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Remembering Luigi Fabbri

Francesco Lamendola

November 6th, 1988

A clear-sighted and very astute intellectual, author of essays crucial to my libertarian understanding of the great political upheavals of the 20th century (the Russian revolution, the fascist seizure of power in Italy). A generous and tireless anarchist militant, he knew imprisonment and internment, physical assault at the hands of fascist thugs and was driven into exile; he was one of the few professors to refuse to take the oath of loyalty to the Italian regime after 1922, a refusal that cost him a chair to which he had always brought honour. A dogged organiser for the movement, a friend and follower of Errico Malatesta (of whom he has left us a moving and comprehensive biography), a supporter of anarcho-communism and of the workers' movement, he attended the International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam in 1907. This was Luigi Fabbri, a comrade whose name is all too rarely invoked these days, and whose books and pamphlets (which are of such immediate relevance, even though their author died before the second World war broke out) are too little read.

He was born on 23 December 1877 in Fabriano in the province of Ancona (Italy), one of the 'classic' stamping grounds of anarchism (along with the Romagna, the Valdarno and the areas around

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Carrera and La Spezia), which was to be the epicentre of the famous 'red week' uprising in 1914. He spent his childhood and early youth farther south in the marches, in Montefiore dell'Asce (in the province of Ascoli Piceno), then went on to the Recanati high school. In 1893 at the age of 15 he encountered anarchist teachings for the first time and instinctively embraced them; from that point on his militant activity would take place under the red and black colours of freedom and into it he poured all of his energies and intellect. Unlike Kropotkin, an anarchist academic who was also capable of scientific work unrelated to politics (such as his research into Ice Age geology and the geography of the Far East and Central Asia), for Fabbri academic and militant were one and the same. His thirst for knowledge and urge to investigate and subject everything to the probing light of a critical and alert intelligence was placed in the service of the libertarian ideal. This was a struggle that was unceasing even during his times in prison (he was first arrested in 1894 at the age of 16, charged with having printed and distributed anti-militarist matter: this was at the time of the disgraceful war in Africa launched by Francesco Crispi for reasons of prestige). In 1896 he enrolled with the law faculty of the university of Macerata. The following year he met Malatesta, becoming one of his best friends and most loyal collaborators. Malatesta was a member of the military draft of 1895, so he was 24 years Fabbri's senior. For Malatesta Fabbri felt a filial affection (if it means anything, the year of Fabbri's birth was the year of the Matese gang, the hapless attempted uprising by Malatesta, Carlo Cafiero and Andrea Costa in the San Lupo mountains). It was with Malatesta that he cut his teeth in his long career as a movement journalist and publicist; in fact he was placed in charge of the publication of *L'Agitazione* in Ancona, whilst his mentor was in prison. But in 1898 it was Fabbri's turn to be arrested. He was interned on offshore islands first on Ponza and then on Favignana. This was a common practice in King Umberto's freemason and clergy-ridden Italy; it followed the failure of the attempt to serum

ous December an incident at the oasis of Wal Wal in Ethiopia had provided the spark for a fascist attack on Ethiopia and the start of a spiral of war-mongering which would carry the Mussolini Dictatorship through events in Spain to the catastrophe of Hitler's war. A catastrophe which Fabbri had been awaiting faithfully, hopefully for many a long year, but which he was denied the chance to see.

their privileges began to wake up to the situation and appreciate their own strength and the weakness of their enemies.” And they had armed the fascists to mount a counter-revolution to pre-empt the revolution; what we might describe as a preventative counter-revolution which fastened upon society even though the revolution never happened. This was Fabbri’s interpretation of the fascist phenomenon, which came into existence as the armed wing of the landlords and capitalists and as a substantially novel force, the subsequent evolution of which defies explanation unless we recognise a frightening series of errors, shortcomings, ingeniousness and weakness on the part of the left.

At the same time as he was publishing his books he was writing articles for old and new libertarian publications (like *Pensiero e Volonta*, *Fede*, *Libero Accordo*, etc.), and Luigi Fabbri was carrying on with his own activities as a militant. In 1919 he was among the promoters of the first hard and fast essay at organising, the launching of the Union of Italian Anarchist Communists, and, the following year, of the Italian Anarchist Union (UAI). In 1923 he suffered his second beating at the hands of fascists. In 1926 he declined to swear an oath of loyalty to the regime and lost his position and fled abroad. This was the beginning of a series of painful moves, throughout which he carried on writing for the world’s anarchist press and launching new publications. In 1927 he was in Switzerland, only to move quickly thereafter to Paris where he launched the journal *Lotta Umana*. Expelled from democratic France he fled to Belgium only to be expelled from Belgium too. It looked as if there was no way for him to carry on the struggle in Europe; but he refused to give up; and in 1929, at the age of 52, he embarked with youthful courage upon a new life in South America. He set up home in Uruguay, in Montevideo, where he soon launched *Studi Social*, although he continued to send items to the libertarian press in Spain, France and the United States and penned his *Malatesta: His Life and Thought* (published in Buenos Aires in 1945). He died prematurely in the thick of the struggle on 24 June 1935. The previ-

a penal colony on the desolate Dahlak islands in the Red Sea along the lines of French Guyana.

In 1900, Fabbri was released. Even though the anti-anarchist crackdown was raging as furiously as ever (following the assassination of Umberto in Monza), his propaganda activity did not let up. In 1903, along with Pietro Gori, Fabbri launched the review *Il Pensiero* and a short time later started to contribute articles to the anarchist newspaper of the émigrés in Paterson, New Jersey, *La Question Sociale*. *Il Pensiero* continued to appear, albeit faced by thousands of problems, until December 1911. He shuttled between Rome, Bologna, Fabriano and his native region, carrying on with his activities as a teacher under close police surveillance but determined to spread his libertarian ideas wherever he went. He joined Malatesta in writing for *Volonta* in Ancona. In 1907 he was in Amsterdam along with Malatesta to attend the International Anarchist Congress which was to have such importance for the evolution of the anarchist movement.

Being caught up in the ‘red week’ he was obliged to quit Italy and took refuge for a while in Switzerland, returning to Italy to throw himself body and soul into anti-militarist and pro-neutrality propaganda in 1914-1915. These were difficult times: the whole of Italy was convulsed by pro-intervention euphoria and uncertainty and confusion infected even the left. Socialists like Cesare Battista, anarchists like Peter Kropotkin argued that the war was a necessity. This eventually stretched and snapped the weakening vestiges of the International. Luigi Fabbri, charged with defeatism, was arrested again; upon his release he carried on with his work as a teacher during the war years under the closet police surveillance (in Corticella in Bologna province). His anti-war propaganda carried on but he had to take certain precautions in order to remain at large.

Aside from *Volonta*, he contributed to *Umanita Nova* which had been launched in 1920 as a daily. But his contributions to *Umanita*

Nova led to his being arrested again in the years after the Great War, tried and convicted again; he also suffered his first fascist attack.

Yet these were his most fertile years as a writer. Back in 1905 he had published his *Letters to a Woman on Anarchy*, followed in 1912 by *The School and the Revolution*, in 1913 by *Giordano Bruno* and in 1914 by *Letters to a Socialist* and *The Aware Generation*. But between 1921 and 1922 he sent to the presses his most important books (aside from a later life of Malatesta), *Preventive Counter-revolution*; and *Dictatorship and Revolution* - works generated by a probing, perceptive intelligence set out in the clearest of styles and closely argued, consistent in their reasoning and non conformist in their approach and conclusions. [KSL hope to print the latter some time in the future]

Some of what he wrote is startlingly relevant even now, like this extract from the 1906 pamphlet *Workers' Organisation and Anarchy*... "This vicious circle has led reformist socialists to devise the curious theory that in their strikes the workers should worry about the interests of the employers and the conditions of their industry... Thus are the workers on strike wrong-footed and the capitalist taken as being right, all in the name of a brand new interpretation of socialism. It has been overlooked, however, that it is the workers who always have right on their side, always, always, even when they declare an ill-timed strike that harms themselves. True, they are not doing the right thing in launching a dispute in unfavorable circumstances, when their defeat is a certainty; but the damage they are doing is to their own interests and not because the boss is in the right or because the industrialists are right rather than the wage earners. For as long as the worker works a single hour for the benefit of an employer, for as long as the boss makes a penny out of a working man's labours, that working man will always have right on his side - the sacrosanct right which is the very basis of socialism and of anarchism..."

In *Dictatorship and Revolution* (1921), an analysis of the Russian Revolution and its authoritarian distortion by the Bolsheviks, he

always deals with the relationship between libertarian socialism and Marxism. "Socialists always say that the 'dictatorship' will be a passing thing, an imperfect transitional stage, something akin to a painful necessity. We have demonstrated what errors and dangers lurk within that belief; even granting (which I do not) that dictatorship may truly be necessary, it would still be a mistake to offer it as an ideal target to aim for and turn it into a flag to afford precedence over the flag of freedom. In my event we ought to agree that one of the essential preconditions of such a dictatorship's being provisional and passing and not consolidating itself and leading on to a stable, lasting future dictatorship, is that it must terminate at the earliest opportunity, and that outside and against the law there should be a watchful and energetic opposition from revolutionaries, a living flame of freedom a strong faction preventing it from solidifying and combating it until it is successfully destroyed, just as soon as its *raison d'être* has evaporated... assuming that it may have only the one! It will be anarchism's natural vocation part of its very essence and tradition, to represent that ultra-revolutionary opposition within the revolution, that flame of freedom..."

But his most incisive, most effective, intellectually most inspiring essay is, in our judgement, *Preventive Counter-revolution* (1922). It was written in the heat of the moment whilst fascist goons were gaining the upper hand over the revolutionary disturbances in the factories and the fields. The post-war elections had inflated out of all proportion the strength of the leftwing parties, the striking workforce was poised to bring the system grinding to a halt and the trams were running with red flags on display. It was time to act, before the reaction could orchestrate any countervailing measures. Fabbri wrote: "But the revolution did not come and was not made. There were only popular rallies, lots of rallies; and alongside these demonstrations, countless choreographed marches and parades ... Moreover, this euphoria lasted too long, at almost two years; and the others, the ones who felt everyday that they were under threat of being toppled from their thrones and stripped of