

Gianfranco Ragona, *Gustav Landauer: anarchico ebreo tedesco 1870-1919*, (Rome: Editori Riuniti University Press, 2010), pp. 448.

by *Steven Schouten*

Gianfranco Ragona, Assistant Professor of History of Political Ideas at the University of Turin (Italy), has written a well-composed study of the intellectual formation process of Gustav Landauer (1870-1919). A man of an 'insatiable intellectual curiosity' (p.9), Landauer synthesized very diverse ideas into an original social and political philosophy. Forgotten today, it influenced many intellectuals and groups in late 19th and early 20th century Europe, such as the Expressionist playwright Ernst Toller and the socialist Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatzair.

Gustav Landauer: anarchico ebreo tedesco [In English: 'Gustav Landauer: German-Jewish Anarchist' or 'Gustav Landauer: Anarchist, Jew, German'] describes the intellectual formation process of the third son of an assimilated German-Jewish shoemaker family from Karlsruhe who became one of Germany's leading anarchist intellectuals. Landauer lived for most of his life in Berlin, where he was exposed to the dehumanizing consequences of the modern industrial society, such as poverty and prostitution, and which laid the foundations of his interest in socialist politics. In the early 1890s he was a member of the so called Independents, a group of revolutionary socialists that had been thrown out of the German Socialist Party (SPD) as a result of their critique to parliamentarianism, and that founded their own society with its own magazine, entitled *Der Sozialist* (The Socialist). Landauer edited this magazine for most of its existence. The Independents were a mix of both intellectuals and proletarians and they were torn by tensions between those who tended towards Marxism and Social Democracy and those who tended towards anarchism. Ragona shows very well how Landauer moved between these rival positions in the 1890s, and how he set himself towards developing a synthesis between these two strands for the rest of his life. According to Landauer anarchism particularly expressed (individual) opposition to the (authoritarian) ideas and institutions of both the state and the church, whereas socialism was an expression of, and a longing towards, community. Anarchism and socialism were complementary, for opposition was necessary to construct. Hence Landauer spoke of 'anarcho-socialism', a philosophy that he developed in various articles and books until his death in 1919. It culminated in his *Aufruf zum Sozialismus* (Call to Socialism, 1911).

Central to Landauer's ideas was the notion that socialism was both a spiritual creed and an expression of the human will. Socialism was possible at all times, as long as people believed in it, and *wanted* it; all it required, therefore, was *Geist* (spirit) and will. Landauer developed these ideas explicitly in opposition to

orthodox Marxism and its emphasis on class struggle and historical materialism. To Landauer, socialism was not the fruit of class struggle, but rather of the cooperation of all classes. Also, he believed that the seeds of change were already present in the actual, industrial-capitalist world. They were present in 'men' of genius, such as poets and artists, who translated the spirit of a pre-industrial, harmonious past into the present, contributing to a revolution of the minds of the population as a whole. These seeds were also present in small community-inspired and autonomous social initiatives, especially cooperatives, in which people peacefully exchanged foods and other goods. In so arguing, Landauer blended the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, Pëtr Kropotkin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Fritz Mauthner, Meister Eckhart, and many others.

Ragona does an excellent job in tracing Landauer's ideas back to their intellectual and political contexts. He also shows how various historical milieus were influenced by the ideas of Landauer. In this respect he pays particular attention to Landauer's influence on Martin Buber (pp. 214-229), a close friend of Landauer and a leading cultural Zionist in 20th century Germany and abroad. The author analyses Landauer's *Werdegang* chronologically. We learn little about Landauer as a person, but all the more about his intellectual formation process and its interrelation with its broader intellectual and political context

Ragona's book is not the first intellectual biography on Landauer, but it certainly is the most accurate and nuanced one at this time. It is here that we find a first strength of the book. Rather than offering an entirely new perspective on Landauer's intellectual contribution to history, the author synthesises earlier work on the thought of Landauer, such as that by Wolf Kalz, Charles Maurer, Eugene Lunn, Siegbert Wolf, Hanna Delf, Michael Löwy and Feruccio Andolfi. It is here, e.g. in synthesizing existing knowledge, that we find a second strength of the book.

Yet the author's synthesizing is implicit rather than explicit – a clear, over-arching synthesis is absent. Moreover, a hesitant yet promising hypothesis in the foreword of his book (p.11), which may have provided the basis for such an over-arching synthesis, is ill-defined. Pointing to Landauer's antiparliamentary and anti-statist philosophy, Ragona argues that the framing of that philosophy as a form of 'anti-politics', as common in scholarship, does not do justice to its *constructive* and essentially political dimension. He also argues that similar constructive anarchist views were found among other, international revolutionary socialists and non-conventional thinkers; according to the author, Landauer's philosophy should be seen within that wider, vaguely defined, context. To be sure, the author touches upon a relevant characteristic of Landauer's political philosophy, and indeed one finds a similar characteristic in the work of other, anarchically inspired theorists, but he does not systematically explore all this throughout his book. Also, questions remain. For

example, Ragona mostly defines his protagonist as an anarchist, yet Landauer, as mentioned, ascribed the *constructive* character of his theory to its *socialist* rather than to its anarchist dimension; so why not defining Landauer as a socialist or (perhaps better) as an ‘anarcho-socialist’ rather than as an anarchist in the subtitle of the book?

The subtitle of the book indicates that the author deals with Landauer (and his thought) from the perspective of three dimensions: e.g. that of anarchism, that of Judaism, and that of German nationalism. In reality the book primarily deals with the first dimension. The author’s preoccupation with the above mentioned hypothesis, too, suggests a primal concern with Landauer as a political theorist, placing Landauer as a German and a Jew on a second plane. Ragona also fails to systematically analyze the interrelation of all three dimensions. His book has a ‘foreword’, but it would have benefitted from a more thorough introduction as well as from including a conclusion that could have defined the significance of each of these three dimensions, that of their interrelation, and that of their relation to the author’s hypothesis.

Undoubtedly, the author is at his best when dealing with Landauer’s *Werdegang* in its context of the socialist and anarchist movement. Ragona traces Landauer’s thought especially back to Proudhon and to a lesser extent to Kropotkin, but he also points to Robert Owen, the socialists of the Fabian Society, Francisco Ferrer, and various others. Interestingly, he writes that Landauer did not fully grasp the richness and complexity of Marxist thought (pp. 337-41), yet he explicitly developed his anarcho-socialism as a critique to Marxism. Also, Ragona emphasizes the importance of Landauer’s experiences with practical experiments, especially that of the Berlin cooperative *Befreiung* (Liberation). By so doing, he aims at emphasizing that Landauer’s ideas were not only spiritual but also *economical* in nature (p. 98). Here his book significantly differs from other intellectual biographies on Landauer, such as that by Lunn.

Less informed is Ragona on the history of (neo)romantic and *Völkisch* thought. Although he recognizes its influence on Landauer’s thought, he also criticizes the work of the above mentioned Lunn and Maurer for relying too strongly on it in their analyses of Landauer’s thought, and for calling that thought, consequentially, “romantic” or “mystical” (p.204). In my view, Ragona here misses the point by not understanding that the folkish and neoromantic sprang from the same intellectual roots, as Lunn also shows, that already influenced Landauer since an early age. Ideas around the *Volk* (e.g. folk, people) had an impact on Landauer just because he was deeply influenced by the Romantic tradition. The problem is that Ragona strongly relies on an outdated theory of

George L. Mosse, developed in his *The Crisis of German Ideology* (1964)¹, which sees the *Völkisch* and neoromantic philosophy from an *ex-post* perspective of the ideology of Nazi Germany, in which a racist and reactionary conception of folkish ideas played a central role. Mosse later corrected his teleological views,² but Ragona does not seem to have taken notice of this (pp. 201-205), though Lunn refers to this in his study on Landauer.³ To be sure, Lunn aimed at further developing Mosse's thought by arguing that the *Völkisch* tradition in Landauer's work was a fruit of a strong and long Romantic tradition. In so doing, he took distance from the teleological views of his teacher Mosse and reframed the folkish tradition in a much wider, not-necessarily rightwing, protofascist or racist context. Indeed, in my view, Lunn's work brilliantly shows that the Romantic tradition, in which the idea of the *Volk* played a central role, also inspired *leftwing* and other progressive thinkers, of which Landauer was his primary example. Due to his strong reliance on Mosse's outdated notion of folkish ideology, however, Ragona, unnecessarily downplays the relevance of the Romantic tradition in Landauer's thought, notwithstanding his references to the influence of Romantics, such as Hölderlin and Novalis.

With regard to the Jewish dimension, the author mainly reproduces and re-affirms the ground-breaking theory of Michael Löwy on an 'elective affinity' between Jewish messianism and (Landauer's) libertarianism.⁴ Ragona dedicates an entire (and interesting) chapter on the Jewish dimension in Landauer's work, but it does not offer any substantial new perspectives, nor does it explain the interrelation of Landauer's work and Jewish identity.⁵

These critical notes notwithstanding, Ragona is clearly a skilled intellectual biographer who succeeds in keeping distanced yet committed to the work of Landauer at one and the same time. In so doing, he successfully revives both the richness and the limitations of Landauer's intellectual thought. Moreover, the author is less interpretative than various other intellectual biographers, for example Lunn. He also has good pen; consequentially, he presents a very readable and attractive account of Landauer's ideas and intellectual formation.

¹ George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: The Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964).

² See for example his "The influence of the Volkish Idea on German Jewry", in George L. Mosse, *Germans and Jews: The Right, the Left and the Search for a "Third Force" in Pre-Nazi Germany* (New York: H. Fertig, 1970).

³ Eugene Lunn, *Prophet of Community. The Romantic Socialism of Gustav Landauer* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1973) 7, (footnote 4); 351; see also p. 261.

⁴ Michael Löwy, *Rédemption et utopie: Le judaïsme libertaire en Europe centrale* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1988).

⁵ In his foreword, Ragona writes that Landauer addressed one of the central themes in his work, e.g. the tension between individualism and community, in a 'nonconventional way guided by his identity as an anarchist and a Jew' (p. 9), suggesting some form of interrelation between Landauer's ideas and his Jewish identity.

Although he benefited much from earlier research, he critically studied his sources and literature, and also integrated a few new insights, such as on the significance of the cooperative *Befreiung*.

On balance, *Gustav Landauer* combines a wealth of sources and literature, few of which is new but all of which is well structured and synthesized, yet without an over-arching synthesis or context. It is currently the most sophisticated, up to date, accurate and complete account of Landauer's intellectual formation process. Hopefully an English translation will follow to disseminate it among a broader, international public, although for an English edition I would recommend further development of the ill-defined hypothesis laid out in the foreword of the book and the inclusion of both an introduction and a conclusion rather than a foreword only.

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