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**David Lazzaretti: heretic, rebel, or mentally insane?  
A cold case in Post-Unification Italy \***

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## **1 - Introduction**

“My tongue will be like a thunderbolt”<sup>1</sup>. These words, included in a letter from 1869 addressed to the Catholic priest Don Nazzareno Caponi, synthesized the charismatic force and verbal violence of David Lazzaretti (1834-1878), prophet, rebel and heretic in mid-nineteenth century Italy. Better known as the ‘Christ of Monte Amiata’, Lazzaretti’s reputation intertwined in a peculiar way, accusations of blasphemy and heresy with charges of crime and mental illness at a time of great change in Italian history. As it is well known, the peninsula that had been unified under Piedmont’s leadership in 1861 - with the exception of Rome, which would follow nine years later - faced many difficulties. Among these, tensions between the northern regions and the *Mezzogiorno* as well as rural resistance to the reform programme launched by officials from the Kingdom of Sardinia figured prominently. In the hinterland of Maremma, a coastal region in Central Italy between Tuscany and Lazio, the consequences of expanding and centralising State power that

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\* This publication, peer evaluated, falls within the scope of the PRIN project “*The revisited brigandage. Narratives, practices and political uses in the history of modern and contemporary Italy*” (Project Code: PRIN 2017WLPTRL).

<sup>1</sup> **D. LAZZARETTI**, *Lettera del 15 Febbraio 1869 - da Montelabbro a Don Nazzareno Caponi*, Roma (lett. 2°), in S. ULIVIERI, S. NANNI (eds), *Religione e società sull’Amiata tra ‘700 e ‘800. Ricerche documentarie su David Lazzaretti e l’esperienza lazzarettista*, Effigi, Arcidosso, 2001, p. 155.



accompanied *Piemontesizzazione*<sup>2</sup> were especially felt and equally disliked. Hence it does not surprise that Lazzaretti's apocalyptic visions, challenges to established political power, calls for social rebellion and celebration of rural religiosity hit on fertile ground. His case emblematised the fragility of the young Italian state just as much as it was a product of it. It also showed how Piedmontese rulers tried to quell signs of rebellion that threatened to undermine national unity.

From the start, the Kingdom of Italy bore the symptoms of an emergency state<sup>3</sup>. Unification had unleashed large-scale migration from the countryside to urban centres, which had expanded so rapidly that homelessness and poverty took a flight. This created a new class of social outcasts that consisted not only of urban poor but of various types of 'subversives' including thieves and prostitutes. In the literary imagination, and in the mind of the bourgeoisie too, the inner-city areas, due the rising *dangerous classes*<sup>4</sup>, soon became places of perdition and immorality. A second issue that threatened the stability of the young Italian state was brigandage<sup>5</sup>; although it has been an ancient phenomenon<sup>6</sup>, the nineteenth century was undoubtedly the "*grand siècle* of the brigandage"<sup>7</sup>. Obviously, most brigands resided in the rural areas of Central- and Southern-Italy,

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<sup>2</sup> On this topic, see at least, **E. RAGIONIERI**, *La storia politica e sociale*, in C. VIVANTI, R. ROMANO (eds), *Storia d'Italia*, vol. IV, *Dall'Unità a oggi*, t. III, Einaudi, Turin, 1976, p. 1689.

<sup>3</sup> **M. SBRICCOLI**, *Caratteri originari e tratti permanenti del sistema penale italiano (1860-1990)*, in ID. (ed.), *Storia del diritto penale e della giustizia. Scritti editi e inediti (1972-2007)*, Giuffrè, Milan, 2009, vol. I, p. 592.

<sup>4</sup> For the origin of this concept see the seminal book **H.A. FREGIER**, *Des classes dangereuses de la population dans les grandes villes, et des moyens de les rendre meilleurs*, Baillièrre, Paris, 1840, tt. I-II. In addition, for the Italian context, see **P. COSTA**, "*Classi pericolose*" e "*razze inferiori*": la sovranità e le sue strategie di assoggettamento, in *I sentieri della ricerca. Rivista di storia contemporanea*, (2008) 7-8, pp. 333-351 and, more recently, **L. LACCHÈ**, *La paura delle «classi pericolose» Ritorno al futuro?*, in *Quaderno di storia del penale e della giustizia*, (2019), 1, pp. 159-178.

<sup>5</sup> The bibliography on brigandage in post-unification Italy is countless. See at least, **F. MOLFESE**, *Storia del brigantaggio dopo l'Unità*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1964 and **S. LUPO**, *Il grande brigantaggio. Interpretazione e memoria di una guerra civile*, in W. BARBERIS (ed.), *Storia d'Italia Einaudi, Annali XVIII, Guerra e Pace*, Einaudi, Turin, 2002, pp. 463-502. In addition, see the recent book **C. PINTO**, *La Guerra per il Mezzogiorno. Italiani, borbonici e briganti, 1860-1870*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Suffice it to say that in 1864 it was stated that "brigandage has always existed in South Italy" (**D. HILTON**, *Brigandage in South Italy*, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, London, 1864, vol. I, p. 2)

<sup>7</sup> **L. LACCHÈ**, *Latrocinium. Giustizia, scienza penale e repressione del banditismo in antico regime*, Giuffrè, Milan, 1988, p. 25.



which had only recently been attached to the Italian kingdom. They were typically peasants claiming ancient privileges on the land and fields. Often leading in revolts that saw peasants defend traditional rights, brigands defied public order as much as they undermined the process of nation-building<sup>8</sup>. Because of this, they acquired an almost legendary status as enemies<sup>9</sup> of Italian unification and became negative heroes *par excellence*. His calls for resistance placed Davide Lazzaretti firmly in the corner of these rural rebels<sup>10</sup>.

As the name “Christ of Monte Amiata” however suggests, Lazzaretti was also more than just a brigand. With his apocalyptic ideas and unusual religious explorations, this lay ‘priest’ negated the centralising and homogenising processes characteristic of the nineteenth-century Catholic Church and this at a time that relations between the Holy See and the Kingdom of Italy were already strained. After Pope Pius IX had strenuously yet unsuccessfully opposed unification and the liquidation of the Papal States, he now tried to retain control over the only territory he could still call his: the city of Rome. As it is well known, the so-called Roman question<sup>11</sup> was militarily solved with the Breach of Porta Pia on 20 September 1870 and the proclamation of Rome as capital four months later; on a diplomatic level, it only ended with the Lateran Pacts in 1929. But beyond appearances, the question also had many consequences and changes in mentality<sup>12</sup>. In short, when Davide Lazzaretti was

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<sup>8</sup> On this topic see *amplius*, L. LACCHÈ, M. STRONATI (eds), *Questione criminale e identità nazionale in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, Eum, Macerata, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> On the concept of criminal considered like an enemy of the society in the late Nineteenth Italy, see at least, P. MARCHETTI, *Le "sentinelle del male". L'invenzione ottocentesca del criminale nemico della società tra naturalismo giuridico e normativismo psichiatrico*, in *Quaderni fiorentini per la storia del pensiero giuridico moderno*, (2009), 38, II, pp. 1009-1080 and, more specifically, on the classification of brigands like enemies, M. STRONATI, *Il brigante tra antropologia e ordine giuridico: alle origini di un'icona dell'uomo criminale nel XIX secolo*, in *Quaderni fiorentini per la storia del pensiero giuridico moderno*, (2009), 38, t. II, pp. 953-1008.

<sup>10</sup> See Z. CIUFFOLETTI, *Le classi dirigenti toscane e il lazzarettismo*, in C. PAZZAGLI (ed.), *Davide Lazzaretti e il Monte Amiata. Protesta sociale e rinnovamento religioso*, Nuova Guaraldi, Florence, 1981, p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> On the centrality of the Roman question for the legal establishment of the Kingdom of Italy, see *ex multis*, A. PIOLA, *La questione romana nella storia e nel diritto: da Cavour al Trattato del Laternano*, Giuffrè, Milan, 1969 and, more recently, M. RIBERI, *La creazione giuridica del Regno d'Italia*, Giappichelli, Turin, 2020, pp. 181-193.

<sup>12</sup> See, *amplius*, P.G. CAIMANI, *Il diavolo e la questione romana. Saggi sulle mentalità dell'Ottocento*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2018.



impressing followers with his unorthodox teachings, religious-political relations in Italy remained uncertain. That he was active in the region of Monte Amiata is significant here, because the area bordered what had until recently been the Papal States. By preaching blasphemous and heretical ideas on the pope's doorstep, this self-styled Christ challenged the premise of Ultramontanism and undermined efforts for papal restoration.

State authorities looked at the case of Davide Lazzaretti with suspicion and warned against the communitarian and subversive implications of his teachings. Their concerns about brigands were backed up by the research of the well-known alienist Cesare Lombroso<sup>13</sup> and other proponents of the Positivist School, who tried establishing scientific criteria for criminal behaviour. Lombroso himself, who with his *Criminal Man* (1876) would soon find the discipline of modern criminology or a "science of the *abnormal*"<sup>14</sup>, considered brigandage a form of primitive crime that justified persecution. Lazzaretti was also fiercely criticised by the Catholic Church. After a series of failed attempts to bring what it regarded as a poor country carter back into the fold, the clergy progressively feared the damage this self-styled Tuscan prophet was doing to an institution under stress. In 1878, church authorities officially accused him of heresy and put his proselytising works on the Index.

This issue analyses the case of Davide Lazzaretti within the delicate legal and social context of post-unification Italy. Drawing on the trials in both civil and ecclesiastical courts, this issue shows how Church officials, state authorities and psychiatrists highlighted in their court testimonies different aspects of Lazzaretti's actions and teachings that moreover differed markedly from the writings of the Christ of Monte Amiata. In doing so, it shows how the case of one lone man helped contemporaries to flash out more general ideas about religious morality, socially acceptable behaviour and nation-building. More specifically, the purpose of this issue is to retrace the different interpretations of Lazzaretti case according to the

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<sup>13</sup> On the controversial founder of Criminal Anthropology see at least, **D. FRIGESSI**, *Cesare Lombroso*, Einaudi, Turin, 2003; **M. GIBSON**, *Born to crime. Cesare Lombroso and the Origin of Biological Criminology*, Praeger, Westport-London, 2002; S. MONTALDO, P. TAPPERO (eds), *Cesare Lombroso cento anni dopo*, Utet, Turin, 2009; and, on the international debate, P. KNEPPER, P.J. YSTEHEDE (eds), *The Cesare Lombroso Handbook*, Routledge, New York-Oxford, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> **E. MUSUMECI**, 'Against the Rising Tide of Crime': Cesare Lombroso and Control of the "Dangerous Classes" in Italy, 1861-1940, in *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies*, (2018), vol. 22, n. 2, p. 87.



point of view used (by the religious authorities, by the State, as well as by the psychiatry of the time) in order to highlight the elusive character of this case, too often subject to deliberate emphasis and political-ideological instrumentalization<sup>15</sup>, going beyond the state of the art and the most consolidated visions<sup>16</sup>.

## 2 - The life and works of David Lazzaretti, the “Second Christ” from Arcidosso

In order to understand the role and success of the man called ‘second Messiah’, it is necessary to revisit his biography. The figure of Davide Lazzaretti (sometimes Lazzeretti) is still shrouded in mystery for several representations of his life in hagiographic way. What we know for certain is that he was born in Arcidosso, a small Tuscan town located between Grosseto and Siena, in 1834 to a peasant family. Like his father, he became a carter, travelling up and down the Maremma area. Although Lazzaretti would later claim that he had experienced his first religious vision at the age of fourteen, he initially led a different and at times dissolute life until,

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<sup>15</sup> This occurred especially thanks to the Gramscian interpretation of Lazzarettism in his *Prison Notebooks* and later to the new interpretation of this vision from the Marxist historian **E.J. HOBSBAWM**, *Primitive rebels. Studies in archaic forms of social movements in the 19th and 20th centuries*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1971<sup>2</sup>. In a similar vein, the most important edited book on Lazzarettism, C. PAZZAGLI (ed.), *Davide Lazzaretti e il Monte Amiata*, cit. On the contrary, Carl Ginzburg underlined that there could be dangerous and harmful to “populistically overestimate” the deeds of Lazzaretti: see, **C. GINZBURG**, *Folklore, magia, religione*, in C. VIVANTI, R. ROMANO (eds), *Storia d’Italia*, vol. I, *I caratteri originali*, Einaudi, Turin, 1972, p. 675. In addition, for a “sociological” point of view of Lazzaretti’s predication, also starting from Max Weber’s work, see **E. TEDESCHI**, *Per una sociologia del millennio. David Lazzaretti: carisma e mutamento sociale*, Marsilio, Venice, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> The storiography for a long time has been too influenced by the mystical reputation of the Tuscan prophet as “the man of mystery” as early depicted by one of the first study on his figure (**G. BARZELLOTTI**, *Davide Lazzaretti di Arcidosso (detto il Santo)*, Zanichelli, Bologna, 1884) and more recently confirmed by local historians, often with hagiographical character (for instance, **G. REPETTO**, *L’uomo del mistero. Guida pratica e sintetica ai luoghi, alla vita e alle opere di David Lazzaretti, Profeta dell’Amiata*, Effigi, Arcidosso, 2001 and **N. NANNI**, *Vita e pensiero di David Lazzaretti. Il Profeta della Terza Era*, Effigi, Arcidosso, 2011) or with a strictly bibliographical or biographical intent (**L. GRAZIANI** (ed), *Studio bibliografico su David Lazzaretti profeta dell’Amiata*, La torre davidica, Rome, 1964 and **A. PETACCO**, *Il Cristo dell’Amiata. La storia di Davide Lazzaretti*, Arnoldo Mondadori, Milan, 1978).






thirty-three years old, he caught a violent fever. After several other fevers, he began to call himself 'the new Messiah' and declared himself ready to change the Catholic Church. A good example is *La mia lotta con Dio* (*My Struggle with God*, 1876), which Lazzaretti wrote in France and which contains a plea for reinterpreting the Old and New Testaments as well as the Apocalyptic books of the Bible.

Typical of millennialism, the book detected a crisis in the Church that only a new Messiah could successfully solve. To underscore how he, Davide Lazzaretti, was the second Christ, he explained how he had been abducted and carried to heaven:

"in the midst of this fiery cloud I saw the luminous and resplendent face of God, upon a triangular and pyramidal throne, and from here a rain of fiery thunderbolts spread out that crawled across the air and fell across the face of the earth"<sup>17</sup>.

The book's frontispiece referred to "Christ the Duce and Judge, complete redemption of men" and included the emblem of the Giurisdavidic Church, which Lazzaretti had founded in 1870. It consisted of two mirrored letters C with a cross in the middle  symbolizing the second coming of Christ, and is here seen being stamped on Lazzaretti's forehead by Saint Peter himself (a truly "divine seal")<sup>18</sup>. Whereas this still showed him as a member of the Roman Church, he presented himself at other times as "the immediate depositary of God's secrets and at the head of a new faith"<sup>19</sup>. He invented rites that differed from established Catholic ritual, called on priests to marry, introduced new confession and communion practices as well as had the faithful of Monte Labbro use a new version of the Creed prayer in 21 articles during the functions. Lazzaretti also claimed to have been told in one of his visions that Monte Amiata should have hosted one of the *Seven Eternal Cities* on which to build the foundations for the rebirth of Christianity.

Even if Lazzaretti was only a semi-literate autodidact, his time in France helped him to publish numerous books on his visions and premonitions in which he described the arrival of a new era: the "Era of

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<sup>17</sup> D. LAZZARETTI, *La mia lotta con Dio ossia Il libro dei Sette Sigilli: descrizione e natura delle sette città eterne*, Filippo Corsini e compagni, Arcidosso, 1877, now online: <https://digilander.libero.it/universotuttoamore/Lazzaretti/La%20mia%20lotta%20con%20Dio.htm>

<sup>18</sup> See A. PETACCO, *Il Cristo dell'Amiata*, cit., pp. 63-64.

<sup>19</sup> G. BARZELLOTTI, *Monte Amiata e il suo Profeta (Davide Lazzaretti)*, Treves, Milan, 1910<sup>2</sup>, p. 100.



the Spirit”, the “Third Person in the Trinity” or the “Reign of Right” (itself a derivative of the “Reign of Grace”). In this new era, Lazzaretti himself would take on the role of “Christ, Leader, Judge” as well as “the Second Son of God come to earth”. In view of these ideas, it does not surprise that Catholic officials considered him a heretic and excommunicated him; his blasphemous writings were put on the Index. Despite Roman sanctions, Lazzaretti’s religious ideas and sermons were shared widely among the peasants of his native Arcidosso as well as among the rural population of other parts of Tuscany. The masses of the peasants soon followed Lazzaretti’s ideas, seeing in him a spiritual guide. His fame even crossed national borders especially when he founded his new cult based on a sort of mystical and utopian socialism mixed with Christians dogmas (his motto was: “The Republic is the kingdom of God”).

Other than professing blasphemies and heresies that angered the Catholic Church, Lazzaretti and his followers boasted a social radicalism that threatened the political foundations of the new Kingdom of Italy and were therefore closely watched by civil authorities. In a monarchical state, republican references were always considered dangerous whilst subversive. Yet the Christ of Monte Amiata went even further when, in his final writings, he called for the establishment of a community based on socialist ideals. The peasants’ land and property were to be transferred to community ownership and every member had to work it in equal measure so that the proceeds could be shared by the whole group. The call to share land was accompanied by the exhortation not to pay taxes, which the Italian state was demanding with increasing pressure.

Lazzaretti’s humble background, his apocalyptic visions and radical views on the social order contributed to a mythical status that was only strengthened by his violent death on 18 August 1878 at the hands of Italian *carabinieri*. On that fateful morning, he was leading a religious procession from Monte Labbro to Arcidosso during which the pilgrims, dressed in colourful and eccentric tunics, were singing the hymns of the Giurisdavidic Church that Lazzaretti had composed himself; this included the *Cantico delle sante milizie crocifere della nazione latina nel governo della repubblica* (*Canticle of the Holy Militias of the Latin Nation in the Government of the Republic*) with its verse “Long live the Republic, God and Liberty”. Roughly halfway, the pilgrims were awaited by two civil officials - the Delegate of Public Safety Carlo De Luca and the Mayor of Arcidosso - as well as eight carabinieri, who ordered the rioters to disperse. After a short conversation with De Luca, Lazzaretti publicly declined to retire and in a desperate attempt to avoid losing face professed his readiness to die should the officials refuse to let the procession pass. The pilgrims



remained silent following a sign from their leader yet when a stone suddenly hit De Luca, the carabinieri fired. Lazzaretti himself was mortally wounded; in the ensuing confusion, the soldiers also aimed at the other pilgrims.

### 3 - The 'Prophet' on the stand: the criminal trials in the State Courts

Before he faced the Tribunal of Holy Office in Rome, which was tasked with defending the Church against heresy, Lazzaretti was placed under police surveillance and prosecuted for allegedly violating the Italian penal code. Different charges were levied at him shared a focus on public order or property and not religious issues<sup>20</sup>. Between 1869 and 1870 alone, Lazzaretti was denounced four times for among others prophesying the impending fall of the Savoy dynasty and other royal families as well as for speeches with 'subversive' content. State officials were also worried about his increasingly large following among the people of Arcidosso and the surrounding area. One noteworthy episode, which the prefect of Grosseto feared would seriously disturb public order, saw Lazzaretti's followers assemble at his spiritual retreat on Montecristo, a small island off the Tuscan coast. Another case of considered proof of the disruption caused by the Christ of Monte Amiata was the public reading of his poem *Who are the kings of the world?*<sup>21</sup>.

In 1870, Lazzaretti was arrested for violating articles 97 and 126 of the Tuscan penal code, which was still in force despite unification. In particular, according to article 126 is punished as crime against the security of the State "anyone, by means of speeches, shouts or threats, pronounced in public places or in public meetings [...] or of public seditious demonstrations, has excited to commit an attack of the kind indicated in articles 96, 97, and 114". The accusation concerned Lazzaretti's decision to gather with a 1,500-strong crowd in Monte Labbro in March 1870, where he held a speech entitled "God Sees Us, Judges Us and Condemns Us" that was later published in his work *Il risveglio dei popoli (Awakening of Peoples, 1870)*<sup>22</sup>. The incendiary tone of the speech

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<sup>20</sup> See F. COLAO, 'Fatti che non sappiamo spiegare, malgrado avvengano sotto i nostri occhi, come i trionfi di Lazzaretti'. *Spiegazioni dell'Italia liberale tra polizia, diritto penale, 'nuova scienza'*, in *Quaderni del Centro Studi Davide Lazzaretti*, (2009), 1, pp. 11-37.

<sup>21</sup> See F. BARDELLI, *David Lazzaretti*, Cantagalli, Siena, 1978, p. 89.

<sup>22</sup> D. LAZZARETTI, *Il risveglio dei popoli. Preghiere, profezie, sentenze*, Maggi Corgoni, Arcidosso, 1870.





convinced Arcidosso's public security delegate to report Lazzaretti to the court for fear of plotting to overthrow the government, implement a new regime or start a civil war. On 29 April 1870 the court of Grosseto declined to prosecute him for lack of incriminating evidence<sup>23</sup>.

Lazzaretti's judicial problems did not end here. In August 1871, he was arrested for inciting riots, illicit begging and fraud. According to the accusation, he had received money for his proselytizing activities, with his followers contributing five cents a week to the fund of the *Santa Lega* (Holy League), which Lazzaretti had founded. These donations also paid towards the costs of erecting a tower in his honour. His legal assistance was taken on by the lawyer Giovanni Salvi, who had previously served as magistrate in the government of the Grand Duke of Tuscany and whose influence enabled him to obtain Lazzaretti's provisional release with the obligation of residence until the sentence issued on 9 March 1872 when the court declined to prosecute him<sup>24</sup>.

Despite these judicial setbacks, officials remained suspicious and in May 1872 the prefect of Grosseto wrote an alarming letter to Italy's minister of the interior on the spread of the Lazzarettist movement. In it, he called Lazzaretti "a dangerous man" whose "mysterious manner leaves well-founded suspicions" of being "capable of any excess" foreseeing that certainly he would have no other way than to "provoke unrest"<sup>25</sup>.

State officials discovered a new venue for prosecution in 1873: the cash donations given to Lazzaretti by his followers. They accused him of having extorted the money from the peasant population by making up stories and consequently arrested him for fraud and vagrancy. This time Lazzaretti was found guilty. On 25 May 1874, the court of Rieti sent him to one year (for fraud) and three months (for vagrancy) imprisonment and to one year police surveillance; he also had to pay a fine and the legal costs. Yet on 22 July 1875, the court of appeal in Perugia annulled the sentence, among others because it saw nothing liable in the *Rescritti Profetici* (*Prophetic Rescripts*, 1870)<sup>26</sup>. The defence by Pasquale Stanislao Mancini who later became Minister of Grace and Justice, together with the

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<sup>23</sup> E. CARAVAGGIO, *Inchiesta e relazione sui fatti di Arcidosso*, in *Supplemento al n. 231 della Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, 1° October (1878), p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> F. IMPERIUZZI, *Storia di Davide Lazzaretti. Profeta di Arcidosso*, Tipografia Nuova, Siena, 1905, pp. 231-232.

<sup>25</sup> A. PETACCO, *Il Cristo dell'Amiata*, cit., pp. 111-112.

<sup>26</sup> D. LAZZARETTI, *Manifeste de Davide Lazzaretti aux peuples et aux princes chrétiens: suivi d'opuscoles inédits du même auteur et de quelques documents justificatifs relatifs à son procès*, S.N., Arcidosso, 1876, p. 82.



lawyers Francesco Ceci and Giovanni Salvi had done the rest<sup>27</sup>. Paradoxically, 'the heretic and blasphemous' Lazzaretti was never accused nor convicted for offences concerning the protection of religion but for crimes against the State, property or public order, despite the Tuscan penal code punished a number of crimes against the religion of the State. While in other codes these crimes had been cancelled after the twenty revolutionaries, (the most striking example was the Napoleonic penal code of 1810 which did not contemplate the crime of blasphemy), the Tuscan code was in contrast with the trend, punishing a range of crimes against the religion of the State or, according to article 1 of the Albertine Statute, the Piedmontese monarchy's constitution approved in 1848 and adopted also by the Kingdom of Italy after the unification, which also declared the Catholic religion to be the official religion of the State. The other cults were instead qualified as "tolerated according to the law"<sup>28</sup>. By contrast, the Tuscan penal code counted no less than twelve crimes against Catholicism as the religion of the state. Among others, it sanctioned various forms of sacrilege (articles 131-135 and 141-142), blasphemy (article 136) - here defined as a verbal offence against God<sup>29</sup> that was punishable with up to five years imprisonment - and proselytism (article 137) - this too was punished with imprisonment of maximum five years or up to seven years in the 'house of force'.

During the period stretching from Italian unification to the introduction of a nation-wide penal code in 1889, three codes<sup>30</sup> coexisted on the peninsula that showed great internal differences among others in

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<sup>27</sup> See **A. MOSCATO**,  *Davide Lazzaretti, il messia dell'Amiata. L'ultima delle eresie popolari agli albori del movimento operaio e contadino*, Savelli, Rome, 1978, p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, a real equalisation of Catholics and non-Catholics not immediately occurred, being still adopted some forms of civil incapacitation, especially against Waldensians and Jews, as underlined by Isacco Rignano who retraced the difficult path towards the conquest of freedom of cults in the Sardinian-Piedmontese Kingdom and, later, in the Kingdom of Italy. See, **I. RIGNANO**, *Della uguaglianza civile e della libertà dei culti secondo il diritto pubblico del Regno d'Italia*, Tip. Vigo, Livorno, 1868<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> About the origins and the transformation of blasphemy from verbal offence against God to an offence against reputation and religious sentiment of other individuals see **D. NASH**, *Blasphemy in the Christian World. A History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012; **A. CABANTOUS**, *Blasphemy, Impious Speech in the West from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002 and **C. CIANITTO**, *Quando la parola ferisce. Blasfemia e incitamento all'odio religioso nella società contemporanea*, Giappichelli, Turin, 2018, pp. 13-20.

<sup>30</sup> In addition to the Sardinian-Piedmontese code of 1859, the Tuscan code of 1853 and the version of the code of 1859 applied in the Neapolitan Provinces starting from 1861.



their respective treatment of crimes against religion. Whereas its Tuscan counterpart still listed numerous crimes pertaining to religion, the Sardinian code of 1859 only included sacrilege and perjury; because it applied to most of the peninsula, a majority of Italians faced few legal restrictions when it came to questions of the faith. The various penal codes drafted before the promulgation of the Zanardelli code were similarly conservative on religious matters. Indeed, the 1889 code referred to the freedom of religion as part of a broader spectrum of individual freedoms as well as to “crimes against the freedom of cults”<sup>31</sup>, including not just Catholicism but all faiths recognised by the State. Undoubtedly, this was a real “liberal turning point” in the history of the protection of religious freedom because for the first time the Italian penal system established its own “incompetence in religious matters and the equal protection of all citizens, regardless of their confessional affiliation”<sup>32</sup>.

The shift away from criminalising offences against Roman religion was a logical outcome of the pluralist and secular worldview propounded by liberal thinkers and politicians, including the founding father of Italian unity Camillo Benso di Cavour, according to his well-known formula “a free Church in a free State”<sup>33</sup>. It is possible that such changed cultural climate inspired state officials, well before the approval of the Zanardelli Code, to prosecute Davide Lazzaretti for trespasses on public order rather than for crimes against religion, which Tuscan law allowed. At a time that criminal law was being progressively secularised in the young Italian kingdom, Lazzaretti’s overtly heretical discourses and religious

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<sup>31</sup> On this kind of crimes on the context of the Zanardelli Code, see **F. CAMPOLONGO**, *Culti (Reati contro la libertà)* (voce), in *Digesto Italiano*, vol. VIII, p. IV, Utet, Turin, 1899-1903, pp. 718-781 and **R. CRESPOLANI**, *Culti (Reati contro la libertà dei)* (voce), in *Enciclopedia giuridica italiana*, vol. III, p. I IV, Società Editrice Libreria, Milan, 1906, pp. 1027-1056.

<sup>32</sup> **L. GARLATI**, *Dalla tutela della religione di Stato alla difesa della libertà dei culti: la svolta liberale del codice Zanardelli*, in A. CERETTI, L. GARLATI (eds), *Laicità e stato di diritto*, Giuffrè, Milan, 2007, p. 77, and in *Stato, Chiesa e pluralismo confessionale*, *Rivista telematica* (<https://www.statoechiese.it>), (2007).

<sup>33</sup> On this formula, see at least, **C.B. CONTE DI CAVOUR**, *Libera Chiesa in libero Stato*, Il Melangolo, Genoa, 2001; **A. VERA**, *Il Cavour e Libera Chiesa in libero Stato*, Stamperia della Regia Università, Naples, 1871; **C. CADORNA**, *Illustrazione giuridica della formula del Conte di Cavour ‘Libera Chiesa in libero Stato’*, Tip. Bodoniana, Rome, 1882; **F. RUFFINI**, *Libertà religiosa e separazione tra Stato e Chiesa*, in **ID.**, *Scritti giuridici dedicati a G.P. Chironi*, Bocca, Turin, 1913, vol. III, pp. 239-274, and **ID.**, *Le origini elvetiche della formula del conte di Cavour: «Libera chiesa in libero Stato»*, in *Abdruck aus der Festschrift für Emil Friedberg*, Verlag Veit & C., Leipzig, 1908, pp. 199-220.



proselytism (acts of *divine lese majesty*)<sup>34</sup> played second fiddle to the threat he allegedly posed to public order and national unity (acts of *human lese majesty*)<sup>35</sup> in what, despite the liberal principles adopted by jurists, was in many ways a “paternalistic police state”<sup>36</sup>. Even if Lazzaretti never officially condemned the Kingdom of Italy, he spent repeated periods in prison awaiting his trials<sup>37</sup>.

#### 4 - Lazzaretti before the Tribunal of the Roman Holy Office

Whereas government officials highlighted the socio-political dimension of Lazzaretti’s actions, portraying him alternately as a subversive, swindler, vagabond or brigand, ecclesiastical authorities concentrated on the dangers emanating from his proselyting activities for the Church itself. At the offices of the Tribunal of the Holy Office in Rome (*Sant’Offizio*), Lazzaretti faced a long and controversial trial for his writings and preaching. Other than the teachings of the Giurisdavidic Church, Roman authorities were concerned about its social composition, including the prevalence of working and lower middle classes (peasants, artisans and small landowners) among Lazzaretti’s followers<sup>38</sup>. At a time that Ultramontanism propagated a strictly hierarchical and rigorously organised form of Catholicism that focused all attention on Rome, Church officials regarded it as a scandal that an ignorant layman like Davide Lazzaretti dared preach a religiosity ‘from below’. Indeed, although the Church embraced other forms of mid-nineteenth-century popular piety -

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<sup>34</sup> Conversely, in the late nineteenth century Germany the psychiatrist and writer Oskar Panizza was prosecuted for the crime of blasphemy as a *crimen laesae maiestatis*. His judicial case has been recently retraced by **C. SABBATINI**, *Lo specchio rotto del Liebeskonzil: un caso di blasfemia nell’Impero guglielmino*, in *Stato, Chiesa e pluralismo confessionale*, cit., (2021), n. 1, pp. 160-215.

<sup>35</sup> On the origins and differences between the crimes of *divine* and *human lese majesty* see the seminal work **M. SBRICCOLI**, *Crimes laesae maiestatis. Il problema del reato politico alle soglie della scienza penalistica moderna*, Giuffrè, Milan, 1974.

<sup>36</sup> **F. COLAO**, *Fatti che non sappiamo spiegare*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> See **N. NANNI** (ed.), *Davide Lazzaretti, scritti 1868-1870*, Effigi, Arcidosso, 2008, pp. 18-19.

<sup>38</sup> See **F. BARDELLI**, *Rinnovamento religioso e aspirazioni di riforma sociale nell’organizzazione comunitaria di Monte Labbro (1871-73)*, in **C. PAZZAGLI** (ed.), *Davide Lazzaretti e il Monte Amiata*, cit., pp. 218-220.



the apparition of the Virgin Mary in Lourdes<sup>39</sup> is a case in point; after the bishops had initially rejected the account of Bernadette Soubirous, they later took control of it - in the hope of strengthening its position, it not only opposed but even excommunicated Lazzaretti.

Seen from the perspective of the Church, Davide Lazzaretti was a charismatic leader advocating a new creed that risked creating a schism within Catholicism or sowing the seeds of a new Protestantism. Whereas Bernadette had submitted to her fate and joined a convent where she died only thirty-five years of age, Lazzaretti loudly proclaimed himself the new 'King of Kings' as he announced the abolition of papacy and monarchy. With his personality cult he lacked the humility of other visionaries, whilst his heresies and blasphemies deliberately undermined the unity of the Church. Ecclesiastical authorities understood this danger well enough. Following numerous complaints filed against Lazzaretti's publications in France and Italy, the Holy Office launched an investigation in autumn 1877 that involved collecting books, pamphlets as well as other corroborating evidence against the self-styled prophet. According to his biographers, Lazzaretti was called to Rome in October to meet the inquisitors yet fled to France following rumours of a pending arrest, later found to be untrue. As part of the trial that took place in March and April 1878, he was interrogated alongside the priests Filippo Imperiuzzi and Giovan Battista Polverini. Among others, the inquisitors cited complaints that Lazzaretti had denied the existence of Purgatory and the meaning of Mass as well as accused him of having "identified [himself] with God" and rejected the dogma of papal infallibility - one of the cornerstones of ultramundane thinking<sup>40</sup>. They even revisited his biography prior to the establishment of the Giurisdavidic Church:

"for 20 years he [Lazzaretti] led a life that was not good and spilled with many distresses and privations: he has been a carter, a soldier and, according to some, a Garibaldian: he has been vicious, blasphemer and so on"<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> As it is well known, the case of the apparitions in Lourdes caused sensation so much that it even attracted an eminent intellectual like Émile Zola to deal with the spectacle of crowds of pilgrims, sign of the awakening of an archaic faith, at the end of a century impregnated by the positivist culture on his novel *Lourdes*, part of the trilogy *É. Zola, Les Trois Villes: Lourdes*, Charpentier et Fasquelle, Paris, 1894.

<sup>40</sup> *Suprema Sacra Congregazione del S. Offizio. Relazione del Padre Fr. Marcolino Cicognani de' Predicatori sulla causa di Davide Lazzaretti e Soci per pretese profezie, visioni, ecc.*, in L. NICCOLAI (ed.), *Davide Lazzaretti davanti al Sant'Offizio*, Effigi, Arcidosso, 2007, p. 23.

<sup>41</sup> *Suprema Sacra Congregazione del S. Offizio*, cit., p. 21.





The judges used Lazzaretti's dissolute past to highlight the absurdity of his messianic claim that: "now he pretends to be the envoy of God, the future monarch of the nations, reformer of the Church, prophet who knows God's decrees"<sup>42</sup>.

They also rejected the suggestion that Lazzaretti was 'King of [all] Kings', which would have made him superior to both the pope and the king of Italy and formed another reason for his condemnation and the indexing of all his writings. Evidence for this decision was obtained from complaints submitted by priests and bishops but also from an examination of Lazzaretti himself, who on the one hand defended himself against the accusations and, on the other hand, declared his willingness to submit to the teachings of the Church. Following a hunger strike, he was realised on 10 April 1878 though only after having been reminded of

"the many errors and blasphemies for which he has been responsible, because he had pronounced, printed and claimed with grave scandal and damage to the faithful both in France and in Italy, the case against him continues. Finally, that he is forbidden to communicate without the express faculty of this Supreme Court"<sup>43</sup>.

Within days, *Il Libro dei Celesti Fiori* (*The Book of Celestial Flowers*, 1876) was placed on the Index for its openly heretical passages that were considered not just "erroneous" but "perverse" as they sought to subvert Catholic dogma. For example, one of the main ideas of Lazzaretti's work has been evaluated as a heresy or his vision of the fulfilment of redemption by the Holy Spirit, not excusable even with the circumstance that Lazzaretti did not possess the theological and theoretical tools to understand that he was in error. No one, even the most ignorant of men, argued the judges of the Holy Office, could believe that the Holy Spirit must complete through a Second Messiah (Lazzaretti) his own work of redemption that Jesus would have left imperfect. Other than placing Lazzaretti's books on the Index, the inquisitors suspended ImperiuZZi and Polverini *a divinis* for their "reckless and sacrilegious" actions, i.e. for having profaned the sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist as well as having led their followers into religious error<sup>44</sup>. They also closed all places of worship in Monte Labbro. Lazzaretti was left paralysed by these

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<sup>42</sup> *Suprema Sacra Congregazione del S. Offizio*, cit., pp. 23-24.

<sup>43</sup> L. NICCOLAI, Introduction to *Davide Lazzaretti davanti al Sant'Offizio*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> A. SCATTIGNO, 'Figlio del dolore e della tribolazione, fatti coraggio'. *La fede di Davide Lazzaretti di fronte al Tribunale del Sant'Uffizio*, in *Quaderni del Centro Studi Davide Lazzaretti*, (2009), 1, p. 81.



decisions as he had always seen himself as working within the Roman Church rather than opposing it. For this reason, he decided to return to Arcidosso to stage an important event on 14 August 1878, later postponed to 18 August (the day of the 'fatal' procession).

## 5 - Life after Death: Different interpretations of the Lazzaretti case

In view of Lazzaretti's personal notoriety and the religious-political weight that his case carried in post-unification Italy, his violent death aroused conflicting feelings. The bulletin of Arcidosso municipal council praised De Luca and the carabinieri for their "zeal, courage and self-denial" and congratulated them on having pushed back a dangerous attack by a "horde of people having as main purpose looting and revenge" and a "fanatical mass greedy of ransacking"; in 1879, De Luca even received the Silver Medal for civic duty<sup>45</sup>.

Whereas Lazzaretti's followers mourned his loss and hoped for his resurrection, the Italian government continued its crackdown on civil disobedience by bringing twenty-three "Lazzarettists" arrested after the turmoil in Arcidosso to court. They too were prosecuted not for crimes against religion but for political trespasses and in particular for having attacked "the internal security of the State, for having committed executive acts aimed at overthrowing the Government and to change its shape, at prepare a civil war and to bring devastation and plunder in a City of the State"<sup>46</sup>. The "famous and singular trial" opened at the Assize Court of Siena on 24 October 1879. As it is possible to understand from the proceeding acts and the minutes of the hearing, there were especially emphasised the importance of certain symbols used by the "rebels" such as "a red flag with 'The Republic is the kingdom of God' written on it"<sup>47</sup>. Similarly, a particular importance was given to the element of the "obedience" to David Lazzaretti from his followers and their "organisation with military discipline" after "having joined to the subversive maxims of their leader under the appearance of religious

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<sup>45</sup> F. BARDELLI, *Davide Lazzaretti*, cit., pp. 95-96.

<sup>46</sup> Archivio di Stato di Siena, Tribunali, Corte d'Assise, 1879, Processi verbali d'Udienza Lazzaretti e altri, filza 163.

<sup>47</sup> This detail was written on the first main question to the jury. See Archivio di Stato di Siena, Tribunali, Corte d'Assise, 1879, Processi verbali d'Udienza Lazzaretti e altri, filza 163, verbale n. 53.



practices"<sup>48</sup>. The intent of the accusation is quite evident: to instill in the jurors the idea that Lazzaretti was a false prophet and that his followers were dangerous subversives who masked their shady political intentions under an alleged religious inspiration. Nonetheless, the trial ended on 9 November 1879 with an acquittal verdict for two reasons. First of all, thanks the efforts of their lawyer Pietro Nocito who had condemned the case as a "political" act, highlighted how the Lazzarettists' had been moved by the ideals of "freedom, innocence and justice" and had uncovered inconsistencies in the evidence - including that a trunk supposedly filled with weapons contained in reality only colourful clothes for the new religious order<sup>49</sup>. In addition, also the audience in the courtroom "favourably" accepted the decision. Someone shouted, "Long live the jury! Long live the Italian common sense"<sup>50</sup>. This decision, heavily influenced by popular opinion and the role of jurors<sup>51</sup>, can be considered as a form of "emotional justice"<sup>52</sup> harshly criticized by legal scholars<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> See, among others, the first main question to the jury related to the defendant Filippo Corsini, Archivio di Stato di Siena, Tribunali, Corte d'Assise, 1879, Processi verbali d'Udienza Lazzaretti e altri, filza 163, verbale n. 53.

<sup>49</sup> *Processo Lazzaretti Illustrato*, Capaccini & Ripamonti, Rome, 1879, p. 66.

<sup>50</sup> *Processo Lazzaretti Illustrato*, cit., p. 72.

<sup>51</sup> About the relationship between jury and public opinion see **L. LACCHÈ**, "Non giudicate". *Antropologia della giustizia e figure dell'opinione pubblica tra Otto e Novecento*, Satura, Naples, 2009; **ID.**, *Una letteratura alla moda. Opinione pubblica, «processi infiniti» e pubblicità in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, in M. MILETTI (ed.), *Riti, tecniche, interessi. Il processo penale tra Otto e Novecento*, Giuffrè, Milan, 2006, pp. 459-513 and **C. STORTI**, *Giuria penale ed errore giudiziario. Questioni e proposte di riforma alle soglie della promulgazione del codice di procedura penale italiano del 1913*, in AA.VV., *Studi in ricordo di Giandomenico Pisapia*, Giuffrè, Milan, 2000, t. III, pp. 639-710.

<sup>52</sup> Among others, it was emblematic the opinion expressed by the eminent legal scholar Francesco Carrara: "[the jurors] judge emotionally" (**F. CARRARA**, *Alcune lettere del prof. Francesco Carrara pubblicate come saggio del suo epistolario a cura del figlio Gio. Battista il 3 maggio 1891 quando inauguravasi in Lucca il monumento al sommo criminalista*, Tip. Giusti, Lucca, 1891, p. 64).

<sup>53</sup> On the 'parable' of the jury in Italy between Nineteenth and Twentieth century see also E. AMODIO (ed.), *I giudici senza toga. Esperienze e prospettive della partecipazione popolare ai giudizi penali*, Giuffrè, Milan, 1979, and recently, **C. PASSARELLA**, *Una disarmonica fusione di competenze: magistrati togati e giudici popolari in Corte d'Assise negli anni del Fascismo*, *Historia et Ius*, Rome, 2020, pp. 1-11. In addition, on the separation of factual and legal questions as another issue that influenced the debate on the jury, slowly leading to the abolition of this institution see **M. MECCARELLI**, "Due lati di una stessa figura". *Questione di fatto e di diritto fra Corte d'Assise e Cassazione nel dibattito dottrinale verso il codice di procedura penale del 1913*, in F. COLAO, L. LACCHÈ, C. STORTI (eds), *Processo penale e opinione pubblica in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2008, pp. 163-194.



By contrast, the Catholic press was unanimous in its condemnation. *L'Osservatore Romano* called the procession held in Arcidosso on 18 August 1878 a "masquerade"<sup>54</sup>. Like other Catholic newspapers it lamented how civil authorities had dithered before prosecuting the republican and internationalist followers of the "false prophet" Davide Lazzaretti, who with his "impious and absurd communism" had tried to subvert Italy's monarchical regime.<sup>55</sup> *La Civiltà Cattolica* repeated these allegations, dubbing Lazzaretti an imposter, communist, freemason and the Antichrist. It found evidence to this end in his tattoo, which included the *nomina blasphemiae* of two inverted letters C, symbolising that "he was a Christ upside down according to the ideal of Freemasonry"<sup>56</sup>. The editor showed considerable satisfaction about Lazzaretti's death, stating that he had met "God's justice" in the form of a "carabinieri's bullet"<sup>57</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, the oppositional press converted these Catholic accusations into merits. From a blasphemous charlatan, Lazzaretti now became a revolutionary martyr and hero of the lower classes as well as the oppressed peasantry. One of the first to emphasize the revolutionary credentials of this carter-turned-prophet was Anna Kuliscioff, the Russian-born Marxist who cofounded the Italian Socialist Party in 1892<sup>58</sup>. In that case, faith became that place of utopia and the matrix of motivation for social change<sup>59</sup>. In a similar vein, Italian communist Antonio Gramsci warned against interpreting Lazzaretti's movement as a case of religious folklore that hid popular discontent with the process of Italian unification<sup>60</sup>. He saw Positivist readings as emblematic of the marginalization frequently faced by subaltern groups trying to achieve political or social autonomy. In this case, claims for a republic, even if they included a "bizarre mixture of prophetic and religious elements" were considered so dangerous by elites that they effectively legitimated Lazzaretti's killing<sup>61</sup>. Other scholars interpreted his actions not so much as

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<sup>54</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, August 25, 1878, n. 194.

<sup>55</sup> *La Civiltà Cattolica*, September 21, 1878, p. 747.

<sup>56</sup> *La Civiltà Cattolica, Cronaca Contemporanea*, November 11, 1880, 1880, IV, p. 475.

<sup>57</sup> *La Civiltà Cattolica, Cronaca Contemporanea*, December 24, 1879, 1880, I, p. 103.

<sup>58</sup> A. KULISCIOFF, *Immagini, scritti, testimonianze*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1978, p. 41.

<sup>59</sup> F. PITOCCHIO, *Eresia e politica: lo sguardo esterno*, in *Quaderni del Centro Studi Davide Lazzaretti*, (2009), 1, p. 54.

<sup>60</sup> See C. GALLIGANI, *Eresia e ortodossia. Dal Medioevo ai nostri giorni*, Armando, Rome, 2003, pp. 22-23.

<sup>61</sup> A. GRAMSCI, *Prison Notebook n. 25, § 1*, 1934-35.



those of a primitive revolutionary but rather of a reactionary who used the veil of religion to resist the advance of capitalism on the Central-Italian countryside<sup>62</sup>.

The Gramscian vision, which understood the Lazzaretti case as part of a broader conflict waged by subaltern groups in post-unification Italy, shaped how the Tuscan prophet was for a long time seen as having initiated a kind of proto-socialism and spontaneous rebellion<sup>63</sup>. Thus, we find Eric Hobsbawm calling him a “primitive rebel” driven by a form of “millenarianism” or “the hope of a complete and radical change in the world”<sup>64</sup>. He saw Lazzaretti’s apocalyptic visions as evident from his omens in which he was the sacrificial victim: “great calamities were to presage the final liberation of men by the hand of God. But he, Lazzaretti would die”<sup>65</sup>. This would be perfectly in line with the millennial-apocalyptic scheme, typical of traditional popular heresy especially developed in the Middle Ages, and in particular of the Joachite doctrines.

Hobsbawm’s thesis is suggestive, yet it confuses modern revolutionism with ancient millenarism<sup>66</sup>, without correctly considering the common thread that historically links apocalyptic visions and terrorist-revolutionary violence<sup>67</sup>. Moreover, Hobsbawm also considered truthful some legendary episodes of Lazzaretti’s life<sup>68</sup>, perhaps for having trusted too much of what was reported by the author of the first scientific work on Lazzaretti, made by the historian of philosophy, Giacomo Barzellotti a few years after his death<sup>69</sup>. However, while according to Barzellotti, as well as

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<sup>62</sup> See **E. SERENI**, *Il capitalismo nelle campagne*, Einaudi, Turin, 1948, pp. 15-16.

<sup>63</sup> **A. MATTONE**, *Messianesimo e sovversivismo. La lettura gramsciana di Lazzaretti*, in C. PAZZAGLI (ed.),  *Davide Lazzaretti e il Monte Amiata.*, cit., pp. 292-293. On the relationship between Lazzaretti’s case and the concept of subalternity see **M.E. GREEN**, *Race, class, and religion: Gramsci’s conception of subalternity*, in C. ZENE (ed.), *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B.R. Ambedkar. Itineraries of Dalits and subalterns*, Routledge, London-New York, 2013, pp. 121-124.

<sup>64</sup> **E.J. HOBBSAWM**, *Primitive rebels*, cit., p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> **E.J. HOBBSAWM**, *Primitive rebels*, cit., p. 69.

<sup>66</sup> On the millenarism professed by Lazzaretti see **S. GIUSTI**, *Solidarismo e millenarismo nella rivolta di David Lazzaretti*, in *Veltro*, (1979), n. 5-6, pp. 587-596.

<sup>67</sup> On this aspect, see **P. ARCIPRETE**, *Apocalittica, terrorismo e rivoluzione. Radici religiose della violenza politica*, Città Nuova, Rome, 2009, pp. 46-49.

<sup>68</sup> One of this is for instance that related to the words presumptively pronounced by Lazzaretti before his violent death: “If you want peace, I bring you peace, if you want compassion, you shall have compassion, if you blood, here I am” (**E.J. HOBBSAWM**, *Primitive rebels*, cit., p. 70).

<sup>69</sup> **G. BARZELLOTTI**, *Davide Lazzaretti di Arcidosso (detto il Santo)* (1884), cit.





for many other subsequent interpreters of this case, lazzarettism has been a purely religious movement with a strong apocalyptic<sup>70</sup> or millenarian<sup>71</sup> cult without any political or violent implication, for Gramsci first and, subsequently for Hobsbawm and other scholars<sup>72</sup> there is an indissoluble link between religious faith and political-social protest.

## 6 - The Prophet and the Alienists

After his death, medical science and in particular positivist psychiatrists<sup>73</sup>, also called “alienists”, described Lazzaretti not as a sacrilegious impostor but as a mentally ill person, who would have benefitted more from treatment than prosecution<sup>74</sup>. However, this idea was established above all post-mortem and, therefore, this thesis could not be supported by scientifically and valid evidence but by few and fragmentary news, in some cases, from journalistic sources. During his life only two medical doctors had examined his mental health as part of a criminal investigation that took place in 1874. The only expertise aimed at assessing Lazzaretti’s mental health before his death was carried out by, Alessandro Silvaggi and Augusto Benghini, two anonymous doctors from Rieti, on 16 February 1874 during one of the trials suffered by Lazzaretti. On the basis of an examination of his skull and organs, Alessandro Silvaggi and Augusto Benghini had concluded that except for a famous scar on his forehead, Lazzaretti was perfectly healthy and certainly did not suffer from *physical* or *moral inertia* or a delirium<sup>75</sup>.

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<sup>70</sup> J. SEGUY, *Davide Lazzaretti et la secte apocalyptique des Giurisdavidici*, in *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, (1958), 5, pp. 71-87.

<sup>71</sup> See G. FILORAMO, *Millenarismo e New Age. Apocalisse e religiosità alternativa*, Dedalo, Bari, 1999, pp. 133-154.

<sup>72</sup> See among others, F. BARDELLI, *Rinnovamento religioso e aspirazioni di riforma sociale nell'organizzazione sociale dell'organizzazione comunitaria di Monte Labbro (1871-73)*, in C. PAZZAGLI (ed.), *Davide Lazzaretti e il Monte Amiata*, cit., pp. 215-228.

<sup>73</sup> On this topic see, at least, V.P. BABINI, M. COTTI, F. MINUZ, A. TAGLIAVINI, *Tra sapere e potere: la psichiatria in Italia nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1982, and P. ROSSI (ed.), *L'età del positivismo*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1986.

<sup>74</sup> This attitude was part of the process of criminalization and stigmatization of the deviant and the “pathologisation of the diversity” implemented by the medical-psychiatric power of the late nineteenth century throughout Europe and especially denounced by M. FOUCAULT, *Le Pouvoir psychiatrique. Cours au Collège de France 1973-1974*, Seuil/Gallimard, Paris, 2003.

<sup>75</sup> D. LAZZARETTI, *Manifeste de Davide Lazzaretti*, cit., p. 67.



For this reason, Lazzaretti was considered perfectly capable of understanding and willing, having no anomaly detectable from the examination of his skull or other organic defects, except for the famous scar on his forehead.

After the tragic events of Arcidosso, psychiatry repeatedly evaluated the Lazzaretti case often relying it on the category of “religious paranoia”<sup>76</sup>. In this sense, just over a year after Lazzaretti’s death, the well-known psychiatrist Andrea Verga, focused his diagnosis on the relevance of numerous hallucinations that tormented Lazzaretti<sup>77</sup>, who therefore was “one of those madmen that alienists call *hallucinated* or *visionaries*”<sup>78</sup> having the audacity, perseverance and even charisma similar to his. According to Verga Lazzaretti should have been locked up in a criminal asylum due his *sensory madness* or *sensory monomania* characterized by *essential hallucinations*. This did not happen, Verga noted, due to the evident blindness and ignorance of part of the judiciary that had considered him, nevertheless competent to stand trial.

Cesare Lombroso offered yet another diagnosis. Drawing on his work on the ‘born criminal’, he used the case of Davide Lazzaretti to refine his theory on the biological origins of crime and introduce a new character: the *mattoid*<sup>79</sup>. Ambivalent figure, half genius half insane, *mattoids* were affected by an *altruistic paranoia* that combined courage and selflessness with personal ambition; juxtaposed to an extraordinary ability to arouse the masses, it made them dangerous individuals as much as catalysts of progress who could not be held fully accountable for their actions, including possible criminal behaviour<sup>80</sup>. In the case of Lazzaretti, he even wore the signs of “*mattoid deviance*” on his body and clothes,

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<sup>76</sup> See also R. VILLA, *La psichiatria e il caso Lazzaretti*, in C. PAZZAGLI (ed.), *Davide Lazzaretti e il Monte Amiata*, cit., pp. 340-353.

<sup>77</sup> See A. VERGA, *David Lazzaretti e la pazzia sensoria. Discorso con cui il prof. A. Verga inaugurò le sue Conferenze psichiatriche nell’Ospitale maggiore di Milano il 3 dicembre 1879*, in *Archivio italiano per le malattie nervose e più in particolare per le alienazioni mentali*, (1880), pp. 27-74.

<sup>78</sup> A. VERGA, *David Lazzaretti e la pazzia sensoria*, cit., p. 29.

<sup>79</sup> C. LOMBROSO, *L’uomo di genio in rapporto alla psichiatria, alla storia ed all’estetica*, Turin, Bocca, 1888, pp. 309-322. See also L. BULFARETTI, *L’interpretazione lombrosiana del Lazzaretti*, in C. PAZZAGLI (ed.), *Davide Lazzaretti e il Monte Amiata*, cit., pp. 307-319.

<sup>80</sup> For the category of *mattoid* developed by Lombroso see G. AMADEI, *I mattoidi*, in AA.VV., *L’opera di Cesare Lombroso nella scienza e nelle sue applicazioni*, Bocca, Turin, 1908, pp. 82-101.



most prominently the cross-shaped tattoo on his forehead<sup>81</sup>. Here Lombroso drew an analogy with the figure of Girolamo Savonarola<sup>82</sup>, the Dominican friar who had professed apocalyptic visions in Renaissance Florence before his brutal execution in 1498. He detected a similarity in how Lazzaretti and Savonarola had mixed religious fanaticism with semantic violence<sup>83</sup>. Similar to others who stood out for their religious or political deviance - reformers and heretics such as Francis of Assisi, Joan of Arc, Martin Luther and Ignatius of Loyola but also anarchists - the two men exemplified an empathetic or *philanthropic* form of deviance<sup>84</sup>. In other words, Lazzaretti showed a kind of lucid insanity often seen in men of genius:

“Geniuses and mattoids, thanks to their love for all that is new and unedited, manage to get out of the quicksand of immobility and from the inertia to which society seems to have enveloped itself in order to start a real change”<sup>85</sup>.

The ecstasy and delirium that seemed to take possession of him during his preaching was a form of “divine madness”<sup>86</sup>. Indeed, Lombroso considered Lazzaretti more of a *theomaniac* than a charlatan guided by a drive for personal enrichment and hence condemned the killing of a “poor religious monomaniac”; for this reason, several years later, he accused Giuseppe Zanardelli, at the time of the events, Minister of the Interior, for having sent carabinieri and soldiers to Tuscany in order to remove “a terrible Catholic-Republican conspirator”<sup>87</sup>.

Under the aegis of Lombroso, the Positivist School of Criminology helped stigmatise religious deviant behaviour that manifested itself in alternative forms of spirituality, which in post-unification Italy were

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<sup>81</sup> P. NOCITO, C. LOMBROSO, *Davide Lazzaretti*, in *Archivio di psichiatria, antropologia criminale e scienze penali per servire allo studio dell'uomo alienato e delinquente*, (1880), 2, p. 145.

<sup>82</sup> On this similitude see also F.-T. PERRENS, *Un Savonarole rustique à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, in *Nouvelle Revue*, 1888, 53, pp. 471-503.

<sup>83</sup> C. LOMBROSO, *L'uomo di genio* (1888), cit., p. 322.

<sup>84</sup> See E. MUSUMECI, *Cesare Lombroso e le neuroscienze: un parricidio mancato. Devianza, libero arbitrio, imputabilità tra antiche chimere ed inediti scenari*, FrancoAngeli, Milan, 2012, pp. 44-45.

<sup>85</sup> C. LOMBROSO, *L'uomo di genio in rapporto alla psichiatria, alla storia ed all'estetica*, Bocca, Turin, 1894, p. 394.

<sup>86</sup> C. LOMBROSO, *Due tribuni studiati da un alienista*, Sommaruga, Rome, 1883, p. 101.

<sup>87</sup> C. LOMBROSO, *Il mio museo criminale*, in *L'illustrazione Italiana*, 1° April (1906), XXXIII, 13, pp. 302-306.



especially widespread on the countryside. In his *Treatise on Mental Illnesses*, Eugenio Tanzi referred to Lazzaretti as the “classic type of religious paranoid” who had been affected by a “religious delirium” that stood at the top of the religious hierarchy (this unlike the “prophets, saints, intermediaries between man and God” whose “boundless and childish ambition” placed them at the bottom hereof)<sup>88</sup>. With his belief to be the “Lord’s anointed”, even wanting to erect a tower in his own name, Lazzaretti had created a sort of “neo-Christianity impregnated with communism, but not very different, nor more inconsistent than that banished by the real Jesus” that had, in Arcidosso, created a kind of “paranoid epidemic”<sup>89</sup>.

For instance, Sante De Sanctis, one of the fathers of Italian psychology and Salvatore Ottolenghi, a pupil of Lombroso and founder of the scientific police in Italy, mentioned Lazzaretti in their *Practical Treatise on Forensic Psychopathology* as an example of religious paranoia conjoined with openly violent and criminal behaviour. In such cases, a delirium could morph into “serious crimes [...] that may have aimed at the proclamation of a new faith, the redemption of the people” or, finally, “to be inspired solely by the greatest fanaticism and drag on to violence and sometimes to the most serious massacres”<sup>90</sup>. A prototype of the crimes committed by “paranoid reformers” was the “armed rebellion led by Davide Lazzaretti and carried out by his followers, when the new prophet with his faithful descended from Montelabbro to Arcidosso proclaiming the social republic”. With their stigmatisation of new forms of popular religiosity, these positivist scholars became unexpected bedfellows of a Roman Church keen to eradicate deviant behaviour and assert its authority in an age marked by dwindling ecclesiastical influence, especially in Italy itself.

## 7 - Conclusion: a prismatic figure

As we have seen, the Lazzaretti case has given rise to lively controversy between those who considered him a martyr and who reputed him a mad

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<sup>88</sup> E. TANZI, *Trattato delle malattie mentali*, Società Editrice Libreria Milan, 1905, pp. 687-688.

<sup>89</sup> E. TANZI, *Trattato delle malattie mentali*, cit. p. 689.

<sup>90</sup> S. DE SANCTIS, S. OTTOLENGHI, *Trattato pratico di psicopatologia forense*, Società Editrice Libreria, Milan, 1920, t. II, p. 850.



visionary (or simply a mentally insane) or, more prosaically, a blasphemous charlatan with the sole purpose of extorting money from his followers. Definitely, different emotional elements characterized the Lazzaretti case: not only violence (suffered by Lazzaretti and unleashed after his death by his followers), suspect (from the Italian Government and the civil authorities), hate and condemnation from the official Catholic world), an ambiguous pietism (from alienists and psychiatrists) and, but also empathy (felt by his followers and popular jurors toward him). Even today in Tuscany, in the places where Lazzaretti lived, his memory is still alive where the locals continue to call him "The Saint"<sup>91</sup>.

From the reconstruction of the most salient moments of Lazzaretti's life and death, as well as from his trials and the consequent and opposing interpretations of his case, we can conclude that this figure is a kind of elusive prism: every different observer (the State, the Catholic Church, his followers, the positivist psychiatrists, socialist and Marxist thinkers and, so on) saw in the *prism-Lazzaretti* only one face, that is, that most congenial to one's own discourse and the strengthening of one's thesis. Consequently, each observer can grasp only single aspect (mysticism, heresy, revolutionary violence, fraud, mental illness...) or a side that is inexorably misleading or inadequate to understand who Lazzaretti really was. The alienist Andrea Verga seemed to have realized this aspect; although he pathologized his figure a few years later, admitted: "I am intimately convinced that, if David Lazzaretti had had a higher cultural level and had been born in different times and in different places, he would have been a St. Paul, a St. Augustine or at least a Martin Luther"<sup>92</sup>.

Not surprisingly, David Lazzaretti has been called a mystic, a brigand, a monomaniac, a revolutionary and a reactionary, without, however, being able to look at this phenomenon with a truly disenchanted look and "from the outside"<sup>93</sup>.

In any case, it cannot be denied that Lazzaretti, regardless of the various interpretations and even the exploitation of his case, was undoubtedly son of his time. On the one hand, he reflects that rebelliousness mixed with religiosity that animated the countryside in the

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<sup>91</sup> Even today, 150 years after his death, his case continues to fascinate not only the scientific world (which continues to take an interest in this case) and the community of Arcidosso (committed to keeping lazzarettian memory alive with a very active study centre, a museum with its works and memorabilia).

<sup>92</sup> **A. VERGA**, *Studi anatomici sul cranio e sull'encefalo psicologici e freniatrici*, Manini-Wiget, Milan, 1897, vol. 3, p. 268.

<sup>93</sup> **F. PITOCOCO**, *Eresia e politica*, cit., pp. 53-58.





post-unification period. At the same time, however, it is not possible to label Lazzaretti as a typical phenomenon of the fight against brigandage or a political crime *tout court*, due to the peculiarities of his case. He was in fact in a certain sense also a brigand, in the broad sense of the term, but he was not only this.

The suggestion practiced by his words on the crowd of devotees would soon be studied in the context of reflections on the suggestion of the *criminal crowd* and on the relationship of emotional contamination binding the leader to the masses<sup>94</sup>. As regards the doctrinal debate, therefore, his figure is at the centre of the hot topics that divided legal science and medical science between the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries: rebellion and banditry and its repression, starting also from an alleged biological diversity of these subjects; political crime and anarchism; behaviour and repression of crowd crimes; the difficult definitions of normality and pathology and its implications on criminal responsibility and imputability; *religious paranoia* as a new nosological category and the blurred boundaries between law and morality after secularization.

In addition, his figure also relived the tensions of the Church-State, sacred-blasphemous, centre-periphery, city-countryside relations. To conclude, in the case of David Lazzaretti, there were condensed political, legal and social conflicts of a delicate phase in which Italy could be said to be “united but not unified”<sup>95</sup>. At this juncture, more than others, the prismatic figure of Lazzaretti, with his multiple and impressive faces, reflected and amplified such contradictions which were so profound as to be, 150 years after his death, mostly still unresolved.

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<sup>94</sup> On this topic see, at least, **D. PALANO**, *Il potere della moltitudine: l'invenzione dell'inconscio collettivo nella teoria politica e nelle scienze sociali italiane tra Otto e Novecento*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan, 2002 and **M. NACCI**, *Il volto della folla. Soggetti collettivi, democrazia, individuo*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2019. More specifically, on the *transmissibility* of emotions as well as on the collective emotions felt by the delinquent crowd and political offenders see **E. MUSUMECI**, *Emozioni, crimine, giustizia. Un'indagine storico-giuridica tra Otto e Novecento*, FrancoAngeli, Milan, 2015, pp. pp. 101-123 and 130-143.

<sup>95</sup> **C. LOMBROSO**, *L'Italia è unita, non unificata*, in *Archivio di Psichiatria, Scienze penali ed Antropologia Criminale per servire allo studio dell'uomo alienato e delinquente* (1888), IX, pp. 144-148.