

'*Sovversivismo*': The Radical Political Culture of Otherness in Liberal Italy

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of *sovversivismo* ('subversiveness') and the *sovversivo* (subversive) within the historical context of Liberal Italy. The political elite of Italy usually defined the enemies of the new state as subversives. The 'Other' was not only the Left (anarchists, syndicalists, socialists and Republicans) but also Catholics and Southern bandits. The concept of subversiveness is difficult to define. The term could mean spontaneous unfocussed rebellion and a general mood against the State and the ruling order. It was an attitude, a mood, which spread beyond the border of the Left. But this paper focuses on anarchism and the anarchist. Sociologically their subversive culture flourished in what can be called a 'second socialist culture', bound together by a network of institutions (Chambers of Labour, suburban working-class clubs, etc.) and embodied in sentiments of localism, anti-statism, *operaismo* and anti-clericalism. Drawing its intellectual sustenance and personnel from a territory that stretched through central Italy, subversive culture gave the anarchists a purchase over the larger socialist movement. As the Red Week of 1914 demonstrated how the 'subversive' could overwhelm the more staid reformists of the PSI and its associated trade union confederation. The subversive also attracted avant-garde intellectuals and artists in Milan, Florence, Rome and elsewhere. Before 1914 Benito Mussolini tried to meld the intellectual subversives with the denizens from its geographical heartland in order to outflank the leadership of the PSI. On the other hand, socialists and anarchists criticised the adoption of *sovversivo* and *sovversivismo* by their members of their movements. Thus the paper discusses the analyses of Antonio Gramsci and Errico Malatesta: leading socialist/communist and anarchist thinkers of this era. The term *sovversivismo* captured the radical sense of 'otherness', which divided Italy into two increasingly tense camps. But the methods and tone of *sovversivismo* was even employed by the polite classes in 1914-1915 during the interventionist crisis and was harnessed to overwhelm the Liberal State between 1919 and 1926.

Introduction

Twenty years ago Franco Andreucci attempted a definition of the term 'sovversivo'. Recalling Gramsci, 'subversiveness' and the 'subversive' were said to have grown out of the dreams and vendettas of Italian 'pre-industrial' and 'pre-modern' society. But Andreucci hedged his bets. Although 'sovversivismo', he argued, was a venerable tradition in the history of the Italian people, it was nevertheless very difficult to define.¹ It was always something more than a simple feeling of spontaneous rebellion against the state. And it was an attitude, a mood, which spread outside of the borders of the Left *per se*. Andreucci was reflecting on the social histories of communist subversives in Tuscany during the Fascist *ventennio*. And the works of Santomassimo, Mannari, Abse, and Sonnessa have employed these concepts in interesting ways for the period 1919-1945.² In previous work I shifted the discussion to antebellum Liberal Italy.³ The term 'sovversivo' was adopted by the Left as a badge of honour, since the authoritarianism and heavy-handedness of the forces of law and order affected the entire opposition to the ruling elite of Liberal Italy. Sociologically, *sovversivismo* flourished in what I have called the 'second socialist culture', bound together by a network of institutions (Chambers of Labour, suburban working-class clubs, etc) and embodied the sentiments of localism, anti-statism, *operaismo* and anti-clericalism. Drawing much of its intellectual sustenance and personnel from a band of territory that stretched through central Italy (the Marches, Tuscany, Emilia, the Romagna and Umbria), the essence of the 'otherness' of this sentiment and social movement can be found in the anarchist movement. But as the Red Week of 1914 demonstrated the 'subversive' could overwhelm the more reformist socialist and trade union movement. The subversive also attracted avant-garde intellectuals and artists in the Milan and elsewhere.⁴ Before 1914, Mussolini of course tried to meld the intellectual subversives with the denizens from its geographical and sociological heartland in order to outflank the leadership of the Italian Socialist Party.⁵ Many anarchist 'subversives' (such as Errico Malatesta) were inherently suspicious of his operation.

In this paper I will examine how the anarchists and syndicalists adopted the very title given to them by the police and criminologists. The term 'sovversivismo'

¹ F. Andreucci, "'Subversiveness' and anti-fascism in Italy', R. Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory*, London, RKP, 1981, p.201.

² T. Abse, 'Sovversivi e fascisti a Livorno: Lotta politica e sociale 1918-1922', Milan, FrancoAngeli, 1991, pp.170-1; A. Sonnessa, 'Working Class Defence Organization, Anti-Fascist Resistance and the *Arditi del Popolo* in Turin, 1919-22', *European History Quarterly*, Vol.33, No. 2, 2003, pp. 183-218.

³ C. Levy, 'Italian anarchism, 1870-1926', in D. Goodway (ed.), *For Anarchism. History, Theory, and Practice*, London, Routledge, 1989, pp. 25-78; C. Levy, 'Currents of Italian Syndicalism before 1926', *International Review of Social History*, vol. 45, 2, 2000, pp. 209-250; C. Levy, 'The Anarchist Assassin in Italian History: 1870s to 1930s', in S. Gundle (ed.), *Assassinations, Murders and Mysteries in Modern Italy*, forthcoming, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴ G. Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics, Between Anarchism Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*, Providence/Oxford, Berghahn Books, 1996, pp. 1-91.

⁵ For good account of the young Mussolini and the subversives see Renzo De Felice first and best volume of his immense and unmanageable biography of Mussolini, *Mussolini. Il rivoluzionario*, Turin, Einaudi, 1965 and more recently the more manageable and enjoyable single volume: R. Bosworth, *Mussolini*, London, Arnold, 2002, chpts. 1-2. Still worth consulting is Gaudens Megaro's exposé written in 1938 of the 'subversive' Duce: Mussolini was not amused. See, G. Megaro, *Mussolini in the Making*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1938.

captures the radical sense of otherness which divided Liberal Italy into two increasingly tense camps. But the methods and tone of *sovversivismo* were even employed by the polite classes in 1914-1915. This pattern of behaviour would overwhelm the Liberal political system between 1919 and 1922.⁶

Definition and Problem

The terms *sovversivo* and *sovversivismo* were used by the police, prefects and the constitutional press in Liberal Italy to describe the anarchist, socialist, republican and Catholic opponents of the Savoyard monarchy. In this paper I will not discuss the clerical and Catholic opponents of the Liberal settlement.⁷ Nor will I discuss the conflation of *sovversivismo* with banditry in the South in the 1860s, the Mafia in Palermo, the *camorra* in Naples and 'millenarian' bandits in Tuscany⁸. Orientalist discourse used to address the Southern Question is closely related to the theme of this paper.⁹ These phenomena were located in the cultural matrix from which the terminology *sovversivo* and *sovversivismo* was drawn. I shall focus on the anarchists, syndicalists and the maximalist socialists who shared similar cultural formation and historical memory with the secular middle classes who ran the Italian State. In other words I shall investigate the *fratelli-nemici* of Liberal Italy's positivist, anti-clerical and largely post Garibaldinian or Mazzinian political elite.¹⁰ In the *Prison Notebooks* Antonio Gramsci reflected on the sociological and historical meanings of these terms.

Gramsci and the Subversive

It is always difficult to disentangle the political message from Gramscian social scientific investigation in the *Prison Notebooks*. Indeed as I show elsewhere, the foundations of much of his more detached Notes can be located in his previous heavily politicised journalism.¹¹ Quite naturally Gramsci's journalism was embedded in the academic training he received at the University of Turin: so it is also quite difficult to disentangle the 'academic Gramsci' from the party secretary. This irritated his fellow socialists and communists and raises problems when one wants to use his investigation of *sovversivismo* in a historical or sociological context. Much of his definition of the subversive and the culture of subversivism, however, reflected similar attitudes and analysis of a wide array of socialists from a broad ideological

⁶ See Roberto Vivarelli's magnum opus on the collapse of Liberal Italy, which uses this as a major theme of his narrative, R. Vivarelli, *Storia delle origini del fascismo. L'Italia dalla grande guerra alla marcia su Roma*, Vols 1-2, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1991.

⁷ For general overviews see, D. I. Kertzer, 'Religion and Society, 1889-1892', J. A. Davis (ed.), *Italy in the Nineteenth Century*, OUP, 2000, pp. 181-206; A. A. Kelikian, 'The Church and Catholicism', in A. Lyttelton (ed.), *Liberal and Fascist Italy*, OUP, 2002, pp. 44-61.

⁸ J. Dickie, "'Darkest Italy": the Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860-1900, New York, St Martin's Press, 1999; N. M. Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002; C. Levy, 'Italy and its Racisms', forthcoming.

⁹ J. Schneider (ed.), *Italy's "Southern Question": Orientalism in One Country*, Oxford, Berg, 1998.

¹⁰ There is an immense literature on this: An interesting case study of Rome where anarchists, anti-clericals, republicans and socialists opposed the Vatican and the Catholic aristocracy, see G. Orsina, *Anticlericalismo e democrazia. Storia del Partito radicale in Italia e a Roma 1901-1914*, Sovveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2002.

¹¹ C. Levy, *Antonio Gramsci. Marxism, Modernity, Machiavelli*, Cambridge, Polity, 2007.

spectrum. Gramsci's take on the subject is unique merely because he approaches it from his unusual mixture of Crocean, Gentilean and Sorelian values. An odd form of socialism in the Italian context that criticised the positivism of his predecessors and preached a form of organised spontaneity, pedagogic enlightenment and as Gramsci grew into a Leninist a good deal of authoritarianism. Nevertheless the Gramscian concept of subversivism can be found in his polemics with anarchists and syndicalists during the period 1916-1920.¹² The *Prison Notebooks* contains approaches, indeed sometimes as startling photographic reproductions of arguments he penned nearly twenty years earlier, which seek to differentiate his libertarian Marxist/Gentilean/Sorelian communism of workers councils from the 'subversive' variety of libertarian socialism, anarchism.

For Gramsci, *sovversivismo* was the product of the bastard modernity that the unified Italian State brought forth.¹³ The narrowness of the Italian ruling class, the lack of national-popular legitimacy, persistence of large groups of '*morti di fami*' in the countryside and their functional equivalent in the urban white-collar middle classes fed into the culture and politics of *sovversivismo*. For Gramsci *sovversivismo* was closely related to the predominate role of volunteers from the *Risorgimento* through to the March on Rome. And for Gramsci this also related to the role of charismatic chiefs within the socialist and left-wing movements of Liberal Italy. *Sovversivismo* was a politically nomadic movement, according to Gramsci. For Gramsci, the 'subversive' chiefs used a radical stance as a form of blackmail against the political ruling class, because at the decisive moment these chiefs invariably threw their lot in with the forces of order. Subversives fed off the lack of a properly articulated civil society and the lack of consistently enforceable rules of governance and law. Thus not only could subversives be reversible Leftists and Rightists, there could also be a '*sovversivismo d'alto*'.¹⁴ Thus much of the Left in particular and Italy politics, runs the Gramscian argument, was a product of the culture of *sovversivismo*. The lack of modern political institutions, a weak ethical political culture, and for anarchists and other on the Left, an incorrect reading and incorporation of Marxism lay at the bottom of the problem. But it must be said that behind the Gramscian analysis of this phenomenon lurked a guilty conscience, a deep feeling of betrayal. The young Gramsci has been a Mussolinian: his gaoler had been the lodestone of Gramscian politics until interventionism burned his fingers. Behind Gramsci's analysis of *sovversivismo* lay an attempt to distance himself from the so-called nomadic forces of anarchism, syndicalism and Mussolinian socialism that he had found rather attractive as a young man. But leaving aside this particularly poignant biographical factor, Gramsci approach to *sovversivismo* and the political education of the Italians is not too dissimilar from a host of representative figures from the educated middle classes and the secular post-Mazzinian political elite.¹⁵

¹² C. Levy, *Gramsci and the Anarchists*, Oxford/New York, Berg, 1999, pp. 99-102.

¹³ For his analysis in the Notebooks, see A, Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere* (ed. V. Gerratana), Turin, Einaudi, 1975, pp. 323-27, 777, 2108.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 326.

¹⁵ C. Duggan, 'Francesco Crispi, "political education" and the problem of Italian national consciousness, 1860-1896, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*. Vol.2 , No.2, 1997, pp. 141-66. This a major theme of his forthcoming volume on Italy between 1860 and 1915.

Socialism and the Subversives

During the Giolittian era Italian socialists were continually occupied with battles between reformists and intransigents. But in many respects underlying, unspoken common assumptions and similar social and educational backgrounds united the radical and reformist leadership who hailed from this socialism of the educated middle classes.¹⁶ Thus Turati and the socialist parliamentary group, largely composed of graduates, free professionals and professors, equated politics with parliament, and parliamentary politics presupposed an elite of specialists who had the best interests of their rather naïve and subversive followers at heart. Claudio Treves, a positivist socialist hailing from the Turinese school of socialism: a student of Lombroso who differentiated between 'sane' moderate socialism and 'criminally inspired' anarchism- indeed between criminal anarchism and altruistic utopians such as Tolstoy wrote in 1901:

The mentality of the proletariat has nothing in common with the mentality of the crowd, or for that matter with the common populace and the urban scum. The *class struggle* implies consciousness, reflection, tactics, organisation, solidarity: that is to say precisely the antithesis of the *crowd* which is only instinct, impulsiveness, brutality, lack of discipline and egotism.¹⁷

Lombroso's sociological socialism stressed environmental and *biological* factors as the cause of urban crime, prostitution and disorder. Socialists such as Filippo Turati disagreed about the emphasis on biology. But they did accede to Lombroso's sociological laws, which separated the working class in two 'types': the honest intelligent son or daughter of labour and his or her dangerous 'double', the denizen of the *classi pericolosi*: the Turinese *barabba* or the Milanese *folla*- the subversive crowd.¹⁸ But this approach was not limited to the mainstream of socialism: the syndicalist opposition used a similar language. The intellectuals of Italian syndicalism claimed to be the most faithful Marxists in Italy and encouraged broad political participation, including mass mobilisation. But the insurrectional Red Week of 1914 disillusioned many of syndicalism's elite: real general strikes were messy affairs involving chaotic rioting. On the other hand Vilfredo Pareto thought that the heroic elite of the proletariat, disciplined through syndicalism, would reinvigorate the Italian political class and undermine crony capitalism. In a similar fashion the

¹⁶ C. Levy, 'The people and the professors: socialism and the educated middle classes in Italy, 1870-1915', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2001, pp. 195-208.

¹⁷ Quoted from G. Paletta, 'Strategia rivendicativa di fabbrica e rapporti di delega nelle organizzazioni operaie milanesi (1900-1906)', in A. Riosa (ed.), *Il socialismo riformista a Milano agli inizi del secolo*, Milan, Angeli, 1981, p. 180; A. Casali, *Claudio Treves. Dalla giovinezza torinese alla guerra di Libia*, FrancoAngeli, Milan, 1989, pp. 109-114.

¹⁸ For Lombroso (notorious for measuring the craniums of Turinese anarchists after their arrest at May Day protests in the 1890s), for the Turinese context see of the 1890s see, M. Scavino, *Con la penna e con la lima. Operai e intellettuali nella nascita del socialismo torinese (1889-1893)*, Turin, Paravia, 1999 and Levy, 2002, pp. 172-174/ There are several good biographies of Lombroso in Italian the most recent English account is M. Gibson, *Born to Crime: Cesare Lombroso and the Origins of Biological Criminology*, Westport, Conn, 2002.

For Turati see, I. Monti Ottolenghi, *Filippo Turati, La Critica Sociale, e la formazione della borghesia industriale in Italia. Dalla origini all'età giolittiana*, *Ricerche Storiche*, Vol. 6, No.2, pp. 335-403;

Nationalists and syndicalist nationalists of the 1910s wanted to channel the subversive energies of the working classes into building an imperialist proletarian Italy.¹⁹

The educated elite attracted to syndicalism and socialism during the Giolittian era should therefore be situated in the pedagogic, modernising and nation-building tradition that was prevalent in the discourse of Liberal Italy. Moral exhortation and reformist public policy was needed to make Italy a 'normal', 'European' state. The spectre of *sovversivismo* had to be banished from Italy and this politics of pedagogy and modernisation was not limited to the socialists. Thus Crispi, the nemesis of the socialist and anarchist Left in the 1890s, pursued a policy of Jacobin reforms that combined the modernisation of the political structures of Italy, the suppression of *sovversivismo* and a course of moral and national education for the Italians.²⁰

Needless to say, Gramsci endlessly criticised the first premises of ante-bellum of progressive and leftist political culture. Thus the numerous newspaper articles and asides in the *Prison Notebooks* referring to naïve or racist positivism of Lombroso and other social scientists, the gibes at the culture of Free Masonry, the satirical shafts at the nomadic populism and the rootless cosmopolitanism of the maximalist and anarchist left. However, if one assumes that the effect of the philosopher Antonio Labriola, Crispi's contemporary of the 1890s, is profound on the Sardinian's intellectual mindset, the Gramscian first assumptions behind *sovversivismo* are not dissimilar from the much-ridiculed positivists, anti-clericals and Free Masons.

Both Labriola and Gramsci confronted subversive and spontaneous movements and drew similar conclusions. According to Gramsci cultural hegemony preceded every major revolution. It had been the inability and unwillingness of Italian intellectuals to abandon their elitist cosmopolitanism that left the masses without proper leadership. Like Labriola, Gramsci relied on working-class organisations immersed in daily life, not directly controlled by the Modern Prince party, to raise popular superstition (*senso comune*) to a universal world-view (*senso buono*).²¹ Labriola's support of the *Fasci siciliani* in the 1890s and Gramsci's support of the Turinese factory council movement of 1919-1920 were motivated by a feeling in both thinkers that the weakness of the Italian socialist movement lay in its failure to connect intellectuals to 'spontaneous movements'. In the *Prison Notebooks* Sorel and the syndicalists were criticised by Gramsci for failing to recognise the importance of educating 'spontaneity'. Thus the 'spontaneity' in the factory council, Gramsci recalled, 'was not neglected, even less despised. It was *educated*, directed, purged of extraneous contamination; the aim was to bring it into line with modern theory.'²² In this formulation, therefore, *senso comune* was the childlike philosophy of the nomadic leadership of the subversive maximalist socialists, the anarchists, and the syndicalists. Modernising, truly scientific socialists were imbued with *senso buono*, the sure-fire antidote to the posturing of the *sovversivi*.

¹⁹ I summarise the vast literature on these themes in Levy, 2000, pp. 236-244.

²⁰ See Christopher Duggan's magisterial biography of Francesco Crispi, *Francesco Crispi, 1818-1901. From Nation to Nationalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

²¹ I discuss this precisely in the context of the anarchists in, Levy, 1999. There is a vast literature on *senso buono* and *senso comune*, but see the Italian lexicon, F. Frosini and G. Luguori (eds.), *Le parole di Gramsci: per un lessico dei Quardeni del Carcere*, Rome, Carocci, 2004.

²² Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, p.330.

Anarchism and the Subversives

This separation of subversive political culture from modern and scientific politics was not limited to the educated middle class socialists, syndicalists and communists. It can also be found within the anarchist movement: considered by many of the above as the quintessence of *sovversivismo*. Indeed, the anarchists had their own 'Lombroso' in the shape of Pietro Gori.²³ Pietro Gori, criminologist, positivist and star defence lawyer for the anarchist movement in the 1890s and 1900s, made his mark in the Italian and Argentine academic worlds. Although he was a libertarian, his positivist determinism made him the anarchist equivalent to the purveyors of Second Internationalist scientific socialism. Except his criminology and sociology, unlike Lombroso's, tried to demonstrate how anarchism was the natural result of human development. In other words, he lent scientific proof, to a widespread opinion held by many Italian socialists of the Liberal era, that the anarchists were somehow better and more ethical, if slightly impractical, socialist comrades. Gori was also Italian anarchism's star cultural organiser and lived a nomadic life within the subversive subculture. He composed some of the most popular songs of the Italian labour movement, and his poetry became a popular form of propaganda, which fed off and enriched the second socialist culture (the culture which Gramsci would term *senso comune*) I have discussed elsewhere.²⁴

If Gori like Peter Kropotkin identified anarchism with the positivist sciences, the leading anarchist of the era, Errico Malatesta, was deeply suspicious of scientism and positivism and posited a relativist, voluntarist and open-ended anarchism.²⁵ Which curiously had much in common with the young Gramsci's Marxism (although for Gramsci, Malatesta was the exemplar of the nomadic, cosmopolitan *sovversivo*).

In fact Malatesta fought a decades' long war against the *sovversivi* of his own movement. He disapproved of the spontaneity of the anarcho-communists such as Luigi Galleani, who quite tellingly named one of the newspapers he edited *Cronaca Sovversiva*.²⁶ He fought against the mass terrorism of the 1890s with great courage. The criminalisation of anarchism in Italy in the late nineteenth century caused the terrorists and the illegalists to draw one conclusion: revolutions were made by criminals or *spostati* (misfits or drop-outs). This term had originally been associated with the young middle-class activists who had sacrificed their creature comforts for the cause (like Malatesta, who left medical school in Naples in *narodnik* fashion, to train as an electrician). But in response Malatesta and his school of anarchism denounced this perversion²⁷, what has been termed *illegalismo programmatico*, and in

²³ M. Antonioli, *Pietro Gori, il cavaliere errante dell'anarchia*, Pisa, Franco Serantini, 1995.

²⁴ S. Pivato, *Bella ciao. Canto e politica nella storia d'Italia*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2005, 55, 57, 67-68, 71, 171, 201.

²⁵ A good account of Malatesta's ideology can be found in P. Nursey-Bray, 'Malatesta and the anarchist revolution', *Anarchist Studies*, 1995, pp. 25-44.

²⁶ On the always fascinating Galleani see, Pier Carlo Masini, *Storia degli anarchici italiani dal Bakunin a Malatesta (1862-1892)*, Mialn, Rizzoli, 1974, *ad nomen*; Pier Carlo Masini, *Storia degli anarchici nell'epoca degli attentati*, Milan, Rizzoli 1981, *ad nomen*; N. Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism 1864-1892*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, *ad nomen* P. Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti. The Anarchist Background*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1991; N. Pernicone, 'Luigi Galleani and Italian Anarchist Terrorism in the United States', *Studi Emigrazione*, Vol. 30, No. 111, 1993, pp. 469-488; N. Whelehan, 'Political violence morality in anarchist theory and practice: Luigi Galleani and Peter Kropotkin in Comparative Perspective', *Anarchist Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2005; N. Pernicone, *Carlo Tresca. Portrait of a Rebel*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

²⁷ Masini, 1974, p.

turn Malatesta and like-minded anarchists were denounced as dictators, police stooges and bourgeois sell-outs by anarchist 'subversives'.²⁸

Malatesta did not celebrate the bread and cost of living riots that were a feature of Italian social protest from the 1890s to the 1920s. While Malatesta was not a scientific anarchist in Kropotkin's sense, he did emphasize the importance of production and the maintenance of the continuity of complex public services during a social revolution. Thus he did not praise 'the moral economy of the crowd' during the riots of April to June 1919, because at the end of the day it left the crowd more impoverished. During the occupation of the factories in 1920, he implored the occupying workers to maintain production and re-establish commerce on libertarian principles. Sabotage may have been justified as a tactic but not as subversive act of class revenge. Burning crops in the fields would only starve the poorest.²⁹ A Turinese follower of Malatesta enunciated his position. He was part of a small group of anarchists who worked as skilled workers and technicians in Fiat and helped Gramsci spread his notion of factory councils. Writing to a follower of Galleani, he explained that he did want anarchism to be utopian in the bad sense of the word. He was thinking in different terms than a workerist who criticised this approach. But he answered without hesitation: 'I said to make anarchists not subversives.'³⁰

Malatesta denounced openly the widespread hero worship that greeted his return to Italy during the *biennio rosso*.³¹ If we may recall Gramsci's formulation of *sovversivismo*: one of its key components was the role of populist charismatic *capi* in charge of social movements of subversive volunteers. By the early twentieth century Italian anarchists relied rather more heavily upon the informal prestige of leaders to keep the sinews of their organisations together. In this respect, Errico Malatesta's relationship to the anarchists in Italy was rather similar to Garibaldi's and Mazzini's role in the political organisations of the Risorgimento. Anarchism relied on its more prominent leaders to activate and energise its weakly structured organisations during periods of upsurge. Like Mazzini and Garibaldi, Malatesta lived most of his adult life in exile. His interventions occurred during periods of great social tension and his arrival home followed a ritual that had its roots in both the political culture of the Risorgimento and in the subversive second socialist culture of Liberal Italy.

But if the anarchists, perhaps ironically relied more heavily on their leaders, to punch over their weight, even the socialists placed a great deal of emphasis on part played by charismatic speakers and socialist notables. These were analysed in depth by Robert Michels before 1915, and this discussion of Italian socialist hero worship is juxtaposed in Gramsci's more general discussions of *sovversivismo*.³² Indeed Gramsci claimed that the charisma of this socialist leadership before 1914 fed off the primitive and subversive stage of socialism.³³ Although this did not mean that for Gramsci, all charismatic politics were bad, primitive or subversive. In 1919-20, if Gramsci and comrades wanted to advocate a radical socialism grounded in modern factories, the 'science' of council communism, and Lenin, their major competitors on the extreme

²⁸ Masini, 1981, p. ; C. Levy, 'Malatesta in London: The Era of Dynamite', in L. Sponza and A Tosi (eds.), *A Century of Italian Emigration to Britain 1880s to 1980, Five Essays*, supplement to *The Italianist*, 13, 1993, pp. 25-42.

²⁹ E. Malatesta, *Pagine di lotta quotidiana. Scritti. Vol. 1, Umanità Nova 1920/22*, Carrara, 1975, pp. 33, 51-2, 85-6.

³⁰ Levy, 1999, p. 43.

³¹ C. Levy, 'Charisma and social movements: Errico Malatesta and Italian anarchism', *Modern Italy*, Vol. 3, no. 2, 1998, pp. 205-217.

³² F. Tuccari, *Il dilemma della democrazia moderna. Max Weber e Robert Michels*, Bari, Laztera, 1993.

³³ Gramsci, *Quaderni*, p. 233

left were rated as the 'prehistoric' anarchists because of their childlike hero worship. Gramsci's voluntarist and libertarian Marxism was validated by the charismatic example of Lenin, but this was contrasted to the 'Garibaldinian voluntarism' of Errico Malatesta and the anarchists.³⁴ However, Malatesta rejected the adulation, which followed his grand progress through Italy. Repeatedly in the anarchist and socialist press Malatesta was likened to the Spartacus, the Lenin or the new Garibaldi of Italy: appearances in Genoa, Turin and elsewhere, sparked spontaneous general strikes and mass demonstrations in the streets. In Turin, for example, he was virtually overwhelmed by the crowd and only saved by being bundled into a car and taken to the *Casa del Popolo*. And one observer noted, that some 'poor devils' with Malatesta's type of goatee, 'mistaken for him, were taken and carried on shoulders with the triumphant cry: long live Malatesta, long live Lenin!' This indeed is *sovversivismo* made flesh.³⁵

Malatesta would have none of it. In fact his was not a very good stump orator, unlike the previously mentioned Luigi Galleani, who would sway crowds in front of the factories of Paterson, New Jersey in the 1900s. Malatesta was not a subversive orator. He had a natural gravitas in facial expression but was also remembered for a subtle irony and a sly smile that broke out on his face when he was in full flow. His lively eyes caught the listener at rallies in an address that appeared as conversation between friends. He avoided the pseudo-scientific phraseology, violent and paradoxical turns of phrase and abuse that were the stock-in-trade of so many fellow anarchists and maximalist socialists during the *biennio rosso*. He could handle hecklers well, but his excelled in Socratic dialogue with the audience, curiously similar to Gramsci's known public speaking method. Thus he was caste against type: he was the non-subversive leader of the anarchists. And publicly criticised the language of *sovversivismo*. The popular hunt for a saviour was to be avoided: 'I would remind comrades', he wrote in 1920, 'that hyperbole is a figure of speech, which should not be abused. Above all I would remind comrades that to exalt one man is as politically dangerous as it is morally degrading for the exalted and the exalters.'³⁶ And he had been suspicious Benito Mussolini before the First World War precisely because of this behaviour.

Conclusion: The Reversible Populism of Subversivism³⁷

This returns us to a last reflection on Gramsci's definition of *sovversivismo*, which will conclude this paper. Gramsci noted the political ambiguity, the reversible populism of *sovversivismo*, and particularly the odd the position of its *capi*. There is first the replenishment of the forces of order supplied by the subversives from Crispi to Mussolini. Even if the moderate, monarchist urban middle classes viewed both gentlemen with a good deal of suspicion for considerable parts of their lives, ultimately they were hailed (at least when all ran smoothly) as champions of stability and law and order. Individuals with rather complicated, bohemian and indeed *louche*

³⁴ Levy, 1999.

³⁵ Levy, 1998, p. 210.

³⁶ E. Malatesta, 'Grazie, ma basta', *Il Libertario*, 8 January 1920 and *Volontà*, 16 January 1920.

³⁷ A reversible populism found in Italy's *ceti medi* is discussed in Renzo del Carria's highly ideological '68' period piece, *Proletari senza rivoluzione: storia delle classe subalterne italiane dal 1860 al 1950*. f5 volumes, Milan, Edizioni Oriente, 1970-1979. It was also a major theme of great historian Leo Valiani who in turn was shaped Carlo Rosselli and the *Giustizia e Libertà* anti-Fascist organisation of the inter-war period.

life styles were hailed as the defenders of bourgeois, monarchical and eventually at least for Mussolini, Catholic values.

The reversibility of the subversive was nourished by the populist and intellectual bohemia of urban Italy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁸ Anarchism and syndicalism, was laced with Nietzschean and Stirnerite themes of the heroic individual, the iconoclast versus the dull herd: a modern Italy versus an antique, Catholic Italy. In the 1880s and 1890s young *scapigliati* (bohemians) in Milan and Turin, such as Turati, dabbled in Bakunin, criminology, law and literature. Subversiveness took on an intellectual hue. In the case of the first generation of educated middle class leadership within the PSI, this in fact led to a renunciation of the bohemian subversive, even if the starting point had been precisely in this milieu. The *sposato* was translated from meaning subversive misfit to meaning a new type of socialist who used the social sciences to challenge the verities of the humanistic political elite in charge of Liberal Italy.³⁹

But this subversive artistic milieu gave birth to a later generation of artists-politicians, who did not follow the Fabian-like conversion path of Turati, and company. The Futurists fed-off working-class anarchist and syndicalist urban subcultures: the first Futurist painting was 'The Funeral of the Anarchist Galli', depicting a police charge on an anarchist procession in the streets of ante-bellum Milan.⁴⁰ It was in the intersection between this milieu, the Italian Socialist Party and the subversive political culture of Central Italy, that Mussolini cut his political teeth. Mussolini was more immersed in the popular culture of the working class than many of the university professor founders of the Italian Socialist Party. But as a one-time schoolteacher and itinerant journalist, harbouring immense intellectual and literary pretensions, he was more the embodiment of lower middle-class Romagnole radicalism than trade union based socialism. We can trace his subversive socialism back to exemplar of the 'warrior anarchist'; Amilcare Cipriani, a Romagnole closely associated with the anarchists from the late 1870s to 1900 whose politics defy exact definition. However, through his spectacular deeds he personified the anti-dynastic 'subversive' during the last decades of the nineteenth century. As a boy he was involved in Garibaldi's exploits in the 1860s, he was made a colonel by the Communards in Paris in 1870-71 and then transported to New Caledonia when the Paris Commune was suppressed. Returning to Europe in 1880, he was arrested by the Italian authorities and charged with an earlier murky murder, he was released after a campaign by the entire subversive left in 1888. In the 1880s and 1890s he worked with Malatesta to organise a 'party' of the anarchists and support the popular movement in Sicily known as the *Fasci Siciliani*. His advocacy of a Union of Latin People, his pronounced anti-German sentiments and his support for an international brigade in Crete to fight the Turks in 1897 jarred on Malatesta's sensibilities but he was congenial to much of Italian 'subversive' political culture. Here was the hero and revolutionary vagabond, the gaol-bird and the people's hero, who appealed to middle-class anti-clericals and working-class anarchists. He was the subject of a popularity cult. Cipriani foreshadowed the rhetoric and actions of the left-wing interventionists

³⁸ Snapshots of the culture of 'subversiveness' can be found in M. Isnenghi, *L' Italia in piazza. I luoghi della piazza. I luoghi della vita pubblica dal 1848 ai giorni nostri*, Milan, Mondadori, 1994; M. Isnenghi (ed.), *I luoghi della memoria*, Bari, Laterza, 1998, see various entries for May Day etc.

³⁹ For the transformation of the concept of the *sposato* see, Levy, 2001, pp. 198. For the Milanese context see G. Rosa, 'La cultura letteraria della modernità', D. Bigazzi and M. Meriggi (eds.), *Storia d'Italia. Le regioni dall'Unità a oggi. La Lombardia*, Turin, Einaudi, 2001, pp. 1919-200.

⁴⁰ Berghaus, op. cit.

who would split the subversives in 1914-15.⁴¹ It is not surprising that one of his strongholds was *Forlì*, the birthplace of that other subversive, Benito Mussolini. Before his arrival on the scene as the *Duce* of Fascism, Mussolini became the *Duce* of ante-bellum subversive socialism. His popularity owed a great deal to the intellectual and moral support he mobilised outside the party proper. He flirted with the anarchists (or a certain type of individualist/Stirnerite anarchist), the republicans and the *Unione Sindacale*.⁴² He appealed to younger impatient workers raised in the drabber new suburbs of Milan and Turin. He became the politician of youth and indeed the rapidly expanding socialist youth movement became his base.⁴³ He sought his intellectual sustenance outside the party traditions. As editor of *Avanti!*, and the theoretical journal *L'Utopia*, a species of anti- *Critica Sociale*, Mussolini played host to the wilder followers of Sorel, syndicalist intellectuals and organisers, and the individualist anarchists. Mussolini was hailed as the *Duce* of a new socialism that emphasised 'faith, sacrifice and heroism'.⁴⁴ He was attracted to the individualist anarchism of Italian Stirnerites and a keen reader of *Le Bon*, one of his keenest supporters Paolo Valera, the populist Milanese was editor of the suitably entitled *La Folla*. Mussolini groomed himself as a new politician. Embodying the 'exceptional personality' he would revive Italian socialism's spiritual drive and undermine the power of the reformists who controlled its key institutions.⁴⁵ Here was a combination of a past history of provincial subversiveness with an instinctual understanding of modern advertising that confused and outraged the founding generation of reformed socialist *spostati*.

But his career would have been short-lived if he had been unable to link his charismatic politics with ill-defined mass movements that embodied the reversibility of *sovversivismo*. Although many things differentiated the political and social nature of the Red Week of 1914 and the Radiant Days of May of 1915, what joined them together was a nucleus of ill-regular subversives who are found as active participants in both. The masses in the movements of 1914 and 1915 may have detested each other, coming largely from different sorts of Italy. But a small and strategic group of anarchists, syndicalists, socialists and Futurists, veterans of the Red Week, switched to become the nucleus of Mussolini's interventionist supporters when he was expelled from the Socialist Party, and from his Paris exile, Cipriani rallied to Mussolini.⁴⁶ And later, many of the 'Fascists of the First Hour' also hailed from this pioneer group. Similar reversible subversiveness can be found during the *Biennio Rosso* and the *Biennio Nero*. Thus the strange alliance for a March on Rome in early 1920 that

⁴¹ I summarise his life in 'Italian anarchism, 1870-1926', D. Goodway (ed.), *For Anarchism. History, Theory and Practice*, London, Routledge, 1989, pp. 42-43.

⁴² A good English account of Mussolini's attraction to certain type of Stirnerite anarchism can be found in P.V. Cannistraro, 'Mussolini, Sacco-Vanzetti, and the anarchists: the transatlantic context', *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 68, March, 1996, pp. 31-62.

⁴³ The latest account in English is,

⁴⁴ M. Ridolfi, *Il PSI e la nascita del partito di massa, 1892-1922*, Bari. Laterza, 192.

⁴⁵ S. Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle. The Aesthetics of Power*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, p. 43.

⁴⁶ P. C. Masini. 'Anarchici italiani tra interventismo e disfattismo rivoluzionario', *Rivista storica del socialismo*, Vol. 5, 1959, pp. 208-212, G. Cerrito, *l'antimilitarismo anarchico in Italia nle primo nel primo ventennio del secolo*. Pistoia, 1968; M. Antonioli, *Gli anarchici italiani e las prima guerra mondiale. Lettere di Luigi Fabbir e di Cesare Agostinelli e Nella Giacomelli (1914-1915)*. *Rivista storica dell'anarchismo*, vol. 1 ,1994, pp. 7-34; M. Antonioli, 'Gli anarchici italiani e la prima guerra mondiale. Lettere di anarchici interventisti (1914-1915)', *Rivista Storica dell'Anarchismo*, Vol. 2, 1995, pp. 77-87; A. Liguori, *Anarchici di Mussolini*, 2001; S. P. Whitaker, *The Anarchist-Individualist Origins of Italian Fascism*, New York, Peter Lang, 2002.

included D'Annunzio's followers at Fiume,⁴⁷ the anarchists, the USI, the railway workers, the Mazzinian seafarers leader Giulietti⁴⁸ and maximalist socialists, such as Nicola Bombacci⁴⁹, Mussolini's fellow Romagnole. Fiume itself is a fascinating laboratory of reversible subversive politics. Other cases were the *Arditi del Popolo* and Garibaldian conspiracies of the period 1921-1925.⁵⁰

Malatesta was never impressed by Mussolini, in fact far less than the former camp-follower Gramsci. He may have seen him as a useful idiot, but in the period before 1914, he rather acutely equated Mussolini with the French demagogue, Gustav Hervé. An exaggerated anti-nationalism obscured its reverse in the rhetoric of each. Nevertheless, the reversibility of subversiveness is perhaps the most interesting part of Gramsci's discussion of the phenomenon. This reversibility is linked to the contested nature of popular patriotism in Italy and the rituals and memories of the selfless heroes of the Risorgimento, never far away the politics of the Left. Within this tradition, the subversive act could be condoned and applauded by the middle classes. Thus middle-class jurors freed Malatesta and Andrea Costa in the 1870s when they had been tried for insurrection and Malatesta's defence lawyer (the old Internationalist Saverio Merlino) used a similar trope to get his client acquitted in 1921.⁵¹ The volunteers of the Fascist militias and the *Arditi del Popolo* appealed to the Risorgimento values of the urban middle classes. And the volunteers of Fascism used the techniques of subversion melded by D'Annunzio at Fiume and transfused by the provincial squads of rural fascism in 1921 to overwhelm the Left in its heartland. This was subversion from the top: the forces of law and order looked on benignly for the most part. Older ex-cadres from the anarchist and syndicalist movements were present but so were the sons of the landlords and the urban professional classes. In certain areas the differences spun on a coin. Where Republicans could form alliances with the socialists and anarchists, such as Parma, young veterans mounted a defence against Fascist squads.⁵²

In the next generation Carlo Rosselli's *Giustizia e Libertà* engaged in the dialectic of patriotism and subversion. Gramsci, Malatesta and Rosselli analysed and lived in close proximity to the subversive tradition.⁵³ Their politics were forged in that force field of Italian life where the national, the popular and the legitimate were and are intensely contested definitions.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ I summarise these events in Levy, 2000, p.224. For an in depth account see Vivarelli, 1991.

⁴⁸ G. Salotti, *Giuseppe Giulietti*, Rome, 1982. For the taste of his bizarre mind, see Giulietti's memoirs, *Pax Mundi*, Naples, 1945.

⁴⁹ Bombacci is an excellent role model for Gramsci's type of *sovversivo*, see, S. Noiret, *Massimalismo e crisi dello stato liberale. Nicola Bombacci (1979-1924)*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 1991.

⁵⁰ M. Rossi, *Arditi, non gendarmi! Dall' arditismo di guerra aglu Arditi dello Popolo, 1917-1921*, Pisa, Franco Serantini, 1997; E. Francesangeli, *Arditi del Popolo: Argo Secondari e la prima organizzazione antifascista, 1917-1922*, Rome 2000. For the conspiracies see L. Lembo, *Guerra di classe e lotta umana. L' anarchismo in Italia dal biennio rosso alla guerra di Spagna (1919-1939)*, Pisa, Biblioteca Franco Serantini, 2001 and Levy, 'The Anarchist Assassin' forthcoming.

⁵¹ Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism*, p. 144; V. Mantovani, *Mazurka blu. La strage del Diana*, Milan, Rusconi Libri, Milan, 1979, p. 510.

⁵² Levy, 2000. pp. 241-243.

⁵³ Rosselli, anarchism and the tradition of *sovversivismo* is approached in a fine biography, see, S. Pugliese, *Carlo Rosselli. Socialist Heretic and Antifascist Exile*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1999.

⁵⁴ G. Bedani and B. Haddock (eds.), *The Politics of Italian National Identity. A Multidisciplinary Perspective*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press.