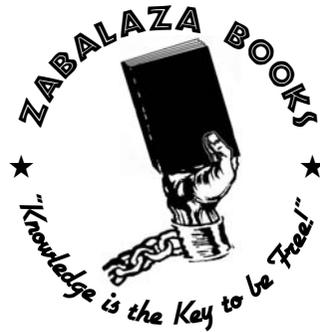


**TWO ESSAYS:**

**Neither Democrats, nor  
Dictators: Anarchists**

**Democracy and Anarchy**



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# Anarchism and Democracy



**Errico Malatesta**

But this is not possible, and if it were, it would not be desirable because it would mean the decline of humanity into barbarism and savagery.

If they are determined to defend their own autonomy, their own liberty, every individual or group must therefore understand the ties of solidarity that bind them to the rest of humanity, and possess a fairly developed sense of sympathy and love for their fellows, so as to know how voluntarily to make those sacrifices essential to life in a society that brings the greatest possible benefits on every given occasion.

But above all it must be made impossible for some to impose themselves on, and sponge off, the vast majority by material force.

Let us abolish the gendarme, the man armed in the service of the despot, and in one way or another we shall reach free agreement, because without such agreement, free or forced, it is not possible to live.

But even free agreement will always benefit most those who are intellectually and technically prepared. We therefore recommend to our friends and those who truly wish the good of all, to study the most urgent problems, those that will require a practical solution the very day that the people shake off the yoke that oppresses them.

**March 1924**

# **Neither Democrats, nor Dictators: Anarchists**

**Errico Malatesta**

Theoretically 'democracy' means popular government; government by all for everybody by the efforts of all. In a democracy the people must be able to say what they want, to nominate the executors of their wishes, to monitor their performance and remove them when they see fit.

Naturally this presumes that all the individuals that make up a people are able to form an opinion and express it on all the subjects that interest them. It implies that everyone is politically and economically independent and therefore no one, to live, would be obliged to submit to the will of others.

If classes and individuals exist that are deprived of the means of production and therefore dependent on others with a monopoly over those means, the so-called democratic system can only be a lie, and one which serves to deceive the mass of the people and keep them docile with an outward show of sovereignty, while the rule of the privileged and dominant class is in fact salvaged and consolidated. Such is democracy and such it always has been in a capitalist structure, whatever form it takes, from constitutional monarchy to so-called direct rule.

There could be no such thing as a democracy, a government of the people, other than in a socialistic regime, when the means of production and of living are socialised and the right of all to intervene in the running of public affairs is based on and guaranteed by the economic independence of every person. In this case it would seem that the democratic system was the one best able to guarantee justice and to harmonise individual independence with the necessities of life in society. And so it seemed, more or less clearly, to those who, in the era of the absolute monarchs, fought, suffered and died for freedom.

**These articles first appeared in Malatesta's journal *Pensiero e Volontà*. The English translation by Gillian Fleming was published in *The Anarchist Revolution* edited by Vernon Richards, Freedom Press 1995.**

But for the fact that, looking at things as they really are, the government of all the people turns out to be an impossibility, owing to the fact that the individuals who make up the people have differing opinions and desires and it never, or almost never happens, that on any one question or problem all can be in agreement. Therefore the 'government of all the people', if we have to have government, can at best be only the government of the majority. And the democrats, whether socialists or not, are willing to agree. They add, it is true, that one must respect minority rights; but since it is the majority that decides what these rights are, as a result minorities only have the right to do what the majority wants and allows. The only limit to the will of the majority would be the resistance that the minorities know and can put up. This means that there would always be a social struggle, in which a part of the members, albeit the majority, has the right to impose its own will on the others, yoking the efforts of all to their own ends.

And here I would make an aside to show how, based on reasoning backed by the evidence of past and present events, it is not even true that where there is government, namely authority, that authority resides in the majority and how in reality every 'democracy' has been, is and must be nothing short of an 'oligarchy' - a government of the few, a dictatorship. But, for the purposes of this article, I prefer to err on the side of the democrats and assume that there can really be a true and sincere majority government.

Government means the right to make the law and to impose it on everyone by force: without a police force there is no government.

Now, can a society live and progress peacefully for the greater good of all, can it gradually adapt to ever-changing circumstances if the majority has the right and the means to impose its will by force on the recalcitrant minorities?

The majority is, by definition, backward, conservative, enemy of the new, sluggish in thought and deed and at the same time impulsive, immoderate, suggestible, facile in its enthusiasms and irrational fears. Every new idea stems from one or a few individuals, is accepted, if viable, by a more or less sizeable minority and wins over the majority, if ever, only after it has been superseded by new ideas and new needs and has already become outdated and rather an obstacle, rather than a spur to progress.

But do we, then, want a minority government?

is at last accepted and even repeated by those writers who most affect to despise our ideas (e.g. Political Science Senator Gaetano Mosca).

We will limit ourselves to inviting our young friends to use greater precision of language, in the conviction that once the phrases are dissected they themselves will see how vacuous they are.

'Government of the people' no, because this presupposes what could never happen - complete unanimity of will of all the individuals that make up the people.

It would be closer to the truth to say, 'government of the majority of the people.' This implies a minority that must either rebel or submit to the will of others.

But it is never the case that the representatives of the majority of people are all of the same mind on all questions; it is therefore necessary to have recourse again to the majority system and thus we will get closer still to the truth with, 'government of the majority of the elected by the majority of the electors.'

Which is already beginning to bear a strong resemblance to minority government.

And if one then takes into account the way in which elections are held, how the political parties and parliamentary groupings are formed and how laws are drawn up and voted and applied, it is easy to understand what has already been proved by universal historical experience: even in the most democratic of democracies it is always a small minority that rules and imposes its will and interests by force.

Therefore, those who really want 'government of the people' in the sense that each can assert his or her own will, ideas and needs, must ensure that no one, majority or minority, can rule over others; in other words, they must abolish government, meaning any coercive organisation, and replace it with the free organisation of those with common interests and aims.

This would be very simple if every group and individual could live in isolation and on their own, in their own way, supporting themselves independently of the rest, supplying their own material and moral needs.

For me there is no doubt that 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. Of course the 'sovereign people' is a clown of a sovereign, a slave with a papier-mâché crown and sceptre.

But to believe oneself free, even when one is not, is always better than to know oneself to be a slave, and to accept slavery as something just and inevitable.

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.

We are not democrats for, among other reasons, democracy sooner or later leads to war and dictatorship. Just as we are not supporters of dictatorships, among other things, because dictatorship arouses a desire for democracy, provokes a return to democracy, and thus tends to perpetuate a vicious circle in which human society oscillates between open and brutal tyranny and lying freedom.

So, we declare war on dictatorship and war on democracy. But what do we put in their place?

Not all democrats are like those described above - hypocrites who are more or less aware that in the name of the people they wish to dominate the people and exploit and oppress them.

There are many, especially among the young republicans, who have a serious belief in democracy and see it as the means of obtaining full and complete freedom of development for all. These are the young people we should like to disabuse, persuade not to mistake an abstraction, 'the people', for the living reality, which is men and women with all their different needs, passions and often contradictory aspirations.

It is not the intention here to repeat our critique of the parliament system and all the means thought up to have deputies who really do represent the will of the people; a critique which, after fifty years of anarchist propaganda

Certainly not. If it is unjust and harmful for a majority to oppress minorities and obstruct progress, it is even more unjust and harmful for a minority to oppress the whole population or impose its own ideas by force, which even if they were good ones would excite repugnance and opposition because of the very fact of being imposed.

And then, one must not forget that there are all kinds of different minorities. There are minorities of egoists and villains as there are of fanatics, who believe themselves to be possessed of absolute truth and, in perfectly good faith, seek to impose on others what they hold to be the only way to salvation, even if it is simple silliness. There are minorities of reactionaries who seek to turn back the clock and are divided as to the paths and limits of reaction. And there are revolutionary minorities, also divided on the means and ends of revolution and on the direction that social progress should take.

Which minority should take over?

This is a matter of brute force and capacity for intrigue, and the odds that success would fall to the most sincere and most devoted to the general good are not favourable. To conquer power one needs qualities that are not exactly those that are needed to ensure that justice and well-being will triumph in the world.

But I shall here continue to give others the benefit of the doubt and assume that a minority came to power which, among those who aspire to government, I considered the best for its ideas and proposals. I want to assume that the socialists came to power and would add, also the anarchists, if I were not prevented by a contradiction in terms.

This would be the worst of all?

Yes, to win power, whether legally or illegally, one needs to have left by the roadside a large part of one's ideological baggage and to have got rid of all one's moral scruples. And then, once in power, the big problem is how to stay there. One needs to create a joint interest in the new state of affairs and attach to those in government a new privileged class, and suppressing any kind of opposition by all possible means. Perhaps in the national interest, but always with freedom-destructive results.

An established government, founded on the passive consensus of the

majority and strong in numbers, in tradition and in the sentiment - sometimes sincere - of being in the right, can leave some space to liberty, at least so long as the privileged classes do not feel threatened. A new government, which relies for support only on an often-slender minority, is obliged through necessity to be tyrannical.

One need only think what the socialists and communists did when they came to power, either betraying their principles and comrades or by flying colours in the name of socialism and communism.

This is why we are neither for a majority nor for a minority government; neither for democracy nor for dictatorship.

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.

May 1926

# Democracy and Anarchy

**Errico Malatesta**

The rampant dictatorial governments in Italy, Spain and Russia, which arouse such envy and longing among the more reactionary and timid parties across the world, are supplying dispossessed 'democracy' with a sort of new virginity. Thus we see the creatures of the old regimes, well-accustomed to the wicked art of politics, responsible for repression and massacres of working people, re-emerging - where they do not lack the courage - and presenting themselves as men of progress, seeking to capture the near future in the name of liberation. And, given the situation, they could even succeed.

There is something to be said for the criticisms made of democracy by dictatorial regimes, and the way they expose the vices and lies of democracy. And I remember that anarchist, Hermann Sandomirski, a Bolshevik fellow traveller with whom we had bittersweet contact at the time of the Geneva conference, and who is now trying to couple Lenin with Bakunin, no less; I say I remember Sandomirski who in order to defend the Russian regime dragged out his Kropotkin to demonstrate that democracy is not the best imaginable form of social structure. His method of reasoning, as a Russian, put me in mind and I think I told him so - of the reasoning made by some of his compatriots when, in response to the indignation of the civilised world at the Tsar's stripping, flogging and hanging of women, they argued that if men and women were to have equal rights they should also accept equal responsibilities. Those supporters of prison and the scaffold remembered the rights of women only when they could serve as a pretext for new outrages! Thus dictatorships oppose democratic governments only when they discover that there is a form of government that leaves even greater room for despotism and tyranny for those who manage to seize power.