

Antonio Gramsci, Anarchism, Syndicalism and *Sovversivismo*
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Dr. Carl Levy
Department of Politics
Goldsmiths, University of London
c.levy@gold.ac.uk

FULL REFERENCES TO FOLLOW.

Abstract

Throughout his career Antonio Gramsci forged a complex relationship with strands of libertarian socialism. This paper will disentangle this relationship. First it sets out an overview of Gramsci's unique form of socialism (Sorel, Gentile, Antonio Labriola) before and during the *Biennio Rosso* and the factory council movement. His early flirtation with syndicalism and Mussolinianism left marks, which positively and negatively affected a later engagement with the libertarian Left. Thus the key term *sovversivismo*, found in the *Quaderni*, is crucial to his discussions. In its conclusion, this paper examines the effects of Gramsci's assessment of the anarchists and syndicalists on Italian historiography in the post-war decades.

1. Introduction

The young Gramsci's unorthodox Marxism had many elective affinities with the libertarian socialist tradition. Gramsci's concept of industrial democracy during the era of the factory councils in Turin (1919-1920) was shaped through his encounters with anarchists who were self-educated workers and formally educated technicians employed by Fiat and other industries. This practical alliance in the campaign for factory councils championed by *L'Ordine Nuovo* has been noted elsewhere (Levy, 1999). But the relationship is far deeper than a tactical political ploy, which Lenin indulged in his anarchist-sounding pronouncements in revolutionary Russia during the spring and early summer of 1917.

Three aspects of the pre-Leninist Gramsci's Marxism serve as benchmarks to evaluate the interaction of libertarian thought and action with Gramsci's social thought before 1918-1919: voluntarism, pre-figuration and hegemony. The theoretical foundations of Gramsci's voluntarism are in sharp contrast to the determinism of Lenin's social thought. Lenin's political activism was informed by the problem of power, how to seize and conserve it (Service,). But his social thought never left the straitjacket of the most rule-bound 'scientific socialism'. Indeed Lenin spent an inordinate amount of time throughout his life stamping out a bewildering variety of 'heresies' that threatened his love affair with 'scientific socialism': monists, 'God-builders' and infantile communists were all chosen targets (Read, 1979; Williams, 1986). Unorthodox and ruthless in seizing and holding power, his political thought was perhaps even more rule-bound and orthodox than his fallen idol, Karl Kautsky. It should be remembered that in 1916 and 1917 Lenin (and Bukharin) argued that time could be sped up precisely because of a new stage of history: world war that flowed

from the imperialist capitalist stage of historical development sanctioned his anarchist-like heretical political behaviour. But it did not sanction a rethinking of the orthodox Marxism he had mentally ingested before 1914. Karl Kautsky was a 'social traitor' because he had betrayed his political principles, not because his theory was incorrect.

Gramsci's introduction to Marxism could not be more different. Marxism was filtered through a political culture of voluntarism that permeated the Italian universities of antebellum Italy. The theme of voluntarism is directly connected to Gramsci's concept of pre-figuration. Simply put, pre-figuration implies that the institutions of the future socialist society should be foreshadowed in the democratic institutions of the working class in civil society under capitalism. Not only does this solve the dilemma of how one gets from the capitalist to socialist stage of history, it also implies the libertarian potential of working-class self-organisation present in the young Gramsci's social theory as well as his political practice. In other words, unlike Lenin who saw Soviets as 'useful idiots' to undermine the Russian state in 1917, for Gramsci *theoretical* Marxist voluntarism is embodied in self-organisation in civil society. This explains why, when Gramsci first encounters Lenin in 1917 and early 1918 he presents him as a charismatic leader-champion of organs of self-government in civil society. Gramsci read Lenin through his own synthesis of Italian neo-idealist voluntarism, which owes more to Giovanni Gentile and Georges Sorel than Kautskyite Marxism.

Gramsci repudiated the theoretical Marxism of the Second International in order to embrace Marxism in the first place when he was still a student at the University of Turin. If we imagine counterfactual history in which Gramsci had encountered Lenin's theoretical Marxist orthodoxy before he successfully had piloted the Bolsheviks to state power, he would have certainly had a dim if not sarcastic reaction to it. Therefore in 1917 and 1918 Lenin became the symbolic and political embodiment of Gramsci's mistaken projections from a unique cocktail of libertarian voluntarism and Marxism. The disjunction between his political thought and the model that proved successful in actually gaining power in the Soviet Union would threaten the coherence of his project for the rest of his life.

But Gramsci was no anarchist or syndicalist: anarchism and syndicalism served as foils to forge Gramscian social thought and political action. In his arguments with the libertarians before his encounters with Lenin and what became known as Leninism, Gramsci had already opened his thought to a ready acceptance of the authoritarian solutions proposed in Russia. The authoritarian aspects of the young Gramsci, however, paradoxically are derived from the voluntarism of his political thought.

As I have shown elsewhere, the origins of Gramsci's pre-figuration and his most famous term, hegemony, is illustrated nicely in a series of articles on the cooperative movement in Turin and Italy written in 1916. These ideas were being developed as he simultaneously developed his evaluation of the role of Antonio Labriola in Marxism. The notions of pre-figuration and the conception of hegemony found in the articles on cooperatives, as well as his engagement with Labriola, are tied to his attitude about the proper evaluation of anarchism and the limits of alliances with anti-war anarchists and syndicalists. But it is his form of pedagogical socialism, drenched in Gentilean assumptions, which demonstrates the theoretical gulf separating his apparent libertarian socialism from the positivist culture of the anarchists and syndicalists.

2. Pre-figuration and the ‘Libertarian Gramsci’: The Origins of the Concept of Hegemony

It has often been claimed that Gramsci’s concept of hegemony arose from encounters with Leninism. Thus in a famous article Perry Anderson argued that the term and the concept were suggested to Gramsci during his sojourn in the Soviet Union in the early 1920s (Anderson, 1977). It has also been advanced that hegemony derives from his thinking about the Southern Question and this only emerges just previous to his arrest and imprisonment in the middle 1920s (Urbinati, 1998), or that hegemony emerges from the hierarchical relationship of nationally dominant languages and Received Pronunciation and minority languages or demotic pronunciation (Lo Piparo 1979; Ives, 2004). Others have argued that the concept of hegemony should be paired with the Gramscian ‘passive revolution’ and his rethinking of the Marxist tradition in his prison cell in the 1930s (Buci-Glucksmann, 1979).

Gramsci employed the daily concerns of Turin’s labour and cooperative movements as laboratories to develop and illustrate his more complex theoretical conceptions very early in his career. Rediscovered articles demonstrate how many of the themes of *L’Ordine Nuovo*, which highlight the (admittedly exaggerated) pre-figurative power of the factory council, were originally developed during a discussion of that reformist institution, the cooperative, in 1916; one or two years before Gramsci began to promote the ‘sovietist’, West European or incipient Turinese versions of council communism.

3. Antonio Gramsci, Antonio Labriola and the Anarchists

Gramsci’s discussion of Labriola grew from his initial re-evaluation of the *Risorgimento*. And if any of the deceased are given decent eulogies, they are surely the intellectuals of the ‘*destra storica*’ (‘the historic right’) (Piccone, 1977); whose emphasis on the pedagogical nature of the modern state’s parliamentary system and its honest and efficient civil service, stimulating the active participation of citizens in its affairs, is assimilated into socialist theory. For Gramsci, Labriola was the intellectual link between the thinkers and writers of the ‘historic right’, Spaventa and De Sanctis, and the modern socialist movement.

Labriola’s Marxism has four aspects to it, which Gramsci found naturally congenial (Dal Pane, 1975; Jacobitti, 1981; Bellamy, 1987, pp. 54-71; Bellamy and Schecter, 1993). First, politics was conceived as culture and therefore intellectuals acted as *maestri*, the brains if not the public leadership behind socialist strategy. Secondly, Marxism promoted a universalizing philosophy that lent coherence to culture. Finally political organization helped realize this philosophy. It has been suggested by several writers that Labriola’s ideas helped Gramsci transform his earlier Gentilean philosophy into his more materialist Marxism of the war years and of the postwar early, the *biennio rosso* (1919-20) (Tronti, 1959; Garin, 1967, pp. 119-33; Asor Rosa, 1975, p. 1040; Piccone, 1977-8, pp. 3-48, Catone, 1994).

Even though a generation separated the two men, the similarities between Labriola’s and Gramsci’s Marxism and their relationships with the anarchists are striking. Gramsci argued that cultural hegemony preceded every major revolution. It had been the inability and the unwillingness of Italian intellectuals to abandon their elitist cosmopolitanism, which left the masses, so to speak, headless. Labriola and Gramsci relied on working-class institutions immersed in daily life, not directly

controlled by the socialist party, to raise popular beliefs to a universal scientific world-view. Labriola's support of the *Fasci Siciliani* (a social movement in Sicily in the 1890s) bears significant similarities with Gramsci's endorsement of rank-and-file movements in Turinese industry during and just after the First World War (Procacci, 1960, pp. 321-8; Berti, 1993, pp. 343-54). Both were able to work with proletarian anarchists. Just as Gramsci, Labriola differentiated between Jacobinical '*capi*', the *spostati della borghesia* (bourgeois dropouts), the intellectual proletariat, and the anarchist workers whom Labriola had helped during the Roman builders strike in the early 1890s. Although Labriola was capable of differentiating between the 'reasonable' anarchism of Errico Malatesta and terrorist bombers and assassins, he never took the intellectual premises of anarchism very seriously.

Gramsci's and Labriola's Marxism can be considered unorthodox because of their novel interpretation of praxis: both men based the superiority of Marxism over other forms of socialism on its ability to forge a world view that required little borrowing from other systems of philosophical thought. If this caused Labriola and Gramsci to fight against the marriage of positivism and Marxism and thereby earn the accolades of the late twentieth century university Marxists, both thinkers tended to deny the intellectual validity of other systems of socialism, particularly anarchism.

3. Cooperation and Pre-figuration: Gramsci, Sorel and the Anarchists

It is commonly assumed that the young Gramsci was hostile or indifferent to the traditional institutions of the working-class movement. For example, most accounts emphasize his sharp differentiation between the trade union, a reformist institution immersed in the logic of the capitalist marketplace and the factory council, representative of the rank and file, as well as reflecting the productivist and functionalist prerequisites of future socialized industry. But many of the *Ordinovisti* articles promoting the pre-figurative powers of the factory councils were developed early than thought. These early articles reveal Gramsci in the process of also developing key concepts such as hegemony and passive revolution and in the context of references to international theoretical syndicalism (Sorel) and debates with Italian syndicalists (Schechter, 1990). But the entire discussion is pitched at several levels: key theoretical breakthroughs arise within the context of the local concerns of the Turinese labour movement.

Gramsci's intervention in the debate on cooperatives reached its climax in an article, 'Socialism and Cooperation' (30 October 1916, published in the ACT's journal, *L'Alleanza Cooperativa*) (Gramsci, 1994, pp. 15-16).

Gramsci makes it abundantly clear that socialism must be productivist. Consumer cooperatives were not, nor could they be, central to these politics. Socialism, he wrote, 'is not simply to solve the problem of distribution of finished products. On the contrary, the moral justification of our struggle, and for the revolution this struggle will bring about, comes from the conviction, acquired by the proletariat through its critique of the existing means of production, that collectivism will serve to accelerate the rhythm of production itself, by eliminating all those artificial factors to productivity' (Gramsci, 1994, p. 15). Socialist cooperatives must, he wrote, arise from the free activity of the proletariat, outside the meddling and corrupting influences of bourgeois legislation or the state will blunt their purpose. Socialist cooperatives were socially useful to the lower classes, otherwise they were,

Gramsci wrote, protectionist cooperatives, parasitical organizations that gave rise to a group of privileged workers, who were successful at freeing themselves partially from capitalist exploitation, but whose actions were harmful to their class and costly to production generally (Gramsci, 1982, p. 677). In much the same way that syndicalists in Britain and diasporic anarchists, such as Errico Malatesta adapted H. Belloc's concept of the 'Servile State' to statist or forms of crony –statist-capitalism just before the outbreak of hostilities in 1914 (Levy, forthcoming).

Thus Gramsci's general tenor of discussion is linked to his earlier connections with free-trade socialists and syndicalists in Sardinia and Turin. Previously, Gaetano Salvemini had been a major influence, and during the war Gramsci organized an issue of *Il Grido del Popolo* devoted to free trade and socialism. Free trade, Gramsci believed would help to lessen the North/South divide but it was also central to the definition of his form of socialism. At the very end of the war Gramsci explained his free-tradism in rather defensive tones. Comparing his programme to President Wilson's (Tobia, 1974, pp. 275-303; Rossini, 2008), he explained that free trade was part of socialism's minimal programme, and his argument betrayed these 'Bellocian' echoes.

Socialists are today free-traders because their doctrine recognizes that in the free development of capitalist society free trade as a revolutionary force against the outmoded form of production and exchange and that it establishes political structures more suitable for the development of its potential: without economic liberty, political liberty is a Giolittian swindle (Gramsci, 1984, p. 410).

This explains Gramsci's attraction to the English radical liberals who founded the Union for Democratic Control, and particularly Norman Angell, whose wartime writings, Gramsci claimed, showed that protectionist state socialism or state capitalism were universal evils arising from the inherent demands of the conflict itself. This pervasive Prussianism (a Germanic Servile State), Gramsci felt, threatened democratic liberties won before the war (Gramsci, 1984, pp. 236-7). Free trade was not only the guarantor of civil rights, free trade also served as a metaphor for Gramsci's *maximalist programme*. Concurrently, Lenin, who appreciated the mechanics of power and production, was *praising* the wartime Prussian state as being a step closer to socialism: cartels, trusts and indeed state-assisted cartels and trusts preparing the way for socialism, these did not corrupt the workers, but trained them for the future socialist industrial society.

The previously mentioned 'Socialism and Cooperation' is one of the finer examples of Gramsci's 'free trade' anti-statism. Throughout the war years Gramsci's fears of Prussianism made him caution socialists against allying themselves with the interventionist war-time state, this became especially pronounced during the debate over whether or not socialists should join the government's Commission on Postwar Reconstruction, established by Prime Minister Orlando (Gramsci, 1984, pp. 169-70).

He believed that 'reform from above' or 'state socialism' had too long been uncritically accepted within prewar socialism and even within Marxist theory itself. This became evident in an article written on 8 April 1917 when Gramsci argued:

Many of our comrades are still imbued with doctrines concerning the state that were fashionable in the writings of socialists twenty years ago. These doctrines were constructed in Germany, and perhaps in Germany might still have their justification. It is certain that in Italy, a country even less

parliamentary than Germany, due to the prevailing political corruption and the lack of parliamentary consciousness, the state is the greatest enemy of citizens (of the majority of citizens) and every growth of its powers, of its activity, of its functions, always equals a growth of corruption, of misery for citizens, of a general lowering of the level of public, economic and moral life (Gramsci, 1982, p. 118).

Gramsci's anti-statism is explained through his appropriation of Georges Sorel's notion of a schism, a separation of the working class from bourgeois culture and lifestyles, without fully accepting the Frenchman's entire message, even if Gramscian language is drenched with Sorelian key words (Bracco, 1974; Badaloni, 1975; Giosis, 1979; Roth, 1980; Malatesta, 1981; Schecter, 1990). Such similarities and differences with Sorel are evident in 'Socialism and Cooperation'.

Similarities in their shared belief in a non-Jacobinical transition to socialism based upon the daily experiences of workers in their own trade unions and cooperatives, with Gramsci alluding to Sorel's highly influential book, *l'Avenir socialiste des syndicats*, circulated by Italian left-wing socialist and syndicalist activists before the war (Furiozzi, 1976, pp. 50-2, 64, 79-80, 95-6; Onufrio, 1979, pp. 89-97, 113-21, 127, 139, 147, 154, 197; Roth, 1980, p. 10). This book is significant too, because it predates Sorel's departure into myth-making and the celebration of violence, and is firmly grounded in his encounters with Eduard Bernstein, Antonio Labriola and the former anarchist Francesco Saverio Merlino during the so-called revisionist debate at the turn of the century (Sanatarelli, 1964; Zagara, 1975; Morabito, 1979, pp. 744-55). All three thinkers were searching for institutions within civil society, which might temper or suppress state socialism. And to complete a very interesting circle of reciprocal influences, Gramsci was an enthusiastic reader of Sydney and Beatrice Webbs' *History of Trades Unions* and their other works: the very examples Sorel used to buttress his arguments in *L'Avenir socialiste des syndicats* (Gramsci, 1976, p. 138). And the very books that Lenin from his Siberian exiles read with some guarded interest.

Gramsci's 'Sorel' was perhaps different from the majority of prewar Italian syndicalists'. The Gramscian transition to socialism relied upon the conscious, reasoned intervention of social actors rather than myths; and Gramsci, needless to say, appreciated the role of education and self-education, even though, as we shall see, he had little time for the efforts of the *Università Popolare* (Broccoli, 1972; Rosada, 1975; Entwistle, 1979). He did not share some of the syndicalist intellectuals' fascination with the imagery of the rude, uneducated workers as intellectual-bashers. Gramsci wrote a famous article in 1916- 'Socialism and Culture' - in direct response to Enrico Leone in which the syndicalist professor is taken to task and in this context explains the role of ideas in historical development and concurrently edges towards a concept of hegemony (For details see Gramsci, 1980, 99-103).

The fact is that only by degrees, one stage at a time, has humanity acquired consciousness of its own value and won for itself the right to throw off the pattern of organization imposed on it by minorities at a previous period in history. And this consciousness was formed not under the brutal goad of physiological necessity but as a result of intelligent reflection, at first by just a few people and later by a whole class, and why certain conditions exist and how best to convert the facts of vassalage into the signals of rebellion and social reconstruction. This means that every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of

culture and the spread of ideas amongst the masses of men who are first resistant, think only of solving their own immediate economic and political problems for themselves, who have not ties of solidarity with others in the same conditions (Gramsci, 1977, pp. 11-12).

Thus, a series of articles about cooperation, the role of intellectuals in the socialist movement and other nods to Sorel, Proudhon, Labriola and the lessons of the French Revolution, the importance of pre-figuration and an analysis stressing the tensions between state and civil society, rather than the political economy of capitalism, will see Gramsci develop the master themes (hegemony, passive revolution etc), which will accompany him throughout his life. In an extraordinary passage, a critique of Marxist determinism, which should have found kindred spirits amongst the more critical anarchists, Gramsci seems to question even Engel's formulation that the base determines dialectical historical development in the last instance. Thus the transition from feudalism to capitalism is not a neat process of the capitalist mode of production displacing enervated feudalism. Events in the superstructure and political civil society (the society of lawyers and intellectuals) play an extraordinarily important role in this process in pre-revolutionary and revolutionary France.

Besides, not even capitalism in its historical essence is bourgeois: in reality it is a bourgeois superstructure, it is the concrete form taken by economic development some time after the affirmation of the political power of the new class, so that this class planted its roots even more solidly in the world (Gramsci, 1994, p. 17).

Questions of theory and interpretation are played out and sparked by the influence of syndicalist or anarchist themes, representatives of anarchism and syndicalism or the tactical imperative to find common cause with anarchists and syndicalists. But later, of course in the *Notebooks*, this novel interpretation of the Marxist historical framework, more fully developed and is cast in more pessimistic and Jacobinical light, seems to have led Gramsci to qualified support, or at least sympathetic appreciation, for the Stalinist revolution from above. But in 1916, however, his targets were those positivist socialists *and* anarchists or syndicalists who were enslaved to a determinist evolutionary vision of history and the historical process.

Thus Gramscian praxis revolted against a passive acceptance of 'positivist facts' or the notion 'that what is customarily called external reality is something so finite, so rigid, so completely separate and independent from the idea; economic and political institutions are not outside of our will and influence' (Gramsci, 1984, p. 300). The conscious socialist should not behave as if he or she possessed a scientific formula, which passive followers need merely learn and obey. In this respect Gramsci's early libertarianism is not merely found in his 'free-trade socialism' as discussed previously but also an interpretation of Marxist praxis that undermined the Second Internationalist concept of scientific socialism, embraced by social democrats and Bolsheviks, or equally the alternative positivist determinism of Kropotkinite anarcho-communism. This led Gramsci to passionate denunciations of the division of socialism between a leadership caste imbued with the correct formulae and followers who were easily manipulated by their scientific magic tricks. So as he imbibed the ideas of the positivist Michaels with caution but with some effect, Gramsci sometimes

could appear to advance anarchist-like critiques of the socialist party machine. Unlike Kautsky or Lenin, who separated knowledge from daily know-how, the young Gramsci, even if his political practice rejected a full-fledged socialist pluralism, could not easily stomach a dogmatic or dictatorial social movement.

The proletariat is not an army; it does not have officers, subalterns, corporals and soldiers. Socialists are not officers of the proletarian army, they are part of the proletariat itself, perhaps they are its consciousness, but as the consciousness cannot be divided from an individual, so socialists are not placed in duality with the proletariat. They are one, always one and they do not command but live with the proletariat, just as blood circulates and moves in the veins of a body and it is not possible for it to live and move inside rubber tubes wrapped around a corpse. They live within the proletariat, their force is in the proletariat's and their power lay in this perfect adhesion (Gramsci, 1982, p. 332).

We have seen how libertarian themes permeated Gramsci's early thought. His socialist is anti-statist. He is suspicious and on guard against the creation of a socialist hierarchy: he is against Jacobinical socialism. He promotes socialism grounded in civil society and pre-figuration. But he is also ill at ease with syndicalist arguments that undermine the importance of education and learning for the socialist and working-class movements. The socialist leadership should not patronize or order about the rank and file, flaunting their well-developed consciousness over the less well read rank and file. However, that does not mean that conscious socialists do not have a duty to educate the movement. And it is over the question of education and the anarchist concept of 'free thought' and the 'free thinker', which Gramsci engages in his most extended theoretical debate with the anarchists. And in this debate he develops the themes and theoretical tools he will use to criticize anarchism in political debate but also as devices employed in supposedly cooler historiographical arguments presented in the Notebooks.

4. Free Thought and Educated Thought: the Origins of the Gramscian concepts *Senso Comune* and *Senso Buono* (the Limits of Gramscian Libertarianism)

By second nature, Gramsci thought of socialist politics as an extension of cultural enlightenment. During the war, he made his mark and generated deep animosities within the Socialist Party through his unorthodox editorship of *Il Grido del Popolo*. But even before his assumption of a major responsibility, his one-off broadsheet, *La Città Futura* had been aimed at a specific audience of highly skilled and motivated workers, who were ambitious enough to attend night school to further their fortunes (Gramsci, 1982, p. 105-06). But Turin, he argued, lacked a cultural organization controlled by and acting on behalf of workers. The *Università Popolare* was, he felt, a purely bourgeois humanitarian venture. On the contrary, his proposed an Association of Culture would have the extra added advantage of supplying trained intellectuals suitably socialized for adequate tasks within the socialist movement. Although he did not quote Robert Michels directly, he was certainly thinking of the German's prewar study of Italian socialism, particularly Michels's description of the ways in which rootless intellectuals became the object of an unhealthy hero worship within the movement (Gramsci, 1982, pp. 498; Levy, 1998, pp. 205-8; Levy forthcoming, 2009). Gramsci equated the authoritarianism of the movement with the

generally low level of education enjoyed by the rank and file of the Italian socialist movement.

An Italian socialist party filled with educated comrades would be more democratic and libertarian because it would function through the spontaneous rationality he detected in micro-institutions he was involved with in these first years of socialist activism. Gramsci's presence within the Turinese labour movement during wartime is found on three levels: firstly his journalistic impact already mentioned; secondly his lectures; finally his curious 'Club of Moral Life'. In all three cases Gramsci stresses a Socratic approach to politics: he was making socialists one by one, not addressing oceanic crowds. The 'Clubs of Moral Life' were, in fact, another incarnation of the third pillar of the socialist movement, which would supplement the trade union/cooperative and the party. *Il Grido del Popolo* and later *L'Ordine Nuovo* were considered the organs of this third institution of the socialist movement. And it is in the opening rounds of his long debate over an association of workers' culture that we discover some of the intellectual prerequisites of Gramsci's Marxism that separated it from mainstream socialism *and* anarchism.

Gramsci's conception of socialist education and culture was democratic, participatory and libertarian, but it had little in common with the rationalist free thought that dominated socialist and anarchist political culture in Liberal Italy (For overviews see, Degl'Innocenti, 1983; Pivato, 1986; Audenino, 1991, Turi, 1993). During the debate over the founding of an Association of Culture in Turin, Gramsci's chief targets of criticism were anarchist and socialist pie-in-the-sky utopianism. Fuzzy-minded rationalist free thought played into the hands of the fickle and bombastic leadership of the prewar Italian Socialist Party, because it denied the rank and file critical faculties to control this leadership. An educated party would be more democratic and libertarian because it would function through a spontaneous 'Socratic' rationality acquired in such micro-institutions as the 'Clubs of Moral Life'. The educated middle classes and the intellectuals would have a specific role as specialists rather than a stump orators and demagogues. Thus if the educational needs of the working classes would be satisfied and channeled through micro-cultural institutions, the formally educated classes might find their vocation through an Italian version of the Fabian Society.

A particularly well-known example, in England, is the Fabian Society, which is a member of the Second International. The task of the Society is that of debating exhaustively and in depth, all economic and moral problems which the proletariat has encountered or will encounter in the course of its life and it has succeeded in recruiting a very significant segment of the English intellectual and academic world to this task of civilization, of liberating minds (Gramsci, 1994, p. 38).

For Gramsci, however, the prewar leaders of the socialist movement – Enrico Ferri, Filippo Turati or Claudio Treves – were corrupted by positivist social thought and shared with working-class popular culture the misleading assumptions of 'free-thought'. During the war Gramsci drew these concerns together in his vitriolic attacks on the favourite shibboleth of prewar anarchism and socialism: Esperanto. Esperanto was prominent course at the *Università Popolare* and amongst the anarchists. His attacks on Esperanto also, of course, highlight another aspect of Gramsci training as a very promising student of linguistics at the University of Turin (Ives, 2004).

Gramsci thought that Esperanto was stuff and nonsense. Even after he left the University for full-time journalism, Gramsci retained a deep fascination for linguistics and the study of dialects, and he remained in close contact with his linguistics professor, Umberto Cosmo. Cosmo has taught him that languages were the unique representation of a national or regional culture (Fiori, 1970, pp. 74-5, 93, 104, 113; Bergami, 1977, pp. 70, 92). Attempts, therefore, to create artificial world languages, such as Esperanto, were less than pathetic; they were pernicious because they evinced an abstract cosmopolitanism characteristic of many socialist and anarchist militants. Italian socialism could only be grounded in Italian conditions; artificial cosmopolitanism retarded the emergence of a true and realistic socialist internationalism.

As a marginal Sardinian student Gramsci had developed an appreciation for the power and dignity that nation-building languages could supply to oppressed groups, and he was, therefore, a keen critic and historian of the linguistic history and pedagogical controversies surrounding the Italian language. He was sensitive to the tensions created between metropolitan languages and their country bumpkin dialect cousins. Language held the key to codes, and these codes translated into power. As a socialist and revolutionary he was exercised about how the ordinary people of Italy might come to share in, or totally displace, the oligarchy's monopoly on it. Gramsci savaged Esperanto, but Esperanto was just part and parcel of the broader syndrome known as 'free thought', his chief target.

As a follower of both Croce and Sorel, who were well known for their attacks on Masonic free thought, it is not surprising that Gramsci would be extremely hostile to one of the Italian left's most long-cherished beliefs (Furiozzi, 1975; Bellamy, 2002, pp 244-42). In March 1918 Gramsci's ideal-typical free-thinker happened to be the anarchist editor of Milan's *L'Università Popolare*, Luigi Molinari, who had published in pamphlet form, a lecture he gave in 1917 on the Paris Commune (*Il dramma della Comune*). Gramsci dismissed Molinari's pamphlet as lacking any historical analysis, of being an historical romance, a mere pyrotechnical entertainment. Molinari had left his audience without any critical sense of cause and effect, without any educational value whatsoever. Molinari's lecture was a particularly depressing example of the intellectual weakness of 'free thought' (Gramsci, 1982, 751-2).

Just before his death Molinari responded personally to Gramsci and Gramsci also received a general drubbing in the anarchist press. In June 1918 Gramsci responded to the ongoing debate but tried to lift the argument above mere personalities. He summarized his criticism of free thought in an article entitled 'Libero Pensiero and Pensiero Libero' in which Crocean and Gentilean themes on the subject dominated (Gramsci, 1984, pp. 113-17). He directed the thrust of his article at the assumptions he believed lay behind Molinari's pamphlet. Molinari's 'world-view' was 'libero pensiero' (free thought), which was a philistine, bourgeois expression and was caused by Jacobin individualism: that is why we find grouped around it Freemasons, Radicals and...libertarians'. Free thought was therefore the mindset of old-fashioned prewar *bloccardismo* (the front that included the Socialists and the free thought radicals, liberals and libertarians). But his Marxist 'pensiero libero' instead was a form of libertarian historicism that had little in common with this tradition and looked to Croce and Antonio Labriola, as we have cause to remark, for its inspiration.

Indeed, Gramsci advanced the opinion that the anarchists, or at least their leaders and theoreticians, were less libertarian than the Marxist socialists of the historicist stamp. As these socialists were able to think 'freely' and 'historically',

they were able to take on contradictory arguments and enrich their own thought by overcoming them. On the other hand ‘in as much as the libertarians are intolerant dogmatists, slaves to their own particular opinions’, they ‘sterilize’ debate with their petty arguments, as Gramsci claimed the controversy over Molinari had demonstrated (Gramsci, 1984, pp. 113-14).

It is also important to point out, that just as the key Gramscian concept if not the actual term, hegemony, was already being employed by 1916 in his articles about pre-figuration and cooperation, the key binomial – *senso comune* (common sense as naïve sense) and *senso buono* (educated and critical sense) is already present in the contrast between *pensiero libero* and *libero pensiero* (For an analysis of these terms see, Cirese, 1982). Thus, to repeat, much of the mental apparatus of the *Quarderni* is already fleshed out in the young Gramsci.

Gramsci’s encounters with the free thinkers helped more clearly to define his unique position within Italian socialist political culture. In most respects he was outside its accepted boundaries. Gramsci was never prepared to accept the force-feeding of culture, ideology or language to the working class. Nor, for that matter, did he accept a naïve populist celebration of the parochialism of the province or the vanishing small-scale community. He did not praise the ‘childlike’ simplicity of the common people, as he believed the more fortunate classes in Italy had for too long possessed a monopoly on ‘real’ Italian and its humanist code, which controlled secondary and tertiary education. He was critical of Molinari’s efforts at vulgarization precisely because it they did not supply the lower classes with the mental equipment with which they could use to combat the dominance of the humanist middle-classes not only in society generally but within the PSI itself.

To assure that in a future socialist commonwealth the rank and file governed, therefore, educational reform was necessary. In a series of articles during the war, Gramsci analyzed the failure of the Italian education system: the dilution of the original meritocratic intent of the 1859 Casati Law and the ensuing dominance of the government by humanist graduates from the South (An excellent example is Gramsci, 1982, pp. 105-06). This in turn had led to an incompetent and anti-democratic corps of civil servants. Looking ahead, Gramsci’s form of universal education would reinstate the meritocratic promise of Casati through consensual discipline that the highly trained and autonomous minds embraced. The products of free thought were incapable of this consensual discipline that underwrote Gramsci’s ‘libertarian historicism’.

Having said this, there is also more than a dose of authoritarian condescension in Gramsci’s remedies. Gramsci dismissed Molinari’s efforts at vulgarization, but his efforts in the fields of science and history for over twenty years had been enormously influential amongst the less educated socialists and trade unionists (Masini). It is true that Gramsci won a loyal following of amongst self-educated workers in confabs at the editorial offices of *Il Grido del Popolo* and from his talks in the suburbs on Ibsen or Romain Rolland. There is much oral testimony to suggest he could earn the respect of workers, who were more than little suspicious of former university students (Levy, 1999, pp. 94-97). Witnesses concur that Gramsci was not a spellbinder and was therefore considered by conventional standards a poor speaker. But he in fact broke those conventions of socialist oratory in order to elicit discussion from his audience. His respect for his audience’s intelligence appealed to small groups of skilled and/or self-educated workers. They appreciated his respect for their technical terms and their practical industrial knowledge; and they were particularly attracted to his productivist rhetoric and prose, to his identification of themselves as the producers. However, on

the other hand it is difficult to see how they digested the digressions into Gentile or Croce found in his key texts such as the *La Città Futura*. Many of the self-educated veterans of the cooperative and labour movements such as Maria Giudice and Francesco Barberis found him a tiresome pedant (Levy, 1999, p. 99). And it should be recalled that the Schools of Moral Life seemed to imply a pecking order of consciousness, with the assumption that the lower middle class comrades were more prepared to imbibe in intellectual discussion than the suburban workers.

Perhaps Gramsci's Gentilean socialism was more libertarian than Lenin's type of scientific socialism, but it too assumed that an intellectual elite of trained socialists was needed to set the tone and parameters for effective politics. Furthermore, although Gramsci was prepared to work with and argue against the anarchists and syndicalists in more tolerant and engaging manner than Lenin had done, his attitude towards them did have some similarities with Lenin's vigilant guardianship of orthodoxy. Lenin's orthodoxy was his version of Second Internationalist gospel. Gramsci's odd mixture of Gentile, Croce, Sorel and Antonio Labriola may have made him appear wildly unorthodox to other Italian socialists, but this did not prevent Gramsci himself invoking orthodoxy when he discussed the potential for the formation of political alliances with the libertarians. In fact, in order to expose the muddleheaded nature of Italian positivist socialism, he argued that his approach was more Marxist and therefore more rigid in its conditions for accepting alliances with the libertarians. As we have seen, Gramsci argued that the culture of free thought had included the prewar socialists and the libertarians and his form of socialism, he argued transcended this murky embrace.

5. Gramsci and the Anarchists: the Barriers to Alliances

During the war a new international left arose from a fortuitous combination of mutually hostile groups: some were pacifist; some social democrat; some anarchists or syndicalist (For overviews see, Lindemann, 1974; Bertrand, 1977; Agosti, 1980, Sirianni, 1982, pp. 307-56; Kirby, 1986). A network of reciprocal influences developed in which intellectuals and journalists such as Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, Jacques Mesnil or Max Eastman transmitted ideas from one pole of the network to another. Gramsci is an excellent example of how observant radicals could tap into a network that was at once magnified and then rapidly diminished by the effects of the Bolshevik Revolution and the founding of the Third International. During the war this network was sustained by reportage in *Avanti!*, *L'Humanité*, the *Liberator* or the *Workers' Dreadnought*; by private correspondence, but above all by the imagery and myths surrounding international conferences at Zimmerwald and Kienthal, as well as over the controversies stirred by the never convened Stockholm Congress, called by the Petrograd Soviet in 1917.

While politicians and intellectuals attempted to mould mass movements from the initial radicalization of 1916-1918, differences quickly reappeared. Gramsci's debate with the anarchists and syndicalists is symptomatic of a broader story played out in the backdrop of the unfolding Russian events. But his peculiar theoretical background presents an interesting variation on a continental, indeed, global theme.

When Gramsci visited the suburbs he discovered the essence of what he understood to be proletarian unity (Levy, 1999, pp. 94-9). Or rather when he saw the suburbs march on the city in June 1914, during the Red Week (For this see, Lotti,

1972), which witnessed socialists, anarchists, syndicalists and republicans on the same side of the barricades, he understood what an alliance through common action might mean. An early article written in January 1916, just when he was honing his concept of pre-figuration through his articles on cooperation, recalls the Red Week, which deeply impressed him when he was still an uncertain university student (Gramsci, 1980, pp. 76-7). The prose is purple and Sorelian; the message is unity through direct action. Gramsci recalled the death of three demonstrators in the anarchist stronghold of Ancona, on a day ‘mockingly consecrated to constitutional liberty’ (it was the holiday that celebrated the constitution, which the House of Savoy had given Piedmont in 1848, and formed the basis of the constitution of the Kingdom of Italy). In Turin the reaction was immediate: ‘our city made through military order and tradition’, a city centre of looming piles of aristocratic townhouses, arrayed ‘like a regiment of the army of their old Savoyard Dukes’, witnessed the march past of well-ordered proletarian ranks. ‘Coarse men descended on the city boulevards and marched in front of the closed shop shutters, past the pale little men of the city police who were consumed by anger and fear.’

Continually, these Sorelian images of the gruff, productive working class marching from its suburban strongholds to the challenge clerical or parasitical café society are present in Gramsci’s writings. The examples include the banned May Day demonstrations of 1916, anti-clerical demonstrations at an unpopular priest’s church in one of the suburbs, the anti-war demonstrations of young anarchists and socialists from September to November of 1916, and the national campaign to save the Ital-American anarcho-syndicalist (Wobbly) Carlo Tresca from the American electric chair.

Gramsci opposed politically inspired united fronts of socialists and anarchists in Turin or nationally. Between 1916 and early 1918, Gramsci took part in a debate in the Italian socialist press on this subject, sparked off by the private and public exchanges of the anarchist Luigi Fabbri and the leading maximalist socialist Serrati (See summary in Levy, 1999, pp. 102-03). Indeed another maximalist socialist, Spartaco Lavagnini, proposed a syndicalist-style Third International to replace the discredited Second International. The railway worker Lavagnini was on very good terms with the anarchist leaders of the syndicalist *Unione Sindacale Italiana*, and its newspaper, *Guerra di Classe*, where, it should be recalled Enrico Leone had published an article that sparked off Gramsci discussion of cultural enlightenment and an early theoretical discussion of hegemony. The syndicalists’ newspaper was published in Florence in 1917-18. Lavagnini and the legal counsel for the anarchist-tinged railway workers union, Mario Trozzi, both wrote for *Guerra di Classe*. Trozzi’s legal study was used for a meeting of socialist ‘rigids’ in November 1917, at which Gramsci was a participant.

Lavagnini’s intervention is a good example of the international network of anti-war radicals at work. Inspired by a letter from Errico Malatesta’s, the greatest Italian anarchist and chief organizer of the Red Week, from his exile in London to Armando Borghi, Lavagnini endorsed Malatesta’s proposal for a new international (*La Mondiale*) that would include anti-war socialist, anarchists and syndicalists. It would heal the schism caused by the expulsion of the libertarians from the Second International in 1896 but any case would have had little in common with the militarized disciplined organization that Lenin would found in 1919.

Gramsci’s intervention in the debate was pitched at two levels. First, Gramsci wanted to contest the commonly held opinion in the Italian socialist left that anarchists or syndicalists were more revolutionary and ‘purer’ socialists than the

socialist themselves. Recalling an earlier debate with Enrico Leone, revolutionary politics, he wrote, should not be equated with gladiatorial posturing or with ‘violent language’, as the chequered history of Italian syndicalism had demonstrated the pitfalls of this approach (Gramsci, 1980, pp. 360-1). Gramsci also wanted to distance his socialism from Lavagnini’s heterodoxy. Not only did the antiparlamentarianism of Malatesta and the anarchists pose an obstacle to formal unity, their mentality, recalling his arguments against free thought, was ahistorical and doctrinaire. International organizations such as Malatesta’s *La Mondiale* undermined Gramsci’s conception of socialist politics. The concept of pre-figuration may have evolved in Gramsci’s theory by 1917, before he encountered the Soviet model, but his type of pre-figuration, while not Leninist was still linked to the well-organized and distinctive socialist party. And external discipline through umbrella organizations such as Malatesta’s *La Mondiale* undermined this key tenet of Gramsci’s conception of politics.

Only an internal discipline would fuse *en masse* the members of the party, and that was the result of agreement between ‘thought and action’ and by the coherence between ‘general principles and the interpretations of particular contingencies’ (Gramsci, 1982, pp. 467-7). But this was a party not founded on the culture of free thought or positivist socialism: the consensual discipline of a party founded on the educational principles of Gramsci’s ‘clubs of moral life’, linked to the creativity of pre-figurative institutions such as the cooperatives, would produce a distinctive socialist politics.

Joint agreements with the anarchists and syndicalists were based on the exigencies of the moment and they were, in short, the type of working-class action expressed in the Red Week of 1914, that touchstone of Gramsci’s radicalism before the Turinese rising of 1917 and the Bolshevik Revolution supplanted it.

6. The Early Gramsci and the Gramsci of the *Biennio Rosso*

I have argued that just as Gramsci’s key conceptions were already operating in his mind before 1918, his attitudes towards the anarchists and syndicalists were already operationalised before he worked closely with them on *L’Ordine nuovo*. Thus, as I have shown elsewhere, anarchist ‘organic intellectuals’ were cultivated but anarchist ‘traditional intellectuals’, the friends and colleagues of Molinari, were denounced as muddled, pernicious demagogues. Just as the Sorelian and productivist legacy were so important to catalyze Gramsci pre-figurative and civil-society based type of socialism of pre-1917/18, his council communism of 1919-1920 was merely a variation on this theme reinforced by international examples. The libertarian productivist Taylorism of an anarchist engineer was the lynchpin, which held together the council communism of 1919-1920, and anarchist metalworkers in FIOM were absolutely essential to propagate the ideas of *L’Ordine Nuovo* throughout the movement in its Turinese industrial heartland. When Gramsci fell out with his colleagues, Tasca, and then Togliatti, over the boundaries between union and factory council, his only remaining allies were the anarchists. The arguments Gramsci advanced in the early war years were merely repeated and placed in a more super-charged and propitious atmosphere, the vehicle of pre-figuration, the factory council came into its own, even if the theory was fleshed out in his discussion of cooperatives in 1916.

One benchmark did change, however, and is a clue to his uncritical acceptance of Lenin’s way, even after his earlier misinterpretation of Lenin (temporary, necessary

charismatic *capo* of a system of Soviets and workers' councils), rather than the dictator of a monopoly party-state. And this is linked to his criticism of Masonic Free Thought, which reformist socialists, most maximalist socialists and the anarchists all suffered from. Gramsci's evaluation of Jacobinism changed drastically from the war years to 1920. Jacobinism is a key conceptual benchmark, which measures how Gramsci's politics grew increasingly authoritarian in the years following the Bolshevik Revolution. But at first Jacobinism was not used in the context of Russian politics, but that of prewar Italian political culture. He used it in the same breath as his invocation of Sorel's, and Croce's attacks on the culture of Masonic free thought. Jacobinism 'is a messianic vision of history: it always responds in abstractions, evil, good, oppression, liberty, light, shade, which exist absolutely, generically and not in historical forms (Gramsci, 1984, p.149).' In other words like free thought, Jacobinism lacked grounding in historicism.

But by 1920 Jacobinism was associated with revolutionary Paris heroically seeing off the internal and external enemies of the Revolution, just as the Bolsheviks fought a civil and external war against the myriad enemies of their new state. Jacobinism took on a different valence when Gramsci approached the question of city and the countryside in Italy (in various and indeed contradictory forms appearing in his essay on the *Mezzogiorno* or his approach to the NEP and even war communism and later forced collectivization). Jacobins were therefore pitiless against the enemies of the Revolution but also strengthened by forming alliances with those elements in the countryside open to accepting their political hegemony. Similarly, Gramsci argued for the hegemony of the PCdI over peasant, syndicalist or autonomist movements in the South, not for an open-ended support for competitors in the rural Left: he was not a pluralist. His early mistaken praise of Cernov is replaced by venomous attacks on the SRs and Makhno's 'anarchist experiment' in Civil-War Ukraine. He endorsed Bukharin's NEP and as a manifestation of alliance of city and countryside based on the hegemony of the Soviet Communist party and as far we can tell Stalin's war on the countryside using these same first premises. The anti-Jacobinical socialism of pre-1918, the negative interpretation of the Jacobins he learnt from Croce, Salvemini or Sorel, is replaced by a praise of their rigour and their successful linkage to the 'healthy' forces in the countryside. No longer socially divorced pedants, arid ideological fanatics or the imbibers of shallow anti-clerical positivist nostrums, Jacobins represent the creative but implacable Bolshevik elite, which Gramsci never abandoned, even if he probably agreed that Stalin has become a cruel tyrant, a Genghis Khan with a telephone, as his former ally in the 1920s, Bukharin, described him.

As Gramsci endorsed all things Bolshevik, particularly the *Twenty-One Points*, he became increasingly militantly anti-anarchist. However, throughout the early 1920s, he was placed in a dilemma tactically. Before the suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion, the suppression of all factions in the Russian Communist Party, and the failure of negotiations between various syndicalist trade unions and the Comintern, Gramsci had to tread carefully. While he mercilessly criticized the leadership of *Unione Sindacale Italiana*, he could not burn all his bridges, since the Russians saw merit in cultivating the Italian anarchists and syndicalists, especially when a pro-Comintern faction was formed in the USI itself. In Turin his anarchist allies were marginalized in FIOM after the occupation of the factories and some were murdered by the Fascists in late 1922, but before the March on Rome and indeed until 1925/1926, Gramsci saw merit in keeping feelers open to the social interventionist Left, D'Annunzio and even briefly with the suspiciously libertarian *Arditi del Popolo*,

the only anti-fascist militia in these years which caused Mussolini and the Fascists some concern. But while Gramsci and his comrades maintained a none-stop tirade against the 'child-like' antics of Malatesta and Borghi, Zinoviev and even Lenin, recognized in Malatesta a revolutionary, and in Borghi a man to be wooed in Moscow. Gramsci reverted to the same twin-track approach he used in 1916: organic intellectual anarchists good: 'traditional' intellectual anarchists bad, and chose to finesse the tactical cunning of the Russians as much as possible.

7. Anarchism as the Highest Form of *Sovversivismo* (Levy, 2007)

In the Notebooks, Gramsci engages in historical and comparative sociological examination of the modern world and particularly the collapse of Liberal Italy and the destruction of the Left within it. Thus the nature of Italian Fascism and its enduring success is the red thread, which runs throughout his notes. The failure of the Left *and* the triumph of Fascism and its transformation of the Italian State are understood through the term *sovversivismo*. This term may be taken as a tool of historical and sociological analysis, but it is drenched with highly partisan political first premises that assume that the Gramsci's historicist Marxism offers a master-key for unlocking the secrets of the past as well as the solutions for the Left in the future. He may have been writing the notes for eternity, and it is unlikely he would have sanctioned their publication in the form they were produced, but he certainly had not left his politics at the cell door. Even if there was good deal of frustration and perhaps justifiable paranoia about party comrades and the murderous ways of the Georgian tyrant, he was still a militant Marxist who wrote in such a spirit. The troubling aspect of Gramsci's historicizing Marxism is that mere empiricism and 'information' is looked upon as the greatest of mortal sins. In short, unlike the rather inelegant, plodding notes of Angelo Tasca on utopian socialism and anarchism that are deposited in Milan's *Biblioteca Feltrinelli*, for example, Gramsci did not yet facts get in the way of theory

The *Prison Notebooks* contain startling recollections of entire passages or their essence from journalism of twenty years previously. Naturally these recollections were reinforced by his university training, and his prison reading, which was on the one hand rather rigorous, but on the other due naturally to the obvious constraints, hit and miss. For instance, there has been much written about Gramsci's analysis of the Southern Question. But this essay is a brilliant revisiting of Salvemini's arguments (very little new empirical evidence is presented to back it up), laced with a party political message, and coupled with a lament for Italy's missed revolution (s). Similarly when he addressed the history of Italian anarchism and syndicalism, he had to rely on the dubious Michels and Italian positivists and some echoes of the sounder Nello Rosselli.

Gramsci was less concerned with an in-depth account of the anarchists and syndicalists so much to use them in his construction of the all-purpose analytical term *sovvervisimo*. But this had been honed from his debates with the anarchists and syndicalists before 1921, and bore all the traces of a political term of art or possibly an artifice of historicist metaphysics. Just as detailed knowledge of the factory councils and Soviets and the Bolsheviks did not prevent Gramsci from creating a fantastically libertarian Lenin in the early years of the Russian regime, lack of detailed analysis of the anarchists and syndicalists before 1926 in Italy, did not prevent him from shoe-horning them in his neat and political charged term, *sovverisivismo*. This is frustrating, because the term certainly has its uses as a tool to interrogate that

anarchist past, but as a provisional probe, an ideal-type, not as a form of political abuse.

An interest in the history of anarchism is apparent in the pages of *L'Ordine nuovo*, however the journal's chief historian was not Gramsci, but Angelo Tasca, who demonstrated an in-depth if rather unsympathetic understanding of the utopian socialists and the anarchists. A series of pedantic debates over the interpretation of the history of schools of libertarian socialism saw Tasca take on a variety of anarchists in the pages of the journal (Levy, 1999). Gramsci's interest throughout his life was to contrast the political and intellectual poverty of anarchism to that of historicist Marxism, not dig deeply into its history. In this respect both Gramsci and the young Togliatti, had less grounding and 'feel' for the culture or the social movement in which Tasca and his self-educated anarchist adversaries were born into.

Whereas Tasca was the son of a railway worker, who cut his teeth within the positivism socialist, free-thinking sub-culture of ante-bellum Northern Italy, Gramsci and Togliatti hailed from the vast and variegated lower to middle-middle classes. There was a certain inherent snobbishness in Gramsci's criticism of the *Università Popolare* or Togliatti dismissal of the 'red baronies' of the Po Valley (ironic, indeed, because those plodding baronies would be inherited by the PCI after 1945 and retain a presence as a pale after-glow in the post-post communist left today). Gramsci and Togliatti were impatient and embarrassed by the socialist and anarchist culture of free-thought and self-education. Of course there were many weaknesses in this culture, and Gramsci made acute and painfully accurate, sarcastic remarks about these throughout his career, but he lacked empathy for this culture, which makes him a hostile witness when he reflects on the failure of the Left in general and the 'subversive' Left in particular in the *Notebooks*. Unlike Edward Thompson, Gramsci did not want to save the anarchists and syndicalists from the condescension of history! Later Togliatti thinking of formidable anarchist competition in the newly born Spanish Second Republic, realized that the anarchists were close to the heart and soul of pre-Fascist socialism, so when Malatesta died in 1932, Togliatti's obituary during the height of Stalinist Third Period sectarianism, was balanced and thoughtful. And the Party cultivated the next likely generation of anarchists from their heartlands of Tuscany, Liguria, Rome etc, when Fascism undermined the continuity of anarchism and victories of the Red Army in the East lent the Russian model great prestige.

For Gramsci the Italian concept of the subversive and *sovversivismo* were based on a populist positioning, of the people pitched against an ill-defined *signori*. This *sovversivismo* was a product of Italy's bastard modernity. Subversives could come from the Left and Right, and there even was a *sovversivismo* from above, and subversives could be reversible, as was the case of the social interventionists, who interested Gramsci when he was an editor in Turin. Thus a lack of modern political institutions, a weak ethical political culture and an incorrect reading of Marxism or social theory, especially amongst the anarchist and syndicalist subversives characterized these currents. The touchstone of his early radicalism, the Red Week of 1914, and Malatesta, became symbolic of this type of Italian radicalism. But the ghost at this banquet was his gaoler, and Gramsci felt this personally, for had been drawn into politics partially by the socialist and Stirnerite Mussolini, and as is well known, almost spoiled his copy book, by his torturous flirtations with Mussolini's war interventionism.

Sovversivismo, Gramsci argued, fed off the role of volunteers, since Garibaldi toppled the Bourbon Kingdom and set in train the Piedmont conquest of the peninsula. The anarchists were merely one variation on this theme, which included the

republicans but also of course the fascist militia of the early 1920s. The state was nourished by reformed *sovversivi* from Crispi to Mussolini. The dependence on charismatic politics, reflected in the anarchist and socialist leaders of pre-Fascist Italy, demonstrated the low level of education of the Italian people and weakly constructed institutions of the socialist and labour movement.

But anarchists, such as Errico Malatesta, were well aware of the dangers of hero worship (Levy 1998; Levy forthcoming). Similarly he preached organization, organization and more organization. Anarchism, Malatesta argued was not about the lack of organization, which was essential if anarchists were serious about dealing with the exigencies of the modern industrial city. He may have been naïve, but Malatesta pleaded with the factory occupiers in 1920 to recommence trade with other factories without the capitalist state. For the Gramsci, the lesson one learnt from the factory occupations was that ‘the spontaneity in the factory council movement was not neglected, even less despised. It was *educated*, directed, purged of extraneous contamination; the aim was to bring it into line with modern theory.’ But nowhere in Gramsci do we find an open acknowledgement of the authoritarianism of Communism and possibility that socialism had failed to take another more libertarian path in the way the tarnished Tasca did in the preface to his post-war edition of his wonderful history of the rise of Fascism, where he invoked the libertarian potential of the pre-Fascist Chambers of Labour. When Gramsci recalled another exemplar of Italian grassroots socialism, the factory councils, their most important contribution was not their inherent democracy, but their contribution to ‘modern theory’.

One can reconstruct a Gramscian critique of the Stalinist Soviet Union but he never questioned the Marxist monopoly on thought and action and he never granted the anarchists the title of gadflies of the revolution, their warnings about the untrammelled powers of the new Soviet state were never accepted by Gramsci even in his deepest pessimistic moments, because their way of thinking was alien to his very being.

8. After 1945

There is an epilogue to this story. It is the many seasons of Gramsci, which followed the defrosting of the Italian left after Stalin’s death and it is mainly centred on the increasingly open-minded nature of Italian communist labour and socialist historiography. But there is another story, which needs more evacuation. This involves dissident socialists engaging Togliatti in the wake of Khrushchev’s revelations and the Hungarian Revolution, where the factory councils of 1919-1920 were rediscovered, and their libertarian nature reevaluated. This had followed the anarchist historian Pier Carlo Masini’s short pamphlet on the role of the anarchists in the Turinese movement of 1919-1920, and the pioneering study of the historiography of Italian anarchism and syndicalism by the veteran *Azionista*, Leo Valiani. Much of this debate was forgotten in 1968-69, as forty-nine varieties of Marxism, Trotskyism, Maoism and *Operaismo* (which was densely Marxist and involved few if any workers in its intellectual leadership), criticized the PCI for its timid reformism and its remnant Stalinism, but certainly did not repudiate Marxist-Leninist core values. The Communists may have been too timid or too national populist but they shared a common inheritance with these youngsters. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s, with the emergence of new generation of historians, not directly linked to the Communists or Christian Democrats or traditional liberal area, that anarchists and syndicalists received their own historians in the shape of Maurizio Antonioli (and *Rivista storica*

dell'anarchismo) and later in the 1990s and to the present, an even more recent generation, which has embraced a much less politicized form of social history.

But it is interesting to note that one can detect a change in tone amongst the chief Communist experts on anarchism as the party traveled towards its more liberal Eurocommunist public persona. An instructive essay could be written, for instance, on the transformation of Enzo Santarelli, a Communist historian of the Marches and of Errico Malatesta, and the author of a small but influential history of anarchism that was the Communist alternative to the works of Pier Carlo Masini. Whereas Masini was Tasca reborn, very empirical and rather tolerant of the pre-war positivist free thinking culture, Santarelli's impressive archival work in the 1950s and 1960s was always distorted by conclusions dictated by Gramscian Leninist orthodoxy. Although, for instance, he clearly demonstrated the popularity and dexterity of Malatesta in Ancona in 1898, he could not end his account without a ritual dismissal of the child-like 'subversiveness' of the anarchist's politics. But this approach changes in the 1973 edition of his history of Italian anarchism originally published in 1959 where a levelheaded evaluation prevails. By the 1970s, leading Communist historians (notably Giovanni Procacci) were prepared to agree that Gramsci's characterization of Italian syndicalism, as largely a Southern movement, was empirically misleading and distorted by political considerations. Indeed, two conferences under the auspices of party historians were important turning points for a balanced study of Italian syndicalism (Levy 2000). If the era of the *compromesso storico* left little of tangible benefit, it certainly did free Italian historians from the constraints imposed by a ritual acceptance of Gramsci's formulaic *sovversivismo*.