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In search of early Italy's "lost" Bakuninist organisations

A review of Nunzio Pernicone's *Italian Anarchism, 1864–1892* (AK Press, USA, 2009)

Michael Schmidt

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I'm a historian of the global anarchist movement (*Black Flame* — 2009; *Cartography of Revolutionary Anarchism* — 2013), but during what I term the First Wave (1868–1894), the Italian anarchist movement was always a bit vague to me. The reason was that most historians make a point of stressing that the Italians made their mark not in Italy, but as travelling militants, especially in Egypt, Tunisia, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and the United States. But the conundrum was: if Italian anarchists were so influential in the revolutionary labour movement abroad, how was it possible that they had little traction where they came from?

Now Pernicone has helped explain why: Firstly, the dominance in Italy from the time of the Italian Federation of the IWMA of a form of self-described anarcho-collectivism (later anarcho-communism) that was insurrectionist and anti-syndicalist in the manner of Hatta Shuzo and the "pure" anarchists of Japan (they initially supported mass formations, but were just not very keen on unions),

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and later due to repression became staunchly anti-organisationist / anti-mass too. Not a smooth trajectory, bearing in mind that the likes of the young insurrectionist Luigi Galleani also cut his teeth on worker organising. Secondly, the new Italian state was dominated by two political factions: the “Historic Right” consisting of conservatives and monarchists, while the “Historic Left” consisted of nationalists and republicans – but this “Left” was compromised by its post-unification support for the monarchy; as a result, until the 1890s, government swung between two anti-socialist poles, which saw the emergent anarchist movement and the socialists more broadly, suffer continual cycles of repression. This repression was meted out by two processes that were not submitted to the courts where they could have been challenged: “admonishment” under which militants were put under restrictive surveillance; and *domicilio coatto*, which involved forced internal exile on islands off the coast such as Lampedusa.

And yet, despite this climate, organisational efforts were perennial. The first International Revolutionary Brotherhood organisation in Italy, the Society of Legionnaires of the Italian Social Revolution (SLRSI), was founded by Bakunin in 1866, being reformed the next year as the Liberty & Justice (LeG) group, which led directly to the foundation of the Italian Federation (FI) of the IWMA in 1869 that adhered to Bakunin’s line against Marx. Although initially based in Naples and its docks and the island of Sicily with more than 3,500 members by 1870, and swelling to an early peak of 32,450 members by 1874, primarily in north-central Italy, the FI was heavily repressed by the state in the late 1870s, while its insurrectionist (which later developed into an anti-organisationist) bias meant it would have to wait decades to achieve its own trade union central. But one of the key innovations of the FI was its emphasis on the equality of women: driven by women leaders such as Luisa “Gigia” Minguzzi of the FI’s Tuscan Federation and Vincenza Matteuzzi of the FI’s Marchian-Umbrian Federation, by 1876, the FI had

organised women's sections and groups in the cities and towns of Florence, Aquila, Imola, Perugia, Carrara and Prato.

By 1880, the FI was essentially dead in the water – although well into the decade in northern Italy, groups in various cities remained loyal to the internationalist line and still considered themselves part of the FI, now aligned to the Black International. Although repression had a generally negative impact on the Italian anarchist movement, with the majority adhering to a self-defeating self-described “anarcho-communist” line that talked insurrection but adopted anti-organisationism, so did little but produce incendiary newspapers and eschewed worker's struggles, there were some positive organisational developments among the constructive minority. For example, in 1885, Ambrogio Galli's Anarchist Communist Group (GCA) of Milan founded the Upper Italian Federation (FAI) with the purpose of reviving the movement, particularly among the workerists of the Italian Workers' Party (POI) founded three years earlier with a programme that excluded from membership any who were not working class; initially the two camps had much in common, but the hostility of most anarchists to what they saw as the reformism of trade unions led to a parting of their ways. There was better progress in 1885 when the Forlì Congress brought together 11 northern cities, scores of anarchist groups and federations from almost every region, resulting in the formation in August of the regional Anarchist Socialist Federation of Pesaro-Urbino (FASPU) and by 1887, a Forlì International Federation (FIF) was founded with 300 members; meanwhile although in 1876, a tiny and ephemeral Florentine Anarchist Federation (FAF) had been founded, adhering to Malatesta's pro-organisational line, significant advances were made by Minguzzi among women workers at one of the two cigarette factories in Florence. However, these initiatives remained overwhelmingly regional and were unable to achieve national federation.

One of Bakunin's main Italian disciples and in many ways his successor, was Errico Malatesta (1853–1932) who turned his back

on his middle class origins to become an inveterate militant, insurgent, organiser and polemicist, and moved from an “anarcho-communist” insurrectionist position that he had held in the 1870s to a mass anarchist position. In 1889, he wrote his Programme, published in his newspaper *L'Associazione*, in Nice, France, as a call to arms against the deleterious effects of the anti-organisationalist, terrorist and individualist deviations which had driven the Italian anarchist movement into isolation from the working class. Impressed by the strike-wave then surging across Europe, especially the struggle of the London dockworkers, Malatesta wrote in another article in the newspaper that “The masses arrive at great vindications by means of small protests and small revolts. Let us join them and spur them forward... Indeed every strike has its revolutionary characteristic; every strike finds energetic men [sic.] to punish the bosses and, above all, to attack property and to show the strikers that it is easier to take than to ask.”

In his neo-Bakuninist Programme, Malatesta stated that “a great revolution is approaching, perhaps it is imminent,” and so the anarchist movement was faced with a “great mission” for which it needed to construct an international revolutionary anarchist-socialist party (later described by Malatesta as “the totality of all who embrace the programme, who advocate its triumph and who consider themselves bound not to do anything opposed to it”). As Pernicone paraphrases it, “Malatesta believed that although only the masses could make the revolution, they needed the guidance of a vanguard anarchist party. For only the anarchists, who harboured no secret desire for power, could arouse the masses to full consciousness of their might and spur them to destroy the state and every other obstacle blocking emancipation. And only the anarchists could be relied upon to resist the formation of new governments that would impose their will upon the masses, arrest and divert the course of the revolution, and prevent the evolution of a libertarian society.”

Malatesta’s Programme finally bore fruit in 1891 at the Capolago Congress in Switzerland, to which more than 200 associations (two thirds of them anarchist and one third socialist and workerist) affiliated, representing more than 50 Italian cities and towns, plus exile groups from Switzerland, France, Britain, Egypt, the United States, Argentina and Brazil, at which it was overwhelmingly decided to found a Revolutionary Anarchist Socialist Party (PSAR), which soon established regional federations across Italy; repressed by the state, the PSAR’s regional federations were revived in 1897, though by then, Malatesta had moved away from the party’s original syncretism towards endorsing a far more ideologically coherent programme; within fifteen years, the Italian pro-organisational anarchists controlled their own 80,000-strong anarcho-syndicalist labour centre, the Italian Syndicalist Union (USI).

In sum, Pernicone has: corrected a longstanding Marxist occlusion regarding the Italian revolutionary left between the Risorgimento (state unification) of 1861 and the eventual establishment of a Marxist party in 1892, a bias that reflects the initial dominance of the Bakuninists; restored the pro-organisational history of the Italian movement — which was especially defined by its dispute with the anti-organisationalists, a battle that it eventually won, in time to be on the barricades during the anti-colonial Red Week in 1914, not to mention the revolutionary Red Years of 1919–1920, with the USI peaking at 800,000 members, backed by a political organisation — in echo of Bakunin’s dual-organisational strategy — the 20,000-strong Italian Anarchist Union (UAI); and lastly, Pernicone has offered tantalising glimpses of the establishment of Women’s Sections which were to prove so influential as the vanguards of anarcho-syndicalism where it dominated the labour movement in most of Latin America until the 1930s.