

"Popular Discontent and the Rise of Socialism"

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In one of his treks through Milan soon after unification, Giuseppe Garibaldi--champion of Italian independence and hero of liberty in two worlds--paused in Piazza del Duomo, strolled over to a young child held up by his father and kissed the boy on the cheek. This gesture seemingly beloved of politicians everywhere in this particular case may serve as an apt symbol.

Garibaldi represented the left, the once-powerful faction with a strong social conscience which had lost out to the moderate Piedmontese monarchist liberals in the struggle for unification. Despite the powerful showing and the very modern revolutionary ideology of the Mazzini group in 1848, and Garibaldi's demonstration in 1860 that such ideas and ideals indeed stood a chance of success, European diplomacy and conservative Italian social forces defanged Risorgimento radicalism.

In the process, the social revolution which the left considered necessary to remake Italy went by the boards. This result, however, hardly heralded the end of social agitation, always ready to boil over in the newly formed Italy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a military man explained it to the Prince, the main character in Giuseppe di Lampedusa's novel The Leopard: "For the moment, owing partly to your humble servant, no one mentions red shirts any more; but

they'll be back again. When they've vanished, others of different colors will come; and then red ones again."

The red shirts can be considered to have made their first comeback in the guise of the child Garibaldi kissed in Piazza del Duomo. His name was Filippo Turati, founder of the Italian Socialist party.

Although Garibaldi declared himself a Socialist in 1871, the color red did not immediately reappear in the form of Marxian socialism. The riots and "banditismo" which shook the Italian state after unification were at first unfocused. Later the First International spread its influence into the country. With the split between Marx and Bakunin, the Italians selected the anarchist leader. With its emphasis on rapid achievement of the millennium by means of concentrated violent action to spark the revolution, anarchism resembled the Mazzinian ideology of 1848. Ironically, Anarchist method seemed to draw vitality from a revolutionary Risorgimento strain of thought whose leader, Giuseppe Mazzini, hated socialism and which had already failed. In the 1870s, the anarchists attempted two revolutions, both easily suppressed.

The reason? In general, the same one which explains the triumph of Marxism over Bakuninism. Despite the unrest boiling underneath the surface, romantic revolution seemed to have had its day. Popular support and modern forms of organization requiring slow, patient work were a prerequisite if the masses wished to have a chance at achieving power.

After 1877, the failure of anarchism became clear even to its leaders. In August 1879, its most prominent Italian head, Andrea Costa, publicly sang the movement's de profundis. Socialists should enter Parliament, he explained in a famous letter from his jail cell to his comrades; they should infiltrate, undermine, and destroy existing political institutions by exploiting the existing system.

Not surprisingly, it was only a matter of time before others argued for capturing the political system in order to improve social conditions. The beginning of industrial development and a new law granting the right to vote to literate males shifted the center of gravity of the movement influenced by socialist ideals. From the small-artisan Romagna, anarchist homeland, the leadership passed to the fledgling proletariat of industrializing Milan. In the early years of the Italian Socialist movement, the southern peasantry had a slight role, although the peasants of the North participated fully and reaped the benefits of political action.

Coinciding with the new electoral law, Milanese workers in 1882 formed the Partito Operaio Italiano, or POI, the direct ancestor of the Socialist party. Its members pronounced themselves as "the sons of the working class...which is always derided, insulted, oppressed, and kept in ignorance." Party leaders had little use for the ideological "quibbling" of intellectuals and distrusted their middle class origins. Consequently, such intellectuals found themselves excluded from

the workers' party, which concentrated on the improvement of working conditions.

Whatever merits the workers' view of intellectuals had, this policy proved to be mistaken. Along with a regional party established by Costa, the POI suffered from an unclear or confused program and unsettled tactics. As a result, the POI could not withstand attacks from radical democrats, who resented the party's challenge to their influence over the lower class, and the government, which viewed the organization as subversive. Furthermore, the POI failed to elect any representatives to the Chamber of Deputies, although it claimed a membership of 40,000. Taking advantage of the POI's political ineffectualness and exploiting a dispute between the upstart workers and the more entrenched radical democrats, the government dissolved the POI and jailed its leaders after the 1896 elections. Although the party reconstituted itself, it never recovered.

In the meantime, intellectual fellow-travelers of the workers had also been active. Considering the POI's primary weakness as ideological, they set out first to fill the gaps and then to repair the damage. Leading these intellectuals were the little boy Garibaldi had kissed, Filippo Turati, and the Russian woman he loved, Anna Kuliscioff.

Turati was of middle-class background, son of a prefect who wrote verse and translated poetry from French, German, and the Slavic languages. The son was very high-strung, attached to his mother, and also given to writing verse. Elegantly educated

in law at the University of Bologna--where the flower of the intelligensia listened to poet Giosue' Carducci's lessons--Turati wrote a brilliant dissertation but gave up the law to become a flower child in Milan during the late 1870's in what is known as the scapigliatura. At first a confused radical democrat, Turati discovered himself attracted to socialism chiefly on humanitarian grounds until he met the love of his life in Naples where they both were helping conduct an inquiry into the causes of southern poverty.

Older and more experienced than Turati, Anna Kuliscioff had participated in revolutionary activities in Russia and France and studied medicine in Switzerland. She became the lover of Andrea Costa and is reputedly responsible for the latter's famous 1879 letter renouncing anarchism. She and Costa had a daughter, Andreina, who she and Turati raised after the breakup with Costa. Much to her mother's chagrin, Andreina went on to marry a conservative Milanese businessman, and their son became a monk who inherited her and Turati's library. A balancing force rules the universe and our existence, Kuliscioff concluded, probably correctly, in a gloomy letter to Turati commenting on her daughter's forthcoming marriage.

Anna Kuliscioff introduced Turati to the serious study of Marxism. She had converted to Marxism before she met him, and, influenced by her, Turati's ideology acquired the "scientific" basis so attractive to late nineteenth century Socialists. Kuliscioff convinced Turati that to comprehend the political and social changes in society one must understand "the

transformations of the means of production and exchange, that is, the economy of an age rather than its ethics or abstract philosophy."

From the beginning, Turati and Kuliscioff eschewed violence and believed in the gradual achievement of socialism as the result of a slow, peaceful transformation of capitalism. "A revolution is not such because of violence, Turati wrote in 1893, "but despite violence." Force degraded the human spirit, killed freedom, caused mental paralysis, servility, and terror, and made socialism impossible. Violence simply meant that society was not ready for socialism, a higher form of association.

According to Turati, Socialist ideas must be spread peacefully until they so permeated society that a majority of people would have no will to resist them. Such a spiritual revolution presumed intensive preparation, but this groundwork would spur the evolution which, for Turati, was synonymous with revolution. Those who preached violence and the "dictatorship of the proletariat" simply deluded themselves. The revolution could evolve only from bourgeois society, and its hallmark would be either the absence or the absolute minimum of force.

This concept of social evolution underlay the entire structure of Turati and Kuliscioff's thought. With all Marxists, they believed that capitalism's internal contradictions would cause it to collapse, but unlike left wing Marxists who, like the early Christians believed in a swift and cataclysmic second coming, Turati-Kuliscioff never imagined that

this collapse would occur immediately. Socialists could and must speed up, by reforms, the "natural" tendency of capitalism to collapse, but to eradicate capitalism now--even if it were possible--would not mean the establishment of socialism. Although the general lines of a socialist society might be known, to impose a leader's or a party's idea of socialism by force was not only barbaric but futile and would most likely provoke a violent reaction on the part of the bourgeoisie. This view explains Turati's strong opposition over the years to the anarchists, left-wing Socialists, and Communists, and allowed him to be prescient when analyzing the coming of Fascism.

In the 1880s, Turati and Kuliscioff were the links between the POI and the future Italian Socialist Party. Utilizing his poetic and ideological skills, Turati wrote the words to the party song, "Il canto dei lavoratori," which confronted conservative theses and explained socialism. The song became the most popular working class hymn and a powerful propaganda tool, despite Turati's later remark that he should have been hanged for murdering the Italian language. Turati also defended POI leaders in court after the party was dissolved and succeeded in getting them off with light sentences.

Turati's main vehicle for the propagation of Socialist ideas, however, was his review Critica Sociale, an earlier journal which he took over in 1899 and which underwent a name change under its new editor. This review survived until the Fascist period, but was revived after World War II and still exists. The Critica's success depended upon Turati's close

collaboration with Anna Kuliscioff, who frequently provided the ideas and oversaw actual publication while Turati served as a deputy in Rome. The imprint of Turati's scathing and ironically eloquent style permeated the publication and attracted the opinion leaders of the time, Socialist and non-Socialist alike. According to Robert Michels, the German Socialist sociologist who taught for years in Italy, Turati's writing could "boil the blood, caress, slap, become tender." His metaphors have been described as "grandiose and unforgettable," his sentences as "being able to pull the skin off." Philosopher Benedetto Croce maintained that Turati's review was livelier than its German counterpart, Neue Zeit. The review attracted a host of leading intellectuals to Marxism.

An institution with a similarly important role was the Lega Socialista Milanese (Milanese Socialist League), founded by Turati and Kuliscioff. A "cell" for the future Socialist party, this organization enunciated the principles that later inspired it. Influenced by German Socialist ideas, the League's program concisely expressed Turati's reformist socialism. The program advocated gradualist methods, stating that the revolution would require an "epoch," the culmination of a great evolutionary movement making use even of the "most hostile elements, which become, in their turn, its helpers." The revolution had to graft itself upon "and penetrate all the most vital organs and strata of the old society." Therefore, "scientific socialism does not believe in miraculous renovation...by decrees from above or revolts from below." The document stressed the Marxist theme of

self-redemption of the working classes. Because they would teach the workers to help themselves, the socialists had to organize the proletariat as an autonomous party.

As will be remembered, however, Italian worker tradition was anti-intellectual, and anarchism--still a far from negligible force--was antiparlamentarian. Turati successfully surmounted these obstacles to a true Socialist party by his efforts.

But in the early 1890s, these forces did not represent the sole, or even the most important obstacles. Marxist philosopher Antonio Labriola also opposed establishment of a Socialist party on the grounds that industry had as yet not developed strongly enough and that, consequently, Italy was still too backward to support a true Marxist Socialist party. Letters flew back and forth to Engels, with Labriola criticizing Turati's work, and Turati defending himself. Ultimately, Labriola's criticisms had a beneficial effect, spurring Turati to take corrective action on the party's platform and constitution and providing the most rigorous Marxist coloring possible within the context of myriad difficulties.

The details of the party's foundation can be found elsewhere. What is important for our purposes is that a viable Socialist party came into existence in 1892 and still exists. Many scholars focus on the problems this influential organization had, and the failure of its challenge to the liberal Italian state. At the same time, they emphasize the criticisms which party left wingers made against right wing

factions, how everything went a rotoli, which we might liberally translate as "to hell in a wheelbarrow."

But we might emphasize instead the positive elements: How the party helped create a social democratic tradition in Italy which survived Fascism, and which still permeates all Italian political forces, despite the errors and rhetoric of some of them; how the social conditions of the masses at least in the North did improve, sometimes dramatically, and how a party which originated as an organization determined to overthrow the state defeated serious reactionary attempts during the decade of the 1890s, turning into a champion of the liberal state, but maintaining a critical attitude towards its shortcomings.

Had left wing Marxists between 1900 and 1922 recognized in the actual and potential accomplishments of that state a positive achievement on which to build a brighter future--as in effect they would acknowledge after 1945--instead of trying to wreck it, they might have avoided the "others of different colors" referred to in The Leopard. And they would have spared themselves, Italy, and Europe untold pain.

Spencer M. Di Scala