of insurrectionary tone on the walls of Carrara on 7 January 1894.45 On the night of 13 January insurgents assembled in six meeting points around Carrara, with the plan to gather further participants and enter the city simultaneously. Telegraph wires were cut,
custom-houses attacked and set on fire, weapons seized, barricades erected on strategic roads, and work stoppages imposed by armed groups in various sawmills. However, unexpected early clashes with the police induced the insurgents to change their plans. The insurgents dispersed in the mountains, falling back on defensive tactics of guerrilla warfare for the next two days. On Monday 15 January, many workers abstained from work, while Carrara was occupied by over three thousand soldiers. On that day the struggle intensified, recording demonstrations and episodes of insurgency. On the morning of 16 January a general strike was proclaimed, and work at the quarries came to a standstill. The troops opened fire on a crowd that was marching in the direction of Carrara, killing eight people and wounding thirteen. Widespread repression ensued, with house searches and arrests. On 17 January all the quarrymen remained on strike, but the uprising was virtually over. On the same day the state of siege in the district of Massa–Carrara was proclaimed, and General Heusch was invested with full powers to re-establish order.

For Vatteroni, the Carrara anarchists intended to arouse an insurrectionary movement that would lead by example and spark revolts in the rest of Italy. However, in contrast to Crispi's conspiracy theory, which sought to explain the uprising by "a broader subversive plan that linked the Apuan insurgents to those of Sicily, to the libertarian centres in Italy and abroad, and through the latter to the dark maneuvers of foreign powers," Vatteroni argues that the uprising was undertaken "in a completely autonomous and independent manner, outside of any kind of influence from or agreement with other 'revolutionary centres' in Italy or abroad." For him, even Molinari knew nothing about

46 Ibid., 12–16, 26–28; "Italy," The Times (London), no. 34,161 (15 January 1894): 5.

47 Vatteroni, 18–22, 34–36; "The Disturbances in Italy and Sicily," The Times (London), no. 34,163 (17 January 1894): 5.

48 "The Disturbances in Italy," The Times (London), no. 34,164 (18 January 1894): 3.
what was being hatched in Carrara. However, Vatteroni acknowledges that the initiatives of the Carrara anarchists followed a line of conduct similar to that of a large section of the Italian anarchist movement. "In practice," Vatteroni concludes, "Carrara followed more or less consciously this political tendency," which sought "a united front for a general insurrection" starting from Sicily and spreading to the whole country.49

By interpreting the uprising as both autonomous and in step with a broader project, Vatteroni wants to have his cake and eat it. His explicit contrasting his own interpretation with Crispi's conspiracy theory points to a preoccupation, typical of much militant historiography, to play down the anarchists’ legal responsibilities and argue for their victimization, but at the price of playing down their rationality. However, legal and historical evidence lie on different planes. Certainly Crispi had little ground for legal charges, and his references to foreign powers were a figment of the imagination. Still, his hypothesis was historiographically more charitable than Vatteroni's. Of course, one need not posit a centralized direction. Malatesta himself had claimed in L'Associazione that the most effective insurrections were those in which everyone knew what to do and acted autonomously. However, a common line of conduct could not arise by chance, but only through prior communication.50

The manifestos sent from London, such as "Agli Anarchici d'Italia" of November 1893, which was an explicit, public call for the very sort of insurrectionary tactics that the Carrara anarchists undertook, were themselves a clear message. Moreover, prominent actors in the uprising, such as Ezio Puntoni, Garibaldi Rossi, Primo Ghio, and Raffaele De Santi had steady contacts with Malatesta and other anarchists: in 1891 Puntoni and Rossi received Malatesta during his clandestine stay in Italy and De Santi was the Roman

49 Vatteroni, 59–62.

anarchists' contact in Carrara;\(^{51}\) a country-wide list of contacts sent in 1892 from Milan to the Palermo anarchists included Rossi’s name;\(^{52}\) in April 1893 a manifesto “coming from abroad” was posted in Carrara, whose description matches the “Agli Operai Italiani,” sent from London few weeks earlier;\(^{53}\) and less than two months after the Carrara uprising Primo Ghio received a bundle of placards from Malatesta’s group in London.\(^{54}\) Ghio and Puntoni’s names were still in Malatesta’s address book at the turn of the century, when the two lived in the United States, after escaping the repressive backlash of 1894.\(^{55}\) Most importantly, Giampietro Berti provides evidence that Luigi Molinari knew about the plans being made in London. That no communication on the subject occurred during his stay in Carrara would be odd, unless one subscribes to the interpretation of the uprising as wholly spontaneous, which, if possible, seems implausible, given the links we know existed.\(^{56}\)

Not only were the tactics of the Carrara anarchists in tune with a broader tendency, but they make sense only if interpreted in a national context. A tenable objective could hardly be attributed to such initiatives on a local level. In contrast, the uprising’s tactics become transparent in the light of a country-wide strategy aimed at overcoming the government’s repressive power by wearing it thin through the sheer extension of the insurrectionary agitations. In this light, the uprising itself, not its local result, would really matter: engaging as many troops as long as possible and hampering their communication would be the objective, provided that the same be done elsewhere. A

\(^{51}\) Gestri, 310–3.


\(^{53}\) Vatteroni, 38.

\(^{54}\) “Elenco dei destinatari,” s.d., DAP, b. 105, fs. 991 “Stampa straniera sediziosa,” ACS.

\(^{55}\) CPC, b. 2953, ACS.

\(^{56}\) Berti, Merlino, 223.
common pattern can be discerned in the anarchists’ attempts in Apulia, Lunigiana, and later Piedmont: the interruption of means of communications; more or less symbolic attacks on government targets; and retreat to defensive position or transfer to other towns. What seems spontaneistic and aimless at a local level, acquires sense in a broader context.

The plan to arouse country-wide insurrectionary agitations was also reflected by the movements of Malato, Malatesta, and Merlino, who all left London in January 1894 for different parts of Italy. The first to leave was Malato, on 12 January. He was to operate in the northern regions of Piedmont and Lombardy; his departure predated the beginning of the Lunigiana uprising by one day. Malatesta and Merlino left in its aftermath. Meanwhile, a handbill titled “Solidarietà con la Sicilia: Ai Lavoratori” (Solidarity with Sicily: To the workers) was printed by the London anarchist-socialists for distribution in Italy. The manifesto addressed again the workers of Italy, but it avoided any reference to anarchism, in an effort to appeal to as many workers as possible, especially socialists and republicans: “If we cannot do better, let us stop working. . . . Let us go on a general strike. Let no one go to work! Let no one pay taxes anymore!” And whereas the manifesto of February 1893 ended with the words “Long live anarchist socialism! Long live the workers’ revolution!” this one ended with “Long live the workers’ solidarity!”

Charles Malato’s movements in Italy are known with reasonable accuracy, mainly thanks to his autobiography Les Joyeusetés de l’Exil. Malato visited Turin, Biella, and Milan. After few more days spent between the Biellese and the Montferrat areas in mostly fruitless talks and meetings, Malato’s presence was requested in Turin, where the local anarchists believed that opportunities for action did exist in the Biellese. The plan,


in Malato’s words, was to “take to the countryside, blow up bridges, cut telegraph wires, blockade roads, attack isolated police stations, endeavour to hold out in the mountains for a month, long enough to allow the winter agitations of the unemployed to spread out to the industrious cities of Northern Italy.” A band was formed, which reached Biella on 7 February, its leading spirit being Romualdo Pappini, whom Malato describes as “leaning towards Stirner’s individualism.” The band held out in the Biellese mountains for several days, but did not succeed in arousing the population. Eventually, after destroying numerous telegraph lines, they returned to Turin, where they were reached by the news of Emile Henry’s bombing of Café Terminus in Paris on 12 February. A month after his departure, Malato made his way back to London.59

Merlino’s mission was short-lived. On 30 January, a few days after his arrival in Italy, he was arrested in Naples, betrayed by the spy Giovanni Domanico. Merlino’s arrest and conviction practically ended his collaboration with Malatesta, for after release he began distancing himself from anarchism. Malatesta’s movements in Italy are hard to reconstruct, as much information comes from police sources, which partly relied on Domanico. Fabbri states that he met Turati in Milan, and Pietro Gori confirms that he was there in late January.60 Domanico states that Malatesta made a stop in Bologna, then in Romagna and later in Ancona.61 Though no notable agitations occurred in Romagna, Malatesta’s presence determined Crispi’s apprehension, which may explain his sending two army corps in that region, “where the situation might become grave,” as he still maintained in late March. According to other sources, Malatesta was also in Tuscany. In Ancona he contributed to the local anarchist press. The article “Andiamo fra il popolo,”


60 Marucco, 229, n. 11.

of 4 February, drew a balance sheet of the anarchist contributions to the agitations, showing that by then Malatesta had abandoned hopes to revive the movement. By 20 February he was back in London. 62

Anarchism, in its stereotypical image of spontaneous and aimless rebellion, allegedly disappeared after the events of 1 May 1891 in piazza Santa Croce in Gerusalemme and reappeared on the Apuan mountains in January 1894. In fact, throughout that period there was a stream of continuous activism, planned and proactive rather than impromptu and reactive. Since 1890 anarchists as Malatesta and Merlino focused on Sicily as a fertile ground for the revolutionary struggle. In the next three years Sicilian anarchists gave a significant and steady contribution to the formidable working-class movement that developed on the island, of which they had been among the early founders. There was continuity between the anarchist groups active in Sicily around 1893 and those that endorsed the Capolago congress of 1891, which in turn had roots that went as far back as the First International. Well before the Sicilian Fasci had developed into a full-blown mass movement, anarchists on the continent and abroad had started focusing on the extension of the struggle to the whole country. Contemporary observers such as Antonio Labriola and historians such as Salvatore Romano have recorded early anarchist activism throughout 1893 in connection with the Sicilian movement. Though anti-organizationists supported the popular agitations but harshly criticized the Fasci form of organization, organizationists as Malatesta favoured the extension of the Fasci to the continent and established alliances with Fasci leaders such as De Felice.

The extension of the Sicilian struggle to the continent and the alliance with De Felice were part of an overall anarchist insurrectionary strategy consistently pursued throughout 1893. Though insurrectionary agitations in early 1894 were sporadic and inadequate,

being limited to Apulia, Lunigiana, and Piedmont, they shared a pattern of action that fits an overall strategy outlined by both Malatesta and De Felice. In particular, the most notable of such agitations, the Carrara uprising, often depicted as a protest demonstration that got out of hand, fits that common pattern in its mode of operation and makes sense only if its objectives are interpreted on a national scale. In Carrara, too, there was considerable continuity between the key figures that were in contact with Malatesta and the Roman anarchists in 1891 and the main actors of the 1894 uprising. As in the rest of the country, revolutionary propaganda in Carrara increased throughout 1893 and insurrectionary plans were laid out well before the uprising occurred. In sum, between 1891 and 1894 anarchists never disappeared or stopped agitating. Instead, a dense web of links can be identified between the events of those two years, in terms of both people and activity. Moreover, conscious planning, not spontaneous reaction was the key factor in the 1894 events.

The tactics pursued by Malatesta exhibited both coherence and flexibility, as the four manifestos issued by the London anarchist in 1893–4 illustrate. The first two, “Agli Operai Italiani” and “Agli Anarchici d’Italia,” openly advocated insurrection. However, they differed in content, as they respectively addressed workers and anarchists: the first manifesto surveyed the social ills that afflicted Italy and recalled the unfulfilled revolutionary ideals of Risorgimento; the second outlined the tactics that anarchists were to follow. The third manifesto, “Solidarietà con la Sicilia,” issued in early 1894, when insurrectionary prospects were becoming less bright, no longer called workers to insurrection, but to the general strike. Shortly after Malatesta’s return to London, hundreds of copies of a fourth manifesto, “Al Popolo d’Italia” (To the people of Italy), dated London, 1 March 1894, and signed by the group La Solidarietà, reached Italy. The manifesto conceded defeat and blamed the lack of support to the areas in revolt from the rest of Italy. Then, it addressed the Italian people in strikingly explicit terms: “Attack and disarm all police stations, set fire to courtrooms, archives, city halls, town halls, and
prefect offices, burning all documents kept therein concerning ownership claims, sentences, and convictions. Take possession of everything....” The manifesto ended with the phrase “Long live anarchist communism!”63

Each manifesto illustrates a different aspect of Malatesta’s tactics. By addressing workers and anarchists differently, the manifestos reflected Malatesta’s distinction between masses and conscious minorities. The manifestos to workers contained little or no reference to anarchism and socialism. In the first of them the only such reference was in the signature phrase “Long live anarchist socialism!” In the third one, even that reference disappeared. In the coherent pursuit of the same insurrectionary project, the manifestos exhibited tactical flexibility, changing focus from open insurrection to the general strike. The focus changed again with the fourth manifesto, which illustrates another aspect of Malatesta’s tactics, the difference between propaganda for immediate action and the propaganda of ideas. The former was to pragmatically adjust to specific contexts, omitting references to anarchism when these could be counterproductive. The latter was to fully convey the anarchist message. Thus, at the same time that the fourth manifesto conceded defeat, it was also the one that most explicitly spelled out insurrectionary tactics and made reference again to the ideal of anarchy. In issuing that manifesto, the London anarchists had already turned to the preparation of the next insurrection.

The contrast between the tactics of the socialist party and Malatesta best illustrates the latter’s originality and the tight connection between anarchist theory and practice. The socialists invested greater effort and gained more prominence than the anarchists in organizing the Fasci. Yet, despite their greater involvement, they abandoned the movement to its fate when class struggle escalated to open conflict with the authorities.

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The two apparently contradictory attitudes were complementary, both proceeding from the socialists’ preoccupation with hegemony. Socialists made every effort to control the movement, but disavowed it when it got out of control. They identified themselves with the cause of the proletariat, but in turn they identified the latter with the cause of their party. Instead, for anarchists as Malatesta the Sicilian agitations might have been only “the revolt of hunger” and not of a party, but that might have been just as well. The movement might not have “proceeded from a determined thought,” but people were to be taken as they were. Despite the anarchists’ lesser involvement in the organization of the Fasci, the movement was to be fully supported, and its action extended by autonomous action on the continent. Participation in popular movements was not conditional upon anarchist hegemony, so long as the movements were not in contrast with anarchist goals. Malatesta found good reasons for joining movements that did not have an anarchist character in the logic of revolt, which had its own dynamics that transcended the explicit aims of actors. The events of 1893–4, in which social conflict escalated from non-revolutionary demands and traditional forms of struggle as in Sicily, or even from patriotic demonstrations as in Naples, showed that Malatesta’s reasons were not based on wishful thinking, but were grounded on empirical reality.

The socialist party’s doctrinarism was acknowledged in an article appeared in Filippo Turati’s *Critica Sociale* of 16 January 1894. The article recalled that the Sicilian movement raised disbelief among socialists, who argued that “it was not conscious, that it was not a socialist movement.” It looked strange to them “that the people could rise up without Marx’s name on their lips, and instead they carried around the portraits of the king and queen and the icon of Our Lady.” However, the author acknowledged, “it was a proletarian movement,” though “it was not as we would have wanted it, as it should have been according to the pure doctrine.” In sum, the author concluded, “our historical
prejudice blinded us to true history.”64 In the anarchist camp, the task of self-criticism was undertaken by Malatesta himself, who characteristically addressed the anarchists’ inadequacies in his article “Andiamo fra il popolo”: “Let us confess it at the outset: the anarchists have not been up to the situation.” With the exception of Carrara, which gave evidence of courage and devotion, but also of inadequate organization, anarchists had had a minor role amidst such a popular upheaval. Malatesta’s targeted the rising anti-organizationist tendency, and the isolation that proceeded from it. He drew a comparison between the Fasci and the French revolution:

_Let us remember that the people of Paris started off by demanding bread to the king amidst applauses and tears of affection, yet—having received bullets instead of bread, as it was natural—after two years they had already beheaded him. And it was only yesterday that the people of Sicily have been on the verge of making a revolution, while still cheering to the king and all his family._65

For him, ridiculing the Fasci because they were not organized as anarchists wished, “or because they were often named after Mary Immaculate, or because they kept in their rooms the bust of Karl Marx rather than that of Bakunin” revealed a lack of understanding and revolutionary spirit. Thus, in the end, the charge of doctrinarism fell upon socialists and anarchists alike, and both had some responsibility in the defeat of the Fasci movement.

For the historian Giampietro Berti, “the general failure of the 1894 revolts marks an important turning point in Malatesta’ thought and action…. Popular spontaneism could not get anywhere by itself. It was necessary to change tune, laying down the foundations of a methodical work of propaganda… it was necessary to ‘go to the people.’” Indeed, the defeat of the Fasci and the related anarchists’ inadequacies led Malatesta to a thorough re-assessment of anarchist tactics. However, Berti’s remark conflates two

65 “Andiamo fra il popolo.”
separate themes, “going to the people” and the theme of a methodical work of propaganda. “Going to the people” was not a new theme; Malatesta had voiced it at least since 1889. At this time, “going to the people” was felt increasingly urgent in the face of anti-organizationism. A similar criticism had already been expressed in January by *L’Art*. 248—the same periodical in which Malatesta’s article appeared—still amidst the agitations: “what are we doing? Nothing at all. We have a revolution in the living-room, and we keep splitting hairs about free initiative and organization.” However, Malatesta’s references to a long and patient work—as spelled out in 1897–8 in *L’Agitazione*—would only begin months later.66

Malatesta’s intense re-working of his tactics is revealed by two documents that he published in the year following his return from Italy and that have remained unheeded by commentators. The first is the article “The Duties of the Present Hour,” which appeared in August 1894 in the London anarchist periodical *Liberty*. The article has never been translated into Italian or any other language, though in the late 1920s Malatesta himself included it in a list of his own works to which he attributed special importance.67 What were anarchists to do, Malatesta asked, in the face of the reaction let loose upon them from all sides? “Before all,” he responded, “we must as much as possible resist the laws; I might almost say we must ignore them.” The degree of freedom under which people lived, he argued, depended less on the letter of the law than on resistance and customs. If anarchists offered energetic resistance to anti-anarchist laws, these laws would at once appear to public opinion as a shameless violation of all human rights and would be doomed to extinction or to remaining a dead letter. Conversely, those laws would gain the status of political customs if anarchists put up with them. The disastrous result would


67 [Luigi Fabbri], “Per una raccolta degli scritti di E. Malatesta,” *Studi Sociali* (Montevideo) 3, no. 21 (30 September 1932).
be that the struggle for political liberties would gain priority over the social question. “We are to be prevented from expressing our ideas: let us do so none the less and that more than ever. They want to proscribe the very name of Anarchist: let us shout aloud that we are Anarchists. The right of association is to be denied us: let us associate as we can, and proclaim that we are associated, and mean to be.” Before anything else anarchists were to go among the people. Whilst their ideas obliged them to put all hopes in the masses, they had neglected all manifestations of popular life, thus becoming isolated: “hence the want of success of what I will call, the first period of the Anarchist movement.” The anarchists’ ordinary means of propaganda, such as the press, meetings, and groups, would become increasingly difficult to use. The alternative was the involvement in the labour movement:

   It is only in working-men’s associations, strikes, collective revolts where we can find a waste [sic] field for exercising our influence and propagating our ideas. But if we want to succeed, let us remember that people do not become Anarchists in a single day, by hearing some violent speeches, and let us above all avoid falling into the error common to many comrades, who refuse to associate with working men who are not already perfect Anarchists, whilst it is absolutely necessary to associate with them in order to make them become Anarchists. 68

The comparison between “Andiamo tra il popolo” and “The Duties of the Present Hour” is especially instructive. There was continuity in the advocacy of “going to the people,” but at the same time different arguments were made. The two articles were written only six months apart, yet their arguments, language, and imagery were respectively akin to those characteristic of two periodicals edited by Malatesta, L’Associazione and L’Agitazione, that were nearly a decade apart. The February article had the same emphasis of L’Associazione on the social indeterminacy of collective action, expressed through the same references to the French revolution. The August article, the first after Malatesta’s return from Italy and months of silence, made novel references to economic

and legal resistance and to the idea of laws as resulting from the balance of antagonistic forces, foreshadowing concepts that he fully developed in 1897–8 in *L’Agitazione*. Clearly, that six-month interlude was a period of transition and elaboration. Malatesta showed full awareness that the “present hour” was a momentous watershed between two phases, as his reference to “the first period of the Anarchist movement” made clear.

The second relevant event in the twelve months after Malatesta’s return to London was his attempt to create the International Federation of Revolutionary Anarchist Socialists. In February 1895 the London anarchist periodicals *Liberty* and *The Torch* published a manifesto containing the programme of the recently-formed Federation, which had started in Italy. *Liberty* stated that the federation was now seeking to extend itself, while *The Torch* claimed that it had been “largely adhered to in Spain, Portugal, Southern France, and South America.” As frequently happened with Malatesta’s initiatives, the manifesto was best received by the Spanish-language anarchist press. It was promptly translated by *El Despertar* of New York and *El Corsario* of Corunna, which explicitly attributed it to Malatesta. *Solidarity*, of New York, also published the manifesto. There is no evidence of any French edition. However, the French syndicalist Fernand Pelloutier took notice of the document, quoting it from *Solidarity*, in an overview of the current situation of socialism for *Les Temps Nouveaux*. The project was short-lived, thus pointing to the difficulties that Malatesta’s organizationist ideas encountered. However, it is valuable as a way to assess the evolution of his ideas on anarchist organization.

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The manifesto comprised three main sections: preamble, aims, and rules. The aims of the Federation were: (i) to propagate anarchist-socialism and the necessity for violent revolution; (ii) to inspire the people with a consciousness of their rights and sentiments of love and solidarity; (iii) to encourage the working-class movement and stimulate workers to organize with the three-fold purpose of resisting employers and authorities for immediate gains, taking part in a general strike or insurrection to overthrow the present institutions, and taking over production and distribution on the day of the revolution; (iv) to encourage and profit by all movements of emancipation to the advantage of anarchist-socialist propaganda, and by all progress in ideas and facts which may be realized by the action of other individuals or parties; and (v) to co-ordinate the revolutionary efforts to attain a general insurrection. The section ended with a statement on violence: “The Federation declares that its work is one of love. It rejects every action inspired by the spirit of hatred and vengeance, and admits violence only as a hard necessity imposed on it by present conditions and limited by the same necessity.”

The manifesto’s significance in Malatesta’s evolution is best grasped by comparing it with the Capolago programme of four years earlier. The means advocated by the latter were expressed by generic phrases such as “propaganda in all forms,” “participation in all agitations and all workers’ movements,” and “revolutionary initiative.” In the Federation manifesto the organization’s ends and means were more sharply defined. Participation in the labour movement was spelled out in terms of both struggles for partial gains and insurrectionary general strikes. Participation in collective movements was qualified by an inclusive reference to the usefulness of “all progress in ideas and facts” coming from “other individuals or parties.” Finally, a line was drawn between different kinds of violence. The sharpening of the Federation’s programme concerned exactly those issues that divided anarchists but had been left hidden in the Capolago programme: participation in the labour movement, the relative importance of collective versus individual action,
and the revolutionary value of violent deeds. In brief, the Federation manifesto was the outcome of Malatesta’s acknowledgment of the errors made at Capolago.

The manifesto’s “Rules” showed great similarity with those of Capolago, but here, too, the few differences were significant. In general, there was stronger emphasis on party discipline and a positive definition of duties. In his programme of 1889, Malatesta had maintained that an anarchist party should reconcile free initiative with unity of action and discipline. Both elements were present in both the Capolago and the International Federation’ rules. However, the Capolago organization scheme placed greater emphasis on free initiative: no terms evoking duty were used; unity of action was generically expressed by the intention “to cooperate to the accomplishment of the stated principles by the stated means.” At the same time, there was a preoccupation to protect the free initiative of groups: groups were “autonomous” and district Committees did not “interfere in the internal matters of the groups.” In contrast, the language of unity and discipline was more prominent in the Federation manifesto: members “must accept” the Federation’s aims, remaining free to leave when such commitment lacked; they engaged in the labour movement, “save in impossible circumstances”; and new members were subject to approval. The Federation had a more centralized structure. National federations were foreseen, and since federations were expected to nominate “correspondents,” it seems that national correspondence committees were also foreseen. Greater detail was also provided about the decision-making process: most notably, “a common line of action” was decided not only by correspondence, but also “by congress or by special delegates,” i.e. by processes shunned by anti-organizationists. Finally, there was stronger emphasis on secrecy, in the face of circumstances that threatened the Federation’s survival.

71 “Programma,” L’Associazione (Nice) 1, no. 1 (6 September [recte October] 1889).
The Federation’s organizational guidelines resulted not only from Malatesta’s evolution and experiences after Capolago, but they also confirmed ideas that he had consistently held since earlier times. Some ideas that differentiated the Federation’s from the Capolago organization scheme could already be found in the *Programma e Organizzazione dell’Associazione Internazionale dei Lavoratori* of 1884: for example, federal committees and congresses were foreseen at both national and international levels; new members needed to be approved; and strict adherence to the programme was explicitly required. What was new in 1895 with respect to 1884 was a keener awareness of the disruptive effects of government repression, and accordingly a greater preoccupation with continuity of action, as Malatesta’s concern for secrecy shows. A cross-comparison of organizational schemes suggests that the weak formulation of the Capolago programme was a concession to anti-organizationist currents, for the sake of building a broad-based anarchist party. In contrast, the manifesto of 1895 focused no longer on uniting all anarchists, but on acknowledging irreconcilable differences. Malatesta was explicitly and intentionally drawing the line that divided him and Merlino from anti-organizationist opponents such as Pomati. A “Declaration” at the end of the manifesto made that clear:

The members of this Federation know well that many Anarchists, or men calling themselves so, will fight their program and their organization. They do not complain. What they want is to unite for a common purpose with those who agree with them, and will be content if their initiative will contribute to destroy prevailing equivocations and will show the difference between principles, tendencies, and aims, often essentially opposed to one another and that go by the general name of Anarchy.

Perhaps because of its lack of success, Malatesta’s project has been discussed by historians in hasty and dismissive terms. Pier Carlo Masini calls it “an attempt to revive the old International,” while Giampietro Berti describes its manifesto as “a sort of reissue, —very cut-down and simplified—of the Capolago programme.” Actually, it was

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72 *Programma e Organizzazione*, 59–64.
neither. With respect to the International, Malatesta longed for the revolutionary thrust that the International had been able to express, but he had systematically criticized its programme and organization since at least 1889. The main difference, already visible in the Capolago programme, was a different outlook on the relationship with the labour movement. The anarchist party no longer aimed at hegemonizing the labour movement, but rather at being part of it, as an influential but autonomous component. As for the Capolago programme, the 1895 programme was significantly different, and by all evidence such differences were exactly the result of Malatesta’s learning the lesson of Capolago. In contrast to revivalistic interpretations, Malatesta’s project was part of a new phase in his anarchism. 73

In sum, for the historiography of anarchism that tends to focus on highlights, especially sensational ones such as the Jerez and Carrara uprisings, Malatesta’s year after his return from Italy was uneventful. Yet it was a crucial year for understanding his evolution. In the day-to-day inconspicuous elaboration of ideas, in obscure projects and false starts historians can trace the continuity that enables them to bridge the gap between highlights, avoiding the pitfall of thinking that these were as many rebirths and deaths of anarchism. The new phase of Malatesta’s anarchism, to which the next chapter is devoted, and whose highlight was the project of L’Agitazione, did not start in 1897, when Malatesta returned to Italy three years after the Fasci’s defeat. It started in 1894, right after that defeat, and it started abroad, while Crispi’s reaction was raging over Italy.

73 Masini, Epoca degli attentati, 75; Berti, Malatesta, 233.
Chapter VII
“A Long and Patient Work”: The Resurgence of Labour-Oriented
Anarchism in Europe and Malatesta’s Experience of L’Agitazione,
1894–98

Change is a problematic concept for the historiography of anarchism. Uncharitable
historians maintain that change was a problem for anarchism itself. The reality is that
understanding anarchist change is a problem for uncharitable historians. The various
ways in which they misunderstand correspond to as many interpretations of anarchism as
necessarily doomed. Some, as E. J. Hobsbawm, simply deny change in anarchist theory
and practice. Others acknowledge change, but interpret it as deflection from an abstract
notion of “anarchism” of their own making, narrowly and arbitrarily characterized as
“impossibilist” or “purist.” In other words, anarchist change and continuity are regarded
as mutually exclusive, for continuity is identified with immutability and change with a
breakaway from anarchism. Conversely, the convenient view of anarchism as a
monolithic movement has led historians to neglect divergences and search for continuity
in the wrong places. As we have seen, Italy in and Spain in 1891–2 are cases in point.
Another example is Richard Sonn’s account of the transition of French anarchism from
“propaganda by the deed” to syndicalism. For Sonn, “this transition was not precipitated
by the anarchists themselves, but rather by the efforts of the government to crush the
anarchist movement and the anarchist press in particular.” French anarchists “shifted
from a predominantly cultural to an economic orientation, from a movement attracting
déclassés to one appealing to workers,” as they realized “the need to bridge the gap
between libertarian ideals and organizational necessity.” The slogan of “propaganda by
the deed” was replaced by the catch-phrase of “direct action.” By 1902, “the era of
anarcho-syndicalism was born.” Regarding French anarchism as an undivided whole
forces Sonn into sketchy explanations of implausible transitions, whereas acknowledging
that different currents coexisted would allow one to seek continuities and discontinuities in the proper places.¹

Yet change, continuity, and divergence are the key themes of Malatesta’s evolution in 1894–8. In this period Malatesta undertook a change in tactics that stemmed from two sources: the disappointing outcome of the agitations of 1893–4 and the acknowledgment of differences among anarchists, divided by a rift on questions of organization and participation in the labour movement. The highlight of that half-decade was the biennium 1897–8, when Malatesta returned to Italy to edit *L’Agitazione* in Ancona. This periodical is widely regarded as a high point in Malatesta’s anarchism. Fabbri considered it Malatesta’s most important periodical, both historically and theoretically. For the Marxist Enzo Santarelli, *L’Agitazione* expressed “open, and, to some extent, unitary and advanced positions,” in contrast to a later alleged anti-socialist involution. As Giampietro Berti remarks, “the insurrectional objective is now subordinated to the indispensable pre-condition of a patient propaganda work among the working classes.”² From the columns of *L’Agitazione* Malatesta preached novel tactics for Italy, advocating the intervention of anarchist-socialists in labour struggles for immediate economic gains.

The biennium 1897–8 is often simplistically viewed as another dramatic rebirth of Italian anarchism spurred by the “reappearance” of Malatesta with new tactics in mind. However, what tends to be regarded as a relatively sudden and circumscribed event was actually part of a more complex process, which can be fully understood only by extending the chronological and geographical scope of analysis from 1897 to 1894 and from Italy to Europe. As we have seen, Malatesta’s rethinking of anarchist tactics began in London, right after the defeat of the Sicilian Fasci. Moreover, Malatesta’s trajectory was not isolated and individual, nor were his new tactics a solitary invention. His action

¹ Sonn, 19, 26–28.

in the mid-1890s to assert his new tactical orientation involved broader circles of Italian anarchists abroad. In order to grasp the continuity between the defeats of 1894 and the new phase of 1897–8 one has to look at the transnational dimension of Italian anarchism.

Most importantly, the new tactics advocated by Malatesta were part of a wider current of change including French anarchism, where syndicalism became prominent in those years. The parallel evolutions of the Italian and French anarchist movements were interrelated and partly came to maturity in the London international milieu of anarchist exiles. The analysis of the characteristics and functioning mode of that milieu reveals the importance of another form of continuity, the collaboration and cross-pollination between different anarchist movements outside of their respective countries. The new labour-oriented tactics progressed in parallel in the two movements. An important venue where Italian and French anarchists made a common front to publicly assert their new tactics was the International London Congress of 1896, in which Malatesta had a prominent role. By showing that labour-oriented tactics in Italy and France had common origins in the years of “propaganda by the deed,” that both arose in contrast to alternative conceptions of anarchism, and that they progressed in step, the new phase of Italian anarchism associated with Malatesta’s return in 1897, as well as the rise of syndicalism in France, can be put in a broader context, which prevents misinterpretations of new anarchist tendencies as sudden rebirths or unlikely shifts of supposedly monolithic movements. Change and continuity can be reconciled, while emphasis is placed on the link between change and the presence of alternative options in the anarchist movement.

Besides chronological continuity and cross-national affinities, theoretical continuity is another key issue. Malatesta’s turn was not a deflection from his former anarchism, nor a move towards other currents of socialism previously alien to him, notwithstanding biased comments from anti-organizationist anarchists and parliamentarian socialists alike, and interpretations by historians assuming that anarchism is inherently impossibilist. Malatesta’s theoretical continuity can be gauged from his theoretical
controversies of those years. While the anarchists’ struggle at the London congress was waged from a new standpoint rather than simply reenacting the First International’s old contrasts, it was also a restatement of the fundamental tenets that separated anarchism from Marxism. And at the same time that Malatesta expounded his new tactics in L’Agitazione, he engaged in a protacted debate with his friend and former comrade Saverio Merlino in which he clarified the theoretical foundations of anarchism and the reasons why anarchists rejected parliamentarianism as firmly as ever. In contrast to interpretations based on a narrow idea of anarchism, Malatesta’s evolution was a trajectory within anarchism, fully coherent with his theoretical principles and tactical basic tenets, yet heading in a novel direction.

A good starting point for reconstructing the parallel rise of labour-oriented anarchist currents in Italy and France in the mid-1890s is a description of the international community of anarchist exiles in London, of which Malatesta had been a notable member for half a decade. That community swelled after repression against anarchism swept across Europe in connection with anarchist uprisings and attentats that occurred from 1892 on, the latter being often undertaken as responses to previous acts of repression: in Spain the Jerez uprising of 1892 and the bombings by Paulino Pallas and Santiago Salvador the next year; in Italy the Sicily and Lunigiana uprisings of 1893–4 and Paolo Lega’s attempt on Crispi’s life in June 1894; and in France, the bombings of Ravachol, Vaillant, and Emile Henry between March 1892 and February 1894, and Sante Caserio’s assassination of president Sadi Carnot in June of the same year. Repression tended to strike the anarchist movement and its press indiscriminately. In Spain an anti-anarchist police force was created, militants were rounded, and innocents executed. After the bombing of the Corpus Christi procession in Barcelona in June 1896, such a massive campaign of arrests, tortures and deaths in the Montjuich prison ensued as to raise international protests. In Italy, exceptional laws were passed in July 1894. By the end of the year thousands of anarchists and socialists were in jail or domicilio coatto. In France,
the *lois scélérates* were passed after Vaillant’s attempt. Anarchist leaders and intellectuals, such as Jean Grave, Sébastien Faure, Paul Reclus, and Émile Pouget, were brought before the courts along with a gang of illegalist anarchists in the so-called Trial of the Thirty of August 1894.³

In the face of such repression exile was one of the anarchists’ options. While Spaniards tended initially to emigrate to the Americas, London was a destination of anarchists from France and Italy, who joined the exiles of earlier times.⁴ The London international milieu of anarchist exiles provides the opportunity to study not only the transnationalism of the anarchist networks of individual countries, but also what might be termed their cross-national dimension, that is the cooperation, involvement in the affairs of each other’s country, and cross-pollination among anarchists of different countries. In that way the historian is in a better position to account for the rise of new currents in specific countries, which cannot be fully explained by analyses of national scope. Three circumstances favoured the coalescing of refugees into a political milieu of effective activism: rootedness in colonies of immigrants; transnational ties with respective homeland movements; and cosmopolitan cooperation across national and linguistic lines. Late Victorian London provided opportunity for each of these, and so its international anarchist community became the headquarters of continental anarchism.⁵

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Europeans dominated foreign immigration to Britain. However, their numbers remained small. Lack of assimilation and

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³ On Spain, see Woodcock, 346–8, and Esenwein, 184–9; on Italy, see Pernicone, 287–289; and on France, see Woodcock, 288–295.


⁵ Hermia Oliver, *The International Anarchist Movement in Late Victorian London* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1983).
separateness from the native population meant that relatively few pockets of foreigners co-existed with a vast majority of native British or Irish origin. Rudolf Rocker, the German anarchist who became prominent in the Jewish labour movement in London, recalled that in the 1890s a small area in the City of Westminster, approximately corresponding to the area known as Fitzrovia in the twentieth century, was almost exclusively inhabited by Germans, French, Austrians, and Swiss, so that the language spoken there was more often German or French than English. The distribution of foreign anarchists even accentuated separation. A report to the police prefecture of Paris lists 227 anarchists of various nationalities resident in London in 1896. Of the 193 militants whose addresses can be identified, more than half resided in a West London rectangle covering less than half a square mile, comprising Fitzrovia and Soho. A slightly wider area around this West London core accounts for nearly 80 percent of the total. For anarchist exiles, lack of assimilation and separateness were not disadvantages. At the same time that they could rely on immigrant colonies to draw support and resources, the colonies’ insularity made them impenetrable to direct police surveillance, which had to resort mainly to spies and informers from those immigrant communities. The drawback for the anarchists was that the concentration of militants in restricted areas made the work of spies and police easier.

Not only did anarchists in London have roots in local colonies; they also kept ties with the homeland and with anarchist colonies around the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean. The Fabian Edward Pease describes anarchist communism in London in the 1880s as an influential doctrine, remarking that its rank and file, mostly continental

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7 “Anarchistes résidant à Londres au 1er Avril 1896,” b. BA 1509, fs. 350.000-18, “Anarchistes à l’Etranger,” APP.
refugees, "had direct relations with similar parties abroad, the exact extent and significance of which we could not calculate." According to a French police report of December 1893, more than one fourth of those who corresponded with Paris anarchists were from foreign countries in Europe, North Africa, and the Americas. In turn, over one-third of the abroad correspondents were from London, which ranked first in absolute numbers, preceding the top-ranking French cities. This was months before the Trial of the Thirty. After the Trial, London gained further prominence as a centre of French anarchism. The flux of French militants, as the Italians', was bidirectional, depending on the homeland situation. For example, in 1894 Pouget resumed the publication of *Le Père Peinard* in London, to be smuggled back to France. However, the next year intervening political changes led him and other French anarchists to return to France, where Pouget became a key figure of revolutionary syndicalism. The incessant interest of the French police, through a network of spies in London, points to the influence that anarchists could exert from there. In 1895 there were no less than three agents in London, as many as in Paris, all six sometimes responding simultaneously to the same requests from the Paris prefecture. In other words, the two cities received equal consideration from the French police, and this indicates the importance of London as an anarchist centre.

Part of the reason why London became the headquarters of continental anarchism is that it was at the crossroads of transatlantic routes. Anarchists en route between Europe and the Americas would spend time in London and meet local exiles, providing a link.

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between anarchists across the Atlantic. In turn, the residents’ rootedness in colonies was a logistic asset in receiving and providing assistance to transient comrades and newcomers. Luigi Fabbri remarks that the house and shop of the Defendis, where Malatesta lived, were a meeting point for all the new arrivals in London. In addition, the shop offered a discrete venue for sheltered meetings. “How many stormy and fraternal discussions,” Fabbri recalls, “in that makeshift athenaeum that was the small kitchen in the back of Defendi’s delicatessen shop!” Defendi even raised the attention of the French police, which placed his address under mail surveillance. Similar shops fulfilled the same function for French exiles, such as Victor Richard’s grocery in Charlotte Street, where Charles Malato recalls that all refugees turned, and Armand Lapie’s bookstore, also in the French district. The latter’s key role is revealed by an 1894 list of thirty-four anarchists resident in London compiled by the French police, which included cross-links to each individual’s associates. In the miniature social network thus described, Lapie was the most densely connected individual, far outnumbering the likes of Pouget, Malatesta, and Malato, thus illustrating the incospicuous but fundamental liaising role that less prominent figures played in the anarchist movement.12

Anarchist cosmopolitanism in London found expression in the movement’s public life, including mass demonstrations, where speakers customarily included representatives of exile groups who spoke in their native languages, and club life, which was markedly international in such clubs as Rose Street, Berner Street, and Autonomie. Aside from the East End clubs of Jewish workers, almost all such clubs were in that half square mile area where foreign population was most dense and where the club life of foreign exiles intersected with a long-standing local tradition.13 In addition, places as the shops and


dwellings of Defendi, Richard, and Lapie complemented club life in accounting for the activism of London exiles. Club life was more conspicuous. Its public character made it appear more defiant and threatening, but also made it more easily targeted by the police.\textsuperscript{14} The back-rooms of shops were more inconspicuous venues of political activism, but by the same token they may have been more effective.

In sum, the study of exile anarchists in London provides insight into the relevance of transnationalism for the working of anarchist networks. Mundane and unconventional venues as shop back-rooms epitomize even more clearly than clubs the correlation between political exile, rootedness in colonies, and transnational links with the homeland. They also epitomize the opacity of anarchism, for which kitchens and back-rooms became more dependable "institutions" than convention halls. In all these respects, London exhibited a pattern that was probably common to other cities around the world. Such militants as the dairyman Constant Martin in Paris and the hatter Cesare Agostinelli in Ancona fulfilled a fundamental function in anarchist networks both abroad and at home, made possible by their pattern of militancy in which low profile and lasting residency were coupled with sustained commitment.\textsuperscript{15}

Not only was London an example of a city where transnational anarchism thrived, but it also fulfilled a unique role as a cross-national hub of cooperation and exchange among continental anarchists, which proceeded from its being a junction in the anarchist networks of different countries. The transnationalism of each country’s movement, along with international exchange and integration among anarchist exiles in London, determined a pattern of cross-national involvement in each other’s movement. A recent study has illustrated the cooperation between French and British anarchists across the


\textsuperscript{15} Antonioli, Dizionario biografico, s.v. “Agostinelli” and “Defendi”; special superintendent A. Moreau, “L’anarchisme en France,” Paris, September 1897, F/7, b. 13053, AN.
Even more characteristic was the mutual involvement between French and Italian anarchist exiles in London. The frequent cooperation between Malatesta and Malato is an example. Because of the entwinement of French and Italian anarchists, the French police monitored the two groups with equal zeal and reports often dealt indistinctly with both. For example, the 1894 list of thirty-four London anarchists lumped eight Italians with the remaining French. Similarly, more than half of the larger 1896 list, which was multi-national but certainly biased towards those of greatest concern to the French authorities, comprised French- and Italian-sounding names, with Italians being nearly forty percent of that sub-group. Finally, an 1897 report by the title “Anarchism in France,” included biographies of Malatesta and Merlino among the “Profiles of some leaders of the anarchist party.”

The exchange and cooperation between Italian and French anarchists in London was instrumental in setting in motion a process by which the currents of anarchism that believed in organization, collective struggle, and participation in the labour movement increasingly regained initiative in the respective countries, after the setbacks of 1894. In France, 1894 was a turning point between a three-year period predominated by individual deeds, ended with the Trial of the Thirty, and an era in which anarchists acted as conscious minorities amidst the masses. Thus for Jean Maitron, syndicalism “was precisely a reaction against that infantile disorder of anarchism that was terrorism,” in contrast to the continuity posited by Sonn. In Italy anarchism was at low ebb in 1894, after Crispi’s repression had disbanded its ranks. That year, after his return to London,

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Malatesta began subjecting anarchist tactics to a thorough reconsideration, lamenting the failure caused by the progressive detachment of the anarchist movement from popular life, and the resulting neglect of sustained agitation among the masses.\footnote{See chapter 5, note 7, and chapter 6, notes 65 and 69.}

The mutual influence between Malatesta and two key figures of syndicalism, Émile Pouget and Fernand Pelloutier, in a crucial phase of their intellectual evolution illustrates the cross-fertilization of ideas among anarchist exiles in London and the part that such cross-fertilization played in setting in motion a new tactical orientation in the anarchist movements of the respective countries. In mid-1893 Pouget traveled from Paris to London to confer with Malato and Marius Sicard, according to a spy, about giving a revolutionary direction to the Bourses du Travail. On the occasion he also visited Malatesta and others. Pouget’s links with the Italians in London were indeed close, for the next year, upon moving to that city, he lived at Defendi’s, where Malatesta also lived. Both Pouget and Malatesta contributed to The Torch, an anarchist periodical edited in London. Significantly, the issue of August 1894 contained articles from both, but it was Malatesta’s article that advocated the general strike as a revolutionary weapon.\footnote{Agent Z6 reports, London, 3 July 1893, b. BA 1508, fs. 350.000-18-A; 5 and 21 February 1894, b. BA 1509, fs. 350.000-18-A, “Anarchistes en Angleterre, 1895 et 1896,” APP; E. Malatesta, “The General Strike and the Revolution,” The Torch (London), n.s., no. 3 (August 1894): 6–8.} The next month, the new syndicalist orientation was signaled in France by a split occurred at the Nantes union congress between the Marxists and a syndicalist majority that voted for general strike tactics.\footnote{Maitron, 290–1.} In 1895 Pouget returned to France. For Jean Maitron, one reason why Pouget’s stay in London was a turning point in his syndicalist trajectory was the influence of trade unions, as witnessed by the London run of Pouget’s periodical, Le Père Peinard. According to Pierre Monatte, Pouget established strong relationships with
British trade unionists that he kept up after his return to France.\textsuperscript{22} In 1895 Pouget and Pelloutier undertook an intense propaganda of the new syndicalist tactics among French anarchists. That year Pelloutier published a series of articles in \textit{Les Temps Nouveaux} advocating anarchist engagement in syndicates. In the first article, “La situation actuelle du socialisme,” he backed up his appeal for new tactics with a reference to Merlino’s ideas and to their implementation in Malatesta’s International Federation of Revolutionary Anarchist Socialists. Pelloutier would restate his affinity with Malatesta four years later in a “Letter to the anarchists,” which he opened by claiming that his ideas found a perfect illustration in Malatesta, who could “combine so well an indomitable revolutionary passion with the methodical organization of the proletariat.”\textsuperscript{23}

At the time of Pouget’s return to France Malatesta remained in London. His own return to his country would only take place two years later. However, there is evidence that in early 1896, a year after Pouget’s homecoming, Malatesta’s plans to return to Italy were already taking shape, too. In a letter from London of March 1896 to Niccolò Converti Malatesta mentioned a recent aborted plan to leave for Italy. In the letter he clearly outlined his motivation for a tactical turn, summarizing the disappointing situation of the movement in Italy and lamenting the Italian anarchists’ inability to take initiative and their division and lack of preparation even when external circumstances created opportunities for action. Such a state of internal strife and paralysis, he argued, could only be overcome by splitting and regrouping according to tactical affinity. Then, in a letter of May 1896 to Victorine Rouchy-Brocher, Malatesta stated that he would probably return to Italy at the beginning of the next year, as he actually did.\textsuperscript{24} Malatesta’s tactical

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 272–3.


\textsuperscript{24} Malatesta to Niccolò Converti, London, 10 March 1896, \textit{Epistolario}, 74; Malatesta to Victorine Rouchy-Brocher, London, 21 May 1896, Gustave Brocher Papers, IISG.
elaboration and early plans of this period, in parallel with the elaboration and plans of the
French anarchists, help bridge the gap between his return from Italy in 1894 and his
departure for Italy in 1897. A straight, uninterrupted line connected the experiences of
1894 to the new tactics of 1897. Malatesta’s own evolution and the new phase of Italian
anarchism were part of a broader trend based on organization and participation in labour
struggles, which was also gaining momentum in France through syndicalism. Any
account of the national anarchist movements in Italy and France in the second half of the
1890s would be incomplete without including developments that not only occurred
outside the countries’ borders, but also involved cooperation and cross-pollination of
ideas among anarchists of different nationalities in London. Only by taking heed of such
elements, processes that appear separate and unrelated from a national perspective reveal
their interconnection and parallel progression.

The labour-oriented currents of Italian and French anarchism not only arose in
parallel, but also publicly and jointly asserted their new ideas when they made a common
front at the International Socialist Workers and Trade Union Congress that took place in
London from 26 July to 2 August 1896, where they waged a battle on the anarchists’
right to participate. The congress was a milestone in the process of re-orienting anarchist
tactics that Malatesta and his comrades promoted. The anarchists’ participation well
signified the change, continuity, and diversity that marked that process. Their ground for
participation in a congress of the Second International had changed from the old struggle
in the First International. At the same time, there was continuity between the two
controversies, owing to the deep theoretical rift between Marxists and anarchists. Finally,
by choosing a socialist and workers’ congress as a venue to assert their new tactics,
labour-oriented anarchists stated their diversity from currents of anarchism that
traditionally shunned such gatherings.

The congress was dominated by the issue of the anarchists’ exclusion from
participation. Though controversies over this question had occurred in all previous
congresses of the Second International since 1889, anarchist opposition was episodic until their exclusion was formalized at Zurich in 1893. Only with the London congress did a co-ordinated opposition to the exclusion of the anarchists take place. The initiative partly owed to anarchists now facing a formal exclusion. Another factor was the choice of London as the host city, because of the presence not only of a strong international contingent of anarchist exiles, but also of a socialist and labour movement of non-Marxist tradition. Finally, the anarchists’ organized participation and combativeness in that congress were made possible by the ascendancy that currents advocating organization and labour involvement were gaining among them.

The controversy over the anarchists’ admission to the Second International’s congresses is usually depicted as a revival of Bakunin’s struggle with Marx, with anarchists fighting once more the old battle and losing it once and for all. For example, James Joll writes that “as soon as the survivors of the old International began to take practical steps [to create another international organization]... they at once came up against two difficulties: the increased hostility of governments... and the fundamental division between Marxists and Anarchists that had wrecked the First International” and “was to dominate the early years of the Second International as it had the end of the First.” For Joll, the ultimate root of that division was “a profound psychological difference, a contrast of types of political temperament.” The stereotype underlying Joll’s analysis is that anarchists were backward-looking, unchanging, disruptive, and doomed. In contrast to such analysis, placing the anarchist opposition in the context of the new trends that were arising in the anarchist movement in that period shows that their battle in London was forward-looking, novel, and constructive.

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26 Masini, *Epoca degli attentati*, 78–79.

The very denomination “International Socialist Workers and Trade Union Congress” contained all the key elements of the new orientation that Malatesta wanted to give to the anarchist movement, and that was summarized by the label “anarchist socialism,” which came to characterize his brand of anarchism. Malatesta proclaimed the socialist character of anarchism and urged anarchists to regain contact with the working masses, especially through involvement in the labour movement. Even the circumstance that the arena of the struggle was a congress reflected Malatesta’s belief in organization. Demanding the anarchists’ admission to the congress meant reasserting those elements as central to anarchism; conversely, the Marxists’ effort to exclude anarchists aimed at denying that they had a place among socialists and workers. In brief, Malatesta’s struggle for admission to the congress was a statement of his new tactics.

Moreover, the terms of the question had changed since the First International. A fortnight before the congress, Malatesta recalled in _The Labour Leader_ that in the old International both Marxists and Bakuninists wished to make their programme triumph. In the struggle between centralism and federalism, class struggle and economic solidarity got neglected, and the International perished in the process. In contrast, anarchists were not presently demanding anyone to renounce their programme. They only asked for divisions to be left out of the economic struggle, where they had no reason to exist.\(^28\) Thus, the issue was no longer hegemony, but the contrast between an exclusive view of socialism, for which one political idea was to be hegemonic, and an inclusive one, for which multiple political views were to co-exist, united in the economic struggle. Kropotkin well summarized the anarchist argument: “Had the Congress been announced as a Social Democratic Congress, Anarchists would evidently not have gone…. But the Congress is announced as a _Universal Workers’ Congress_, and therefore—either trade

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unions only are admitted, or all Socialist and Revolutionary groups that care to come must be admitted.” The matter of the question had changed: the controversy was no longer with the anarchists, but about the anarchists. 29

Accordingly, the struggle was presently between two larger fronts, or at least between a compact one, led by the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, or SPD, for which parliamentarianism was a sine qua non of socialism, and a diverse one including not only the anarchists, but also the majority of the British Independent Labour Party, the Allemanist fraction of French socialism, the “young” German socialists expelled from the SPD Erfurt congress of 1891, and the Dutch, anti-parliamentarian Socialistenbond of Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis and Christian Cornelissen. 30 Hence, if continuity existed with the First International, it was on the Marxist side, as Engels’s comment on the 1891 Brussels congress shows: “Voting the exclusion of the anarchists was the right thing to do; thus had ended the old International, and it is thus that the new one is being launched. It confirms, purely and simply, the resolution taken at The Hague nineteen years ago.” 31

The London congress was a step in a new direction for French anarchists, too. Their continuity was not with the First International but with the Nantes congress of two years before. As Jean Maitron remarks, the London congress, where the majority of the French delegation voted against the anarchists’ exclusion, was the “continuation and completion” of the split occurred at Nantes between Marxists and syndicalists. 32 Carl Levy rightly emphasizes the forward-bound character of the anti-parliamentary


30 Rocker, En la Borrasca, 37–39.


32 See note 21.
congressional opposition at London, arguing that it was “a transitional link between an older Bakuninism, and other varieties of populist socialism, and conscious syndicalism.” However, even Levy’s remark does not fully do justice to that opposition. The transition pattern was not so much a linear evolution of anarchism as a whole, as the result of the interplay between co-existing currents. The rise of syndicalism is best contrasted not to a distant Bakuninist past, but to the spread of anti-organizationist tendencies. Moreover, the process did not simply consist of the rise of syndicalism, but more generally of the resurgence of organizationist tendencies, including those in Italy, committed to collective action in the labour movement. Seen in this light, the process represented more a resumption than a rejection of the Bakuninist tradition.

By demanding admission to the London congress, Malatesta and his comrades faced not only the opposition of Marxists, but also set themselves apart from anarchist currents opposed to organization and involvement in the labour movement. That anarchist forces coalesced around a congress was itself a declaration of intent about their tactical orientation. Though the struggle with Marxists was a clash of ideas, it took the form of an extenuating battle over mandates, letterhead, stamps, voting systems, that is the very machinery that many anarchists dreaded as outward symbols of the authoritarianism inherent in organization. For example, in 1893 La Révolte had sarcastically remarked that the Zurich expulsion served anarchists right. Kropotkin’s absence from the 1896 congress was also telling. Malatesta’s correspondence reveals repeated but vain efforts to secure his participation. Malatesta conjectured that Kropotkin’s reluctance proceeded from a deep-seated aversion to voting, coupled with the anticipation that not voting at the congress would be perceived as playing in the opponents’ hands. Thus, the anarchists’ congressional initiative was engaged on a double front, aiming to assert the anarchists’

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33 Levy, “Malatesta in London,” 34.
place among socialists and workers and to propagate an organization- and labour-oriented attitude in the anarchist ranks.\textsuperscript{34}

Meetings in London to organize the anarchist presence at the congress started a year earlier. In July 1895 the Freedom Group expressed the unanimous opinion to attend \textit{en masse}.\textsuperscript{35} In the following months, the initiative was taken by the English anarchists, though it was fraught with dissension and ineffectiveness.\textsuperscript{36} In August–September 1895 the \textit{Torch} group issued an appeal and a manifesto for free admission to the congress, which received a wide echo in the anarchist press.\textsuperscript{37} The comments by the Italian Antonio Agresti and Pietro Gori in \textit{La Questione Sociale} of Paterson, New Jersey, expressed the novel context of the foreseen opposition in London. Both regarded participation as part of new tactics focused on propaganda among workers. In contrast to past methods, anarchists were to seek an understanding on broad demands with anti-parliamentarian socialists and British trade unions, and spread among workers not only anarchist communism, but also the idea of the general strike, as a step towards insurrection. Both Agresti and Gori had recently come to the United States from London, where such ideas must have been debated. Thus, for organizationist anarchists, the demand to join the congress was not just a disruptive maneuver to contrast Marxist hegemony, but was part of broader tactics based on participation in the labour movement.\textsuperscript{38} The initiative of \textit{The Torch} was a false start, for internal dissension among

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{34} "Mouvement Social. Suisse," \textit{La Révolte} (Paris) 6, no. 48 (12–17 August 1893): 3; Malatesta to Hamon, London, 3, 8, 11, and 17 July 1896, Hamon Papers, file no. 109, IISG.
\item Quail, 202–4.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
British anarchists deprived it of support.\(39\) A new committee was appointed, but its progress remained slow.\(40\) At any rate, between February and April 1896 initiatives were taken in London, ending with a West End meeting at the end of April, with which the committee ended its activities.\(41\)

However, other anarchists in London believed that much remained to be done. By late June a new “Anarchist and Anti-Parliamentary Committee” was formed, with Malatesta as the most active member. While the previous committee had focused on domestic propaganda, Malatesta liaised with anarchists abroad, especially in France. Throughout July 1896 a nearly daily correspondence went on with Augustin Hamon, through which Malatesta was also in contact with Pelloutier. According to Hamon, these three militants were the main organizers of the anarchist opposition. Their correspondence provides valuable insights on Malatesta’s activities, expectations, and congressional tactics.

A key task was to ensure mandates for anarchists in London.\(42\) As a result, the list of French delegates contained the names of several British anarchists.\(43\) The distribution of


\(39\) *Liberty* (London) 2, no. 22 (October 1895): 172.


\(42\) Malatesta to Hamon, London, 30 June, 9, 17 and 20 July 1896, Hamon Papers, file no. 109, IISG.

mandates at the congress is a telling indicator both of the role of international anarchist exiles in London and of the affinity and cooperation between Italian and French anarchists. Malatesta himself, who held mandates from workers’ organizations in both France and Spain, was eventually admitted in virtue of a mandate from the Amiens metal workers; Pelloutier represented the Italian Federation of Labour Chambers; Louise Michel carried a mandate from an anarchist-communist association in Northern Italy; Agresti represented a workers’ association of Morez, in France; and Isaia Pacini, another Italian exile in London, also represented a French group.44 Considering that the French delegation voted against the exclusion of anarchists by a narrow margin, such mandates proved crucial.

Malatesta’s commitment to the struggle for admission at the London congress well illustrates the breadth and adaptability of his tactics. The advocate of insurrectionary tactics was equally at ease with congress politics, fully appreciating its procedural nuances. Anarchist principles are often regarded, by supporters and opponents alike, as a Procrustean bed that severely limits anarchists’ options. Malatesta’s inclusiveness shows that the principle of coherence between ends and means did not prevent any effective action and that within its scope a broad range of tactics were available. Malatesta was aware that procedure would be the congress battleground and was ready to enter it without reservations. Thus, he remarked to Hamon that formal requirements were to be taken seriously, for only those with unexceptionable mandates would be initially admitted. For him, anarchists were to carry mandates from both unions, so as to gain admission, and anarchist groups, so as to be able to put the Zurich resolution on the agenda.45


45 Malatesta to Hamon, London, 8 July 1896, Hamon Papers, file no. 109, IISG.
Malatesta’s congressional tactics displayed a remarkable pragmatism and political moderation. He regarded unity of action as paramount, stating that he would even prefer that “a stupid course of action be taken,” rather than each acting in a different way. The importance of unity and the role of the British delegation counseled restraint to him. Thus, he expressed doubts about the Allemanists’ idea to resist by force. “I believe,” he countered, “that we will have the majority of the English on our side if we do not commit intemperances.” A final decision on a common line of conduct was expected to be taken at a private meeting of delegates on the eve of the congress. English trade unionists, representatives of the French syndicates and labour chambers, Dutch delegates, and members of Italian groups and labour organization attended the meeting. However, Hamon stated, “the discussion was quite vague, though it all took place peacefully. No resolution was taken and nothing came out of the meeting.”

The meeting’s indecisiveness illustrates the divisions and biases that hindered the effectiveness of anarchist opposition. In a letter of July to Hamon, Malatesta reported a telling debate with Kropotkin, Nettlau and others, about voting systems to be proposed at the congress. No agreement was reached, leaving the question unsolved. Malatesta commented that for many anarchists, possibly the majority, “the mere word ‘voting,’ no matter how and why, has the same effect that the devil would have on a bigot.” He argued that “they would prefer to leave even the most important and necessary thing undone, rather than going through a vote.” Thus, he concluded “at the congress as anywhere else, they would like not to vote and not to join any discussion about the question of voting.” Ten days before the congress, Malatesta already expressed to Hamon his disappointment about the gap between what anarchists could have done and what they actually did: “Certainly, if we win or just come out well, we will owe it to the French

46 Malatesta to Hamon, London, 3 and 11 July 1896, Hamon Papers, file no. 109, IISG; Hamon, Le socialisme et le Congrès de Londres, 83, 95.
labour organizations and the Allemanists. You know that the anarchists in a strict sense have been very divided throughout on the question of the congress, and because of this they have done almost nothing.”

The anarchists did not win, but they did come out well. Various British newspapers, including the mass circulation radical liberal *Star* and the literary weekly *The New Age*, sympathetically reported the libertarians’ battles. Most notably, the anarchists won the sympathy of *The Clarion*, the main newspaper of British socialism, with a circulation of 60,000. Its editor Robert Blatchford sternly remarked that the congress proceedings were conducted with “intolerance and contempt” and presented socialism as “a cast-iron creed administered by a dictatorship or priesthood of superior persons of the conference platform type.” Moreover, the vote of the French delegation was an important event that foreshadowed the predominant role that anarchists would have in the labour movement in the following years. For the French anarchists as for Malatesta and the Italians, the congress was a step in the constructive path towards asserting anarchism as a significant force in workers’ collective struggles.

Malatesta was guided along that path by his view of the relationship between conscious minorities and masses, which he had evolved from his criticism of the First International and which his article for the *Labour Leader* hinted to. This view sharply contrasted with the Marxists’. The struggle at the London congress stemmed from radically different outlooks on the relationship between conscious minorities and masses, which in turn proceeded from opposite perspectives on the relation between theory and practice, or knowledge and action. In order to make sense of the struggle between

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47 Malatesta to Hamon, London, 11 and 17 July 1896, Hamon Papers, file no. 109, IISG.


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Marxists and anarchists those theoretical foundations need to be explained, so as to understand how the respective stances were both internally coherent and mutually exclusive. This way one can avoid causalistic explanations in terms of irrational motives, such as the psychological and temperamental differences purported by Joll, or in terms of contingent or opportunistic reasons. In turn, illustrating how Malatesta’s theoretical foundations differed from those of Marxism makes clear how his novel tactical orientation represented both change and continuity in its departure from the anarchist stances of the First International and its reassertion of anarchist principles in contrast with Marxism.

Explanations of the London congress controversy in terms of contingent reasons tend to present the contrast asymmetrically, the stronger side having the stronger reasons. The anarchists’ expulsion would result from the Marxists’ desire to get on with their business, in the face of the anarchists’ aimless disruptiveness. However, the Marxists’ exclusionary attitude was not accessory, but essential to their theory. An apparently marginal example helps set the terms of the question. In January 1896, as congress preparations were in full swing, the London Jewish anarchist L. Baron asked the secretary of the congress committee Will Thorne whether a trade union not believing in parliamentary action was entitled to send a delegate to the congress. Thorne responded: “all Trade Unions recognize the necessity of political action: that being so, the Zurich resolution covers them.” This might seem a throw-away response dictated by contingent reasons. Yet a straight line connects that response to the theoretical tenets of Marxism.50

The Marxist relation between theory and practice rested on a conflation between the positive and normative spheres. Any contrast between “is” and “ought” was rejected. As early as 1843 Marx urged: “it is out of the world’s own principles that we develop for it

new principles.”\textsuperscript{51} In \textit{The German Ideology} Marx and Engels argued that communism was not “a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself,” but “the real movement which abolishes the present state of things,” whose conditions resulted “from the premises now in existence.”\textsuperscript{52} And in the \textit{Communist Manifesto} they explained that “the theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer”; rather, “they merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.”\textsuperscript{53} As Steven Lukes notes, Marxism rejected all moral vocabulary, regarding moral thinking as stemming from cognitive inadequacy.\textsuperscript{54} In rejecting abstract ideals, Marxism placed great emphasis on knowledge as a guide of action. Thus, in the \textit{Communist Manifesto} Marx and Engels claimed that, theoretically, the communists had “over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.”\textsuperscript{55}

The Marxist conflation of positive and normative was characteristically expressed by the notion of “historical mission,” a normative concept arising from objective, historical circumstances. The proletariat was not to set itself abstract goals, but to become aware of and embrace the aim that the development of productive forces had set for them. The same conflation of positive and normative was present in Marx and Engels’s discussion of workers organizing as a political party. It was a Marxist axiom that every class struggle was a political struggle. This meant that the workers’ interests became class

\textsuperscript{51} Karl Marx, “A Correspondence of 1843,” in \textit{Selected Writings}, 44–45.

\textsuperscript{52} Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” in Marx, \textit{Selected Writings}, 187.


\textsuperscript{55} Marx and Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” 256.
interests only when the economic struggle became political. The notion of the proletariat “constituting itself as a class” or “organizing itself into a class” essentially amounted to the constitution of a political party. The process was characterized as necessary, where “necessity” was interpreted both descriptively and prescriptively. For example, in The Poverty of Philosophy Marx aimed to provide a study of “strikes, combinations and other forms in which the proletarians carry out before our eyes their organization as a class,” remarking that combination had “not yet ceased for an instant to go forward and grow with the development and growth of modern industry.” Marx dealt with workers’ purposive action, but described the process as historically necessary. Yet at the 1866 Geneva congress of the International, he penned a resolution on trade unions, in which he lamented that these concentrated too exclusively on immediate struggles, and urged them to undertake just what, in The Poverty of Philosophy, he had claimed that proletarians were carrying out before everyone’s eyes: the promotion of the political organization of the working class.

The Marxist equation between class struggle and political struggle, as implied by the Zurich resolution, informed the whole London congress. The equation was most clearly represented by the demand that Jean Jaurés and other French socialists put forward to be admitted without credentials, on the sole ground of being socialist members of Parliament. The assumption underlying such obliteration of any distinction between political and labour representation was that political representation was the strongest form of workers’ mandate. Shortly before his own case was discussed, Jaurés had supported the Zurich resolution arguing that “trade unionism of itself and by itself is


58 International Socialist Workers and Trade Union Congress, 194.
powerless.... Trade unionism must be a political movement; it must capture political power....”59 Thus, when Marxists argued that social-democrats and anarchists were distinct parties, and the former had every right to separately convene, they ignored the real objection.60 As Kropotkin stated, anarchists would have not objected to an explicitly social democratic congress. The point was that the congress was meant to involve the whole working class, with trade unions and social democrats respectively representing the class “in itself” and “for itself.” Anarchism was thus denied a place in the working class, as per the claim that “every class struggle is a political struggle.” The claim was both descriptive and prescriptive: a historical process was both acknowledged and enforced. Thus, when Will Thorne stated: “all Trade Unions recognize the necessity of political action: that being so, the Zurich resolution covers them,” he was conflating an allegedly descriptive statement about trade unions with its normative counterpart represented by the Zurich resolution, thus providing an example of the Marxist unity of theory and practice.

Malatesta shared with Marxists the advocacy of the socialists’ involvement in the labour movement, but he differed from them on all key points concerning the role of a political organization, and its relation with other parties, unions, and workers. In turn, tactical differences proceeded from opposite theoretical and methodological approaches. While Marxist theory was based on the conflation of the positive and normative spheres, Malatesta’s theory was based on a sharp distinction between them. Such distinction was closely linked to his voluntarism and had important ramifications on his view on class. The contrast between Marxists and anarchists on such themes had already arisen at the time of the First International, but the theoretical roots of such contrast became


increasingly explicit in Malatesta’s later elaboration. Similarly to his voluntarism, the
distinction between the descriptive and prescriptive domains was already fully at work in
Malatesta’s ideas of the 1890s, but he expounded it in detail only much later. The most
comprehensive exposition can be found in the same series of articles, which appeared in
Volontà in 1913–14, in which he dealt with voluntarism, in reaction to the positivistic
scientism made popular among anarchists by Kropotkin.

The premise of Malatesta’s distinction between positive and normative was the
mutual exclusion between determinism and voluntarism. Determinism, he argued, was a
sure guide in the study of the physico-chemical world, but its consequential application in
the social sphere undermined the very possibility of conceiving purposive action, in
contrast to the plain fact that any individual undertook purposive action. Malatesta
neither denied the logical cogency of determinism, nor the pragmatic cogency of the
will’s efficacy, even if they contradicted each other. He acknowledged the dualism, but
made no attempt to resolve it. Accordingly, Malatesta looked upon attempts to infer
practical aims from empirical observation as instrumental. Arguments about “revolution
not being made by the caprice of man” and “coming only when the time is ripe for it,” he
argued, were just expedients to steer efforts in one or the other direction.\(^{61}\)

Even the positivistic pretence of giving anarchism solid scientific foundations,
despite its best intentions, made such foundations shakier, based as they were on mutable
hypotheses. If an anarchist was really such because of scientific convictions, he would
have to “continually consult the latest bulletins of the Academy of Science in order to
determine whether he can continue to be an anarchist.” For Malatesta, science “does not
tell man what to desire, whether he should love or hate, be good or bad, just or unjust.
Goodness, justice, and right are concepts which science ignores completely.”\(^{62}\)

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\(^{61}\) “Liberta e fatalità: Determinismo e volontà.”

\(^{62}\) “Scienza e riforma sociale,” Volontà (Ancona) 1, no. 29 (27 December 1913), translated into English in
Though science could not provide normative statements, purposeful action did not escape scientific analysis. Malatesta drew a distinction between natural sciences, which dealt with the physical world, and social sciences, whose task was “to uncover, to determine what are the necessary facts, the fatal laws resulting from people living together in the diverse circumstances in which they can find themselves, thus preventing vain efforts and enabling the wills of all men to concur to a common aim, beneficial to everyone, instead of paralyzing each other.” Yet anarchy could not be demonstrated, for it was based upon sentiments such as respect of the human person and love. Unlike an argument, which was logically cogent, a sentiment could only be communicated by awakening a similar sentiment in one’s mind. Science could not create sentiments, and human redemption could only be the work of “the will of those who wish such redemption.”

Malatesta’s anarchism and Marxism looked at the relation between positive and normative from opposite perspectives, which were rooted in opposite methodological stances. The Marxist method of looking at social reality as a concrete totality aimed precisely at overcoming the dichotomies between subject and object, normative and positive, voluntarism and determinism. Conversely, such dichotomies were ineliminable for Malatesta, who founded upon them his approach to social action. In contrast to Marxist holism, Malatesta’s point of departure was methodologically individualist. For him, individual aims and intentional action were the elements of social reality, which was the resultant of the interaction of individual forces acting in different directions, sometimes concurring to a common aim and sometimes paralyzing each other. In is worth noting that various scholars, such as the Norwegian political theorist Jon Elster and the French sociologist Raymond Boudon, have pointed out methodological individualist

63 “La Volonta (Ancora intorno al tema ‘Scienza e riforma sociale’),” Volonta (Ancona) 2, no. 1 (3 January 1914).
aspects in Marx’s sociology. However, both scholars also point out Marx’s methodological inconsistency. For Elster, Marx was committed to methodological individualism only intermittently, and for Boudon he introduced notions, such as false consciousness and alienation, which were incompatible with an individualist methodology.

In contrast to the idea that history had a knowable line of march, with change spurred by endogenous “contradictions,” Malatesta emphasized indeterminacy and unforeseeable exogenous factors. At an anti-parliamentarian debate on “agricultural propaganda” in margin to the London congress, Malatesta and Pouget joined forces against the opinion that the rural population was worth the anarchists’ attention only insofar as it was proletarianized, thus becoming a revolutionary force. For Pouget, such beliefs revealed that “fallacious Marxist ideas” were still lingering among anarchists; instead, these “must not wait for an impossible development sketched out by Marx; but take matters as they really are.” Malatesta added that the Marxists’ rule of conduct towards rural populations was “to contrive to bring them on a level with the English labourers,” for which Marx had “laid down the further course of development.” Were socialists to “wait for a hundred years,” he asked, “until the alleged concentration eliminates the last peasant?” Not even this was certain, “for anything, such as the invention of a new electric motor decentralising machine power might turn the whole course of events another way.”

The pragmatic implications of this methodological and theoretical divide described thus far were manifold. From the Marxist holistic perspective, there was one line of


march of history, hence there was one effective course of action, the one fulfilling the "historical mission" of the proletariat. For Malatesta, there were as many courses of action as aims collectively pursued by social actors. Not each one was viable, though. Given one's aim, its achievement depended on the non-arbitrary selection of the appropriate means. Finding such means was an empirical problem, to be solved experimentally. Social sciences helped precisely to determine the possible forms of social life.

Another difference concerned revolutionary minorities. Marx and Engles claimed in the Communist Manifesto that communists "do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties" and "have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole." For Marx, every class struggle was political, and only on the political terrain workers acted as a class. Thus, Marxists posited continuity between trade unions and "the working class organized as a party." As the working class was one, there could only be one such party, representing the interests of the whole class.

Malatesta's views were diametrically opposed. For him, only in the economic terrain workers could act as a class, because only there they shared the common interest of resisting capitalists, while there were as many political aims as working class parties. Accordingly, Malatesta kept apart workers' organization for economic resistance and revolutionary parties aiming at the overthrow of capitalism. Unions were to be independent from revolutionary ideals, or else there would be as many of them as political ideals, with an unnecessary fragmentation even in the economic struggle. Anarchists were to "go to the people," but unions were not and could not be anarchist. Conversely, anarchists were to organize autonomously, without dampening ideals for the sake of class unity thrusted upon them on the terrain of revolutionary aims.

67 Ibid.
In sum, Malatesta’s urge that anarchists get involved in the labour movement and in economic struggles and his consequent battle for their admission to the London congress rested on very different premises from the anarchists’ battle in the First International. Malatesta’s new premise was the distinction between unions and political organizations. The residue of authoritarianism that he recognized in the anarchists’ struggle for hegemony in the First International stemmed, in his view, from their failure to draw that distinction. Such failure to differentiate between unions and parties still characterized the Marxist standpoint at the London congress. At the same time that Malatesta’s new tactics were based on a criticism of anarchism in the old International, the theoretical foundations of his tactics made explicit elements that already set apart anarchists from Marxists in the First International, such as voluntarism and a view of class solidarity as proceeding from ideals and values rather than from material interests alone.

Hence, Malatesta’s new tactics implied both continuity and change with respect to the First International. There was continuity with elements that had always set apart anarchists from Marxists. These only received new emphasis in Malatesta’s theoretical foundations. The change consisted in moving further away from Marxism. In fact, Malatesta often argued that a key trait of the anarchists’ evolution was the riddance of Marxist ideas, of which “anarchists were once more consequential, if not more orthodox, supporters than those who declared themselves Marxist and perhaps even than Marx himself.”

The struggle at the London congress was rooted in this deepening theoretical contrast. The methodological focus on social wholes, the conflation between positive and normative, the idea that history had a knowable line of march, the rejection of ideals, and

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68 Giuseppe Rinaldi [Errico Malatesta], “La decadenza dello spirito rivoluzionario e la necessità della resistenza,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 28 (23 September 1897); “Un’intervista,” Avanti!, 3 October 1897, quoted in Rivoluzione e lotta quotidiana, ed. Gino Cerriuto (Turin: Antistato, 1982), 123–7; Errico Malatesta, “Evoluzione dell’anarchismo (A proposito di un’intervista),” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 31 (14 October 1897); preface to Nettlau, Bakunin e l’Internazionale, xxvi.
the role attributed to knowledge in setting aims and providing leadership—all epitomized by such notions as communism being “the real movement”—were the Marxist ground for positing a single, hegemonic working-class party, whose revolutionary political struggle subsumed the day-to-day economic struggle. In contrast, Malatesta’s methodological individualism, his dualism between positive and normative, his emphasis on social indeterminacy, his propensity for moral vocabulary, and his voluntarism led him to posit a distinction between a plurality of working-class parties and single, inclusive unions.

Nor was this difference opportunistically dictated by the contingent circumstance that at that time socialists had the upper hand in the labour movement. The conflation of Marxist party and working class was already advocated when the Communist League, for which the Manifesto was written, was a tiny formation. Conversely, Malatesta’s separation between anarchist and labour organizations still held for cases as Spain, where anarchists were majoritarian in the workers’ movement. Explanations of the contrast between Marxists and anarchists that fail to acknowledge such fundamental theoretical differences are bound to rest, one way or another, upon the attribution of irrationality.

For Italian anarchism, especially in its transnational segment, the London congress was part of the debate and propaganda drive for the spread of labour-oriented tactics that had begun before the congress, in parallel with a similar process in France, and that continued right after the congress. In August 1896 Malatesta’s “anarchist-socialist group” edited in London the single issue “L’Anarchia,” a programmatic manifesto of the new tactics. The editors made clear that they spoke on behalf of a cohesive group, with no pretension to speak for the whole movement: “If this is bound to determine a split—which, by the way, has already existed for years in a more or less latent state—let it come soon and be very clear, because nothing is more harmful than confusion and misunderstanding.” Luigi Fabbri, then a young anarchist militant in Central Italy, relates that “L’Anarchia” exerted much influence on the Italian anarchist movement and “laid
the foundations of a whole well-defined and methodical orientation.” Malatesta’s article “Errori e rimedi” (Errors and remedies) criticized the ideas of many self-styled anarchists about morals and violence. He argued that “denying morals” altogether was meaningless, for no society or individual could be conceived without a moral whatsoever; and on the subject of violence he rejected as equally harmful the opposite errors of terrorism and passive resistance. Other contributors dealt with further themes of the new tactics: the anarchists’ powerlessness due to divisions; the theoretical byzantinism and practical disorganization at the time of the Sicily and Lunigiana agitations; the need for a separation between advocates and opponents of organization; and the necessity to intermingle with the people, enter its organizations, and live its same life.

In a few months, the initiative would be directly transferred to the Italian soil. In contrast to the alleged “disappearances” and “reappearances” of anarchism, the movements of such militants as Pietro Gori and Antonio Agresti provide a glimpse into the interplay between transnational anarchism and the movement at home. After a stay in London, Gori and Agresti participated in the debate before the congress from the United States. Both returned to London for the congress, where Gori represented Italian groups and workers’ associations of North America and Agresti represented French workers. The latter was also among the editors of “L’Anarchia.” Both were back in Italy by 1897, the year of Malatesta’s return. As for Malatesta, the Ancona anarchist Rodolfo Felicioli recalls that in 1896 Malatesta corresponded from London with Cesare Agostinelli in Ancona. Together they took the decision to start a periodical. In November 1896 Agostinelli and Emidio Recchioni returned to Ancona from domicilio coatto. This may

69 Luigi Fabbri, Vida de Malatesta, 134–6.

have helped plans fall in place.\textsuperscript{71} Furthermore, Saverio Merlino’s pronouncement of January 1897 in favour of parliamentary action reinforced and hastened plans for Malatesta’s return and for the periodical’s publication, so as to counter the potential negative effects of a change of tactics by such an influential figure. In February 1897 Freedom announced the imminent publication of L’Agitazione. Malatesta reached Italy in March, prudentially incognito, though his conviction of 1884 was to lapse within weeks. On 14 March the first issue of L’Agitazione appeared, under the editorship of Malatesta.\textsuperscript{72}

Without repudiating revolution and anti-parliamentarianism, L’Agitazione preached novel tactics for Italy, advocating the intervention of anarchist-socialists in labour struggles for immediate economic gains. Moreover, it maintained that political liberties could be obtained neither by abstention, nor parliamentarian means, but rather by direct and conscious action of the people.\textsuperscript{73} The backdrop to the new tactics were the events of socialism in the previous half decade. The founding of a parliamentarian socialist party in Italy in 1892 had the two segments of socialism take different routes, with parliamentarians increasingly gaining momentum in Italy in workers’ economic and legal resistance. Moreover, Malatesta’s resolution that a clear-cut separation between anarchists was in order gave him a free hand in decidedly pursuing organizationist tactics and participation in the labour movement, challenging socialists on the ground where they had made progress.

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\textsuperscript{71} Rodolfo Felicioli, “Episodi anconitani,” Umanità Nova. 1853–1953. Numero speciale per il centenario della nascita di Errico Malatesta (Rome), December 1953: 9; Antonioli, Dizionario biografico, s.v. “Agostinelli” and “Recchioni, Emidio.”
\textsuperscript{72} Luigi Fabbri, Vida de Malatesta, 137; “International Notes,” Freedom (London) 11, no. 113 (February 1897).
\textsuperscript{73} Il processo Malatesta e compagni innanzi al Tribunale Penale di Ancona e i recenti processi di Ancona e Castelferretti per le bombe ammaestrate (Castellamare Adriatico: Di Sciullo, 1908; reprint, Pescara: Samizdat, 1996), 13–14.
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The new tactics were based on a self-criticism on behalf of Italian anarchism, guilty of drawing away from the people. The juvenile Mazzinian illusion that revolution could come soon by the action of a minority had made anarchists averse to any long and patient work to prepare and organize the people. Strikes were frowned upon and the labour movement only appreciated as a source of recruits for insurrection. The traditional forms of revolution, Malatesta argued, were still excellent, but in most situations they remained wishful thinking. The insurrectionary spirit still had great value, but by neglecting modest means of struggle one ended up being powerless. This was why legalitarians had gained momentum. Conversely, the anarchists’ focus on insurrection exposed them to unnecessary persecutions and drew away the most advanced workers, who saw their own success in wresting improvements from their masters as a refutation of anarchist claims. These errors had reduced anarchism to such isolation and dissolution as to be unable to oppose any resistance to Crispi’s reaction, and to raise any solidarity. 74

Revolution was a longer process than anarchists had believed. A long-term, daily commitment was required, made of practical work in trade unions, co-operatives, and educational societies. The labour movement was to be the foundation of the anarchists’ strength and the guarantee that the next revolution would be truly socialist and anarchist. In response to Pietro Gori’s piqued reaction to Malatesta’s claim that Italian anarchists had been indifferent to the labour movement, the latter stressed the difference between theoretical statements in favour of the labour movement, or sporadic attempts to organize workers, and a constant, methodic, generalized work. The latter had never been undertaken in Italy or elsewhere, except in Spain. Malatesta recalled the reaction to the Sicilian Fasci as a case of anarchist prejudice against labour organizations that were not fully anarchist. At present, anarchists had a foothold in too few unions, notwithstanding

74 “L’anarchismo nel movimento operajo”; Errico Malatesta, “Evoluzione dell’anarchismo (A proposito di un’intervista),” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 31 (14 October 1897).
their support to them. The struggle was still two-fold, against government and capitalists. However, economic oppression took priority. The economic struggle implied the political one, though the reverse did not necessarily hold. The economic struggle was more difficult to suppress, because workers were indispensable for production. Hence, no matter how strong reaction was, it still remained possible to fight the bosses, and thus the government, which anarchists were powerless to attack head-on.\(^7\)

Describing revolution as the end-point of a process, rather than a circumscribed event, involved clarifying the difference between the new tactics and reformism, to face both the anarchist charge of wasting time in “agitations made of paper and chatter,” and the socialist argument that anarchists were evolving towards them. For Malatesta, “the workers’ real condition at a given time depended—all the rest being equal—on the degree of resistance that they could oppose to the masters’ demands.” To the errors of classic revolutionaries, Malatesta argued that bourgeois institutions could still yield much before capitulating. In the past, both republicans and anarchist committed all expectations of social change to the overthrow of governments. This created a rift between present and future, which in practice meant that their day-to-day work was limited to propaganda and futile military preparations, awaiting the day of insurrection. Instead, Malatesta insisted, revolutionaries should be interested in wresting any possible concessions, both to diminish present sufferings, and to hasten the final conflict. People were so much apter to revolution as their conditions were better and they developed confidence through resistance and struggle. Not only was there room for improvement within the bourgeois

\(^7\) “Il 1° Maggio,” Agitiamoci per il Socialismo Anarchico (Ancona), single issue in lieu of no. 8 of L’Agitazione (1 May 1897); “L’alba che sorge,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 17 (2 July 1897); “Postilla alla polemica sull’evoluzione dell’anarchismo,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 34 (4 November 1897).
society, but, more importantly, every concession wrested from the bosses brought nearer the point of crisis at which violent conflict would be unavoidable. 76

A case in point were the First of May agitations. The key point was for workers to get used to collectively asserting themselves, not the specific reforms that they demanded. As long as workers knew how to assert themselves, it would become easier to make them understand what they should really pursue. The eight-hour workday, for example, was indeed a poor reform, but it was a mistake for anarchists to deplore it, for the struggle would promote class consciousness. In order to bring one’s arguments home to the workers, one had to live and fight with them. Neither could the people accept anarchist ideas at once, nor could society suddenly jump from hell to heaven. Still, every step was a real advantage, so long as it went in the right direction—the abolition of authority and individual property—and developed the workers’ spirit and habit of free and voluntary co-operation. 77

Malatesta further illustrated the value of labour struggles by commenting upon the Toulouse congress of the *Bourses du Travail*, of September 1897. It was not an anarchist congress, and rightly so, as it was for all workers. Yet anarchist tactics prevailed, thus showing that “the conscious part of the French proletariat, even when they do not comprehend or accept our general principles, can devise the way that must lead to the end of human exploitation.” The congress had accepted direct action methods: strikes, boycotts, ca’canny, and sabotage, many of which were new for Italy. These, Malatesta remarked, might seem petty means of struggle, only good for “legalitarians.” However, the prejudice against such methods was due to the fact that in Italy the collective

76 “Leghe di resistenza,” *Agittiamoci per il Socialismo Anarchico* (Ancona), single issue in lieu of no. 8 of *L’Agitazione* (1 May 1897); Giuseppe Rinaldi [Errico Malatesta], “La decadenza dello spirito rivoluzionario e la necessità della resistenza,” *L’Agitazione* (Ancona) 1, no. 28 (23 September 1897); “La nostra tattica,” *L’Agitazione* (Ancona) 1, no. 35 (11 November 1897).

77 “Echi del 1º Maggio,” *Agitatetevi per il Socialismo Anarchico* (Ancona), single issue in lieu of no. 9 of *L’Agitazione* (8 May 1897).
consciousness of class struggle had been lacking until recently, and hence antagonism had mostly found individual outlets. Socialists, including anarchists, had to foster the consciousness of class antagonism and of the need for collective struggle. To the extent that a new consciousness would spread, the tactics being adopted in France and long used in England would also become practicable and useful in Italy. 78

Malatesta’s ideas were criticized by Italian comrades, who accused him of wanting to introduce ingleseismo (Anglicism) in Italy, by which was meant the fashion of struggling method imported from British unions. Their argument was that legal resistance and slow organization were not suitable for Italy, where legal resistance, if successful at all, would soon escalate into riots. Malatesta pointed out that the alleged Italian revolutionary spirit had not manifested itself for decades and rejected the criticism: “Forget about ingleseismo. If this term means anything at all, it means economic resistance for its own sake, as it was practiced by the “old” trade unions, which—though they wanted to improve the workers’ conditions—accepted and respected the capitalist system and all the bourgeois institutions.” In contrast, Malatesta believed that workers’ organizations, economic resistance, and other more or less legal form of resistance, were means toward the total transformation of society, which ultimately, he restated, could not occur peacefully. The substance of the matter was the long and patient work that Malatesta urged anarchists to undertake. However, the mistrust that “foreign” tactics met with implicitly speaks to the broad-mindedness that transnationalism gave to anarchist exiles. 79

At the same time that he restated that class struggle could only have an insurrectionary solution, Malatesta placed new emphasis on sustainability. Though their ultimate aim was the complete transformation of society, anarchists were not to bite off

78 “L’anarchismo nel movimento operaio.”

79 “La nostra tattica.”
more than they could chew. Thus, in the face of criticisms to *L’Agitazione’s* support to a campaign against a law that introduced *domicilio coatto* as an ordinary measure, Malatesta admitted the narrow character of the agitation and the anarchists’ even narrower role: “Yet what should be done, if the others do not want to do more, and we do not have the strength to do more ourselves?” In order to undertake more radical initiatives, such as riots and aggressive strikes, one had to be in a position to do so, or else have the patience to work and wait until that time would come: “what those friends are suggesting to us has already been done, or attempted, by both us and them for years on end, without any success. And if we managed to morally survive and preserve our capability to do better, it was simply because we have always dearly paid in person for our deeds.” Malatesta and his comrades did not intend to eternally run through the same cycle: “six month of quiet activity; then some microscopically tiny uprising, or more often simple threats of uprisings; and then arrests, escapes abroad, interruption of the propaganda, disbandment of the organization,” only to start over again the same story two or three years later. “Now,” Malatesta concluded, “we have persuaded ourselves—and yet it took us a long time!—that in order to act one must have the necessary strength for acting; and if time is required to gain such a strength, we will have the patience to wait for as long as it takes.”

The emphasis on sustainability involved a new attention to adjusting anarchist struggles to the horizon provided by the current legislation—a strikingly novel theme in its moderate and pragmatist tone, which resonated awkwardly in many anarchist ears. The focus on sustainability involved carrying out as much propaganda as possible within legal boundaries, undertaking campaigns against the introduction of more repressive laws, such as *domicilio coatto*, or against existing laws, such as the infamous article 248 of the penal code, which equated anarchist organizations to associations of malefactors.

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80 Ibid.
Accordingly, a new emphasis was placed on defensive struggles. Malatesta discussed the anarchists' attitude towards the law in the article "Il dovere della resistenza: Gli anarchici e la legge" (The duty of resistance: anarchists and the law). While the word "insurrection" rarely appeared in L'Agitazione, "resistance" was Malatesta's recurring term: "economic resistance against the masters' exploitation; political resistance against the violations of freedom, and moral resistance against anything that contributes to let workers be considered or treated as an inferior caste." Rebellion for its own sake had to be set aside; the focus was to be on the means conducive to victory. The conflict with the law was to be precipitated when the chances were in the anarchists' favour. For the time being, they were to do what could be done usefully: "Since we have not been able to gain enough strength to resist the law, yet, at least let us resist—and incite the people to resist—within the limits of the law. That is already enough to take us a long way."

Opposing legalitarian tactics to achieve emancipation did not mean shunning legal means. Indeed, Malatesta remarked, the law was the weapon of the privileged. Yet some laws were popular victories, because they replaced more oppressive ones, under collective pressure. It was indeed bad for people to be happy with a law, instead of imposing their full right; but it was even worse when people, after wresting a concession out of their masters' scare, quietly let it be taken back, only to fight the same struggles over and over again. Such was the situation in Italy, where all political liberties—freedom of press, association, and assembly, house inviolability, mail secrecy, personal freedom, etc.—were lost or about to be lost, unless a strong re-awakening of the public opinion put a check on police arrogance. To such re-awakening and resistance anarchists were most interested, because they were hardest hit, and above all because the loss of liberties would produce the huge harm of taking the struggle back from the economic to the political ground. Hence, it was legitimate for anarchists harmed by an abuse of power
to demand that the law be respected, as Nino Samaja argued in the article “In difesa della legge” (In defence of law). 81

Malatesta thus described the tactics of moral resistance that circumstances imposed on the anarchist movement: "Since presently we cannot gain broader freedom, at least let us use whatever freedom the law leaves us: however, let us use it to its extreme limit. If the defenders of the law violate it against our persons and actions—as they unfortunately do—we will profit from the anti-legalitarian propaganda that spontaneously results from any abuse of power.” Entrenchment in popular and workers’ movements and organization in broad daylight were the anarchists’ weapons to counteract government repression. Before the attempts to take away freedom of association and to treat anarchists as an association of malefactors, these were to associate ever more, publicly and visibly, using public venues whenever possible, and publishing their program and the addresses of their groups, associations, and federations on the newspapers: “Eventually, people will wonder who these new and strange malefactors are, which demand daylight instead of seeking obscurity, and willingly suffer for an openly avowed cause—and deep down every person of heart will feel a little bit like a malefactor.” Likewise, before attempts to take away the anarchists’ right of free speech, these were to profit of every opportunity to let their voice be heard, or, where there was no opportunity, to create it. Anarchists were numerous enough to make persecutions powerless to halt their march, if they all fulfilled their duty: “Great as the reactionary rage of our oppressors can be, they can jail, deport, or force to exile but a tiny part of us.” 82

The continuity of Malatesta’s tactics of 1897–8 should be emphasized along with their novelty. All the tactical tenets illustrated earlier on were still present, though their

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82 “In alto i cuori,” Agitiamoci per il Socialismo Anarchico (Ancona), single issue in lieu of no. 8 of L’Agitazione (1 May 1897).
relative weight changed. Less emphasis was placed on insurrectionism, not because
insurrection was no longer viable, but because the road to it was longer than previously
hoped. In contrast, a renewed emphasis was placed on "going to the people" and
inclusiveness. Yet, as the importance of partial struggles for economic concessions and
legal resistance was acknowledged, coherence between ends and means was re-affirmed,
thus distinguishing Malatesta’s tactics from pure and simple reformism. Economic and
legal resistance were not so much important for the actual concessions being wrested, as
for the way in which they were wrested and for the struggling habit induced in workers.
Finally, as participation in the labour movement was advocated, anarchist autonomy was
re-affirmed: "This is our programme," Malatesta wrote, "against the masters, with all the
workers; against the government, with all the enemies of the government; for anarchist
socialism, with all the anarchist socialists."83

The continuity of Malatesta’s ideas was not only tactical, but also theoretical. At the
same time that he emphasized the theme of sustainability, the importance of legal battles,
the value of economic struggles for immediate objectives and reform, and the room for
progress within the bourgeois society, he rejected parliamentarianism as strongly as ever,
clarifying the common theoretical foundations of such rejection and his new tactics. The
opportunity for this clarification came from a long debate between Malatesta and Saverio
Merlino about parliamentarianism and democracy, which had started in the press shortly
before L’Agitazione appeared and continued in Malatesta’s paper from its first issue
throughout 1897. The controversy set out as a disagreement about tactics, but its scope
soon extended, revealing a profound divide of methodological nature. It was one of the
most insightful debates about anarchism and parliamentarianism of which we have
written record, owing to the intellectual capacity of the opponents, the constructive
atmosphere of mutual respect and friendship, and the extent of the debate that allowed the

83 "Lotta politica e lotta economica," L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 14 (11 June 1897).
opponents to amply articulate arguments and objections. The opponents were probably as close as a supporter of anarchism and one of parliamentarianism could be; yet their differences proved irreconcilable. Hence, the debate provides an opportunity to assess what the nature of such differences was, as well as to analyze Malatesta’s viewpoints on a number of tactical and theoretical issues that illuminate the foundations of his anarchism.

The controversy started when Merlino, in a letter to the daily Il Messaggero of 29 January 1897, proposed that Italian anarchists use their right to vote in the upcoming March elections. Merlino presented his proposal as a tactical one, maintaining that the real battle was to be waged outside of parliament. Still, he argued, there was no reason for not fighting that battle during elections, too. Bad as it was, parliamentarianism was better than absolutism. Anarchist socialists did not need to run for election, as they did not aim for power. Still, a socialist member of parliament was preferable to a reactionary one, and anarchist votes could make a difference.84

While conceding that parliamentarianism was preferable to absolutism, Malatesta countered that political liberties were only obtained when the people appeared determined to obtain them, and only lasted as long as governments felt that the people would not tolerate their abolition. Getting people accustomed to delegating the conquest and defence of their rights was the surest way to give rulers a free hand in acting arbitrarily. Likewise, parliamentarianism was better than absolutism only to the extent that it was a concession made out of fear: “Between accepting and flaunting parliamentarianism, and enduring despotism with one’s mind focused on reconquest, despotism is a thousand times better.” The two methods of struggle, inside and outside parliament, were at cross-purposes, and by accepting both one fatally ended up sacrificing any other consideration to electoral interests. Merlino himself, Malatesta

84 Il Messaggero, 29 January 1897, reprinted in Anarchismo e Democrazia, 29–33.
argued, showed awareness of the danger, when he claimed that anarchists did not need to have their own candidates. However, for Malatesta, this stance was untenable. If anything good could result from parliamentary action, why would anarchists let others take it? If anarchists did not long for power, why should they help those who did? If they had no use for power, what would others do with it, except use it against the people? "Let Merlino rest assured," Malatesta concluded, "if we told people to vote today, tomorrow we would tell them to vote for us."85

The debate illustrated from the outset Malatesta’s methodological individualism. He refused to assess parliamentarianism and absolutism as wholes, but broke them up into their components, the dispositions of social actors. His preference for a system depended on the dispositions of individuals that determined that system. He also displayed awareness of the “heterogony of ends.” Merlino’s argument was that, all the rest being equal, there was no reason for not using parliament as a means. Malatesta objected on the ground of coherence between ends and means. The struggles inside and outside parliament served different goals, as revealed by Merlino’s own aversion to the anarchists’ presence in parliament. Voting would serve anarchist goals only indirectly, by instrumentally furthering the goals of other parties. However, if parliamentarian tactics were seriously pursued, electoral considerations would eventually become predominant. Malatesta did not reject the usefulness of voting, but did reject Merlino’s ceteris paribus clause, that is, the assumption that one could vote while everything else remained equal. The modification introduced in anarchist behaviour by voting was a displacement of goals. The electoral struggle educated one to parliamentarianism, transforming those who practiced it into parliamentarians, including Merlino. Though Malatesta had no doubt about Merlino’s honesty in denying ambitions to parliament, the inner logic of supporting parliamentarian tactics would be stronger, and he would end up accepting, if asked to.

"Abstentionism, "Malatesta argued, "is a question of tactics for us. Yet it is so important that, by giving it up, one ends up giving up the principles, too. This is so because of the natural connection between the means and the end." 86

Malatesta’s methodological individualism was even more clearly spelled out in the continuation of the debate. When Merlino remarked that it was contradictory for anarchists to abstain from voting while expressing satisfaction for socialist electoral successes, Malatesta responded that he rejoiced not only in a socialist victory over bourgeois parties, but also in a republican victory over monarchists, or even of liberal monarchists over clerical monarchists. Still, that was no good reason for becoming oneself monarchist, liberal, or republican, when one deemed one’s own belief to be more advanced. 87 Likewise, with respect to Merlino’s call in defence of parliamentarianism against the impending dangers of reaction, fostered by the discredit into which parliament was brought by the simultaneous attacks from clericists, Bourbonists, and anarchists, Malatesta retorted: “Such a logic can go a long way, as no institution is so reactionary, harmful, and absurd that someone cannot be found who fights against it to the end of replacing it with something worse.” Instead, he argued, the best way to prevent a return to the past was to render the future ever more threatening for conservatives and reactionaries: “There would be no constitutional monarchies, if kings had not been afraid of the republic....” 88 For Malatesta, the line of march of society depended on the various directions in which its components tended, which in turn depended upon the respective

86 Malatesta, “Anarchia e parlamentarismo,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 1 (14 March 1897), reprinted in Anarchismo e Democrazia, 65–72; Malatesta’s note to the article “Da una questione di tattica ad una questione di principii” by Saverio Merlino, L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 3 (28 March 1897), reprinted in Anarchismo e Democrazia, 90–96.

87 Saverio Merlino, “Poche parole per chiudere la polemica” and Malatesta’s editorial note, L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 6 (18 April 1897), reprinted in Anarchismo e Democrazia, 97–108.

aims. Rather than being determined in advance, that line of march could be acted upon. Making one’s aim depend on an assessment of the present society did not make one’s action more effective. Rather, by watering down one’s programme to make it more pragmatic, a group simply weakened its own contribution to the overall direction of society, in favour of the contribution of other, more conservative forces. Hence, seemingly pragmatic moves, such as contributing to the electoral success of socialists or whatever electoral forces were most advanced, or defending parliamentarianism from the specter of reaction, actually bore a regressive character.

The debate soon extended to the role of parliamentarianism, majorities and minorities in the anarchist society. The two opponents agreed that some decisions would be taken by majority, as unanimity could not always be expected. For Merlino, this amounted to admitting that some form of parliamentarianism would survive. Malatesta countered that any concession by a minority had to be the result of an act of free will, not a principle or a law automatically applied in all cases. For him, this was the difference between anarchy and government. 89 Merlino retorted that either one believed in a Kropotkinian providential harmony, which Malatesta admittedly rejected, or accepted some form of parliamentarianism. 90 Malatesta responded that when minorities refused to yield and majorities abused their strength, anarchy was simply not possible. Likewise, if bullying and violence were rampant in society, the weak would end up invoking a police. Again, in a society of cowards and bullies, anarchy was not possible. “However things stand, we, the anarchists, are not the whole of humanity, and cannot make all human

89 Malatesta, “Da Londra: Cose a posto,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 1 (14 March 1897), reprinted in Anarchismo e Democrazia, 73–79.

90 Saverio Merlino, “Da una questione di tattica ad una questione di principii,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 3 (28 March 1897), reprinted in Anarchismo e Democrazia, 83–89.
history by ourselves. However, we can and must work to the realization of our ideas, striving to eliminate as much as possible mutual struggle and coercion from social life."\(^91\)

In an article for *Revue Socialiste* of June 1897, Merlino further articulated his effort to abandon doctrinaire formulas in favour of practicable socialist schemes, striking a middle path between anarchy and democracy. He argued that the two systems were in contrast only in their utopian versions. As soon as practical application was taken into account, qualifications had to be added, such that the only practicable system ended up being an intermediate form in which the two principles were reconciled. The acknowledgment of both individual intangible rights and indivisible collective interests resulted in a form of administration that left as little room as possible to the administrators’ abuse of power.\(^92\) For Malatesta, any attempt to reconcile democracy and anarchy ignored the difference of method: “authority or freedom; coercion or consensus; compulsion or voluntarism.” Merlino countered again that voluntarism, freedom, and consensus were incomplete principles, which could not account for the entire social organization, either presently, or for a long time to come. On the other hand, democratic socialists were not advocating authority, coercion, and compulsoriness across the board, without acknowledging the value of the principle of freedom. If both sides abandoned abstract principles to discuss concrete modes of organization, Merlino argued, they would come to an understanding. Even with respect to the revolutionary period, a complex social organization could be achieved neither by a newly constituted despotic power nor by the masses randomly gathered in the streets. Malatesta could only restate

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91 Malatesta’s note to the article “Da una questione di tattica ad una questione di principii.”

the object of disagreement between socialists and anarchists: socialists advocated the law; anarchist advocated free agreement.\textsuperscript{93}

In sum, Merlino and Malatesta’s arguments lay on different planes that could never intersect. There was no substantial divergence about values or empirical claims: Merlino shared Malatesta’s value judgment on freedom versus coercion; Malatesta acknowledged that the full realization of anarchy was presently out of reach; and both aimed for whatever society came closest to the anarchist-socialist ideal. The divergence was methodological. Merlino started from a holistic assumption, in contrast to Malatesta’s methodological individualism. As a consequence, they held symmetric and opposite views on the relationship between the descriptive and normative domains. Merlino’s point of departure was society as a whole, which did not depend on anyone’s individual will. Accordingly, his arguments based normative statements on descriptions of society. In particular, his model of socialism started from an assessment of what practicable systems were collectively reachable from the present society. This ruled out utopian models where coercion was altogether absent, for they were too distant from present reality. Therefore, controversies over abstract models that were not presently attainable were futile for him. Accordingly, his preoccupation was to provide the blueprint of a practicable future society where coercion was reduced to a minimum, which he expected all reasonable socialists, parliamentarians and anarchists alike, to agree upon and aim for. In contrast, Malatesta looked at society as the “effect of composition” of all its members’ oriented action. What each individual aimed for contributed to determine the overall direction of society. Accordingly, he started from an ideal model of society that fully realized anarchist-socialist principles, and maintained that all the efforts of anarchis-

\textsuperscript{93} Malatesta, “Collettivismo, comunismo, democrazia socialista e anarchismo,” \textit{L’Agitazione} (Ancona) 1, no. 21 (6 August 1897), reprinted in \textit{Anarchismo e Democrazia}, 119–124; Saverio Merlino, “Per la conciliazione” and Malatesta’s editorial note, \textit{L’Agitazione} (Ancona) 1, no. 23 (19 August 1897), reprinted in \textit{Anarchismo e Democrazia}, 125–139.
socialists should be aimed at approaching that model. To what extent that model could be approached was not known in advance. It depended on the anarchists’ strength and ability to propagate their ideas. In any case, whatever the achieved result, that would be the best possible society that could be reached from the present one, given the current strength of the anarchist movement. In brief, for Merlino, the kind of society that could be realistically attained was to determine what socialists aimed for. For Malatesta, what socialists aimed for was a factor in determining what society could be realistically attained.

Spelling out the theoretical foundation of Malatesta’s arguments helps clear up some misunderstandings. In particular, Giampietro Berti claims that Malatesta’s preference for endured despotism over flaunted parliamentarianism shows that he “places moral requirements before political ones”; his acknowledgment that minorities may have to yield to majorities was “a crucial admission: the sharp and unequivocal recognition that it is impossible to exceed the democratic criterion of the majority’s political and moral superiority, and to make anarchist pluralism work in circumstances of compulsory choice”; and his expectation that minorities surrender voluntarily, would signal that “he refuses to acknowledge the objective insurmountability of certain situations in which surrender is simply a must.” For Berti, Malatesta insisted on the moral diversity between anarchism and democracy as a way out of his failure to argue for the former’s political superiority. Berti’s further remarks are variations on the theme of the contrast between politics and ethics: Malatesta allegedly made an epistemological mistake in contrasting the political principle of authority with the ethical one of freedom, “since the two entities are ontologically different, and thus not comparable”; Merlino represented Weber’s “ethic of responsibility,” in contrast to Malatesta’s “ethic of ultimate ends”; Malatesta was bound to an anthropological optimism, while realism and “the historical responsibility of the present” prevailed in Merlino. In sum, for Berti, Malatesta’s anarchism “is indeed fideistic; it summarizes the utopian mentality, which always
prioritizes ‘ought’ over ‘is’ and shirks any immediate reality check, by criticizing the present not in relation to its possible outcomes, but rather in relation to a hypothetical future.”

If the concern of politics is the collective good, Malatesta’s anarchism was about politics, notwithstanding dictionary definitions of politics as “public life and affairs as involving authority and government.” Obviously, the exclusion of anarchism from the latter definition is a truism, which Malatesta himself rejected in a response to the socialist Osvaldo Gnocchi Viani, who had commented upon the Malatesta–Merlino debate, arguing that anarchists were finally approaching the political struggle: “Today,” Malatesta wrote, “there is a school that means by political struggle the conquest of political power through elections. However, Gnocchi Viani cannot ignore that logic imposes other methods of struggle to those who want to abolish political power instead of occupying it.”

Ethics played a key role in Malatesta’s anarchism, but that role was political. Thus, regarding ethics and politics as ontologically different is a misunderstanding. Malatesta gave priority to the normative over the descriptive domain on the basis of his methodological individualistic outlook on society as an “effect of composition” and of his awareness of the heterogeneity of ends. In other words, his focus on ethics did not derive from a neglect of politics, but rather from his overall outlook on society and his inherently political preoccupation with the best way of achieving collective goals.

When Malatesta claimed that the majority rule was reasonable in some cases, but that it was to be voluntarily accepted by the minority, he was not simply keeping up

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94 Berti, Malatesta, 259, 263–4, 268, 272; see also Berti, Merlino, 235–256.

95 Concise Oxford Dictionary, s.v. “politics.”

96 Malatesta, “Da Londra: Cose a posto,” part 2, L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 2 (21 March 1897), reprinted in Anarchismo e Democrazia, 80–2.
anarchist appearances while tacitly admitting the political superiority of democracy. Instead, he was making a substantive point. While the majority rule was reasonable in some cases, in others it might be reasonable to adopt multiple solutions, or even for the majority to yield, if it was deemed that the issue at stake demanded unanimity. It would be up to those involved to adopt a criterion by free agreement, that is, an agreement about how to settle a disagreement. Establishing an a priori decision-making process and coercively enforcing it would be bound to induce some form of goal displacement. Were majority rule enforced, the common good would no longer be the immediate goal; rather, achieving a majority would become the immediate goal for a group, while holding a majority would become an incentive to ignore dissent. Conversely, should unanimity rule be in force, minorities would be encouraged to prioritize selfish interests over the common good.

Indeed, each political system has its own point of crisis. In anarchy, the inability to reach agreements is such a point, which makes anarchy impossible, as Malatesta acknowledged. Yet in democracy, too, there are circumstances that determine a systemic breakdown. As Carl Schmitt pointed out in his criticism of parliamentary democracy, “the danger exists that democracy might be used in order to defeat democracy.” However, acknowledging the fragility of democracy does not amount to maintaining its lack of realism or impossibility. As is routinely claimed, democracy rests on the people’s capability to live democratically. So does anarchy rest on people’s capability to live anarchically. Anarchy stands in a similar relation to democracy as the latter to autocracy. In principle, in an autocratic system a blueprint of society can be provided in advance, given that the entire decision-making process is managed autocratically. In contrast, an a priori “democratic” blueprint of society would be a self-contradictory concept, since it is

up to elective parliaments to pass laws. What is established in advance is the decision-making process, as enshrined in a constitution and thereafter coercively enforced. Anarchism goes one step further on the path of under-specification, and claims that the decision-making process itself cannot be pre-determined, but always depends on free agreements. A custom may arise, but it can never be coercively enforced. In brief, autocracy, democracy, and anarchy lie on a scale of progressive under-specification about the future society. Berti’s charge that Malatesta escaped from providing political solutions could similarly be leveled by an advocate of autocracy to a democrat. Such a progressive scale of under-specification—and institutional fragility—coincides with the progressive scale of freedom. Berti’s notion of politics, which implies the restricted sense of public life as involving authority, is realized to the extent that it moves away from freedom. In contrast, Malatesta’s appeal to ethics was an appeal to the method of freedom as the best realization of politics in the broader sense of common good provision.

In its escalation from a tactical disagreement about the expediency for anarchists to use the right to vote to a contrast between irreconcilable methodological and theoretical perspectives, Malatesta’s debate with Merlino well illustrates the link between tactical and theoretical issues. Since Merlino first expressed his opinion on elections in January 1897, Malatesta immediately perceived the implications of his friend’s tactical stand. Most importantly, as Fabbri notes, “Merlino’s intelligence and extraordinary culture, his evident good faith and the influence of his name” made his evolution towards parliamentarian socialism a serious threat for the destiny of the anarchist movement in Italy, on the eve of Malatesta’s return to Italy and of the mobilization campaign he intended to undertake. Such concerns motivated the promptness and vigour of Malatesta’s reaction, which eventually succeeded in averting the danger. “Merlino remained isolated,” Fabbri recalls, “too revolutionary, eclectic, and independent to be
looked on favourably in socialist circles, but too legalitarian for the anarchists, with which he kept the friendliest relationships until his death."

With upcoming elections, the re-assertion of anti-parliamentarianism, which was central to the controversy with Merlino, was one of Malatesta's priorities at the time of his return to Italy. Such re-assertion came with a manifesto of March 1897, endorsed by groups from sixty-three localities, half of which in Marches, Tuscany, and Romagna. Similarly to the manifesto of November 1890, which was the opening act of the 1891 mobilization campaign, including the Capolago congress and the First of May riots in Rome, the manifesto of March 1897 marked the beginning of the 1897–8 mobilization. The manifesto clearly sketched the new socialist-anarchist tactics: "Do you want the freedom of association? Associate, and if the government dissolves you, keep associating all the same. Do you want the eight-hour workday? Organize, and refuse to work for longer than eight hours." The manifesto was itself the first instance of the new tactics. Unlike the manifesto of November 1890, which was signed by anarchists abroad, this one was almost entirely signed by groups and individuals in Italy, to assert the movement's right to openly exist in the homeland.

The extensive anarchist-socialist mobilization drive of 1897–8 was centered on L'Agitazione not only as a vehicle of propaganda and theoretical debate, but also, to borrow Lenin's expression of few years later, as a "collective organizer," as was often the case for anarchist papers. Years later, Malatesta wrote about another editorial project: "I attribute the greatest importance to the success of the newspaper, not only for the propaganda it will be able to carry out, but also because it will be useful as a means, and

98 Luigi Fabbri, Vida de Malatesta, 137–8.

99 “Ai compagni,” L'Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 1 (14 March 1897); “Adesioni al manifesto astensionista,” L'Agitazione (Ancona), 1, nos. 2–5 (21 March–12 April 1897), and L'Agiatore Socialista Anarchico (Ancona) single issue in lieu of no. 7 (25 April 1897).

100 “Adesioni al manifesto astensionista,” L'Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 2 (21 March 1897).
a cover, for work of a more practical nature.” The same held for *L’Agitazione* during the mobilization of 1897–8, which had very different characteristics from the insurrectionary projects of Malatesta’s earlier stays in Italy. This time the focus was on the steady growth of the anarchist and labour movements through public activities. The mobilization can be split into two parts, before and after the Ancona bread riots of January 1898, which led to Malatesta’s arrest and changed the nature of the mobilization. In 1897, this was centered on three themes: labour struggles; the growth of the anarchist-socialist movement; and legal struggles for civil liberties. The 1898 riots and the ensuing repression turned the anarchist struggle into one for survival, in the form of a legal struggle for the right of association. Malatesta remained a protagonist, though from jail. His trial became the focal point of the anarchist country-wide struggle to assert its right to exist as a movement.  

The foremost task of Malatesta’s new tactics was “going to the people,” in the form of widespread, local participation in labour struggles. *L’Agitazione*’s weekly reports illustrate this activity. An article of 1 May 1897 explained Malatesta’s views on unions:

> The workers of the same trade, or of various trades employed in the same factory, unite and struggle to improve their salary and other working conditions, or to prevent the boss from worsening the present ones, as well as to defend any of them who is the object of personal injustices or harassments. The various groups, conscious of the ever increasing solidarity among the interests of workers of all trades and countries, keep progressively uniting in local, national, and international federations of each trade, and in general federations of workers of the various trades, in order to make the struggle more effective and direct the means of all towards helping the specific fractions that are in turn engaged in a struggle.

The outline superficially resembles Marx’s description of how workers came together as a class through combination. However, Marx regarded the process as historically

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102 “Leghe di resistenza.”
necessary. In contrast, for Malatesta the only necessity concerned the link between means and end. In order to prevent both illusion and scepticism, Malatesta illustrated the economic and moral import of strikes. Most often strikes ended up in compromises or defeats, or in victories for which an enormous price was paid, but the fear of them was the only check on the bosses’ abuses. Yet the balance of strength obtained through strikes was constantly threatened by broader circumstances, such as economic crises, which were stronger than any workers’ resistance and constantly endangered temporary gains. To secure a steady improvement of all workers’ conditions, while unions engaged in the daily struggle, they also had to aim for the higher and more general goal of transforming the current system of property and production. At the same time, they had to get workers used to organizing and managing their own interests by themselves. Every act of resistance to the bosses had value, insofar as it went in the direction of forming a revolutionary class consciousness.103

Such ideas were put in practice in the day-to-day unionization effort that anarchist-socialists undertook in Ancona. The choice of Ancona as Malatesta’s base of operations was not casual. Ancona was a stronghold of organizationist anarchism and Malatesta’s link with the city dated back to 1894 and would last until 1913–4. Moreover, as Pier Carlo Masini notes, the city was strategically located in the heart of the area where historically anarchism had strongest roots: Marches, Romagna, Emilia, Tuscany, Umbria, and Rome.104 Finally, the distribution of political forces in the city, as shown in Table 1, was favourable to Malatesta’s project. Four traits stand out: (i) there was an overwhelming preponderance of revolutionary forces, mainly republican; (ii) anarchists had a minoritarian but sizable presence in the city and district; (iii) socialist presence was weak; (iv) the strong presence of socialist-republicans indicates a social orientation

103 Ibid.
104 Masini, Epoca degli attentati, 87.
among republicans. In brief, Ancona was an ideal terrain for anarchist propaganda, with a notable anarchist presence, potential for expansion provided by a socially-oriented revolutionary milieu, and weak socialist competition.

Table 1. Number and size of political groups in the city and district of Ancona, June 1894.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of group</th>
<th>City Groups</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>District Groups</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Total Groups</th>
<th>Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anarchist-socialist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist-republican</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3384</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2244</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>5628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitutionalist</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1348</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: Prefecture of Ancona, “Elenco delle società politiche della provincia di Ancona,” 8 June 1894, DAP, b. 103, fs. 975 “Internazionalisti anarchici in Ancona,” ACS.

The core of the city’s urban proletariat comprised sugar mill workers, railway workers and dockers, all categories among which anarchist-socialists were active. On the same day on which the above article appeared, a meeting took place in which over two hundred workers of the Ancona sugar mill constituted a union. However, it is the case of the Ancona dockers that best illustrates the role of anarchist-socialist propaganda in uniting workers, emphasizing the need for class solidarity, irrespective of skill or occupation, and seeking as much to overcome workers’ rivalries as to foster antagonism to the bosses. In the port of Ancona labour was traditionally organized hierarchically. A form of monopoly allowed stevedores to hand down jobs from father to son and to temporarily sub-contract work to casual labourers. A contract system gave control over

105 “Notizie,” Agiatevi per il Socialismo Anarchico (Ancona) single issue in lieu of no. 9 of L’Agitazione (8 May 1897); “Cose locali,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 10 (15 May 1897); “In Ancona,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, nos. 15 (18 June 1897) and 32 (21 October 1897); Enzo Santarelli, “L’azione di Errico Malatesta e i moti del 1898 ad Ancona,” Movimento Operaio 6, n.s., no. 2 (March–April 1954): 252–3.
stevedores’ gangs to foremen, who negotiated contracts with shipping companies. The situation started to change in 1897, when the formation of new gangs organized as co-ops challenged the traditional monopoly. *L’Agitazione* stood by the new gangs, arguing that instead of trying to preserve waning privileges at the expense of all other workers, the right course of action in the face of job shortage was for all stevedores to unite and demand decent salaries, while the result of competition would be to lower salaries, to the whole category’s detriment. ¹⁰⁶

Enzo Santarelli acknowledges the effectiveness of the anarchist-socialists’ labour propaganda, arguing that their activism among stevedores turned thereafter this category into a stronghold of anarchist socialism in Ancona, shunning the influence of the republican party and the patronage system of foremen and brokers. Unfortunately, Santarelli’s interpretation is also plagued by the Marxist axiom that anarchism was a sign of backwardness. Thus, he argues that the stevedores’ support for anarchist socialism was typical of a social setting in which the limited development of industry, the predominance of handcraft occupations, the guild-based organization of labour, and the consequent individualism of dock workers provided the organic basis for the anarchist-socialist ideology: “the plant of Bakuninism still bears fruits in an environment in which the great modern industry has not arisen, yet. Anarchist preaching catches on with relative ease among the dockers, a privileged and widely diverse group of workers, inclined to an extremely individualistic vision of life, lacking discipline, and insufficiently ‘educated’ by the use of machinery in their toil.” ¹⁰⁷

Contrary to Santarelli’s assertions, however, anarchist-socialists attacked precisely that individualism and the defence of craft privileges, promoting instead class unionism.

¹⁰⁶ Santarelli, “Azione di Errico Malatesta,” 253–5; “Cose locali,” *L’Agitazione* (Ancona) 1, no. 10 (15 May 1897); “In Ancona,” *L’Agitazione* (Ancona) 1, nos. 11 (22 May 1897), 17 (2 July 1897), 31 (14 October 1897), and 32 (21 October 1897).

Moreover, in contrast to Santarelli’s charge of backwardness and localism, Malatesta’s strategy was backed by first-hand knowledge of a wide international context, which came with his transnationalism. His strategy had roots that went as far back as the late 1880s’ labour struggles in Argentina, and had been deeply influenced by the Great Dock Strike. Notwithstanding the different sizes of the cities, the situation in Ancona presented commonalities with that of the London docks in 1889. In both cases, casual labour was the central problem; the struggle against contract work also sparked the London strike; and the idea of general workers’ unions enrolling all classes of skilled and unskilled workers, which Malatesta brought to the Ancona dock workers, was the same established by the new unionism that arose from the Great Dock Strike in the world’s most advanced capitalist city. Malatesta was also keenly aware of the current European context. In particular, it was not accidental that L’Agitazione held up as an example the dockers of Hamburg, where there were “neither new nor old, but only conscious workers in agreement, who were able to resist their bosses.” A notable role in the Hamburg dockers’ strike, which occurred from November 1896 to February 1897, was played by Tom Mann, a leader of the Great Dock Strike and Malatesta’s friend. In June 1896 Mann had become the president of the International Federation of Ship, Dock, and River Workers, which promoted organisation on international lines. The Federation made its presence felt at the 1896 London congress with a manifesto foreshadowing an imminent international strike. Then, Mann and others undertook a tour in various European ports, including Hamburg. In February 1897, shortly before Malatesta’s departure for Italy, an


109 “In Ancona,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 31 (14 October 1897).

international conference convened by Mann was held in London to the end of enforcing uniformity of treatment. The International Federation held another conference in London in June 1897, when the Ancona stevedores’ controversy was under way.\textsuperscript{111}

The European backdrop was familiar to Malatesta as he worked out his labour strategy for the port of Ancona. Another strike that \textit{L’Agitazione} held up before the Ancona stevedores as an example of national and international solidarity was that of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, which lasted throughout the second half of 1897 and represented the first major national labour conflict in British history. Malatesta even considered starting a national fund-raising campaign for the British strikers, but he abandoned the idea, doubting that in Italy the initiative would be backed by socialist and workers’ organizations.\textsuperscript{112} In brief, Malatesta’s ideas may have grown on the Bakuninist plant, but were also in unison with the most forward-looking labour strategies arising from the dockers’ experience of a decade in the most industrially advanced European countries, which Malatesta had directly witnessed. In the end, Santarelli’s claims undermine his own analysis. He argues that “at the end of the century, the Ancona workers’ movement was about to finally come out of a still immature phase of development, in which the old guild spirit confronted, with ever smaller success, the new and modern impulse toward association that resulted from maturing economic transformations and from the numerical increment of a still scarcely qualified proletariat.” Yet despite his depiction of anarchism as a lingering remnant of the past, he remarks: “for long years, up to the Red Week and the uprisings of June 1920, anarchist


traditions took root in the vivacious, restless, mobile mass of the dockers, and in their characteristic social and economic organization." It is legitimate to question accounts involving death struggles so vital as to last longer than a movement’s healthy life.113

Throughout 1897, L’Agitazione supported the unionization efforts of various other categories, such as bakers, barbers, and shoemakers, helping to overcome divisions. For example, resistance to unionization existed in the Ancona printing industry, where past episodes of union malpractice had alienated workers, including anarchists. L’Agitazione issued repeated appeals in support of the renewed effort toward the printers’ unionization. The effort paid off, and in October a local section of the publishing industry national union was created. By its local and ordinary character, the anarchist-socialists’ involvement in the labour movement’s life was an eloquent assertion of their new tactics. Their day-to-day activities were a living testimony of the concepts of inclusiveness, sustainability, organization, and collective action that were most contentious among anarchists.114

The periodical even engaged in a controversy with the customs administration over grievances by its officers. The episode, triggered by a letter from a custom officer to the periodical, illustrates the local credit of L’Agitazione as an advocate of workers’ rights, as well as the newspapers willingness to support the grievances of all workers without distinction. Some anarchists protested that L’Agitazione had gone too far: would they also defend policemen from the ill-treatment of higher-ranking officers? For Malatesta, the protest assumed “a clear-cut separation between useful workers and exploiters or

113 Santarelli, “Azione di Errico Malatesta,” 252, 256.

114 On bakers, see: “In Ancona,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, nos. 17 (2 July 1897), 19 (17 July 1897), and 36 (18 November 1897); Santarelli, “Azione di Errico Malatesta,” 256, 266. On barbers and shoemakers, see: “In Ancona,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, nos. 35–37 (11–25 November 1897); “In Ancona,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 25 (2 September 1897). On printers, see: “In Ancona,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 23 (19 August 1897); “Per l’organizzazione dei tipografi,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, nos. 30 and 31 (7 and 14 October 1897); “In Ancona,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 33 (28 October 1897).
defenders of exploiters, with everyone being free to choose one’s place.” However, he countered, no such separation existed: people were often forced by necessity to take up jobs they disliked; competition was everywhere; and everyone could be in turn oppressed and oppressor, exploited and exploiter. The point was not to draw untenable lines, but to fight oppression and exploitation wherever they occurred. Evil did not depend on the individuals’ wickedness, but on the entire social constitution. Hence, the remedy did not consist in hating individuals, but in spreading the feeling that institutions must be changed. Malatesta concluded by restating his inclusive view of class and his humanism: anarchists were to especially instigate the organization of workers as a struggling class, but at the same time they were to bring a message of love and brotherhood to everyone.115

For Malatesta, taking root among workers was the anarchists’ first priority, but in order to do so as anarchists they also had to organize amongst themselves. Along with their long-term, daily commitment to agitating among workers, Italian anarchist-socialists similarly attended to re-organizing their own movement, a task in which L’Agitazione acted as an informal correspondence committee. The effort took a different shape than at the time of Capolago. Its progress was reported by L’Agitazione in the column “Movimento Socialista Anarchico.” The reference to a “movement” rather than a “party” had a double significance: the project of uniting all anarchists into a single organization had been abandoned, and anarchist-socialist organization was now looked upon as a gradual process. While in 1891 the creation of a party began the mobilization drive, in 1897 the creation of a party was expected to be the result of a mobilization drive. Thus, when in May the Lugano anarchists, the promoters of the Capolago congress in 1890, posed the issue of a national congress, L’Agitazione deemed the idea premature, giving priority to a bottom-up growth starting at the local and regional levels.

115 “In Ancona,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, nos. 38 and 39 (2 and 9 December 1897); “Giustizia per tutti.”
Meanwhile, anarchists were to focus on taking firm root in the labour movement. “Later on, after our organization will have extended throughout Italy and acquired a solid basis through the practice of local and regional work, we will finally have the means to start our national congresses, and be able to do so profitably.”116

The anarchist-socialists of Ancona set the example. By August, five new groups in the city had been added to the seven that endorsed the March manifesto. Further impulse to propaganda came from Malatesta’s arrest and immediate release in November 1897. During the previous nine months of underground presence he had not remained in hiding, even lecturing out of town under the name of Giuseppe Rinaldi. However, after earlier convictions had lapsed, Malatesta was free to openly engage in spoken propaganda, as witnessed by the anarchist-socialist movement column in L’Agitazione, which weekly reported his activity throughout the Marches and Umbria. The same column, which in April had recorded the initial country-wide difficulty of organizing—reporting most often police persecutions, amidst scant announcements of projected manifestos and publications—by January 1898 had a different tone, with spoken propaganda and the creation of new groups across Italy as predominant themes. The slow but steady progress that socialist-anarchists had envisaged was taking place.117

An important event in that growth process was the congress of the Anarchist-Socialist Federation of Romagna in December 1897, the first of the regional congresses projected back in April. Twenty-seven groups from fifteen localities participated, with endorsements from nine more localities. The congress resolutions closely reflected the tactics advocated by L’Agitazione. Groups were to regularly report on unions and the

116 “Un congresso di anarchici italiani,” Agitatevi per il Socialismo Anarchico (Ancona), single issue in lieu of no. 9 of L’Agitazione (8 May 1897).

117 “Movimento Socialista Anarchico,” L’Agitazione (Ancona) I, no. 4 (4 April 1897); no. 6 (18 April 1897); L’Agitatore Socialista Anarchico (Ancona) single issue in lieu of no. 7 of L’Agitazione (25 April 1897).
anarchists' activity therein; in case of trials for criminal association, the existence of anarchist associations was to be admitted and claimed as a right; furthermore, solidarity with the defendants was to be publicly declared. Such provisions anticipated a scenario that would become reality in less than a month.\textsuperscript{118}

In addition to agitation among the working masses and the internal growth of the anarchist-socialist movement, the third kind of long and patient work that anarchist-socialists undertook was legal struggle, a terrain that offered opportunities for cooperation with other political forces. Throughout 1897, the new tactics of legal struggle took the form of a campaign against a bill that made domicilio coatto part of the permanent legislation, \textit{de facto} introducing deportation for political reasons as an ordinary procedure. The agitations picked up after the bill, approved by the Senate, was scheduled for debate at the Chamber. From mid-July on, \textit{L'Agitazione} urged anarchist-socialists to get involved, for "this is an agitation in which we can agree with all participants, in terms of both ends and means.... Let us take the initiative ourselves wherever we can; and where we cannot, or we have been preceded by others, let us loyally follow their initiative."\textsuperscript{119} Meanwhile, \textit{L'Agitazione} published the series of articles "Come si conquista quel... che si vuole" (How one obtains what... one wants), on such episodes as the 1893 Belgian struggle for universal suffrage, to illustrate the idea of legal struggles by popular action.\textsuperscript{120} The agitations went on for the rest of 1897. In August many local committees were formed with the contribution of socialists, anarchists, republicans, and occasionally other democratic and radical parties.

\textsuperscript{118} "Il 1.\textdegree Congresso della Federazione Socialista-Anarchica Romagnola," \textit{L'Agitazione} (Ancona) 1, no. 42 (30 December 1897). The report was incomplete, due to censorship. The full report appeared in the following issue of 6 January 1898.

\textsuperscript{119} Pietro Gori, "Per la libertà," \textit{L'Agitazione} (Ancona) 1, no. 19 (16 July 1897); "Contro il domicilio coatto," \textit{L'Agitazione} (Ancona) 1, no. 21 (6 August 1897).

\textsuperscript{120} See chapter 6, note 11.
Throughout September *L’Agitazione* reported on mass rallies held or planned in Northern and Central Italy. A further wave of initiatives occurred between late November and early January 1898. Anarchist socialists were particularly active in Emilia, Romagna, and Marches, in a spirit of cooperation with other progressive forces that brought them to share speaking platforms with socialists and republicans.\(^{121}\)

By early January 1898 the bill’s menace was averted, and the agitations subsided. *L’Agitazione* of 30 December drew a balance sheet of the agitations. These were regarded as a popular victory over the reactionary plan of prime minister Di Rudini. They had been characterized by the concerted action of popular parties, and the hope was expressed that they would be the prelude to broader popular struggles. Still, they had been kept within the rules of the game imposed by the government. As for anarchist-socialists, their legitimate realism about their limited strength had tended to turn into excessive timidity and self-deprecation; the article ended by even voicing the conjecture that the ditching of the bill mainly owed to Di Rudini’s political indecisiveness, with popular agitations merely providing its “decorative appearance.” The comment did not intend to belittle the agitation, but to urge anarchist-socialists to a more energetic action.\(^{122}\)

During 1897 the food crisis that would spark the bread riots of the next year began to be felt. *L’Agitazione* started agitating the issue as early as August. The article had a subdued tone, pointing to the present situation as far from inevitable, since the wheat shortage that caused the crisis was induced by a profit-driven economy.\(^{123}\)

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weeks, as the agitations against *domicilio coatto* were gaining momentum, the first initiatives about the cost of bread in places of anarchists and socialists presence were also being taken. In Ancona, a well-attended rally was held in late September. In calling people to action, the anarchist Adelmo Smorti emphasized that such action should go to the root causes, rather than being misdirected to bakers. It was for the government to set a fixed price on wheat and to remove import duties, and for local authorities to remove consumption duties: “Will governments and municipalities do any of these things? None, if we look feeble.” Socialist-anarchists were not fanning insurrectionary flames, but at the same time their call was for direct action aiming at capitalists and the government. This was the way to obtain reforms such as the abolition of duties, while at the same time building the workers’ revolutionary collective strength.\(^{124}\)

The wave of bread riots that swept Italy for four months started in early January 1898 with revolts in southern villages.\(^{125}\) However, Ancona was the first urban centre where major agitations occurred, and the Marches the first region where they widely propagated. The agitations lasted several days. Military occupation of the city put them an end on 18 January. The socialist Bocconi, Malatesta, and other anarchists were arrested. On 19–20 January the revolt spread to numerous urban centres of the Marches.\(^{126}\) As a result, bread prices were reduced and soup kitchens were arranged in the city. The next issue of *L’Agitazione*, promptly seized by the authorities, made the tongue-in-cheek remark that the authorities had acknowledged that the people’s demands were legitimate. Yet in the next three months the Ancona criminal court alone held thirty-

\(^{124}\) “Da lettere e cartoline,” *L’Agitazione* (Ancona) 1, nos. 25–27 (2–16 September 1897); “In Ancona,” *L’Agitazione* (Ancona) 1, no. 29 (30 September 1897).


eight trials involving two hundred forty-three people. Meanwhile, the government temporarily reduced by one third the import duty on wheat from 25 January to 30 April. _L'Agitazione_ remarked that the temporary character of the decree was going to benefit speculators, who would buy cheap after January, to re-sell at a higher price after April. The repression that followed the agitations changed the nature of anarchist action. The “anarchist-socialist movement” column, that had weekly recorded the movement’s growth throughout 1897, was discontinued. At that juncture the priority was no longer to extend the movement, but, as expected, to defend its right to exist publicly and legally.

In the aftermath of the Ancona agitations, _L'Agitazione_ argued that, in contrast to the attitude of all parliamentarian forces, the duty of the extreme parties, as parties of action, was to “to fight at the side of the people.” The tone was quite different from that of 1893–4. No insurrectionary scenario was evoked, but no check was placed on popular action either. The focus remained on collective direct action as a means to defend and extend concessions. The attitude towards socialists was notable. Unlike republicans, socialists were spared from criticism and the article made an inclusive appeal for common tactics to “extreme parties” indistinctively. The article sheds light on the role of anarchists in the Ancona agitations, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between spontaneous popular action and conscious action of organized parties. While the agitations cannot be ascribed to the action of anarchists alone, their presence was crucial in making Ancona the leading city of the resistance. Santarelli’s pre-packaged interpretation is that anarchists joined the agitations as “a step to ascend to the longed-for social revolution, which they had always imagined to be imminent.” However, their

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128 “I provvedimenti del governo,” _L’Agitazione_ (Ancona) 2, no. 3 (28 January 1898).

129 “Sfogliando i giornali,” _L’Agitazione_ (Ancona) 2, no. 4 (3 February 1898).
whole tactics of this period were based on the premise that no immediate revolutionary prospect was in sight.\textsuperscript{130}

After the Ancona agitations, the focal point of the anarchists’ struggle for the right of association became the trial of Malatesta and eight others that had been arrested, including the staff of \textit{L’Agitazione}. The trial took place in Ancona from 21 to 28 April 1898. As planned, the defendants admitted the existence of their associations, claiming their right of expression and association. In mid-March the Romagnole Federation started a country-wide campaign for the right of association, centered on a collective, public declaration of solidarity with the comrades under arrest. A protest manifesto addressed “To the Italian People” was distributed to all groups throughout the country with the recommendation that it be signed by anarchists only. In this way anarchists wanted to make clear that the manifesto was not simply a generic sign of solidarity with their comrades on trial, but that they were unequivocally throwing down the gauntlet at the government. In a country where a repressive law on the right of association equated anarchist groups to criminal associations, the manifesto challenged that law by a collective declaration that amounted to self-incrimination. The manifesto was published in Ancona as a supplement of \textit{L’Agitazione} on 24 April, in the middle of the trial, followed by individual names and places of 3,137 signatories from 116 localities across Italy. As with the abstentionist manifesto of a year before, emphasis was placed on the requirement that the signatories be individuals rather than groups, so as to underline the legal responsibility that each militant was taking.\textsuperscript{131} Though the initiative was part of the new tactics, it had precedents. When Malatesta, Merlino, and others were convicted for criminal association in 1884, seventy-eight Florence internationalists signed a manifesto

\textsuperscript{130} Santarelli, “Azione di Errico Malatesta,” 262–3.

\textsuperscript{131} “Per la libertà d’associazione,” \textit{L’Agitazione} (Ancona) 2, no. 13 (7 April 1898); editorial note, \textit{L’Agitazione} (Ancona) 2, no. 15 (19 April 1898); “Al Popolo Italiano,” special supplement of \textit{L’Agitazione}, Ancona, [24 April 1898].
of solidarity. They were indeed tried and convicted for "contempt of the fundamental laws of the state." Fourteen years later the sheer number of signatories made any such measure impossible.132

The trial had considerable echo outside of Italy. The Parisian L'Aurore, which a few months earlier had published Émile Zola's "J'Accuse," repeatedly dealt with the trial. In England an extensive campaign weeks ahead of the trial involved the Daily Chronicle, the Daily News, and the Star and was endorsed by delegates of many trades unions, Independent Labour Party, and the Socialist Democratic Federation branches. An international protest manifesto was signed by Tom Mann, Keir Hardie, the writer Edward Carpenter, the painter Walter Crane, the journalist Henry W. Nevinson, and other intellectual and political figures.133 In Italy itself, however, the campaign for the right of association did not have the hoped-for following. A week after its start, L'Agitazione lamented that not even socialist and republican newspaper had publicized the campaign. However, the trial did have a national echo. For its duration, L'Agitazione published a daily supplement with a circulation of 8,000 copies. The trial did not end with the hoped-for acquittal: Malatesta was sentenced to seven months, the others to six months, with one person acquitted. However, the criminal association charge against everyone was dropped, and this was regarded as a victory. Nevertheless, right after the trial L'Agitazione drew a first balance sheet of the agitation that expressed disappointment: "Let us admit it at the outset: even in relative terms, the effect has been nearly nil." The campaign mainly consisted of conferences held by anarchists-socialists, the paper complained. In the anarchist camp, the article continued, the criticism was raised that the initiative was semi-legalitarian and misleadingly focused solely on article 248, which

132 Masini, Da Bakunin a Malatesta, 331–3; Conti, 239.

equated anarchist organizations to associations of malefactors, rather than on the entire penal code. The reaction of other parties feebly consisted of protest resolutions. In the end, anarchist socialists were left alone. Still, the support from their own ranks to the manifesto of the Romagnole Federation was a success. The convenient theory that one had to hide in order to act had been hard hit: "we, who want to civilly live in broad daylight like any other party, have set off on the right path." 134

The Ancona trial coincided with the onset of the 1898 bread riots. Agitations had occurred throughout Italy in the wake of the Ancona events of January. 135 However, the situation was precipitated by a worsening of the food crisis due to the Spanish-American war, which reduced imports and increased the price of wheat. In the space of two weeks, between the last decade of April and the first decade of May, agitations spread as wildfire across Italy. 136 In Milan, what came to be known as Fatti di Maggio (May Events) started on 6 May and went on for four days. A state of siege was declared and General Bava Beccaris was put in command of the city. Heavy artillery was used and blanket orders to shoot were given to the troops. Counts and estimates of the casualties in Milan widely vary. An official count of 80 deaths is usually mentioned. Louise Tilly raises the baseline to 264 victims, whose names she collected from local newspapers. Del Carria mentions further journalistic estimates ranging from 400 to 800 deaths. 137 In the following months, 129 trials were held by the Milan military tribunal, involving 828 defendants, of which 688 were convicted. Writing at the end of 1898, Napoleone Colajanni reported that the

134 Kristen Larsen [Nino Samaja], "Per la libertà d'associazione," L'Agitazione (Ancona) 2, no. 10 (18 March 1898); Les Temps Nouveaux (Paris) 3, no. 51 (16–22 April 1898): 4, for Merlino's appeal; Berti, Malatesta, 279; Il processo Malatesta e compagni, 16–17; "Il bilancio della nostra agitazione," L'Agitazione (Ancona) 2, daily supplement no. 10 (30 April 1898) to issue no. 15.

135 "Azione popolare," L'Agitazione (Ancona) 2, no. 3 (28 January 1898).


military tribunals of Florence, Milan, and Naples alone convicted approximately 2,500 people. Sources quoted by Del Carria report that civil and military courts together inflicted nearly 5,000 years of jail.\textsuperscript{138}

Unfortunately, the time when anarchists could civilly live in broad daylight was yet to come. \textit{L'Agitazione}'s balance sheet of the agitations for the right of association appeared only days before the \textit{Fatti di Maggio}. Then, repression fell not only upon anarchists, but also upon socialists, republicans, radicals, and Catholics, with greater brutality than in 1894. The suppression of the freedom of speech is graphically illustrated in Figure 3, which compares a May issue of \textit{L'Agitazione} before and after censorship. The very denomination “anarchist-socialist periodical” was censored. Ironically, \textit{domicilio coatto} was utilized more than ever, and colonies destined to that purpose were repopulated.\textsuperscript{139}

In this situation, Pier Carlo Masini remarks, “the anarchist movement, broken up, with its people put away and its means of communication confiscated, and banished from political life, should have disappeared. Instead, exactly the opposite happened…. At the \textit{domicilio coatto} islands the cream of Italian anarchism came to meet for the first time in a permanent congress…. ” The next year a one-off publication appeared, jointly edited by anarchist groups at \textit{domicilio coatto} and significantly titled \textit{I morti} (The dead).\textsuperscript{140} However, these were already the prodromes of the next “reappearance” of Italian anarchism, while the anarchist-socialist experience of 1897–8 could be looked at retrospectively.

\textsuperscript{138} Del Carria, vol. 1, 337; Colajanni, 254.

\textsuperscript{139} Masini, \textit{Da Bakunin a Malatesta}, 125–8.

\textsuperscript{140} Masini, \textit{Epoca degli attentati}, 127, 136.
Figure 3. L’Agitazione of 12 May 1898, before and after censorship.
Such experience represented a remarkable tactical turn from 1893–4. The focus shifted from social indeterminacy to a sustainable growth of the anarchist movement as part of the labour movement’s growth. The anarchist-socialist experience of 1897–8 was as remote as any from historiographical stereotypes that presuppose a dichotomy between two paths to social change: a pragmatistic, incremental, peaceful, reformist, and legal path, and a utopian, all-or-nothing, violent, revolutionary, and illegal one. The latter, it is alleged, was the path of anarchism, barred from the former path by its own nature, defined in a suitably narrow way for the historian’s convenience. Effective and “anarchist” means being mutually exclusive, the equally doomed options supposedly left to anarchists ranged from “dynamiter” to “dreamer,” with no middle ground. However, real-life anarchists did not comply with a priori generalizations. The core idea of the anarchist-socialist experience of 1897–8 was to shed both dynamite and dreams without shedding either revolution or anarchy. That experience can only be understood on the basis of its own theoretical foundations, which were roomier than arbitrary stereotypes allow.

For Malatesta, the line of march of society was the composite result of multiple social forces. Anarchists were to exert whatever influence their strength allowed them. Their action was simultaneously revolutionary and reforming: they aimed to build the workers’ revolutionary strength, for emancipation could only come by revolution; at the same time they contributed to wrest from the bourgeoisie whatever concessions could be obtained in the present society. Inclusiveness and coherence between ends and means characterized anarchist action. No effort or gain was too partial to be significant. Every labour struggle was worth fighting if class solidarity was its guiding principle. Conversely, no deflection from anarchist means was too small to be questioned, for it implied a displacement of goals: “if we told people to vote today,” Malatesta remarked to Merlino, “tomorrow we would tell them to vote for us.” Every struggle fought by direct action was relevant. This did not necessarily mean illegality or violence. Struggles could
be peaceful and within the bounds of law, so long as they were directly fought by those who had a stake in them. Legal struggles such as the ones against *domicilio coatto* and for the right of association were the clearest examples. Their objective was as pragmatic as the repeal of a law; their means were as peaceful as rallies and mass self-denunciation; yet what made them coherent with anarchist ends was their being fought in the streets and not in parliament. The workers’ fighting habit and class consciousness were made through reforming but anti-parliamentarian struggles.

Violent and illegal means were not rejected, as anarchist participation in the bread riots shows. The standard dichotomy between peaceful and violent, legal and illegal means was meaningless to anarchists. For them, means were either coherent or in contrast with anarchist ends. The former case included all direct action, in a continuum that ranged from strikes to sabotage and from rallies to riots. Meaningful distinctions concerned sustainability and the way of “going to the people.” Rather than agitating for insurrection as in 1893–4, anarchist-socialists focused on sustainable struggles. Yet they placed no check on the escalation of class struggle. Their attitude towards the 1898 bread riots illustrate their view of the dynamic relation between conscious minorities and masses. As Malatesta argued in 1889, anarchists were to “take the viewpoint of the mass, reach down to its starting point, and thence push it forward.” This idea was put in practice in the anarchist-socialists’ inclusive participation in day-to-day labour struggles, where talk of anarchy was out of the question. At the same time, as *L’Agitazione* argued in February 1898, in “moments of general stir” the duty of the parties of action was to “fight at the people’s side, guide it, and defend its legitimate demands.” In the co-existence of such stances lay the originality of the “going to the people” idea. Unlike anti-organizationists, anarchist-socialists believed their place to be in collective struggles.

141 “Un altro sciopero.”

142 See note 129.
Hence, they took responsibility, as an advanced minority, to actively promote and direct those struggles in an anarchist direction. However, unlike Marxists, they did not expect to hold the reins of those struggles. The difference was as evident in 1893–4 as in 1897–8, when the socialist Filippo Turati tried to persuade the Milan workers in revolt to disband. In contrast, anarchist-socialists expected as much to be steered by collective struggles as to steer them.

In contrast to the stereotypical dichotomy between reformism and revolution, in 1897–8 Italian anarchist-socialists experimented with progress within the bourgeois society. They advocated and practiced direct action that was meant to be both reforming and conducive to revolution. The lesson of experience was that the room for such progress was narrower than Malatesta had assumed. The unbearable hardships imposed by capitalism upon the popular masses and the government’s willingness to crush any collective movement whose demands were not kept within the rules of the parliamentary game, even when those demands had no revolutionary character, thwarted the anarchist-socialists’ project. In the end, the choice between gradual reform and insurrection, which stereotypes arbitrarily ascribe to the theoretical foundations of anarchism, was thrust upon anarchists by the government’s repressiveness, epitomized by Bava Beccaris’ cannons in Milan. Insurrectionism received empirical corroboration from the events of 1897–8. Malatesta had time to ponder the lesson of experience, for in September 1898, after serving his prison term, he was sent to domicilio coatto. He regained freedom in April 1899, and then only by escaping from Lampedusa Island. The results of his further tactical elaboration found expression shortly thereafter in the pamphlet Contro la Monarchia, which opened a new phase in Malatesta’s anarchist struggle.

143 Tilly, 261–2.
Chapter VIII
“The Obstacle That Prevents Any Progress”: Malatesta’s pamphlet *Against the Monarchy* and his journey to North America, 1899–1900

The year between Malatesta’s regaining of freedom in April 1899 and his permanent return to London in April 1900 had the semblance of an intermission between two similar cycles. However, such cyclical appearance can be dispelled precisely by paying due attention to intermissions. The 1894–8 period of Malatesta’s life and the one of 1900–14 had the same superficial structure: years of exile in London, the return to Italy, the editing of a periodical in Ancona, an unsuccessful uprising after an approximately year-long stay, and Malatesta’s eventual escape back to his London refuge. Yet the key to uncovering the differences between one cycle and the next lies in the intervening and often neglected periods. Just as the apparently uneventful year following Malatesta’s return from Italy in 1894 was the time he laid the ground for his tactics of the next half decade, so Malatesta pamphlet *Contro la Monarchia* (Against the Monarchy), published in 1899, marked the beginning of a new tactical phase. Malatesta remained in London for the next thirteen years, during which he did not join any popular mobilization in Italy. The circumstance speaks to the short-term lack of success of his new tactics. At the same time, not only did the pamphlet have lasting consequences for the evolution of Malatesta’s anarchism, but the Red Week of 1914 followed the tactical model proposed in the 1899 pamphlet, revealing once more continuity where continuity is not immediately apparent.

Moreover, the period 1899–1900 was not only intellectually productive, but, unlike the 1894–5 intermission, it was eventful. For the most part it was occupied by an eight-month journey to the United States, which superficially looks like a diversion in Malatesta’s Europe-centred life of the previous decade, but was far from being one. Similarly to another transition period in Malatesta’s life, the year 1889 that linked his
stay in South America to his settling in London, the journey of 1899–1900 to North America was characterized by a set of themes that were steadily central to the mode of operation of Italian anarchism. The journey included three main events. First was a controversy over the editorship of *La Questione Sociale* of Paterson, which had received an anti-organizationist direction from its editor Giuseppe Ciancabilla. After his arrival Malatesta took on the editorship of the newspaper, and from its columns engaged in a debate on organization with the former editor. Then Malatesta undertook a speaking tour throughout the Eastern part of the United States. Finally, he accepted an invitation for another, shorter speaking tour in Cuba, recently passed from Spanish colonial domination to United States control. These events respectively provide the opportunity for systematic discussion of three themes that have run through the previous chapters: the controversy between Italian organizationist and anti-organizationists, which provided one of the trip’s motives; anarchist transnationalism, which was most notably represented by the Italian anarchists in North America; and the anarchists’ cross-national mutual involvement, most notably represented by Malatesta’s affinity with Spanish anarchism. The first theme sheds light on the practical issues that really mattered to anarchists, in contrast to charges of utopianism; the second theme is key to understanding the continuity of anarchist action; and the third theme is crucial to put the debate of national anarchist movements, such as the ones on organization in Italy and on collectivism versus communism in Spain, in a broader perspective. All such themes characterized not only Malatesta’s journey to North America, but his entire militant life.

Malatesta’s route to North America was a circuitous one, that took him first from Lampedusa Island to Tunisia, Malta, and London. Malatesta escaped from Lampedusa Island on the night between 26 and 27 April 1899, after seven months in prison and eight at *domicilio coatto*, where he was supposed to spend five years. According to Fabbri, what made the escape easier was that “Malatesta inspired such confidence in the director of the penal colony, that the latter granted all kinds of facilities to Malatesta and all the
political detainees, closing an eye on everything.... The preparations for the escape could be easily made." Fabbri mentions that Malatesta “got some help from the socialist Oddino Morgari, who once visited the colony in his capacity of Member of Parliament.” On the set night, “amidst the most complete obscurity and with a rough sea, Malatesta, comrade Vivoli from Florence, and a civil detainee swam to a fishing boat anchored some way out—with the Sicilian socialist Lovetere aboard—boarded it and set sail for Malta.”

Malatesta’s escape from Lampedusa Island illustrates the problems that trouble the historiography of anarchism even at the level of factual accuracy, as Vernon Richard points out in “Anarchism and the Historians.” This sort of event tends most easily to trigger romanticized accounts. An amusingly extreme but representative example comes from the memoirs of the Scotland Yard inspector Herbert T. Fitch, where Malatesta is transfigured into a Count of Monte Cristo: “He had managed to smuggle into his cell a small stone-breaking tool, with which he picked and wrenched a hole large enough to admit his body. One stormy night he clambered through it, made his way to the harbour, swam out to a tiny fishing smack which was riding at anchor, and succeeded in navigating it himself as far as Malta in a sea in which practised seamen refused to put out in pursuit because of its danger.” On the other hand, accounts such as Fabbri’s tend to be reticent or incomplete. The emphasis on odd figures such as the director of the Lampedusa penal colony looks like a diversion from a full account of people and events, for reasons of discretion. In contrast to simplistic or romanticized accounts, a closer look at the events illustrates the working of the anarchist network.

1 Prefect of Girgenti to Ministry of Interior, 9 May 1900, CPC, b. 2949, ACS; Luigi Fabbri, Vida de Malatesta, 142–4.

To begin with, the loose surveillance, and even cooperation, by the penal colony’s director was not simply a matter of personal relationship with Malatesta. Oddino Morgari related years later how things went. Malatesta, made aware that the director could be corrupted, asked for financial help from Giovanni Bergamasco, a participant of the 1891 Capolago congress who had money at his disposal. Bergamasco had been himself at domicilio coatto, possibly at Lampedusa with Malatesta for a short time. In turn, Bergamasco, who had generously supported the socialist newspaper Avanti! in the past, contacted its administrator, Morgari, asking for aid in delivering the money to Malatesta. Morgari was eager to help, and visited Malatesta during a tour of the domicilio coatto islands in February–March 1899. At a meeting in Lampedusa with Malatesta and the director the money was delivered and the agreement made.³

Malatesta’s plan was to escape to Tunisia, then to Malta, with London as final destination. The plan required organization, and it must have been prepared for some time. More than once Malatesta’s attempts to approach Greek captains of sponge-fishing vessels had been reported to the colony director and reports about Malatesta’s plans had reached the Ministry of Interior. Eventually, on 27 April 1899 a police inspector arrived on Lampedusa to transfer Malatesta, but he could only ascertain that Malatesta and two other detainees had escaped the night before. It is not clear who made the arrangement with the vessel that took Malatesta to Tunisia. According to information from the Italian Consul in Marseille, a sum of money was paid to the owner of the sponge-fishing vessel by Nicoló Converti and Nicoló Ponzio, two Italian anarchists resident in Tunis. Converti

³ Oddino Morgari, “Come conobbi gli anarchici,” Almanacco Socialista 1934: 55–60. On Bergamasco see the following items in CPC, b. 516, fs. 76787, ACS: “Cenno biografico al giorno 21 Giugno anno 1894”; Prefect of Naples to Ministry of Interior, 17 September 1898; telegram from Prefect of Naples to Ministry of Interior, 22 October 1898; Ministry of Interior to Prefect of Girgenti, 24 October 1898; see also Antonioli, Dizionario biografico, s. v. “Bergamasco Giovanni.”
later admitted to holding a correspondence with Malatesta during the latter’s sojourn in Lampedusa, but he predictably denied discussing any escape plan.⁴

Malatesta and the other two fugitives disembarked on the shore of Sousse, in Tunisia. Being outside of the Italian soil meant by no means being safe. Tunisia was then a French protectorate. Three years earlier, six anarchists, including Galileo Palla, Francesco Pezzi, and Giovanni Bergamasco, had escaped from domicilio coatto to Tunisia. Breaking a tradition of granting the right of asylum, the French-Tunisian authorities had turned the fugitives back to the Italian government.⁵ Given this precedent, it was crucial for Malatesta and his comrades to keep their presence in Tunisia as secret as possible. A plan had been laid out in advance for this purpose. Anarchists in Paris were assigned the task of spreading the rumor, after the escape, that Malatesta was safe on the British soil of Gibraltar. The rumour caught on well: by 5 May the news of Malatesta in Gibraltar appeared in Le Temps of Paris, and got as far as New York, where it was published in the Evening Sun of the same day. Malatesta confirmed to be the source of the false news in a letter to Max Nettlau: “The news that I was in Gibraltar was false. I had it spread myself, because I was still in danger of being arrested and I wanted to sidetrack the government.” On 7 May Malatesta and Vivoli embarked for Malta.⁶

The organization of Malatesta’s stay in Malta and his passage to London were taken care of by a circle of militants linked to Giuseppe De Felice Giuffrida. Though in Malta

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⁴ Amedeo Boschi, Ricordi del domicilio coatto (Turin: Edizioni “Seme Anarchico,” 1954), 53–58; for government sources see the following items in CPC, b. 2949, ACS: telegram from Prefect of Milan to Ministry of Interior, 4 April 1899; Prefect of Girgenti to Ministry of Interior, 25 April and 9 May 1899; Italian Consul in Marseille to Ministry of Interior, 6 May 1899. On Converti, see Converti’s interrogation by police officer Mattei, Tunis, s.d., CPC, b. 2949, ACS.


⁶ “Errico Malatesta,” La Questione Sociale (Paterson) 5, no. 113 (27 May 1899); Malatesta to Max Nettlau, London, 1 July 1899, Max Nettlau Papers, file no. 197, IISG; note from “Direction de la Sûreté Publique” of Tunis to Italian Consul, s.d., CPC, b. 2949, ACS.
Malatesta was finally safe from arrest, foreigners could stay undisturbed for no longer than eight days, after which police would summon and examine them, as well as require that a deposit be paid and security be given by a Malta citizen. In order to preserve Malatesta’s safety, Filippo Lovetere, a Palermo lawyer who had been involved in the Fasci, placed him under the care of a friend, an actor who was then in Malta with his theatre company. Eventually, the actor’s help proved unnecessary. Two friends of De Felice Giuffrida, residents of Malta, arranged a passage to London for Malatesta before the eight days went by. On May 14 Malatesta boarded a ship due to reach London in ten days. On 26 May the Italian Ambassador in London reported to the Ministry of Interior: “I am informed by the English Police that the registered anarchist Malatesta arrived here on the 24th of the current month, and took domicile at his old address....”

In the light of the above, one can better appreciate the inaccuracy and deceptiveness of accounts such as Woodcock’s, especially for their implicit outlook on anarchism: “One stormy day [Malatesta] and three of his comrades seized a boat and put out to sea in defiance of the high waves. They were lucky enough to be picked up by a ship on its way to Malta, whence Malatesta sailed to the United States.” In contrast to such pervasive and obstinate emphasis on spontaneism and lack of organization percolating down even to personal events, Malatesta’s escape reveals the existence of a complex solidarity network, extending beyond anarchist circles, and capable of effective concerted action. Malatesta’s escape was not an isolated episode. Within a year, another prominent figure of Italian anarchism, Luigi Galleani, escaped from Pantelleria Island, following a familiar

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plan. As Ugo Fedeli relates, “the boat that carried him had Tunisia as its destination. He disembarked in Sousse, whence, with a false passport in the name of Antonio Valenza, he embarked again... and reached first Malta, then Alexandria in Egypt. This was the old itinerary of the refugees of Italian Risorgimento.” The money to fund Galleani’s escape was collected among London exiles by Emidio Recchioni, a co-editor of *L’Agitazione* who was at *domicilio coatto* with Galleani and migrated to London in 1899.

The level of organization and effective action that could be reached in such undertakings was a function of both the resources that anarchists under restraint could call upon through their connections, and, conversely, the resources that autonomous initiatives of solidarity from outside summoned in their favour. Both variables were highest for prominent figures such as Malatesta and Galleani. Arguably, those two complementary factors combined into a selective mechanism whereby leaders were helped first in emergency situations such as the 1898 repression. Of course, “leadership” is to be intended as an informal, spontaneous acknowledgment on the part of anarchist militants, not a formal, hierarchical relationship. However, such an acknowledgment existed and had consequences. Figures such as Malatesta and Galleani were considered, and arguably were, especially important to the anarchist movement. Accordingly, their freedom was especially valued by their comrades. In brief, spontaneous, decentralized activities could effectively self-organize into a complex and oriented whole, such as is usually associated with centralized planning and hierarchical party discipline.

During his brief stay in London between the end of May 1899 and the beginning of August, when he left for America, Malatesta published the pamphlet *Contro la Monarchia* (Against the Monarchy). Since the pamphlet bore the date August 1899 and Malatesta set sail for the United States on August 5, its completion must have

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10 Antonioli, *Dizionario biografico*, s. v. “Recchioni, Emidio.”
immediately preceded Malatesta’s departure. The pamphlet, in which the overthrow of the monarchy was set as a priority for a revolutionary strategy in Italy, marked the beginning of a new tactical phase that included Malatesta’s next exile in London upon his return from America. That exile lasted thirteen years, during which Malatesta did not participate in any popular mobilization in Italy, a circumstance that speaks to the lack of success of his call for an anti-monarchical front. However, the pamphlet contains important ideas that not only had lasting consequences in the evolution of Malatesta’s anarchism, but also shed light on events that occurred a decade and a half later, upon his next return to Italy.

The pamphlet began with a brief overview of the state of oppression in which Italy languished. The analysis was framed in general terms that could be agreed upon by all the “progressive people” addressed in the pamphlet’s subtitle. Little mention was made of class antagonisms and only passing references to government as an instrument of capitalism. Rather, the focus was on the contrast between national interests and the Savoy monarchy, which, he argued, had lost legitimacy and turned into an autocratic regime that promoted disastrous policies and suppressed the civil liberties “that cost so much martyrdom and blood to our fathers.” Malatesta pointed out the endemic poverty of the working people, “the increasing hardships of the middle classes,” and the inability of parliament “to safeguard even the interests of the class it represents.” Malatesta’s overview insisted on national rather than class interests, with references to “oppressive taxes,” a customs system that favoured certain classes at the expense of “the mass of citizens and national production,” “useless public works,” “huge armaments,” “pompous politics,” and “alliances imposed by dynastic interests in contrast to the national sympathies and interests.” In brief, Malatesta argued, Italy found itself in a situation that

11 [Errico Malatesta], Contro la Monarchia: Appello a tutti gli uomini di progresso ([London], 1899); “Piccola Posta,” La Questione Sociale (Paterson) 5, no. 113 (27 May 1899): 4; Malatesta to Max Nettlau, London, 1 July and 4 August 1899, Max Nettlau Papers, file no. 197.
could not last without dragging the country “in such a state of abjection as to make it forever incapable of raising itself up again to the dignity of a civilized life.”

Then Malatesta set out to demonstrate that the tyranny could only be overthrown by insurrection, arguing that “it is a general characteristic of the ruling classes to persist so much more in wrongdoing as they are threatened with ruin,” and that “the monarchy can count on nothing but the sword, and to the sword it will commit its own defence and that of the class that has solidarized with it.” “Hence,” Malatesta argued, “it is a matter of opposing force to force….” In contrast to so many past uprisings that were easily repressed and offered pretexts for a ferocious reaction because of their lack of preparation, coordination, and clarity of objective, it was necessary to match the opponent’s strength with equal strength in order to make a successful insurrection.

At this point Malatesta issued his appeal for a common insurrectionary front among all the enemies of the monarchy. In Italy there were various parties, which all sincerely aimed for the common good, but radically differed in their judgments about the causes and remedies of social evils. However, given that they had a common enemy in the monarchy, while none was strong enough alone to overthrow it, the common interest was to unite “in order to get rid of this obstacle that prevents any progress and any improvement.” No party was to give up ideas, hopes, and autonomous organization to merge into a single formation. Mutual differences were too serious for that. However, differences need not prevent distinct parties from uniting for a specific aim of common interest. Furthermore, since popular rage, to which all subversive parties had a duty to contribute, was bound to break out anyway, “would it not be a huge mistake to act each by oneself outside of any agreement, running the risk of paralyzing each other to the advantage of the common enemy, instead of seeking, by concerted action, to secure the material victory that is the necessary condition of any transformation of the present state of affairs?”
Afterwards, “if all will have the respect for freedom that they claim to have, and will grant to everyone the right and the means to propagate and experiment with their own ideas, freedom will yield what it can yield, with the triumph of those methods and those institutions that best meet the current material and moral conditions.” At the very least “the fall of the monarchy will still represent the suppression of the worst enemy, and the struggle will restart, only in more humane and civilized conditions.” The last part of the pamphlet outlined the multiple tasks that a successful insurrection posed to its participants, and strongly advocated tactical coordination and military preparation.

The propounded tactics were not new, and were subsumed by the wider theme, frequent in Malatesta’s writings, of the anarchists’ attitude toward the “kindred parties” of socialists and republicans. The Capolago resolutions of 1891 already envisaged a possible cooperation with the republicans “in deeds of a revolutionary character” involving no “compromise on the Party’s principles.” In his letter of March 1896 to Converti, Malatesta speculated again about a similar tactical alliance: “If republicans were willing to take action, it seems to me that we could do no better than massing with them. Once the sleep into which Italy seems to have fallen is broken, we could raise our banner again and continue the struggle in our own way and for our own ideals.” In January 1897 Malatesta explained his ideas about “the tolerance towards the kindred parties” in La Questione Sociale of Paterson. He expressed disapproval for intolerance and exclusivism and remarked that tolerance should not be confused with abdication. Parties must separately organize, each with its own programme. However, “there are innumerable circumstances in which giving priority to narrow party interests would be a crime, and in which the hearty cooperation of all those who aspire to human emancipation is a duty.”

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Malatesta's proposal reaffirmed all his tactical tenets: insurrectionism, inclusiveness, coherence between means and ends, and anarchist autonomy. In this respect, one can see continuity with the tactics of 1897–8. Yet the proposal represented a dramatic tactical turn, thus illustrating how his tactical tenets delimited a coherent but broad space within which different tactics were possible. The import of such a turn is thrown into relief by a comparison between Malatesta's respective justifications for his tactics of 1897 and 1899. In 1897 he distanced himself from the Mazzinian illusion of a short-term revolution accomplished by a minority, which had made anarchists averse to any long and patient work of popular preparation and organization; he pointed out the pitfalls of the past focus on enrolling forces for the armed insurrection; he emphasized that the barricades erected without a certain consciousness in the people can only lead to the replacement of one government with another, and that such a consciousness could only develop gradually; and argued that bourgeois institutions could yield much before reaching the point of crisis. In 1899 an insurrection to topple the monarchical institution was presented as an absolute and immediate priority, in a country where "every illusion of peaceful progress has become impossible." Accordingly, all enemies of the monarchy were called to a work of tactical and military preparation concerning the provision of weapons and agreements on how to distribute military tasks, ensure simultaneous action, etc.

Such a radical change of perspective had been determined by the events of 1898 in Italy. One can gauge the distance between expectations and reality from Malatesta's article on the First of May 1897. After lamenting the present state of the Italian workers' movement and pointing out the anarchists' past mistakes, he described the long-term, constant, daily work to which he called all anarchists. "This is what we promise to our comrades," he stated, "and this is what we demand of them." Then he concluded: "If we

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13 See chapter 7, note 76.
all earnestly undertake that work, the next First of May will find us in quite different
conditions.”¹⁴ Malatesta kept his promise during the following year, obtaining a
favourable response not only from the majority of the Italian anarchist movement, but
also outside of it. The First of May 1898 indeed found Malatesta and the Italian
anarchists in a different condition than a year before, but, ironically, not quite in the
hoped-for direction. At that date Malatesta was in jail, and a few days later, the heavy
artillery of General Bava Beccaris killed hundreds of people in the streets of Milan.
Arrests and convictions followed by the thousand, and Italian anarchists, who had hoped
to “civilly live in broad daylight,” had to live in large numbers at domicilio coatto for
long months. In brief, Malatesta’s hope for a steady growth of the anarchist movement,
based upon a long and patient work within the workers’ movement, was irreparably
shattered. If the earlier experiment of 1897–8 has been characterized as innovative,
progressive, and forward-looking, its ultimate failure does not generally receive equal
emphasis. Likewise, the conviction of Malatesta and his comrades is often referred to as a
political victory, because the charge of criminal association was dropped. Still, Malatesta,
who had made continuity of action and sustainability the key tenets of his new tactics,
was put in a condition of inactivity for fifteen months, as many of his comrades were, and
would return to Italy only fifteen years later. In such conditions, one could have held on
to the same tactics and restarted from the beginning, but somehow it would have been a
self-defeating move, as the very purpose of such tactics was to achieve a steady and
continuous growth.

Instead of cyclically and unchangingly repeating the same mistakes, as the
historiographical stereotype would have it, Malatesta learned the lesson of experience.
His changed outlook was illustrated by the article “Il compito degli anarchici” (The

¹⁴ “Il 1º Maggio” Agitiamoci per il Socialismo Anarchico (Ancona) single issue in lieu of no. 8 of
L’Agitazione (1 May 1897).
anarchists' task), of December 1899, which asked the classic question: “What is to be
done?” The best tactics would be to systematically undertake the propaganda of anarchist
ideas, “to kindle the spirit of association and resistance in the proletarians with all
possible means and to arouse in them ever growing demands,” in an incremental and
continuous process, eventually giving anarchists enough strength to rise up autonomously
and win. However, several obstacles intervened. Propaganda could not progress
indefinitely in a given environment, for a point of saturation was always reached, at
which only a transformation of the environment itself could bring new social strata into
the reach of effective propaganda. The same reasons limited the effectiveness of workers’
organization. A strong anarchist organization found an obstacle in the lack of means and
in government repression. And even admitting such an indefinite progress as theoretically
possible, “every day, and well before we get to have that strength, political situations
arise, in which we are obliged to intervene, not only on pain of renouncing the
advantages that can be obtained from them, but also to lose any influence on the people,
to destroy part of the work already done, and to make the future work more difficult.”

Thus, the problem was to find a way of determining the modifications of the
environment needed by the progress of propaganda, “and to profit from the struggles
among the various political parties and of any occasions that present themselves, without
giving up any part of our programme.” At that point Malatesta discussed the short-term
scenario of an insurrection against the monarchy, the result of which would certainly not
be anarchist socialism, asking, “should we take part in preparing and undertaking this
insurrection? And how?” Malatesta warned against the opposite errors of abstaining from
any tasks short of the full anarchist goal, and of temporarily setting aside anarchist goals
to merge with the republicans in pursuit of immediate aims. In advocating participation,
Malatesta reiterated that, for anarchists, republic and monarchy were equivalent, for all
governments equally tended to extend their power. Yet the weaker a government was, or
equivalently, the stronger resistance it encountered, the greater freedom and opportunities
for progress were. By contributing to the fall of the monarchy, anarchists could oppose the constitution or consolidation of a republic, remain armed and refuse obedience to the new government, as well as make attempts at expropriation and libertarian organization of society. "We could," he concluded, "prevent the revolution from halting after its first step, and the popular energy just awakened by the insurrection from subsiding again."\(^{15}\)

The article contained references to the context of 1897–8, such as the observation about the tactics of "kindling the spirit of association and resistance in the proletarians with all possible means and to arouse in them ever growing demands." Significantly, Malatesta was now casting doubts on the possibility of indefinitely extending propaganda and workers’ organization within the present social context. The purported reasons made equally evident reference to 1898. The extension of anarchist organization, even when aimed at propaganda, was limited by government repression, as the events had demonstrated. And, at any rate, social unrest independently arose, in which anarchists were obliged to intervene, as had been the case with the bread riots.

In what light should Malatesta’s new tactical turn be seen? Giampietro Berti regards it as a return to the past: "Now, after the events of 1898, in his view the classical insurrectionary perspective seemed to present itself again with renewed vigour. The barricades in Milan, nearly a revival of the similar ones of fifty years earlier, seemed to make the idea of an immediate and violent revolution current again; most of all they seemed to corroborate the conviction that the dominant class, in the face of the possibility of losing its power, was ready for anything." Berti further remarks: "Although it was reaffirmed ‘that republic and monarchy are equivalent’ emphasis was placed on the necessity for the anarchists to participate in a popular action, so as not to leave the anti-monarchy movement in the hands of socialists, republicans, and bourgeois democrats."

\(^{15}\) "Il compito degli anarchici," *La Questione Sociale* (Paterson) 5, n. s., no. 13 (2 December 1899).
What makes the pamphlet interesting, for Berti, is that "it put back on the agenda an insurrectionary hypothesis that seems almost written for the days of 1848."\(^{16}\)

Berti’s analysis, which repeats the stereotypical image of Malatesta as a nostalgic proponent of an obsolete insurrectionary model, is utterly misleading. First of all, there is as much justification, or arbitrariness, in linking Malatesta’s insurrectionary tactics to the past uprisings of 1848 as to the future capture of the Winter Palace in October 1917, which was indeed an insurrection undertaken by a coalition of forces. Regarding Malatesta as backward or forward-looking is a matter of choice. More importantly, Malatesta’s proposal was not a revival of the “classical” insurrectionary perspective. It could not be a revival, simply because Malatesta had never abandoned the insurrectionary perspective, as he kept reasserting even in 1897, though he did not posit it as an immediate objective. At the same time, the current perspective on insurrection implied a break with the past. In contrast to both Berti’s claim that the barricades in Milan revamped the idea of an immediate revolution, and to the anarchists’ past belief in such a prospect, for Malatesta those barricades had a totally different meaning: they proved that the linear path to revolution he had earlier envisioned was problematic. In contrast to his hope of 1897 that anarchist could gradually build revolutionary strength within the present society, the key point he was now making was that such a process was bound to be interrupted long before it could come to a hoped-for completion, precisely because popular agitations such as those of Milan would inevitably intervene before the conditions for a truly revolutionary outcome were reached.

Malatesta’s tactical turn was neither a return to the past, nor a rejection of the ideas recently advocated in *L’Agitazione*. In fact, the key intuitions that had led to the new tactics of 1897 were preserved and further articulated in the new tactical turn of 1899. The proposal for an insurrectionary alliance was an instance of Malatesta’s inclusive

attitude toward “kindred parties” that had been prominent in the anarchist-socialist tactics of 1897–8. Furthermore, Malatesta had maintained that the barricades erected “without a certain consciousness in the people can only lead to the replacement of one government with another.” Now, Malatesta was advocating insurrection in the short-term. Yet his earlier point was not forgotten. In fact, he made clear that the next insurrection would not result in anarchist socialism. In 1897 he had argued that people’s consciousness “can only develop gradually, through the daily struggle, which cannot be the one fought on the barricades.” Now, the purpose of the insurrection was precisely to remove the obstacles in the way of such a gradual process, and to bring about a transformation of the environment that could bring new social strata into the reach of propaganda. In 1897, Malatesta had claimed that bourgeois institutions could still yield much before reaching the point of crisis. Now, it was still not a matter of abolishing bourgeois institutions altogether, but of replacing the monarchy with less repressive bourgeois institutions.

Though Berti seems to regard Malatesta’s claim that republic and monarchy were equivalent as paradoxical or contradictory, Malatesta explained clearly how they could be both equivalent and different in the very paragraph in which he made that claim. They were equivalent from the point of view of rulers, which all had an equal tendency to extend their power as much as possible. They were different because rulers, against their will, could be stronger or weaker depending on the degree of resistance they encountered. In turn, different degrees of freedom and opportunity for progress could be found in different societies, depending on the rulers’ degree of weakness. What really made the difference between Malatesta’s ideas of 1897 and 1899 was the lesson of experience, especially the realization that not even the conditions for sustainable struggles for simple economic improvements existed in Italy. As he remarked in *Contro la Monarchia*: “To put an end to an agitation that, after all, amounted to unarmed demonstrations and small-scale riots, which the abolition of customs and few other insignificant concessions would
have easily calmed down, the government did not hesitate to massacre citizens by the hundred.”

In sum, Malatesta returned to the idea of insurrection by moving further away from the old idea of insurrection that was equated with revolution. Instead, the gap between insurrection and revolution became wider. Short-term insurrectionary prospects were contrasted with the long-term prospects of an anarchist revolution. Insurrection came to be incorporated into the gradual process that led from the present society to anarchy. This led Malatesta to the thoroughly novel and unconventional idea that the next step in the process towards the anarchist revolution was a non-anarchist insurrection. This contrasted with the oft-repeated claim that “the revolution will be anarchist or will not be at all,” against which Malatesta would still be arguing in 1922.¹⁷ It was not just a matter of supporting a non-anarchist insurrection that was likely to happen anyway, as Malatesta somewhat deceivingly made it appear in his article of December 1899, probably because he was wary of publicly revealing such plans as his own. Rather it was a matter for anarchists to promote such an insurrection as a priority, as Malatesta actually did in Contrò la Monarchia, which had been published anonymously. Furthermore, commentators have often emphasized the novelty of Malatesta’s tactics, by pointing out his realism in proposing tactics suitable for anarchism as a minoritarian movement. However, it should be remarked that his proposal was not simply a sort of tactical makeshift solution for low-ebb times. Malatesta’s claim was much stronger and crucial: anarchists were essentially and necessarily bound to be a minority within bourgeois society. If anarchists were to stick to their own principles and tactics—as Malatesta was adamant they should—crises were bound to happen long before they could become majoritarian. These would not be abortive attempts, but rather crises that would bring about a freer society without immediately bringing about the anarchist society, yet. In

this conception, one can see the seed of the idea of “anarchist gradualism” that Malatesta would fully express a quarter of a century later.

Such gradualist awareness was clearly expressed a few months after _Contro la Monarchia_ and a week after Malatesta’s article on the anarchists’ task, in the article “Verso l’anarchia” (Toward anarchy). This article has rightly become one of Malatesta’s most reprinted and translated articles. In contrast to the prejudice, traceable even in their own ranks, that anarchists expected anarchy to come with one stroke, and to the associated belief that anarchy thus conceived was impossible, Malatesta argued that the essence of anarchy was that it could not be forcibly imposed, but it could only triumph when all human beings had developed an anarchist conscience—a process which could only happen gradually. Hence, “anarchy cannot come but little by little, slowly, but surely, growing in intensity and extension”; “it is not a matter of achieving anarchy today, tomorrow, or within ten centuries, but of walking toward anarchy today, tomorrow, and always.” The problem lay in knowing how to choose the path that approached the ideal’s realization, without confusing real progress with hypocritical reforms. Though anarchists might not be able to overthrow the present government, or to prevent another one from arising in its place, every weakening of authority that they could achieve would be a progress toward anarchy. Anarchists could not soon abolish private property, and perhaps they would still not be able to in the next insurrectionary movement. Still, every victory against the bosses, every decrease of exploitation, would be a step on the road of anarchy.¹⁸

Even after the right of force had disappeared and the means of production had been placed under the producers’ management, anarchy would only be for those who wanted it, and only in those things that they could accomplish without the cooperation of the non-anarchists. Anarchists did not intend to destroy anything but what could be replaced,

as such replacement became gradually possible. As bad as collective services such as food distribution, mail, and schools were presently, they could only be destroyed to the extent that something better could be put in their place. In sum, “to arrive at anarchy, having the material force to make a revolution is not enough; it is also essential that the workers, grouped according to the various branches of production, become able to ensure by themselves the functioning of social life, without the need of capitalists or governments.” Ultimately, anarchist ideas were “the experimental system brought from the field of research to that of social realization.”

Malatesta expounded these ideas while he was in the United States, during that “intermission” between two cycles of his struggle. In fact, far from being a temporary disengagement from the anarchist movement in Italy, Malatesta’s journey was motivated precisely by issues of crucial importance to that movement. Such importance can be appreciated by giving due attention to two fundamental aspects of Italian anarchism: the centrality of the controversy on organization; and the role of the movement’s transnational segment. Both aspects were key to Malatesta’s trip, which also provides evidence of how cross-national ties among worldwide-mobile militants of different countries were upheld over time. As Fabbri relates, Malatesta was invited to the United States by his old Spanish friend Pedro Esteve, who lived in Paterson, New Jersey. Esteve tried to contact Malatesta with urgency, as soon as news of Malatesta’s escape spread. In the editorial mail column of *La Questione Sociale* of 27 May we find the following message: “London — E. M. [Errico Malatesta] — Esteve wrote to your address and to that of K. [probably Kropotkin] He hopes for a prompt response.” About a month later, the project had already taken shape. On 1 July Malatesta wrote to Max Nettlau: “I might spend a few months in the United States for a propaganda tour. If the project materializes, I will leave in 4–6 weeks.” The editorship of *La Questione Sociale*, of which Esteve was

19 Ibid.
the typesetter, was a key issue that prompted Malatesta to undertake his trip. At that time *La Questione Sociale* was directed by Giuseppe Ciancabilla, who had come from Europe nine months earlier and had given an anti-organizationist direction to the periodical. The import of the question for Malatesta, as well as for Esteve, can be fully appreciated in the context of the situation in which Italian anarchism found itself in the homeland at that time.\(^{20}\)

The aftermath of the 1898 riots in Italy was one of those period in which the role of the transnational anarchist press became especially crucial. The anarchist press had been completely silenced in Italy, and worldwide there existed only two Italian language periodicals at the time of Malatesta’s trip to America: *La Questione Sociale* of Paterson and *L’Avvenire* of Buenos Aires.\(^{21}\) In this context, one can understand how serious it was for Malatesta that during his captivity one of the two surviving voices of Italian anarchism worldwide had been given an anti-organizationist direction. The editorship of *La Questione Sociale* had been contentious for some time after Ciancabilla took it on. A meeting of February 1899 declared that *La Questione Sociale* was “the organ of all comrades in the United States and outside of Italy,” and, upon Ciancabilla’s proposal, adopted the formula that the periodical be an open forum for discussion, in which both organizationist and anti-organizationist tendencies would have a voice.\(^{22}\) However, discussion in the Paterson group continued. After Malatesta’s arrival in Paterson, the editorship issue was put again on the agenda and settled relatively quickly. The editing group “Diritto all’Esistenza” (Right to exist) called a meeting in which the inclusive open


\(^{21}\) Data from Bettini.

\(^{22}\) “Avviso importante,” *La Questione Sociale* (Paterson) 5, no. 96 (28 January 1899); *La Questione Sociale* (Paterson) 5, no. 97 (4 February 1899): 1; “La Riunione di West Hoboken,” *La Questione Sociale* (Paterson) 5, no. 99 (18 February 1899).
forum approach was rejected as unsatisfactory. It was acknowledged that effective propaganda required a clear direction and the vast majority of the group declared itself for organizationist tactics, such as creating anarchist federations. Ciancabilla resigned the editorship, and with a small group of dissidents he founded a new periodical, *L’Aurora*. On 9 September the new series of *La Questione Sociale* started under Malatesta’s editorship. Significantly, the first issue of the new series started the publication of an anarchist programme, which was one of the most contentious subjects between the supporters and the opponents of organization.

In the wake of the split at *La Questione Sociale* came one of those episodes that constitute juicy opportunities for historians interested more in colourful than in insightful accounts of anarchism. During a meeting Malatesta was shot in a leg by an anti-organizationist opponent, fortunately without serious consequences. In George Woodcock’s account the episode sums up Malatesta’s whole journey to North America:

> ... Malatesta sailed to the United States. There his life once again took a sensational turn, which this time almost brought it to an end. He became involved in a dispute with the individualist anarchists of Paterson, who insisted that anarchism implied no organization at all, and that every man must act solely on his impulses. At last, in one noisy debate, the individual impulse of a certain comrade directed him to shoot Malatesta, who was badly wounded but obstinately refused to name his assailant. The would-be assassin fled to California, and Malatesta eventually recovered: in 1900 he set sail for London. [...]

The detail that “the would-be assassin fled to California” indicates that Woodcock gives credit to Max Nomad’s faulty account that identifies the assailant with Ciancabilla, who did eventually move to California but had no part in the shooting. The controversy

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23 “Separazione,” “Cioè che sarà il nostro giornale,” “Idee e tattica [dichiarazioni dei dissidenti],” *La Questione Sociale* (Paterson) 5, no. 127 (2 September 1899).

24 “Il nostro programma,” *La Questione Sociale* (Paterson) 5, no. 1, n.s. (9 September 1899).

25 Woodcock, 330.

26 Nomad, 30.
between Malatesta and Ciancabilla largely owes its notoriety to the sensational character of the associated events, that is Malatesta's shooting and the bitter personal character that the controversy eventually took on. However, its real historical value is that, before turning sour, the debate was an articulate exposition of the arguments of organizationists and anti-organizationists as made by two brilliant advocates. Therefore, as Malatesta's debate of two years before with Merlino on anarchism and parliamentarianism, the debate with Ciancabilla provides an opportunity to review those opposing arguments and systematically discuss Malatesta's views on the central issue of organization. This was the object of the most heated, divisive, and long-lasting controversy of Italian anarchism. The issue was discussed in Malatesta's writings for over four decades, from 1889 down to 1927–30, when Malatesta, the life-long champion of anarchist organisation in the face of charges of authoritarianism, critiqued the authoritarian content of the Platform, the model of anarchist organization advocated by Nestor Makhno and other Russian anarchists.

The crux of the controversy between organizationists and anti-organizationists was whether anarchists should organize in any institutional form. As Ciancabilla explained in parting from La Questione Sociale, anti-organizationists claimed that an aim "spontaneously directs towards itself the efforts of those who struggle to the same end, without this implying the binding acceptance of a common programme of struggle, which would be impossible to follow without mutual concessions and curtailments by individuals with diverse temperaments and ways of thinking, viewing, and feeling, for the sake of complying with a majority." For them, "party" meant a sect. Admission, excommunication, and exclusivism were its fatal consequences.27 Similarly, Luigi Galleani, the most influential representative of anti-organizationism, argued in 1925 that

27 "Idee e tattica [dichiarazioni dei dissidenti]," La Questione Sociale (Paterson) 5, no. 127 (2 September 1899).
“a political party, any political party, has its programme, i.e. its constitutional charter; in assemblies of group representatives, it has its parliament; in its management, its boards and executive committees, it has its government.” In short, it was “a true hierarchy, no matter how disguised, in which all stages are connected by a single bond, discipline, which punishes infractions with sanctions that go from censure to excommunication, to expulsion.”

In contrast, organizationists argued for the creation of anarchist federations. In the three-part article “L’organizzazione” of June 1897—his most comprehensive work on the subject—Malatesta argued that it was only natural that individuals sharing a common goal “make agreements, join forces, distribute tasks, and take all those appropriate measures to reach the goal that constitutes the object of an organization. In contrast, he argued, isolation meant “dooming oneself to powerlessness, wasting one’s energy in small, ineffective acts, and soon losing faith in the goal and falling into complete inaction.”

Organizationists emphasized that their model of organization had no authoritarian element, for nobody had the right to impose one’s will, or committed oneself to resolutions that one had not previously accepted. Members only had the moral duty to see through their commitments and to do nothing that would contradict the accepted programme. Within those boundaries, individual members could express any opinion and use any tactics.

The controversy was rooted in opposite perspectives about the relationship between individual and society. The fundamental value of anti-organizationists was individual autonomy, the ability to only act in conformity with one’s own will. “We aspire to realize the autonomy of the individual within the freedom of association,” Galleani wrote, “the

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29 “L’organizzazione,” parts 1–3, L’Agitazione (Ancona) 1, no. 13 (4 June 1897); no. 14 (11 June 1897); no. 15 (18 June 1897).
independence of his thought, of his life, of his development, of his destiny, freedom from violence, from caprice and from the domination of the majority, as well as of various minorities." Anti-organizationists, Galleani continued, referred to libertarian communism as a way “to find an economic ubi consistam [where should I stand] in which this political autonomy of the individual may find an enlightened and happy reality.” Obviously, they were aware that individual autonomy was limited in the bourgeois society. However, for them this was one more reason for treasuring such autonomy in the sphere of political action. In contrast to stereotypical representations, anti-organizationists neither advocated acting solely on one’s impulses, nor egoism, that is, the exclusive concern for their own individual interest. On the contrary, they were thoroughly egalitarian and advocates of solidarity. Likewise, the distinction between anti-organizationist and organizationists should not be confused, as is frequent, with more popular distinctions, such as between individualists and communists. The two most influential anti-organizationists argued otherwise: Ciancabilla claimed that individualism and anarchism were contradictory terms, while Galleani preferred to argue that between communism and individualism there was no contradiction; at any rate, neither rejected communism.30

In contrast to the anti-organizationist emphasis on individual autonomy, organizationists considered association the fundamental human trait. For Malatesta, organization was a necessity of life: “organization” and “society” were nearly synonyms. The isolated man was so impotent that he could not even live the life of a brute. Having to unite with other men, or rather finding himself already united as a consequence of the species’ prior evolution, he had three options: submit to others and be a slave; impose one’s will on others and be an authority; or live in brotherly agreement for the greatest

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welfare of all, thus being an associate. For Malatesta, “no one can get out of this necessity.” The fact that present institutions were authoritarian was not to obscure that they addressed social needs: “all institutions that oppress and exploit man had their origin in a real need of human society.” The anarchist society was at the same time the society where organization was at its highest, and authority at its lowest. Significantly, Malatesta added: “if we believed that there can be no organization without authority, we would rather be authoritarian, because we would still prefer authority, which hinders and aggrieves life, to disorganization, which makes it impossible.” Thus, for Malatesta man was unavoidably a social being, always immersed in a web of social relations.

However, Malatesta shunned holistic outlooks on society. For him, two models of organization existed, corresponding to two concepts of human society. All acknowledge, he argued, that man needs man, and that society is the result of this need. However, some maintain “that the aim of association and cooperation among men is to contribute to the well-being and improvement of ‘society,’ and that the individual good must be sacrificed to the ‘collective good.’” This view was based on an analogy with complex organisms, in which “the work of cells and of the various organs is done to the service of the entire organism, which alone has a conscience and is properly capable of pleasure and pain.” Since, in human society, “each individual has a conscience, while no collective conscience exists, the ‘collective good’ of which the abovementioned theorists talk means, in practice, the good of those who rule.” In contrast, “others think that the aim of society must be the well-being and self-development of all its members, and hence that all must have equal rights and equal means, whereas nobody can oblige someone else to

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32 “I nostri propositi.”

33 “L’organizzazione,” part 1.
do anything against their own will."

Missing the distinction between the sociological and methodological planes is a source of confusion about Malatesta’s view. For example, Sharif Gemie contrasts Bakunin’s claim that the “isolated individual” is a fiction and society an “eternal reality,” with Malatesta’s claim that “the real thing is man, the individual.” For Gemie the two claims are mutually contradictory. Yet Malatesta maintained both: no living individual existed outside of society, but “society” denoted no undivided whole.

From the axiomatic value respectively attributed to autonomy and association, anti-organizationists and organizationists derived opposite views about permanent collective structures. For the former, membership in any such structure—no matter how free form coercion—amounted by definition to accepting external constraints on autonomy, and was therefore rejected. For the latter, organization was a necessity, or more simply a fact of life, beyond individual choice. What was indeed a matter of choice was whether people organized in an authoritarian or egalitarian way. Accordingly, they gave little consideration to individual autonomy as an abstract value, for in practice it amounted to unsustainable isolation. Rather, they aimed to prevent anyone from being forced to obey someone else’s individual will. For anti-organizationists, external norms limited individual autonomy and therefore were authoritarian. For organizationists, such norms were both necessary and harmless, as long as they were self-imposed and modifiable. Such difference in theoretical premises determined a sort of asymmetry between the respective attitudes to the debate. Organizationists, for whom organization was a necessity for everyone, whether one admitted it or not, regarded the debate as lacking real ground, while anti-organizationists emphasized the gap between them and their opponents and turned organization into a question of principle.

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34 "Il principio di organizzazione," La Questione Sociale (Paterson) 5, n.s., no. 5 (7 October 1899).

35 Gemie, “Counter-Community,” 352.
The issue of organization had far-reaching ramifications, concerning especially the relationship of anarchist and labour movements: in a nutshell, for anti-organizationists there was mutual exclusion and discontinuity, for organizationists inclusion and continuity. “In the face of the unconscious and unaware mass,” Ciancabilla argued, “our action of anarchists can be only one: to form anarchist consciences.” He described the process of becoming anarchist as one of “separating from the unconscious mass.”  

Ciancabilla’s language illustrates an outlook on the formation of anarchist consciousness as an individual, not a collective process; not as gradual, but as happening at once; and finally, as a process of separation from the unaware mass. Galleani conveyed a similar idea when he remarked that “the anarchist movement and the labour movement follow two parallel lines, and it has been geometrically proven that parallels never meet.” Nevertheless, Galleani maintained that anarchists should join unions “whenever we find it useful to our struggle and wherever it is possible to do so under well defined pledges and reservations.” His viewpoint was epitomized by his foremost role in the Paterson silk strike of June 1902, which cost him a bullet in the face and forced him to escape to Canada. Galleani’s pledges and reservations were largely shared by organizationists and Malatesta claimed to be “almost completely in agreement with Galleani” on the subject. However, Galleani’s stance was mainly instrumental. Unions were environments for anarchist propaganda, and possibly for anti-capitalist direct action, but no intrinsic value was attributed to their ends and means, both deemed inconsistent with anarchism.

36 “Idee e tattica [dichiarazioni dei dissidenti],” *La Questione Sociale* (Paterson) 5, no. 127 (2 September 1899).


39 “‘La fine dell’anarchismo’ di Luigi Galleani,” *Pensiero e Volontà* (Rome), no. 9 (1 June 1926).
In contrast, Malatesta observed in 1897 that workers could never emancipate themselves until they found in union the moral, economic, and physical strength to overcome their enemy. He remarked that some anarchists were hostile to any organization that did not explicitly aim for anarchy and follow anarchist methods. Hence, some kept aloof from all unions, or meddled with them with the avowed goal of disorganizing them; while others admitted that one could join existing unions, but considered nearly as defection any attempt to organize new ones. In contrast to the belief that any forces organized for less than revolutionary goals took away from revolution, Malatesta maintained that aloofness from unions doomed anarchism to perpetual sterility. Propaganda, he argued, was to be done among the people, and unions provided the most receptive ground for that. In addition, propaganda could only have a limited effect, as anarchist consciousness could seldom be reached at once. Organization was a worker’s means to gradually and collectively approach anarchism through class consciousness:

To become an anarchist for good, and not only nominally, he must start to feel the solidarity that links him to his comrades; learn to cooperate with the others for the defence of the common interests; and, struggling against the masters and the government that supports the masters, understand that masters and governments are useless parasites and that workers could manage by themselves the social enterprise. When he has understood all this, he is an anarchist, even if he does not carry the denomination.40

Most importantly, the support for popular organizations was not only good tactics, but also a consequence of anarchist ideas, and as such it should be inscribed in the anarchist programme. Authoritarian parties were interested in organizing the people only to the extent that it was necessary to get them in power, either electorally or militarily, depending on a party’s parliamentarian or revolutionary tactics. In contrast, anarchists did not believe in emancipating the people, but rather in people emancipating themselves. Hence, it mattered for them that all interests and opinions have a voice in collective life through conscious organization and that as many people as possible be accustomed to

40 "L’organizzazione," part 3.
organizing and managing their interests. "Social life," Malatesta argued, "admits no interruption. During the revolution—or insurrection, whatever we want to call it—and immediately after, one must eat, dress, travel, print, cure sick people, etc., and all these things do not get done by themselves." Once government and capitalists were driven out, those tasks fell upon workers. "And how could these workers provide for the urgent needs if they were not already accustomed to meet and deal together with the common interests, and were not already prepared to take upon themselves the heritage of the old society?"41

Malatesta acknowledged the authoritarian risks of unions. In 1897 he discussed the issue of salaries in socialist enterprises, such as newspapers and unions, comparing the options of paid staff versus volunteer personnel. He illustrated the risk of creating a privileged class of employees by the examples of the German SPD and the English trade unions. He pragmatically suggested the middle course that paid staff should be limited as much as possible, gain no more than in one’s regular profession, and in any case not more than manual workers. A similar proposal was renewed in 1913, when Malatesta added that unions’ executive staff should change as frequently as possible. Still, he attributed increasing importance to anarchist full involvement in unions. In 1921 he argued that anarchists should not simply participate passively as workers, but also accept responsibilities compatible with their beliefs. He acknowledged that this course of action was not immune from risks of "taming, deviation, and corruption," but he also argued that such risks could be minimized by prescribing a specific line of conduct, and by exercising a "continuous, mutual control among comrades." In 1923 he returned to the subject of anarchists’ executive positions in unions, suggesting again a middle course between extreme options: "I believe that in general and in quiet times this would be better avoided. However, I believe that the harm and the danger does not lie so much in

41 Ibid.
occupying an executive position—which in certain circumstances may be useful and even necessary—as in perpetuating oneself in that position.\textsuperscript{42}

Finally, in an article of 1927 Malatesta drew a clear line between anarchist and authoritarian organization in response to the pamphlet \textit{Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists}, published the year before in France by a group of exiled Russian anarchists including Nestor Makhno and Peter Arshinov. Malatesta’s response, which complements the debate with anti-organizationists and provides a fuller picture of his outlook on organization, expressed long-held ideas that, as often happened, he fully formulated only when the need to do so arose from current debates in the anarchist movement. Malatesta’s main target was the “principle of collective responsibility” introduced by the executive organ of the newly-formed Anarchist Union, according to which “the entire Union will be responsible for the political and revolutionary activity of each member; in the same way, each member will be responsible for the political and revolutionary activity of the Union as a whole.\textsuperscript{43} If the Union was responsible for what each member did, Malatesta objected, how could it leave individual members the freedom to apply the common programme as they thought best? Being responsible for someone’s action meant being in a position to prevent it. Hence, Malatesta continued, the Executive Committee would need to monitor the action of individual members and order them what to do or not do. Conversely, how could an individual accept responsibility for the actions of a collectivity before knowing what they would be and if he could not prevent what he disapproved of? Moreover, what did “the will of the Union” stand for?

\textsuperscript{42} “Il salario nelle aziende socialiste e nelle organizzazioni operaie,” \textit{L’Agitazione} (Ancona) 1, no. 13 (4 June 1897); “Gli anarchici e le leghe operaie (Ancora sul sindacalismo),” \textit{Volontà} (Ancona) 1, no. 15 (20 September 1913); “Gli anarchici nel movimento operaio,” parts 1–3, \textit{Umanità Nova} (Rome), 26–28 October 1921; “La condotta degli anarchici nel movimento sindacale (Rapporto al Congresso anarchico internazionale di Parigi del 1923),” \textit{Fede} (Rome), 30 September 1923.

\textsuperscript{43} Dielo Trouda, \textit{The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists} (n.p.: Workers Solidarity Movement, 2001).
Once again, Malatesta rejected any holistic concept of an undivided collective, on the
ground that decisions would always ultimately come from a set of individuals; if this was
not the set of all members, in which case unanimity would be required, it was bound to be
a group, either a majority or a minority, which imposed its will on the others. Malatesta
did not object to the need for unity, but rather, as he had done in his debate of 1897 with
Merlino, to the blind acceptance of a binding decision process, even by majority rule.44

Ultimately, and in contrast to irrationalist interpretations of anarchism as
unconcerned with practical means, the whole debate on organization concerned precisely
the relation between anarchist ends and means. As Malatesta repeated in his criticism of
the Platform, “it is not enough to want something; one also has to adopt suitable means;
to get to a certain place one must take the right path or end up somewhere else.”45 That
organizationists and anti-organizationists shared common goals was always understood
throughout the debate, which concerned the best means to achieve them: in particular, by
focusing on the possibly authoritarian outcome of anarchist organization, even beyond
the intentions of its advocates, the debate was about the displacement of goals. Yet,
despite its breadth, the debate has gone largely unnoticed outside of anarchist circles. Part
of the reason may be that the debate, as was characteristic of the anarchist movement,
was almost entirely carried out on anarchist periodicals, thus severely limiting its
circulation outside of the anarchist movement and its transmission to the posterity. In any
case, the crude stereotype of anarchists simply rejecting organization out of hand is still
predominant. At the same time, many ideas debated between organizationists and anti-
organizationists have become common currency in the sociological literature.

44 Malatesta, “A Project of Anarchist Organization,” in Anarchist Revolution, 95–99; originally published
as “Un progetto di organizzazione anarchica,” parts 1 and 2, Il Risveglio (Geneva) 27, nos. 728–9 (1–15
October 1927).

45 Ibid., 98.
This is due, in particular, to the German sociologist Robert Michels, whose *Political Parties*, of 1911, has been defined “one of the twentieth century’s most influential books” and “a classic of social science.” Its “fundamental sociological law of political parties,” better known as the “iron law of oligarchy,” is clearly linked with the foregoing discussion: “it is organization which gives birth to the domination of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization says oligarchy.” A socialist in his early years, Michels grew disillusioned with German Social Democracy and turned against parliamentarianism. From 1904 on he developed intellectual ties with French syndicalists and anarchists, and in 1907 he obtained a professorship in Italy. In brief, Michels had a first-hand acquaintance with the ideas of the anarchist movement, especially the Italian movement. He acknowledged that “anarchists were the first to insist upon the hierarchical and oligarchic consequences of party organization. Their view of the defects of organization is much clearer than that of socialists and even than that of syndicalists.” The historian Carl Levy argues that Michels specifically used Malatesta’s ideas on bureaucracy in workers’ organizations. The similarity exists, but Malatesta’s points about labour bureaucracy were pressed even more forcefully by anti-organizationists. In other words, Michels’s arguments reflected ideas that were the

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47 Michels, 365.


49 Michels, 325.

50 Levy, “Malatesta in Exile,” 274; see note 42.
common denominator of organizationists and anti-organizationists alike, from which their different outlooks branched off.

In fact, organizationists differed most from Michels, because, unlike anti-organizationists, they believed that the law of oligarchy was not as iron-made as Michels claimed. Specifically, Malatesta and Michels diverged in their outlook on the masses. Michels thus expressed his “scientific conviction”: “the objective immaturity of the mass is not a mere transitory phenomenon which will disappear with the progress of democratization *au lendemain du socialisme*. On the contrary, it derives from the very nature of the mass as mass, for this, even when organized, suffers from an incurable incompetence for the solution of the diverse problems which present themselves for solution—because the mass *per se* is amorphous, and therefore needs division of labor, specialization, and guidance.” From this belief Michels derived his rejection of anarchism. Commenting on Johann Most’s claim that “only the dictatorial and the servile could be sincere opponents of anarchism,” Michels remarked that “in view of the natural endowments of human beings, it seems probable that the majority will always continue to belong to one or other of the two types here characterized by Most.” In contrast, Malatesta believed that the incompetence of the masses was curable; or, at least, he agnostically refrained from either postulating any natural endowment of human beings, or venturing into historical prophecies.

The theoretical articulation of the Malatesta–Ciancabilla debate of 1899 on organization made it a highlight in a controversy that spanned several decades. That a foremost episode in such a long-lasting and momentous controversy for the Italian anarchist movement in the homeland took place abroad speaks to the transnational dimension of that movement. “Nostra patria è il mondo intero” (Our homeland is the

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51 Michels, 367.

52 Ibid., 329, 370.
whole world), declares a popular song by the Italian anarchist Pietro Gori. That line expresses hope for a future in which the whole world would be a homeland without borders; it also expresses the internationalist disposition of anarchists to solidarity towards workers and oppressed of all countries; but above all it expresses a factual truth. The mode of operation of the Italian anarchist movement was as transnational as Malatesta’s life. Furthermore, that the Malatesta-Ciancabilla debate took place in the United States epitomizes that country’s prominence in the geography of Italian transnational anarchism worldwide. Far from being a diversion, Malatesta’s journey to North America took him to one of the sources of the strength and continuity of the anarchist movement in Italy. Malatesta himself emphasized such a link in the first issue of *La Questione Sociale* under his editorship, addressing an appeal to the Italian anarchists in North America and pleading for transnational solidarity, which he called an “anarchist duty.”

Despite its importance for the working of the movement, the transnational dimension of Italian anarchism has fallen through the cracks of histories of national scope. Just as it has been neglected by historians restricted to an Italian national perspective, so it has been largely lost on American historians who have leveled their own charges of detachment from empirical reality against Italian anarchists. Thus, George Carey remarked that *La Questione Sociale* “was continually caught between the interests of its local group constituents in improving the conditions of their lives through local union related activities, and leadership imported from abroad—however distinguished—which sought blindly to apply to American conditions formulae forged in the European context.” Such an exclusive focus on North America is misleading, and Carey himself concedes that “study of the American context in the absence of the Italian is

53 “Il dovere anarchico,” *La Questione Sociale* (Paterson) 5, no. 1, n.s. (9 September 1899).
In fact, the relationship between Italian anarchists in North America and the homeland was a two-way cooperative relationship. Militants from Europe—including Malatesta and before him Francesco Saverio Merlino and Pietro Gori—contributed to propaganda and periodicals in North America. Conversely, in times of repression in Italy, it fell upon the anarchist press abroad to carry on propaganda in Italian. *La Questione Sociale* appeared in July 1895, when the reaction of the Crispi government was raging in Italy. At that time, no anarchist periodical existed in Italy.55 Therefore the appearance of *La Questione Sociale* in Paterson, in relatively unhampered conditions, fulfilled a fundamental role in the Italian anarchist movement worldwide. North American militants, besides being readers, regularly subsidized a large distribution of the paper in Italy and other countries.

The reciprocity of the relationship between Italian anarchists across the ocean is illustrated by the support from North America for the anarchist press in Italy and elsewhere, through subscriptions and donations. The following data illustrate the relative weight of donations from the United States to four major periodicals, *L'Associazione, L'Agitazione, La Rivoluzione Sociale,* and *Volontà,* edited by Malatesta between 1889 and 1915, as regularly reported in the periodicals themselves. All periodicals were weekly or fortnightly. Only direct donations to the periodicals are considered, as opposed to collections on such accounts as propaganda tours or political prisoners. In each case the country of publication and the United States were the two highest-contributing countries, although their relative order varied. The United States ranked highest with *La Rivoluzione Sociale,* published in London in 1902–03, with contributions at 41.5%, as against 17% from the United Kingdom. Since Italy was the country of highest circulation,


55 Bettini.
contributions from the country of publication were predictably higher for periodicals published in Italy, such as *L'Agitazione* and *Volontà*, respectively published in 1889–90 and 1913–15. The former’s contributions from Italy and United States were respectively 68.7% and 17.1%, and the latter’s were 42.4% and 40%, respectively.

The case of *Volontà* is particularly significant. Contributions from the United States, though significant throughout the periodical’s life span, really soared after a financial crisis forced *Volontà* to suspend publication in mid-October 1914. The editors attributed the crisis to a drop in readership with the outbreak of World War I, and few weeks before ceasing publication they issued an appeal for help to their comrades in North America, where the war’s effects were not felt, yet.\(^{56}\) A massive response came from the United States and elsewhere, allowing the periodical to resume publication on 14 November, continuing until July 1915, when publication ceased shortly after Italy’s declaration of war. While donations to *Volontà* from Italy and the United States before the suspension were respectively 59.5% and 14.9%, thus being comparable to those of *L'Agitazione* in 1897–8, after World War I broke out contributions from the United States became absolutely predominant, soaring to 67.4%, as against 23.6% from Italy, and showing again that country’s fundamental role in bridging periods of difficulty for the movement.\(^ {57}\)

Transatlantic integration also found organizational expression. Debates and projects affecting the movement in Italy could be decisively influenced by initiatives in North America. The opacity of anarchist organization makes it difficult to provide systematic evidence. However, institutional manifestations of Italian anarchism show a steady participation from North-America. For example, the signatories of the abstentionist manifesto of November 1890 included the New York anarchists Napoleone Carabba and

\(^{56}\) "Ai nostri compagni residenti in America," *Volontà* (Ancona), 5 September 1914.

\(^{57}\) Data collected from source periodical by the author.
Vito Solieri—the latter being Malatesta’s old comrade, expelled with him from Switzerland in 1879 and fellow exile in London in 1881. In January 1891 the anarchists of the United States were represented at the Capolago congress. Solieri was also in the editorial staff of La Questione Sociale, the prospective organ of the newly-created party. Another pro-abstention manifesto published by L’Agitazione in March 1897 was subscribed by forty-three New York militants.58

Such episodes document that Italian anarchists in North America were both interested and influential in the Italian movement in Europe, as well as organizationally closer than the physical distance might lead us to believe. Their sustained contribution of militants, resources, and ideas must be reckoned with in assessing the strength of Italian anarchism, to avoid the pitfall of exchanging mobilization campaigns in Italy for cyclical and short-lived episodes of spontaneous combustion. As we have seen, the same sort of integration and resource exchange also existed for other countries around the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. In fact, for European countries—especially those neighboring Italy—cooperation across the border was an ordinary mode of operation.

Transnational support for the anarchist press is quantitatively illustrated by the worldwide contributions to the same four periodicals referred to for the United States. The peak of transnational contributions was reached by La Rivoluzione Sociale, with 83% of contributions from outside the country of publication. L’Associazione and Volontà follow on a par, with contributions from outside the country of publication of 57.5% and 57.6%, respectively. Ironically, the least impressive total, 31.3% of foreign contributions for L’Agitazione, is probably also the most significant, for three reasons. First, the figure concerns a relatively long period, covering fifty-two weekly issues, thus

providing more valuable data than shorter-lived periodicals, in terms of both statistical reliability and significance as a financially viable periodical. Second, the periodical was published in Italy. Hence one can expect contributions from the country of publication to be highest. Finally, unlike Volontà, whose figures were partly due to an exceptional wartime situation, L'Agitazione reflected a relatively ordinary situation. It is true that solidarity to the periodical was partly spurred by governmental repression in 1898, including Malatesta’s arrest. However, this can hardly be considered exceptional. In fact, Malatesta rarely resided in Italy longer than a year without being arrested or escaping arrest by going underground or fleeing the country. In brief, L'Agitazione exhibits a steady contribution from abroad of nearly one third of overall donations in standard conditions, thus providing a baseline from which one can generalize and claim that contributions from abroad were crucial for the viability of any Italian anarchist periodical. For similar reasons, L'Agitazione better illustrates the worldwide spread and balance of contributions in ordinary times. For example, it illustrates the importance of contributions from South America, on a par with Europe and Africa. Contributions from these three areas together amounted to 14.3%, coming close to the volume of contributions from the United States. In contrast, those three areas are not given justice in the case of Volontà, being comparatively dwarfed by the United States.

Predictably, the highest contributing countries overlap with those of highest Italian immigration. This intersection defines the map of Italian anarchist transnationalism: France, Switzerland, and United Kingdom in Europe; Egypt and Tunisia in Africa; Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay in South America; and the United States in North America. However, no hard-and-fast correlation can be established. This is readily apparent by comparing North and South America, with the former having a much higher volume of contributions, in contrast to the latter’s higher Italian immigrant population. A comparison between the rate of overall contributions from abroad and the rate of Italian population abroad is also instructive. As of 1 January 1901, the population on the Italian
territory amounted to 32,447,474, while Italians abroad were 3,344,548 around that year. Therefore the latter comprised 9.3% of the Italian worldwide population, which strikingly contrasts with the 31.3% rate of contributions to L’Agitazione from abroad. While better economic conditions of workers abroad may partly explain this gap, further causes were at work with anarchist transnationalism, of which government repression was foremost. As a consequence, the proportion of exiles among Italian anarchists was higher than that of migrants among Italian workers. Suffice it to mention that, according to an extensive biographical dictionary of Italian anarchists, approximately 60% of them emigrated at least once for longer than six months. Clearly, anarchist exiles were attracted to areas of Italian migration, both because they were workers themselves, and because those areas provided a more fertile ground for their political activity. However, the relevance of transnationalism for their movement exceeded the transnationalism of Italians at large.59

The Italian anarchist press was also transnational in another way: periodicals were also locally published in those same areas of Italian migration. Besides their local readership, they also had a wider circulation, thus fulfilling a fundamental propaganda role. A statistical survey of Italian anarchist periodicals and single issues published worldwide between 1889 and 1913 reveals that nearly 40% of the periodicals were published outside of Italy, in those same countries of Italian immigration and anarchist concentration. South America—represented by Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay—is particularly prominent, with a share of 14% of all periodicals, remarkably higher than the 9.5% share of North America. The discrepancy between the rates of periodicals and single issues published abroad is worth noting: less than 25% of single issues were published abroad, in contrast to nearly 40% of periodicals; or, to put things in a different

but equivalent perspective, 59% of anarchist publications in Italy were single issues, as against only 41% abroad.

This discrepancy is statistically significant. How to explain it? Why were Italian anarchists more prone to publish single issues in Italy than abroad? The rate of single issues is an indicator of the difficulties that the press encountered in an area. Sometimes publications were intentionally given the form of single issues, when the need to comment on specific questions arose. However, more often than not publishing a single issue was a necessity, or simply the unforeseen outcome of an aborted editorial project. In many cases it was a fall-back solution when resources were not sufficient for a serial publication. In other cases, what we call single issues were simply planned periodicals that ceased publication after the first issue, for lack of funds or police harassment. For example, in 1897 *La Protesta Umana* was immediately seized by the authorities and its editor Luigi Fabbri was prosecuted. Relatedly, single issues could be stratagems to circumvent police prohibition: the title of a serial publication was changed at every issue so as to be formally unrelated to the previous issues hit by police prohibition. This is what *L’Agitazione* did for three consecutive issues in April–May 1897.60 In sum, rather than representing a discrepancy, the figures on periodicals and single issues complement each other in showing that publishing anarchist press was easier abroad than in Italy: periodicals had a less troubled life abroad, and therefore they had a longer life span. Conversely, fewer single issues, or fewer aborted periodicals, were published abroad.61

The circulation of anarchist ideas was not limited to the press. Anarchist literature, especially pamphlets, was another crucial component, though constructing a systematic analysis is more problematic in this case. However, we can catch a glimpse using Malatesta’s pamphlets as a case study. Since they were steadily popular throughout the

60 Bettini, vol. 1, 128–9, 132.

61 Data from Bettini.
period under consideration, in all areas of anarchist presence, and among anarchists of all
tendencies, they can be regarded as a fairly representative sample. The most popular was
undoubtedly *Fra Contadini* (Between Peasants), which was reprinted so often and for so
long that its figures are large enough to have statistical significance, even limiting
ourselves to editions in Italian. Between 1884 and 1913, 25 editions were published,
including both new editions and simple reprints, but excluding serializations in
periodicals. The editions printed in Italy were less than half, amounting to 12. The United
States follows with 8 editions; then the rest of Europe with 3, and South America with
2.\(^6\) Places of publication tended to be repetitive: 3 Italian editions appeared in Turin, and
3 more in Messina; 2 editions came out of London; and 6 of the 8 North American
editions were published in Paterson. Such places of publication correspond to those of
major anarchist periodicals, such as *L'Avvenire Sociale* in Messina, and *La Questione
Sociale*, then renamed *L'Era Nuova*, in Paterson. More generally, pamphlets almost
invariably came out of the printing presses of periodicals, further confirming both the
broader propaganda tasks associated with newspapers, and the importance of places as
Paterson, Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Tunis, London, and Paris for a wider range of
anarchist activities than publishing periodicals. Printing presses lasted longer than
periodicals, and thus the production of pamphlets, which required less resources but were
more durable and exchangeable propaganda vehicles than some local and ephemeral
periodicals, is an even stronger indicator of the continuity of transnational propaganda
provided by those centres.

Why was anarchist propaganda easier abroad than at home? The Catalan historian
Joan Casanovas argues that Spanish anarchists enjoyed greater freedom of organization
and expression in the United States than in Spain, partly because of the difficulty of the
United States administration to censor the press and infiltrate groups that used foreign

\(^6\) Data collected by the author from various bibliographies, catalogues, and original pamphlet editions.
languages. The argument could clearly be extended to other countries. On this note, in 1905 an Italian police agent in London reported a telling episode. At the time a strong, anarchist-oriented, Jewish labour movement existed in London. The Yiddish anarchist paper *Der Arbayer Fraynd* (Workers' Friend) had recently reached sales of 6,000 copies. The circumstance worried the London chief of police, who sent three hundred policemen to attend Yiddish classes, so as to monitor speeches and street conversations among Russian and Polish Yiddish-speaking refugees. Clearly, such a language barrier probably hampered police surveillance of Italian anarchists as well.

Furthermore, it is often assumed that countries with liberal traditions, such as Great Britain and Switzerland, were “safe havens” for anarchist exiles. Data about the number of expulsions from Switzerland between 1879 and 1902 cast doubts on this assumption, though. Overall, 241 individuals were expelled in that period, 141 of whom were Italian. The peak was in 1898, the year of *Fatti di Maggio*, when repression in Italy determined a wave of exiles, which in turn spurred the Swiss government’s reaction: 87 expulsions occurred, of which 76 concerned Italians. Most people expelled in those 23 years were anarchists: Malatesta was expelled in 1879; the only expulsion of 1881 was that of Kropotkin; other notable cases were Galleani in 1890, Schicchi in 1891, Gori in 1895, and Ciancabilla in 1898. In brief, Switzerland was by no means a “safe haven.” Nor was the Swiss republican government unconcerned with anarchist activities targeting the Italian monarchy: Malatesta’s expulsion of 1879 was determined by a manifesto against the king of Italy after Passanante’s attempt; and in 1900 arrests were made in


64 “Relazione del movimento dei sovversivi in Londra nei mesi marzo ed aprile,” 21 May 1905, ACS, Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, Divisione affari generali e riservati, Archivio generale, Categorie annuali, 1905, Partito anarchico, box 22, folder 377 (Inghilterra).

Switzerland, in connection with the publication of Malatesta's pamphlet *Contro la Monarchia*. Still, anarchists in Switzerland were comparatively safer from the clutches of the Italian government, for the Swiss government was not inclined to accede to the requests of the Italian monarchy, at the same time that it had little tolerance for anarchist activity. So, while Malatesta was expelled from Switzerland and imprisoned for violating the order of expulsion in 1891, on that occasion the Swiss government rejected Italy's request of extradition. Similarly, the London Metropolitan Police kept a tight watch on Italian anarchists, but was reluctant to act upon information provided by the Italian embassy when it was solely about crimes or plans concerning Italy.

Malatesta and the Italian anarchists were aware of the importance of transnationalism. They consciously relied on it and turned it into an ordinary component of organization and struggle on the Italian soil, as many initiatives in which Malatesta was involved in the 1890s illustrate: the Capolago congress of 1891; the Rome riots of the same year, sparked by a foremost figure of transnational anarchism, Galileo Palla; and the 1893 circular “To the Italian Workers Abroad,” issued by Malatesta’s London group *La Solidarietà*, which urged Italian anarchists to form groups abroad that would correspond amongst themselves and with Italy.66 Transnationalism helped carry out openly illegal propaganda in Italy. When the manifesto “Al Popolo d’Italia” reached Italy from London in March 1894, while Crispi’s repression was raging, the Italian authorities prosecuted many recipients of the placards, including well-known anarchists, but the defendants invariably ended up being acquitted, as long as they could claim, as they all unfailingly did, that they had not solicited the mailing. The episode illustrates a sort of

division of labour between militants in Italy and abroad, which shielded the former from
government persecution.67

Malatesta reiterated the importance of transnationalism from the columns of La
Questione Sociale. After calling for the “anarchist duty” of transnational solidarity in the
first issue, he addressed a further appeal to the Italian anarchists of North America two
weeks later, on the eve of a propaganda tour. Malatesta clearly expressed the essence of
anarchist transnationalism as follows:

As bad as conditions may be here in the United States, they are still
exceptionally favourable to us, compared to continental Europe: there are
more resources than elsewhere, and there is opportunity for an activity that
can be expanded slowly, perhaps, but without too much danger of being
suddenly interrupted by the government. We must take advantage of the
present circumstances to build up a strength that, now and later on, in one
way or another, can come to the aid of our cause where the opportunity
arises, especially in Italy, which is the country we come from, whose
language we speak, and where consequently we can exert our influence
more effectively.68

The reference to a slow but continuous expansion was crucial, coming in the aftermath of
the 1898 repression in Italy, which abruptly ended Malatesta’s effort to undertake
precisely that kind of expansion in the homeland.

In sum, borders did not necessarily always work against anarchism. Italian borders
circumscribed not only the territory inside of which the Italian government ruled, but also
that outside of which it could not rule. Italian anarchists, whose homeland was “the
whole world,” lived on either side of the border, while the Italian government had a
limited reach beyond it. For example, the International Anti-Anarchist Conference of
1898 in Rome was a largely unsuccessful attempt by the Italian government to cope with
anarchist transnationalism. The domestic policy of countries like Switzerland and Great
Britain was not more liberal towards Italian anarchists than that of Italy. However, the

67 DAP, b. 105, fs. 991 “Stampa straniera sediziosa,” ACS.

68 “Federazione Socialista-Anarchica,” La Questione Sociale (Paterson) 5, no. 3, n.s. (23 September 1899).
foreign policy of those countries made Italian anarchists safer there than in Italy, in the narrow sense of being out of the Italian government’s reach.\textsuperscript{69}

Transnationalism was not a peculiarity of Italian anarchism. Emigration was a lot that Italians shared with other workers, as was exile for Italian anarchists and those of other countries. A consequence of the simultaneous transnationalism of the anarchists movements of different countries was their cross-national mutual involvement, as the example of Italians and French in London in the mid-1890s illustrates. An even closer affinity and long-standing mutual involvement characterized Malatesta’s relationship with Spanish anarchism, especially in its majoritarian collectivist current. Malatesta’s journey of 1899 to North America was a significant episode in such relationship, though standard accounts do not give adequate prominence to this aspect of the journey.

As we have seen, Pedro Esteve was instrumental in bringing Malatesta to the United States. Moreover, a significant part of the journey was devoted to Spanish-speaking workers. Biographies usually mention Malatesta’s brief propaganda tour in Cuba, but this was preceded by initiatives arranged by Esteve in the United States, to which biographies make little or no reference. Malatesta spoke at the \textit{Círculo de Trabajadores} (Workers’ Club) of Brooklyn towards the end of September.\textsuperscript{70} Subsequently, the New York Spanish-language union of cigarmakers entrusted him with the task of going to Tampa, Florida, to promote the idea of a country-wide federation of tobacco workers, among whom ethnic lines often separated Cubans from Spaniards.\textsuperscript{71} In February 1900 Malatesta spent several days in Tampa, trying in vain to smooth out local conflicts among workers and promoting the tobacco workers’ Federation.\textsuperscript{72} He met with Italian workers too, many

\textsuperscript{69} Masini, \textit{Epoca degli attentati}, 120–4.

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{El Despertar} 9, no. 193 (20 October 1899); Malatesta to the editors, New York, 23 September 1899, \textit{La Questione Sociale} (Paterson) 5, n. s., no. 4 (30 September 1899).

\textsuperscript{71} “La Federación,” \textit{El Despertar} 10, no. 197 (30 January 1900).

\textsuperscript{72} “Por la posta,” \textit{El Despertar} (New York) 10, no. 200 (20 May 1900).
of whom were exiles of the 1893 Fasci, and he lectured in Key West. In late February he reached Cuba, where he was received by Adrián del Valle, whom he had met during his 1891–2 tour in Spain and again in London, whence del Valle emigrated to America. Malatesta was forced to cut his speaking tour short, due to harassment from the authorities. As he boarded the steamship that took him back to New York, he greeted del Valle: “First in Barcelona, then in London, now in Havana. Where shall we meet next?” At the end of March Malatesta reported back to the Círculo de Trabajadores in New York about his mission.73

The Spanish-language leg of Malatesta’s stay in America speaks to the continuity of his relation with Spanish anarchism and again illustrates the working of the anarchist network. The manifestations of Malatesta’s cross-national cooperation with the Spaniards were chronologically and geographically scattered, as his farewell to del Valle well expressed. Hence, its continuity cannot be detected through recurring occasions or circumscribed places, but rather through the intersecting, transnational trajectories of individuals. Most importantly, Malatesta’s affinity with Spanish anarchists throws a bridge between the controversies that divided the respective movements, that is, the Italian controversy on organization and the Spanish one on collectivism and communism. The figures of Malatesta, Esteve, and Ciancabilla epitomize how the two debates intersected. In the years around 1889 Malatesta took great interest in the Spanish debate, which spurred his pluralist stance on the collectivism–communism controversy. Likewise, Esteve took interest in the Italian controversy, as his involvement with La Questione Sociale and his role in Malatesta’s coming to Paterson illustrate. However, the respective standpoints intersected in non-obvious ways that defy standard categorizations. Both Malatesta and Ciancabilla were anarchist-communists, while

Esteve was an anarchist-collectivist. Yet, the greatest affinity bound together Malatesta and Esteve, who stood in the same camp in both the Spanish and the Italian controversies and jointly opposed Ciancabilla. By analysing the ground of the affinity between Malatesta and Esteve one can identify commonalities between the two national debates and put both in a broader perspective.

Standard accounts of the Spanish controversy are based on some kind of Spanish exceptionalism. For example, George Richard Esenwein remarks that the transition from collectivism to communism in Europe did not generate anything like the controversy that preoccupied the Spanish anarchists for two decades. He attributes this to the peculiar way in which anarchism developed in the Spanish context. In the rest of Europe, Esenwein argues, anarchists had never secured a foothold within the trade union movements. Hence collectivism was easily displaced by a doctrine like communism, which did not rely on the support of organized labor groups. In Spain, however, anarchist collectivism had from the beginning been identified with the trade union movement and this identification persisted in time, thus allowing collectivism to survive longer in Spain than elsewhere. 74

In pointing out the association between collectivism and organized labour, Esenwein emphasizes that the controversy was not simply about the future society, but also concerned anarchist tactics in the present, though he does not explain what the necessary link was.

In fact, the first dissidence arose in Andalusia on the tactical ground, out of irritation with gradualist tactics based on labour organizations. As Esenwein argues, those who criticized the "legalist" orientation, which focused on an open and legal trade union movement, did not reject the collectivist creed at first; only later, with the penetration of anarchist communist ideas from abroad, did these dissident elements become the

74 Esenwein, 109–110.
disciples of the new ideology. The theoretical controversy between anarchist collectivism and anarchist communism concerned distribution in the socialist society, which for collectivists was to be done according to work performed and for communists according to needs. On the tactical ground, Esenwein attributes the following tenets to communists: they were “intractably opposed to trade unions, which were viewed as essentially reformist bodies” and “as being invariably accompanied by the three most iniquitous features of capitalism: bureaucracy, hierarchy, and corruption”; they preferred to “set up small, loosely federated groups composed of dedicated militants”; and they held a profound faith in the power of spontaneous revolutionary acts. “Quite understandably,” Esenwein concludes, “they tended to shun strikes and other forms of economic warfare in favor of violent methods, extolling above all the virtues of propaganda by the deed.”

There is evident similarity between the tactics advocated by Spanish anarchist communists and Italian anti-organizationists. The tactical rift was as sharp in Spain as in Italy, but the divide on collectivism and communism, though nominally more relevant, was blurred. Max Nettlau remarks that, on reading the journals published in Madrid from 1885 on, one can hardly distinguish whether they were collectivist or communist. Most notably, from the second half of the 1880s, Catalan anarchists strove to overcome the controversy and in 1889 El Productor argued that the various economic systems were a secondary aspect of anarchist theory. The outcome of such a trend was the idea of a

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75 Ibid., 113.
76 Ibid., 108–9.
77 Nettlau, Short History, 195.
78 Jordi Piqué i Padró, Anarco-col·lectivisme i anarco-communisme: L’oposició de dues postures en el moviment anarquista català (1881–1891) (Barcelona: Publicacions de l’Abadia de Montserrat, 1989), 134–7; “Los principios económicos,” El Productor (Barcelona) 3, no. 134 (8 March 1889); “Recapitulación,” parts 1–3 El Productor (Barcelona) 3, no. 138 (April 5 1889); no. 139 (April 12 1889); no. 140 (April 19 1889); “Sobre la producción,” El Productor (Barcelona) 3, no. 142 (May 3 1889).
tolerant “anarchism without adjectives,” akin to Malatesta’s pluralism. The group of *El Productor* discussed such questions in an open letter of August 1890 to the Parisian *La Révolte*. Significantly, while the article advocated a pluralist solution, it criticized the French comrades for their exclusive emphasis on individual initiative, strongly contrasting this to the tactics adopted in Spain, which were based on federative organization, action among the proletarian masses, and association for resistance to capital. Just as the tactics of the anarchist communist dissidents were akin to those of Italian anti-organizationists, the above outline clearly foreshadows the perspectives of Italian organizationists.

In brief, tactics were not just an important but accessory component of the controversy in Spain, but its very core. In this light, commonalities between Spain and Italy become more than simple similarities: the core of the debate was the same. Hence, it becomes problematic to look at Spain as an exceptional case, one where the Bakuninist heritage of collectivism lingered for longer than elsewhere. Rather, the same crucial tactical issues were debated in Spain as in other major countries for decades to come. Relatedly, if we acknowledge that organization and labour involvement were the key ideas at stake, then the claim that such ideas lingered in Spain because Spanish anarchists identified with trade unions is a tautology rather than an explanation. Moreover, if those were the ideas really at stake, they did not just “linger” in Spain, but remained key ideas for half a century, eventually turning Spanish anarchism into a powerful mass movement.

Identifying the cross-national link between the controversies in Spain and Italy helps clarify both. The Italian communist Malatesta and the Spanish collectivist Esteve agreed in advocating organization. In 1893 Esteve remarked that it was a serious mistake to

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80 Esenwein, 137–9; “Questions de Tactique,” parts 1 and 2, *La Révolte* (Paris) 3, no. 51 (6–12 September 1890); 4, no. 1 (13–19 September 1890).
consider Spanish anarchism a deviating branch. Instead, he argued, its distinctive trait was that it remained within the lines drawn by the International. It was this essentially associationist tradition, based on organization and the labour movement, that Spanish anarchists shared with Italian organizationists. Indeed, collectivism was part of that heritage, which is why Spanish anarchism was born collectivist. However, collectivism was ultimately the accessory part of that heritage as the eventual agreement on pluralism between Malatesta and Esteve illustrates. In the opposite camp we equally find agreement between Italian and Spanish anti-organizationists. However, unlike their opponents, they retained the link between communism and anti-organizationism. The situation can be summarized as follows: communism was a necessary requirement for anti-organizationists and organization was a necessary requirement for collectivists. However, in the middle there were organizationists who could be either communist or pluralist. For example, Malatesta was both. However, there was no such thing as an anti-organizationist advocacy of pluralism. Why did anti-organizationists posit that link so forcefully?

The explanation proceeds from the respective values of anti-organizationists and organizationists: individual autonomy and association. The contrasting principles of communism and collectivism about consumption had different implications for those values. The communist principle that each should receive according to one's needs assumed abundance, which made it possible to take from the hypothetical and thus controversial "inexhaustible stockpile." In such conditions, the criterion of consumption, need, was entirely individual and free from constraints. As such it was consistent with individual autonomy. In conditions of abundance the choice between the communist and collectivist principles became irrelevant, given that each could receive enough to satisfy all needs, regardless of one's contribution to production. The collectivist principle only

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81 "Schiarimenti," part 1, *La Questione Sociale* (Paterson) 4, no. 64 (28 February 1898).
became relevant in conditions of scarcity, where the problem of consumption became one of distribution of the social product. The worth of each individual’s labour was determined with respect to the whole social product available: it was the portion to which each was entitled. In this respect, and in contrast to the communist principle, the collectivist principle of distribution was inherently relative and socially determined. In implying the notion of social organization it offended the anti-organizationist principle of individual autonomy. On the other hand, while collectivism implied social organization, the reverse was not true: social organization was equally compatible with collectivism and communism. In brief, individual autonomy required communism, collectivism required social organization, and social organization itself was compatible with a pluralist stance.

The commonality of themes debated by Italian and Spanish anarchists has important implications for this thesis and our charitable interpretation of anarchism. Rather than by exceptionalism and the weight of tradition, the persistence of collectivism in Spain proceeded from reasons shared by anarchists in other countries and concerning not the future society but disagreement about practical means. Moreover, that both debates were rooted in a shared contrast of basic values, individual autonomy and association, throws into relief both the diversity of the anarchist movement and the internal coherence of competing versions of anarchism. Contrasts were not based on dogmas, but on complex, interconnected, and rational arguments. The anarchist movement was neither monolithic nor inconsistent. By acknowledging that coherent but contrasting versions of anarchism coexisted, one can replace irrationalist explanations in terms of alleged contradictions, implausible changes of course, or unreasonable attachment to tradition by national anarchist movements with a rational comprehension of the steady and consistent evolution of alternative, cross-national anarchist traditions.

At the end of March 1900, a few weeks after his return from Cuba, Malatesta reported back to the *Círculo de Trabajadores* in New York about his mission. On 4 April
he finally left for London. The different parts of his activity in America show a variety of themes: organization, the key issue of Italian anarchists; patriotism and national independence, which divided Spanish and Cuban workers; and anarchist participation in unions. Malatesta and the anarchist tobacco workers advocated a brand of unionism based on solidarity across ethnic and occupational lines, which coupled immediate gains with the long-term goal of overthrowing capitalism. Five years later such ideas would be made current in North America by the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905. Despite such variety and relevance of themes, standard accounts present Malatesta’s stay in America as the trip in which the knight-errant of Anarchy got shot in the leg. By focusing on the anecdotal, the exotic, and the sensational such accounts portray anarchist action as made up of disconnected, unplanned and unpredictable events, from which an image of anarchism as ultimately irrational results. In contrast to such trivializations, in which sensationalism and the “enormous condescension” stigmatized by E. P. Thompson replace rational understanding, a charitable reading reveals complexity, interconnection, and orientation as ordinary features of anarchist theory and action. Malatesta’s journey to the United States was not a diversion from his engagement in Europe, nor was his tour in Cuba a diversion from his journey to the United States. Both were part of a transnational and cross-national engagement that knew no temporal or spatial interruption.

On 13 April 1900 Malatesta arrived in London, where he remained for the next thirteen years. At forty-six, he had been an anarchist militant for nearly thirty years. The eight-month American “intermission” at the turn of the century, in the middle of his adult life and militancy, was probably his most definitive turning point. While his theoretical and tactical evolution did not stop there, all the theoretical elements from which his

82 “En el Circulo de Trabajadores: Conferencia Malatesta,” El Despertar (New York) 10, no. 199 (1 May 1900); telegram from the Italian consul in New York to the Italian ministry of Interior, 3 April 1900, CPC, b. 2949, ACS.
subsequent evolution stemmed had been put in place. On the basis of Malatesta's trajectory from 1889 to 1900, it is possible to finally attempt a comprehensive interpretation of the system of beliefs that gave sense and coherence to his anarchism.
Chapter IX
A Charitable Interpretation of Malatesta’s Anarchism

The concept of “anarchist gradualism,” which Malatesta worked out in the 1920s, was the final outcome of his theoretical and tactical elaboration. The two decades after his return of 1900 to London were by no means idle or intellectually unproductive, as a brief excursus of his activity shows: in 1902–3 he edited La Rivoluzione Sociale, in which historians such as Pier Carlo Masini have seen “an involutorial phase,” in contrast with the “politics of realism and pragmatism” of earlier years, but which still in the 1920s Malatesta himself considered both important and underrated;\(^1\) in 1907 Malatesta was a protagonist of the international anarchist congress of Amsterdam; in 1913–4 he was back in Italy, where he edited Volontà and had a key role in the “Red Week” insurrectionary movement; and in 1914–6, during World War I, Malatesta reaffirmed anti-militarism as a cornerstone of the anarchist coherence between ends and means, in dramatic opposition to Kropotkin. Still, the core ideas of anarchist gradualism are clearly traceable in Malatesta’s writings of 1899, as such articles as “Verso l’anarchia” illustrate.\(^2\) Hence, gradualism provides a vantage point from which Malatesta’s evolution in 1889–1900 can best be assessed, because it fully spells out the implications of ideas germinated in that period.

By stereotypical standards, “anarchist gradualism” may seem a contradictory concept, or at least a thoroughly revisionistic one that sheds the “impossibilist” assumptions typical of anarchism. Yet it was the outcome of Malatesta’s coherent trajectory of half a century, begun with the First International. It thus provides the opportunity to re-assess the substance of Malatesta’s anarchism and to discuss how it

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\(^1\) Masini, *Epoca degli attentati*, 212–5; Fabbri, “Per una raccolta degli scritti di E. Malatesta.”

\(^2\) See chapter 8, note 18.
“made sense.” The task consists of showing how anarchists ends and means were interconnected, and what beliefs provided the backbone that supported and justified those interconnections. Such re-appraisal of the rationality of anarchism can be best accomplished by a critical comparison of its “good” reasons with ideas and theories of collective action that have become current in the social sciences of the twentieth century. This way anarchism can be rescued from the cultural domicilio coatto in which it is often segregated. By bringing to the fore similarities and connections with “sensible” theories outside of the anarchist tradition, the intellectual sophistication of anarchist theory can be vindicated and the attribution of irrationality, usually made easy by conveniently confining anarchism to the rank of an intellectual aberration, becomes more problematic and questionable.

Malatesta summed up the trajectory of Italian anarchism in an article of 1931, a year before his death. He recalled that sixty years earlier, at the outset of their movement, anarchists believed that anarchy and communism could come about as direct, immediate consequence of a victorious insurrection and that their establishment would be the very initial act of the social revolution. “This was indeed the idea that, after being accepted a little later by Kropotkin, was popularized and almost established by him as the definitive programme of anarchism.” That confidence rested on the beliefs that the people had the innate capacity to self-organize and provide for their own interests and that anarchists interpreted the deep instincts of the masses. As time went by, study and experience proved that many such beliefs were wishful thinking. The historian Richard Hostetter regards the early belief in the “instinctive revolutionism of the masses” as the kernel of the inescapable “anarchists’ dilemma” that by 1882 had already determined the “ideological liquidation” of the Italian International. However, in spite of the “obsequies
of the Italian anarchist movement” that end Hostetter’s book, anarchist theory and tactics had more resources and potential that many historians would like to believe.3

As Malatesta remarked in his 1931 article, the key realizations that neither the mass had all the virtues attributed to it nor that propaganda had all the potential that anarchists had believed were the starting point of a new outlook on the social struggle. Anarchists realized that only a limited number of people could be converted in a given environment; then, finding new members became increasingly difficult, until economic and political occurrences created new opportunities. “After reaching a certain point,” Malatesta observed, “numbers could not grow except by watering down and adulterating one’s programme, as happened to the democratic socialists, who were able to gather imposing masses, but only at the price of ceasing to be real socialists.” Anarchists came to understand their mission differently, based on the conviction that the aspiration to integral freedom, or the “anarchist spirit,” was the cause of humanity’s progress, while political and economic privileges pushed humanity back into a barbaric condition, unless such privileges found an obstacle in a more or less conscious anarchism. Anarchists understood that “anarchy could only come gradually, to the extent that the mass could understand and desire it, but it would never come except under the impulse of a more or less consciously anarchist minority, acting so as to prepare the necessary environment.” Remaining anarchists and acting as anarchists in all circumstances, before, during, and after a revolution, was the duty they set to themselves.4

For Malatesta, anarchy could still be seen as absolute perfection, and it was right that this concept should remain in the anarchists’ minds, like a beacon to guide their steps, but obviously such an ideal could not be attained in one sudden leap. Nor, conversely, were

3 “A proposito di ‘revisionismo.’” L’Adunata dei Refrattari (New York) 10, no. 28 (1 August 1931); Hostetter, 409–410, 425.

4 “A proposito di ‘revisionismo.’”
anarchists to wait till everyone become anarchist to achieve anarchy. On the contrary, they were revolutionary precisely because they believed that under present conditions only a small minority could conceive what anarchy was, while it would be chimerical to hope for a general conversion before the environment changed. Since anarchists could neither convert everybody at once, nor remain in isolation from the rest of society, it was necessary to find ways to apply anarchy, or that degree of anarchy that became gradually feasible, among people who were not anarchist, or were such to different degrees, as soon as a sufficient amount of freedom was won, and anarchist nuclei existed with enough numerical strength and capabilities to be self-sufficient and spread their influence locally.

Before a revolution, Malatesta argued, anarchists were to propagate their ideas and educate as widely as possible, rejecting any compromise with the enemy and keeping ready, at least mentally, to grab any opportunity that could present itself. What were they to do during a revolution? They could not make a revolution alone, nor that would be advisable, for without mobilizing all spiritual forces, interests, and aspirations of an entire people a revolution would be abortive. And even in the unlikely case that anarchists were able to succeed alone, they would find themselves in the paradoxical position of either pushing forward the revolution in an authoritarian manner or pulling back and letting someone else take control of the situation for their own aims. Thus, anarchists should act in agreement with all progressive forces and attract the largest possible mass, letting the revolution, of which anarchists would only be one component, yield whatever it could. However, anarchists were not to renounce their specific aim. On the contrary, they were to remain united as anarchists and distinct from other parties and fight for their own programme: the abolition of political power and the expropriation of capitalists. If, notwithstanding their efforts, new powers succeeded in establishing themselves, hindered popular initiative, and imposed their will, anarchists should disavow those powers, induce the people to withhold human and material resources from them, and weaken them as much as possible, until it became possible to overthrow them.
altogether. In any case, anarchists were to demand, even by force, full autonomy, and the right and means to organize and live their own way, and experiment with the social arrangements they deemed best.

The aftermath of a revolution, after the overthrow of the existing power and the final triumph of the insurgents, was the terrain in which gradualism was to become really crucial. All practical problems of life were to be studied—concerning production, exchange, means of communication, etc.—and each problem was to be solved in the way that was not only economically most convenient, but also most satisfactory from the point of view of justice and freedom, and left the way open to future improvements. In case of conflict between different requirements, justice, freedom, and solidarity were to be prioritized over economic convenience. While fighting against authority and privilege, anarchists were to profit of all the benefits of civilization. No institution that fulfilled a need, even imperfectly, was to be destroyed until it could be replaced with a better solution to provide for that need. While anarchists were intransigent against any imposition and capitalistic exploitation, they were to be tolerant toward any social plans prevailing in the various groupings, as long as such plans did not infringe the equal freedom of others. Anarchists were to be content with progressing gradually, in step with the people’s moral development and as material and intellectual means increased, doing at the same time all they could, by study, work, and propaganda, to hasten the development towards ever more advanced ideals. Solutions would be diverse, according to circumstances, but would always conform, as far as anarchists were concerned, to the fundamental principle that coercion and exploitation were to be rejected. ⁵

Ultimately, as Malatesta wrote in an open letter of 1929 to Nestor Makhno, “the important thing is not the victory of our plans, our projects, our utopias, which in any

⁵ “Gradualismo,” Pensiero e Volontà (Rome) 2, no. 12 (1 October 1925); translated in Anarchist Revolution, 82–87.
case need the confirmation of experience and can be modified by experience, developed and adapted to the real moral and material conditions of the age and place. What matters most is that the people, men and women lose the 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 anarchists must specially dedicate themselves.”

Anarchist gradualism was the outcome of a long itinerary started in 1889. It was built upon the new foundations for anarchism that Malatesta first laid down in L’Associazione. All the stages of Malatesta’s subsequent evolution were preserved and merged together in his gradualist conception. Its primary motivation was provided by Malatesta’s disenchanted outlook on the masses that he began to express in his 1889 articles in which he urged anarchists to “go to the people” and take the masses as they were. Malatesta’s realism found expression not only in the idea that a limited number of people could be converted to revolutionary ideals in a given environment, but also in his belief that the mere defence of economic interests did not necessarily turn into a revolutionary force. “After all—Malatesta argued in 1922 in contrast with syndicalist theories—interests are always conservative; only the ideal is revolutionary.” He meant that economic interests were by nature divisive, as the controversy of 1897 between Ancona dockers illustrated: the closed-shop and freedom of work, each expressed workers’ legitimate but conflicting interests. A revolutionary consciousness could only be achieved by transcending both. Though Malatesta acknowledged the relevance of material needs, he recognized that immediate, personal, material interests often clashes with future, general, moral ones. Every person who fought social evils had to address this tension. Though examples of self-sacrifice and even martyrdom abounded, the spirit of

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sacrifice could not be expected of large masses. Still, economic resistance helped create a fertile terrain for the germination of revolutionary ideals. Gradualism was Malatesta’s ultimate response to the conundrum of anarchist collective action, whereby the conscious participation of the masses was necessary to any truly emancipatory revolution, while at the same time revolutionary consciousness could not be the prerogative of large masses under the existing material constraints of exploitation and oppression. In Malatesta’s gradualist view, the uplifting of consciousness and the increase of freedom, equality and well-being fed each other in a dynamic, iterative, and open-ended process.

Experimentalism was another leading theme of Malatesta’s anarchism that received full expression in his gradualist view. Anarchists ideas were “the experimental system brought from the field of research to that of social realization.” This made the method of freedom paramount. Only by letting social experiments flourish could the best solutions arise and be recognized. Anarchy was not “perfection” or an “absolute ideal,” but “the way open to all progress and all improvements for the benefit of everybody.” In a pluralist perspective, as Malatesta advocated in 1889, “utopias” and specific solutions pertained to individuals and groups, rather than to a shared anarchist doctrine. In 1896 Malatesta thus summarized his view on the issue of collectivism and communism, from which his pluralism originated: “I am communist only at the condition that I do not have to be. That is to say that I consider collectivism as a necessary alternative to ensure the libertarian character of communism.” Social experimentation was to act as a filter, discarding unviable solutions and selecting viable ones, which might not necessarily coincide with anyone’s specific utopia, but result rather from their interplay.

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7 “La lotta economica in regime capitalistic,” Umanità Nova (Rome), no. 193 (21 October 1922); “Interesse ed ideale,” Umanità Nova (Rome), no. 196 (2 December 1922).

8 See chapter 8, note 18.

9 Malatesta to Hamon, London, 20 July 1896, Hamon Papers, file no. 109, IISG.
The keystone of anarchist gradualism was the notion of anarchism as a method, another idea that Malatesta first expressed in 1889, whose import is best appreciated retrospectively, in the light of his subsequent trajectory. The anarchist method not only characterized anarchist action in the present, but became the substance of anarchy itself, no longer identified with one or the other blueprint, but with the society where the search for the best solution to social problems was carried out by the method of freedom. As Peter Marshall remarks, “not only do the means influence the ends, but means are ends-in-the-making.” In brief, the method of freedom was both a method of struggle and the very substance of anarchy. In this perspective, anarchy characterizes a decision-making process, rather than a specific social arrangement, similarly to the notion of democracy. In either case, it would be a category mistake to require a detailed description of society, for the essence of such notions is that the specific shape of a society be left to its members.\(^1\)

There was a necessary link between anarchist gradualism and anarchism as a method. It consisted in defining society in terms of the aggregation of individual dispositions. In this perspective, anarchy was recast as a society of anarchists, that is of individuals holding anarchist dispositions. Aiming for the welfare of all human beings, practising the method of freedom, and being motivated by solidarity were all intentional stances that could be predicated of individuals rather than of whole societies. Anarchy was a society where solidarity and the method of freedom were generalized. Still, before reaching that point, all kinds of intermediate stages existed, where solidarity and the method of freedom were limited to sectors of society, or even minorities. In other words, the methodological shift—in the dual sense of defining anarchism as a method and of understanding society in methodological individualistic terms—enabled a view of anarchy as a gradual process. Anarchism became one of the forces whose interaction the

\(^{10}\) See chapter 4, note 7; Marshall, 637.
direction of society resulted from. The stronger the anarchist force, the more society would steer toward anarchy.

The theoretical breadth of anarchism as a method can be appreciated by pointing out similarities with contemporary theories outside the anarchist tradition, such as Karl Popper's “open society” and Robert Nozick's “framework for utopia.” Popper's approach to politics abandons the positive task of determining “who should rule” for the negative one of devising political institutions that prevent tyranny. For him, theories of sovereignty recall the “paradox of freedom,” for sovereignty can always be exercised in a self-defeating manner, for example by a people choosing to be ruled by a tyrant. In contrast, Popper seeks to develop a theory of democratic control that does not proceed from a doctrine of the righteousness of majority rule, but from the baseness of tyranny. Though no foolproof institutions can ever be developed, Popper regards elections and representation as reasonable safeguards against tyranny, “always open to improvement, and even providing methods for their own improvement.” A self-sustainable search for the viable rather than for the absolutely best also motivates Popper's piecemeal approach to social engineering, for social life, he maintains, is too complex for anyone to judge a blueprint for social engineering on a grand scale. By its approach made up of experiments, readjustments, and readiness to learn from mistakes, Popper argues, piecemeal social engineering would mean the introduction of scientific method into politics.\(^\text{11}\)

Nozick is likewise interested in principles of institutional design such that “bad men at their head can do little harm.” He discusses the minimal state from the perspective of utopian theory. For Nozick, “there will not be one kind of community existing and one kind of life led in utopia.” Rather, “utopia will consist of utopias, of many different and

divergent communities in which people lead different kinds of lives under different institutions." Hence, utopia becomes "a framework for utopias, a place where people are at liberty to join together voluntarily to pursue and attempt to realize their own vision of the good life in the ideal community but where no one can impose his own utopian vision upon others." For Nozick, utopia as meta-utopia, as the environment in which experiments may be tried out, and which must be realized first if more particular utopian vision are to be realized stably, is equivalent with the minimal state. In this framework, the best society is sought by a combination of "design devices" and "filter devices." Specific models of community are generated and promoted by individuals and groups, while the support, or lack thereof, to such proposals works as a filtering process.\(^\text{12}\)

There are clear commonalities between these two models and Malatesta's gradualism: there is a basic distrust for power as a means to achieve positive goals; no description of the best institutions is provided; a method is described that makes an open-ended process of improvement possible, leaving its accomplishment to the responsibility and aggregate initiatives of individuals; and the process is experimental, upon the assumption that the complexity and diversity of society makes it impossible to collectively, intentionally pursue an \textit{a priori} blueprint. In particular, Popper's concern to make the method of freedom self-sustainable and avoid the paradoxes of freedom and sovereignty is also the concern of anarchists, for whom those paradoxes were the very substance of any society where people alienate their freedom to a government. Just as they exposed the oppressive nature of government, they emphasized that its main pillar was people’s submission, the "voluntary servitude" of Étienne de La Boétie.\(^\text{13}\) Such affinity between Popper and anarchism is confirmed by a 1982 interview in which Popper


expresses sympathy with anarchism, which he dismissed in *The Open Society*. It is, he says, an unrealizable ideal, but the closest we can get to it, the better off freedom is.\(^\text{14}\)

In turn, Nozick emphasizes the fundamental role of utopia as individual and collective motive, in a framework that is not utopian itself but pluralistically open to all utopias, insofar as they do not endanger the framework itself. Clearly, fundamental differences separate Malatesta from Popper and Nozick. However, these are not so much about the dynamics of the framework, which bears striking resemblances, as to the conditions that make its working possible, which are more stringent for Malatesta. He spelled out such differences in *Anarchy*, where he defined liberalism as “a kind of anarchy without socialism.” For him, the liberal method “relies on free individual enterprise and proclaims, if not the abolition, at least the reduction of governmental functions to an absolute minimum; but because it respects private property and is entirely based on the principle of each for himself and therefore of competition between men, the liberty it espouses is for the strong.” Far from producing harmony, this method leads to exploitation and domination. In brief, for Malatesta, the method of freedom shared by Popper and Nozick is not self-sustainable without solidarity.\(^\text{15}\)

Malatesta’s references to socialism and solidarity make clear that recasting anarchism as a decision-making process does not mean turning it into a hollow and formalistic notion. It is worth recalling Malatesta’s definition of anarchism as having equality of conditions as its point of departure, solidarity as its beacon, and freedom as its method.\(^\text{16}\) Though the definition gave no description of an anarchist society, it was far from vacuous. In fact, it drew a line even within anarchism. The point of departure in the

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\(^\text{15}\) Malatesta, *Anarchy*, 46.

\(^\text{16}\) See chapter 4, note 15.
pursuit of the well-being of all was the equality of conditions, as provided by the abolition of private ownership of the means of production. Malatesta thus reasserted a socialistic and substantial notion of equality based on the satisfaction of material needs, in contrast to the formal notion of liberal democracy. Yet socialism was only a starting point. Different paths were open and diverse solutions might be tried, so long as their motive was solidarity. This apparently obvious statement was crucial. In contrast with the Marxist tradition, Malatesta was claiming human dispositions as the substance of the socialist society. At the same time, in contrast with the liberal tradition, he claimed that the common good could only be achieved by intentionally aiming for it. Finally, in contrast with egoistic versions of anarchism, he maintained that there could be no anarchy without solidarity.

Just as anarchism as a method was not a formalistic notion, neither did it become an unchanging standpoint detached from concrete situations, or an aimless and merely individual moral stance without political goals. Malatesta’s methodological individualism was coupled with the assumption that humans were eminently social beings, and this constituted the main divide from anti-organizationism. Though Malatesta did not disavow the legitimacy and possible usefulness of individual deeds, for him anarchist action was pre-eminently collective and had to be constantly adjusted to fit the current conditions of the people, with the aim of fostering their material and moral uplift. Malatesta’s crucial step was his inclusive interpretation of the principle of coherence between ends and means, whereby anarchists could do anything that did not contrast with their principles. A range of initiatives, such as labour struggles and insurrectionary alliances, which others regarded as compromises that watered down anarchist principles, were legitimate for Malatesta, as well as crucial in drawing the masses to anarchist practices. Thus, anarchism as a method was thoroughly situated in the social context, in virtue of its collective dimension.
Most importantly, insurrection remained a goal of anarchist collective action. It might be more or less distant in time, but it was the single most definite task on the anarchist agenda. On the one hand, though some progress was possible within bourgeois society, open insurrection was the unavoidable outcome of class struggle, if further progress was to be made. On the other hand, though Malatesta increasingly regarded insurrection as only the beginning of a revolutionary process, the direction of society after a successful insurrection was indeterminate and open-ended; setting goals for the post-insurrectionary stage could only be conjectural. Hence, insurrection was the one aim firmly in sight. Malatesta’s evolution towards gradualism did not affect this belief. Gradualism evolved from a changing outlook on the revolutionary potential of the masses, not on the coercive potential of governments. It originated from the increasing abandonment of the identification between insurrection and revolution. Hence, it concerned more social evolution after a successful insurrection than before it. In fact, gradualism arose precisely from the combination of an evolutionary outlook on social change, as spelled out in 1897, with the awareness of the limited scope of such evolution within a bourgeois society, as emphasized in Contro la Monarchia.

By shifting focus from the end-point of anarchy to the process by which to approach it, whether or not the end-point was fully attainable, anarchist gradualism throws into relief Malatesta’s predominant concern for practical means in the pursuit of ultimate goals. His outlook on means is summarized by a concise formula: the rejection of “good by force,” as Malatesta put it.\footnote{E. Malatesta, “Le bien par la force,” L’Idée, no. 7 (15 October 1894), reprinted in Le Réveil Anarchiste (Geneva) 27, no. 972 (1 May 1937).} This was the root of the asymmetry between the tactics of anarchists and those of all parties aiming at political power. The latter’s goal was ultimately to achieve enough strength to be able to enforce what they regarded as the common good. In contrast, the anarchists’ aims were limited to spreading the anarchist
ideal through propaganda and example, and to removing the obstacles that hindered the method of freedom. As Malatesta tirelessly pointed out, the constructive task of building new social institutions was equally important as destroying the evil ones, but that task could not be committed to anarchists alone, or to any party or minority, on behalf of a passive majority. Such institutions could only be built by those directly affected by them, insofar as they were morally equipped for the task. Hence, anarchy could only be realized to the extent that such moral readiness was widespread among the population. In brief, anarchists aimed for the collective good without aiming to gain the strength to impose it. Herein lay the difference from other parties, and what I have termed the conundrum of anarchist collective action, which can be restated as follows: anarchists strove for an aim that could never be entirely up to them to realize.

From this asymmetry, it followed that the inadequacy of means and defeat was a matter of course to be reckoned with. Indeed, anarchists did not look upon defeat as an unqualified liability. There was a greater failure than defeat, and that was the forsaking of anarchist principles. Coherence between ends and means had priority over winning. In 1914, in the heat of the debate among anarchists about World War I, Malatesta argued that in those circumstances where socialists were powerless to act efficaciously to weaken the State and the capitalist class their duty was to “refuse any voluntary help to the cause of the enemy, and stand aside to save at least their principles—which means to save the future.” In 1924, discussing terror as a revolutionary weapon, he argued: “the revolution has to be defended and developed with an inexorable logic; but it must not and cannot be defended with means that contradict its own ends…. If, to win, we have to set up the gallows in the public square, I would prefer to lose.” And in 1931 he reiterated: “we must always act as anarchists, even at the risk of being defeated, thus giving up a victory that might be the victory of our persons, but would be the defeat of our ideas.”

18 "A proposito di 'revisionismo.'"
This attitude towards defeat did not proceed from a dogmatic attachment to abstract values, but from the preoccupation to stay on the right path. Anarchists were concerned not only about which means were adequate, but most importantly about which ones were not and led elsewhere than desired, that is about the unintended consequences of their action. This concern reveals a side of anarchism that is seldom pointed out, and could be described as its conservative dimension. The advocacy of coherence between ends and means, the rejection of self-defeating means such as parliamentarianism, the mistrust of reformism, the acceptance of defeat, the rejection of formal organization by some, all point to a predominant preoccupation with not going in the wrong direction. At the root of such preoccupation was a keen awareness of the issue of the heterogony of ends, which had characterized the anarchists since the time of the International.

As with the anarchists’ general attitude towards defeat, the rejection of specific means was based on pragmatic reasons. For example, in contrast to the blanket rejection of organization customarily attributed to anarchists, the question of organization was not just about organizing or not, but rather about formal organization. Anti-organizationists opposed the conformity to rules induced by bureaucracy, a question whose importance has been later pointed out by sociologists as Robert K. Merton. Merton argues that the adherence to rules required for bureaucracy to operate successfully, and originally conceived as a means, becomes transformed into an end-in-itself, in a process of displacement of goals, such that devotion to rules interferes with the achievement of the organization’s purposes. Anti-organizationists claimed that formal structure added nothing valuable to the advantages of organization, and shunned organization at the point where it generated bureaucracy. Aside from that, all anarchists did organize. Malatesta’s most frequent objection to anti-organizationists was that, despite their claims, when they wanted to get something accomplished they did organize, sometimes better than self-
proclaimed organizationists. The most common form of organization was the common denominator between organizationists and anti-organizationists, the anarchist network. 19

The link between Malatesta’s outlook on social evolution as a gradual, experimental process characterized by the method of freedom and the anarchists’ adherence to the principle of coherence between ends and means can be brought forth by re-describing social evolution, as viewed by Malatesta, as an incremental invisible-hand process driven by morality, which could unfold to the degree that coercive visible hands hindering the process were removed from its way. Again, a comparison with twentieth-century theories that discuss invisible-hand processes is useful to illustrate such an interpretation of Malatesta’s view of social dynamics. A good starting point for discussing the relation between invisible-hand processes and the method of freedom is the work of F. A. Hayek, which contains an articulate defense of that method.

"The case for individual freedom," Hayek contends, "rests chiefly on the recognition of the inevitable ignorance of all of us concerning a great many of the factors on which the achievement of our ends and welfare depends." If there were omniscient men, Hayek argues, there would be little case for liberty. Instead, through mutually adjusted efforts, more knowledge is utilized than any individual possesses. Dispersed knowledge makes greater achievements possible than any single mind can foresee. "It is because freedom means the renunciation of direct control of individual efforts that a free society can make use of so much more knowledge than the mind of the wisest ruler could comprehend." In contrast, when the exclusive right to try alternatives is conferred to one agency, presumed to hold superior knowledge, the process ceases to be experimental and beliefs held at a given time may hinder the advancement of knowledge. Hayek’s key example of how dispersed knowledge works is the distribution of products in a competitive market, which

informs individuals in what direction their several efforts must aim in contributing to the total product. For Hayek human civilisation depends on the spontaneous extended order of human cooperation known as capitalism.²⁰

Hayek’s view belongs to the class of the so-called “invisible-hand explanations.” In turn, these are a special case of what Raymond Boudon calls explanations that feature “perverse effects,” which include not only unintended collective benefits, but also unintended collective problems. In fact, much of the study of collective action and the provision of public goods has concerned what Russell Hardin has called “the working of the back of the invisible hand,” that is, the failure to secure greater collective interests in seeking private interests. Similar concerns motivated the anarchists’ preoccupation with coherence between ends and means and solidarity.²¹

The affinity between Hayek’s case for individual freedom and Malatesta’s advocacy of the method of freedom as “the experimental system brought from the field of research to that of social realization” should be apparent. Incidentally, given such affinity between Hayek and an advocate of socialism who belonged to the First International, it is ironic that the Left, especially British, has recently engaged with Hayek’s ideas in an effort to renew the socialist project.²² However, there are two fundamental differences between Hayek’s and Malatesta’s appeal to the method of freedom. The first is the scope of its application. When it comes to preventing coercion, Hayek no longer commits the advance of reason to freedom and unpredictability, but to control and predictability. His pre-condition to prevent coercion is the recognition of a private sphere, including most


crucially private property, to be protected against interference by everyone’s acceptance of rules enforced by a government. In contrast, anarchists advocated the method of freedom across the board. For them, knowledge dispersion was valid not only in the economy, but also in politics. Carl Schmitt characterizes liberalism as a “consistent, comprehensive metaphysical system” that is not limited to the economic sphere in applying a general principle: that “the truth can be found through an unrestrained clash of opinion and that competition will produce harmony.” In this light, the anarchists’ across-the-board advocacy of freedom would be a consequent interpretation of the liberal principle, though one Popper, Nozick, and Hayek would deny.23

The second difference between Malatesta and Hayek is that they hold diametrically opposed views on the role of solidarity. For Hayek solidarity and altruism are “a remnant of the instinctual, and cautious, micro-ethic of the small band.” In a large group, “the old impulse to follow inborn altruistic instincts actually hinders the formation of more extensive orders.” Hence, implicit in Hayek’s account is a normative urge to abstain from solidarity, so as to let the “spontaneous” extended order work for the collective good.24 Herein lies the self-referential paradox of an agent who, in view of the collective good, intentionally abstains from pursuing it. In contrast, for Malatesta freedom led to exploitation and domination when individuals were motivated by self-interest rather than solidarity. For him, the collective good could only arise from its intentional pursuit. However, insofar as an invisible-hand process is one in which the end result is unpredictable, unplanned, and unintended by anyone, Malatesta’s pursuit of the collective good was one such process. No individual or group could hold the knowledge necessary to plan or predict what the end result would be. The outcome could only be the result of free experimentation. Even competition was not absent from Malatesta’s


scenario, insofar as different ideas of the collective good competed to gain predominance, just as different scientific theories compete in pursuit of the common aim of truth. "If the day came," Malatesta wrote, "that all fully agreed on the advantages of a given thing, it would mean that any possible progress with respect to that thing would be exhausted." In brief, the common good would arise as a spontaneous social result of its intentional individual pursuit. The self-referential paradox pointed out in Hayek's case did not arise for Malatesta, while the non-controlled character of the process was preserved.

In Malatesta's view, the concern for the well-being of all humanity was the substance of the anarchist morals. Thus, his invisible-hand process of social evolution can be described as being driven by morality. Malatesta regarded this disposition as ultimate and fundamental. He thus refrained from any attempt to derive it from other principles: "We could cease to be communist or anarchist," Malatesta argued in 1913, "if it seemed to us to have found a better solution, but the force that sustains and drives us would still remain the love of humanity. Such love is either felt or not felt: it comes neither from science nor from philosophy. However, it is often a latent feeling, that can be brought forth and set in motion: this is the main goal of propaganda." Likewise, Malatesta refrained from deriving explicit, universal rules of conduct from this disposition, as his argument against the principle of non-violence, which kept Tolstoyans from defending the oppressed, expressed well: "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: the good of humanity, of all humanity." Though Malatesta refrained from philosophical abstractions, his formulation echoes Kant's principle of humanity as an end in itself. The idea of love as the ultimate foundation of anarchy, even above justice, was thus argued for in a letter of 1931: "Strictly speaking, justice means giving to

25 Malatesta, "Da Londra: Cose a posto."
the others the equivalent of what they give to you; it means Proudhon’s *échange égal*.... Instead love gives all it can and wishes it could give ever more, without counting, without calculating.... It seems to me that there are two contrasting feelings in the human mind: the feeling of sympathy, or love, for one’s fellow human beings, which is always beneficial; and the feeling of justice, which gives rise to unending strife, because everyone finds it fair what suits him best.”

For Malatesta morality was pervasive in society and inherent in intentional action. One could choose which morals to follow, but could not help holding a moral view of some kind. Thus he charged anarchists who affected to reject morality altogether with forgetting that “in order to reasonably fight some morals, one must oppose superior morals to them, in theory and in practice.” For him, “morals are the rule of conduct that each individual considers good.” One could reject specific moral views, but a society without any morals whatsoever could not be conceived, nor an individual who acted consciously without any criterion for discriminating what was good or bad for himself and the others. Thus, in fighting the present society, anarchists “oppose the morals of love and solidarity to bourgeois individualistic morals of struggle and competition.” In upholding the centrality of morals, Malatesta rejected the claim that the social environment prevented one from acting morally, at the same time that he acknowledged the overwhelming constraints that limited such action:

Certainly every anarchist, every socialist understands the economic fatality that today force man to fight against man, and every good observer sees the impotence of individual rebellion against the preponderant force of the social environment. However, it is equally certain that without the rebellion of the individual, who associates with other rebellious individuals to resist the environment and strive to transform it, such an environment would never change.

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“All of us, without exception,” Malatesta acknowledged, “are obliged to live, more or less, in contradiction with our ideals; but we are anarchists and socialists because, and in so far as, we suffer by this contradiction, and seek to make it as small as possible.” The day one adapted himself to the environment, one would end up losing the desire to change it, thus turning into an ordinary bourgeois; perhaps penniless, Malatesta concluded, but nevertheless a bourgeois in one’s acts and intentions.27

Malatesta maintained that solidarity was a widespread sentiment. If hate, competition, and war had been the exclusive or dominant factors in human relationships, he argued, humanity could not have developed and progressed; there would not even be any humanity to speak of, but only brutes. By setting a limit that conflicts could not cross without arousing repugnance, human sympathy was morality in the making. Along with the awareness of the advantages that stem from its fulfillment, that sympathy yielded the ideas of “justice,” “right,” and “morals” that, notwithstanding endless hypocrisy and lies, represented an ideal towards which humanity advanced. “This ‘morality’ is fickle and relative,” Malatesta maintained; “it varies with the time, with different peoples, classes, and individuals; people use it to serve their own personal interests and that of their families, class or country. But discarding what in official ‘morality’ serves to defend the privilege and violence of the ruling class, there is always something left which is in the general interest and is the common achievement of all humanity, irrespective of class and race.” For Malatesta, the fact itself that the privileged felt the need to justify their status by a “morality,” however contradictory, was already a step towards a superior morality, and evidence that privilege did not feel secure on the mere basis of brute force.28

At any rate, Malatesta’s anarchism did not rest upon such empirical observations. It made no appeal to any supposed human nature or law of social evolution, but equally—

27 “Errori e rimedi.”

and this was the aim of his observations—it rejected human nature or social evolution as the basis for normative statements. On the other hand, grounding anarchism on an ethical choice that did not proceed from scientific or philosophical theories did not imply reducing it to an absolute principle independent of any appraisal of empirical reality, as often argued by commentators. For example, commenting upon the Malatesta–Merlino debate of 1897, Giampietro Berti utilizes Max Weber’s fundamental distinction between “ethic of ultimate ends” and “ethic of responsibility,” which, in Berti’s view, were respectively epitomized by Malatesta and Merlino. For Malatesta, Berti argues, “nothing was worth struggling for except the full realization of the anarchist idea;” in contrast, Merlino was allegedly driven by “the present historical responsibility.” By trivializing Weber’s distinction into a dichotomy between idealism and realism Berti does justice to neither Weber nor Malatesta. Both Weber’s concepts, as his choice of words makes clear, partake of an ethically oriented conduct, in which “some kind of faith must always exist.” Neither one is identical with irresponsibility nor the other with unprincipled opportunism. Rather, Weber claims, the two “are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements, which only in unison constitute a genuine man—a man who can have the ‘calling for politics.’” Such combination can be found in Malatesta. In addition to his ethical orientation, Malatesta’s concern for the consequences of one’s action was evident from his argument for violence and against Tolstoyism. Moreover, his urge to “take the people as they are,” was in step with Weber’s claim that “a man who believes in an ethic of responsibility takes account of precisely the average deficiencies of people.”

The anarchists’ “conservative” concern for the consequences of one’s action was expressed in general form by their principle of coherence between ends and means rather than by any attempt to calculate the consequences of singular initiatives. This view was

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akin to Popper's, who assigns social sciences the task “to trace the unintended social repercussions of intentional human actions,” rather than to propound historical prophecies as a pre-requisite to conducting politics in a rational way. Similarly, for Malatesta the task of social sciences was to uncover “the necessary laws resulting from the interaction of men living together in the diverse circumstances in which they find themselves.” At the same time, his emphasis on social indeterminacy implied that social evolution was not predictable and that the consequences of singular initiatives were only foreseeable to a limited degree.30

By recasting anarchist gradualism as an invisible-hand process driven by the individual pursuit of the collective good it is possible to grasp the connection between two aspects of anarchist theory, spontaneism and morality, which are usually addressed separately by commentators. When their connection is severed, both aspects are misunderstood and criticized as obviously irrational. Spontaneism is misconstrued as the unrealistic and unreasonable assumption of a benign human nature and the expectation that the collective good be provided without being intentionally aimed for. Morality is misconstrued as an individual stance that stubbornly ignores the social nature of the provision of collective goods. The two criticisms converge in the charge that anarchism fails to acknowledge the political dimension of the provision of collective goods.

For example, Giampietro Berti argues that the strategic considerations underlying Malatesta’s gradualism “point out, willy-nilly, the fate of anarchism’s structural political subordination.” This is so because, in a revolutionary transition, “anarchists must not personally engage in carrying out those inevitable coercive measures that follow every social upheaval.” Not being able to steer a revolution amounts to remaining in a subordinate position, as it is not possible to “reach a political point at which the entire

authoritarian part of the revolution spontaneously and peacefully surrenders to the libertarian part.” In brief, for Berti, coherence between ends and means prevented anarchists from seizing power, while the authoritarian turn that every revolution took unfailingly refuted the anarchist expectations about a universal, benign human nature.\textsuperscript{31}

Indeed, Malatesta did not believe that the authoritarian forces of revolution would surrender to the libertarian ones. Instead, the essence of gradualism was the more modest expectation that after each revolutionary upheaval new opportunities for freedom would open up, and authoritarian forces would end up weaker. The anarchists’ struggling for full realization of their ideal was not based on self-deception about what was directly reachable from the present society, but on their understanding of the dynamics of collective action. For Malatesta, social change was a function of the strength and direction of each component involved. If anarchists aimed for a more moderate goal, the result would also be a lesser change. Moreover, nobody knew exactly what was reachable from the present society. The standard relation between the desirable and the possible was reversed. For “realists,” the set of reachable possible worlds was an independent variable, to which individuals adjusted their goals. For anarchists, individual goals were the independent variable. If all were anarchist, anarchy would become possible, or rather real.

In brief, for Malatesta, aiming for the full anarchist ideal and adhering to anarchist morals came neither from an unrealistic apprehension of reality nor from a retreat from politics. Instead, spontaneism and morality together comprised the anarchist’s outlook on the political problem. On the one hand, he regarded the provision of the common good as the spontaneous and socially unplanned result of individual intentional efforts. On the other hand, morality was the individual stance intentionally embraced in pursuit of the common good. Spontaneism did not rely on the assumption of a benign human nature or

\textsuperscript{31} Berti, Malatesta, 762, 766, 768–9.
on the substitution of fideistic wishful thinking for empirical analysis. It relied on a rational understanding of social evolution as an invisible-hand process of the same kind that social theorists invoke in the description of market economy and many other social phenomena described as effects of composition. Conversely, morality was the sort of individual behaviour socially conducive to the common good as an unplanned effect of composition. Such conscious connection between spontaneism and morality constituted the essence of Malatesta’s voluntarist theory of collective action.

Its poignancy can be best assessed by comparing it with the theories of collective action in the mainstream traditions of rational-choice theory and Marxism, especially with respect to each theory’s outlook on the relation between positive and normative statements. Such a comparative approach points out that such ideas as coherence between ends and means, voluntarism, morality, and social indeterminacy were not accessory eccentricities of anarchist theory, but necessary elements that marked off the anarchist path from alternative ones. Rational-choice theory explains the behaviour of social systems in terms of the behaviour of individual actors. The theory compares actions according to their expected outcomes for the actor and postulates that the actor will choose the action with the best outcome. A key theme of rational-choice theory is the conflict between individual and collective rationality, in contrast to the “fallacy of composition” inherent to the presumption that a group with a common interest takes action to further that interest.32 The contrast between individual and collective rationality has received formal expression in the Prisoners’ Dilemma model of game theory. In turn, this game is regarded as the paradigm of collective action problems, that is, problems of joint action in pursuit of a collective good. For example, Russell Hardin claims that “the problem of collective action in social contexts… is the Prisoners’ Dilemma writ large”.

and for Jon Elster politics is "the study of ways of transcending the Prisoners' Dilemma." In its methodological individualism, rational-choice theory provides both a term of comparison and a challenge to Malatesta's approach to collective action, for the Prisoners' Dilemma is the mainstay of arguments for the desirability of government in the provision of collective goods.

The conflict between individual and collective rationality has been clearly formulated in Mancur Olson's influential book The Logic of Collective Action. Olson argues that, unless a group is small, or unless there is coercion or some separate incentive, "rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common group interest." The reason is that an individual's action has no perceptible effect in a large group. In such situations, the model of individual rationality is the "free rider," that is, the individual who enjoys an indivisible collective good without contributing to its provision. Any such situation, in which what it makes sense for an individual to do is not what it would make sense for the group to do, is modelled by the game theory's Prisoners' Dilemma, in which two players can choose between a "defection" and a "cooperation" strategy. Either player gets the highest payoff by defecting when the other player cooperates and vice versa. Mutual defection and mutual cooperation yield intermediate payoffs, with mutual defection paying off lower than mutual cooperation. The model has been used to restate Hobbes's argument that government is necessary, because otherwise people would not voluntarily cooperate to provide themselves with basic public goods, such as peace and security.


In being both descriptive and normative, the argument for the desirability of government is circular. From the descriptive assumption of self-interest as a universal disposition, the rationality of defection is normatively asserted. Moreover, the claim that government yields universal cooperation is based on a departure from a strict methodological individualism, for government is regarded as an unanalyzed entity external to the game. Yet, as anarchists have relentlessly pointed out, governments are made up of individuals. Hence, they should be amenable to rational-choice analysis as every other actor in the game. At that point government can no longer be regarded as an agent that imposes cooperation on all players, for government members are not bound themselves by cooperation, and therefore they constitute a residuum of defectors. In brief, the result of introducing government is not the collectively optimal outcome.

Thus, the argument for the desirability of government is tenable only insofar as it avoids self-referentiality. As soon as the actors which it describes are identified with those to which it prescribes, the argument becomes self-fulfilling, not only because self-interest is both described as universal and prescribed as rational, but also because, as Michael Taylor argues, government “exacerbates the conditions that are supposed to make it necessary.”

Malatesta made the even stronger point that “a police force where there are no crimes to solve or criminals to apprehend, will invent both, or cease to exist.” Moreover, when government is no longer regarded as an exogenous agent but as a player, free-riding and government become two sides of the same coin, rather than being mutually exclusive as the theory argues. Free riders live off cooperators. Their ideal situation is for everyone else to cooperate. Hence, a free-rider’s best condition is to be able to enforce cooperation. Conversely, actors in a position to enforce cooperation must be assumed to seek to maximize their own benefit, on pain of making the theory

36 Ibid., 168–9.
37 See chapter 2, note 22.
self-contradictory. In brief, both free-riding and government imply defection and rest on everyone else’s cooperation. Government does not remove free-riding, but monopolizes it.

The anarchists’ approach to situations modelled by the Prisoner’s Dilemma was a straightforward and unconditional adherence to collective rationality: as Malatesta claimed, their actions aimed at the well-being of all humanity; their ideal was a society characterized by universal voluntary cooperation, which, unlike the monopoly of free-riding by a government, represents the optimal outcome in the Prisoner’s Dilemma; and through the principle of coherence between ends and means their every action in the here and now was driven by collective rationality. By framing the problem of collective action in methodological individualistic terms, as the effect of composition of individual action, the Prisoner’s Dilemma illuminates the political import of morality. For example, Derek Parfit argues that a solution to Prisoners’ Dilemma situations would be to become Kantians. Since none could rationally will that all choose a self-benefiting alternative, each would choose an altruistic alternative. In other words, the anarchist advocacy of morals was a way of transcending the Prisoner’s Dilemma. 38 The Prisoner’s Dilemma as an iterative game sheds further light on the strategic dimension of morality. Anarchists did not only practise collective rationality, but equally focused on propaganda and example. As Michael Taylor argues, altruism may be encouraged by the observation of altruism. The anarchists were the “early adopters” of collective rationality, but they recognized that most actors’ disposition to cooperate was constrained by the struggle for survival. Hence, they focused on removing government and the private ownership of the means of production, the obstacles that prevented actors from embracing collective rationality. 39


39 Taylor, Possibility of Cooperation, 168–175.
The anarchists' solution to the Prisoners' Dilemma, as well as their larger claims about solidarity, are often charged with neglecting how real actors behave. For example, Olson contrasts his theory with the alleged “anarchistic fallacy” of believing that “once the existing, repressive, exploitive state was overthrown, a new, voluntary, natural unity would somehow emerge to take its place,” which he regards as “evidence of hopeless eccentricity.”\footnote{ Olson, 130–1.} However, Olson’s own work demonstrates that anarchism is not so far outside the mainstream as it is portrayed. His argument that “action taking” groups tend to be small reflects a key argument of anti-organizationists. At the same time Olson argues that “federal” groups constitute an exception to his theory. Again, federation was the standard form of large anarchist organizations. Thus Olson, unwittingly, since he does not understand anarchism, brings grist to the anarchist mill.\footnote{Ibid., 53–54, 62–65.}

Furthermore, anarchists maintained that solidarity was pervasive in society. Kropotkin’s studies of mutual aid are well-known and Malatesta himself regarded association as the fabric of society. However, anarchists most strongly refuted the claim that self-interest was universal by their own existence. They were a living example of solidaristic behaviour in the present society. Olson’s theory is again relevant, here. Referring to utopian mass movements he claims: “There is paradoxically the logical possibility that groups composed of either altruistic individuals or irrational individuals may sometimes act in their common group interests.” Olson dismisses this “logical possibility” as being “usually of no practical importance.”\footnote{Ibid., 2, 161–2.} Yet, with its own existence as a mass movement, anarchism refuted Olson’s empirical claim, lending practical importance to the logical possibility. The implied argument was self-fulfilling, like the Hobbesian one, but, unlike the latter, it was explicitly and unproblematically so. In a
nutshell, the two sides respectively argued: “we must be egoist since everyone is” and “anyone can be altruist since we are.” The “realist” argument grounds normative statements on allegedly empirical assumptions and is made unsound by its being self-referential. The voluntarist argument is self-contained and made sound precisely by its being self-referential.

If the assumption of universal self-interest is dropped, univocal normative statements can no longer be inferred from the Prisoners’ Dilemma. Each actor makes a choice between individual and collective rationality in a game whose structure and outcome are indeterminate, depending on the aggregate choice of all actors. This is the very situation that Malatesta outlined when he claimed that the choice between egoism and solidarity confronted every individual and could only be consciously made. Through this claim he rejected the opposite and equally unwarranted beliefs in the necessity of government and in a natural harmony among individuals.

In sum, rather than exposing the “anarchistic fallacy” purported by Olson, the Prisoner’s Dilemma corroborates Malatesta’s approach to collective action. Unlike the advocates of government, anarchists aimed for the optimal solution from the point of view of collective rationality. And unlike Hobbesians, Malatesta made no assumption about human nature. By their own existence, anarchists proved that living morally was a feasible course of action; by their example and propaganda, they spread the preference for collective rationality; and by the growth of their movement they increased the likelihood of an anarchist outcome. As Hobbes had claimed, if a multitude of people could live morally “we might as well suppose all Man-kind to do the same.”

By being anarchist, that is by embodying and propagating collective rationality, anarchists were the living proof that anarchy, or the realization of collective rationality, was possible. Even

E. J. Hobsbawm, certainly no anarchist, makes a similar point when he argues that utopianism is probably a necessary social device to generate a revolution, because “revolutionary movements and revolutions appear to prove that almost no change is beyond their reach.” Revolutionaries, Hobsbawm continues, carry a higher standard of morality into practice, the implied message being: “If this is possible within their movement, why not everywhere?”

The tension between positive and normative statements is also at the core of the contrast between Marxist and anarchist theories of collective action. Marxists were normatively driven by the analysis of historical processes, while anarchists were driven by the coherence between ends and means. The contrast is often portrayed as being between “scientific” and “utopian” socialism, the one allegedly based on empirical knowledge and the other shunning it. However, this is misleading. Both theories concerned the relation between theory and practice, but differed radically in the appraisal of that relation. Marxists tended to conflate descriptive and prescriptive statements, while anarchists drew a sharp line between them. Again, the issue of self-reference is central to understanding the respective versions of self-aware rationality. The key question is whether empirical knowledge can concern one’s own beliefs and actions.

At the heart of the question is the notion of reflexive beliefs, thus characterized by the sociologists William I. and Dorothy Swaine Thomas: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” Reflexivity proceeded directly from the tenets of historical materialism, when the theory was invoked as a guide to social action. By conflating the positive and normative spheres, “self-understanding,” on which historical materialism founded normative statements, amounted to self-fulfilling belief, for beliefs


were both constitutive of reality and derived from it. For historical materialism, history had a knowable line of march; the agency of the proletariat was a key determinant of that line of march; at the same time the proletariat was to embrace the mission assigned by the course of history and deemed to be independent from anyone's will. The Marxist philosopher György Lukács describes the process as the proletariat self-referentially becoming "both the subject and the object of knowledge." In a more unflattering manner, the formerly Marxist philosopher of science Imre Lakatos thus wrote in 1974 to his colleague Paul Feyerabend:

Marx's greatest weakness... was that he advocated both historical determinism and then human freedom. For his whole theory it was vital to encourage the working class by showing that they are supported by historical necessity; on the other hand he was afraid that if they take this argument really seriously they will find out that they do not have to make a revolution and suffer for it, since the revolution will come anyway. Therefore Marx is for historical necessity on even pages and for freedom of the will on odd pages, so that revolutionaries should know that without their efforts historical determinism will stop working."

Determinism and voluntarism, which were conflated in Marxist theory, were kept sharply apart in Malatesta's anarchism. On the issue of determinism and free will, Malatesta's standpoint was a characteristic suspension of judgement and unresolved dualism. What was remarkable in this stance was precisely the implicit avoidance of self-referentiality: the observer Malatesta embraced determinism, but he stopped its application where the will of the actor Malatesta began. A rift between the observer and the actor was retained, rather than building a theoretical system encompassing one's own beliefs as possible objects of belief. Incompleteness on the descriptive side and unwarranted assumptions on the prescriptive side, were accepted. Inconsistency between

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descriptive and prescriptive systems was not ruled out. However, the consistency between Malatesta’s theory and action might well rest upon not making any claim about their consistency. In its apparent inconsequence, Malatesta’s standpoint is remarkably in step with recent formal results in belief logic. Recasting Kurt Gödel’s metamathematical theorems in terms of systems that can reason about their consistency and inconsistency, Raymond Smullyan has proven that such systems cannot consistently believe in their own consistency: “if the reasoner is consistent, he can never know that he is consistent; or, stated otherwise, if the reasoner ever believes that he cannot be inconsistent, he will become inconsistent!”

While the Marxist theory of collective action was implicitly based on self-fulfilling beliefs, Malatesta’s was explicitly so. This was the essence of his voluntarism. Malatesta positively advocated a version of the “Thomas theorem”: “If men define anarchy as real,” the theorem could be paraphrased, “anarchy is real in its consequences.” A question thus arises: if, after all, both Marx’s and Malatesta’s theories of collective action hinged upon self-fulfilling beliefs, what set them apart? The difference consisted in the opposite views about what beliefs were legitimate. Marx and Malatesta agreed that the working class had numbers, but in order to turn those numbers into a revolutionary movement a revolutionary consciousness was also required. For Marx, this could only be the consciousness of the working class’s historical mission, as uniquely identified through knowledge of the concrete totality’s real movement, and summarized by the notion of “self-understanding.” In contrast, for Malatesta history had no knowable line of march, nor there was any mission set by history. Missions, aims, and normative concepts pertained to individuals. They were collective and socially relevant to the extent that they were widespread and spurred collective organization in their pursuit.

“Self-understanding,” however, was a problematic notion in the light of Marx’s own theory of ideology, which made knowledge of the concrete totality by actors who were part of it a contradictory notion. Only an external observer could soundly undertake the task of “letting the world perceive its own consciousness by awaking it from dreaming about itself.” In fact, it was the responsibility of the philosopher, or of the Marxist party, to make the proletariat aware of its historical mission. Since there was one definite line of march of history, which dictated one definite mission, only one path was admitted. No other successful course of action was deemed to be open to the proletarian actors. However, the matter was not just to interpret the world, but to change it. The task of Marxist philosophy was not only to make the proletariat aware of its mission, but to lead it in its fulfillment. In brief, the task was both to define a situation as real and to make it real in its consequences, as per the Thomas theorem.

Yet defining situations as real is not a purely “objective” operation, when one can have beliefs about one’s own beliefs under certain conditions. As has been pointed out in the current sociological debate about reflexive beliefs, these have more profound implications than making originally false conceptions come true. For example, Emile Grunberg remarks that phenomena often characterized as self-fulfilling beliefs, such as minority stereotypes, do not concern public reflexive predictions, but rather social interactions that involve private predictions motivating action. In a similar vein, Daya Krishna argues that “consciousness, beliefs, ideals, imaginings, prejudices, values... enter essentially and constitutively into the being of the reality studied in the social sciences.”

It is worth noting that, in addition to the previously mentioned results, Raymond Smullyan has demonstrated that self-fulfilling beliefs are provable in formal belief systems, using a metamathematical theorem due to Martin Löb. Löb’s proof can be

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sketched very succinctly. Let $A$ be any arbitrary sentence and let $B$ be the sentence “if this sentence is true, then so is $A$.” If $B$ is true, then so is $A$; that is, $B$ is true; hence, $A$ is true.\(^{50}\)

The above findings imply that the issue of reflexivity has not only epistemological relevance, but it also crucially concerns the relation between the beliefs and actions of an observer-actor, which was the context of the controversy between Marxism and anarchism. In a nutshell, Löb’s theorem proves that what “goes on before our eyes” depends on a choice, which in turn can be “demonstrated” within our belief system. Furthermore, as William R. Avison notes, “the likelihood of a prediction becoming self-fulfilling increases with the proximity of the man of knowledge to the reins of power,” for in that case intellectuals “possess the resources to alter future social conditions so that their predictions may be fulfilled.” The relevance of this remark is obvious in the case of Marxist parties, which attributed themselves the role of providing knowledge to the proletariat, claimed to represent “the working class organized as a party,” and, in that capacity, aimed at exercising a dictatorship of the proletariat.\(^{51}\)

E. P. Thompson’s historiographical attempt at reconciling historical materialism with human agency provides a significant confirmation of the conflict between understanding a concrete totality and acting in it. For Thompson, “we can see a logic in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any law”; “history is not rule-governed, and it knows no sufficient causes.” This is so because “the hypotheses, or the blend of ideology and of self-knowledge, which we... adopt in this present will themselves enter as an element within eventuating process.” The import for historiography is that “the historians of the future, who will know how things turned

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out will have a powerful aid to understanding, not why they had to turn out in that way, but why in fact they did.... And today's historians stand in exactly the same position in relation to the historical past.” The implication is that today's historians cannot understand the present, whose explanation will only be accessible to future historians. In brief, the concrete totality can be understood, insofar as reflexivity is avoided. 52

In contrast to Marx, for Malatesta collective action admitted as many self-fulfilling paths as collective projects. Each “utopia” was a possible path, in principle; the extent to which each succeeded depended on the ascendancy it gained in the social arena. Malatesta’s approach was steeped in incomplete knowledge, social indeterminacy, and arbitrary choice of aims, which, however, could be held by all actors within a social system. In other words, the very cognitive completeness and determinacy of the Marxist approach prevented it from being universalizable; and the very cognitive incompleteness and indeterminacy of the anarchist approach made it amenable to universalization.

In sum, an inherent link between theory and practice existed for both Marx and Malatesta. For Marx, the link was between historical materialist theory and authoritarian practice. The latter was not an accessory trait, but the result of extending historical materialism from the descriptive to the prescriptive domain. In the latter domain, the issue of reflexivity arose, and authoritarianism was the way historical materialism dealt with it. Conversely, the libertarian practice of Malatesta’s anarchism had a counterpart in his suspension of judgment and unresolved dualism on the controversy between determinism and voluntarism, which de facto prevented the issue of reflexivity from arising. Authoritarianism resulted from the pretension to be simultaneously observer and actor with respect to the same concrete totality. In contrast, anarchist voluntarism resulted from universalizing the mutual exclusion between observing and acting posited for individuals.

52 Thompson, Making of the English Working Class, 10.
In conclusion, the comparison between the anarchist theory of collective action and those of rational-choice theory and Marxism throws into relief the soundness of the former in the area where it is least given credit, the relation between theory and practice. There was more to anarchist theory than the “hopeless eccentricity” attributed to it by Olson or the “schoolboy’s asininity” by which Marx branded Bakunin’s voluntarism. The two comparisons point in the same direction, revealing the central role of self-reference as a crucial test bed for the adequacy of theories of collective action. Both rational-choice theory and Marxism base their conclusions upon empirical claims and dismiss anarchist theory for its empirical inadequacy and voluntarist arbitrariness. However, for both rational-choice theory and Marxism the pretension to derive normative from positive statements breaks down in the face of self-reference. Both theories have to resort to exogenous agents in their accounts of the relation between theory and practice. Rational-choice theory does so by departing from its own methodological individualistic assumption and Marxism does so by the very nature of its methodological holism. On the practical side, in both cases the resort to an exogenous agent amounts to the provision of the common good by authoritarian means. Both Hobbesians and Marxists advocate “good by force” as a political solution. In contrast, anarchist voluntarism deals unproblematically with self-reference. The anarchist theory of collective action is consistent and self-contained, involving no resort to exogenous agents, and correspondingly advocating the method of freedom as a political solution to the provision of the common good. In brief, when abstract theorizing is to be replaced by a sound approach to the relation between theory and practice, the anarchist lesson is that less is more.

Conclusion

Historians have portrayed anarchist action as unplanned, unorganized, spontaneistic, aimless, futile, cyclical, and unchanging; their aims as purist, “all-or-nothing,” utopian, “pie-in-the-sky,” and impossibilist; and their beliefs as backward, stubborn, romantic, fideistic, infantile, primitive, and millenarian. Each qualification is based on evidence but at the same time interprets evidence in a way that denies anarchists the benefit of common sense. As a result, anarchism has appeared doomed, eccentric, absurd, contradictory, or stupid. In the face of such appearance, two paths lay open. The uncharitable historian is content with concluding that anarchists appeared irrational because they were so, and sets out to causally explain the anarchists’ irrationality in terms of socio-psychological motives. No doubt E. J. Hobsbawm’s most unobjectionable claim about millenarian movements is the following: “Those who cannot understand what it is that moves them—and even some who do—may be tempted to interpret their behaviour as wholly irrational or pathological, or at best as an instinctive reaction to intolerable conditions.”

In step with Hobsbawm’s authoritative guidelines, the charitable historian assumes that anarchism appears irrational because it has been interpreted in a faulty way, and sets out to re-interpret evidence in a way that grants common sense to anarchism. In the process, the attribution of rationality is used as a criterion to filter interpretations and challenge appearances. The aim is a self-contained explanation of anarchism in terms of reasons. This has been the task of the present work in investigating the ideas and action of Errico Malatesta. A charitable account of Malatesta’s anarchism is at the same time an account of the historians’ pitfalls about anarchism.

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1 Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, 60.
The pillars of Malatesta’s anarchism were his methodologically individualist view of social action and his concept of anarchism as a method. These ideas, which Malatesta began expounding in 1889, were the key to his evolution in the next four decades. For Malatesta, social action was “the resultant of initiatives, thoughts, and actions of all individuals who make up society.” The resultant depended on the aim to which the different social components were directed and on the strength of each. The rise of an anarchist society was a gradual process. Society would become increasingly anarchist as the component acting in the direction of anarchy became increasingly strong. Both anarchism as a movement and anarchy as a result were characterized by freedom as the method of social action. In the light of these ideas many traits of anarchism commonly interpreted in irrationalist terms can be reframed and made sense of.

The canonical objection on which anarchism supposedly founders is about the possibility of anarchy. Accordingly, the standard irrationalist interpretation is that anarchists had unrealistic expectations, based on unwarranted optimistic beliefs. Alternatively, the obvious unattainability of the full anarchist objective has led commentators to the conclusion that anarchist action was aimless. Such views assume a “holistic” view of anarchy, according to which either anarchy is realized or it is not, without any middle ground. For Malatesta anarchy was indeed possible, though its feasibility was not committed to an alleged benign human nature, but to the degree of the moral development of the people. At any rate, it did not really matter whether anarchy could be fully realized or not. On the ground of a methodological individualist assumption, the objection was by-passed as simply misplaced. For Malatesta, anarchists were to strive for the full realization of their ideal, even if anarchy was not an immediate possibility, and whether or not it could ever be realized. In a way, he literally urged anarchists to be impossibilist, in the spirit of Max Weber’s remark that “all historical experience confirms the truth—that man would not have attained the possible unless time
and again he had reached out for the impossible.”

The key point was that the anarchist method ensured the best possible world to be experimentally attained, without knowing in advance what that world might be. For Malatesta, there was no gain in watering down the anarchist programme, which would simply weaken the anarchists’ impact on the overall direction of society. Instead, the anarchists’ struggle for their entire programme was the surest way to steer as much as possible the progress of humanity toward their ideal. In brief, anarchism did not theoretically stand or fall with the feasibility of its ideal society; and anarchist action was neither impossibilist nor aimless, but reforming.

The standard irrationalist interpretation of anarchist “impossibilism” is an exclusive one, such that anarchism was for “all-or-nothing.” Thus, for Woodcock the anarchist future “was a kind of revolutionary pie-in-the-sky, and one was expected to fast until mealtime.” For him, anarchists “displayed an infinite and consistent contempt for piecemeal reform....” However, though Malatesta rejected any transgression of principles, his anarchism was inclusive. He did not overlook partial gains, but for him uncompromising direct action was the best way to obtain legal reform or to wrest concessions from the bosses, at the same time that it fostered revolutionary consciousness. Laws and concessions were the result of a balance of strength; force and fear were the only means of persuasion effective on rulers. Demanding a full meal was the most effective way to obtain snacks, but these were not to replace a full meal as the workers’ objective.

Underlying Malatesta’s “impossibilism” were considerations of social indeterminacy, another theme that differentiates individualistic from holistic approaches to understanding social action. Indeterminacy arises in contexts of strategic interaction, which is to say “in virtually all social contexts,” as Russell Hardin argues. In such

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2 Weber, Politics as a Vocation, 55.

3 Woodcock, 447.
contexts an actor can only choose a strategy, not an outcome. The latter depends on the choices of other actors, which are not known in advance. Anarchist “impossibilism” did not reflect expectations about actual outcomes, but strategic considerations in situations of limited knowledge. More generally, Malatesta rejected any pretence to comprehend social processes as wholes. The same attitude characterizes modern methodological individualistic arguments, such as the criticisms of holistic social engineering by Hayek and Popper, foreshadowed by anarchist arguments since the First International. Considerations of strategic interaction were also at the heart of Malatesta’s voluntarism.

Writing about the revolutionary theory of Andalusian anarchism, Hobsbawm asks: “How would the great change come about? Nobody knew. At bottom the peasants felt that it must somehow come about if only all men declared themselves for it at the same time.” In a similar vein, Irving Horowitz argues: “Isn’t it true, as Plekhanov and others have insisted, that anarchism is simply a form of utopianism, a longing for a world of human perfection independent of the agencies for getting to such a perfect condition? And therefore, would it not be more rational to conceive of anarchism as a religious expression, a messianic critique, of the social world as it is?” Hobsbawm and Horowitz’s arguments illustrate the stereotypical interpretation of voluntarism, which was a trait of anarchism since the First International, where it contrasted with the Marxist focus on historical necessity. Such contrast is usually interpreted as being between a messianic expectation that overlooked actual agencies and a due consideration given to empirical reality.

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Hobsbawm’s argument is not groundless. In fact, the unconscious feeling that he attributes to Andalusian anarchists corresponded to Malatesta’s explicit claim that the day everyone was anarchist, anarchy would be real. Obviously he did not expect that all would become anarchist at once, or even that everyone would eventually become anarchist. However, he did construe anarchy in terms of the actors’ anarchist dispositions. Again, methodological individualism allows one to make sense of anarchist voluntarism, in contrast to irrationalist interpretations. The emphasis on oriented action as the matter of social reality, which is inherent to methodological individualism, implies that beliefs, ideals, and values are essential and constitutive of that reality. In the social sciences of the twentieth century such a focus is most evident in the study of reflexive belief, summarized by the Thomas theorem: what is conceived to be real also tends to become real. Yet by reading the Thomas theorem normatively one obtains a statement of voluntarism. For Malatesta, anarchy became real to the extent that people became anarchist. In brief, the social science idea of self-fulfilling prediction and voluntarism express the same statement, of which they respectively constitute the descriptive and prescriptive interpretations.

In contrast to the misconception that anarchism ignored real agencies, Malatesta’s voluntarism was coupled with a strong realism about the choices that situated individuals could make. Anarchist gradualism precisely arose from a realist outlook on the masses and the consciousness that a mass conversion to anarchism was out of the question. In fact, Malatesta’s voluntarism and realism proceeded in parallel and reinforced each other. To the extent that Malatesta committed revolution and anarchy to conscious choices, he correspondingly refrained from comforting analyses that committed social progress to allegedly empirical trends, be they Kropotkinian evolutionary laws or Marxist historical necessities. Malatesta held a realistic outlook on class consciousness formation. He realized that propaganda had limited power on masses constrained by harsh material conditions. At the same time, he did not expect capitalist development to create the
proletariat as a revolutionary force, nor mere economic interests to unite the working class into a compact army. For Malatesta, interests tended to be conservative, while only the ideal was revolutionary. Unlike Marx, he did not believe that interests and capability for collective action proceeded in parallel, and did not subscribe to the “group theory” idea that “groups will act when necessary to further their common or group goals.” Much of his anarchism consequently proceeded from such realist appraisal of social dynamics.

The “fundamental vagueness about the actual way in which the new society will be brought about,” which Hobsbawm considers typical of millenarian movements, concerns not only the revolutionary process, but also the revolutionary programme. Likewise, Woodcock argues that the anarchists’ “disinclination to attempt specific proposals led to their producing a vague and vapid vision of an idyllic society” congenial to “primitive and evangelically minded people like the Andalusian peasants,” with their “millenarian longings for the earthly Kingdom of God.” In Malatesta’s case, the “vagueness” of the anarchist programme was not the symptom of a primitive and evangelical frame of mind, but the original result of nearly two decades of theoretical elaboration. What came to characterize his anarchism from the 1890s on was the method of freedom, not a blueprint of society. Anarchists were indeed to discuss solutions for the future, and in the 1920s Malatesta lamented that such discussions had been largely wanting in the anarchist movement. However, no blueprint of society was to be inscribed in the anarchist programme, which was to be deliberately limited to outlining a method. For Malatesta, those who expected detailed answers in advance about the future society, beyond the scope of personal opinions, did not really understand what anarchy was about.

7 Olson, I.

8 Hobsbawm, Primitive Rebels, 58–60; Woodcock, 446–7.

9 See chapter 4, note 13.
The core of his anarchism as a method was the idea that the most collectively rational society would be brought about not by implementing a pre-conceived blueprint, but by free experimentation aimed at the collective good. The much-maligned anarchist spontaneism can be reframed in the light of such notion. The idea of a spontaneous self-ordering process, which is, as we have seen, ubiquitous in social sciences and taken for granted in liberal theory, is looked upon as problematic when it is advocated by anarchists. The anarchist appeal to spontaneity is regarded as either a utopian and futile expectation that all actors agree upon a universally accepted plan, or a fideistic belief in a pre-established harmony, such that social mechanisms run smoothly while actors are only intent on following private impulses. The only “realistic” alternative to such unrealistic expectation is deemed to be social chaos. In contrast, the process described by Malatesta was spontaneous, but bore no such traits. No faith in a benign human nature that had only to be freed from unnatural fetters was involved. The process was unplanned, but it consisted of oriented action.

The idea of an invisible-hand process driven by solidarity is one of those concepts that run counter to standard categorizations, for it fits neither of the mutually exclusive blocs separated by the conceptual Berlin Wall mentioned in the introduction. Liberal theory advocates individualism across the board, both methodologically and ethically. Marxist socialism is for holism all along the line. Anarchism fits neither side. The originality of Malatesta’s anarchism stemmed precisely from his advocacy of methodological individualism and ethical holism at the same time. Social action was the effect of composition of individual actions; but the fundamental principle of anarchist action was that it be aimed at the collective good. Malatesta advocated the method of freedom as against centralized planning, but at the same time he made socialism a precondition of that method. Unfortunately, anarchism is not only overlooked, but also misconstrued as contradictory in terms of dichotomies that were alien to its own conceptual framework.
However, ethical holism, social indeterminacy, and voluntarism made up a coherent theory of collective action that approached the contrast between individual and collective rationality, as modeled by the Prisoner's Dilemma, in empirically adequate and theoretically sound terms. In this context ethical holism was not an ungrounded moral stance, but could be motivated in a utilitarian fashion. The anarchist theory of collective action squarely contrasts with the standard charge that anarchists ignored reality or made arbitrary assumptions about human nature, and provides an alternative to the allegedly more sophisticated approaches of mainstream rational choice theory and Marxism. The relation between theory and practice, deemed to be the greatest weakness of anarchism, reveals its greater sophistication and consistency in addressing crucial questions of observer–actor self-reference and self-fulfilling beliefs.

Anarchism as a method bridged the gap between the future anarchist society and anarchist action in the present, redefining anarchism as a continuous process, rather than the attainment of a static end-result. If anarchism was a method and means were ends-in-the-making, the essence of anarchism was constituted more by its means than by its utopias. In fact, notwithstanding the misrepresentation of anarchism as unconcerned with practical means, debates over different ways of organizing and struggling took priority among anarchists over controversies about different models of the future society. The most profound division of Italian anarchism concerned the issue of organization. Ultimately, the debate was about different interpretations of the fundamental anarchist principle of coherence between ends and means.

This principle has been misinterpreted as a form of purism. However, coherence with ends was not just a straitjacket imposed upon anarchist means. Instead it expressed the anarchists' pragmatic preoccupation with the consequences of their action. Anarchists were not only concerned about which means were adequate, but most importantly about which ones led elsewhere than desired. Their concern for the displacement of goals and the unintended consequences of their action represented their conservative side. The
constraints placed by the principle of coherence between ends and means on anarchist action varied with its interpretation. With his inclusive tactics and advocacy of organization, Malatesta stood in the most possibilist wing of the anarchist spectrum, often lamenting the paralyzing concerns of anti-organizationists. His own interpretation was that all means were good except those that either implied the imposition of "good by force" or a displacement of goals, which in turn amounted to indirectly furthering anarchist goals by furthering other goals that implied "good by force." Still, the "conservative" preoccupation was present in Malatesta, too. An example was his piecemeal approach to post-revolutionary reconstruction: no institution, no matter how imperfect, was to be destroyed until a better solution was found to fulfill the need in question.¹⁰

"Impossibilism" and "purism" represented opposite but complementary aspects of anarchist action. Both stemmed from the anarchist awareness of social indeterminacy. Actors chose strategies, but could not foresee the outcome of strategic interaction. In the absence of any such knowledge, anarchists were to exert their social influence in the "impossible" direction of anarchy, and refrain from any means that led in any other direction. Both aspects of anarchist action have been irrationalistically interpreted as forms of millenarian detachment from empirical reality.

Ultimately, millenarian interpretations fail to realize that anarchists were aware of the gap between their ultimate end and their present means. Though such interpretations still have currency among historians, they received the clearest and fullest refutation as early as 1899, when Malatesta pointed out the misconception that anarchists expected anarchy to come with one stroke and the associated belief that anarchy, thus conceived, was impossible. In contrast, he claimed, "anarchy cannot come but little by little, slowly, but surely, growing in intensity and extension." It was not a matter of "achieving anarchy

¹⁰ See chapter 8, note 19, and chapter 9, note 5.
today, tomorrow, or within ten centuries, but of walking toward anarchy today, tomorrow, and always.” Hence, “every victory against the bosses, every decrease of exploitation, would be a step on the road of anarchy.”

Along that road, ultimate ends gave perspective to the anarchists’ action. They looked not only at immediate gains, but also at long-term consequences. In this, a key concern was to stay on the right path, avoiding entry of dead ends that barred future progress. This led them to “conservative” tactics that, in the short term, looked ineffective and hardly conducive to revolution. Yet in undertaking actions that were a far cry from their ultimate ends, anarchists were realistically gauging the distance. The stereotype of anarchists as doomed and fighting for lost causes is the irrationalistic counterpart of their awareness that they struggled for an aim they could not accomplish alone, and that the self-defeat of entering a wrong path was more irrecoverable that any setback along the right path.

If the substance of anarchism was no longer a blueprint, but the forms in which anarchist action unfolded, the history of anarchism becomes the practical illustration of how the method of freedom was applied and anarchism creatively made. Such experimental making of anarchism was not carried out in insulated colonies, but amidst society and through collective action. Anarchists were always to adopt the method of freedom and to pursue the full realization of the anarchist ideal, without any transgression of their principles. However, constancy of method and aim did not imply that anarchism was an endless repetition of an unchanging pattern of action, irrespective of circumstances.

Thus Malatesta’s activity illustrates a wide array of tactics. He gave priority to collective action, though individual deeds and affinity groups were not ruled out. Anarchist action could be carried out in many ways: underground or openly; on economic

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11 See chapter 8, note 18.
or political ground; autonomously by anarchists or as part of larger agitations with non-
anarchist objectives; violently or peacefully; legally or illegally; in pursuit of immediate
partial gains or broader insurrectionary aims. Over time, Malatesta promoted, joined, or
praised various kinds of tactics: guerrilla warfare, such as the Benevento uprising of
1877; affinity groups’ propaganda by the deed, as advocated in *L’Associazione* in 1889;
economic general strikes, such as the London dockers’ strike of 1889; urban guerrilla, as
advocated on the First of May in Paris in 1890, and practised the next year in Rome;
political general strikes, such as the one for universal suffrage in Belgium in 1893;
popular riots, such as the Sicilian Fasci of 1893 and the bread riots of 1898; legal
struggles to repel laws, such as the campaign against *domicilio coatto* in 1897; peaceful
campaigns of self-denunciation, such as the manifesto for the right of association in
1898; labour struggles for immediate demands, such as in Argentina in the late 1880s and
in Ancona in 1897; full-scale insurrectionary initiatives, such as the one initiated in
Lunigiana in 1894 and the Red Week of 1914; and individual deeds, including Bresci’s
assassination of Humbert I and forms of theft. Malatesta even undertook a hunger strike
in jail in 1921, and by refusing to leave Italy during Fascism and living in an undeclared
condition of house arrest, he foreshadowed the figure of the “dissident.” Yet there was
unity in all such tactics, which were all inscribed in the space defined by his tactical
principles: insurrectionism, coherence with ends, inclusiveness, “going to the people,”
and anarchist autonomy. Diversity and coherence practically illustrate the range and
potential of the anarchist method.

The uncharitable historians’ conclusions that unconcern for practical means, lack of
organization, cyclicity, and spontaneism were the unchanging features of a doomed and
irrational anarchist movement are consistent with the empirical evidence. Between 1889
and 1900 the only attempt at a country-wide Italian anarchist organization was the short-
lived party created at Capolago in 1891. During that period anarchist activism peaked in
1891, in 1893–4 and in 1897–8. The highlights of each onset were respectively the Rome
riots of 1 May 1891, the Carrara uprising of January 1894, and the bread riots of 1898. However, such analyses fail to explain how the anarchist movement lasted, for its sheer duration is testimony of its sustainability. The same evidence upon which anarchism is declared doomed and irrational motivates the charitable historian to look for anarchist rationality beyond the framework of formal and public organization within national bounds. Outside of that framework lies the realization that the very characteristics that made anarchist collective action seem discontinuous were precisely the ones that made it sustainable. These were organizational opacity and transnationalism.

Whenever we pierce through the appearance of casual and unplanned events, a web of connections is revealed that speaks to a more complex reality. Even individual episodes of Malatesta’s life speak to this. In 1889, his return to Europe, his founding a periodical in Nice, and his hasty escape to London bore a casual and impromptu appearance. Questioning this appearance reveals that London, a hub of anarchist exiles, was Malatesta’s centre of gravity from the outset; that ongoing plans existed to establish a periodical in Nice by Malatesta’s old Florentine comrades of the early 1880s; and that Malatesta had steady contacts throughout Europe. An even more striking contrast is offered by his escape from Lampedusa Island in 1899. The romantic tale of a brave and lucky individual who defies the waves of a stormy sea in a tiny boat must be replaced by the reality of a well-thought and carefully executed plan involving comrades in three continents. In contrast to the appearance of an isolated individual at the mercy of events, the reality was that of a dense network through which Malatesta made plans and kept abreast of events even from the other side of the Atlantic or from captivity.

At the level of collective action, the appearance of spontaneism and lack of organization must be replaced by the reality of opaque organization, as the events of 1890–2 illustrate. In Italy a stream of underground agitations for the First of May 1891 surfaced under the appearance of a spontaneous commotion of an inflammable crowd aroused by an unknown speaker. In Spain an articulate and far-reaching organization
effort is hardly mentioned in accounts of Spanish anarchism, the historical stage being stolen, as it were, by yet another apparently spontaneous commotion of an inflammable crowd, the Jerez uprising of January 1892. That effort remains confined to a few lines in Malatesta's biographies, while historians are left to debate about his role in the uprising that thwarted the very project that brought him to Spain. However, reality was made of preparation and organisation carried out from one First of May to the next, without interruption and across national borders. Yet the necessarily underground character of such work makes it disappear from historical accounts.

As E. P. Thompson has argued for Luddism, there was an intentional side to the opacity of anarchist organization, for this was the very pre-condition of effective action. The counterpart of the opacity of organization was the spontaneous semblance of popular agitations. One cannot assume that behind any seemingly spontaneous mob there lay anarchist organization. But where such work did take place, the image of a spontaneous mob was an indicator of its effectiveness. That an agitation appeared to be carried out by a mob speaks to the popular participation to it; and that the agitation seemed spontaneous speaks to the ability of anarchists to work underground. Neglecting anarchist opacity and limiting one's scope of analysis to what rises to the surface, attempting to simply connect public events, is likely to provide distorted interpretations. Correcting such views is not simply about providing sympathetic interpretations. Paradoxically, these interpretations tend to endorse official versions, given that authorities were inclined to regard anarchist agitations as the outcome of pre-ordained, highly organized, and far-reaching conspiracies. Giampietro Berti's and Temma Kaplan's respective interpretations of the events in Italy and Spain are cases in point. The issue with opacity is not to re-interpret available evidence, but to question it and probe beneath the surface, so as to capture complexity and rationality concealed by simple and odd appearances.

In contrast to simplistic views of anarchist tactics, the events of Italy and Spain in 1891–2 point out internal divisions and tactical divergences within the anarchist
movement, which in turn point to a range of alternative tactical options. Obviously, such divisions were a weakening factor. However, acknowledging the shortcomings of the anarchist initiatives under discussion does not invalidate the rationality argument. A failed insurrection is a failed insurrection. In hindsight, it is clear that the means employed by the anarchists in those circumstances were inadequate. However, there is a significant difference between ascribing such inadequacy to the inherent incoherence between anarchist means and ends and ascribing it to contingent overpowering circumstances. The latter attribution complies with the principle of charity, but the former does not.

The anarchists’ lack of formal organization does not mean that anarchists did not organize, but rather that they did not organize formally. Thus, the historian cannot simply look for congresses, party programmes, and party structures, but rather has to look also at the dense network of links between individuals and groups to study how anarchism functioned as a collective movement. In the sustained and multi-directional personal links between individuals and groups one can find the coordination and continuity that is usually looked for in the impersonal structure and fixed roles of formal organizations.

In addition to overlooking the informal and opaque character of anarchist organization, historians have neglected the movement’s transnationalism. The use of analytic frameworks of national scope is responsible for the seeming cyclical pattern of advance and retreat, according to which the Italian anarchist movement seemed to disappear in the wave of arrests, exiles, shut-down of periodicals, and disbandment of groups after each struggle’s onset, only to resurface years later in a new cycle of agitations. The movement did not vanish, it just moved from one sphere to another. Italian anarchism was characterized by intense transnational mobility of militants, resources, and ideas across the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.

A transnational perspective provides the appropriate context in which the individual lives of militants should be placed. Malatesta’s life is paradigmatic in this respect. From a
national perspective his exiles through Europe, North Africa, and the Americas may appear as the wanderings of a knight errant in and out of his country, an alternation of engagements with and disengagements from anarchism in Italy. From a transnational perspective the same movements represent a coherent itinerary within Italian anarchism, either in Italy or outside of Italy, with no interruption and no disengagement.

Moreover, transnationalism is key to understanding how anarchism functioned as a movement. Anarchist mobility had its own dynamics and was not a simple function of the mobility of the Italian population at large. However, anarchist transnationalism was indeed rooted in the areas of Italian immigration. The steady presence of Italian anarchists in such areas was relied upon by comrades in the homeland and elsewhere in the world. The transnational segment of Italian anarchism provided financial resources for propaganda in Italy, most notably by supporting the anarchist press. It also had a key role in publishing its own periodicals and pamphlets. Such periodicals were transnational in various ways: not only were they published abroad, but they were also meant for distribution outside of their country of publication; and their content was itself considerably transnational, thanks to regular correspondences from comrades in other countries.

Transatlantic organizational integration characterized Italian anarchism, as best exemplified by the relations with militants in the United States, which was visited by most Italian anarchist leaders, with the purpose of strengthening the anarchist movement and press in that country. The sustained editorship of *La Questione Sociale* of Paterson by a steady stream of foremost anarchists over a long period of time constitutes a singular pattern of cooperation. Conversely, militants from overseas locations regularly participated in the collective life of the Italian movement, as institutional events like the Capolago congress of 1891 illustrate. Groups in New York, Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Tunis, and Alexandria, with their periodicals and their steady participation to the life of the homeland movement, were by all means integral parts of it. Transnational anarchism
in Europe had an even closer role. A sort of division of labour existed, whereby a
significant amount of the organizational and propaganda workload, such as arranging
congresses and printing materials, could be taken up by groups outside of Italy,
especially when such activities were likely to incur in government repression.
Conversely, exiles like Malatesta were always ready to clandestinely re-enter Italy, when
circumstances required it.

Transnationalism was a crucial factor for the anarchist movement’s sustainability. In
times of repression, it provided continuity to the movement that had been beheaded in the
homeland, and its press abroad took up the task of carrying on propaganda in the Italian
language. However, transnationalism was not just an emergency mode of operation in
exceptional times. Rather, it was a built-in characteristic of the movement, closely related
to the nature of its tactics. Italian anarchists were aware of the role of transnationalism
and relied on it. Insurrectionary tactics required preparation and organization. The more
this work could be carried out quietly and covertly, the more effective it could be. Hence,
in the division of labour between anarchists in Italy and abroad, the latter were more
suited to carry out such preparations. Conversely, direct action tactics were as effective
as they could be sudden and widespread. Thus, direct action tactics, opacity of
organization, and transnationalism together provide an alternative pattern of explanation
to the advance-and-retreat or appearance-and-disappearance patterns.

Abandoning a national framework of analysis also means being able to grasp the
cross-national links between movements of different countries and to look at national
debates in a new light. Thus, the parallel process occurring in Italy and France in the mid-
1890s sets syndicalism in a broader context of labour-oriented anarchism. The similarity
of themes between the Spanish controversy about collectivism and communism and the
Italian debate on organization reveals the real content of the debate in Spain, thus
refuting the theory of Spanish exceptionalism and confirming that means were the real
matter of debates even when these appeared to be about models of the anarchist society.
On the basis of this understanding of anarchism, standard categorizations should be reframed. Distinctions based on organization and the labour movement are more revealing than those based on pairs like collectivism–communism or communism–individualism. Malatesta’s case illustrates well the negative effect of inappropriate categorizations. He is often portrayed as a communist and a defender of anarchist purism in contrast to syndicalism, at the Amsterdam congress of 1907, and to Platformist organizationism. This picture becomes awkward, though, if Malatesta is categorized as an organizationist and hence as primarily a supporter of both labour involvement and organization.

Transnationalism and cross-nationalism enriched Malatesta’s theoretical and tactical evolution, as did his direct experience of workers’ struggles in four continents. That evolution, from an early faith in the revolutionary virtue of the people to anarchist gradualism, was a long process forged in the crucible of social struggles. Each tactical formula was put to the test of collective action; and each failed insurrectionary attempt, repressed popular movement, or missed revolutionary opportunity occasioned a reformulation of Malatesta’s tactics. Such was the case of the London Dock Strike of 1889, the First of May agitations of 1890–2, the Sicilian Fasci movement of 1893–4, and the labour struggles and bread riots of 1897–8. Rather than to an endless cycle of advance and retreat, the process can be more appropriately likened to the method of trial and error. Tentative solutions were put to the test of experience and revised accordingly. In this sense, those attempts can be truly regarded as Malatesta’s experiments with revolution.

None of those experiments was victorious. However, even in defeat, Malatesta’s work was not useless. As historians such as Kirwin Shaffer and Matthew Thomas have recently argued, anarchists, the early adopters of collective rationality, had an impact on
society. However, this impact was not in contrast with their “impossibilist” ends but in step with them. Moreover, from a voluntarist perspective, the protracted existence and sustainability of the anarchist movement provides historical evidence that self-fulfillingly reinforces the viability of anarchism as a political proposal. If anarchism can exist, then anarchy can be real. Arguably, the same logic, used in the opposite direction, tacitly underpins the eagerness of many historians to present anarchism as a necessarily doomed movement. The normative implication would be that anarchism is politically unviable.

Notwithstanding the impact and sustainability of anarchism, the lack of success was painfully present to Malatesta’s mind. In his last years, seriously ill, he wrote to Luigi Bertoni about the “intimate tragedy” of his heart: “I am moved by the great affection that the comrades have for me and at the same time I am tormented by the thought to have done so little to deserve it.” Still, self-defeat overrode defeat in the anarchists’ consideration. For Malatesta, the anarchists’ last stand was to save their principles when they were materially powerless to further their cause, for that meant saving the future. The very last sentence of Anarchy was: “if today we fall without compromising, we can be sure of victory tomorrow.” In hindsight, three quarters of a century after Malatesta’s death, the historian can dismiss his belief as naïve and his hope as ill-conceived and irrational. Still, the voluntarist Malatesta could rejoin that the historian’s own assessment is another example of self-fulfilling belief, for tomorrow is yet to come.

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12 See chapter 1, note 11.
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