

Carlo Cafiero

Prophet of Anarchist Communism

Richard Drake

2003

Contents

Cafiero on Marxism	11
The Clash with Costa	14
On Revolution	16
Cafiero's Last Years	18

A part of the bourgeoisie is desirous of redressing social grievances, in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society.

Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*

Published history does not record when the men of the Cafiero family abandoned the sea of Naples to become landowners in Barletta on the Adriatic coast in the extreme South, but young Carlo, born in 1846, grew up on the family lore about his seafaring forebears. He never liked farming or his native Puglia and sought to escape as soon as possible to Naples, where in 1864 he began to study law at the university. Upon taking his degree, Cafiero briefly pursued a career in diplomacy. He moved to Florence, then the nation's capital, and began to make his way. Contemporaries described him as a wealthy, elegant, handsome, and well-educated young man with a seemingly limitless future before him. The choice of diplomacy, however, proved unfortunate. The diplomats and the politicians bored him. He did not have to work and soon quit his job.¹

For the next few years Cafiero took up and abandoned in rapid succession a series of intellectual interests, including Oriental languages and Islam. He had been interested in religion as a child, and his family had thought he might become a priest. They had sent him to a seminary in nearby Molfetta, but he had hated the place. Cafiero very early lost all interest in Catholicism and came to detest the Catholic Church as a repressive force in Italian life. He continued to be fascinated by religion, however, and to look for a variety of it that would satisfy him. While in Florence, Cafiero frequented the radical circle of Telemaco Signorini, a leading member of the Macchiaioli school of painters and with his caustic scenes of life in prisons, insane asylums, and houses of prostitution a severe critic of post-Risorgimento Italy.² This encounter seems to have been the beginning of the long road that would lead Cafiero to his life's work as a revolutionary. Still vague about his future, he set out for Paris and witnessed the last months of the Second Empire. From July 1870 to May 1871 Cafiero resided in London, where he entered the orbit of Marx and Engels. These leaders of the International Workingmen's Association dazzled him. Marx in particular struck him as the most brilliant man he had ever known. Despite the crises in their subsequent relationship, Marx's originality, as well as the energy and confidence with which he expressed himself, always compelled Cafiero's admiration.

For their part, Marx and Engels welcomed Cafiero to their cause. In Italy no Marxists of note had been found to combat the rival leftist theories of Bakunin and Mazzini. They asked him to go back to Italy — to Naples — where Bakuninists and Mazzinians held sway over the left. Cafiero accepted the offer, to become the special agent in Italy of the International's General Council, with all the enthusiasm of an idealistic youth who feels at last that the true meaning of his existence is about to be revealed to him. He left London on 12 May and arrived in Florence just as the Paris Commune went down to defeat. Soon afterward he made the journey to Naples and began sending reports of his activities back to London.

Cafiero's reports constitute the main documentary source of his activities in this period of Marxism's beginnings in Italy. In tone, they reflect the eager and upbeat boosterism of a young

¹ Pier Carlo Masini, *Cafiero* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1974), 12: written from a strongly pro-anarchist viewpoint, this is the most authoritative biography of Cafiero. Max Nettlau, *Bakunin e l'Internazionale in Italia: Dal 1864 al 1872* (Geneva: Edizione del Risveglio, 1928), 217.

² Albert Boime, *The Art of the Macchia and the Risorgimento: Representing Culture and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), introduction. The Macchiaioli were the approximate Italian counterparts of the French Impressionists.

branch manager's assurances to his superiors in the home office that the company product, in this case revolution, is moving briskly. Cafiero did not have to wait for Pasquale Villari's landmark exposé of Neapolitan poverty in his "Southern Letters" (1875) to learn about the city's deplorable conditions. He vividly commented on them in a letter of 28 June 1871 to Engels: "The great masses of the suffering exist in a state of barbarism, unconscious of every human progress, weighed down by the yoke, knowing nothing, believing firmly in being born to serve and to suffer on this earth, hoping to go on to enjoy the mercy of God in paradise [through the] intercession of the Most Holy Virgin and by virtue of the blessed blood of San Gennaro."³ All of the Italian South, he continued, lived in "a state of barbarism." He told Engels that the Spanish, the Bourbons, and the Catholic Church had created the tragedy of the South; now the government of Italy had come along with the vile mission of keeping this horrendous status quo substantially intact. Cafiero confidently predicted that the irrepressible force of class struggle would lead to revolution.

The class struggle to which Cafiero referred, however, was not the one that Marx had in mind. Backward Italy lacked an industrial proletariat, but it did have plenty of poor people as well as a class of vicious exploiters. The situation was pregnant with revolution, but who would deliver the baby: Marx, Mazzini, or Bakunin? These three doctors of revolution vied with one another to command the loyalty of the Italian left in the years after the Paris Commune. From the very beginning of his duties as the special agent in Italy of the General Council, Cafiero seems to have been drawn toward some kind of amalgamation between Marxism and Bakuninism. Mazzinianism he castigated without mercy. He ridiculed Mazzini's nationalist invocation of "God and People" as obscurantist nonsense. Mazzini's denunciation of the Paris Commune as a diabolical perversion of democratic values inspired Cafiero to flights of revolutionary invective. Completely oblivious to "the tyranny of capital," Mazzini had no understanding of the contemporary situation: "The poor old man cannot comprehend that he has had his day."⁴ About Bakunin, in contrast, Cafiero said nothing critical in his initial reports to London.

Engels duly expressed his appreciation for Cafiero's observations of the Italian scene. Yet he sought to bring Cafiero around to his point of view about the dangerousness of Bakunin's ideas. Cafiero's silence about anarchism plainly worried Engels. He repeatedly reminded his young agent that Mazzini was not the only enemy of true communism in Italy. Bakunin knew absolutely nothing about political economy, Engels charged. From this confusion about the economic basics of every political situation, all of Bakunin's many other errors stemmed. "Bakunin has his own theory," Engels concluded, "consisting in a mixture of communism and Proudhonism."⁵ Engels wanted Cafiero to show as much zeal in attacking the Bakuninists as he did the Mazzinians.

Cafiero did not see Bakuninism as a threat to Marxism at all. He wrote back to Engels on 12 July 1871: "Regarding Bakunin, I can assure you that he has many friends here in Naples who share many of his principles, who have with him a certain community of views, but that he has a sect, a party that dissents from the principles of the General Council, I can deny completely."⁶ In fact, Cafiero entertained a warm sympathy for the Bakuninists he knew in Naples and wanted to keep them in the International. He thought that the Bakuninists and the Marxists had much

³ Cafiero to Engels, 28 June 1871, in Giuseppe Del Bo, ed., *La corrispondenza di Marx e Engels con italiani* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1964), 18.

⁴ Cafiero to Engels, 12 June 1871, *ibid.*, 14.

⁵ Engels to Cafiero, 1 July 1871, *ibid.*, 20.

⁶ Cafiero to Engels, 12 July 1871, *ibid.*, 24.

more in common than either group cared to acknowledge. Cafiero saw his task as one of creating unity between them.

Engels would have none of Cafiero's assurances about the Bakuninists. On 16 July 1871 he insisted that "it would be better to do without them entirely." Engels encouraged Cafiero to find other allies in Naples. The Bakuninists were "a sect" within the International, he warned. Two weeks later he added: "the Bakuninists are a tiny minority in the Association and are the **only** ones who on every occasion cause dissension." He regarded the Swiss anarchists of Bakunin's immediate circle as the worst offenders against the unity of the International.⁷

Cafiero waited nearly two months to answer Engels and then did not respond to his attacks on Bakunin. Instead he described his run-ins with the Neapolitan police and their general campaign of repression against left-wingers of all stripes: "Here the government is in full reaction, and the malcontents grow in number day by day at a geometric rate, battenning on the plague of misery of the proletariat." He thought that "the most terrible social revolution" could break out at any time. The next month he explained to Engels that the misery of the peasants had made it possible for the International to sink "deep roots in Italy, and no force will ever be able to pull them up."⁸

On 29 November 1871 Cafiero at last tried to address Engels's complaints about Bakunin. He continued to insist that Engels's charges against the anarchist leader lacked a grounding in reality. Cafiero found in Bakunin's writings "words of profound esteem and respect for Marx." Indeed, Cafiero judged him to be an asset for the International: "Bakunin has many personal friends in Italy, having long lived here, and he corresponds with some of them. Because of his past [in Naples] and the continuous work he performs for our cause, he is loved even by many who do not know him personally."⁹

Engels responded to Cafiero's professions of admiration for Bakunin with a reproving silence. Cafiero tried to elicit a response from him on 21 January 1872, but Engels remained silent. By this time Cafiero had begun to waver in his Marxist political convictions. Marxism remained his basic frame of reference for an understanding of capitalism, but the social situation in which he found himself was pre-capitalist. Marx's ideas about capitalism and the industrial proletariat did not apply to nineteenth-century Naples. Bakunin's ideas about the revolutionary potential of the peasants and the lumpenproletariat did.

Gradually during his 1871–1872 stay in Naples Cafiero reached the conclusion that he could no longer serve as the special agent of Marx and Engels. Accompanied by the Neapolitan anarchist Giuseppe Fanelli, he met with Bakunin in Locarno, Switzerland, on 20 May 1872. Cafiero reacted to Bakunin with the same kind of admiring declarations that he had made a year earlier to Marx, only this time his emotions, as well as his mind, were engaged. Bakunin had lived the revolution; Marx had only written about it. To unrivaled charisma as a revolutionary leader Bakunin added enormous personal charm, something else at which Marx could not match him.

Yet another advantage on Bakunin's side was his first-hand knowledge of Naples and the political dynamics there. Bakunin's connections to Italy went back to his father, who had been a student at the University of Padua and had been stationed in Florence and Turin as a diplomat. Beginning in the 1840s, Bakunin had known numerous Risorgimento patriots and, though differing from them ideologically, he shared their dream of overthrowing the hated Congress of

⁷ Engels to Cafiero, 16 July 1871, *ibid.*, 30; 28 July 1871, *ibid.*, 34.

⁸ Cafiero to Engels, 10 Sept. 1871, *ibid.*, 42; 18 Oct. 1871, *ibid.*, 53.

⁹ Cafiero to Engels, 29 Nov. 1871, *ibid.*, 94, 96.

Vienna status quo. He had lived in Florence in 1864 and 1865 and then in Naples until 1867. In Naples he found “a fertile breeding ground for the subterranean intrigues so dear to his heart.”¹⁰ Attaching himself to the circle of Italian and foreign revolutionaries subsidized by Princess Zoe Obolensky – a radical émigré who found life more congenial in Italy than in her native Russia – Bakunin encountered numerous alienated intellectuals. He soon became the ideological leader of that group. During this Neapolitan sojourn he developed some of his most distinctive ideas about the exceptional revolutionary potential of the peasants and the lumpenproletariat, making many converts to the cause of anarchism. He thought that Italy could collapse at any moment and wrote numerous articles, essays, and letters in support of revolution.

The key to the Italian situation, Bakunin claimed, was the intellectual class, which he described as “completely adrift, without prospects, and with no way out.” These individuals had come from the bourgeoisie but were entirely alienated from it. They now served as “the most ardent, sincere, audacious, and tireless” advocates of revolution. He saw them as the shock troops of anarchism.¹¹

Following Princess Obolensky, Bakunin left Italy for Switzerland in August of 1867. His activities in Switzerland during the late 1860s and early 1870s continued to arouse Marx’s suspicions. Cafiero had failed to smooth over the differences between the two men and now had to choose between them. He remained in Locarno for a month in the late spring of 1872, and by the time he returned to Italy Bakunin had made a thoroughgoing anarchist of him.

Back in Italy, Cafiero wrote a letter of leave-taking to Engels. He blurted out the truth of his meeting with Bakunin: “After a few moments of conversation we realized that both of us were in complete accord on principles.” Under Bakunin’s tutelage, he had come to see the oppressiveness inherent in the dictatorship of the proletariat concept: “Now, my dear friend, permit me to speak to you with frankness. Your **communist program** is, for me, in its positive aspect a great reactionary absurdity.” Cafiero now professed to have a horror of the state in all of its forms, including the state of the workers.¹²

Engels had kept his silence for nearly a year, but now he sent Cafiero a brutal letter. He accused Cafiero of showing his letters to Bakunin. The 10 May 1872 issue of the *Bulletin jurassien* had carried an article about odious calumnies written by Engels to friends in Italy. Engels knew exactly who these “friends” were. “I have not written letters to anyone in Italy except to you,” he icily declared. Cafiero, therefore, had to be the source of this embarrassing disclosure. What, Engels wondered, had he done to deserve such a betrayal from one he always had treated “with extreme sincerity and confidence”? Cafiero did not respond.¹³

Now Bakunin’s man in Italy, Cafiero set about helping the other anarchists to purge the few elements of Marxism remaining in Italy. At a 46 August 1872 congress in Rimini, the anarchists called for a complete break with the London-based General Council. Cafiero, as Bakunin’s favorite, served as the president of this meeting. Another of Bakunin’s Italian lieutenants, Andrea Costa, became the secretary for the congress. The Bakuninists completely dominated the proceedings at Rimini, and it surprised no one when the delegates voted to break with the General Council. They further decided to create an international association of their own with anarchists from other European countries, and this new organization came into being later that year at Saint

¹⁰ E. H. Carr, *Michael Bakunin* (New York: Vintage, 1937), 4, 329.

¹¹ Nettlau, *Bakunin e l’Internazionale in Italia*, 167, 248, 211, 212.

¹² Cafiero to Engels, 12 June 1872, in Del Bo, ed., *La corrispondenza*, 221, 220.

¹³ Engels to Cafiero, 14 June 1872, *ibid.*, 227, 228.

Imier, Switzerland, where Cafiero acted as the co-president of the congress. Plagued by these and other defections, the Marx- and Engels-led International slipped into a moribund state that ended in formal dissolution.

Cafiero, still only 26 in 1872, received such recognition at the congresses of Rimini and Saint Imier in large part because of his role as the chief financial sponsor of the anarchist movement. He became Bakunin's new patron, taking over from Princess Obolensky when her estranged husband cut off the generous allowance that he had been sending to Italy and then to Switzerland. Cafiero paid the expenses for many of the delegates. From this time on he put his immense fortune entirely at Bakunin's service. In the following year he bought Bakunin "la Baronata," a villa in Switzerland, the repair and improvement of which over the next year drained him of most of his remaining money.

At first he appears to have shed his fortune with the gladness of a man leaving a leper colony, cured at last of a condition that had put him beyond the pale of the only company he truly prized, that of the poor. The curse of money had ruined him, he thought, as it did everyone in one way or another. There can be no doubt about the fervency of his belief in Bakunin's ideas as the world's best chance of ending the money curse forever. Nevertheless, personal animosity eventually arose between the two men as Cafiero came to suspect Bakunin of extravagance and a most un-anarchist-like devotion to the material well-being of his young wife, Antonia.¹⁴

Meanwhile, Cafiero purchased more than 250 military rifles and pistols for the uprising that he and Bakunin felt certain could occur at any moment. All over Italy, worsening economic conditions and unemployment sparked angry demonstrations. With other anarchist leaders, notably Costa and a very youthful Errico Malatesta (1853-1932), Cafiero and Bakunin tried to coordinate a national plan of action for August of 1874. In a propaganda statement written by Cafiero, the anarchists announced that the redemption of Italy's peasants was at hand. The conspirators envisaged simultaneous outbreaks of revolutionary violence in Tuscany, the Marches, Lazio, Puglia, the Campania, and Sicily, with the epicenter in Bologna where Bakunin himself would lead operations. The authorities, however, knew about the conspiracy from the beginning. They arrested Costa, the insurrection's chief organizer in Italy, before a single shot could be fired. Worse, the peasants — the intended beneficiaries of the uprising — refused to accept the Bakuninists as liberators and betrayed them to the police, who crushed the conspiracy with ease. Bakunin ignominiously fled the scene disguised as a priest. Most of the other leaders ended up in jail. The fiasco of August 1874 did enormous damage to the prestige of the anarchist movement in Italy.¹⁵

In Russia to be with a revolutionary named Olimpia Kutusov during the spring and early summer of 1874, Cafiero did not participate in the Bologna uprising. He had met Olimpia at the Baronata and then had gone to Russia to marry her. He did not marry for love, but only to give Olimpia asylum in the West when Russian officials attempted to detain her as a subversive. Although Cafiero struck many of the people who have left descriptions of him as a warm and personable man, he was absorbed completely by his life's work. Olimpia interested him not as a woman but as a comrade. His passion he appears to have reserved in its entirety for the cause.¹⁶

Quarrels over the Baronata and the disastrous outcome of the 1874 uprising badly damaged Cafiero's relationship with Bakunin, who died two years later. The two men were eventually rec-

¹⁴ T. R. Ravindranathan, *Bakunin and the Italians* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), 196.

¹⁵ Masini, *Cafiero*, 125. Max Nettlau, *Errico Malatesta: Vita e pensieri* (New York: Casa Editrice "Il Martello," 1927), 109. Nunzio Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism, 1864-1892* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 9095.

¹⁶ Masini, *Cafiero*, ch. 9.

onciled, but Bakunin never again had a commanding presence in Cafiero's life. Cafiero resumed his restless search for the truth of revolution. In 1875 he began a brief but significant association with *La Plebe*, the first daily socialist newspaper in Italy. He proved not to be a very good journalist. Never a facile writer, he struggled with the demands of daily newspaper work. He claimed to prefer manual labor anyway, which he thought more noble than phrasemaking. The once wealthy playboy now had to work for a living, and he took any job he could get, including emptying the trash at a hotel. No matter. His inner life teemed with significance for him.

An article that Cafiero did get published in *La Plebe* in November 1875 provides an idea of that inner life. In "The Times Are Not Yet Ripe," Cafiero revealed his boundless and ever youthful passion for revolution. The times are never ripe for revolution, he began, unless one is a real revolutionary. Many people who claim to be revolutionaries care only to strike a revolutionary pose while simultaneously accepting, as a practical matter, the reality of the status quo. He condemned liberal progressives as the worst enemies of genuine progress.

They could always be counted on to complain passionately about the evils of society without for a moment wishing to change anything in a systemic way. These professional keepers of society's moral conscience accepted the validity of revolution in principle. They could all think of revolutions they would support, but not the one that Italy needed right now. That particular revolution frightened them because it would end the status quo in which they ensconced themselves, really enjoying the best of both worlds, as morally superior critics of the establishment on which their physical ease and social status depended. To such individuals the times were never ripe for revolution, only for talk about it, for the beautiful gesture of defiance, at which they excelled, perhaps even convincing themselves of their sincerity and worth as paladins of suffering humanity. For the real revolutionary, though, "the times are always ripe to strike at injustice." There was no time like the present, Cafiero concluded, to begin the crusade for the recovery of "the greater part of humanity that languishes **without thought, without dignity, without life.**"¹⁷

After his rupture with Bakunin, Cafiero's closest collaborator long remained Emilio Covelli, also from Puglia but at that time living in Naples. From similar class backgrounds, Covelli and Cafiero had been born in the same year and had studied first at the seminary in Molfetta and then at the law faculty of the University of Naples. The paths of the two young men diverged at last upon their graduation from the university. Cafiero joined the diplomatic corps in Florence, and Covelli continued his academic studies at two German universities: Heidelberg and Berlin. At the University of Berlin, Covelli attended the lectures of Eugen Dühring, a socialist thinker in conflict with Marx over the role of class in history and many other issues as well. In this way, Covelli came into contact with Marx's thought. He did not share Dühring's negative assessment of Marx. Indeed, Covelli wrote an admiring review of *Capital* for the *Rivista Partenopea* of Naples, the first notice in Italy of Marx's masterpiece. In addition, he wrote other articles about Marx's ideas, most notably an 1874 essay, "L'economia politica e la scienza."¹⁸

By the time Covelli returned to Italy, in the mid-1870s, he possessed a linguistic and scholarly preparation second to none in the country for an appreciation of Marxism. His path then intersected again with that of Cafiero. He visited Cafiero in Locarno and afterward joined the Neapolitan section of his old friend's anarchist association. Roberto Michels (1876-1936), the Ital-

¹⁷ Cafiero, "I tempi non sono maturi," *La Plebe*, 2627 Nov. 1875, in Cafiero, *Rivoluzione per la rivoluzione*, ed. Gianni Bosio (Rome: La Nuova Sinistra, 1970), 41.

¹⁸ Antonio Lucarelli, *Carlo Cafiero: Saggio di una storia documentata del socialismo* (Trani: Vecchi, 1947), 103110.

ianized German sociologist, once noted that men like Cafiero and Covelli became anarchists out of an aversion to the authoritarian character of Marxism without repudiating the essential core of Marx's critique of capitalism. For Michels, Marxism and Bakuninism functioned as two intimately related systems of radical thought. Both began with an obliterating indictment of capitalism. Both then sought the same socialist ends, though by different means. One should not skip over the differences, Michels thought, but the conventional wisdom about Bakuninism and Marxism skipped over the similarities. Marxism entered "the mentality of Italian socialists" through Bakunin. In Michels's telling of the history of Italian socialism, Bakunin appears as a kind of John the Baptist, preparing the way for the gospel of Marxism: "One can say that the Italian workers, saturated with Bakuninist ideas, were then psychologically prepared to receive the ideas of Marx."¹⁹

The Michels thesis about the close family relationship between Bakuninism and Marxism helps to explain the ideological itineraries of Covelli and Cafiero, as they moved back and forth between these two ideologies without apparent conflict. Neither man thought he had to make an either/or choice between them. In Cafiero's case the move back to a contemplation of Marxism cannot be said to have been sudden or sharp because all along, since his initial encounter with Marx in London, he had admired the great man. Bakunin himself always acknowledged Marx's exceptional brilliance and originality. No one who knew Marx or had a first-hand acquaintance with his writings honestly could do otherwise, Cafiero concurred.

The appearance of Covelli in Locarno in 1875 no doubt intensified Cafiero's interest in Marxism, as he continued to take stock of revolutionary ideas and techniques. The complete failure of the 1874 uprising had mortified the anarchists, Cafiero included. He certainly did not give up on revolution, but obviously something had gone terribly wrong and needed to be remedied. Still and always a man of anarchist action, Cafiero thought that revolutionary combat would reveal the secret of how the peasant proletariat would win its ultimate victory over the landlords and the capitalists. Searching for the right combination of revolutionary concepts and tactics, he began to develop a synthesis of anarchism and communism, which in his mind meant a world without property or authority. Because of the anarchist element in this formula, the propaganda of the deed remained obligatory. During the winter of 1876-1877 Cafiero and Malatesta began to plot just such a deed, one that would avenge the shame of 1874 and pave the way for the triumph of the revolution. Malatesta, born into a landowning family in Capua and a one-time medical student at the University of Naples, would become the major figure of Italian anarchism in the late nineteenth century and one of Cafiero's closest friends.

This time the anarchist plan called for a concentrated attack on a part of the country known since the 1875 publication of Villari's shocking articles to be corroded with anti-establishment feeling and prone to social violence. The agricultural villages in the Matese mountains, not far from Naples, had been a focal point of the Brigandage, the peasants' post-Risorgimento war against the state. In one violent episode alone, in August 1861, a local peasant band had killed forty-five soldiers and an officer, prompting a scorched-earth response from the state that had resulted in numerous executions and deportations.²⁰ The ensuing "pacification" had been one of the most brutal of the Brigandage, and the area still seethed with peasant discontent. Here, Cafiero and Malatesta thought, a decisive blow for the revolution could be struck. Accordingly,

¹⁹ Roberto Michels, *Storia critica del movimento socialista italiano: Dagli inizi fino al 1911* (Florence: La Voce, 1926), 50. See also his *Storia del marxismo in Italia: Compendio critico con annessa bibliografia* (Rome: Notes to Pages 3953 · 237 Libreria Editrice Luigi Mongini, 1910); the bibliography in this book is invaluable.

²⁰ Masini, *Cafiero*, 182.

in April 1877 they assembled an armed force whose mission was to touch off a peasant revolution against the Italian state.

Once again, the police knew about the plot from the beginning. They had easily infiltrated the anarchist movement, whose aversion to leadership and organization made security impossible. Even in the Matese mountains, the anarchists ritualistically changed leaders every day lest they be corrupted by power. Chaos and anarchy, side by side in the thesaurus, became one in actuality as well.

With the authorities tracking their every move, Cafiero and the others descended on the village of Letino, proclaiming freedom, justice, and socialism to a crowd of stupefied peasants. Cafiero addressed these people and tried to explain the character of the revolution unfolding before their eyes. They liked what he had to say about the end of taxes and conscription. “Long live the International, long live the communist republic of Letino,” they cried as he finished speaking. After burning some land deed documents in the communal archive, the anarchists declared Letino liberated and moved down the road to their next conquest.²¹

At nearby Gallo the rebel band informed the parish priest of their plans for the town. He turned to the faithful and reassured them: “Be not afraid. There will be a change of government and a burning of papers. That is all.” More talk about the social revolution followed. The anarchists then burned some land deeds as well as a portrait of the king, Victor Emmanuel II. Another town had been liberated.²²

The illusoriness of these two conquests soon became manifest. Even before they could be intercepted and imprisoned, a blizzard caught the anarchists completely unprepared. Miserable from cold and hunger, they talked about making a last stand against the rapidly approaching government troops. Unfortunately for these would-be martyrs, their weapons, soaked from the storm, would not fire. The soldiers captured nearly all of the rebels without resistance. One group of twenty-six anarchists fell into the hands of the peasants they had come to liberate, who promptly turned them over to the authorities.²³

Once again, as three years earlier, the anarchists suffered a total defeat at the hands of the state. With their inept revolutionary tactics, the anarchists themselves had proved to be the state’s front-line weapon against anarchism.

The so-called Benevento debacle of 1877 sealed the fate of anarchism in Italy. It swiftly declined as the dominant force on the Italian left. Without the charismatic personality of Bakunin for inspiration, the Italian anarchists were bound to experience a crisis of confidence. Even while he lived, the movement suffered from factionalism. Extremists like Cafiero, who constantly pressed for revolution, had to deal with relative moderates like Costa, who after the failure of 1874 began the process of re-evaluation that would lead him to embrace legalitarian socialism by the end of the decade. Thus, during Bakunin’s lifetime his movement had already ceased to be monolithic, if any anarchist movement can ever be such.

Moreover, the problem of anarchism’s intellectual inconsistency became more evident with the removal from the scene of Bakunin’s charm and spellbinding eloquence. He had been a devastating counterpuncher against Marx, showing great perceptiveness in noting the potential for tyranny in the dictatorship-of-the-proletariat theory. Bakunin’s own political theories, center-

²¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

²² *Ibid.*, 203.

²³ Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism*, 126.

ing on the notion of a revolutionary elite that would function as a “collective, invisible dictatorship,” amounted in practice, however, to a much less clearly delineated alternative to Marxism than he imagined.²⁴ It became increasingly obvious to the many anarchists who flocked to the cause of legalitarian socialism after Bakunin’s death that the conspiracies he promoted of self-appointed judges and jurors, with no concern for due process or checks and balances, also contained the seeds of tyranny. Indeed, an anarchist cabal is one of the most absolute forms of authority. Bakunin never had resolved the contradiction between his ideal of perfect freedom for all men and his insistence that he should get to decide how this ideal would be implemented and defined.

Now 30 years old, Cafiero would spend the next sixteen months in prison. The charges against him and his confederates were extremely serious: conspiracy against the state, armed subversion, arson, destruction of state property and equipment, robbery, theft of public funds, and the murder of one carabinieri and the wounding of another. For a time it seemed that for Cafiero and the other ringleaders the state would seek the death penalty. All ended happily for the anarchist prisoners because of the timing of King Victor Emmanuel’s death in 1878. When the courts decided that the Benevento uprising qualified as a political crime, the prisoners were able to benefit from the amnesty decreed by the new king, Umberto I. A jubilant crowd of two thousand well-wishers greeted the prisoners upon their release. A much publicized celebratory feast ensued. In the classic *Governo e governati in Italia* (1882), Pasquale Turiello called this celebration an ominous sign of “great significance,” one that plainly indicated the extent to which the country’s political institutions had failed to find a satisfactory rapport with the populace.²⁵

Cafiero on Marxism

While in prison Cafiero read the French translation of *Capital*. The book electrified him with its brilliance, and he immediately set about writing a commentary on it. By the time Cafiero left prison in August 1878, he had a short book ready for publication. The following February his old newspaper, *La Plebe*, began to publish installments, in Italian translation, of the thirty-first chapter of *Capital*, “The Genesis of Industrial Capitalism,” and in March the paper announced the imminent publication of a “compendium” of the entire book. On 20 June 1879 *Il Capitale di Carlo Marx brevemente compendiato da Carlo Cafiero, Libro Primo, Sviluppo della produzione capitalista* appeared in print. The Word had reached Italy.

In the preface Cafiero lamented that such a great original socialist thinker as Marx could be “in fact unknown in Italy.” Cafiero wanted his own book to be a faithful guide to “the new truth that demolishes, crushes, and throws to the winds the centuries-old edifice of errors and lies.” Revolutionaries the world over would find in it the intellectual armor they needed for the decisive battle against capitalism. Marx had given revolutionaries “a great quantity of new arms, of instruments and machines of every sort that his genius has been able to derive from all the modern sciences.” Where virtually nothing had existed before, Marx had conceived a universe of

²⁴ Bakunin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Arthur Lehning (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), 178182, quoted by Pernicone in *Italian Anarchism*, 62.

²⁵ Pasquale Turiello, *Governo e governati in Italia*, ed. Piero Bevilacqua (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), 209.

scientifically socialist meaning. Cafiero thought that *Capital* towered over every other intellectual achievement of the age.²⁶

The *Compendio* included in its 126 pages extensive passages from the meaty analytical sections of *Capital*, giving Italian readers their first substantial exposure to Marx's seminal book. As Cafiero summarized the contents of *Capital*, he paid special attention to its major concepts: the labor theory of value, appropriation, the division of labor, capital accumulation, and alienation. The most vivid passages in *Capital* deal with the misery of the working class under capitalism, and Cafiero emphasized this theme above all: if the capitalists pay any attention to the worker, "it is only to study the best way to exploit him." Cafiero devoted many pages to the sad effects of the capitalist factory system. Marx, he asserted, had done more than any other revolutionary thinker to explain the true purpose and history of factory life under capitalism, which never lacked for "theologians who explain all and justify all with their eternal laws." The capitalists could afford high-priced intellectual talent to defend the status quo, but *Capital* laid bare for all to see the whole corrupt, immoral, and destructive system.²⁷

Marx had taken most of his examples from England, but Cafiero noted for the Italian audience that "all modern nations" were already or nearly on the English road to industrialization. Therefore, the social and economic developments of England served as a window from which the other countries of Europe could look onto their own future. The Italians had another reason to read *Capital*. The gross and savage exploitation of the English peasantry under capitalism, so vividly described by Marx, would give the Italians an understanding not of their future but of their present. Marx's heartrending description of the demise of English agriculture contained many arresting parallels with the contemporary Italian situation. Motivated by their insatiable greed, the "money men" controlled and transformed everything. Progress was a euphemism used to obscure the fundamental realities of the modern world. Progress did not come about spontaneously as a result of a Promethean quest for the betterment of mankind, but rather as a series of technological, cultural, and social shifts on behalf of the masters of the world.²⁸

The masters would shrink from nothing to maintain their domination. Now, thanks to European imperialism, they controlled the whole world as never before. "A sad story of blood" had extended the "benefits" of modern capitalism to all peoples. Here Cafiero permitted himself a personal aside. Despite capitalism's appalling record of violence and cruelty in imposing European imperialism around the world, bourgeois justice had solemnly indicted the anarchists for their "bloodlust" (*la libidine di sangue*) at Benevento in 1877. Revolutionary violence paled into insignificance by comparison with the horrors of capitalism. Revolution alone, of the kind analyzed by Marx in *Capital*, could restore "the equilibrium of the most complete order, peace, and happiness" to a world disordered, violated, and traumatized by capitalism. Man, by nature rational and communal, lived an unnatural life under the capitalist system, which reduced every aspect of society to a monstrous orgy of acquisitiveness and self-absorption.²⁹

Cafiero sent two copies of the *Compendio* to Marx in London. In an accompanying letter that began "Stimatissimo Signore" (Most Esteemed Sir), he apologized for not letting Marx see the manuscript before publication. It had been his intention to do so, but then a publisher had unexpectedly made him an offer. He explained to Marx: "Fear of losing a favorable opportunity

²⁶ Cafiero, *Compendio del "Capitale"* (Rome: La Nuova Sinistra, 1969), 7, 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 43, 54.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 72, 83.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 97, 101.

prompted me to consent to the proposed publication.” Cafiero closed with an expression of “the deepest respect” for Marx and the hope that he had done right by *Capital*.

He did not mention his own desertion of the International in 1872.³⁰ Marx replied with high praise for Cafiero’s book. Although Marx wrote to Cafiero in French, he had made a serious study of Italian in his youth and read the language quite well. Most such summaries of his work, Marx complained, frustrated him with their superficiality, misrepresentation, and outright fabrications. Cafiero, he continued, had mastered almost all of his ideas. He had noticed only “one apparent deficiency” in the *Compendio*: Cafiero had not addressed his argument about how “the necessary material conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat are spontaneously generated by the development of capitalist exploitation.” Marx, likewise tactfully ignoring the unpleasantness of 1872, encouraged Cafiero to return to the omitted theme in a future work of exegesis.³¹

Cafiero set out to follow Marx’s advice. While living in Lugano in 1880, he began another essay on Marxist thought, this time in the form of a dramatic dialogue between two characters, Crepafame (Dying of Hunger) and Succhiasangue (Bloodsucker). In September the following year the Swiss police sequestered this manuscript before it could be completed. Cafiero’s notoriety as a violent anarchist made it increasingly difficult for him to avoid run-ins with the police.

In November 1880 Cafiero did succeed in publishing an update of his views about Marx, “Anarchy and Communism,” a summary of an address he had given earlier that year to an anarchist congress. By this time the conjoining of Bakuninism and Marxism into a single socialist synthesis had become the supreme cause of his intellectual life. He saw anarchism and communism as synonyms for liberty and equality, the two fundamental terms “of our revolutionary ideal.” “From each according to his means, to each according to his needs”: with these immortal words Marx had pithily summed up the essence of the most exalted social system yet devised. Nevertheless, communism required a corrective that anarchism alone could furnish. The statist political solution of communism, in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, remained a blot on Marx’s system. The stateless polity of anarchism would bring Marxism to perfection, in the same way that the unparalleled scientific rigor of *Capital* would give anarchist theory the socioeconomic insights it lacked. Under the anarchist-communist synthesis, men at last would become what nature had intended them to be: collaborators, friends, and brothers.³²

Cafiero welcomed the technology of the anarchist-communist future as well. The capitalists had harnessed technology for their own profit. With the profit motive eliminated, technology would be designed to serve the genuine needs of all mankind. The only motive for the technological research of the future would be the public good. After the triumph of socialism, there would be no need for war. All the money, manpower, and intelligence currently devoted by capitalists to the war machines of the nation states would be transferred, in the new order, to education, medicine, and pensions. In addition, the vast sums spent by the wealthy on their obscene luxuries would go into the general fund. Because of this revolutionary reallocation of society’s resources, humanity would enter its golden age: “work [would] lose its ignoble aspect” as men, in overcoming capitalism, became one with nature.³³

In the second installment of “Anarchy and Communism,” published two weeks after the first one, Cafiero held up the working-class family as an “example, in miniature, of anarchist-

³⁰ Cafiero to Marx, 23 July 1879, in Del Bo, ed., *La corrispondenza*, 285.

³¹ Marx to Cafiero, 29 July 1879, *ibid.*, 286.

³² Cafiero, “Anarchia e comunismo,” *Le Révolté* (Geneva), 13 Nov. 1880, in *Rivoluzione per la rivoluzione*, 48.

³³ *Ibid.*, 51.

communism.” In such a family, every member brings home his pay and puts it in a common pot, and all basic needs are met. Anarchist-communism taught that all society should be “a great human family.” People of the future must be encouraged from birth to think of society as their real family in the full sense of the term. Only under anarchist-communism could such a culture be encouraged. The anarchist-communist synthesis offered the best chance to achieve true equality while protecting society from the dangerous authoritarianism of Marx’s unamended political system.³⁴

Cafiero also expressed concern over the increasing prominence of reformism, which he saw as the Trojan Horse inside the gates of the socialist citadel. He wanted everything to be held in common. Increasing numbers of self-styled socialists wanted to blur this point, or to eliminate it altogether by accepting the principle of private property. Cafiero stands out in the history of the Italian left as the first great nemesis of reform socialism. His vituperative reaction to reform socialism constitutes a point of departure for revolutionary politics in Italy.

The Clash with Costa

By 1880 Cafiero’s old friend and comrade-in-arms Andrea Costa had come to embody the reformist socialist mentality. More than anyone else, Cafiero embodied the Italian revolutionary ideal. These two passionate personalities were bound to collide, and they did so with a rhetorical violence extraordinary even by Italian standards. The break between them came slowly. It began in the aftermath of the failed anarchist uprising of 1874.

Costa had worked closely with Bakunin and Cafiero in preparing this uprising. In the re-crematory aftermath of the defeat, Costa stood accused by many of his erstwhile admirers and followers of excessive optimism about the prospects for revolution in Italy. These criticisms stung him, and he began to re-evaluate his political ideas. After his release from prison, in 1876, his calls for revolution became increasingly perfunctory. He no longer had the passion for conspiracy and armed insurrection that continued to excite Cafiero. Almost invariably now the two men found themselves on opposite sides of the issues that divided Italian anarchists into accommodating gradualists and intransigent revolutionaries. Costa, ever mindful of the humiliation of 1874, urged prudence, while Cafiero pushed for immediate armed action. The truth about Costa’s change of heart began to emerge in 1877, when he refused to support Cafiero’s plan for an insurrection in the South. He objected to the scheme as an ill-conceived and ill-timed flight from reality. While prophetic in his analysis, Costa cut a poor figure in this episode. He hung back in the Romagna, hoping to take advantage of Cafiero’s uprising if it proved successful. His ambiguous declaration in 1881, “It is true that I did not approve of the movement, but it is false to say that I did nothing to facilitate it,” captures perfectly the cruel dilemma in which he found himself.³⁵ Without being able to admit it in public or even to himself, Costa had lost faith in the idea of revolution. Still strenuously resisting legalitarian socialism as treason to the cause, he had abandoned the values of his Bakuninist youth without yet finding replacements for them. After 1877 he continued to search for a third way between revolutionary and legalitarian socialism, but this endeavor led him into one contradiction and mealy-mouthed evasion after another. At last, in

³⁴ Cafiero, “Anarchia e comunismo,” pt. 2, *Le Révolté*, 27 Nov. 1880, in *Rivoluzione per la rivoluzione*, 55.

³⁵ Costa quoted by Nettlau in *Errico Malatesta*, 156.

1882, Costa fully and unambiguously embraced legalitarian socialism by running for parliament as a socialist deputy — the first to do so in Italy.

Long before Costa's momentous political campaign, Cafiero raised a cry against him. In 1880 Costa had founded the *Rivista Internazionale del Socialismo* and then, in the following year, the weekly *Avanti!* Costa used these publications as sounding boards for his rapidly maturing political plans, which he had begun to unveil to the public in the summer of 1879 with an open letter, "Agli amici di Romagna." Costa's maneuvering toward the center incensed Cafiero. To a friend, Francesco Pezzi, Cafiero wrote in November 1880 that he still believed in the revolution: "I am ready to enlist as a simple soldier without any other thought than to fight royal troops."³⁶ Capitalism could not be reformed, he insisted. It could only be destroyed if men wanted a social system based on human needs instead of profits for the exploiters.

Two weeks later Cafiero expressed the same sentiments in a letter to the anarchists of Florence. Once again he invoked the ideal of anarchist communism. Costa's idea, to have socialists join the bourgeois institution of parliament and to work with the government, he called "the plague of our revolutionary party." Cafiero vigorously denounced Costa's "minor and practical programs." By strengthening the status quo and putting off the day of revolution, such minimalist steps played directly into the hands of the bourgeoisie. Instead, Cafiero proposed immediate revolutionary action: "the first step on our road must be the destruction of the present order." Words had to mean something. Socialism meant revolution or it meant nothing. Costa's definition of the term made it a synonym for capitalism, and this made him an enemy of socialism.³⁷

A period of feverish literary activity began for Cafiero as he took it upon himself to expose Costa's reformism and the mortal danger it posed for Italian socialism. In December 1880 he published an article entitled "Action" in which he publicly challenged Costa. His rebuttal began with the following premise: to cooperate with bourgeois political institutions, as Costa now proposed to do, was to give up on socialism as a serious alternative to capitalism. There could be no way around this self-evident truth. Capitalism stood for competition and profit, socialism for cooperation and equality. These two concepts could never be fused, except rhetorically, and as a rhetorical device the legalitarian socialist attempt to fuse them had much to recommend it — as a screen for capitalism. Cafiero contended that if socialism was the real goal, then certain steps had to be taken and others avoided. Above all, getting in bed with capitalists had to be avoided. Another imperative was action: "It is, therefore, of action that we have need, of action, always of action. With action, one acquires at the same time theory and practice because it is action that generates ideas, and it is action, again, that spreads them throughout the world."³⁸

By action Cafiero did not mean sending socialist deputies to sit in parliament. What true revolutionary, he wondered, could ever get such an idea. "No, a thousand times no. We want nothing to do with the maneuvers of the bourgeoisie. We must not play the game of our oppressors unless we want to participate in their oppression." He argued that revolution entailed violence against the status quo. For a genuine socialist revolution to come to pass, certain people would have to be killed. The capitalists and their lackeys would not exit the stage of history quietly. They would resist, and their resistance would have to be overcome. Costa once had understood these truths, but he had forgotten them. Cafiero gloried in the heritage of violent anarchism, and he urged

³⁶ Cafiero to Pezzi, 20 Nov. 1880, in *Rivoluzione per la rivoluzione*, 57.

³⁷ Cafiero to the Florentine Internationalists, 6 Dec. 1880, *ibid.*, 59, 60.

³⁸ Cafiero, "L'Azione," *Le Révolté*, 25 Dec. 1880, *ibid.*, 62.

revolutionaries not to shrink from using “the knife, the rifle, and dynamite.” Every action against the system, he claimed, promoted the revolution.

Cafiero implored his readers to go out into the streets and to start the revolution without delay. The capitalists had a plan, to subjugate the masses and to exploit them. The masses needed a plan of their own, one that involved the immediate implementation of revolutionary action: “My friends, if we wait to attack until the day we are completely prepared, we will never attack.” Only through revolutionary action could the masses learn about revolution. They had to throw themselves into the water in order to learn how to swim. “As gymnastics develop the strength of the muscles,” so did revolutionary action affect the political acumen of those who participated in it. At the same time, Cafiero stressed the importance of revolutionary leadership. Only a “very restricted minority” had a clear understanding of revolution, but he felt certain that the masses would respond to their avengers. These leaders had to be true to their calling, which in the present context meant avoiding the deception of parliamentary politics.³⁹

On Revolution

In Cafiero’s next essay, which stands out as his most original work, he continued to explore the theory and practice of revolutionary violence. The history of this essay reads like a detective story. In 1881 “Sulla Rivoluzione” appeared by installment in *La Révolution sociale*, a newspaper based in Saint-Cloud, France, and secretly subsidized by the police with the aim of inciting the anarchists to illegal action. The turbid world of anarchist meetings and publications swarmed with government infiltrators. Cafiero had no knowledge of the actual situation on *La Révolution sociale*. He sent his article to its staff, and they began to publish it. After several installments had appeared, funding for the newspaper stopped, and it went out of existence. The unpublished portion of Cafiero’s essay disappeared for ninety years.

A university student, Gian Carlo Maffei, discovered the missing work. While doing research for his thesis on the Italian anarchist community in Switzerland, he examined the Federal Archive in Berne, where the Confederation kept police records. There he found a folder entitled “Personal Dossier, Cafiero Carlo.” The folder contained papers not seen since 1881, including the complete 155-page manuscript of “Sulla Rivoluzione.” It was the historical researcher’s dream come true.⁴⁰

Thanks to Maffei’s find, we now know that the essay consisted of four parts, not three as previously assumed: “Revolution and the Natural Law,” “Our Revolution,” “Revolutionary Practice,” and “Revolutionary Morale.” The first two parts had been published in their entirety in *La Révolution sociale* and then republished by Gianni Bosio in *Rivoluzione per la rivoluzione* (1970). Portions of the third part had appeared in these same publications. In 1972 Maffei published the missing sections of part 3 and the hitherto unknown part 4.

Cafiero began the essay with a quotation from his *Compendio del “Capitale”*: “The revolution of the workers is the revolution for the revolution.” In part 1, “Revolution and the Natural Law,” he addressed the problem of revolutionary violence. Actually he saw such violence as a solution rather than a problem. Cafiero bluntly promised the bourgeoisie that they would be liquidated. Their fate, he wrote, had been sealed from the beginning of time. The natural law of revolution operated fatally throughout history, and now the time for the overthrow of capitalism had come.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁰ Gian Carlo Maffei, *Dossier Cafiero* (Bergamo: Biblioteca “Max Nettlau,” 1972), introduction.

As Marx had cogently explained, out of capitalism's contradictions socialism would emerge. By developing capitalism to its uttermost limits, the tycoons of today were preparing "the necessary ground for our revolution." Cafiero, therefore, wished the capitalists good appetite: "eat and devour to satiety; because when you have eaten everything, it will fall to us to eat you." If they fattened themselves up they would have a better flavor: "And how hungry we are!"⁴¹

In part 2, "Our Revolution," Cafiero extolled proletarian violence as the most exalted force in history: "Oh, revolution, sublime law of nature, law of life and of progress, law of justice and love, law of liberty and equality. Holy revolution, return to our midst; resume your course among the peoples, among them establish your definitive reign and your will be done." "Our Revolution," he continued, is the heir of all past revolutions and must derive its force and basic direction from them, against the social order, religion, the family, and property. "Down with authority!" he cried. "With the iron of their chains," he predicted, "the gladiators in their revolt will forge the sword of liberty: from the centuries-old chains of our servitude, we will produce the weapons of human emancipation." Then, after the final battle against capitalism, all would be well, and men would be able to live in concord and brotherhood. Without capitalists and proletarians, all men would be free and equal: "No longer will each be against all, and all against each." The full actualization of the principle of sociability would bring about the final stage of human history.⁴²

Maffei's publication in 1972 of the missing sections of "Rivoluzione" filled in a major gap in part 3, "Revolutionary Practice." Left out in the previously published part of this section was Cafiero's emphasis on the extreme danger posed by any state, even one supposedly controlled by the workers. Maffei thus restored the symmetry of Cafiero's original argument. Until 1972 it appeared that capitalism had been Cafiero's exclusive substantial concern in part 3, but in the newly added pages he expatiated on the manifold dangers of authoritarian socialism. He repeated Bakunin's dire pronouncements about the extreme likelihood that the state of the workers would be "a new and terrible monster." For the dictatorship of the proletariat — the only governing entity allowed in Marx's system — to have total political and economic power, "what new and monstrous bureaucratic mechanism would it not be necessary to create?" The leaders of such a state could not escape the corrupting effects of so much power, "and they will be new and even more terrible political oppressors and economic exploiters." Cafiero warned, as Bakunin had before him, that a fully realized dictatorship of the proletariat would be the end of human emancipation and liberty. Such dictators would destroy the cause of the revolution. They would make the capitalists and even the medieval nobles look benign by comparison. To avoid the corruption that power always causes, society had to become and to remain stateless.⁴³

Government existed for two purposes only: to protect powerful elites and to oppress the defenseless and disorganized multitude. Under anarchist socialism there would be no protected elites and no oppressed multitude. There would be a society of equals, with an abundance of material goods for everyone. All men would be able at last to develop themselves fully and freely: "to study, to live with nature, to admire the beautiful in works of art, to love." Every kind of work would be of equal importance to society because each job would be useful and serve a true need. The allocation of enormous resources for the maintenance of the privileged and pampered lives of the rich introduced the social and economic distortions that anarchist communism alone could

⁴¹ Cafiero, "Rivoluzione," in *Rivoluzione per la rivoluzione*, 67, 85.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 90, 91.

⁴³ Maffei, *Dossier Cafiero*, 32.

eliminate. Therefore, Cafiero concluded, “the principal end of our revolution must be to take away from man the means of inflicting useless and dangerous activity on humanity.”⁴⁴

None of the essay’s fourth and concluding section had appeared in *La Révolution sociale*. In this section, Cafiero made a passionate appeal for the propaganda of the deed. Everyone on the socialist left, he began, professed to believe in revolution, but how many seriously contemplated acting on that belief? Marx thrilled him, above all for the intellectual power and originality of *Capital*, but also for his stirring call to revolution. Cafiero saw very clearly the affinities between Marxist revolution and anarchism’s propaganda of the deed. The differences between these two concepts meant much less in practice than they did in theory. Marxism, unlike anarchism, hedged its call for revolutionary violence with an elaborate philosophical justification and a complex historical theory. In practice, however, the justification and the theory quickly receded into the background for Marxists when they became convinced of the existence of a revolutionary situation. At that point the differences between anarchist and communist revolutionary tactics diminished appreciably, and under capitalism what situation was not revolutionary? Cafiero thought that an honest reading of Marx would lead inescapably to the conclusion that communist revolutionaries had a permanent obligation to resist capitalism in every efficacious way. Bakunin had preached the same message. Cafiero did not see how Marxism differed from anarchism in its practical fundamentals as a revolutionary creed. By amalgamating them into one entity, Cafiero hoped to create the ultimate nemesis of capitalism.

Cafiero further insisted that anarchism and communism reinforced each other on the great issue of left-wing politics in Italy at the close of the 1870s: reform socialism. Marx and Bakunin spoke with one voice against the moderates of the left, that is, those who “renounce revolution.” Cafiero defined moderation as the “limitation, reduction, [and] diminution” of socialism. The moderates, “with their minimum program,” had no intention of bringing socialism to the masses. They intended instead to protect the capitalist status quo by distracting the masses with symbolic gestures and meaningless reforms. Cafiero saw the capitalists as criminals who deserved nothing but expropriation and punishment. One could not enter into collaborative arrangements with those who had plundered, repressed, tortured, maimed, and killed the workers of the world. Cafiero concluded “Rivoluzione” with a rousing endorsement of Marxist and Bakuninist extremism: “To diminish, reduce, or limit our program, in a parliamentary sense, is to treat with the enemy, to fold one’s battle flag, to trick the people, and to renounce the revolution.”⁴⁵

Cafiero’s Last Years

Cafiero had opposed Costa’s reformism from the day of its announcement, but until the summer of 1881 his attacks had not been bitterly personal. Then he sent a ferocious open letter, “To the Comrades of the Romagna,” published in *Il Grido del Popolo* on 21 July. The once great tribune of the Romagna had abandoned the cause of revolution for a “program of expedients and little reforms [*riformette*].” For the first time, he denounced Costa by name: “Yes, Costa is an apostate, a renegade of the revolutionary faith of the people.” Cafiero did not even give him credit for acting in good faith. Costa the careerist, he charged, had seen where power and political opportunity lay and had changed his beliefs accordingly. Such a traitor had no right to live, and Cafiero in-

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 41, 45.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 56, 57.

cited the faithful to inflict revolutionary justice on him. He signed his letter “In the anarchist revolution, yours for life and death.”⁴⁶

Cafiero’s threats against Costa coincided with a bleak period in his personal life. His general health had been in decline for some time. He lost weight and became exceedingly pale during the spring and summer of 1881. In June he suffered a nervous breakdown. Upon recovering, Cafiero journeyed to London, in September, hoping to meet with Marx. The meeting did not take place because Marx had left the city in search of a cure for his own health problems. Cafiero stayed in London for the winter of 1881-1882. His illness grew worse. The mental part of it, which took the form of an acute persecution mania, especially alarmed his friends. He became so suspicious of people that by the end of his stay in London he would only talk to Malatesta. The two men would meet in the middle of Hyde Park and Cafiero would whisper confidences in Malatesta’s ear. Later, at an anarchist conference, Cafiero surveyed the delegates and told Malatesta, “Can’t you see? They are all spies.”⁴⁷ Not long after this he made an unsuccessful suicide attempt.

After returning to Italy, Cafiero inexorably descended into madness. He drifted from city to city. On 8 February 1883 he left his room at an inn in Fiesole, near Florence, and began to wander the fields completely in the nude. Local peasants found him standing in a pool of icy water. By the time a doctor reached him, he was in convulsions. Authorities committed him to the asylum of San Bonifazio in Florence. He would never completely regain his mental balance.

In attempting to explain Cafiero’s insanity, Peter Kropotkin — after Bakunin the major international leader of anarchism — claimed that Cafiero had been undone by Anna Kuliscioff’s rejection of him in the winter of 1880-1881.⁴⁸ He had pursued this Russian Jewish beauty and star Marxist while her lover, Costa, served a jail sentence.⁴⁹ The fury of the falling out between these two men may have had much to do with their rivalry over Kuliscioff. Cafiero, however, did not have a history of passionate romantic involvements, and the record of his relationship with Kuliscioff is ambiguous. It is difficult to tell what transpired between them or how their relationship affected his psyche. Many other factors probably contributed to his final breakdown: the stress of repeated disappointment, failure, police surveillance, expulsions, interrogations, and imprisonment should not be underestimated.

Cafiero’s long-absent wife, Olimpia, now reappeared and tried to help him. In 1886 she secured his transfer to a mental institution in Imola, where his physical health began to improve. He continued to inhabit a twilight world of intermittent mental lucidity. In November of 1887, however, the asylum authorities released him to his wife’s care. The couple lived in Imola and then in Bologna. Cafiero’s condition remained unstable as sharp bursts of crisis followed periods of calm. In 1889 the couple moved to the family home in Barletta, and he seemed to get better. He responded to the familiar surroundings of his youth, but soon his wife had to commit him to another asylum, in Nocera Inferiore. While there, he developed intestinal tuberculosis and died on 17 July 1892 at the age of 45.

In his classic historical novel *Il diavolo al Pontelungo* (1927, *The Devil at Longbridge*), Riccardo Bacchelli (1891-1985) told the story of Bakunin and the Italian anarchists in the 1870s. Bacchelli,

⁴⁶ Cafiero, “Ai compagni delle Romagne,” *Il Grido del Popolo*, 21 July 1881, in *Rivoluzione per la rivoluzione*, 95.

⁴⁷ Masini, *Cafiero*, 314.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 20.

⁴⁹ Michels singles out Kuliscioff as “the real founder of Marxism” in Italy. Her natural brilliance and firm grasp of Marxist ideology made a profound impression on the Italian left in the 1870s. Michels comments at length about her “stupendous” looks in *Storia del Marxismo in Italia*, 77. 238 · Notes to Pages 5461

a political conservative, wrote the novel in the same antirevolutionary spirit that had animated Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *The Possessed* (1872) and Joseph Conrad in *The Secret Agent* (1907), two of the major novels in Western literature that deal with terrorism. He belonged to the traditionalist Ronda group of writers in the 1920s and espoused the values of Alessandro Manzoni's Christian humanism. Applying that standard of judgment to the anarchists, Bacchelli found them wanting in the extreme. Like Dostoyevsky and Conrad, he castigated the anarchists as delusional and ineffectual fanatics. At the outset of his book, Bacchelli declared: "It is necessary to say that this is the story of an error, and of an error that produced crimes and inglorious events." He portrayed Bakunin and company as men who "cannot learn. They would no longer be themselves if they could learn."⁵⁰

Despite Bacchelli's excoriation of the anarchists as a whole, his portrait of Cafiero is oddly appreciative. Of all the unreconstructed revolutionaries in the novel, Cafiero is the most humanly credible figure. Bacchelli does censure him for his fanaticism and in a flash-forward shows his madness and premature death to be a fitting end for the terrible choices he made in life. Yet he describes a Cafiero who possessed a "human nobility" that manifested itself in unstinting generosity to all who approached him.⁵¹ For Bacchelli he is much more admirable than Bakunin, who, as a character in the novel, has a large streak of perfidy and charlatanry in him.

If a conservative like Bacchelli could develop sympathy for Cafiero, the left could be counted on to do far more for him. The myth of Cafiero as the martyr of anarchist communism began to take hold while he still lived. Anarchist groups named themselves after him in Livorno, Ancona, Ravenna, San Remo, and New York. In anarchist families it was common to give children the first name of "Cafiero." His exploits and sacrifices inspired songs, sonnets, and paintings. In one of his last moments of lucidity, Cafiero intoned, "The principle is affirmed."⁵² For those who drew inspiration from him, Cafiero had affirmed the principle of revolution. The Word had been made flesh in him, and the mendicant order of revolution in Italy had its first patron saint of the Marxist era.

⁵⁰ Bacchelli, *Il diavolo al Pontelungo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1965), 27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁵² Masini, *Cafiero*, ch. 22 and 357.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Richard Drake
Carlo Cafiero
Prophet of Anarchist Communism
2003

Retrieved on 27th December 2023 from www.fdca.it
Excerpted from Chapter 2 of *Apostles and Agitators: Italy's Marxist Revolutionary Tradition*.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net