

## Two Critiques Against the State: Errico Malatesta and Carlo Rosselli

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During the 1920s and 1930s, in the context of the Fascist dictatorship in Italy, two of the most trenchant critiques against the modern state were expressed through the humane anarchism of Errico Malatesta and the heretical socialism of Carlo Rosselli.

In a life that spanned eighty years (1853-1932), Errico Malatesta witnessed the unification of Italy and the evolution of Fascism. Born into a family that owned small tracts of land in the Campania province of Italy, by the age of fourteen he was arrested for mailing a threatening letter to the king of Italy.<sup>1</sup> Malatesta already had what the Russian anarchist Bakunin was to recognize later and consider necessary for the life of a revolutionary: *le diable au corps*. Leading three generations of anarchists, he even managed to acquire the respect and admiration of the police. In his thought and in his actions – volunteering for work in a hospital during the 1884 cholera epidemic in Naples, donating his inherited land and houses to the peasants who lived in them, adopting an orphaned child – he endeavored to follow Giuseppe Mazzini's injunction to unite theory and practice. As a student at the University of Naples, he passed from the republicanism of Mazzini to the anarchism of Bakunin.<sup>2</sup> Feared by governments in a dozen countries, attacked by an ignorant and complacent society, exiled from his home and dying under the suspicious eyes of the Fascist police, Malatesta was a visionary whose vision bordered on the utopian.

Malatesta never considered himself a theorist: echoing Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, he once remarked that "it is more important to make history than to write it."<sup>3</sup> All discussion of political theory must be grounded in the empirical, everyday experience of the people. In many ways, he was still tied to a romantic, nineteenth-century conception of society and political action; yet he recognized the tremendous changes taking place in his lifetime, fundamentally altering the relation between subject and the state. Malatesta was caught in the ideological crossfire that raged between Marx and Bakunin in the late nineteenth century. For Malatesta, Marx represented a "new form of authoritarianism disguised as something else... perhaps more insidious and dangerous than the enemy we had in the past."<sup>4</sup> Besides being repulsed by what he perceived as Marx's authoritarian, oppressive and dogmatic personality, Malatesta also could not accept belief in the necessity for a strong, centralized and industrialized state as the pre-condition for a proletarian revolution. While Marx's ideas began to penetrate the northern Italian proletariat, it was Bakunin who succeeded in forging a revolutionary mentality in the *Mezzogiorno* (Italian south).

Arrested and tried for an attempted insurrection in 1878, a journalist present in the courtroom described the young anarchist as “small, dark, with two of the blackest eyes full of fire; he is all energy, all intelligence.”<sup>5</sup> There followed a period of more arrests, trials, imprisonment, and the peregrinations of exile in London, Argentina, Spain, Egypt, and even Patterson, New Jersey – home to a large Italian-American anarchist community. With the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, Malatesta denounced those anarchists such as Kropotkin who allowed their nationalism to overwhelm their internationalist principles. With the end of the war and the rise of Fascism, Malatesta continued his activities under the surveillance of Mussolini’s police. Harassed but never arrested, his state of semi-liberty was proof that the regime feared his popularity. While other anti-fascist intellectuals were being arrested, beaten, sent into exile or assassinated, Malatesta continued to earn his living as a mechanic and electrician. The only other anti-fascist intellectual accorded the same freedom was Benedetto Croce, considered at the time one of Europe’s foremost philosophers. Malatesta’s pristine personal integrity attracted the idealists and the hopeful. When, after the Bolshevik Revolution, his followers urged him to “become their Lenin,” he refused, saying “We follow ideas and not men and rebel against the habit of embodying a principle in a man.”<sup>6</sup>

Malatesta’s conception of the formation and evolution of the state was directly related to his experience as a southern Italian who lived through the unification of Italy. Victor Emmanuel of the House of Savoy signed a secret treaty with Napoleon III and manipulated a naive Austria into war. By 1861, the Kingdom of Italy had been formed with the expulsion of the Austrians from the north and the defeat of the Spanish Bourbons in the south.<sup>7</sup> In the process, the idealism of Giuseppe Mazzini and the heroism of Giuseppe Garibaldi were both defeated by the *Realpolitik* of Camillo Cavour, secretary to Victor Emanuele. Thus for most Italians, the despotism and oppression of the Austrians and the Spanish was simply replaced by that of the Savoy dynasty.

Besides this historical and sociological account for the character of the Italian state, Malatesta also presents an anthropological explanation: being born and always living chains, man believes that this inheritance of slavery is the natural condition of things; a facet of the cosmos, a fact of “natural law.” The condition of non-freedom was an eradicable and essential component of the universe; to contest that fact was to contest the natural order of things. The peasant and the worker see their fate as intimately bound up with the fate of the landlord and industrialist to such an extent they cannot conceive of a social reality other than that which exists. The bitter irony of this is that the worker and peasant become accomplices in their own oppression and exploitation. Added to this is the naked and brutal fact that the state claims a monopoly on the exercise of violence; that the state can marshal the forces of religion and education to its side, and the subjugation of the people is complete. The state fosters the myth that its existence is a necessary pre-condition for civilization;

without the state, we would revert back to Hobbes' State of Nature. "Anarchy," from the Greek *anarchos* (without a ruler), is defined by Webster's as 1) the complete absence of government and law; 2) political disorder and violence; 3) disorder in any sphere of activity. But does 2) *necessarily* follow from 1)? "Anarchy," writes Malatesta, is "a natural order, a harmony between the needs and interests of all; complete liberty within complete solidarity."<sup>8</sup>

The "metaphysical tendency" that substitutes an abstract idea of the state in place of its brutal reality is a "hallucination." This abstract idea is the state as a moral entity, with certain given attributes of reason, of justice, of equality. These attributes of the state are supposedly independent of the actual people who make up the government. Malatesta scorns these "metaphysicians" for holding that the state is an abstract social power; that it is representative of the general interests; that it is the expression of the right of all considered as a limit on the rights of each individual.<sup>9</sup> Why do we abdicate our power and place it in the hands of the few? Malatesta rhetorically asks "Are they so exceptional? Are they so endowed with reason? Are they infallible or incorruptible?" Even universal suffrage does not guarantee us freedom, for numbers alone do not assure us either reason or justice. All theories of the state share a common preconception, whether admitted or not: that all men have contrary interests, and that there is the need for a superior, external force to obligate one to respect the interests of another. If the premise that human society is based on competition rather than cooperation is denied, then the entire edifice supporting the existence of the state is called into question. Of course, Malatesta was well aware that for the landless peasant or the factory worker, life seemed to confirm the idea that brutal competition was a "natural law." In the complaints, curses, proverbs, aphorisms, legends and advice of the people, there is the ever-present consciousness of the oppressiveness of the state and those in power.

Reform is not possible for the state as the dispenser of justice, a moderator in the social struggle; impartial administration of the public interest is not realizable. Moving from the sociological-historical to the anthropological-biological, Malatesta held that the individual and society have self-preservation in common as a "necessary and fundamental property." Even a cursory examination of the natural world demonstrates that mutual assistance, cooperation and association are the values that will ensure the survival of the individual and the species. Man became fully human only when he became social, acquired the characteristic of language, and forged culture – that is, only when he came to recognize the importance of cooperation and association. For Malatesta, the modern industrial world and the contemporary form of the nation-state were ironically forcing human beings back into the primitive state.

Ever conscious of his semi-literate and semi-educated audience, Malatesta's writings have the ability to present complex ideas easily and with the force of simple truths:

Whoever has power over things has power over men; whoever governs production also governs the producers; whoever determines consumption is master over the consumer. Either things are administered on the basis of free agreement among the interested parties – and this is anarchism – or else they are administered by administrators – and this is Government, it is the state, and inevitably, it turns out to be tyrannical.<sup>10</sup>

With echoes of Mazzini, Garibaldi, Bakunin and Marx, Malatesta was a thinker in the heroic nineteenth-century mode struggling to understand the evolution of the modern nation-state. The Great War and the rise of Fascism only confirmed his understanding of the state. With Carlo Rosselli, we have a more modern critique.

Carlo Rosselli (1899-1937) was born into a wealthy Florentine family with strong ties to the *Risorgimento*. As secular Jews, they saw their own emancipation as tied to the evolution of the new nation-state. Abandoning a promising career as a professor of political economy, Carlo Rosselli devoted himself and his considerable fortune to the anti-fascist cause. In 1925, he established one of the first underground anti-fascist newspapers which published documents directly implicating Mussolini in the assassination of a Socialist deputy of Parliament. In 1926, he formed a more theoretical journal, *Il Quarto Stato*, with the young socialist Pietro Nenni. Arrested for the clandestine ex-patriation of Filippo Turati, the “grand old man” of Italian socialism, Rosselli was tried and sent to *confino* (the practice of internal, domestic exile) on the island of Lipari, off the coast of Sicily. There, between 1928 and 1929, he secretly wrote his major theoretical work, *Liberal Socialism*, hiding the manuscript in an old piano. In June of 1929, his English-born wife Marion spirited the manuscript off the island; the next month Rosselli managed a daring and dramatic escape by sea. He met Marion and a large exiled anti-fascist community in Paris, where his book was published the following year in French. For the next several years, he lived in Paris, one of the most charismatic and influential of the exiled anti-fascist intellectuals. His most important endeavor was the creation of a new political movement, *Giustizia e Libertà* (“Justice and Liberty”) with a newspaper and journal of the same name. Justice and Liberty was the most effective and popular of the non-Marxist anti-fascist groups, soon eclipsing the moribund Socialist Party. It was a young, dynamic, and vital movement, attracting some of the most prominent writers, artists and thinkers in Italy and in exile. Rosselli characterized Justice and Liberty as a new movement without precedent in the political landscape of Europe. Its activity was marked by “an open-minded – almost experimental – character” and was driven by an “intellectual restlessness.”<sup>11</sup> Rosselli prided himself on being the *enfant terrible* of the anti-fascist opposition; criticizing his colleagues for their timidity and failure to respond aggressively enough to the fascist onslaught. Fascism had to be confronted on every level, from the

theoretical to the practical; as proof of his conviction, Rosselli was one of the first to arrive in Barcelona in defense of the Republic at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. He was given command of a column of Spanish and Italian volunteers and wounded at the front; behind the lines, he delivered fiery broadcasts over Radio Barcelona which were beamed out of Spain into the rest of Europe, including Fascist Italy, thus sealing his fate. In June of 1937, he and his brother, the noted historian Nello, were ambushed and killed on a lonely stretch of road in the French countryside by French fascists in the pay of Mussolini's regime.

Rosselli's analysis of the Fascist state bordered on the heretical. Contrary to the orthodox socialist and communist interpretation which saw Fascism as a blind class reaction of the bourgeoisie, Rosselli recognized that Fascism was a new political phenomenon: he called it "the central fact, the tremendous *novelty* of our time."<sup>12</sup> He evoked the tradition of Proudhon, Bakunin and Marx: the Marx of the 1844 manuscripts and the *Critique of the Gotha Program* – not the Marx that had been made into an idolater of the state by his followers. "Freedom," Marx had written in 1875, "consists in transforming the State, the supreme organ of Society into an organ that is completely subordinate to society." In his work *The Civil War in France*, Marx had defined the state as "the parasite that feeds itself on the substance of society and paralyzes free will." Rosselli often cited Marx in this way in response to his Marxist critics.

In his analysis of the state – not necessarily the Fascist state – Rosselli came very close to the position of the anarchists: "There is a monster in the modern world – the State – that is devouring Society." The dictatorships of the 1930s had destroyed human relations, and substituted law for liberty, equality with military discipline. In the place of voluntary, free and creative associations, it substituted forced, sterile, tyrannical, inhuman associations. The modern dictatorial state – the logical conclusion of nineteenth-century statism – makes no place for man; only a place for the servant of production, the servant of administration, the servant of the race and the servant of imperial grandeur. The state is ubiquitous and forces the subject to adore it. A century earlier, the state was a simple organ of society. Before Hegel and especially before his servile disciples, no one thought of the state as an Absolute or Universal. No one dreamed that the state represented the divine ideal in terrestrial form or that true freedom could only be reached by submitting fully to the state. Before "the state," there existed only states.<sup>13</sup>

The prototype of the anti-state federal society was the system of communes in Italy during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These medieval communes were characterized by their craft guilds, the corporations, the universities, the confraternities and various other societies. Even in early modern Europe and after the birth of the nation-state, various organizations and institutions remained outside the sphere of the state. What then, caused the

mutation into the monster of the modern state? Part of the blame can be laid at the feet of Hegel and his disciples, all worshipers of the State. Equally important was the evolution of industrial capitalism and what Rosselli called “Jacobin democracy.”<sup>14</sup> Ironically, both began as forces of liberation, only to degenerate into forms of oppression. In little more than a century, citizens who had just become voters were transformed back into subjects. More recently, the Great War and its subsequent crisis accelerated the process: all states – including the liberal, Western democracies – abrogated for themselves unlimited power, including the most sacred one of demanding the blood of their subjects. The Fascist state, by demanding control over blood and bread, acquires control over the hearts and minds of its subjects as well. The alienation of the citizen is thus total and complete; or as Rosselli put it, “We are in full barbarism... Man is the end, not the State”<sup>15</sup>

Some of Rosselli’s most provocative ideas concerning the state arose in the course of debate over a seemingly-unrelated matter: the nature and character of the movement he created, Justice and Liberty. Rosselli had always insisted that Justice and Liberty remain a movement and not a party; this was consistent with his vehement condemnation of the traditional political parties in Italy, which he saw as ineffective, powerless and unable to respond to the Fascist regime. In the context of Fascism, it was even more important to remain a movement. For Rosselli, the distinctive, peculiar and essential characteristic of the political party was that it could not be conceived except in comparison and competition with other parties, within a certain political climate. That climate was the liberal political atmosphere of the nineteenth century. The notion of the party presupposes that of political struggle, of freedom and autonomy. A party cannot exist where there exist no parties; a party cannot exist where there is no political struggle; there can be no political struggle where there is no freedom. All political parties, including the communist party, were born in this particular liberal climate of certain fundamental freedoms: of association, of speech, of the press. All modern parties reproduce the climate and structure of the liberal state in which they were formed. The modern political party therefore is within the state, an organ of the state, even if its ultimate goal is the destruction of that state. If, instead, the party is completely outside the state, it is in “flagrant contradiction” to the state; it can in no way be a part of the structures of the state. Then it is no longer a party but a revolutionary movement: an “anti-state.”<sup>16</sup> In this sense, the Fascist Party in Italy, the Nazi Party in Germany, and the Communist Party in the Soviet Union are not parties because they are singular, they are totalitarian. A political party is a part of the whole, or as Rosselli writes “a moment in the dialectic of political forces.” These particular parties present themselves as the Whole, the Absolute, the State.

As a fatalistic post-script, I would like to note one other writer’s view on the state. Carlo Levi is known in America as the author of *Christ Stopped at*

*Eboli*, a work that chronicled his year spent in *confino* (domestic exile) in a (literally; hence the title) God-forsaken town in the Italian *Mezzogiorno*. Levi was a member of Justice and Liberty and a close colleague of Rosselli's. The year spent with the impoverished peasants of the South radically changed the thinking of this northern Italian intellectual. After returning from his exile and speaking to his friends and colleagues in the anti-Fascist struggle, he wrote:

At bottom, as I now perceived, they were all unconscious worshipers of the State. Whether the State they worshiped was the Fascist State or the incarnation of quite another dream, they thought of it as something that transcended both its citizens and their lives. Whether it was tyrannical or paternalistic, dictatorial or democratic, it remained to them monolithic, centralized, and remote. This was why the political leaders and my peasants could never understand one another.

As the conversation drifted toward the perennial question of what to do with the South, Levi shocked his friends when he told them that the state, as they conceived it, was the greatest obstacle to the accomplishment of anything.

The state cannot solve the problem of the South, because the problem which we call by that name is none other than the problem of the state itself... We must make ourselves capable of inventing a new form of government, neither Fascist, nor Communist, nor even Liberal, for all three of these are forms of the religion of the state. We must rebuild the foundations of our concept of the state with the concept of the individual, which is its basis. For the juridical and abstract concept of the individual we must substitute a new concept, more expressive of reality, one that will do away with the now unbridgeable gulf between the individual and the state.<sup>17</sup>

Although penned in another age, the critiques of Malatesta, Roselli and Levi offer fruitful and fertile impetus for commentary on the contemporary nation-state.

<sup>1</sup>Max Nettlau, *Errico Malatesta: Biography of an Anarchist*, (New York 1923), 14.

<sup>2</sup>Fifty years after their first encounter Malatesta wrote "Bakunin came to shake up all the traditions, all the social, political, and patriotic dogmas considered until then to be sure truths and outside the realm of discussion by the intellectuals of Naples. For some, Bakunin was the barbarian of the North, without God and without Country, without respect for anything sacred, and constituting a danger to the holy Italian and Latin civilization. For others, he was the man who brought to the stagnant marsh of Neapolitan traditions a breath of fresh air, who opened the eyes of the young to new and vast horizons." "Il primo incontro con Bakunin," in *Pensiero e Volontà*, July 1, 1926.

<sup>3</sup>Stefano Arcangeli, *Errico Malatesta e il comunismo italiano*, (Milan 1972), 47.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>5</sup>*Il Corriere del Mattino*, 20 August 1878; quoted in Pier Carlo Massini, *Storia degli anarchici italiani*, (Milan 1974), 144.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Nettlau, 76.

<sup>7</sup>For a poetic and fictional recounting of the events in the south from the perspective of the landed aristocracy, cf. Giuseppe Lampedusa's classic work, *The Leopard*, trans. Archibald Colquhoun, (New York 1960).

<sup>8</sup>Errico Malatesta, *Anarchia*, ed. Alfredo Bonano, (Catania 1969), 47.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>10</sup>*Agitazione*, 15 May, 1897.

<sup>11</sup>"Per l'unificazione politica del proletariato italiano: Giustizia e Libertà," in *Giustizia e Libertà*, 14 May, 1937, 1; reprinted in Carlo Rosselli, *Scritti dell'esilio II Dallo scioglimento della concentrazione antifascista alla guerra di Spagna (1934-1937)*, ed. Costanzo Casucci, (Turin 1992), 530-537.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 530.

<sup>13</sup>These comments are from Rosselli's essay "Contro lo Stato," in *Giustizia e Libertà*, 21 September, 1934, 1; reprinted in *Scritti dell'esilio II*, 42-45.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>16</sup>"Pro o contro il partito," in *Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà*, n. 8, August, 1933, 3-12; reprinted in *Scritti dell'esilio I Giustizia e Libertà e la Concentrazione Antifascista (1929-1934)*. ed. Costanzo Cassuci, (Turin 1988), 215-225.

<sup>17</sup>Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, trans. Frances Frenaye, (New York 1984), 249-253.