

Do Anarchists Support Democracy?

The Opinions of Errico Malatesta

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In the current U.S. political crisis it is vital for anarchists and other radicals to be clear about their view of democracy. To this end, I am reviewing the opinions of the Italian revolutionary anarchist Errico Malatesta.

U.S. democracy, such as it is, is in crisis. The national leadership, under Donald Trump, is deliberately working to undermine what democratic freedoms the people have left. Peter Thiel and other ultra-wealthy businesspeople subsidize theoreticians, such as Curtis Yarvin, who openly reject popular rule. Read by people high in the Trump Republican administration, they advocate “monarchy” or rule by a national “C.E.O.”

The Republicans’ model is Viktor Orban of Hungary, who got legally elected and then twisted the state into a virtual dictatorship. Members of Trump’s MAGA base, when asked, have said they would not object to Trump being a “dictator.” Whether this trend should be called “fascism” (a hotly debated question), it is a reactionary authoritarianism.

Liberal Democrats respond by defending the status quo—even though popular dissatisfaction with the status quo led to Trumpism. They hold on to the Constitution, a document written by merchants, big landowners, slaveholders, and their lawyers. Its creators wanted neither democracy (“mob rule” to them) nor a new king, just the stable government of the rich. U.S. people live under this (much amended) Constitution. It grants them a limited measure of freedom and self-rule. Meanwhile the capitalist class becomes wealthier and mightier than the monarchs and pharaohs of old, without “democratic” controls.

Of those who oppose the capitalist state, even with its democratic trimmings, the revolutionary far-left is largely Marxist-Leninist. Their goal is not democracy but a dictatorship of their party, ruling the state, and standing over the mass of people. Whatever their motives, this could only be state capitalism, not a society of freely associated producers.

What about revolutionary anarchists (who are also on the far-left, in their own way)? Where do they stand on “democracy”? *This is not a time to be unclear about our opinion of democracy.*

Many anarchists, social ecologists, autonomous Marxists, and other libertarian socialists have advocated “radical democracy,” “direct democracy,” “participatory democracy,” “self-management,” “self-government,” etc. U.S. anarchists, of various tendencies, who have been pro-democracy have included David Graeber, Murray Bookchin, Kevin Carson, Cindy Milstein, Noam Chomsky, Paul Goodman, and many more. (For example, see Finley 2025; Graeber 2013)

Yet other anarchists, etc., have opposed support for “democracy” (however modified). They do not want to use a term which is the ideological justification for the U.S. imperialist state. (For some reason, they do not object to using “freedom” and “liberty,” which are also ideological justifications for Western capitalist governments.) They also fear that even in the freest, directly-democratic, commune, there would be domination

of the minority by the majority. This would contradict the central idea of anarchism: a society without any domination or rule.

Malatesta on Democracy

Anarchist opponents of “democracy” often cite the views of the Italian anarchist, Errico Malatesta (1853–1932), comrade of Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin. After all, he had titled an article, “Neither Democrats nor Dictators: Anarchists.”

I am a great admirer of Errico Malatesta and have written several essays on his work. (For example, Price 2022; 2024) Despite changes in capitalism since his time, I find his strategic and theoretical thinking still enormously valuable. Yet I also find it useful to use the term “democracy.” It places anarchists within a long tradition of popular revolutionary struggle for increased freedom. I see anarchism as democracy without the state. Therefore I want to examine carefully what Malatesta, of the classical anarchists, really thought about democracy.

Malatesta was clear that in even the “best” bourgeois democracies the working people were oppressed and exploited by the capitalists and their state. In his time, Italy was ruled by an archaic monarchy, which propped up the big capitalists. One political opposition were the republicans, anti-monarchists who advocated a parliamentary democracy (no relation to the U.S. Republican Party). The other opposition party were the “democratic socialists,” who were reformist Marxists (Malatesta and his comrades called themselves “anarchist-socialists”). These social-democrats also advocated replacing the monarchy with a parliamentary democracy. Then, they said, they would get elected and implement socialism. Meanwhile, both parties ran in elections for the (very limited and mostly powerless) Italian parliament under the monarchy.

Much of the writing in Malatesta’s *Collected Works* are arguments against the republicans and reformist Marxists. He regarded it as a delusion to think that freedom and socialism could be reached by using the state, even a representative republic. He pointed out to the republicans and democratic socialists that there were king-less republics, such as France, the U.S., and in South America. Not one was an example of freedom, equality, or movement toward socialism. Why would an Italian republic be any better?

“Do not bring up...the republic of the United States, which is a swamp of corrupt politicians in the service of millionaires....” (*Malatesta 2016; p. 248*)
“In the United States there are a hundred or more billionaires who can call upon the parliament [Congress], the government, and the whole government hierarchy as servants....” (*same; p. 270*) “The republic of the United States...being the country where government’s dependence on capitalists is at its most complete and blatant.” (*same; p. 310*)

Nor did he think that the vote gave a great advantage to workers, peasants, and the poor. It just sent someone else to go into the government to be political for the voters, who themselves go back to work for their bosses. “The right to vote...is the right to renounce coping for oneself.” (same; p. 207) It is “the world’s grossest and stupidest illusion: once you vote, you will be the ones in charge.” (Malatesta 2019; p. 98) Far better was to organize unions, popular associations, and movements to engage in mass demonstrations, strikes, civil disobedience, rebellions and uprisings—direct action. The goal was revolution.

Yet Malatesta was aware of the difference between capitalist democratic republics and more authoritarian governments, such as monarchies and military dictatorships. (He did not live to see Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianisms.)

“...The worst of democracies is always preferable, if only from the educational point of view, than the best of dictatorships. Of course democracy, so-called government of the people, is a lie; but the lie always slightly binds the liar and limits the extent of his arbitrary power....” (Malatesta 1995)

For working people, it is easier to live in a capitalist democracy than in a dictatorship. Most of the time, oppression is indirect (it is most heavy on the marginalized and People of Color). It is easier for anarchists and other radicals to meet, organize, and try to reach people.

“Democracy is a lie, it is oppression and is in reality, oligarchy; that is, government by the few to the advantage of a privileged class. But we can still fight it in the name of freedom and equality, unlike those who have replaced it or want to replace it with something worse.” (Malatesta 1995)

As I write, the limited and minimal freedoms of U.S. bourgeois democracy are under attack. Those at the helm of the state are doing their worst to move the government in a more authoritarian direction. It is important to recognize the difference between even limited democratic freedoms and outright dictatorship. This is even while being clear about the essentially oppressive nature of the most democratic capitalist state (which is not the U.S.A!).

“[Our good friends] are wasting their time when they tell us a little freedom is better than a brutal and unbridled tyranny...for we are in complete agreement.” (*Malatesta 1984; p. 79*) “While preaching against every kind of government, and demanding complete freedom, we must support all struggles for partial freedom....” (*Malatesta 2014; p. 290*) “If today we cannot get rid of every kind of government, this is not a good reason for taking no interest in defending the few acquired liberties and fighting to gain more of those.” (*same; p. 509*)

Malatesta worked with the republicans and the democratic socialists on certain limited issues, such as campaigns to free political prisoners. He further proposed an alliance with the democratic socialists and the more radical republicans to coordinate their activities in the event of a revolution against the monarchy. The anarchist-socialists would not dissolve themselves in a common organization, but would ally themselves in a joint struggle.

The anarchists would seek to push the revolution as far as it would go, if possible beyond the limits of what their allies wanted. But even overturning the monarchy and replacing it with a democratic republic would have opened up further possibilities for the revolutionary anarchists. (A similar united front was attempted by Italian anarchists in the fight against the rise of Fascism—but was rejected by the Italian Socialist and Communist leaders. See Price 2021.)

However, Malatesta's final goal was the end of any kind of state, any rule and coercion, whether by a minority or a majority. "We are neither for a majority nor for a minority government; neither for democracy nor for dictatorship." (Malatesta 1995) Of course, he emphasized that the supposed democracies were not really ruled by their deluded and lied-to voting majority, but actually by their capitalist minorities. But even if there were a (hypothetical) democratic socialist government, with real majority rule, he still would have opposed it.

The freedoms of minorities against majorities is an essential part of democracy. Freedom of religion, of speech, of reproductive choice, of "the pursuit of happiness," are all minority—in fact individual—rights. The majority should not tell individuals or small groups what to do in matter which do not require collective action.

It is not "democratic" for the white majority to oppress the Black minority in the U.S. Nor for the straight majority to deny freedoms to LGBTQ people. For the Christian majority to repress Jews, Muslims, or atheists. For the majority of legal citizens to expel undocumented immigrants. For the Democratic and Republican majority to outlaw anarchists and state socialists.

Nor can the majority be said to really be a majority, if its members have not had the opportunity to hear all views, including those of minorities, and decide among them. It is not a true democracy unless members of the minority have the opportunity to become the majority.

In reality, the Founding Fathers were most concerned with defending the "rights" of the minority of rich people from the majority of workers, farmers, and the poor. Today, for all the talk of "majority rule," the corporate rich fights tooth and nail against the majority of working people taking away their wealth and their power over others. But revolutionary anarchists want to end all domination and exploitation.

"We are for the abolition of the gendarme. We are for the freedom of all and for free agreement, which will be there for all when no one has the means to force others, and all are involved in the good running of society. We are for anarchy." (Malatesta 1995)

Organization under Anarchy

Malatesta was against any kind of state, “neither for a majority nor for a minority government.” However, he did not see a stateless society as a heap of unattached atoms which might or might not choose to form temporary alliances. “Organization, which is, after all, only the practice of co-operation and solidarity, is a natural and necessary condition of social life....” (Malatesta 1984; p. 83) He argued against individualist-anarchists and anti-organizational communist-anarchists on this issue.

Like Bakunin and Kropotkin, his vision of socialist anarchy was of voluntary associations, self-managed industries, and free communes—cooperating through networks and federations.

Before a revolution, while we still live under capitalism and the state, Malatesta advocated the self-organization of the oppressed. He supported labor unions and urged anarchists to be active in them. He called on peasants to form associations.

He proposed that revolutionary anarchist-socialists should associate together to further their program. They should work together in producing and distributing anarchist newspapers. They should work inside and outside of labor unions. They should coordinate in different cities to have common demonstrations and rebellions. They should organize conferences and common work across national borders. He called for building an “anarchist party.” By “party,” he meant a federation to advance anarchist ideas and not a centralized party aiming to take state power by elections or revolution.

But if there must be (voluntary) organizations, how will they function? In what way will they be organized? How will decisions be made? Must everyone be involved in every decision? Must everyone agree on every decision? Must the furniture makers guild, the New York Anarchists League, the art students’ association, the New Haven Commune, or a passenger ship’s crew, etc, immediately split whenever there are disagreements among the members, no matter how inconsequential? These were Malatesta’s questions.

His response was to endorse the use of voting in organizations to determine opinion and to assign tasks. After discussion on major issues, in which everyone would have a chance to participate, he was for majority decision making. This was not because the majority was always right (consider how the direct democracy of classical Athens condemned Socrates to death!). It was so that decisions could be made and work get done.

More precisely, he was for the minority agreeing to accept the decision in order for the organization to function. The minority always had the right to split off, if the decision was intolerable to it. But if their members stayed, some of them might be in the majority on the next issue.

“For us the majority has no rights over the minority; but that does not impede, when we are not all unanimous and this concerns opinions over which nobody wishes to sacrifice the existence of the group, we voluntarily,

by tacit agreement, let the majority decide.” (*Malatesta 2019; p. 74*) “Only in matters unrelated to principle...will the minority find it necessary or useful to adjust to the majority opinion....” (*same; p. 133*)

His conception is consistent with a radical democracy with majority decision-making but only after a fully participatory process where all can have their say and minority rights are fully respected. It would also be consistent with a consensus process, with the minority being able to step aside, to “not block” consensus, if it chooses.

Malatesta accepted the need for division of labor in organizations, including special jobs being assigned, delegates being sent to other parts of a federation, committees being formed to oversee specific tasks, etc. All this with control over delegates, specialists, and committee members by the membership, rotation of positions, recall of people who are not carrying out the members’ desires, and so on. There must be no imposition of some people’s wishes on others.

Without using the word, Malatesta appears to be for democracy under anarchism. He is for an anarchist democracy—a radical, direct, participatory democracy. Perhaps it could be called a “voluntary democracy,” since it implies agreement and cooperation, and there is no violence or coercion by a majority over the minority nor by a minority over the majority. This is a conception of anarchy as “democracy without the state.”

Conclusion

This is no time for anarchists or anyone else to be unclear about democracy.

The democratic freedoms of the U.S. people, as limited as they are, are under attack by an authoritarian, fascist-minded, government and reactionary movement. The resistance to this attack is generally being channeled into electoral support for the Democratic Party. That party is dominated by big capitalists (now called “the donor class”); it holds back labor struggles; it endorses U.S.-supported Israeli genocide and war-waging; it followed anti-immigrant policies; it failed to effectively counter climate change; it is unwilling to really fight Trump; and so on.

Errico Malatesta provides a different direction for struggle. He was in revolutionary opposition to all governments and all statist parties. This included governments that claim to be democratic, majoritarian, and representative. He was against sowing illusions in the elitist, capitalist, and repressive nature of the most democratic republic

However, Malatesta was aware of the differences between liberal-democratic states and outright dictatorships. He supported all struggles to keep and expand freedoms in opposition to direct state repression—while continuing to assert opposition to the state as such. Defense of liberties was not for the sake of the capitalist class nor for abstract love of a Constitution. It was for the workers and oppressed to use against their rulers. He was for using what freedoms existed for non-electoral struggle, including demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, “riots” and rebellions.

He opposed the top-down, centralized, organization of capitalism and the state—and of the parties which sought to take them over. Instead he advocated bottom-up, participatory, self-organization and self-management. He was against the majority of the members of any association coercing a minority which might disagree with them on some issue. He expected that, with full participation of all members, those in a minority would usually be willing, voluntarily, to go along with most of the members—unless the issue was a such a principled matter that it was worth splitting over.

Without using the word, Malatesta may be said to have supported democracy—radical, participatory, direct, anarchist, democracy. His stated opposition to democracy was to the supposedly democratic state.

Brian Morris quotes Mikhail Bakunin (Malatesta’s Inspirer and mentor), “Where all rule...there is no state.” Morris goes on to say, “Such notions as...the ‘democratic state’ are thus, for Bakunin, contradictions in terms. If the term, ‘democracy,’ denoted government of the people, by the people, for the people, then this would imply no State, and Bakunin could therefore happily call himself a ‘democrat.’” (Morris 1993; p. 99)

While Malatesta did not use “democracy” (or “government”) positively, he could have called himself a “radical democrat.” So could other revolutionary anarchists.

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