

Becoming “sovversivi”: how personal suffering and compassion inspire the choice to be a revolutionary

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Abstract

In the autobiographical accounts of nineteenth-century revolutionaries, one recurrent theme is that the socialist road to Damascus is found in the discovery of the pain and misery of the people: witnessing other people’s suffering is what triggers the shift towards political activism. For these rebels, compassion played a central role. This feeling, like all the others, is culturally as well as “naturally” determined. By exploring a sampling of memoirs, my essay will focus in particular on the role nineteenth-century literature played in arousing empathy for the unfortunate. However, in anarchist-socialists’ self-portraits, the morality and practice of solidarity that characterise the choice to be a revolutionary are based on the personal experience of physical or mental suffering: as Turati wrote when he was a young man shaken by depression, one’s own pains are “windows open onto the pain of the world”. By looking in-depth at these biographies, this paper will show how existential pessimism can combine with the great plans of revolutionary cultures and how activism in the name of the oppressed may be conceived as one’s means of escape, compensation or redemption.

Author information

Elena Papadia is associate professor of Contemporary History at University ‘La Sapienza’ of Rome. She teaches “Political, social and cultural history of the contemporary age”. Her research mainly focuses on generational mobilization and political cultures in Italy during the Liberal era. Her publication includes *Nel nome della nazione. L’Associazione Nazionale Italiana in età giolittiana*, Roma, Archivio Guido Izzi, 2006; *Di padre in figlio: la generazione del 1915*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2013; *La forza dei sentimenti. Anarchici e socialisti in Italia (1870-1900)*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2019. She is now writing a biography of the revolutionary Amilcare Cipriani.

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Monday, 14 June - Session 2 - **10,30-12,00 CET (Webex)** - Panel – *Revolution and the language of feelings in Italy: from Mazzini to 1970s terrorism*

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