evolution was a topic supremely exercising intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In one country after another, self-selected and self-admiring men and a few women took their inspiration from the French revolution and Karl Marx. They met, corresponded with one another, and concerted their programs, and sometimes their conspiracies, through the Second and then the Third International. As though it were a mere matter of opportunity and organization, they debated who was to be murdered, and when and how, and in what numbers. These debates found consummation in the careers of Lenin and Stalin, and their many imitators, arguably including Hitler. And by means of the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting, as Auden was to put it, people of supposedly sensitive disposition were promoting the execution squad and the armed mobs in the street, thus becoming accessories to the totalitarian crimes of the recent age.

Many have likened the unconditional surrender of so many intellectuals to Marxism to a religious phenomenon, and the passing of time seems more and more to confirm such an explanation. Marx was an improbable deity. For all the wide range of his reading, he was coarse and brutal as a
thinker, as in the way he lived. Prescription for him was the end of argument. But he had the one over-arching idea that class warfare is the motor necessarily driving history. Deemed elect by definition, the proletariat was to dispossess and eliminate other classes, whether feudal, bourgeois, or capitalist, all deemed irredeemably non-elect, therefore condemned to death. The idea of class warfare appealed naturally to hard men because it could serve so well to justify a predisposition to murder strong enough altogether to detach them from reality.

Class is only a figment, a reduction of human beings to their material means and occupations, in short one of those vacuous organizing principles that those with a sociological bent like Marx are in the habit of inventing. Marx's one-time friend, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, and certainly a hard man, foresaw that the projected dictatorship of the proletariat was bound to end in tyranny and corpses. Such admirers of Marx as Friedrich Engels, Eduard Bernstein, and Karl Kautsky also came to have doctrinal doubts, but still class warfare as a sacrosanct engine of politics and history worked its way deep into the European imagination, to become the core value of the Communist Party.

Class warfare took on different glosses in different nations. In Italy, the hard men were formed in a famously historic culture of violence, compounded with genuine revolution against foreign occupiers as well as the turmoil of the Risorgimento. There was also plenty of injustice and inequality for the hard men to latch on to. Naples and the southern provinces were a by-word for human misery.

Richard Drake is an academic who has previously written about the Italian Left, and in Apostles and Agitators he describes in self-contained essays the careers of seven of Marx's principle disciples in Italy, the hard men who perpetuated his influence and built the Communist movement there. Giving his accounts of these leading Italian Marxists, Drake has based himself almost exclusively on their publications, reported speeches, and letters. The result is certainly elegant, but limited by its literary approach, not to say stylization. The context in which these hard men operated is left to look after itself. The industrial unrest, peasant uprisings, political crises, wars and other events against which to measure the opinion and careers of these revolutionaries are passed over with a distant nod at most. Also accorded only an oblique mention here and there was what Drake calls a time-honored play between reform and revolution. He drops the names of the reformers—Filippo Turati, Giovanni Giolitti—on to the pages as though they were self-explanatory. Specialists alone will be able to fill in the blanks, and know that those who advocated reform were both brave and right in their stand. It is only when measured properly against reformers that revolutionaries stand revealed as the monsters they were.

Again, the names of the revolutionaries for the most part will be familiar only to specialists. Carlo Cafiero, for instance, came from a privileged background, spent some time in London where he knew and idolized Marx, married an aristocratic lady, and lavished his fortune on promoting revolution. The first to popularize the writings of Marx in Italy, he himself understood that in the revolution people would have to be killed, and he glorified the knife, the rifle, and dynamite. He
died in the mad-house. Antonio Labriola wrote what Drake calls "a major work of Marxist theory" with the characteristic title of "Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History." Arturo Labriola (no relation of Antonio) met and worked with Georges Sorel in Paris, and through him came to believe that workers' strikes would trigger the revolution. He lived until 1959, long enough to be able to understand the futility of his life's work, and to renounce it.

Benito Mussolini was self-educated, and he too came to Marxism via Sorel, picking up and adopting the idea of class struggle. Undoubtedly he was a hard man, with no qualms about a revolution which would kill people. Opposing the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911, he was sent to prison for a year. Right up to the eve of the First War, he was calling Marx "the magnificent philosopher of violence," and advocating left-wing revolution and a neutral foreign policy. The revolutionary wing of the Socialist Party made a hero of him. Once the war was under way, however, he reversed his opinion abruptly but sincerely, and was expelled from the party. Joining the army, he rose like Hitler to non-commissioned rank. Mussolini founded his fascist movement in 1919; his revolutionary friends put on black shirts, and not long afterwards they began to persecute and murder erstwhile colleagues in true Marxist style. Drake makes it unmistakably clear that Italian fascism was a split-off or mutant from revolutionary socialism.

The Communist Party was founded at the same moment out of the rump of the revolutionary socialists. Amadeo Bordiga, its first secretary general, had been a close colleague of Mussolini's. Class war was imperative in his opinion, and he welcomed the Bolshevik revolution as a fine example of it. Not quite agile enough, he backed Trotsky against Stalin, and was lucky to live to tell the tale. Antonio Gramsci replaced him as secretary general. Born into a poor Sardinian family in 1891, he suffered from a hump on his back and general bad health. Like Mussolini, he was a brilliant journalist. The fascist regime cracked down on the Communist Party and dissipated it in 1926, sending Gramsci to prison. Before his death there in 1937 he was able to write copiously, developing the original view that Communists ought to evolve from the tactic of primitive revolution, and instead infiltrate the institutions of society and so take power from within. Their conspicuous success in doing exactly this in the post-Stalin era has given Gramsci a reputation as "the most famous and influential Marxist in the world today," in Drake's words.

Palmiro Togliatti was Gramsci's rival and successor. Much of his career in the Mussolini period and right through the Second War was spent in Moscow as a Comintern agent. His most important Comintern assignment was in Spain during the civil war there, when he was responsible for sending many Communists to their death. A hard man certainly, a slave-executioner, he could read the omens correctly and took due care to back Stalin in matters great and small, and so survived to return to Italy in 1945, lead the Communist party, and enter the government. In an example of black humor, this blood-drenched old Stalinist was soon overtaken by Italian Maoists, and the likes of Adriano Sofri and Toni Negri, the founding fathers of the Red Brigades. Almost exclusively born into privileged backgrounds, the members of the Red Brigades murdered twelve hundred people before the state at last mobilized, brought them to justice, and sentenced them to prison. Perhaps second only to the Soviet Union, Italy cherished the tradition of
revolutionary Marxism, but seemingly it has come to an end there too, and all that survives is the memory of delusion and inhumanity.

David Pryce-Jones, the author of *Fault Lines* (Criterion Books), is at work on its successor, *Signatures*.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 22 Number 4, on page 99
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