Review of Luigi Galleani’s “The End of Anarchism?”

Paul Avrich

1983

The career of Luigi Galleani involves a paradox. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, he was the leading Italian anarchist in the United States, one of the greatest anarchist orators of his time, in a class with Emma Goldman and Johann Most, editor of the foremost Italian-American anarchist periodical, La Cronaca Sovversiva (The Subversive Chronicle), which ran for fifteen years before its suppression by the American government, and inspirer of a movement that included Sacco and Vanzetti among its adherents.

Yet Galleani has fallen into oblivion. He is virtually unknown in the United States, outside of a small circle of scholars and of personal associates and disciples, whose ranks are rapidly dwindling. No biography in English has been devoted to him, nor is he mentioned in the general histories of anarchism by George Woodcock and James Joll or in the comprehensive history of American anarchism by William Reichert. His writings, moreover, had remained untranslated until the appearance of the work under review, which, distilling the essence of his radical beliefs, his credo of revolutionary anarchism, fills a con-
spicuous gap in the literature of anarchism available to English readers and restores a major figure in the movement to his proper historical place.

Galleani was born on August 12, 1861, in the Piedmont town of Vercelli, not far from the city of Turin. The son of middle-class parents, he was drawn to anarchism in his late teens and, studying law at the University of Turin, became an outspoken militant whose hatred of capitalism and government would burn with undiminished intensity for the rest of his life. Galleani, however, refused to practice law, which he had come to regard with contempt, transferring his talents and energies to radical propaganda. Under threat of prosecution, he took refuge in France, from which he was expelled for taking part in a May Day demonstration. Moving to Switzerland, he visited the exiled French anarchist and geographer Elisée Reclus, whom he assisted in the preparation of his *Nouvelle Géographie universelle*, compiling statistics on Central America. He also assisted students at the University of Geneva in arranging a celebration in honor of the Haymarket Martyrs, who had been hanged in Chicago in 1887, for which he was expelled as a dangerous agitator. Returning to Italy, Galleani continued his agitation, which got him into trouble with the police. Arrested on charges of conspiracy, he spent more than five years in prison and exile before escaping from the island of Pantelleria, off the coast of Sicily, in 1900.

Galleani, now in his fortieth year, began an odyssey that landed him in North America. Aided by Elisée Reclus and other comrades, he first made his way to Egypt, where he lived for the better part of a year among a colony of Italian expatriates. Threatened with extradition, he moved on to London, from which he soon embarked for the United States, arriving in October 1901, barely a month after the assassination of President McKinley. Settling in Paterson, New Jersey, a stronghold of the immigrant anarchist movement, Galleani assumed the editorship of *La Questione Sociale — The Social Question*, then the lead-
In Turin, Galleani resumed publication of *La Cronaca Sova-
siva*. As in America, however, it was suppressed by the au-
thorities. On Mussolini’s accession to power in 1922, Galleani
was arrested, tried, and convicted on charges of sedition, and
sentenced to fourteen months in prison, where his health be-
gan to deteriorate. After his release, he returned to his old
polemic against Merlino, completing it in a series of articles
in *L’Adunata dei Refrattari* (*The Call of the Rebels*), the jour-
nal of his disciples in America, who issued it in 1925 as a booklet.
Malatesta, whose conception of anarchism diverged sharply
from that of Galleani, hailed the work as a “clear, serene, elo-
quent” recital of the communist-anarchist creed. In its present
English edition, it takes its place beside Malatesta’s own *Talk
About Anarchist Communism*, Alexander Berkman’s *What Is
Communist Anarchism?*, and Nicolas Walter’s *About Anarchism*
as a classic exposition of the subjects.

It is a pleasant task, in this age of shoddy production, to re-
view a work of such notable aesthetic quality. Apart from its
handsome cover by Flavio Costantini, the celebrated Italian an-
archist writer, it is attractively designed and printed, and the
frontispiece contains a drawing of Galleani, based on a well-
known photograph, by Bartolo Provo. The translation by Max
Sartin, longtime editor of *L’Adunata dei Refrattari* and asso-
ciate of Galleani, and Robert D’Attilio, an authority on Italian-
American anarchism, is both readable and accurate. There are
a number of typographical and factual errors, especially in the
notes, but these, while regrettable, do not detract from the over-
all value of the book.

The publication of the *L’Adunata* edition of this work in 1925
did not endear Galleani to the Mussolini government. Arrested
in November 1926, Galleani was locked up in the same cell in
which he had spent three months in 1892 and found it “as dirty
and ugly” as before. Soon afterwards, he was banished to the
island of Lipari, off the Sicilian coast, from which he was later
removed to Messina, and condemned to serve six months in

ing Italian anarchist periodical in America. Scarcely had he in-
stalled himself in this position when a strike erupted among the
Paterson silk workers, and Galleani, braving the anti-radical
hysteria which followed the shooting of McKinley, threw all
his energies into their cause. In eloquent and fiery speeches he
called on the workers to launch a general strike and thereby
free themselves from capitalist oppression. Paul Ghio, a visitor
from France, was present at one such oration. “I have never
heard an orator more powerful than Luigi Galleani,” he after-
wards wrote. “He has a marvelous facility with words, accom-
panied by the faculty — rare among popular tribunes — of preci-
sion and clarity of ideas. His voice is full of warmth, his glance
alive and penetrating, his gestures of exceptional vigor and
flawless distinction.”

The strike occurred in June 1902. Clashes took place between
the workers and the police, shots were fired, and Galleani was
wounded in the face. Indicted for inciting to riot, he managed
to escape to Canada. A short time after, having recovered from
his wounds, he secretly recrossed the border and took refuge in
Barre, Vermont, living under an assumed name among his an-
archist comrades who regarded him with intense devotion. It
was in Barre, on June 6, 1903, that Galleani launched *La Cronaca
Sovversiva*, the mouthpiece for his incendiary doctrines and
one of the most important and ably edited periodicals in the
history of the anarchist movement, its influence, reaching far
beyond the confines of the United States, could be felt wherever
Italian radicals congregated, from Europe and North Africa
to South America and Australia. In 1906, however, during a
polemical exchange with G.M. Seratti, the socialist editor of *Il
Proletario* in New York, the latter revealed Galleani’s where-
abouts (a charge also leveled at the English writer H.G. Wells),
and Galleani was taken into custody. Extradited to New Jer-
sey, he was tried in Paterson in April 1907 for his role in the
1902 strike. The trial, however, ended in a hung jury (seven for
conviction, five for acquittal), and Galleani was set free.
Galleani returned to Barre and resumed his propaganda activities. Now in his late forties, he had reached the summit of his intellectual powers. Over the next forty years his fiery oratory and brilliant pen carried him to a position of undisputed leadership within the Italian-American anarchist movement. An eloquent speaker, Galleani had a resonant, lilting voice with a tremolo that kept his audience spellbound. He spoke easily, powerfully, spontaneously, and his bearing was of a kind that made his followers, Sacco and Vanzetti among them, revere him as a kind of patriarch of the movement, to which he won more converts than any other single individual. Galleani was also a prolific writer, pouring forth hundreds of articles, essays, and pamphlets that reached tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of readers on several continents. Yet he never produced a full-length book: the volumes appearing over his signature, such as Faccia a Faccia coi Nemico, Aneliti e Singulti, and Figure e Figuri, are collections of shorter pieces previously published in La Cronaca Sovversiva. In this respect he resembles Johann Most, Errico Malatesta, and Benjamin Tucker (author of Instead of a Book: By a Man Too Busy to Write One), rather than, say, William Godwin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, or Peter Kropotkin.

The End of Anarchism? Galleani’s most fully realized work, itself began as a series of articles. In June 1907, shortly after Galleani’s acquittal at Paterson, the Turin daily La Stampa published an interview with Francesco Saverio Merlino, himself a former anarchist of distinction, under the title “The End of Anarchism.” Merlino, like Galleani, had been trained in the law, had lived in the United States, and had founded an important Italian-American journal, Grido degli Oppressi (The Cry of the Oppressed), which appeared in New York from 1892 to 1894. Unlike Galleani, however, Merlino had abandoned anarchism in 1897, joining the socialist movement. Merlino, in his interview with La Stampa, pronounced anarchism an obsolete doctrine, torn by internal disputes, bereft of first-rate theorists, and doomed to early extinction. Galleani was incensed. “The end of anarchism?” he asked in La Cronaca Sovversiva, adding a question mark to the title of Merlino’s interview. Just the opposite was the case. In an age of growing political and economic centralization, anarchism was more relevant than ever. Far from being moribund, “it lives, it develops, it goes forward”.

Such was Galleani’s reply to Merlino, elaborated in a series of articles into Cronaca Sovversiva from August 17, 1907, to January 25, 1908. Combining the spirit of Stirnerite insurgency with Kropotkin’s principle of mutual aid, Galleani put forward a vigorous defense of communist anarchism against socialism and reform, preaching the virtues of spontaneity and variety, of autonomy and independence, of self-determination and direct action, in a world of increasing standardization and conformity. A revolutionary zealot, he would brook no compromise with the elimination of both capitalism and government. Nothing less than a clean sweep of the bourgeois order, with its inequality and injustice, its subjugation and degradation of the workers, would satisfy his thirst for the millennium.

Galleani produced ten articles in response to Merlino. He intended to write still more, but day-to-day work for the movement — editing La Cronaca Sovversiva, organizing meetings, issuing pamphlets, embarking on coast-to-coast lecture tours — prevented him from doing so. In 1912 he moved La Cronaca Sovversiva from Barre to Lynn, Massachusetts, where he had won a dedicated following.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, he opposed it, in contrast to Kropotkin, with all the strength and eloquence at his command, denouncing it in La Cronaca Sovversiva with an oft-repeated slogan, “Contro la guerra, contro la pace, per la rivoluzione sociale!” (Against the war, against the peace, for the social revolution!) With America’s entry into the conflict in April 1917, Galleani became the object of persecution. His paper was shut down and he himself was arrested on charges of obstructing the war effort. On June 24, 1919 he was deported to his native Italy, leaving behind his wife and four children.