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Citation for final published version:

Ferretti, F, Ince, A and White, R 2020. Malatesta in Brexitland: toward post-statist geographies of democracy. *Theory in Action* 13 (1) , -. 10.3798/tia.1937-0237.2006

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3798/tia.1937-0237.2006>

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## “Malatesta in Brexitland: toward post-statist geographies of democracy”

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### Keywords:

Anarchism    Geography    Malatesta    Democracy    Statism    Brexit

### Abstract

This paper aims to make a timely and original contribution to the long-standing debates regarding the interrelationships(s) between democracy, anarchism and the state in two key ways. The first is by exploring more fully the work of Errico Malatesta, particularly focused on critical discussions around 'the nation', 'federation' and 'democracy'. Cognisant of these Malatestian insights, the second part of the paper reflects a resurgent interest in anarchist geographies more generally, and foregrounds a contextual focus of the divisive politics associated with Britain's attempts to leave the European Union ('Brexit'). Here the paper argues for the need to recognise that the crisis of representative democracy is always social *and* spatial in nature. This is illustrated primarily by highlighting the importance the state places by repeatedly appealing to popular "nationalist" sentiments. In doing so, the state draws on a *spatial* mechanism of control, one which relies heavily on imagined and real geographical senses of sovereignty, territory and boundaries. Thinking through the implications that a more explicitly spatial reading of democracy, anarchism and the state presents, the paper concludes by considering how post-statist democratic futures might be better envisaged and enacted more fully.

## Introduction

"Social transformation is, of course, necessarily a spatial project, and a spatial dimension to the effective critique of existing structures is an important element of imagining and forging spaces for new ones" (Springer et al., 2012: 1593)

Written at a time when the violent tides of (far) right-wing populist politics are in the ascendancy once again, from the UK and Western Europe to North and Central America, this paper uses such moments of turbulence to revisit the body of work by Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta (1853– 1932). By adopting an explicitly *spatial* reading of these events and the concepts that frame them, we hope to meaningfully extend discussions on the relationships between anarchism and democracy in new and timely directions. In the first part of the paper, distinctly Malatestan anarchist lines of flight will be advanced to speak to broader and longer-standing debates, including federalism versus statism, as well as interrogating more fully the crises that beset *contemporary* geographies of representative democracy. While making an important contribution in its own right, this critical discussion also serves to offer an important and meaningful context for the rest of the paper. Here the narrative moves to explore a more contextual and spatial reading of the ever-more visible cracks and limitations of representative democracy that has become evident through the deeply divisive political geographies of Brexit.

The question of Brexit is a lightning rod that both animates - and is animated by - an increasingly deep-rooted legitimization crisis of representative democracy. On many levels - this crisis is social and spatial, insofar as it calls into question the state's spatial mechanisms of control through popular "nationalist" appeals that draw on imagined and real senses of sovereignty, territory and boundaries (see A Collective of Anarchist Geographers, 2017). Meanwhile, meaningful spaces for robust extra-parliamentary deliberation and praxis are being

threatened by increasingly violent and repressive authoritarian modes of governance. Foregrounding an anarchist geographical perspective to better understand and navigate the quick-sands of these Brexit lands, the paper draws to a conclusion by exploring more fully how post-statist democratic futures could be – and indeed are being – envisaged and enacted in the here and now.

## **Brexitlands**

Should we as Anarchists be taking an active stance in favour of leave or remain? For one thing I think we've rather missed the boat on either, and for another we are taking the only consistent stance we can; Neither Westminster nor Brussels. The EU is a godawful capitalist institution, but the leave campaign is dominated by racism and patriotism. Remaining would be a more secure option for our migrant friends and comrades, but staying means our continued involvement [with] the EU border. One of the most militarised and deadly borders in the world, where the only 'enemy' are refugees. Brexit is somewhere between a quagmire and a minefield, and one that has already had every possible opinion, from the extreme to the nuanced, thrown at it, all to little effect (Bristol AFed, 2019)

Brexit is not simply a legislative process that followed a democratic referendum: it lives through the matrices and relations within society, and has sent ripples far beyond the borders of the United Kingdom. Rather than focusing on the technocratic machinations of Brexit *per se*, we therefore prefer to emphasise its diverse and contested socio-spatial manifestations – the *Brexitlands*. However, before continuing in this vein, it is important that we sketch out some of the highly contested critical geographies that surround the catch-all political phenomenon referred to as 'Brexit'. A timeline of major events (Walker, 2019) is perhaps the least contestable truth that can be put forward here, so we'll start there.

F. Ferretti, A. Ince and R. White, "Malatesta in Brexitland: locating the geographies of democracy", *Theory in Action* [Special Issue on Anarchism and Democracy], vol. 13, n. 1 2020, forthcoming

January 1 1973: Britain joins the European Economic Community. Under a Labour government, in June 7 1975, the majority of British voters (67%) backed the UK's continued membership of the European Economic Community, while the UK parliament narrowly approved the Maastricht Treaty in July 1993. On December 17<sup>th</sup> 2015 The European Union Referendum Act on whether the United Kingdom should remain a member of the European Union received Royal Assent. Those entitled to vote in the referendum were given the choice of two alternative answers to the stated question: "“*Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?*” The set answers were either, "*Remain a member of the European Union*" or "*Leave the European Union*".

The UK referendum was held on 23 June 2016, with more than 30 million people voting (71.8% turnout). A slight majority of UK voters (51.9% versus 48.1%) voted to leave the European Union. However there were highly uneven voting patterns geographically across the UK: for example, the majority of voters in Scotland (62%) and Northern Ireland (55%) backed Remain. On a regional level support for Leave was highest in Boston (75.6%) and lowest in Lambeth (21.4%). 59.9% of the 3,776,751 million votes cast in London voted Remain (BBC, 2016; Goodwin and Heath, 2016).

There is no doubt that the overall success of the Vote Leave campaign was significantly buoyed by the presence of elite white-male populist figures (particularly Nigel Farage, then Leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)), and key Conservative politicians including now Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The(ir) pro-Brexit campaigns were largely built on constructing the EU as the 'Other' (Simões-Ferreira, 2018). This project was animated by aggressively appealing to UK nostalgia for empire and insular nationalism (Virdee and McGeever, 2018), and the insistence that Britain once again 'takes back control' (Gietel-Basten, 2016, 673), regains its sovereignty, and by doing so "making

all things possible again" (Gamble, 2018, 1215). Indeed, the libertarian-socialist journal *Aufheben* (2016) went as far to declare that:

UKIP and its leader, Nigel Farage, were the ideological winners of Brexit. They were able to use a populist, nationalist, anti-establishment message which united a large number of people from different classes: from middle class Tory voters in the south of England, who contributed to the majority of Brexit votes, to working class people in industrial cities of the north, disillusioned with social democracy. In the eyes of everybody, from immigration experts to MPs, it was clear that the campaign for Brexit boiled down to a campaign against the Freedom of Movement

On 29 March 2017 the Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May triggered Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union, signalling the two-year countdown to Britain exiting the EU (29 March 2019), which subsequently became popularly expressed by the portmanteau 'Brexit'. Despite this timeframe passing, we are still very much in Brexitland: further permissions to extend the Article 50 process have been made, and the EU27 has currently agreed to an extended deadline of 31 October 2019. Needless to say, life in Brexitland is riddled with uncertainty and confusion among residents of the UK and beyond, personal vendettas among politicians, capital flight (or threats thereof), and incessant media dissection of these minutiae. But can anything meaningful emerge from this grim terrain? What lessons and insights might be usefully extracted from these experiences and developments by appealing to a broad 'anarchist tradition'? It is the first part of the paper that addresses these key and complex questions, by paying closer attention to the work of Errico Malatesta. In doing so a range of rich, nuanced, challenging - and indeed wholly unexpected - insights and arguments are forthcoming.

## ***1. Nation, federation and democracy in the anarchist tradition***

Brexit is not alone in appealing to national sovereignty in ways have ignited and inflamed recent debates on the status of countries within the European Union. Two notable examples to drawn on here would include recent campaigns for Scottish (see Dekavalla, 2016) and Catalan independence (Cramer, 2015). These current nationalistic trends are intriguing for scholars of the anarchist tradition, and perhaps for a series of reasons that might be considered both unexpected and surprising. Indeed, those who only know anarchism through common stereotypes, rather than through the close study of its authors and practices, might be interested to find that some pieces of rhetoric deployed by opposite sides of these current debates were used by early anarchists in the nineteenth century. Revisiting such writings, therefore, may help us disentangle the contemporary moment. For instance, few scholars and activists are aware that Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876) and the brothers Elie (1827-1904) and Elisée Reclus (1830-1905) planned to edit a journal supporting the establishment of the *Etats-Unis d'Europe* (United States of Europe) in the late 1860s (Bakunin, 1989: 309).<sup>1</sup> Concurrently, these activists were strong supporters of national liberation and praised the braveness of “patriots” fighting for national causes (Ferretti, 2017; Gutierrez-Danton and Ferretti, 2020).

Here, scholars should proceed with caution. It is particularly important, for example, to pay close and critical attention to the use of lexicon (especially when translated from different languages and cultures)! Such a discerning eye must also be used when considering anachronisms that, in early debates at least, there exist several definitions which do not match current uses of the terms. For instance, the definition of “anarcho-communists” to designate the members of the international anarchist movement organised around the “Anti-authoritarian

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<sup>1</sup> Zurich, Zentralbibliothek, Handschriften, Nachl G. Vogt 10, 54, Elie Reclus to Gustav Vogt, 4 November 1867; Nachl G. Vogt 10, 22, Charles Perron to Gustav Vogt, 10 February 1869.

International” was only adopted in the late 1870s. Today a person might be very surprised to hear that the left/libertarians - itself an "astonishingly polysemous word" (de Souza, 2016: 19) - of the 1871 Paris Commune used to define themselves openly as “republicans” (see Ferretti, 2014). Obviously, this belongs to a long historical tradition of revolutionary left/wing republicanism, for which all comparisons with the current Republican parties in countries like France and the United States would be abusive. Following these kinds of anachronisms and lexical misunderstandings, one could instrumentalise the anarchist tradition for disparate political purposes: for instance, a Brexiteer could claim Brexit to be a form of national independence and of the right for self-determination (or even the alleged defence of working-class rights), while an anti-Brexiteer could conversely invoke anarchist ideas on internationalism and European (or worldwide) federalism. And if so, then so what? Why does this matter?

The argument of this section is that anarchism has deep and extended history of radical praxis that has analysed and proposed its own views of the world, and offers its own alternatives to current debates on nationalism and democracy. Rather than filling theoretical lacunas in the anarchist tradition, what we need at this precise moment is to consider the great patrimony of ideas and practices that is offered by this tradition. In considering them we then have the responsibility - and opportunity - to translate them into terms that can be understandable and relevant today. This must result in something that speaks to a range of audiences: scholars, activists and to the oppressed peoples and communities in general. Taking on this responsibility what follows is an explanation as to how anarchism can provide meaningful, timely and original insights that expose the false oppositions that are being framed between national sovereignty on the one hand, and internationalism and federalism on the other. The same can be said about the invented contrast between a cosmopolite financial and technocratic



establishment and the alleged “people’s will” expressed in no small way by the Brexit referendum.

Tackling the issue of national sovereignty, it is clear from the scholarship quoted above that the idea of national independence was endorsed by early anarchists, on the condition that national (that is, anti-colonial) struggles could be associated with social liberation. Conversely, Errico Malatesta (1853-1932) was one of the strongest supporters of anti-patriotic antimilitarism, as well as the most incisive proponent among the few anarchists who argued for defending “Western democracies” from the authoritarianism of the Central Empires during the First World War. One of the few other anarchists here would certainly have included an elderly Pyotr Kropotkin (1842-1921).

While authors such as Ruth Kinna (2016) have rightly explained Kropotkin’s choice within an anti-colonialist tradition, it is worth noting that, for Malatesta also, anticolonial ideas of national liberation played a role in processes of global emancipation. In 1897, for example a debate arose among Italian anarchists on whether to follow senior Internationalist Amilcare Cipriani (1844-1918), who was organising volunteers’ brigades in the Greek war of liberation against the Turkish Empire. Eventually, Malatesta supported the non-participation of anarchists in the Greek war, but he did so because he deemed it more urgent to reorganise the anarchist movement in Italy. He argued that it would have been wrong to refuse to support Cipriani on purely ideological grounds: for Malatesta, this decision did “not mean that we disengage from the questions which are debated in the Orient, or that we believe that they lie outside the social problem” (Malatesta, 2011: 43).

Malatesta recognised that, as far as colonial oppression existed, it was difficult to correctly address social questions simply by ignoring national ones. In the Greek war of national

liberation, for Malatesta, the anarchists had to be the champions of freedom for everybody, arguing that:

We should act [among the Greeks] to make them understand that the enemy is not the Turkish proletariat, but the Turkish government and the Pashas; and that the enemy is also Greek, Armenian, Bulgarian if he is the exploiter of others' work. ... With the Greeks, until when they are the oppressed who struggle for freedom; with the Turkish, when the Greek, once they become the strongest, might possibly want to turn in murderers and oppressors (Malatesta, 2011: 45)

In this conception, anarchism could not see class struggle as separated from other struggles towards individual and collective liberation, anticipating notions of what today is called “intersectionality”, which was substantially prefigured in Malatesta’s (2014) writings. More specifically, this implied a tension between, on the one hand, decentralisation, communalism and federalism and, on the other, internationalism. This tension is a specificity of anarchism, which renders anarchist thinking necessary to avoid seeing the autonomy of territories and “people’s” sovereignty as something contradicting cosmopolitanism and wider federalist projects. This apparent contradiction is entirely false, yet it is one that has been mobilised extensively, aggressively and disingenuously by both sides of the Brexit debate in the defence of their own differing definitions of ‘democracy’.

Nonetheless, for anarchists, democracy and sovereignty are simply illusory if they occur within a capitalist society, and the appeal “to be democratic” is defined and governed within the context of the state. This is because in such a society individuals are neither free nor equal. How can anybody claim freedom or equality while remaining in economic dependence and political subjection? An important document here to better understand an anarchist approach to democracy is the 1897 debate between Malatesta and Francesco Saverio Merlino (1856-

1930). Though this discussion took place in Italy, its international renown and repercussions make it worthy of being analysed here. Merlino was an old Internationalist and Malatesta's friend, who distanced himself from the anarchist movement following that year but remained in friendly terms with the anarchists, working as a lawyer in defence of both Gaetano Bresci in 1900 and Malatesta in 1921 (on Merlino, see: Venturini, 1984). In 1897, Merlino stated that he would have voted at the political elections, breaking the traditional abstentionism of the anarchists (and, it is worth noting, of other "subversive" Italian parties like the Republicans). Merlino argued that this would have supported the defence of "political and constitutional liberties" (Malatesta and Merlino, 2010:10), considering parliamentarism as something bad, but nonetheless better than absolutism. For Merlino, anarchists did not need to send their own candidates to parliament, but simply to prefer at each time the most progressive candidates as an "episode" of a wider social struggle.

The long polemic which followed remained friendly in tone, but very clear in its contents and in describing what would become a deep and substantial disagreement between Merlino and the great majority of the anarchist movement, eventually represented by Malatesta. In responding to Merlino, this latter exposed some principles that will remain as very important milestones of his "gradualism" (Levy 2010; Turcato 2015). That is, for Malatesta, anarchism does not reject improvements in workers' well-being or in civil liberties that might be obtained under the bourgeois society: yet, they can effectively occur only if they are the result of radical action from below, and should never be conceded only through parliamentary negotiation. Ultimately, "parliamentarianism [i.e. representative democracy] is better than despotism, indeed; but only when it represents a concession that the despot makes for fear" (Malatesta and Merlino, 2010: 15). That is, reforms should not be confused with *reformism*, of which they are rarely the result: according to Malatesta, "there would not be constitutional monarchies, if the

kings did not fear the republic” (Malatesta and Merlino, 2010: 117). Likewise, in France, a democratic-republican regime was definitively established instead of an absolutist monarchy, not as a result of the action of moderate republicans, but of the fear of social revolution.

In the numerous articles that Merlino and Malatesta wrote to respond to each other all along 1897, the issue of the roles of majorities and minorities in “democracy” was often addressed. Merlino recalled that Malatesta had formerly admitted that “in certain cases, the opinion of the majority should prevail on that of minority” (Malatesta and Merlino, 2010:21). In his response, Malatesta clarified a series of points that can still serve today to address some misunderstandings about anarchism. First, Malatesta argued that anarchists do not accept “democratic” vote in the case of political elections that give political (rather than technical) mandates to candidates who cannot be directly accountable or revoked. Yet, anarchists accept to vote in cases in which voting has a direct effect, like in a public assembly, or when there is to vote a strike at a union meeting, and so on. Malatesta laughed at the silliness of those who refused to vote in those circumstances only because “voting is not anarchist” (Malatesta and Merlino, 2010:48); on the contrary, he argued, ending meetings without formal votes and formal mandates would have implied reproducing mechanisms of (micro or macro) power. Without any counting of the attendants’ opinions, at least for simple information, it is impossible to know the real orientations of a meeting and, as a consequence, “only some people, better skilled than others in oratory, can undo and redo everything, while those who cannot, or do not dare, speak publicly, i.e. the big majority, do not count for anything” (Malatesta and Merlino, 2010:49). For this same reason, anarchists like Malatesta and Luigi Fabbri (1877-1935) worked tirelessly to build formal anarchist organisations, considering formal organisation to be a necessary condition for (1) putting in place equality among activists and; (2) for confronting the mechanisms of power which are unavoidably reproduced in activist

groups operating according to “informalism” (today we would call this the “microscale” or “microaggression”) (Ferretti, 2016).

In the context of 'minorities' and 'majorities', Malatesta argued that the common anarchist refrain, that a majority does not have the right to impose its will onto a minority, does *not* mean that decisions can be taken only through full unanimity. On the contrary, he argued that blocking all decisions which did not reach unanimity would have substantially implied the imposition of the will of a minority. Thus both the dictatorship of a majority and the dictatorship of a minority should be rejected. For Malatesta, this was a complex problem for which there was not just one solution: yet, in most cases, it could be resolved much more easily than what was currently believed. For instance he argued that:

[I]n all those matters that do not admit more concurrent solutions or where the divergences of opinion are ... substantial ... or where the need for solidarity imposes the union, it is just, reasonable and necessary that the minority yields to the majority. But this renouncement by the minority must be the effect of free will, determined by the consciousness of the necessity: it should not be a principle or a law to be accordingly applied to all cases, even when there is no need for that (Malatesta and Merlino, 2010: 50)

This effectively means that the core of decision-making, in the anarchist tradition, is not unanimity, but the idea that decisions only engage those who freely embrace them; in practice, most of the possible conflicts between minorities and majorities can be avoided by decentring decisions and by creating links of solidarity and responsibility among the people involved, before the *extrema ratio* of a possible scission. In the following decades, the anarchist organisations inspired by the ideas of Malatesta, like the 1920 UAI (from 1945 FAI) in Italy, adopted the principle of the “synthesis”, that means that, within the same organisation, theoretical disagreements of various kinds can exist at the condition that there is some

operational synthesis, which should be respectful of the different sensitivities possibly expressed in internal debates (see: Sacchetti 2018).

Malatesta's positions outlined here historically inspired (and can still inspire) the anarchists of later generations in joining antifascist and anti-totalitarian alliances, albeit while maintaining their identity. This means that, for anarchists, civic liberties are worthy of being defended in alliance with different political forces, but anarchism should never be confused with something else. "We are always delighted to see a clerical turn into a liberal, a monarchist into a republican, a fence-sitter into something; but it does not follow from that that we—whose thinking is streets ahead of theirs—must become monarchists, liberals, or republicans" (Malatesta, 2014: 174). Already in 1924, at the beginning of the fascist dictatorship in Italy, Malatesta warned his comrades about the danger of trusting "ancient reactionaries" (Malatesta, 1936: 45) who proposed themselves as a governmental alternative to fascism, and noted that: "The worst democracy is always preferable to the best dictatorship, at least from a pedagogical standpoint. Yet democracy, the so-called government of the people, is a lie ... We are not democratic also because democracy, sooner or later, is conducive to war and to dictatorship" (Malatesta, 1936: 46). Therefore, anarchists should never be duped by representative democracy, which cannot alone guarantee freedom in a capitalist society; a society where most of people are "obliged to submit themselves to other's will to gain their life" (Malatesta, 1936: 230). As Davide Turcato explains, "Malatesta's insistence on the moral diversity between anarchism and democracy [was not] an escape from politics" (Turcato, 2015: 160). Rather such a discussion was vital to both focus on future alliances and as a practical means for defending those emancipatory grounds upon which social justice and liberation was rooted in.

Taking forward and applying the spirit and verve of these Malatestan arguments the second part of the paper focuses explicitly on the contested political geographies of Brexit. In deepening our understanding of anarchism, democracy and the state, we are particularly concerned to impress the importance of recognising how a powerful *spatial* imaginary underpins and informs seemingly social ideas concerning what is possible, desirable and enactable.

## ***2. Spatial imaginaries of and beyond Brexitland***

Disappointingly, anarchist voices have been relatively quiet in the context of the Brexit vote, its various social, cultural and political aftermaths, and ongoing uncertainty about the future. How can we build a strong and distinctive anarchist imaginary? As we have argued so far, Malatesta's reflections nearly a century ago can still help to guide us in careful and nuanced reflection on this democratic impasse. In this section, we build on this by bringing a specifically *geographical* angle onto anarchist understandings of the state, state sovereignty, and state territory, in order to illuminate ways of thinking about democratic practice and the spaces and scales thereof. The main points that result from the discussion above can be summarised as the issue of granting concessions from top-down (reforms versus reformism), the need for refusing political delegation, the need for anarchist organisation, the refusal of the mere principle of majority in decision-making, and the need for decentring decisions. While current debates rarely draw directly upon Malatesta's claims, it is possible nevertheless to build on these to imagine new alternatives.

### ***2.1 Non-statist geographies against the top-down logics of the state***

In advocating the suppression of the state, consistent with the previous discussion on the difference(s) between reforms and reformism, Malatesta did not mean the dismantling of public services such as hospitals, posts or railways, but the “abolition of the government and of every power which makes the law and imposes it to the others” (Malatesta 1919), including the borders separating different peoples and the armies ‘defending’ those borders. Today, geographical scholarship is similarly uncovering the fragility of statist frameworks in reading geographical and geopolitical processes.

Thus, it is essential to begin with a separation of the state from the geographical ‘reach’ of democracy. Geographers have long analysed democratic practice from the perspective of the nested scales of government (local, national, global) which remain legislatively separate, but do interact and overlap in practice (e.g. MacKinnon, 2011; Reed and Bruyneel, 2010). However, in the popular imagination, democracy remains firmly connected to the scale and the territorial limits of the state. This negates the democratic practices to be found in the governance of a host of non-state organisations – from community groups to social movements, or even sports clubs – that do not conform to the state’s territorial reach or state-demarcated scales of government. The simple conflation of the scale of democracy with the scale of the state makes the transition from liberal-democracy to fascism a deceptively simple one, as it establishes the state as part of a ‘natural’ order, something that was discussed early in the tradition of Malatestian anarchism, since Luigi Fabbri’s *The Preventive Counter-revolution* (1922), analysing the continuity between bourgeois democracy and the rising fascism in Italy. Statism, in turn, nurtures nationalism, legitimises the militarisation and strengthening of borders, and ultimately facilitates the dehumanising of foreign ‘others’.



Such a conflation of democracy with the state is not only politically problematic but also empirically incorrect. While geography continues to reproduce a range of problematic tropes related to the state (Ince and Barrera, 2016), it teaches us that the things we consider to be stable, fixed components of state infrastructures and imaginaries are in fact fluid, porous and often have contradictory effects. The nature of borders, for example, creates multiple effects. Borders are well documented as heavily shaping people's identities, but equally those who live in borderlands continually challenge and reshape the nature of the border and its meanings through their daily practices (see, for e.g., Diener and Hagen, 2009). In the context of the physical movement and negotiation of borders at a geopolitical level, these borderlands are therefore sites of ambiguity and flux as populations and their cultures change over time. It is not surprising, then, that the border between the Republic of Ireland and the British colonial territory of Northern Ireland has become a key site of contention in Brexit negotiations: not only are there technocratic geopolitical and economic questions to resolve concerning the regulation of movement post-Brexit, but also those living in the shadow of this border have experienced, negotiated, and resisted multiple configurations of border regime over the course of generations (Nash and Reid, 2013). Borders themselves, and the populations encircled or divided by them, therefore undergo processes of *bordering*, where borders are not static entities but are in constant process (e.g. Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias and Pickles, 2013; Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002).

Much like borders, (state) territory is equally lacking in coherence, stability or permanence. Territory has traditionally been conceived as a portion of land to be controlled and managed by a central point of power, yet since the state can never quite be everywhere (Scott, 1998), it is never fully under the control of the state. Geographers have increasingly recognised how territory is constituted not only by authoritarian rulers but also through grassroots

practices, such as occupations and the demarcation of autonomous spaces (e.g. Clare et al, 2018; Halvorsen, 2015; Ince, 2012). Much like bordering, territory has become understood as a processual dynamic, whereby territories are made and re-made through patterns of practices, meaning that they are more accurately understood as *territorialisations*. In the context of global neoliberalisation, for example, with the increased functional integration between different state territories, territory is not being dismantled but re-shaped through multiple de-territorialisations and re-territorialisations (e.g. Brenner, 1999; Bryan, 2012; Elden, 2005).

Geographical scholarship on borders and territory – two central facets of the state’s governance practices and physical infrastructure – shows how many of the characteristics of the state are contingent, fluid, and changing. Indeed, archaeology shows that over the longer term it is uncommon for states to last for longer than a few hundred years, even though the polities on which they are based remain in existence for much longer periods (e.g. McAnany and Yoffee, 2010). This all means that the contemporary fetishisation across Europe of (state) sovereignty as the *sine qua non* of democracy – or what we might call ‘sovereignism’ – is anathema not only to anarchist analyses but also to geographical analyses; there is no material reality to the view of fixed and stable borders, states, and territories that underpins the statist-sovereignist impulse driving Brexit. As noted in the previous section, it is important to recognise that certain conditions can lead anarchists to instrumentally support moves towards the decentralisation of power through the accession of segments of a state, yet when the driving force is an exclusionary view of the world and its peoples then it cannot normally be consistent with an anarchist perspective. Even on an interpersonal level, sovereignty is a slippery beast: while classical liberals foreground the atomised, sovereign subject as the foundation of human agency, morality and existence,

anarchists are clear in their rejection of this self-centred notion. For example, Bakunin is explicit in asserting the “liberty of each man [sic.] that does not find another man’s freedom a boundary but a confirmation and vast extension of his own” (1971: 262). This discussion can stimulate reflections on how to challenge nationalistic egoisms, something which is most needed in current debates, first on Brexit.

## *2.2 Beyond the principle of majority: decentring decisions*

Shattering the conceptual frameworks of the state also allows for appreciating and putting into practice classical anarchist claims for different ways of making decisions than the majoritarian/electoral one, by questioning the geographical scales at which they occur. This provides new intellectual tools to fight sovereignism, which is both fundamentally flawed in terms of contemporary geographical research and politically dangerous in terms of its affinities with fascism. The anarchist conception of sovereignty is clear: only under a revolutionary situation of free and equal association can “the sovereignty of the individual... be reconciled with social peace” (Malatesta, 2014: 34). This condition of equity is a far cry from the unholy alliance of ruling class figureheads such as Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson and their followers that has emerged through Brexit, in which unequal power relations between classes have been obscured in favour of an obsession over power relations between states.

Theoretically, democracy (an unchanging normative principle) cannot inherently be limited to the boundaries of the state (a shifting component of (some) societies), because the universal and eternal cannot logically be contingent upon the particular and time-bound. Nonetheless, the spatial reach of democracy *in practice* will always be to some extent

shaped by the context to which it is applied; hence the need, for example, for autonomous spaces for anarchists to prefigure democratic practices of the future we wish to create. The sovereignism that besets contemporary Europe therefore requires anarchists to outline and enact their alternative visions robustly, but to do so – as Malatesta and others have done – clearly and accessibly, in relation to the wider political context. We do not propose the risky populism that some elsewhere on the left have promoted (see Behrent, 2019), but to recognise the material conditions, and articulate anarchist perspectives in ways that make sense to this turbulent moment. A major part of this involves outlining a distinctive approach to democracy that refuses the constraints of the electoralism, statism, and binary Leave-Remain thinking that has seeped through these Brexitlands.

To summarise, and re-emphasise some key lines of argument: a Malatestan-informed spatial anarchist critique of the Brexit referendum would certainly not seek to question the legitimacy of “people” to make *any* decision about the autonomy of any given territory from wider federations of states. Instead it might focus on challenging the scale of decision-making. For example, one can question the very legitimacy of the United Kingdom as a political unity whose framework was not decided by its inhabitants. If we examine the Referendum’s results that emerged within different political units such as England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, or indeed a city such as London, the outcomes of that vote would be different. Following Malatesta, one should also question the alleged freedom of vote within a state framework where many people threatened by poverty and despair can become seduced by politicians’ propaganda and jingoism. This is particularly visible through attempts to other and scapegoat already vulnerable groups and communities by appealing to nationalist (spatial/ social) sentiments. The ugly and oft-repeated stereotype of “foreigners swarming into Britain to steal British jobs from British people” is one

example of this. Furthermore, referenda votes do not have the value of (non-statist) direct democracy or active participation, as far as they imply delegating politicians to “do and undo”, in Malatesta’s terms. The three years of ongoing negotiations, still unresolved at the time of writing, between the political elites of the UK and EU; the alternatives between British Leave and Remain; between different levels and cases of claims for national sovereignty and a European Union made for politicians, capitalists and bankers rather than for the “people” – these are all false dilemmas which incorrectly align elites with the interests of their subjects, only at different territorial scales.

### *2.3 Voting or anarchist organisation*

Following the above discussions on the odd electoral geographies of the Brexit referendum, it is possible to fully highlight the arbitrary way in which this kind of statist and centralist suffrages pretend to represent what they call ‘people’s will’. From this standpoint, the choice of UK anarchists of not engaging directly with the referendum campaign makes clear sense, given that anarchism’s terrains of action and conceptions of democracy are far removed from that of the elections. They generally include the realms of grassroots social struggles, prefigurative solidarity practices, counter-cultural production and so on. Yet, anarchists’ engagement with the wider social and political implications of Brexit are urgently needed. Albeit historically less numerous than in other European countries, the anarchist movement in the UK can count on the Anarchist Federation (which is also the local ‘branch’ of the International of Anarchist Federations), doubtlessly the closest to the Malatestian tradition, on activists working in radical unions such as the IWW or the Solidarity Federation, on alternative editorial endeavours such as Freedom Press, and in general on activists operating in occupations and in a myriad of social initiatives. While

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these are pursuing an array of struggles that we cannot summarise here, what is worth stressing here is the need for scholars of anarchism to connect more with activists and to value more the insights which can come from the anarchist tradition, both activist and academic (and, indeed, activist-academic). Without this groundedness, there exist risks concerning the uncritical defence of any ‘dogma’ or immutable principle.

An intriguing aspect of the latest news released by the newspapers about Brexit is the insecurity of many British consumers, who are stockpiling alimentary products to anticipate a possible raise of their prices. This confirmation of the absurdity of capitalist economy in relation to people’s real needs is highly ironic as it takes place now in the UK, where Kropotkin famously elaborated his critiques against artificial ‘scarcity’ and where Malatesta, who was likewise exiled there for several years, pronounced a speech in in 1903, eventually in London, arguing for the economic inefficiency of the state, whereby “misery first of all [is understood as] a problem of distribution” (Malatesta, 2015: 143 [London 1903]).

Much of this can lead to a relaunching of anarchist ideas on federalism, a notion strictly associated with the anarchist geographers’ (and Malatesta’s) understanding of spaces and places as decisive factors in the transformation of society. Only in anarchist federalism we find the idea that territories should have their autonomy, self-determination and respect of each culture at all scales (city, region or nation), while remaining open to the world through the principle of international solidarity, applied for instance to migrants, to overseas social movements or to class struggle all over the world. Local sovereignty, cosmopolitanism and internationalism are not in contradiction as far as “nations” (intended as groups based on cultural identity and not on institutions) and local communities are constructed without and

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against states and political frontiers. One only need to think of the free commune, for example, which is the pivot of the anarchist social organisation stated in 1936 by the Spanish CNT (upon the three spatial and scalar levels of “the individual, the commune and the federation”).<sup>2</sup> The free commune has no need of any state or any boundary.

### **Final reflections/ Possible futures**

"[We need] a focus on both resistances and the evolution of alternatives, a foregrounding of predominantly interactive politics... An orientation speaking to the radical democratisation of all spheres of society and eco-social justice – to both post-capitalist alternatives and a world beyond nation states" (Asher, 2016)

What might this all mean in practice? Thinking beyond the state and statist framings of democracy can take many forms. Starting from a point of recognising the impermanence, contingency, and *fragility* of the state – and especially in the contemporary moment of turbulence and uncertainty – is a powerful way to confront and subvert statist viewpoints. Such confusion among the establishment in the UK and across many European polities cries out for the old anarchist slogan that “government is chaos; anarchy is order”. In this regard, telling different histories to the founding myths of the state can further trouble the perceived certainty and fixity of the state’s boundaries and perceived integrity of the state’s territory. However, such approaches, rooted in intellectual framings, must not, and cannot, be the limit of our activity, since they also need to engage with material praxis in ‘real life’. Seeing through a Malatestan ‘squint’, there is certainly a renewed role for specific anarchist organisations in building and nurturing infrastructures, skills, and resources. This also

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<sup>2</sup> J. Peirats (1951), *La CNT en la revolución española*, Toulouse, Ediciones CNT.

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involves counter-institutions that have been shown to develop *public*<sup>3</sup> spaces and networks where libertarian-egalitarian democratic practices can thrive and operate at multiple non-state scales (e.g. Routledge, 2003; Jupp, 2012), as well as constitutionalising through non-state “post-sovereign” logics (Kinna et al., 2019).

Following failures such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, it has become clear that the Marxist ‘long march through the institutions’ is a dead-end for radical democratic politics. Thus, promoting and supporting – critically where necessary – liberation movements in nations and regions that have clear libertarian socialist dimensions can also give voice to, and provide inspiration for, other democratic (and spatial) imaginations. The Zapatistas in Mexico and Kurdish autonomous zones in Rojava and other parts of Syria are clear examples of regions whose democratic and social structures deliberately and explicitly confront, undermine and provide alternatives to the state’s authoritarian territorial and bordering logics. Their ongoing development and expansion make for compelling tales not only of their resilience but also the *effectiveness* of their methods of organisation. Equally, there are examples of grassroots forms of democracy within the matrices of dominant society that can be supported, such as co-operative models of housing and workplace self-management. These may not be perfect, but they provide workable forms of collective power and direct democracy that could have broad appeal to precisely those groups who have felt left behind by anti-democratic neoliberal globalism (exacerbated and sharpened by austerity in many states). The everyday feelings of precarity and disenfranchisement that these processes have wrought (e.g. Hall, 2019) give rise to a search for other ways of governing; unfortunately the far right has capitalised most

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<sup>3</sup> As Springer (2016, 107) argues, "Because democracy is meant to be inclusive, it is specifically those public spaces and places that are of primary importance. Thus public space can be understood as the very practice of radical democracy..."



effectively on this so far (Bangstad et al, 2019; Carter, 2018; Froio and Gattinara, 2015). Nevertheless, there remains key opportunities for anarchist geographical perspectives to have greater influence - operating as they do beyond the dominant Remain (liberal/globalist) versus Leave (authoritarian/parochialist) binary. Breaking out of this self-destructive binary is not only beneficial; the future of democracy depends on it.

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