

Outline of the speech at the Italian Cultural Institute in Edinburgh (18 September 2025), Maurizio Degl'Innocenti

Institutional greetings

1. Born in Fratta Polesine in 1885, from a wealthy family, Matteotti became a socialist at a very young age, following in the footsteps of his brother Matteo. He was a reformist socialist who believed that the emancipation of workers should be the product of three factors: widespread education, local administration (i.e., the municipality), and trade union and cooperative organization. It had to be had to take place not because of a traumatic, revolutionary upheaval, but through a gradual process of awareness, education and training, of the creation of organisms sufficiently equipped to participate in the general growth of society. That is, of self-emancipation, albeit supported and led by the Socialist Party, an ally of science and technology, gradualist, alien to dogmatism, profoundly democratic, parliamentary, respectful of the alternation between majority and minority in government. He was therefore an opponent of the revolutionary syndicalists, the revolutionary intransigents, the maximalists, the communists, all political currents that involved Italian socialism between the end of the 19th century and the first post-war period.

2. He graduated in Law from the University of Bologna with a thesis on *Recidivism*, and engaged in legal studies with great authority. The severe study, enriched by studies on statistics and refresher stays abroad, accentuated the already natural distrust of catchphrases, populist slogans, demagoguery, which he considered the form available to those who intended to manipulate and therefore deceive public opinion, and in particular the most marginalized classes. Matteotti was never indulgent towards those who resorted to rhetoric, communication based on agendas, improvisation to ride the wave of an ephemeral success, abstract ideology, it seemed to him that such an approach meant nothing more than betraying the trust of the masses of which, moreover, those same subjects presented themselves as more or less authentic interpreters. To an academic career, more than likely, he preferred practical action, "doing", for himself and for the benefit of others. Even his wife, Velia, whom he married in a civil ceremony in Rome in 1916 and with whom he had three children, had to resign herself. There was always great affection and respect between the two, even when opinions diverged: the democratic approach was lived by Matteotti first of all within the family.

3. In 1919 he was elected to the Chamber of Deputies, where he soon emerged as an authoritative exponent, close to the position of Filippo Turati, leader of the reformist socialists, on the issues of the budget and the reconstruction of the country after the war, in the denunciation of rising fascism, in the defense and enhancement of the

parliamentary institution and the rule of law. He was a leading element against the maximalism prevailing in the Socialist Party and against communism, which he accused of being in fact an involuntary accomplice of fascist extremism in pursuing the goal of revolution in the wake of Moscow and the establishment of the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat.

4. When, on 4 October 1922, the Unitary Socialist Party (PSU) was established, the appointment of Giacomo Matteotti to the secretariat seemed to be an obligatory choice: he was a cultured and authoritative leader, rigorous with himself and with others, an expert in parliamentary procedures and activities, with an extraordinary capacity for work. And he was young, being 37 years old. The revival of the Party proved to be an arduous task; there was a need to promote the press, reconstitute the youth group and reorganize clubs and federations, that is, precisely the sector where the reformist socialists had shown a chronic weakness. After the destruction of the connective tissue of the red administrations, it was essential to rebuild the network of trustees by stimulating and heartening the comrades in the face of fascism, and at the same time it was necessary to oppose the sectarian factionalism of the communists and the maximalist orientation of the PSI.

5 The young secretary was aware that the struggle would be reduced to a pure "defense of position", but he considered it equally necessary to react to the repercussions of the rise of power of fascism on the political, trade union, cooperative universe: in the present it was necessary to hold on to focus on a recovery in future times, for which it was necessary to prepare. In fact, he considered fascism, which had come to power in the aftermath of the march on Rome with a vote sanctioned by Parliament, which could only count on the presence of 35 fascist deputies and a dozen nationalists, that could not be amended. because it was a movement based on violence that drew new impetus from its successes. He was convinced that the publication of the socialist newspaper was not only an essential means of propaganda, but also a factor of social and cultural aggregation without which the Party would have run the risk of closing itself into a "conspiratorial" activity. In his constant activity of information and documentation on the facts, he therefore made <<La Giustizia>> the instrument to unmask the representation given by fascism as a restorer of public order, the state budget and the interests of the nation. And this in order to counter an image that had a hold on the liberal ruling class, on the middle classes, on the ex-interventionist and ex-combatant circles and also on the young or very young of bourgeois extraction who appealed to activism and spirituality against the materialism imputed to the socialists. It was a task that he felt he could not delegate to others and that he carried out with his usual rigor and punctiliousness,

even with criticism of his comrades whom he always wanted to be solicitous in collective work. In doing so, he also promised to pursue a pedagogical orientation aimed at the formation of consciences and skills. In an original way, he made <<La Giustizia>> the organ of counter-information, drawing on the news published in the fascist press as a primary source to unmask the action of the Mussolini government. It was an action of incessant demystification, suffocating, intolerable for the new masters.

6. On 10 June 1924, while on his way to Parliament, Matteotti was kidnapped and killed by fascist assassins, close to the Prime Minister's Office. The body was found only forty days later. The very circumstances of the kidnapping and killing of the secretary of the largest opposition party on his way to Parliament was an extremely dramatic event that impressed national public opinion with wide echoes even abroad, and seemed to shake the government itself. On June 27, the opposition deputies met and pledged to abstain from parliamentary work until clarity, and justice, was done on the facts that had occurred. Death was presented by his companions as the sacrifice for the ransom of the entire nation. Martyrdom marked the access to immortality. This is how Turati expressed himself in the commemoration of June 27: "the dead rise, and speak". It was the Aventine, with a call to the King, guarantor of the Statute, to intervene, but the King refrained from doing so also because the Senate renewed its confidence in the Government. On January 5, 1925, Mussolini was able to regain the initiative to start the country towards the authoritarian turn, towards that dictatorship that Matteotti had already denounced in 1922-3.

7. For militant opponents, certainly in the minority, the road was opened to exile, confinement, prison, and, for dissidents, silence or simple refusal. For everyone, Matteotti was a symbol or flag under which to fight for future redemption. For the unitary socialists, Matteotti's death represented the re-foundation and rebirth of the Party. The image was that of absolute purity, which was transformed into an idea, an idea destined for life-giving life: it was the restart. And so it was preserved in the following decades, at least until the Second World War. He filtered through the meshes of censorship and was the object of popular *pietas*, with the dissemination of medals, photographs, portraits placed on altars or hung on the walls, or even just kept in hiding. The laying of a flower on places of worship, the participation in a song, the pilgrimage to the Lungotevere Arnaldo da Brescia, the quotation of words attributed to him induced the author to feel an integral part of a rite of initiation or confirmation of fidelity to the Idea. For all opponents of fascism, democrats and liberals, he became the shadow or ghost that stood over Mussolini as a perennial reminder of his misdeeds. An irreparable sentence. In exile, Matteotti's image became ritual, a sort

of sanction for the most important acts. <<La Libertà>>, the organ of the Anti-Fascist Concentration directed by Claudio Treves, inaugurated publication on May 1, 1927 praising the socialist martyr. The Congress of Socialist Unity in Paris in 1930 under the direction of Turati and Pietro Nenni took place under the portrait of a blessing Matteotti. The clubs and federations that were formed adopted its name. The *Socialist Almanac* of 1934, on the tenth anniversary of his death, was dedicated to him. Portraits, stamps, almanacs were dedicated to him. The Socialist International of London financed the translation of *Matteotti's A Year of Fascist Domination* into French, English and German, ensuring its wide circulation. Sylvia Pankhurst founded the Matteotti Committee, which played an important role in promoting anti-fascism in Britain. The evolution of the figure of Matteotti as a martyr of freedom at the international level was amply witnessed by the congress of the Socialist International in Vienna in 1931. It was the international consecration of the martyr of liberating freedom, surrounded by a religious halo, fruitful of political, popular, youth, intellectuals and artists initiatives towards an ideal of freedom in any case declined but with an ethical content. Along the paths of Italian emigration, the memory of Matteotti was preserved, in Europe, South America and the United States. Poets and writers, graphic designers and artists dealt with it by reviving memory. Fascism was no longer considered an Italian phenomenon, but an international one: an imminent danger for democracy and for the peace of peoples in Europe and beyond.

8. In Italy, with the Second World War, Matteotti became one of the symbols of the Resistance, in the Olympus of the martyrs of anti-fascism in a Hellenistic key. But because of the ideological prejudices imposed by frontism, his democratic and reformist socialism was underestimated. Only later, in the wake of the recovered socialist autonomy, after 1956 and finally with the formation of the center-left governments, was there a different attention to the reformist tradition, even if an assessment of this experience, to which the figure of Matteotti was linked, has long represented a knot with respect to which much of Italian historiography has shown itself not to be ready. out of militant loyalty or academic conformism. This is a problem that perhaps still awaits complete secularization. The revival of the figure of Matteotti as a symbol of the struggle for democracy and freedom took place in the 70s on the occasion of black subversion and after the coup d'état in Chile against Allende.

It was necessary to reach the 90th anniversary for a solemn celebration of Matteotti in Montecitorio, with the participation of the Foundation for Historical Studies and the Matteotti Foundation, and then in the hall on the initiative of all the parliamentary groups. With the Centenary (2024), on May 30, 2024, in the presence of the Head of

State, and the Presidents of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, a solemn commemoration was promoted in Montecitorio, of which -it seemed to me- the culminating moment was the meeting between the High Authorities of the State and a representation of the students who had participated in the national competition for schools held on Matteotti's values. It was a high moment of the ceremony for its symbolic and evocative profile. Ideally, Matteotti was proposed to young people as a protagonist of parliamentary life and a martyr for democracy and freedom, a freedom that is not closed in on itself, and acquired once and for all, but that unfolds towards others in society, becomes "liberating", open to new needs. An education to freedom, to put it in his words, to be promoted "in all respects", starting with school, from access to knowledge, so as to guarantee "the possibility of learning and discussing all theses, all knowledge"; to give substance to the "aspiration and will to live a higher and more dignified existence, for the delights of the spirit, for the refinement of feelings", for a "higher awareness of oneself and of the right and duty of the moral life; to form and realize in the individual the "Man who lives brother and not wolf, in a better humanity for solidarity and justice"; enabling the citizen to democratically manage public affairs in their own interest, but also in the interest of the community.