

Converti, Nicolò, 1855–1939 and anarchism in Tunisia

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Born in Roseto Capo Spulico (in the province of Cosenza, Calabria) on 18 March 1855, his parents were Leonardo and Elisabetta Aletta, both from well-off families. He attended primary school in Calabria and moved to Naples to attend high school, where his teacher for the final year was Giovanni Bovio. He went on to university to study medicine, though he did not graduate — as he said to A[ndrea]Costa (with whom he would always remain friends) — until several years later in 1909 when, after a long spell in Tunis, the city he was to choose as his principal residence, he returned to Italy for the first time.

Becoming attracted to the ideas of libertarian socialism, which were widely known in Naples thanks to the influence of Bakunin who had lived in the town, he became friends with E[milio] Covelli and other Neapolitan militants. He joined the International, quickly becoming the most active member of the Neapolitan group, and carried on intense propaganda activity, both with contributions to the existing press at the time and with the creation of new bulletins. In 1878 he joined the editorial board of the periodical “Il Masaniello” a fortnightly which, in seeking to fill the gap left by the move of the weekly “L’Anarchia” to Florence, favoured an alliance with the authoritarian socialists. The newspaper, however, was short-lived and after nine issues, each systematically impounded by the police, it suspended publication.

Relations between CConverti and the other Internationals, however, did not come to an end, and led to the founding of the “Pisacane” circle, with Converti as secretary and Merlino as treasurer; there were also several projects, such as one to print a Neapolitan anarchist newspaper (entitled “La Campana”), reviving the previous newspaper and founding a newspaper to counter the positions of Costa. Both plans went awry, partly as a result of clashes amongst the workers among the members, who favoured policies linked to the particular problems of labour but who often lacked the ability to think in wider terms, and the “intransigently” anarchist intellectuals, who were all given to utopistic dreaming and were often unable to reconcile “final goals and intermediate objectives”.

In May 1885, Converti published “Il Piccone” in brochure format (as it lacked the necessary authorization). It was an anarchist communist newspaper that was quite rigorous with both the legalitarian socialists and Costa, and with the Republicans, who were in those years of irredentism, held to be the most dangerous elements to the anarchist cause. But his forced departure

for France meant that he left the Neapolitan anarchist movement in difficulty (and indeed the movement would henceforth become indistinguishable from the socialist movement and radical democracy in general), halting publication of the newspaper for a month and only succeeding in recommencing, until November, thanks to an editorial team composed entirely of students.

Though by now out of Italy, C. also supported “Il Demolitore”, the newspaper of the Neapolitan “Il Lavoratore” Circle, in which he published a letter written together with G(aetano?) Grassi where the two anarchists took a strong position in favour of a modern revolutionary organization. He contributed to the Milan magazine, “Rivista internazionale del socialismo” (in which he published an article entitled “La proprietà” [“Property”]), to the Pesaro weekly “In Marcia” and to other anarchist-inspired periodicals, including “Il Proletario” from Palermo, in which he published an article entitled Anarchia [“Anarchy”] that concluded by saying “anarchy without communism is impossible”. A turning point in his life came in 1885 when, having been sentenced to 22 months in prison for signing “a manifesto by the International (the last to be published in Italy) signed by over 300 delegates of branches and federations”, for which “only about fifteen were tried” and “appeals were lodged just to give enough time for the accused to flee the country” (“L’Adunata dei refrattari”, 28 Oct. 1939, p.5), he took the decision to leave Italy.

Embarking at Livorno, he took refuge in Corsica and then moved to southern France, first at Nice, where he shifted the editorial line of the newspaper “Lo Schiavo” to one of revolutionary anarchism, and then in Marseilles. Here he would once again begin to engage in revolutionary propaganda and with the help of some Italian and French anarchists, he founded the “L’Internationale anarchiste”, which eventually came out on the 16 October 1886 after struggling to find funding. The newspaper, containing articles in both French and Italian, had a run of four issues and was quite an important novelty for the anarchist press.

As he wrote in the editorial, the paper set itself the task of “bringing an end to the hatred created and sustained by the bourgeois press between French and Italian workers”, and also the goal engaging in quality criticism of Republican institutions and doctrine.

These positions were later set out in the pamphlet “Repubblica ed Anarchia” (Tunis, 1889), which is the most important theoretical contribution by Converti and were also republished in the Italian press at the time. The programmatic elements of the pamphlet were rejected however, in particular by E. Matteucci in the Rome newspaper “L’Emancipazione”, and it was impounded by the authorities. Having failed to conclude an arrangement to contribute regularly to two medical journals in Paris, C. moved definitively to Tunis with his friend Grassi on 10 January 1887, once again leaving the Italian anarchist movement in southern France in difficulty.

Since the earliest period of the liberal movement during the years of the Risorgimento, the African city had become a place of refuge for numerous Italians (particularly Sicilians) suffering from political persecution, and was home to a community of bourgeois and illiterate proletarians who mixed readily with the locals and consisted of over 100,000 individuals by 1912. In this community, considered at the time to be a sort of African appendix to Italy’s territory and which was predominantly Italian-speaking, and thanks to the circle of friends he soon made (through his uncle, a bishop, according to some sources), Converti was to live the rest of his life, working with great dedication as a doctor in the local hospitals.

A note by the Prefect of Cosenza indicates that Converti graduated in medicine in Tunis thanks to favourable intervention by a cardinal. But having obtained his degree, his sterling work contributed to the extension of the Tunisian healthcare system -in his opinion far from being accept-

able — and setting up the “Green Cross” Relief Society [Società di soccorso “Croce Verde”], to the approval even of Muslims, an organization which he presided over for several decades.

Apart from his work as a doctor to the indigent, C. soon became one of the fathers of the Maghrebi workers movement, continuing his journalistic battles, remaining in contact with international libertarian circles, contributing to several Italian and foreign anarchist papers and publishing “L’Operaio” in 1887, a weekly that described itself as the mouthpiece of the anarchists of Tunis and Sicily. With simple language and a style which avoided emphasis and rhetoric, this “rag” — produced at the newspapers own press — attacked the two main Christian groups of the local bourgeoisie, the French and Italian, thus seeking to “shake the workers and the grey mass of the indifferent out of their apathy” about the exploitation being carried out by the larger companies. Later there followed a syndicalist newspaper, “La Voix de l’Ouvrier”, in which Converti busied himself by studying the causes of misery and possible cures for this curse.

At the same time, C. formed an active anarchist propaganda group, a real hive of conspiracy which was also set up in order to organize and aid Italian anarchists who had fled to Tunisia in order to escape forced residence [translator’s note: used as punishment for political crimes, but also as a preventive measure; it was not imprisonment or confinement, but one was forced to live in a certain place, usually an inaccessible spot or island and weren’t free to move away] in the various islands of Sicily (mainly Favignana and Pantelleria).

In 1896 he started the theoretical magazine “La Protesta umana”, whose contributors included well-known libertarian writers of the time such as A[ugustin] Hamon, L[uigi] Fabbri, A[milcare] Cipriani and P. Ravaggi. Converti published some of his own writings too, including a three-part essay, “Idee generali” (“General Ideas”), in which he polemicized with the German theoreticians of naturalism about the concept of the State, seen as the “brain” of the social body. There was also an important and vibrant protest in defence of some Italian anarchists who had fled their forced residence, landed on the shores of Tunisia and been handed over to the French and Italian authorities. After an interval of some time due to tax reasons, the magazine was moved for one issue (June 1897) to Macerata, qualifying it as the only anarchist publication [in Italy] at the time.

In order to spread his theories, C. did not disdain from writing for certain bourgeois democratic news-sheets in the years between 1894 and 1913; many French and Italian newspapers, anarchist or otherwise, published his articles concerning the debate on the political and economic organization of the working masses. These papers included: “La Petite Tunisie” from Tunis, “L’Avenir social” and “Le Courier”, both from Tunis, “L’Emancipateur” from Algiers, “Il Progresso” from Palermo, “Il Picconiere” from Marseilles, “L’Avvenire sociale” from Messina, all of which were anarchist papers; “Il Secolo” and “La Gazzetta” from Milan, “Il Momento” from Paris and also the “Unione” from Tunis, the official mouthpiece of the Italian community, founded by the Livornese.

In the early 1900s, there was a partial evolution in his revolutionary propaganda, partly due to the conditions of the Tunisian working class, who were the target of great attention from democratic circles, and this led to the creation of benevolent societies as well as a move towards the ideas and the parliamentarianism of Costa, who visited Tunis in December 1907 and who indicated in a letter his intention to see Converti after so many years. The meeting, if it did come about, was certainly decisive in the decision he made in 1913 when in Calabria to allow himself to be carried along by a vast popular movement that started in the Upper Ionian region of Cosenza province in order to bring attention to the need for certain types of infrastructure in the zone.

All this led him into toying with the idea of driving the masses into forms of direct political action and he created uproar in Italian and European anarchist circles by standing as a candi-

date in the Cassano Ionio constituency for the 26 October elections, on an anarchist-communist platform. His attempt naturally failed, despite a vigorous election campaign, and remained as a purely theoretical protest against the centralizing State.

Having returned once again to Tunis after a further journey of several weeks in November of that year to his own country, he dedicated himself to his work and family. He continued to work until the early 1930s as a doctor on the night shift at the Italian colonial hospital G. Garibaldi, which he had also helped to found. During the Fascist period he continued his activities, maintaining constant links with C[amillo] Berneri and anarchist and anti-fascist circles in France and America, and “in his few remaining writings, he returned to the volcanic phraseology of his early youth” ([A.] Riggio, [“Un libertario calabrese in Tunisia: N.C.”, in “Archivio storico per la Calabria e la Lucania,” nn. 1-4, 1947] p.87).

While noting that Converti was a die-hard, militant anarchist and “a declared adversary of the regime against which he speaks and writes quite frequently”, in March 1933 the Italian consul in Tunis (who had him closely watched in case he were to organize a mission to Italy “for unknown reasons”) rejected the possibility that “he [had it] in mind to come to Italy for any criminal intent”, even though he could be considered as an individual who was capable of providing aid of any kind to elements who may well commit criminal acts. On 14 August 1936 – according to the consul – he participated in a demonstration in support of the Spanish Popular Front and spoke out to declare his faith “in a better future for a regenerated, more fraternal humanity and to send his greetings to his comrades in Spain who are fighting for the triumph of liberty”.

He died in Tunis on 14 September 1939 and at his funeral, where he was eulogized by the anarchist Sapelli, the entire anti-fascist community of Tunisia turned out to salute him as one.

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