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Making Sense of Anarchism: Errico Malatesta's Experiments with Revolution, 1889–1900

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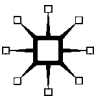

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Contents

List of Illustrations vii

Preface viii

Acknowledgments xi

1 Introduction: Anarchism, a Simple and Odd Business? 1
Historiography and the irrationality of anarchism 1
A policy of rational accommodation 6
Epilogue: a charitable approach to anarchism 12

2 The First International: A Lasting Heritage 14
Errico Malatesta, one of the 'Benevento Band' 14
Two brands of socialism at cross purposes 16
Distinctive anarchist themes 20
Epilogue: the anarchist project 35

3 An 'Anarchist Rarity' Reappears, 1889 36
Opaque planning across borders 36
London: direct action on a mass scale 41
An official 'reappearance' 44
A transnational network 46
Epilogue: three paradigmatic months 49

4 A Short-Lived, Momentous Periodical, 1889–90 50
Anarchist pluralism 51
Anarchism as a method 55
Solidarity as a value 56
Conscious minorities and masses 60
Tactical principles 63
Methodological individualism 66
Epilogue: pragmatism and coherence 69

5 Opaque Insurrectionary Trials, 1890–92 71
The indeterminacy of social action 71
Propaganda by the deed redefined 73
France: the First of May 76
An anarchist party 79
Italy: 'An Unknown Young Man . . . ' 81

Spain: a speaking tour? 90
Epilogue: the continuity of anarchism 99

6 Open-Ended Popular Movements, 1892–94 101
The anarchist tactical chasm 101
Belgium: workers on strike for universal suffrage 104
Sicily: peasants in revolt against taxes 108
An uneventful year of deep change 122
Epilogue: the tide of history 126

7 Patient Work in the Light of Day, 1894–98 128
The crossroads of cosmopolitan anarchism 130
A pluralist view on the labor movement 136
Two methodological approaches at cross purposes 142
Sustainable struggles and steady growth 147
Anarchism, parliamentarianism, and decision making 154
An anarchist mobilization drive 161
Epilogue: the 'fatal dichotomies' of anarchism 173

8 From the Other Side of the Atlantic Ocean, 1899–1900 176
An impromptu escape? 177
Anarchist tactics and the lesson of experience 180
New Jersey: taking care of Italian business 188
Organization and oligarchy: an anarchist debate 190
A national movement spanning continents 199
The cross-national dimension of anarchism 206
Epilogue: the proper scope of anarchist history 211

9 Malatesta's Anarchism: A Charitable Interpretation 213
Anarchist gradualism 213
A socialist open society 217
The rejection of 'good by force' 221
A morality-driven spontaneous process 223
Theories of collective action: a comparison 229
Epilogue: less is more 238

10 Conclusion: A Complex, Rational Business 239

References 252

Index 267

Illustrations

Figures

4.1 *L'Associazione*, front page of the first issue 52
5.1 Malatesta at the time of his 1891 underground stay in Italy 84
5.2 Malatesta during his 1891 detention in Switzerland 90
5.3 A handbill announcing a meeting with Malatesta and Esteve 94
6.1 Malatesta's photograph, presumably from the mid-1890s 109
6.2 Handbill *Solidarietà con la Sicilia* 118
7.1 Front page from an issue of *L'Agitazione* 155
7.2 Malatesta's 1898 police photographs 171
8.1 First page of *Contro la Monarchia* 181
8.2 *La Questione Sociale* of Paterson, front page of the new series' first issue, under Malatesta's editorship 191
8.3 Malatesta's photograph taken around the year 1900 207

Table

7.1 Number and size of political groups in the city and district of Ancona, June 1894 164

Preface

It has been argued that the historian resembles a detective (Winks). The historiography of anarchism certainly lends itself to such a comparison.

In 'The Purloined Letter', one of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories featuring the Parisian detective Auguste Dupin, we make the acquaintance of Monsieur G, a type of police officer 'who had a fashion of calling every thing "odd" that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of "oddities" '. One day he calls on Dupin, who is sitting at home in a meditative mood, to explain to him a new case: 'The business is *very* simple indeed, and I make no doubt that we can manage it sufficiently well ourselves; but then I thought Dupin would like to hear the details of it, because it is so excessively *odd*.' 'Simple and odd', echoes Dupin doubtfully (257–8).

Such is the situation with the historiography of anarchism.

Many historians do not expect to make sense of anarchism, and therefore, like Monsieur G, they happily live amid a legion of oddities: for them, anarchists 'are moving in their sincerity, if naïve to the point of self-destruction' (Carr); 'when one argues with anarchism, one argues with an absurd point of view' (Horowitz, 589); and 'the disinterestedness and heroism of the best anarchist activists arouse our admiration, while at the same time their stupidity irritates and baffles us' (Zagorin). Naïvety, absurdity, stupidity are regarded as anarchism's obvious attributes that need not be argued. Obviously absurd, simple, and odd . . .

Needless to say, it was Dupin who eventually solved the case of the purloined letter, which turned out to be neither simple nor odd. His method, which is the antithesis of G's, is well illustrated by another Poe story, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', in which the police are at a loss with a ferocious murder committed without apparent motive by one or more individuals with puzzling physical features. Confronted with a maze of conflicting details, Dupin uses coherence as a heuristic principle and sets out to prove that 'apparent "impossibilities" are, in reality, not such'. For example, after establishing that the murderers must have escaped by the windows of a certain room, he thus reasons: 'This being so, they could not have re-fastened the sashes from the inside . . . Yet the sashes *were* fastened. They *must*, then have the power of fastening themselves . . . A concealed spring must, I now knew, exist . . . ' Upon examination, Dupin finds indeed a concealed spring and eventually the solution to the mystery: the murderer was an orang-utan escaped from its owner. The police, he explains, had considered the mystery insoluble because they had fallen 'into the gross but common error of confounding the unusual with the abstruse' (148–9).

In this book I propose to take Dupin's approach to investigate whether anarchism can be made sense of and interpreted as a sensible and rational strategy of action. Anarchism is indeed unusual. Of all political movements that have ever existed, it is the only one to seek the abolishment of political power rather than its seizure. Is it abstruse, though? This may indeed be a common but gross error that stems from lack of understanding. Like Dupin in the 'Rue Morgue', I intend to embark on an exploration of anarchist ideas and action driven by coherence as a heuristic principle, in the hope of being led to an interpretation in which apparent 'oddities' and 'impossibilities' are dissolved and replaced by comprehension.

Just like detective stories do not explain their protagonist's method in the abstract, but show it at work, so I apply my approach to a historical case, that of the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta (1853–1932).

Malatesta's figure is both prominent and underrated. He is acknowledged to be a foremost representative of international anarchism, yet his name does not always resonate, especially outside of Italy. His pamphlets – *Fra Contadini* (Between Peasants), *L'Anarchia* (Anarchy), *Al Caffè* (At the Café) – are among the greatest anarchist 'best-sellers' of all times. Yet he is regarded more as a man of action than of thought, perhaps, ironically, because his rare ability to express complex ideas in simple terms has been mistaken for lack of intellectual depth. And, of course, he has had his share of historical judgments of the simple-and-odd type. An early biographer wrote that in his old age his views remained 'simple enough and as far removed from reality as the anarchist creed of his early days. A generous creed and a humanitarian philosophy, but as effective a revolutionary weapon against the existing system as the tomahawk of an Indian brave against the tank' (Nomad, 47). The judgment has stuck. A memorial article of February 2011 in a major Italian newspaper calls Malatesta 'a champion of failures' and wonders why governments were afraid of him (Stancanelli). The emphasis of such analyses is on the abysmal gap between aims and means, ideal and reality. However, could the gap be between reality and the observer's understanding, instead?

My starting move in trying to answer this question is to grant Malatesta the benefit of common sense. This methodological presumption becomes my driving principle in attempting a complete and coherent interpretation of his intentions, beliefs, and actions.

As part of this reinterpretation process I systematically try to relate anarchists' seemingly odd beliefs to more 'reasonable' and credited ideas from political theory and social sciences. Anarchist concepts often seem to run counter to standard categorizations in those fields. This may be the fault not of anarchist inconsistency but of those categorizations. Pairs of opposite concepts, such as individualism–holism, egoism–solidarity, free initiative–planning, and capitalism–socialism, have traditionally been clustered into two mutually exclusive blocs separated by a sort of 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. One of this volume's tasks is to explain how anarchists regarded it as an open road.

The book examines 11 years in Malatesta's life, from 1889 to 1900, which he spent for the most part in exile in London, the headquarters of continental anarchism, while at the same time he made his presence strongly felt in Italy and other countries. This period is broad and central enough in Malatesta's life to allow a comprehensive view of how his ideas developed. At the same time, it is sufficiently restricted to allow a detailed empirical reconstruction of his action. This last task necessarily requires a broader study of how the anarchist movement functioned, in search of those 'concealed springs' – and anarchism had a few – which help to show that apparent 'impossibilities' are not really such.

In accounting for anarchist collective action, I identify three levels, which, for the sake of brevity, could be labeled 'anarchist network', 'anarchist party', and 'anarchist mobilization'. Roughly speaking, I 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 anarchists' initiative within larger social movements.

The book is both a historical tracing and a systematic analysis of Malatesta's anarchism. The two tasks are orthogonal, for the former is chronological while the latter is thematic. I have striven to combine the two tasks and address them in parallel. The book's overall structure is chronological. However, in order to avoid thematic fragmentation, I discuss each theme only once and in full, in connection with the earliest suitable period. Thus, in each chapter, sections concerning Malatesta's action are interwoven with others dealing with theoretical or tactical aspects that are historically related to the chapter's main narrative. Throughout the book I constantly engage in a critical dialog with the historiography of anarchism, seeking to illustrate and contest the methodological weaknesses and historiographic pitfalls surrounding this movement.

The book has no notes. All citations are made by reference to the works-cited list at the end. When a reference is not fully recoverable from the text, a parenthetical citation is added. A citation is by shortened title for Malatesta's or anonymous works. Otherwise it is by author's name.

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

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1
Introduction: Anarchism, a Simple and Odd Business?

What strikes the ordinary observer of anarchism is the gap between its naïve, simple ideal and the hard, complex reality. Anarchists seem to miss some obvious point about the way people are or to make unwarranted assumptions about the way people can be. Indeed the oddity of anarchism seems to be plain to see. To increase the observer's puzzlement, the obviousness of the anarchists' cognitive shortcomings is only proportional to their obduracy in neglecting them.

This makes understanding anarchists a difficult task. It is a postulate of interpretive sociology of Weberian derivation that an action can be understood in terms of its reasons: 'observers *understand* the action of an observed subject as soon as they can conclude that in the same situation it is quite probable that they too would act in the same way' (Boudon, *Theories*, 31). In this respect, anarchism looks like a sociological puzzle. The kind of empathy required to understand it seems to be out of reach. Based on the social science common definition of rationality as coherence between desires, beliefs, and behavior (Martin and McIntyre, 283), anarchism seems to imply an element of irrationality.

Historiography and the irrationality of anarchism

This common-sense perception is largely shared by the historiography of anarchism, which tends to regard this movement as inherently flawed. Consequently, much of this historiography 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.

Marxist historiography has followed a pattern established by Marx himself, who branded anarchism a form of sectarianism typical of early stages of the proletariat's development. His 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 70 years – a

paradoxical circumstance, if one considers that an alleged cornerstone of marxism is its being based on empirical observation, not on abstract theory. In marxist theory, doom is expressed in the form of historical backwardness and obsolescence. So, within that pattern of analysis, anarchism is always found on the losing side of the march of history. Hence, the typical master narrative has been about the 'end', 'death', or 'liquidation' of anarchism.

Italy is a good example. Richard Hostetter places the 'ideological liquidation' of Italian anarchism between 1879 and 1882 (409). For Elio Conti, the markedly anarchist Italian internationalist movement died out in 1885. However, he adds, anarchism continued to endemically meander through the lowest classes (240). For Luciano Cafagna, who studies socialism in Rome from 1882 to 1891, the heyday of anarchism ended in 1891, but 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 (770–1). Franco Della Peruta, whose topic is socialism in Rome in 1872–77, places the liquidation of anarchism at 1877, though anarchists had a revival in 1889–91 (52). For Enzo Santarelli, Italy's delayed development explains why a 'cumbersome current of utopian socialism' could survive well beyond 1914 (*Socialismo*, 7). In brief, thus goes the marxist pattern: whatever the period examined, 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, and often exhibiting a surprising vitality in its death struggle.

The judgment of liberal historiography is tinged with condescension. An early obituary was issued in 1911 by Ernest 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' (299–300). Approximately half a century later, George Woodcock set the death of anarchism to 1939 (443). 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' (449). In a similar spirit, Irving 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' (588). However, 'its very absurdities and deficiencies' proceeded not only from the anarchist position, but also from the way of life in the twentieth century (589): 'the anarchists are a romantic, absurd breed that cannot, thank goodness, come to terms with some of the oppressive excesses of civilization' (603). Finally, James Joll remarked in 1979 that the past 150 years illustrated the inconsistency of anarchism, and the impossibility of putting it into practice (*Anarchists*, 257). 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' (*Anarchism*, 284). 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.

Obsolescence and irrationality as the fate of anarchism are combined in the influential analysis of Eric J. Hobsbawm in *Primitive Rebels*, written in 1959. Hobsbawm interprets anarchism as a millenarian movement, characterized by 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' (57–8). Abstract revolutionism and unconcern for practical politics mean, for Hobsbawm, that anarchism was not only irrational, but also unchanging. As a critic has remarked, in Hobsbawm's book anarchist 'attitudes and beliefs of 1903–05, 1918–20, 1933, and 1936 are lumped together or considered interchangeable' (Mintz, 271). In turn, immutability is Hobsbawm's ground for extending his verdict from the past to the future, concluding that anarchism, being 'a form of peasant movement almost incapable of effective adaptation to modern conditions', had a history of unrelieved failure and was bound to go down in the books with the prophets who, 'though not unarmed, did not know what to do with their arms, and were defeated for ever' (92).

In brief, the historiographical interpretation of anarchism stems essentially from the same attribution of irrationality that common sense seems to dictate.

Regarding the anarchist tradition as rational, however, is not simply a matter of replacing a dismissive analysis with a sympathetic one, or even openly advocating anarchism. In fact, after the events of 1968 and the advent of the 'new social history', renewed interest in anarchism generated numerous works that did just that, emphasizing anarchist adaptability to changing conditions, partly in reaction to millenarian interpretations à la Hobsbawm. Yet the attribution of irrationality has not disappeared, cropping up in less crude but equally serious ways. For example, Peter Marshall's encyclopedic *Demanding the Impossible* passionately argues for the relevance of anarchism, striving to rectify misconceptions, such as its association with terrorism. However, driven by such preoccupation, his discussion of anarchist violence ends up corroborating a few *pièces de résistance* of the irrationalist stereotype, as when he remarks that 'at its most violent their action 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 (629–30).

In the spirit of social history, some authors have studied the relationship between anarchism and labor movements, focusing not on 'the trees', the anarchist leadership, but on 'the forest', the movement and its culture, which embedded the real movement's ideology. They have identified the real essence of that culture in older traditions of republicanism or 'popular' liberalism, regarding anarchism as a catalyst, a stepping stone toward the

emergence of labor movements with a powerful voice in national affairs. This, they have argued, is the real, positive legacy of anarchism (Nelson; Lear).

A related stream of research has focused on the notion of anarchist counter-culture. These historians have pictured anarchism as engaged in political and cultural conflicts with their larger national societies. They have emphasized the anarchists' ability to adapt their ideas to fit the realities of their countries and to impact a wider political culture. Thus, they have argued for the realism, pragmatism, and effectiveness of anarchist action, in contrast to the idealistic, purist, and impossibilist character of their proclaimed ideology (Shaffer, *Anarchism*; M. Thomas).

The move from the institutional to the cultural terrain is even more marked in some historians of French anarchism, who have claimed that the anarchist subculture, with its diversity, was able to effectively interpret the lower-class Parisian mentality, to appeal to avant-garde artists, and to address cultural concerns central to Parisian life. However, they have argued, cultural ferment and diversity were in inverse relation to the anarchists' capacity to organize and promote their aims (Sonn; Varias).

In their diversity, all such works 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. For the labor movements as for the counter-cultures or subcultures under investigation, anarchist goals are ultimately regarded as a liability. As such, we are told, either they were practically, even if not nominally, disregarded by workers, or they 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. Likewise, anarchist diversity, which enabled anarchists to grapple with current issues and be in tune with the culture of their times, is also taken to be the very reason that precluded them from successfully pursuing their anarchist ends.

From the perspective of rationality, in the sense of coherence between desires, beliefs, and behavior, 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 necessary failure, or a permanently unsuccessful movement. The former take seriously the anarchists' stated ends and emphasize the inadequacy and futility of the means employed in their pursuit. The latter take seriously the anarchists' means, emphasizing their adaptability and effectiveness, but judge them by a different yardstick than the actors' stated goals, which tend to be regarded at best as a dead letter, or at worst as a dead weight. In either case, rational understanding of how anarchists selected their means in the light of their own ends is wanting.

One way or another, the explanation process introduces an element of oddity, inconsequence, or irrationality at some point, 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 or whether – as Raymond Carr claimed about Spanish anarchism in a book review 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.

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. Equating rationality with effectiveness would imply that rationality is always on the side of the strongest, and ultimately of 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 inveterate 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.

An anecdote may help illustrate this point. In a study of Italy during 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 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' (593). Unfortunately, in 1935 Errico Malatesta had been dead for three years. Mussolini's supporter was a non-anarchist namesake.

This blunder is an extreme case, but it is paradigmatic. 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. The attribution of irrationality 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 behavior can always be reconciled without questioning it when irrational behavior is a matter of course.

In brief, the attribution of irrationality makes for poorer historiography.

A policy of rational accommodation

How is rationality to be assessed, though? Is its attribution a matter of choice?

In fact, the attribution of rationality to an agent is not a result of observation, but an a priori methodological assumption. This is the key tenet of 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 V. O. 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 (27). What criterion should one prefer? Quine asserts the maxim that 'assertions startlingly false on the face of them are 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' (59). The more absurd the imputed beliefs, the more suspicious a translation is (69).

Davidson's starting point is that 'neither language nor thinking can be fully explained in terms of the other, and neither has conceptual priority' (*Inquiries*, 156). 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' (144). 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' (159–60).

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' (*Problems*, 35). 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' (36).

The principle of charity provides the criterion that will guide the present work in search of anarchism's 'good' reasons.

As Davidson explains, the process is that of constructing a viable theory of desires and beliefs from behavior open to observation, that is actions undertaken, just as a theory of meaning and belief is constructed from linguistic behavior, that is 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 (*Inquiries*, 160). 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' (*Problems*, 195).

Adopting the principle of charity is not a matter of benevolence or leniency toward 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' (*Inquiries*, 154). 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' (197).

Davidson's philosophical 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' (*Inquiries*, 196), goes in the same direction as the methodology that the French sociologist Raymond Boudon advocates for social sciences.

Boudon's 'cognitivist theory of action' is based on Max Weber's interpretive sociology, which assigns sociological analysis the goal of reconstructing individual behavior so as to make it meaningful and not interpret it, except in the last resort, as the effect of irrational forces ('Beyond'). For Boudon, observed behavior is often irrational only in terms of the observer's situation, whereas rationality or irrationality should be determined in relation to the actor's behavior. Thus, he rejects explanations in terms of 'alienation', 'the weight of tradition', 'resistance to change', 'false consciousness', and so on (*Theories*, 50).

Boudon's fundamental axiom is that behavior is governed by reasons. He emphasizes that social actors are socially situated: reasons may be objectively debatable, but nevertheless be perceived as good and compelling by actors (*Art*, 236). This idea shifts the focus of explaining behavior 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 (*Origin*, 40).

In brief, both Davidson and Boudon urge us to interpret individual behavior 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.

It is clear that much historiography of anarchism has 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 (589) and Joll (*Anarchists*, 257). 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*' (151), in such books rationality is found locally, not globally, in the anarchists' beliefs. Thus, we are told, Chicago anarchists are not best understood as anarchists (Nelson); Mexico City anarchists did not really aim at overthrowing capitalism (Lear); British anarchists were effective to the extent that they shed their typical anarchist impossibilism (M. Thomas); and the appeal of French anarchism stemmed from its very ineptitude (Sonn; Varias). In many cases, lame accounts from the viewpoint of rational accommodation are complemented with causalist explanations in terms of backwardness, alienation, radicalization, polarization, and so on.

Charity, in the sense of a rigorous methodological approach aimed at adequate understanding, is largely lacking in the historiography of anarchism. The more unproblematically dismissive remarks are made, such as Zagorin's one on the anarchists' stupidity, the more they speak to the 'monumental ineffectiveness' of the historiography they represent.

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 behavior, and Boudon emphasizes that the actor is situated. At the same time, however, interpreting an actor's behavior 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.

Thus, 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' (21).

Valuable and innovative as Jones's study of Chartism is, its value does not lie in the method allegedly 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 14 centuries, thus opening the door to the entire Egyptian civilization (see Solé and Valbelle).

As Martin Hollis puts it, as he describes 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' (214).

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 world.

In fact, the historiography of anarchism may require an even stronger version of the principle of charity than Davidson's. His discussion concerns how beliefs and evaluative attitudes are to be related to open behavior, to which the observer has direct access. However, historians in general, dealing with the past, do not have the opportunity to directly interrogate actors. The problem is even more serious in the case of anarchism, since the anarchists' behavior 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 face 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. The myth that all reformers were conspirators necessarily drove reformers into obscure, secretive form of activity. In order to penetrate underground activities, authorities employed spies and informers on an unprecedented scale. The more alarmist the informer's reports were, the more lucrative his trade was. This was a second form of partisanship (529). Finally, 'the third great reason why the sources are clouded is that working people *intended* them to be so' (531). For Thompson, 'if there had been an underground in these years, by its very nature it would not have left written evidence' (540).

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 often recognized by historians of anarchism, who have often circumvented rather than tackled it. For example, Sharif Gemie motivates a 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 organizations prevented them from generating historical sources that would help making sense of the puzzle ('Historians', 154). Likewise, George 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 (4–5). Jerome Mintz tellingly relates how his field research on an insurrectionary episode in Spain had to confront the anarchist actors' intentional efforts to mislead observers, even decades after the fact (x–xi). Any study of anarchist action has to start by recognizing such inherent difficulties, which make the detection of continuity and sustained organization critical.

Continuity and sustained organization can also be obscured by the historian's scope of analysis. In their book *The Many-Headed Hydra*, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker tell the lost history of proletarian resistance to the rise of capitalism around the Atlantic, and claim that its historic invisibility owes not only to repression, but also 'to the violence of abstraction in the writing of history', which has been captive of the nation-state as an unquestioned framework of analysis (7). The same claim can be made about anarchism.

The history of anarchism often appears to follow a cyclical pattern of advances and retreats, with outbreaks of revolt followed by periods of quiescence and then resurgences. For example, E. J. Hobsbawm thus summarizes 60 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 (1931–36) saw the last of the great revivals . . . ' (78–9). Nunzio Pernicone, while rejecting Hobsbawm's millenarian thesis, similarly identifies the periods of resurgence of Italian anarchism with the years 1884–85, 1889–91, 1892–94, and 1897–98, and comments: '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 . . . ' (7).

Thus goes the pattern of anarchist movements that seem to disappear in the wave of arrests, exiles, shut-down of periodicals, and disbandment of groups after the onset of each struggle, only to reappear years later in a new cycle of agitations. This model fosters interpretations that identify discontinuity, spontaneism, and lack of organization as prominent features of anarchist movements, but it fails to explain what made them last. Could the seeming appearances and disappearances of anarchist movements be the fault of the historian, not of the movements? It is for charitable historians to question analyses of national scope, and investigate whether seeming entrances and exits of an anarchist movement on its country's stage may not in fact correspond to shifts of initiative between the homeland and the movement's transnational segment.

In sum, 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 that rational accommodation dictates 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.

Epilogue: a charitable approach to anarchism

Adopting a policy of rational accommodation, as outlined above, means shifting the uneasy burden of the attribution of irrationality: whenever the attribution occurs, the observer, not the actor, must be the first to carry that burden.

Such a shift involves questioning the arsenal of standard themes that have characterized the irrationalist historiography of anarchism: the doom of a movement that can only endlessly die and come alive again, as if by spontaneous germination; cyclicity, discontinuity, spontaneism, lack of organization, incoherence, and futile violence as the key traits of anarchism;

and a 'causalist' explanation of protest as a blind reaction to economic distress by a movement to which no understandable reasons could be ascribed.

Davidson maintains that an actor's beliefs can only be made sense of in terms of an observer's own rationality. So, the task of the charitable historian becomes to investigate whether anarchism can be interpreted in terms of what we regard as rational: continuity, sustained action, evolution based on experience, planning, organization, coherence between ends and means, and sound theory. This involves questioning not only our own understanding of the anarchists' beliefs, but also the deceptive appearance of their opaque behavior.

Focusing on anarchist action in relation to the anarchists' beliefs and evaluative attitudes, and on reason-giving rather than causalist explanations, implies looking at anarchism from an internal perspective. The broader social context in which anarchist action was situated needs to be analyzed to the extent required to make sense of that action, and mainly in terms of the anarchists' own perception of that context.

An irrationalist and a rational explanation can equally fit the available evidence. However, by its very rationality, the latter is superior. An irrationalist account calls for a backing explanation of irrationality. In contrast, to paraphrase Boudon, as soon as anarchism can be explained as the outcome of rational action, the explanation invites no further question: 'rational action is its own explanation' ('Beyond', 2–3).

2
The First International: A Lasting Heritage

It is ironic that the birth of the movement that is least associated with organization and officialdom can be traced to a specific date and event – a congress, moreover. Yet anarchism as a movement unquestionably dates from the St. Imier Congress of 15–16 September 1872, where the federalist branch of the First International laid out its constitutive principles, in open contrast with those of the marxist branch.

Making sense of anarchism begins with a reflection on those origins, as this invites us to reappraise anarchism in positive terms, not just as a generic rejection of government, but as an anti-authoritarian brand of socialism. Until the split with the marxists called for distinctions, anarchists in the First International called themselves simply 'socialists'.

That first nucleus of the anarchist movement included a young student from Italy, Errico Malatesta. He would remain a protagonist of that movement for the next 60 years.

The early experience of the First International imprinted forever Malatesta's anarchism. His thought and action were constantly informed by that fundamental reliance on workers, collective action, and organization that was the common denominator of socialists of all persuasions. However, his anarchism was also characterized by another set of key themes that can equally be traced back to those years, but which specifically underpinned the anarchists' arguments in their controversies with the marxists. Those themes, which are best appreciated in contrast with their counterparts in marxist discourse, delineate the contour of Malatesta's anarchism as a distinct political philosophy. They are the proper place from which an assessment of the theoretical soundness of Malatesta's ideas ought to begin.

Errico Malatesta, one of the 'Benevento Band'

When Malatesta took part in the St. Imier Congress he was 18 years old. He 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 ten, 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 (Berti, *Errico*, 11–13). In 1872 the Italian Federation of the International was founded at the Rimini conference of 4–6 August, and a few weeks later the Federalist International, of which the Italian section became a pillar, was founded at the St. Imier Congress, where Malatesta made 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 the Apulian town of Trani. He remained there for several months, but at the trial he was acquitted (Luigi Fabbri, *Vida*, 87–91). In April 1877 Malatesta and Carlo Cafiero were at the head of the 'Matese band', a group of about 30 revolutionaries that penetrated the countryside around the Matese mountain range, in the Benevento province, not far from Naples, and seized a few 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 (Luigi Fabbri, *Vida*, 101–5). 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' lasted for many years.

The following three years, up to the International Socialist Revolutionary Congress of July 1881 in London, were years of exile and wandering 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 (Berti, *Errico*, 81–6, 90, 99).

By early 1883 Malatesta had finally returned to Italy, settling in Florence. However, in April 1883 the Rome Tribunal issued a warrant of arrest against him 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. This departure marked the end of a cycle in his life (Luigi Fabbri, *Vida*, 117–21).

Two brands of socialism at cross purposes

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. Hence, Malatesta's formation and the political influences his anarchism underwent in the first 13 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 St. Imier Congress on 'the nature of the political action of the proletariat', which respectively 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' (Stekloff, 446). The final version of the Preamble and Provisional Rules was the work of Marx, who nevertheless inserted two sentences about 'duty' and 'right' and about 'truth, morality, and justice' in the Preamble as a concession to the members that followed the Italian republican Giuseppe Mazzini (Hostetter, 71–2).

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 5 out of 28 periodicals inserting it in their mastheads, while two sported the phrase 'Truth, Justice, and Morality' (Bettini). Among these was *La Campana*, the organ of the *Federazione Operaia Napoletana*, which Malatesta helped to found. The federation's declaration of principles, signed by Malatesta as secretary, comprised seven articles, four of which were expressed in terms of rights and duties (Nettlau, *Bakunin*, 278–81).

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' ('Giuseppe').

At the same time, in Italy the International arose from the moral and intellectual discomfort and dissatisfaction of the idealist Italian youth toward mazzinian republicanism. The acknowledgment 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 . . . ' ('Questione'). 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