

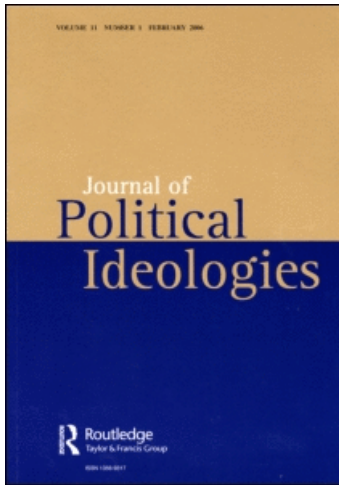
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Journal of Political Ideologies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713435568>

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Online Publication Date: 01 June 2007

To cite this Article Levy, Carl(2007)'Soversivismo': The radical political culture of otherness in Liberal Italy',Journal of Political Ideologies,12:2,147 — 161

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13569310701284993

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569310701284993>

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‘*Sovversivismo*’: The radical political culture of otherness in Liberal Italy

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ABSTRACT *This article examines the concept of sovversivismo (‘subversiveness’) and the sovversivo (subversive) in Liberal Italy. The term could mean spontaneous unfocussed rebellion and a general mood against the State and the ruling class. 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. 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 popular and working-class subversives from its geographical heartland in order to outflank the leadership of the PSI. The article discusses the analyses of sovversivo/sovversivismo by Antonio Gramsci and Errico Malatesta, but sovversivismo was also employed by the polite classes in 1914–1915 during the interventionist crisis and used to overwhelm the Liberal State between 1919 and 1926.*

Introduction¹

More than 20 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.² 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 1919–1945.³ In previous work I shifted the discussion to antebellum Liberal Italy.⁴ The term ‘*sovversivo*’ was adopted by the Left as a badge of honor, since

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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 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 Milan and elsewhere.⁵ 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.⁶ Many anarchist 'subversives' (such as Errico Malatesta) were inherently suspicious of his operation.

In this article I will examine how the anarchists and syndicalists adopted the very title given to them by the police and criminologists. The term '*sovversivismo*' 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 1922.⁷

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 article I will not discuss the clerical and Catholic opponents of the Liberal settlement.⁸ 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 Tuscany.⁹ Orientalist discourse used to address the Southern Question is closely related to the theme of this article.¹⁰ 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 a shared cultural formation and historical memory with the secular middle classes. In other words, I shall investigate the *fratelli-nemici* of Liberal Italy's positivist, anti-clerical and largely post Garibaldinian or Mazzinian political elite.¹¹ I have three different approaches to the terms *sovversivo/sovversivismo*: the historical/sociological, as a trope in political discussion and rhetoric and as a way of life or identity for a political sub-culture. These three approaches are by no means discrete and should be understood as heuristic devices. In the *Prison Notebooks* Antonio Gramsci reflected on the sociological and historical meanings of *sovversivo* and *sovversivismo*.

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Gramsci and the subversive

It is always difficult to disentangle the political message from Gramscian social scientific investigation in the *Prison Notebooks*. Indeed, the foundations of much of his more detached Notes can be located in his previous heavily politicized journalism.¹² Quite naturally, Gramsci's journalism was embedded in the academic training he received at the University of Turin: so it 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 spectrum. Gramsci's take on the subject is unique merely because he approaches it from his unusual mixture of Crocean, Gentilean and Sorelian values. His was an odd form of socialism in the Italian context that criticized the positivism of his predecessors and preached a form of organized 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 1916–1920.¹³ The *Prison Notebooks* contain approaches, indeed sometimes as startling photographic reproductions of arguments he penned nearly 20 years earlier, which seek to differentiate his libertarian Marxist/Gentilean/Sorelian communism of workers councils from the 'subversive' variety of libertarian socialism, anarchism.

'The purely Italian concept of the "subversive"', Gramsci writes in the *Prison Notebooks*, 'can be explained as followed: a negative rather than a positive class position—the people is aware that it has enemies, but only identifies them empirically as the so-called *signori*'.¹⁴ For Gramsci, *sovversivismo* was the product of the bastard modernity that the unified Italian State brought forth.¹⁵ The narrowness of the Italian ruling class, the lack of national-popular legitimacy, the persistence of large groups of '*morti di fame*' 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 predominant 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 him, 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'.¹⁶ Thus, much of the Left in particular, and Italian politics in general, 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 others on the Left, an incorrect reading and

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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 had been a Mussolinian and his gaoler had been the lodestone of Gramscian politics until interventionism (support for Italy's entry into the First World War) 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's 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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 pericolose*: the Turinese *barabba* or the Milanese *folla*—the subversive crowd.²⁰ 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 mobilization. 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

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syndicalism, would reinvigorate the Italian political class and undermine crony capitalism. In a similar fashion the Nationalists and syndicalist nationalists of the 1910s wanted to channel the subversive energies of the working classes into building an imperialist proletarian Italy.²¹

The educated elite attracted to syndicalism and socialism during the Giolittian era should therefore be situated in the pedagogic, modernizing 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.²² The spectre of *sovversivismo* had to be banished from Italy and this politics of pedagogy and modernization was not limited to the socialists. Thus, the statesman Francesco Crispi, the nemesis of the socialist and anarchist Left in the 1890s, pursued a policy of Jacobin reforms that combined the modernization of the political structures of Italy, the suppression of *sovversivismo* and a course of moral and national education for the Italians.²³

Needless to say, Gramsci endlessly criticized the first premises of ante-bellum progressive and leftist political culture. Thus, the numerous newspaper articles and asides in the *Prison Notebooks* referring to the 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 organizations 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*).²⁴ 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 criticized by Gramsci for failing to recognize 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'.²⁵ In this formulation, therefore, *senso comune* was the childlike philosophy of the nomadic leadership of the subversive maximalist socialists, the anarchists, and the syndicalists. Modernizing, truly scientific socialists were imbued with *senso buono*, the sure-fire antidote to the posturing of the *sovversivi*.

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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.²⁶ Pietro Gori was a criminologist, positivist and star defence lawyer for the anarchist movement in the 1890s and 1900s, and he also 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. But in this case Gori's 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, comrades. Gori was also Italian anarchism's star cultural organizer 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*).²⁷

If Gori, like Peter Kropotkin, identified anarchism with the positivist sciences, the leading Italian anarchist of the era, Errico Malatesta, was deeply suspicious of scientism and positivism and posited a relativist, voluntarist and open-ended anarchism.²⁸ Malatestan anarchism 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 tellingly named the newspapers he edited *Cronaca Sovversiva*.²⁹ He fought against the mass terrorism of the 1890s with great courage. The criminalization of anarchism in Italy in the late 19th century caused terrorists and the 'illegalists' to draw one conclusion: revolutions were made by criminals (*malfattori*, malefactors) or *spostati* (misfits or drop-outs). The Rome Court of Cassation ruled in 1880 that a group of five or more Internationalists was a criminal gang of the underclass:

Do peddlers of matches, shoemakers, tailors, blacksmiths, delicatessen sellers, servants of tobacco merchants, and others of this kind only discuss social theories at their meetings? Can they be confused with Saint Simon, Fourier, Owen, Reibaud, and other noted socialists? As it is not possible that such people at their meetings, according to the expression used by the minister of justice to the Chamber of Deputies, 'serenely debate like the academicians of Socrates and Plato under the colonnades of Athens or the academicians of Brunetto Latini', one must of necessity believe, and the facts prove it, that *internationalism* is only a mask under which the common malefactor hides.³⁰

The term *spostato* had originally been associated with the young middle-class activists who had sacrificed their creature comforts for the cause (like Malatesta,

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who left medical school in Naples in narodnik fashion, to train as an electrician). But other middle class *spostati* embraced the criminal subversive definition handed down by the Rome Court of Cassation. Thus, Malatesta's former comrade Emilio Covelli (one of the first Italians acquainted with Marx's work), published a pamphlet in 1880 aptly entitled *I Malfattori*. In it he argued that:

The declassed, the *dangerous classes*, the *putrid precipitate* of the other social classes, the malefactors, who for the individual or social reasons fight and cannot but fight for the moral revolution, are the last word of the social revolution [they] are human liberty developing according to the necessity of its own nature.³¹

Later at a congress of anarchists and social revolutionaries held in London Covelli added that 'the revolution is the continuous action of exciting and perpetuating every kind of crime against public order'.³² But in response Malatesta and his school of anarchism denounced this perversion,³³ what has been termed *illegalismo programmatico*. Malatesta always claimed that anarchism would promote order and reduce crime. He recalled at his 1921 trial how crime had dropped in the city of Ancona once his group had established a strong presence during 1897–1898, how the police even complained that the anarchists were undermining their job and threatening their livelihoods and how the local police commissar had to admit that Malatesta and his followers had a moralizing effect on the Anconan underworld!³⁴ In turn Malatesta and like-minded anarchists were denounced as dictators, police stooges and bourgeois sell-outs by anarchist 'subversives' who embraced their criminalization.³⁵

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 or June 1920, because at the end of the day it left the crowd more impoverished. A fellow anarchist, the brilliant intellectual Camillo Berneri, echoed Malatesta's anti-subversive anarchism. The cost of living riots of May and June 1919 which saw the collapse of authority in many Italian towns and cities and the temporary emergence of dual power exercised by the Chambers of Labour may have been less revolutionary than was thought. The leaders of the workers' movement allowed the crowd to attack the small shopkeepers while the large shops were guarded by the police. The leaders allowed their followers to sack the small shops. And 'the consequences were: a part of the working masses believed that the revolution was nothing more than looting on a vast scale, large shopkeepers thought of revenge and the small shopkeepers equated "Bolshevism" with looting'.³⁶

During the occupation of the factories in 1920 Malatesta 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 a subversive act of class revenge. Burning crops in the fields would only starve the poorest.³⁷ 'It's your property', Malatesta told the readers of *Umanità Nova*,

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on 10 June 1920. 'We would understand', he reasoned, 'these desperate acts in an epoch in which the labourers hadn't any hope of their imminent liberation, when the slave, having no way to free himself, wants to taste a moment of bitter revenge dragging himself and his master to their deaths'. But, 'today the labourers are on the verge of becoming the masters of all they have produced'.³⁸ Helots and slaves or subversives did not make revolutions; conscious revolutionaries did. A Turinese follower of Malatesta had enunciated this position a few years earlier. 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 criticized this approach. But he answered without hesitation: 'I said to make anarchists not subversives'.³⁹

Malatesta denounced openly the widespread hero worship that greeted his return to Italy during the *biennio rosso* (1919–1920).⁴⁰ 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 20th century Italian anarchists relied rather more heavily upon the informal prestige of leaders to keep the sinews of their organizations 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 organizations of the Risorgimento. Anarchism relied on its more prominent leaders to activate and energize its weakly structured organizations 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 above their weight, even the socialists placed a great deal of emphasis on the part played by charismatic speakers and socialist notables. This was analyzed in depth by Robert Michels before 1915, and this discussion of Italian socialist hero worship is juxtaposed by Gramsci's in his general discussions of *sovversivismo*.⁴¹ Indeed, Gramsci claimed that the charisma of this socialist leadership before 1914 fed off the primitive and subversive stage of socialism.⁴² This did not, however, mean that for Gramsci, all charismatic politics were bad, primitive or subversive. In 1919–1920, 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 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.⁴³ During the *Biennio Rosso* (1919–1920) Gramsci and his followers equated Malatesta with *sovversivismo*, albeit, as we have seen, he had criticized anarchists for embracing the subversive and the criminal. Thus, Alfonso Leonetti, a faithful follower of Gramsci, writes this of Malatesta in 1920:

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Errico Malatesta arouses pity because of his boundless childishness. He has a revolutionary conception that must be called Masonic and populist. He confuses a great industrial city, which lives and can only live through advanced relations that connect one factory to another and production to the banks, with a Southern encampment of poor peasants for whom to expropriate means only to invade a large estate. He has a messianic faith in the elemental power of the people, indeed in the common people. And who are 'the people'? One hundred loudmouths who proclaim convinced and satisfied: 'We are the people'.⁴⁴

However, Malatesta rejected the adulation that 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.⁴⁵

Malatesta would have none of it. In fact he 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 a 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 he excelled in Socratic dialogue with the audience, curiously similar to Gramsci's known public speaking method. Thus, he was cast against type: he was the non-subversive leader of the anarchists and he publicly criticized the language of *sovversivismo*. The popular hunt for a savior 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'.⁴⁶ And he had been suspicious of Benito Mussolini before the First World War precisely because of this type of behaviour.

Conclusion: The reversible populism of subversivism⁴⁷

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 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

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of stability and law and order. Individuals with rather complicated, bohemian and indeed *louche* life styles were hailed as the defenders of bourgeois, monarchical and eventually at least for Mussolini, Catholic values. Their mass base, Gramsci argued in an ideologically loaded manner, is found amongst the white collar classes of the city, especially the *morti di fame* who stream in from the countryside in search of modest clerical positions. He continues:

The 'subversivism' of these strata has two faces, one turned to the left and one turned to the right, but the left face is simply a means of blackmail; and at the decisive moments always moves to the right, and their 'desperate courage' always prefers to have the *carabinieri* on their side.⁴⁸

The reversibility of the subversive was also nourished by the populist and intellectual bohemia of urban Italy of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴⁹ Anarchism and syndicalism were 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 *spostato* was translated from meaning subversive misfit to meaning a new type of socialist who used the social sciences to challenge the verities of the humanist political elite in charge of Liberal Italy.⁵⁰

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 funeral procession in the streets of ante-bellum Milan.⁵¹ 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 the exemplar of the 'warrior anarchist' Amilcare Cipriani, a Romagnole closely associated with the anarchists from the late 1870s to 1900s, whose politics defy exact definition.⁵² However, through his spectacular deeds he personified the anti-dynastic 'subversive' during the last decades of the 19th 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 1871 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 earlier murky murders, then released after a campaign by the entire subversive left in 1888. In the 1880s and 1890s he worked with Malatesta

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to organize 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 revolutionary vagabond, the gaol-bird and the people's hero, who appealed to middle-class anti-clericals and republicans and working-class anarchists. He was the subject of a popularity cult. Cipriani foreshadowed the rhetoric and actions of the left-wing interventionists who would split the subversives in 1914–1915. It is not surprising that one of his strongholds was Forlì, near 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 mobilized outside the party proper. He flirted with the anarchists (or a certain type of individualist/Stirnerite anarchist), the republicans and the *Unione Sindacale*.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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 organizers, and the individualist anarchists. Mussolini was hailed as the *Duce* of a new socialism that emphasized 'faith, sacrifice and heroism'.⁵⁵ He was attracted to the individualist anarchism of the Italian Stirnerites and an avid reader of *Le Bon*. One of his keenest supporters Paolo Valera—the populist Milanese journalist—was editor of the suitably entitled *La Folla (The Crowd)*. 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.⁵⁶ 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 the 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 irregular subversives who were 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 sides 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.⁵⁷ 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* (The Red Biennium, 1919–1920) and the *Biennio Nero*

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(The Black (Fascist) Biennium, 1921–1922). Thus, the strange alliance for a March on Rome in early 1920 included D'Annunzio's followers at Fiume,⁵⁸ the anarchists, the USI, the railway workers, the Mazzinian seafarers leader Giulietti⁵⁹ and maximalist socialists, such as Nicola Bombacci,⁶⁰ Mussolini's fellow Romagnole. Fiume itself is a fascinating laboratory of reversible subversive politics where a bohemian but nationalist sub-culture flirted with aspects of the free-lance far left (from anti-imperialism linked to the Comintern to Dada).⁶¹ Other cases were the *Arditi del Popolo* (an anti-fascist militia which derived much of its leadership from the ur-fascist veterans' milieu of Italy's elite commando units of the First World War) and Garibaldian conspiracies of the period 1921–1925.⁶²

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 from 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, swayed by such rhetoric and Malatesta's defence lawyer (the old Internationalist Francesco Saverio Merlino) did not even have to employ this trope to get his client acquitted almost 50 years later in a Milanese courtroom in 1921, because as the trial collapsed the *prosecutor* already knew his lines: he asked for an acquittal paying homage to the 'sublime madness' of the defendants. He argued 'that without the provocation of advanced ideas, human generations would be enslaved to their prejudices and ignorance'.⁶³ So the representative of law and order was not immune to the culture which Malatesta had embodied since the death of Mazzini. The volunteers of the Fascist militias *and* the *Arditi del Popolo* also 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.⁶⁴ In certain areas the differences spun on a coin. Where Republicans could form alliances with the socialists and anarchists, such as in Parma, young veterans mounted a defence against Fascist squads.⁶⁵

In the next generation Carlo Rosselli's *Giustizia e Libertà* engaged in this dialectic of patriotism and subversion.⁶⁶ Gramsci, Malatesta and Rosselli analyzed and lived in close proximity to the subversive tradition. 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.⁶⁷

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Michael Freeden and the two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and the hospitality of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, where as a Member (2006–2007) I finished the final version of this paper.

Notes and References

1. Earlier versions of this paper were given at 'Italians and their Others: Representations, Identities and Exchanges at Home and Abroad', Australasian Centre for Italian Studies (ACIS), Second Biennial Conference, The University of Western Australia, Perth, 3–5 July 2003 and for the Specialist Group for the Study of Anarchism, 56th Political Studies Association Annual Conference, University of Reading, 3–6 April 2006.
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