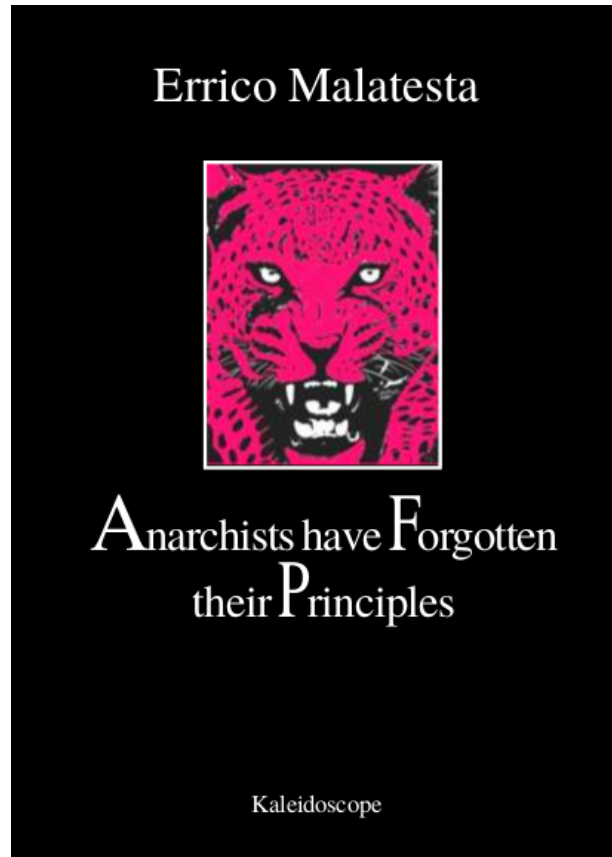


Anarchists have forgotten their principles

Errico Malatesta



1914–1922

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Anarchists have forgotten their principles

At the risk of passing as a simpleton, I confess that I would never have believed it possible that Socialists—even Social Democrats—would applaud and voluntarily take part, either on the side of the Germans or on the Allies, in a war like the one that is at present devastating Europe. But what is there to say when the same is done by Anarchists—not numerous, it is true, but having amongst them comrades whom we love and respect most?

It is said that the present situation shows the bankruptcy of “our formulas”—i.e., of our principles—and that it will be necessary to revise them.

Generally speaking, every formula must be revised whenever it shows itself insufficient when coming into contact with fact; but it is not the case to-day, when the bankruptcy is not derived from the shortcoming of our formulas, but from the fact that these have been forgotten and betrayed.

Let us return to our principles.

I am not a “pacifist”. I fight, as we all do, for the triumph of peace and of fraternity amongst all human beings; but I know that a desire not to fight can only be fulfilled when neither side wants to, and that so long as men will be found who want to violate the liberties of others, it is incumbent on these others to defend themselves if they do not wish to be eternally beaten; and I also know that to attack is often the best, or the only, effective means of defending oneself. Besides, I think that the oppressed are always in a state of legitimate self-defense, and have always the right to attack the oppressors. I admit, therefore, that there are wars that are necessary, holy wars: and these are wars of liberation, such as are generally “civil wars”—i.e., revolutions.

But what has the present war in common with human emancipation, which is our cause?

To-day we hear Socialists speak, just like any bourgeois, of “France,” or “Germany,” and of other political and national agglomerations—results of historical struggles—as of homogenous ethnographic units, each having its proper interests, aspirations, and mission, in opposition to the interests, aspirations and a mission of rival units. This may be true relatively, so long as the oppressed, and chiefly the workers, have no self-consciousness, fail to recognize the injustice of their oppressors. There is, then, the dominating class only that counts; and this class, owing to its desire to conserve and to enlarge its power, even its prejudices and its own ideas, may find it convenient to excite racial ambitions and hatred, and send its nation, its flock, against “foreign” countries, with a view to releasing them from their present oppressors, and submitting them to its own political economical domination.

But the mission of those who, like us, wish the end of all oppression and of all exploitation of man by man, is to awaken a consciousness of the antagonism of interests between dominators and dominated, between exploiters and workers, and to develop the class struggle inside each country, and the solidarity among all workers across the frontiers, as against any prejudice and any passion of either race or nationality.

And this we have always done. We have always preached that the workers of all countries are brothers, and that the enemy—the “foreigner”—is the exploiter, whether born near us or in a far-off country, whether speaking the same language or any other. We have always chosen our friends, our companions-in-arms, as well as our enemies, because of the ideas they profess and of the position they occupy in the social struggle, and never for reasons of race or nationality. We have always fought against patriotism, which is a survival of the past, and serves well the interest of the oppressors; and we were proud of being internationalists, not only in words, but by the deep feelings of our souls.

And now that the most atrocious consequences of capitalist and State domination should indicate, even to the blind, that we were in the right, most of the Socialists and many Anarchists in the belligerent countries associate themselves with the Governments and the bourgeoisie of their respective countries, forgetting Socialism, the class struggle, international fraternity, and the rest.

What a downfall!

It is possible that the present events may have shown that national feelings are more alive, while feelings of international brotherhood are less rooted, than we thought; but this should be one more reason for intensifying, not abandoning, our antipatriotic propaganda. These events also show that in France, for example, religious sentiment is stronger, and the priests have a greater influence than we imagined. Is this a reason for our conversion to Roman Catholicism?

I understand that circumstances may arise owing to which the help of all is necessary for the general well-being: such as an epidemic, an earthquake, an invasion of barbarians, who kill and destroy all that comes under their hands. In such a case the class struggle, the differences of social standing must be forgotten, and common cause must be made against the common danger; but on the condition that these differences are forgotten on both sides. If any one is in prison during an earthquake, and there is a danger of his being crushed to death, it is our duty to save everybody, even the gaolers—on condition that the gaolers begin by opening the prison doors. But if the gaolers take all precautions for the safe custody of the prisoners during and after the catastrophe, it is then the duty of the prisoners towards themselves as well as towards their comrades in captivity to leave the gaolers to their troubles, and profit by the occasion to save themselves.

If, when foreign soldiers invade the *sacred soil of the Fatherland*, the privileged class were to renounce their privileges, and would act so that the “Fatherland” really became the common property of all the inhabitants, it would then be right that all should fight against the invaders. But if kings wish to remain kings, and the landlords wish to take care of *their* lands and of *their* houses, and the merchants wish to take care of *their* goods, and even sell them at a higher price, then the workers, the Socialists and Anarchists, should leave them to their own devices, while being themselves on the look-out for an opportunity to get rid of the oppressors inside the country, as well as of those coming from outside.

In all circumstances, it is the duty of the Socialists, and especially of the Anarchists, to do everything that can weaken the State and the capitalist class, and to take as the only guide to their conduct the interest of Socialism; or, if they are materially powerless to act efficaciously for their own cause, at least 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.

* * *

All I have just said is theory, and perhaps it is accepted, in theory, by most of those who, in practice, do just the reverse. How, then, could it be applied to the present situation? What should we do, what should we wish, in the interests of our cause?

It is said, on this side of the Rhine, that the victory of the Allies would be the end of militarism, the triumph of civilization, international justice, etc. The same is said on the other side of the frontier about a German victory.

Personally, judging at their true value the “mad dog” of Berlin and the “old hangman” of Vienna, I have no greater confidence in the bloody Tsar, nor in the English diplomatists who oppress India, who betrayed Persia, who crushed the Boer Republics; nor in the French bourgeoisie, who massacred the natives of Morocco; nor in those of Belgium, who have allowed the Congo atrocities and have largely profited by them—and I only recall some of their misdeeds, taken at random, not to mention what all Governments and all capitalist classes do against the workers and the rebels in their own countries.

In my opinion, the victory of Germany would certainly mean the triumph of militarism and of reaction; but the triumph of the Allies would mean a Russo-English (i.e., a knouto-capitalist) domination in Europe and in Asia, conscription and the development of the militarist spirit in England, and a Clerical and perhaps Monarchist reaction in France.

Besides, in my opinion, it is most probable that there will be no definite victory on either side. After a long war, an enormous loss of life and wealth, both sides being exhausted, some kind of peace will be patched up, leaving all questions open, thus preparing for a new war more murderous than the present.

The only hope is revolution; and as I think that it is from vanquished Germany that in all probability, owing to the present state of things, the revolution would break out, it is for this reason—and for this reason only—that I wish the defeat of Germany.

I may, of course, be mistaken in appreciating the true position. But what seems to be elementary and fundamental for all Socialists (Anarchists, or others) is that it is necessary to keep outside every kind of compromise with the Governments and the governing classes, so as to be able to profit by any opportunity that may present itself, and, in any case, to be able to restart and continue our revolutionary preparations and propaganda.

E. MALATESTA
FREEDOM, November 1914

Pro-government anarchists

A manifesto has just appeared, signed by Kropotkin, Grave, Malato, and a dozen other old comrades, in which, echoing the supporters of the Entente Governments who are demanding a fight to a finish and the crushing of Germany, they take their stand against any idea of "premature peace".

The capitalist Press publishes, with natural satisfaction, extracts from the manifesto, and announces it as the work of "leaders of the International Anarchist Movement."

Anarchists, almost all of whom have remained faithful to their convictions, owe it to themselves to protest against this attempt to implicate Anarchism in the continuance of a ferocious slaughter that has never held promise of any benefit to the cause of Justice and Liberty, and which now shows itself to be absolutely barren and resultless even from the standpoint of the rulers on either side.

The good faith and good intentions of those who have signed the manifesto are beyond all question. But, however painful it may be to disagree with old friends who have rendered so many services to that which in the past was our common cause, one cannot—having regard to sincerity, and in the interest of our movement for emancipation—fail to dissociate oneself from comrades who consider themselves able to reconcile Anarchist ideas and co-operation with the Governments and capitalist classes of certain countries in their strife against the capitalists and Governments of certain other countries.

During the present war we have seen Republicans placing themselves at the service of kings, Socialists making common the cause with the ruling class, Labourists serving the interests of capitalists; but in reality all these people are, in varying degrees, Conservatives—believers in the mission of the State, and their hesitation can be understood when the only remedy lay in the destruction of every Governmental chain and the unloosing of the Social Revolution. But such hesitation is incomprehensible in the case of Anarchists.

We hold that the State is incapable of good. In the field of international as well as of individual relations it can only combat aggression by making itself the aggressor; it can only hinder crime by organising and committing still greater crime.

Even on the supposition—which is far from being the truth—that Germany alone was responsible for the present war, it is proved that, as long as governmental methods are adhered to, Germany can only be resisted by suppressing all liberty and reviving the power of all the forces of reaction. Except the popular Revolution, there is no other way of resisting the menace of a disciplined Army but to try and have a stronger and more disciplined Army; so that the sternest anti-militarists, if they are not Anarchists, and if they are afraid of the destruction of the State, are inevitably led to become ardent militarists.

In fact, in the problematical hope of crushing Prussian Militarism, they have renounced all the spirit and all the traditions of Liberty; they have Prussianised England and France; they have submitted themselves to Tsarism; they have restored the prestige of the tottering throne of Italy.

Can Anarchists accept this state of things for a single moment without renouncing all right to call themselves Anarchists? To me, even foreign domination suffered by force and leading to revolt, is preferable to domestic oppression meekly, almost gratefully, accepted, in the belief that by this means we are preserved from a greater evil.

It is useless to say that this is a question of an exceptional time, and that after having contributed to the victory of the Entente in "this war," we shall return, each into his own camp, to the struggle for his own ideal.

If it is necessary to-day to work in harmony with the Government and the capitalist to defend ourselves against "the German menace," it will be necessary afterwards, as well as during the war.

However great may be the defeat of the German Army—if it is true that it will be defeated—it will never be possible to prevent the German patriots thinking of, and preparing for, revenge; and the patriots of the other countries, very reasonably from their own point of view, will want to hold themselves in readiness so that they may not again be taken unaware. This means that Prussian Militarism will become a permanent and regular institution in all countries.

What will then be said by the self-styled Anarchists who to-day desire the victory of one of the warring alliances? Will they go on calling themselves anti-militarists and preaching disarmament, refusal to do military service, and sabotage against National Defense, only to become, at the first threat of war, recruiting-sergeants for those Governments that they have attempted to disarm and paralyse?

It will be said that these things will come to an end when the German people have rid themselves of their tyrants and ceased to be a menace to Europe by destroying militarism in their own country. But, if that is the case, the Germans who think, and rightfully so, that English and French domination (to say nothing of Tsarist Russia) would be so more delightful to the Germans than German domination to the French and English, will desire first to wait for the Russians and the others to destroy their own militarism, and will meanwhile continue to increase their own country's Army.

And then, how long will the Revolution be delayed? How long Anarchy? Must we always wait for the others to begin?

The line of conduct for Anarchists is clearly marked out by the very logic of their aspirations.

The war ought to have been prevented by bringing about the Revolution, or at least by making the Government afraid of the Revolution. Either the strength or the skill necessary for this has been lacking.

Peace ought to be imposed by bringing about the Revolution, or at least by threatening to do so. To the present time, the strength or the skill is wanting.

Well! There is only one remedy: to do better in future. More than ever we must avoid compromise; deepen the chasm between capitalists and wage slaves, between rulers and ruled; preach expropriation of private property and the destruction of States as the only means of guaranteeing fraternity between the peoples and Justice and Liberty for all; and we must prepare to accomplish these things.

Meanwhile it seems to me that it is criminal to do anything that tends to prolong the war, that slaughters men, destroys wealth, and hinders all resumption of the struggle for emancipation. It appears to me that preaching "war to the end" is really playing the game of the German rulers, who are deceiving their subjects and inflaming their ardor for fighting by persuading them that their opponents desire to crush and enslave the German people.

To-day, as ever, let this be our slogan: Down with Capitalists and Governments, all Capitalists and Governments!

Long live peoples, all peoples!

ERRICO MALATESTA
FREEDOM, April 1916

Appendix: *The Manifesto of the Sixteen* (1916)

From various sides, voices are raised to demand immediate peace. There has been enough bloodshed, they say, enough destruction, and it is time to finish things, one way or another. More than anyone, and for a long time, we and our journals have been against every war of aggression between peoples, and against militarism, no matter what uniform, imperial or republican, it dons. So we would be delighted to see the conditions of peace discussed—if that was possible—by the European workers, gathered in an international congress. Especially since the German people let itself be deceived in August 1914, and if they really believed that they mobilized for the defense of their territory, they have since had time to realize that they were wrong to embark on a war of conquest.

Indeed, the German workers, at least in their more or less advanced associations, must understand now that the plans for the invasion of France, Belgium, and Russia had long been prepared and that, if that war did not erupt in 1875, 1886, 1911, or in 1913, it was because international relations did not present themselves then as favorably, and because the military preparations were not sufficiently complete to promise victory to Germany. (There were strategic lines to complete, the Kiel canal to expand, and the great siege guns to perfect). And now, after twenty months of war and dreadful losses, they should realize that the conquests made by the German army cannot be maintained, especially as they must recognize the principle (already recognized by France in 1859, after the defeat of Austria) that it is the population of each territory which must express its consent with regard to annexation.

If the German workers began to understand the situation as we understand it, and as it is already understood by a weak minority of their social-democrats—and if they could make themselves heard by their government—there could be common ground for beginning discussions about peace. But then they should declare that they absolutely refuse to make annexations, or to approve them; that they renounce the claim to collect “contributions” from the invaded nations, that they recognize the duty of the German state to repair, as much as possible, the material damages caused by its invasion of neighboring states, and that they do not purport to impose conditions of economic subjection, under the name of commercial treaties. Sadly, we do not see, thus far, symptoms of an awakening, in this sense, of the German people.

Some have spoken of the conference of Zimmerwald, but that conference lacked the essential element: the representation of the German workers. Much has been made of the case of some riots which have taken place in Germany, because of the high cost of food. But we forget that such events have always taken place during the great wars, without influencing their duration. Also, all the arrangements made, at this moment, by the German government, prove that it is preparing new aggressions at the return of spring. But as it knows also that in the spring the Allies will oppose it with new armies, fitted out with new equipment, and with an artillery much more powerful than before, it also works to sow discord within the allied populations. And it employs for this purpose a means as old as war itself: that of spreading the rumor of an imminent peace, to which, among the adversaries, only the military and the suppliers of the armies are opposed. This is what Bülow, with his secretaries, was up to during his last stay in Switzerland.

But under what conditions does he suggest the peace be concluded?

The Neue Zuercher Zeitung believes it knows—and the official journal, the Nord-deutsche Zeitung does not contradict it—that the majority of Belgium will be evacuated, but on the condition of giving pledges that it will not repeat what it did in August 1914, when it opposed the passage of German troops. What will these pledges be? The Belgian coal mines? The Congo? No one is saying. But a large annual contribution is already demanded. The territory conquered in France will be restored, as well as the part of Lorraine where French is spoken. But in exchange, France will transfer to the German state all the Russian loans, the value of which amounts to eighteen billions. That is a contribution of eighteen billion that the French agricultural and industrial workers will have to repay, since they are the ones who pay the taxes. Eighteen billion to buy back ten departments, which, by their labor, they have made so rich and opulent, but which will be returned to them ruined and devastated.

As to what is thought in Germany of the conditions of the peace, one fact is certain: the bourgeois press prepares the nation for the idea of the pure and simple annexation of Belgium and of the departments in the north of France. And, there is not, in Germany, any force capable of opposing it. The workers who should have been raising their voices against the conquest, do not do it. The unionized workers let themselves be led by the imperialist fever, and the social-democratic party, too weak to influence the decisions of the government concerning the peace—even if it represented a compact mass—finds itself divided, on that question, into two hostile parties, and the majority of the party marches with the government. The

German empire, knowing that its armies have been, for eighteen months, 90 km from Paris, and supported by the German people in its dreams of new conquests, does not see why it should not profit from conquests already made. It believes itself capable of dictating conditions of peace that will enable it to use the new billions in contributions for new armaments, in order to attack France when it sees fit, to take its colonies, as well as other provinces, and no longer have to fear its resistance

To speak of peace at this moment, is precisely to play the game of the German ministerial party, of Bülow and his agents. For our part, we absolutely refuse to share the illusions of some of our comrades concerning the peaceful dispositions of those who direct the destinies of Germany. We would prefer to look the danger in its face and seek what we can do to ward it off. To ignore this danger would be to increase it.

We have been deeply conscience that German aggression was a threat—a threat now carried out—not only against our hopes for emancipation, but against all human evolution. That is why we, anarchists, anti-militarists, enemies of war, passionate partisans of peace and the fraternity of peoples, are ranged on the side of the resistance, and why we have not felt obliged to separate our fate from that of the rest of the population. We don't believe it necessary to insist that we would have preferred to see that a population takes the care for its defense in its own hands. This having been impossible, there was nothing but to suffer that which could not be changed. And with those who fight we reckon that, unless the German population, coming back to the sanest notions of justice and of right, finally refuses to serve any longer as an instrument of the projects of pan-German political domination, there can be no question of peace. Without doubt, despite the war, despite the murders, we do not forget that we are internationalists, that we want the union of peoples and the disappearance of borders. But it is because we want the reconciliation of peoples, including the German people, that we think that they must resist an aggressor who represents the destruction of all our hopes of liberation.

To speak of peace while the party who, for forty-five years, have made Europe a vast, entrenched camp, is able to dictate its conditions, would be the most disastrous error that we could commit. To resist and to bring down its plans, is to prepare the way for the German population which remains sane and to give it the means to rid itself of that party. Let our German comrades understand that this is the only outcome advantageous to both sides and we are ready to collaborate with them.

28 February 1916

Pressed by events to publish this declaration, when it was communicated to the French and foreign press, only fifteen comrades, whose names follow, had approved the text of it: Christian Cornelissen, Henri Fuss, Jean Grave, Jacques Guérin, Pierre Kropotkine, A. Laisant. F. Le Lève (Lorient), Charles Malato, Jules Moineau (Liège), A. Orfila, Hussein Dey (Algérie), M. Pierrot, Paul Reclus, Richard (Algeria), Tchikawa (Japan), W. Tcherkesoff.

Elephant Archives

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Anarchists have forgotten their principles
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Anarchists have forgotten their principles, FREEDOM, November 1914
Pro-government anarchists, FREEDOM, April 1916
Reformists or insurrectionaries? 'Humanita Nova', n. 140, June 18, 1922
The Manifesto of the Sixteen (1916)

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