

Comeback: Will the Twenty-First be Mazzini's Century?

By

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It is ironic that Giuseppe Mazzini, one of the great harbingers of modernity, should be shunted aside and ignored in his native land. But that is exactly what happened to the great nineteenth century thinker in Italy. His disputes with Karl Marx and the subsequent triumph of Marxism in Italy caused him to be the victim of historical, and historiographical, assassination. Italian Marxists set the tone in labeling him a superficial thinker, or worse, ignoring him. Marxism has been frequently compared to a religion and if Roland Sarti's characterization of Mazzini's story as "a life for the religion of politics" is accurate, then we might have a basis for understanding Mazzini's historical defeat. While Mazzini's "religion of politics" may be seen as being imbued with fervor, committed to humanitarianism and inspired by tolerance, Marxism may be compared to fundamentalism where fanaticism, schism, and intolerance reigned. In the short run, the latter usually defeats the former—but not in the long run.

History: A Novel

The origins of the dispute between Mazzini and Marxism goes back before Marx to Mazzini's dispute with Filippo Buonarroti (whose techniques resembled Marx's) over how Italy should be unified. Buonarroti, influenced by the French Jacobin experience, argued that the 1790s demonstrated that revolutions generate class warfare, and that the French Revolution of 1830 confirmed this principle. Revolutions therefore were necessarily social revolutions and the poor must organize themselves militarily to fight in

them. The leadership of these revolutions conceived as class warfare consequently devolved to an elite, a concept that introduced a dictatorial principle into class action. Buonarroti applied the same concept to the international plane, arguing that the more ideologically advanced countries must lead the less advanced. Buonarroti assigned the role of international revolutionary leader to France, and later Marxists assigned the same role to the Soviet Union.

Mazzini's disagreements with Buonarroti emerged clearly on considerations having to do with the purely military plane, but the disparity had a philosophical basis. Though he acknowledged that insurrections had to be prepared in secret by a few leaders, to avoid dictatorship and terror, Mazzini emphasized the people's role, unlike Buonarroti and later Lenin. Do not, he wrote, "condemn the yearning masses to inertia; do not delude yourselves into thinking that you operate for them; do not entrust to only one class the great work of national regeneration." This idea led to Mazzini's espousing the idea of a revolutionary war of the people by means of bands, a technique he picked up from Carlo Bianco, who had fought in Spain. Although it may have failed at the time, the war by bands resembled modern "wars of national liberation."

Mazzini's challenge to Buonarroti—and later to Marx—fed the charge of leftist commentators that he neglected the "social question." This accusation, however, was superficial and a diversion because Mazzini aimed to exorcise the specter that the elitism of the leaders, even if leftist, inexorably produced a dictatorship against the workers. In contrast to Buonarroti's (and later Marx's and Lenin's) belief, the people as a whole, not one class, must be associated in a pact that promises equality of conditions and progressive development if popular revolutions were to avoid degenerating into dictatorships. In his arguments against one class as the repository of revolution, Mazzini

insisted on a republic as the only form of government within whose context the people could implement a truly democratic society while avoiding the transformation of national revolutions into civil wars among different classes.

In seeking to avoid this development, Mazzini merged the idea of “nation” and “people.” In 1832, he defined “nation” as “the universality of citizens speaking the same tongue, enjoying equality of civil and patriotic rights, and associated in the common endeavor of developing and perfecting the social right forces and activities of those same citizens.” According to Mazzini, equal rights, realized through universal suffrage and the development of “social forces” that liberate labor, “permit people to become the People.” From the nation-people emerges Mazzini’s idea of a democratic popular nation. In exile, particularly in London, Mazzini internationalized his ideas. In fact, unlike Marx, he advocated associations of nations, not an alliance among the working classes of different countries. He concretized his ideas by creating associations in exile. He founded Young Italy, Young Europe, Young America, and similar organizations, and, to appeal to workers, the Union of Italian workers and a newspaper, the Apostolato Popolare. This activity gave him more practical experience and placed a greater emphasis on social problems.

Mazzini’s founding of the Union of Italian Workers stimulated him to highlight workers’ issues in a direction that can be described as social democratic. His efforts crucially affected the development of mutual-aid societies and the progress of social legislation. Mazzini threw himself into the various debates then occurring on the future of European society, the issue of repressed nationalities, and on the nature of democracy. In his Mazzini Against Marx: Thoughts Upon Democracy in Europe, Salvo Mastellone has rediscovered for us this “European” Mazzini who participated in the lively

intellectual debates of the period, including the one with Marx. Mastellone emphasized a series of fundamental articles, the “Thoughts Upon Democracy,” published in the British weekly The People’s Journal between August 1846 and April 1847.

In these essays, Mazzini argued that the increasingly insistent demand of the masses to participate in governments and to remove control of the decisionmaking apparatus from the hands of the privileged minority could be defined as the democratic tendency of the times. No longer a utopia or a dream of political writers, this tendency toward equality had become a powerful reality in all Europe. Mazzini defined democracy not as the liberty of all “but as a government freely consented to by all.” The people did not wish that “others” guide them, but that government be in the hands of the best individuals of wisdom and virtue, as determined by the people. These considerations showed up the flaws of Communist ideas. “Clearly,” he wrote, “a system of absolute equality in the distribution of products and labor is unjust, practically impossible, and ultimately leads to the evil which we wish to eradicate. It negates all value to talent, virtue, energy, sacrifice, and to the importance and quality of work.” In a prescient prediction, he added: “With Communism you must have an arbitrary domination of chiefs having the entire disposition of the common property; masters of the mind by an exclusive education; of the body by the power of deciding upon work, the capacity, the wants of each.”

According to Mazzini, with a Communist regime instead of the government of the proletariat the result would be the dictatorship of the Communist political class. This result would be embodied in what Mazzini viewed as the Communist republic—authoritarian, based on the concept of absolute equality. Tyrannical tendencies that produced the violation of individual right characterized this republic. Most interested in

the “needs” of the people, the Communist republic addressed the economic side of life, imposed “duties” on its citizens, and ended up with a government that owned and possessed everything and distributed “everything which existed—land, capital, means of work, products, with every individual forced to work for a certain number of hours and receiving in return what his individual needs demand.” To find a better description of Soviet-style communism would be nearly impossible.

Believing it essential to refute Mazzini’s criticisms, the German Communist League and the English Fraternal Democrats, invited Marx to London and he responded in the second section of his Manifesto.

It is easy to understand why Mazzini was anathema to the Marxists if we describe the type of republic he advocated. Mazzini wanted a national democratic republic based on representative democracy, led by persons responsive to the rights and duties of citizens elected by the people, and “the association of labor with intellect and capital.” This republic must assure the right to vote and ensure the individual’s participation in politics. Mazzini’s republic would abolish all kinds of aristocracy and privilege and encourage association as an antidote to bourgeois individualism. It would modify existing society not by destroying the principle of authority but by substituting the authority that flows from the consensus of the majority for authority born of despotism.

Mazzini and the American World

In addition to the two types of republics described above, Mazzini identified a third one. This was the American federative republic, based on “bourgeois individualism,” exclusively political, ruled according to majoritarian principles, and interested only in defending the rights of the individual. Compared to Mazzini’s ideal,

this republic obviously came up short because of its downgrading of associative principles. Clearly, however, Mazzini's judgment of the American republic was less harsh than his view of the Communist one. He made criticisms, but despite them Mazzini influenced American intellectuals and believed that he could draw on the strength of both Americans and Italians who had settled in the country to advance his ideas in Europe. In the process, his general philosophy became known to an American intellectual elite.

Relations between Italy and the United States began early and concentrated on the US as a "myth" of radical democracy. Roland Sarti's forthcoming article for the Feltrinelli Annali, "La democrazia radicale: uno sguardo tra Stati Uniti e Italia," clearly describes the various stages through which this relationship passed. As far as Mazzini was concerned, his major criticism—besides slavery which ended after the Civil War—was the American emphasis on individual rights above the welfare of the group. In practice, Mazzini saw the US as potentially helpful in the struggle for Italian liberty. He worked hard to raise funds both by approaching Americans in a position to help and by extending the organizations he had founded in Europe to the United States.

The first goal clearly failed, despite a promising start; however, basing himself on Italian exiles, he had more success in the second aim. On June 6, 1841 his friend Felice Foresti, an Italian exile, established the Central Congregation for the twenty-five American states in New York City. Local congregations were established, in New York, Boston, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Louisville (Kentucky) and Cincinnati (Ohio). According to Foresti, through these congregations "the voice of Young Italy can reach the most remote sections of the Federation." The Boston, New York, New Orleans, and Louisville chapters were particularly active. Even though Foresti cited the poverty means

and the low numbers of the American congregations, Mazzini exalted their zeal and fervor. Their activities brought Mazzini and the Italian cause to the attention of American Liberals and of their most important publications, including The Democratic Review, the Sun, and the Evening Post. In an October 22, 1841 letter to his mother, Mazzini happily reported: “A monthly review of New York, America, entitled The Democratic Review, contains, in its September issue, a long article on the Apostolato Popolare and our association, full of praise and declarations of sympathy on the part of the American democracy.” The article was indeed flattering and accurate.

Besides the penetration of American public opinion, another activity of the American congregations that Mazzini welcomed was the establishment of schools for poor Italian children in Boston and New York (1842), patterned on the school Mazzini himself had established in London in 1841. Mazzini consistently emphasized education as essential for the workers to improve their lot and to prepare them for life as citizens—much like the later Italian Socialists of the Turati School.

After 1842, Mazzini’s name and thought gained important authority among native Americans, although sometimes in strange ways. Through his American organizations, Mazzini made contact with Protestant groups who shared his own hostility to the Papacy. Mazzini hoped through them to raise funds for his schools and for the activities of Young Italy in the Papal States. What motivated the American Protestants, however, was the influx of Catholic immigrants into the United States and their apprehension that the Pope would gain more power in the country through them. They hoped to stop the Pope’s “infiltration” of American politics by allying with this sworn enemy of the Papacy. Mazzini seems not to have given much thought to this aspect of the problem, although there is scant evidence that the groups with which he cooperated were linked with the

most repulsive aspects of the Nativist politics of the era. Mazzini was shrewd enough to understand that an open alliance with Protestant groups to overthrow the Papacy might damage his cause in Italy, and therefore the cooperation remained secret.

December 12, 1842 witnessed the foundation of the “American Philo-Italian Society,” which counted Samuel F.B. Morse (inventor of the telegraph) among its founders, an event that the New York Observer reported on in its January 21, 1843 issue. This society concluded an agreement with Young Italy in America. On May 12, 1843, the organization changed its name to “The Christian Alliance” with the avowed aim of promoting “religious freedom” and “to diffuse useful and religious knowledge among the natives of Italy and other papal countries.” The Christian Alliance took advantage of the connection with Mazzini to spread propaganda, books advocating their point of view, and Bibles in the Papal State, so much as to warrant an encyclical of condemnation by Pope Gregory XVI on May 8, 1844. Collaboration continued after this time, but Mazzini was disappointed with the lack of material aid, despite the extensive contacts made during the Roman Republic and the deal between him and the Protestants ended. In 1849, the Christian Alliance merged with another Protestant Association to form the “American and Foreign Christian Union,” which, on May 12, 1850 declared that while it sympathized with Italian patriots, intended to limit its action to “a simple propagandist operation.”

This development is hardly surprising, given that conservative American Protestants were wary of connections with “red” republicans of the Mazzini stripe. Despite the end of the connection between the Mazzini and the Protestant associations, given the orientation of American intellectuals and their intimate connection with Protestantism, the conjunction of Mazzini and these groups made a lasting mark in

American society. Among his friends, Mazzini counted the preacher Henry Edward Beecher and Calvin Ellis Stowe, husband of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin. (Abraham Lincoln once introduced her as the lady who began the Civil War.) Mazzini's opposition to slavery made him friendly with abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison and an admirer of John Brown, who seems to have adopted the insurrectionary tactic of "war by means of bands" suggested by Mazzini and Carlo Bianco.

These links spilled had reciprocal influences on policy and tactics. Jessie White Mario, who made a successful lecture tour of the United States, contended that the "Boston Tea Party" inspired the tobacco boycott in Milan that contributed to the 1848 revolution in that city. During the same revolutionary period, when the Pope fled Rome and a republic was set up under the guidance of Mazzini, American officials in Rome advocated American recognition of the Roman Republic. The American government was understandably loath to do so, but American public opinion encouraged it to reverse its policy. Unfortunately, the French overthrew the Roman Republic before recognition could be accorded.

These incidents illustrate the reciprocal influence between Mazzinian thought and the American intellectual elite. Among the most famous of American intellectuals connected with Mazzini was the a leader of the influential Transcendentalist movement, Margaret Fuller, author of a book that influence the founding of the women's movement in the US, Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1845). According to Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady in their book on the history of American women (1881) Fuller "possessed more influence on the thought of American women than any woman previous to her time." Born into a well-connected family in the Boston suburb of Canton,

Massachusetts, Fuller hobnobbed with the Emersons and the Alcotts, major American writers and Transcendentalists. Fuller traveled to Europe and Italy. She met Mazzini in London and fell under his spell. She supported the 1848 revolutions in Italy, which she believed stood for freedom and human rights. She sent eyewitness reports from the Eternal City to the New York Tribune. While in Rome, she met and married a young Italian nobleman, Giovanni Angelo Ossoli, with whom she had a son. When war broke out, she served as a hospital volunteer and fled to Florence when Rome fell. There the young couple joined the expatriate community which included the Brownings. Margaret Fuller worked on a history of the Italian revolution. However, on her return voyage, her ship floundered in a storm within sight of New York and the entire family was lost.

Ralph Waldo Emerson encouraged Henry Thoreau to search the wreckage, but no trace of the bodies or the personal effect, including the manuscript on the Italian revolution, was ever discovered.

The involvement of the intellectual elite of the United States with Mazzini and the Italian revolution cemented the cultural relationship between the two countries, and this affected practical developments. During Garibaldi's expedition to Sicily, the Americans procured ships to bring reinforcements to him. The source of the funds is still obscure and the supposed involvement of the Freemasons—if such there was—is still dispute. Interestingly, the American government was the first to recognize the government of the Kingdom of Italy, proof of the penetration which Mazzini's thought had made in the United States.

Mazzini's Century?

In analyzing the American federation and the type of republic advocated by Marxists, Mazzini demonstrated an unmatched power of political analysis. His predictions about the course of a republic founded on Marxist principles have been borne out, and, although Marxist intellectuals succeeded in dimming his star in the twentieth century, their own ideas have proven fallacious on both the national and international planes. The theoretician of collaboration among nations and of an alliance among peoples, Mazzini fought throughout his life for the political independence of nations. If Mazzini may be credited with awakening national sentiments in Italy and elsewhere, he can in no way be considered a theoretician of twentieth-century nationalism. For Mazzini, nation was intimately linked with humanity; one nation could not oppress another because the improvement of humanity was his final goal. Thus, he correctly predicted the downfall of multinational empires—the Austrian, the Russian, and the Turkish. As the champion of the nation, Mazzini opposed any nationalism that advocated hegemony and racial superiority. Mazzini defended “nationality,” but not “nationalism,” which he viewed as “jealous” and “hostile.” He also condemned imperialism, which he defined as the expansion of a state limited only by its own force. Against a “narrow nationalism” he wrote: “re-attach the nations to the laws of progress, to humanity, to God.” He added, “I abhor the usurping and monopolizing nation, conceiving its own grandeur and force only in the inferiority and in the poverty of others; but who would not welcome with enthusiasm and love that people which, understanding its mission in the world, should found its security upon the progress of all surrounding it, and should be ready to sustain against the oppressor the course of right and eternal justice, violated in the oppressed?”

Mazzini thus appears as the implacable opponent of oppression, whether exercised by nation or class and out of sympathy with major twentieth century developments such as communism and fascism. By adopting modern methods for national liberation while avoiding the trap of class warfare Mazzini demonstrated himself a modern thinker. As he wrote in 1846, “The union of the democratic principle with representative government is an entirely modern fact.”

In the post-Cold War world of the twenty-first century Mazzini has a lot to say both to emerging nationalities and to established powers, unlike Marx, the erstwhile victory of the nineteenth century debate on political organization. Although he appeared a failure in his recipe for Italian unification, a failure in reaching a mass public, a failure in his fight against Marxism, Mazzini has made a comeback, as he has done many times in the past. He did so in the organization Italian exiles in the United States created to encourage the establishment of a republic in Italy—aptly called the “Mazzini Society”; he did so in the principles that fostered the foundation of the Italian republic; he did so in the associative principles that motivated Western Europe after World War II; he did so in the principles that inspire the European Union; he does so in the inspiration of international organizations.

The relationship of Mazzinian thought with the United States is more complex. Clearly, he appealed to an elite in that country, and he continues to do so even if it might be unaware of his influence. In his visit to the Mazzini monument in Genoa on January 5, 1919, President Woodrow Wilson, founder of the League of Nations, informed the Mayor:

On the other side of the water we have studied the life of Mazzini with almost as much pride as if we shared in the glory of his history, and I am very glad to acknowledge that his spirit has been handed down to us of a later generation on both sides of the water. It is delightful to me to feel that I am taking some

small part in accomplishing the realization of the ideals to which his life and thought were devoted. It is with a spirit of veneration, Sir, and with a spirit I hope of emulation, that I stand in the presence of this monument and bring my greetings and the greetings of America with our homage to the great Mazzini.

Yet, as we know, the American public abandoned Wilson precisely on the issue of the League of Nations, and there is much resistance in the US to the United Nations. Yet the United States intervened in two European wars in the name of democracy and this principle has been cited again and again by the Bush administration to justify its policies. Before we dismiss this concept out of hand, most Americans applaud the principle of spreading democracy while quarrelling with the means, for the “Neocons” in the American administration appear genuinely moved by the concept. Perhaps Mazzini’s thought—having become, without due recognition, the common heritage not only of Europe but also of the United States—has some influence in the general push for the extension of democracy to other parts of the world. After all, Mazzini himself, despite his reservations about the American republic, thought that it would teach the world “the practical application of the republican form of government.” Nor is it certain that the US in the long run will continue the methods of fostering democracy implemented by the Bush administration, indeed, it seems improbable. The spread of democracy in the Mazzinian sense will not be a perfect or a quick development. It will probably undergo an unpredictable evolution, but one thing seems evident: Marx’s moment having passed, Mazzini’s has arrived.