

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright
June 25, 2012



Francesco S. Nitti

Italian Anarchists

Francesco S. Nitti
Italian Anarchists
November 1898

The North American Review, Vol. 167, No. 504 (Nov., 1898),
pp. 598–608 Published by: University of Northern Iowa
Scanned from original

November 1898

Since the 24th of June, 1894, when Sante Caserio murdered President Carnot, only four years have elapsed. In that short period the Italian anarchists, armed, like the classical regicides, with a dagger, have murdered Don Antonio Canovas del Castillo, the Prime Minister of Spain, by the hand of Angiolillo, and the Empress of Austria, at Geneva, by the hand of Luccheni.

These two dreadful deeds are not without a cause, and the press of all the world has turned its attention upon Italian anarchism, regarding it as a phenomenon peculiar to Italy, which forms a danger for all civilized people.

Anarchism is not peculiar to Italy. On the contrary, it was imported into Italy about thirty years ago by Michele Bakonnine, and the Italian workmen who abandon themselves most readily to anarchy are those who live *à l'étranger*. There is no nation which is exempt from anarchy. Russia and Spain are the countries from whence anarchist propaganda originally proceeded. But Germany, England, France, all have a number of anarchists. Not even the United States have been exempt from contagion. Indeed, the anarchists of Chicago are among those who are most admired by Italian anarchists, whose organs commemorate every year in November what they regard as the martyrdom of their American brethren.

What is peculiar to Italy is the diffusion of the anarchist spirit on the one hand, and, on the other, the readiness of that spirit to vent itself in attempts upon the lives of elevated persons, be they sovereigns, princes, or political men. The former phenomenon has its cause, in part, in the economic conditions of the country, and in a certain spirit of intolerance, which is widely found among Italians; the latter, in a historic tradition which, perhaps, has never been interrupted. Caserio, Angiolillo, Luccheni follow without intending to do so, perhaps without knowing that they do so, the tradition of Agesilao Milano, Orsini, and of the numberless conspirators and regicides whom the middle classes in Italy have glorified. The radical bourgeoisie of Italy has elevated, in other times, the murder of a tyrant into an act of heroism. There are streets that are named from regicides, and towns which pride themselves upon having given birth to them. In the schools, they speak, even now, with a mysterious respect of Agesilao Milano, who was executed for having attempted

to kill Ferdinand II., King of Naples. He has been, nay is, considered a martyr. Then the most sensitive minds are incited by such pernicious teaching to acts of wild energy. The Southern imagination does the rest, and the humble workman, like Caserio, thinks of himself as an avenger of wrong and a benefactor of humanity in killing a high personage.

Anarchists are rebels; and, in all time, among rebels some have been generous, some violent, some perverse. There are, idealist anarchists, and criminal ones; the evil is that the latter are generally the most conspicuous. Now, Italian workmen who, driven out of Italy by their uneasy economic conditions to seek employment abroad, are the best subjects for anarchist propaganda. Having abandoned their country not to enrich themselves, not to seek prosperity, but often only to live, they carry in their hearts a feeling of bitterness and sorrow. They possess generally, as did Caserio, Angiolillo or Luccheni, the very limited culture of inferior Italian schools, with a basis of historical anecdotes, more or less exaggerated. If the anarchist ferment penetrates their minds, and the revolutionary press infuses into them the slow and pernicious poison of intolerance and violence, they become the most dangerous anarchists.

Anarchist doctrine and propaganda were introduced into Italy by Michele Bakonnine. Having escaped from Siberia in a marvellous manner, he, after sojourning for short periods in almost every country, stopped in Italy, where he remained from 1864 till 1868, almost without interruption. He was a poor writer, but an unsurpassed organizer and worker. He lived in nearly every part of Italy, but most of all in Florence and Naples. He admired Naples, for he saw in it a perfect field for the development of anarchy. A Slav writer, Professor Dragomanow, published in the Russian language, a few years ago, the collection of Bakonnine's letters, having a political or social character. Many are dated from Naples, and are of an extraordinary bitterness.

In April, 1872, exiled at Locarno in Switzerland, Bakonnine, even after the defeat of the Commune of Paris, wrote to a Spanish friend: "You know that in Italy, in this last time, our International and dear Alliance have had a great development. Till now, it is not the disposition which has been lacking, but organization and idea. Italy

little or no culture, but the hot and quick southern intelligence renders them able to appropriate to themselves readily general ideas. Among their fellow workmen they meet socialist and anarchist workers; the latter especially act upon their excitable imagination. With surprise, they see that even in rich countries poverty exists. Poverty is then seen to be not a condition peculiar to a poor or backward nation. Then the idea enters their minds that the fault is with the social constitution. Society is held responsible for poverty, and for the hardships of the poor. A worker is dismissed because he is lazy or unfit for his work; it is the fault of society. Another cannot live as he would; it is the fault of society, where the law establishes and buttresses injustice. These ideas move excited souls, and the purpose of dismantling society, of giving some memorable example, is strengthened by individual vanity, which is so strong among people of the Latin race.

We must add that in the schools of Italy, an error never too much to be deplored, they make an apology for regicide. Unlearned teachers do not explain the difference between martyr and murderer. The history of ancient Rome is full of murders of tyrants or aspirants to tyranny. An individual becomes thus the avenger and the deliverer of society. I take up by chance a manual of history, used in a great number of Italian schools. It is astonishing to observe how many tyrannicides they justify, from Brutus to Agesilao Milano. There is praise for all. There was a time when Italy, specially Central Italy, was full of little tyrants; the regicide became an emancipator. The tradition has been unfortunately perpetuated. Even the poets, in like manner, have not refused to applaud political murder, not only the less odious regicides, but also the worst.

countries. In some districts of Italy workmen are very poor, and social relations very difficult. In those districts the socialist leaders find often numerous followers, who accept the programme of the Labor party. But in some of these individuals the socialist programme often produces a sudden discouragement. Why wait so long for the promised resurrection? Why work for a future which is long in coming, too long perhaps? They become, then, an easy prey to the first anarchist they meet. They are easily converted to a gospel that spares them the long expectation and allows every man of good will to try and to do. The anarchist journal of Ancona, "*L'Agitazione*" (Agitation), published a rubric with the title, "*Progredendo*" (Progressing). In that rubric were printed the letters, very numerous, that socialists, after their conversion to anarchism, sent to the journal. In such letters they always say that they are tired of waiting, that they have no more faith in legal methods and parliamentarianism, etc.

But why, then, have Italian anarchists such a bad reputation out of Italy? There are anarchists in France, in Spain, in Austria,. Three high personages have been murdered in those countries by Italian anarchists. The causes are manifold.

Italy, at this moment, is passing through a very trying period of her history. In spite of all that has been said and written, it has made great progress in the last forty years. It is a country that has many bad political institutions. It has made great mistakes, but it possesses a great deal of energy. Every year more than two hundred thousand Italians go abroad, driven to emigrate above all by their great fecundity, which is out of all proportion to the increase of wealth. To America the peasants go in greatest numbers, and they constitute an emigration that requires to be ruled and that nevertheless is not always composed of good elements. Above all, it is impoverished by a great proportion of parasites.

In the countries that are contiguous to Italy — France, Switzerland, Austria — there go, on the other hand, thousands of workmen and laborers, who stay only a few months and return home every year. Thither go also individuals who have compromised themselves in their own country, and wish to elude the vigilance of the police. Caserio, Angiolillo, Luccheni, were workmen who had gone abroad for employment, the first two being of a very moral life. They have

is perhaps actually the most revolutionary country. In Italy there is what is wanting elsewhere; a flaming youth, energetic, without career, without resources, which, in spite of its bourgeois origin, is not morally and intellectually enervated like the youth of other countries. Now, it throws itself unreservedly into revolutionary socialism on our programme, that of Alliance." Words full of exaggeration, but not without an element of truth.

Bakonnine founded in Naples the first section of the International in the year 1867. He had some workers with him, but the greater number of his followers belonged to the petite bourgeoisie.

The first journal founded in Naples by Bakonnine's influence was called *L'Eguaglianza* but it had not, and could not have, many readers. The movement of the International spread rapidly. Associations were formed everywhere, leagued with the vast organization. The first and greatest friend of Bakonnine in Italy was Charles Cafiero, who died some years ago. Even now, anarchists speak everywhere with veneration of Cafiero, who was the most generous adherent of the party. Belonging to a very rich family of Puglie, he had studied jurisprudence with a view to dedicating himself to a diplomatic career. He was attracted by the doctrines of anarchy, and gave up all — family, riches and comfort — to espouse its cause. He had not a strong intellect, but great sincerity. He died mad, with a fixed delusion that wings would sprout out of his body, and that he would fly into heaven.

The International in Naples was dissolved by an order of the Minister of the Interior, on the 14th of August, 1871. In the ordinance of dissolution it was said that that association constituted "a permanent offence against the laws and the fundamental institutions of the nation."

Between 1867 and 1871 had arisen at the same time a few associations of revolutionary character. None of them professed to be anarchist, but they were all really so. Italy, but a short time before delivered from its domestic tyrants, had retained a love for violent agitations, for sects, for secret associations. The conviction was even general that it required the work of only a few individuals to reform the whole of society. Garibaldi and Mazzini intervened in the discussions which were so numerous in that period among republicans,

socialists and anarchists. Mazzini, a high thinker, who, in the purity of his mind, despised violence, published, when the internationalist and anarchist agitation was at its height, a small work against the Commune of Paris. A firm believer in God, and with a profound respect for right, he could not tolerate that his friends did not set themselves against multiplying societies and sects that stood for the negation of God and of the fundamental principles of contemporary society.

Garibaldi, on the contrary, a more impulsive spirit, magnificent in action, but less temperate, published a letter in defence of the International, which he characterized as "the sun of the future." He was a great man of war, but in philosophic and social matters his words had little importance. Many of his followers were accordingly driven by his words to opposite parties. There was then a great discontent in Italy. As often happens in revolutions, many bad men had secured the most important places; many more who asked for places were dissatisfied. Not a few declared themselves republican, not because of belief in the principle or in the institution, but because monarchy had not satisfied them. The seed of anarchism fell then on ground well prepared for it. Many were only discontented, and confounded republicanism, socialism, anarchism; others sought means to wreak hatred upon a society by which they thought themselves ill treated. Discontent was specially rife among the bourgeoisie. It is remarkable that the bourgeoisie and more specially the petite bourgeoisie, had cherished in few countries revolutionary ideas. Proudhon, the theorist of anarchy, said that workmen were not by nature revolutionary; that the true revolutionary classes are the middle classes.

Under the influence of propaganda and agitation, and of the peculiar conditions of Italy at that time, anarchism began a series of small revolutionary movements, which were more frequent than elsewhere in Tuscany, in Romagna and in the neighborhood of Naples. The tumults of Carrara, Imola, the revolutions of Ponte Molle and San Lupo were the first of a series of anarchist attempts. Bakonnine had declared that the southern brigand of Italy is the type of an anarchist. What were these brigands? They were only — putting aside exaggerations — outlaws, persons who placed themselves in open conflict against society, and who acknowledged no law and no

exaltation of their purpose, they mature the idea and put it into execution. It is seldom that they confide even in an intimate friend, or that they associate two or three individuals, at the most, with them. The anarchist of action always fears that he may be betrayed or sold.

Bakonnine had conceived for some time the idea of making some vast secret societies, and Most tried to realize the concept. But anarchy and authority are things that cannot agree together, and without authority there cannot be a durable association.

Recognizing the necessity of organization, Malatesta wrote a few years ago: "We must organize ourselves in a purely anarchist manner; that is to say, without any authority, neither open nor disguised. We must have an organization that conciliates the free initiative of individuals and groups, the free development of all faculties and wills, with the unity of action, the discipline and often even the secrecy necessary for carrying on the struggle in which we are engaged. Is that possible? He naturally concluded that it was. But ten years have elapsed since he wrote these words, and facts have not confirmed them. In all their journals, the Italian anarchists speak of spontaneous action, of free initiative, of individual will, of complete autonomy of the individual, and of many other things which are not compatible with association. Intolerant of discipline as he is, the Italian anarchist, if he succeeds only in forming little congregations, better than associations, feels however very strongly the spirit of solidarity toward his comrades. But groups are independent, the one from the other.

How many anarchists are there in Italy? It is impossible to give any answer to this question. A person who occupied a high political office and whose duty it was to follow the reports periodically sent to the government, told me that there are in Italy no more than three or four thousand active anarchists. But this number may be very far from the truth. It has happened that many individuals who have accomplished the most dreadful attempts, were not known as anarchists or polity considered them as inoffensive proselytes. Sudden resolutions are often more frequent among unknown individuals, who think they may pass abruptly to celebrity and story.

The Marxist socialism is, in its doctrinal essence, contrary to anarchism; but, in its turn, it takes on a different character in different

oneself from elections, and he wishes that his friends would enter Parliament. Malatesta's position is, on the contrary, unchanged.

Within the last two years, there has been published in Ancona, a journal with the title "L'Agitazione" (Agitation). This journal, communist and anarchist, was issued under the inspiration of Malatesta, who was the principal writer for it. It was, of all anarchist organs, the most widely circulated, and contributed signally to the anarchist propaganda in Romagna and Emilia. It lasted, in spite of persecutions, till the government suppressed it. In point of fact, since the events of last May, there are no more anarchist journals. The government has suppressed them all, arresting the editors who had not been able to escape in time.

Here a question naturally arises, What are the numbers of Italian anarchists? How many are registered in the anarchist party? Journals have published upon this point some fantastic statements. A true anarchist party, which is organized, which has acknowledged chiefs, does not exist in Italy — perhaps it does not exist anywhere. Individual action, if it does not exclude, makes very difficult, a large and permanent accord for collective action. I have observed almost always that one becomes an anarchist when, with a slight culture, or with one-sided culture, one entertains a high conception of one's strength. Now, men who have a high conception of their own strength, who think the will and the example of a few, if not of one, sufficient to overthrow deeply rooted institutions, do not succeed in associating with each other permanently. A very large party, with a determined plan, cannot subsist without the authority of one chief or of a few chiefs who direct the movement. Now authority is the negation of anarchy.

From time to time, however, they form associations. Four, five, ten, twenty individuals, at most, do succeed in associating themselves together to make readings in common, to try propaganda in some countries. The association of twenty persons without a chief authority, is impotent to act; it is merely a seed-plot of propaganda, a lecture circle, a more or less tumultuous club. The true anarchists, the anarchists of action, when they conceive the idea of an attempt at a murder, generally do not confide in anybody. Alone, in the daily

authority. They acted with the most absolute liberty, pitting strength against strength.

"We," wrote an anarchist journal of Bologna, "are revolutionists and anarchists, and we aim at the destruction of existing political, social and religious orders. (. . .) All that is good in the world has been obtained against the laws, has been squeezed out by force. Rebellion, then, against laws is the first condition for each step of progress. Human civilization is but the result of a succession of great social crimes." The violence of the language of many of the little anarchist journals published under Bakonnine's influence and inspiration was incredible. The anarchist associations, also, had the most violent and the strangest names: "*Morte ai borghesi*" (Death to Bourgeois) "*Combattiamo*" (Let us fight), "*L'Ottantanove*" (The eighty-ninth), "*La Rivendicazione*" (The revenge), "*La Dinamite*" (Dynamite), "*Forca e pugnale*" (Gibbet and dagger), etc. Sad names of sad things! !

Among all the anarchist movements at that time, an interesting one was that of San Lupo, which happened in April, 1877. A band of anarchists went there with weapons and tried to make the populace rebel. They were arrested, and taken to Naples, and in August of the following year tried by the Court of Assizes in Capua. At the head of the rebels were Cafiero and Malatesta, and others who, later, exercised a decisive influence upon the whole anarchist movement.

Since the revolutionary attempt at San Lupo, anarchism in Italy made no attempt at insurrection. But not infrequently popular disturbances have been turned to the account of anarchist designs. The propaganda, as they call it, has often very dreadfully asserted itself. It has happened, as in Florence and Pisa, that even in demonstrations of the people, they have thrown bombs in the crowded streets. Anarchism, after 1880, showed a tendency rather to lose ground than to develop itself. Between 1893 and 1894, however, it revived strongly, and we have seen the evidences of greater activity and increased violence. But it may be said that Italian anarchists have attracted more attention outside of Italy than in Italy.

Italy has enacted a few laws against anarchists, which sometimes have been well, and often poorly, enforced. But the insufficiency of laws to repress anarchism is an evident fact. Anarchists are, for the most part, exalted spirits, who are prepared to sacrifice everything

to a false pride. Persecution, trials minutely and widely reported, executions graphically described by journals, inflame the mind and incite the wish for imitation. The warmest imaginations, the most unquiet spirits, far from being discouraged, delude themselves into the fatal error by thinking that the sacrifice of one alone is sufficient to change deeply a state of things which has its roots in the necessities of every society.

It is wrong to think that all anarchists are corrupt or perverse; they are for the most part ingenuous. Anarchist doctrine bases itself upon three fundamental principles: (1.) Men are naturally good; therefore, all law and all authority are pernicious, because absolute individual liberty is the condition of happiness. (2.) Men have a natural tendency to work, and when every bond is broken, they will work willingly, so that society as a whole will have greater wealth; some say, all will have in proportion to their wants. (3.) Religion and government are nothing but instruments of oppression. Humanity cannot be happy without abolishing both the one and the other.

These are three principles that have their modern origin in Rousseau and Fourier's works, and are such as to have seduced even some of the most cultivated minds. When they are accepted and proclaimed by persons devoid of culture, or having a very limited culture, they must, of necessity, lead to criminal consequences. Each individual, being freed from restraint of law, can act as he thinks best for the good of humanity. As soon as to render humanity happy it is supposed to be only necessary to open the eyes of the greatest number to the propaganda of fact, the wildest outrages are or seem to be a good. It happens that many delinquents call themselves anarchists, and thus find the means of satisfying their criminal instincts.

Italian anarchists are like those of other countries; there are those who are sincere in their delusion, and who act, even in the most violent actions, with ingenuousness; and there are others who are merely violent or perverse. There is, besides, a third type of anarchist, the anarchist of policy, who makes profit out of his associations or out of some individuals who profess the doctrine. Of such are those who are, in appearance, almost always, the greatest enthusiasts. But it is curious to remark that Italian anarchists are, always or almost, the most sincerely deluded.

Pini himself, who was condemned in Paris, and with whom the press of all the world occupied itself for so long, was a thief for the benefit of others. He had surrounded himself with thieves, who professed themselves anarchists, and who robbed for a social purpose; anticipating, that is to say, the expropriation of the bourgeois. The product of the thefts was divided among his fellow anarchists of all the world for the service of the propaganda. Then, while Pini's comrades made merry, he lived poorly, soberly, on thirty sous a day. The sums stolen were given by him to the others.

When Pini was arrested and tried, a great question arose among anarchists, whether or not one could rob to help the propaganda. And it must be said that the greater number of Italian anarchists answered the question in the negative.

After Cafiero's death, the two Italian anarchists of whom Europe has talked most, and who are the best known, are Merlino and Malatesta. But they are two very different types. Both are Neapolitan, with a quick and living spirit and an acute intelligence. Merlino is very learned, and is also a subtle reasoner; Malatesta is a man of action. It is strange that the Italian anarchists who are most conspicuous as representing ideas belong to the south. The people of that region often lack the artistic qualities to be found in other districts of Italy, but they are subtle reasoners. When they accept a general idea, they know how to extract all the conclusions.

The difference between Merlino and Malatesta — so far as ideas and plans are concerned — is clearly marked by the different attitudes of the two men toward the horrible crimes of Ravachol. Merlino declared to a Parisian journalist: "Ravachol is not one of us, and we repudiate him. His explosions lose their revolutionary character because of his person, an unworthy one to serve the cause of humanity." On the contrary, Malatesta avowed that in theory he admitted bombs, and that the employment of them in one way or another was only a question of tactics.

Merlino is an advocate, and also an easy speaker and an acute writer. At present, he is less than an anarchist — a very advanced socialist. His recent book upon "Socialism and Its Most Recent Manifestations" removed him decisively from the apostles of the propaganda of action. Merlino even acknowledges that it is an error to withhold