

Excerpt from:

CHAPTER VI

Individualism and Futurism: *Compagni* in Milan

...Tracking back a few years, Leda and her beau Giuseppe Monanni had been invited to Milan in 1908 in order to take over the editorship of the newspaper *The Human Protest* (*La Protesta Umana*) by its directors, Ettore Molinari and Nella Giacomelli. The anarchist newspaper with the largest circulation at that time, *The Human Protest* was published from 1906–1909 and emphasized individual action and rebellion against institutions, going so far as to print articles encouraging readers to occupy the Duomo, Milan’s central cathedral.³ Hence it was no surprise that *The Human Protest* was subject to repeated seizures and the condemnations of its editorial managers, the latest of whom—Massimo Rocca (aka Libero Tancredi), Giovanni Gavilli, and Paolo Schicchi—were having a hard time getting along.

Due to a lack of funding, editorial activity for *The Human Protest* was indefinitely suspended almost as soon as Leda arrived in Milan. She nevertheless became close friends with Nella Giacomelli (1873–1949). Giacomelli had started out as a socialist activist while working as a teacher in the 1890s, but stepped back from political involvement after a failed suicide attempt in 1898, presumably over an unhappy love affair.⁴ She then moved to Milan where she met her partner, Ettore Molinari, and turned towards the anarchist movement. Her skepticism, or perhaps burnout, over the ability of humans to foster social change was extended to the anarchist movement, which she later claimed “creates rebels but doesn’t make anarchists.”⁵ Yet she continued on with her literary initiatives and support of libertarian causes all the same. Her partner Ettore Molinari (1867–1926) was a chemistry teacher at the Polytechnic University. He worked alongside Giacomelli on the newspaper *The Cry of the Masses* (*Il Grido della Folla*, 1902–1907) before launching *The Human Protest*.

Vir had already established Monanni and Leda as leading proponents of individualist anarchism, and they are widely credited for introducing Milanese circles to this new strain of anarchism.

There is little consensus among historians as regards precisely how many different currents were present in the Italian anarchist movement from 1900 through WWI: some classify the movement into three camps, which included communist organizers, communist anti-organizers (who favored local, grassroots and spontaneous initiatives over the larger scale and more formal structures of the communist organizers), and individualists; others count no less than six predominant interpretations, which were communist, syndicalist, antimilitarist/pacifist, educationalist/humanitarian, local grassroots groups, and individualist.⁶

Depending on whether their energy was devoted to personal development or rabble-rousing, individualist anarchists could be further divided into two different varieties: those who generally agreed with the ideas of Leda and Monanni, and those who more readily fell in with the likes of Libero Tancredi (1884–1973). Much of the notoriety attributed to individualist anarchists, and perhaps even anarchists in general, can be traced to the attitudes and actions of those who, like Tancredi, advocated a violent, often militaristic form of amoralism; to the detriment of our understanding of the “other” form of individualist anarchism: a more “refined” interpretation of anarchism, meaning more intellectual or, according to its detractors, more elitist and bourgeois.

Individualist anarchism, as Leda and Monanni interpreted it, drew from the conviction that structural changes would not be enough to advance humanity: only a rigorous examination and adjustment of one’s mentality, in order to develop the capacity to think and act as a liberated individual, would truly ensure emancipation from all oppressive institutions. Such examination and adjustment, naturally, could not be mandated or prescribed: it depended solely upon an individual’s initiative, though support and encouragement could be provided, particularly through the right kind of reading material. The ultimate goal of an individualist anarchist would be to ensure their own happiness, by living their everyday life in accordance with their authentic self and not bowing down to any form of social or cultural construct that would limit the free expression of their personality and spirit. By and large, individualist anarchists were largely indifferent to whether or not society caught on to their school of thought. As Leda explained: “Individualists feel and advocate a different concept and vision of life, entirely different from other interpretations. And it’s truly this different understanding of life that gives us our reason for being and our indifference to proselytism. Whether or not people follow us, whether or not we’re understood, we remain what we are and our

ideas are not diminished nor devalued, but remain intact, alive inside of us.”⁷ This “indifference” to proselytism did not mean individualist anarchists would refrain from diffusing their ideas through propaganda, however: “We give everything without expecting anything back—and we don’t want anything in exchange for what we give. We release our ideas into the general public, almost sure that they will be lost and scattered, and not only does this fail to bother us, but we also feel somewhat delighted in this useless effort, the effort of giving something to those who refuse it, to those who do not understand the value of the gift.”⁸

The “different concept and vision of life” advocated by individualist anarchists provided a stark contrast to the major ethical trends of the mid to late nineteenth century. Altruism was considered to be at the heart of human ethics, as reflected by the works of John Stuart Mill, August Comte, and Arthur Schopenhauer; more equitable distribution of resources amongst ordinary people was a central preoccupation of socialist groups. By the turn of the century, however, a philosophical backlash had risen in the form of staunch individualism, based largely on Nietzsche’s celebration of individual freedom, creativity, and capacity for self-transformation outside of the constraints of ordinary morality and social values. Nietzsche’s hardline criticism of the state, religion, and social institutions in general was matched in intensity by his disdain for the conformity and mediocrity of the herd mentality, manifested within any type of mass movement or organization. Away from the herd, however, an individual could strive to become an *Übermensch*, a superman: various interpretations exist as to what exactly this superman represents, but it is generally understood to symbolize a form of greatness, of potential realized, of human skill and intelligence at its finest.

In addition to Nietzsche, Max Stirner (1806–1856) is also credited as a source of inspiration for the individualist current of anarchism. Stirner’s work, particularly *The Ego and its Own* (1845), argues against the trappings and conditioning of society and posits the amoral egoist as the protagonist of a new form of liberty: “You despise the *egoist* because he puts the spiritual in the background as compared with the personal, and has his eyes on himself where you would like to see him act to favor an idea.”⁹ The truly free individual, however, the *unique one*, recognizes no authority, whether in the form of an idea or a person, and experiences an authentic and highly individualistic existence: “I am owner of my might, and I am so when I know myself as unique. In the unique one the owner himself returns into his creative nothing, of which he is born. Every higher essence

above me, be it God, be it man, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness, and pales only before the sun of this consciousness.”¹⁰

Aside from laying the foundations for new forms of individualist ideology, the work of these two authors was also used to justify a wide range of amoral and perverse behaviors, including hyper-nationalism, arguments of racial superiority, and general disregard for the rights and freedoms of other people: the idea of being super and above the masses, or unique and unbridled by authority, could be flipped in order to posit the inferiority or insignificance of the masses.

The interpretation of individualist anarchism championed by Libero Tancredi, often called egoist individualism as compared to the altruistic individualism of Leda and Monanni, provides an example of this logic. Anarchism, “is the struggle against humanity, in order for humanity to progress [...] It is responsible and irreverent sacrilege, many times horrific, always misunderstood, and always victorious; more sublime and immortal than any divinity, as it perpetuates throughout the centuries with the ethical and indomitable strength of its will and creed.”¹¹ Through his articles and his lectures, Tancredi urged other anarchists to resort to violence and line their pockets with “holy dynamite,”¹² professing that “respect of the freedom of others is a form of ‘self-castration.’”¹³ Ultimately aligning with the fascist government, Tancredi was by no means loyal to anarchist principles: yet the “little pimp,” as Monanni called him,¹⁴ was loud enough to attract attention to his skewed understanding of the anarchist cause. The logic of individualist anarchism, as Monanni and Rafanelli understood it, was to dismantle all of the thoughts or beliefs imposed upon a person’s psyche through the society and institutions within which they developed, thus freeing them to think for themselves and come to their own conclusions. A person’s greatest enemy, according to this reasoning, was not the state or the church, but themselves: an individual, his or herself, was the source of all belief in limitations and legitimization of repression and hierarchy.

Furthermore, under the logic of individualist anarchism, the concept of humanity itself is merely an illusion. Only the individuals that comprise humanity are real entities, and thus rather than work toward improving (or improving conditions for) humanity, one focuses on the individual as both the end and the means for transformation. The happiness of each person has that same person as its own agent; therefore, society must be designed in such a way that everyone has complete freedom to conduct their own personal revolution; for only after liberating oneself can one help others to liberate themselves.

As this theoretical, philosophically-oriented strain of anarchism flourished in the newspapers and magazines *Leda* and *Monanni* directed, a larger debate was taking place within the Italian anarchist movement concerning the principle of organization. The June 1907 Italian Anarchist Congress had brought together activists and representatives from across the peninsula to discuss common concerns and initiatives, fueling the continued debate concerning the best methods for fostering revolutionary change. In contrast with the syndicalist, communist, and communist anti-organizational strains of anarchism, the relative indifference of individualists to any form of organization came across, to some observers, as smug. Anarchist theorist Saverio Merlino (1856–1930) summed up his observations in a notorious 1907 interview later titled *The End of Anarchism?*: “Currently, the anarchist party [sic] is fragmented by the conflict between the advocates of two different trends; that is, between the individualists and the organizationalists. The organizationalists are unable to find a form of organization compatible with their anarchist principles. The individualists, who are opposed to organization in any form, can’t figure out how to act.”¹⁵ The general takeaway from Merlino’s interview was that socialism had co-opted the best intellectual fruit of the anarchist movement, which now failed to produce any new ideas.

The lively criticism and debate in the anarchist community was a sign of its vitality as well as its lack of coherence. Historian Gino Cerrito describes *The Human Protest* as a perfect microcosm of the myriad and often competing strains of anarchism: “Aside from the voices of anti-organizational, anarcho-communism—which its directors Nella Giacomelli and Ettore Molinari claimed to profess—it was the playground for ideas and trends in the Movement. Therefore, within its pages, one found articles by organizational and anti-organizational anarchists, pieces by individualists inspired by Nietzsche and Sorel, yet [these points of view] were not published as opinions in free competition with one another, but more as components of an undigested minestrone soup, with undetermined colors, to the point that one often wondered if such ideological confusion reflected the theoretical inconsistency and practical incapacity of its editors and directors to present a coherent discourse.”¹⁶

Yet this heterogeneity was later defended in the 1920s by Errico Malatesta, when he noted that “[...] with regard to their moral causes and ultimate ends, individualist anarchism and communist anarchism are the same thing, or nearly the same thing. [...] The question, in my opinion, is therefore not between “communists” and

“individualists,” but between anarchists and non-anarchists.”¹⁷

NOTES

3 Ibid., 11.

4 Ibid.

5 Nella Giacomelli, *Anarcopedia*,

http://ita.anarchopedia.org/Nella_Giacomelli#cite_ref-permettete_5-0

6 Giorgio Sacchetti, *Comunisti contro individualisti, il dibattito sull'organizzazione del 1907*. Bollettino del Museo del Risorgimento, anno XXXV. (Bologna: 1990).

7 Leda Rafanelli, “La mia libert.” in *La libert*, 18 October 1913. Fondo “LRM,” conserved at the ABC.

8 Ibid.

9 Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, trans. Steven Byington, 1907. URL:

<http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/max-stirner-the-ego-and-his-own#toc14>.

10 Ibid.

11 Libero Tancredi, *L'anarchismo contro l'anarchia* (Pistoia: Casa Editrice “Rinascimento,” 1914), 485.

12 Antonioli, M; Berti, G; Fedele, S; Iuso, P (directors) *Dizionario Biografico degli Anarchici Italiani volume 2*, 483.

13 Armando Borghi and Gaetano Salvemini, *Mezzo Secolo di Anarchia (1898–1945)* (Naples: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1954), 78–79.

14 Giorgio Sacchetti, “Comunisti contro individualisti, il dibattito sull'organizzazione del 1907,” *Bollettino del Museo del Risorgimento*, anno XXXV, 1990.

15 Luigi Galleani, *The End of Anarchism?* trans. Sartin and D'Attilo (Orkney: Cienfuegos Press, 1982).

16 Gino Cerrito, *Dall'insurrezionalismo alla settimana rossa: per una storia dell'anarchismo in Italia 1881–1914* (Florence: CP, 1977), 107.

17 Errico Malatesta, *Rivoluzione e lotta quotidiana* (Venice: Edizioni Antistato, 1982), 211.