Antifascism and the Reshaping of Democratic Consensus in Post-1945 Italy

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The fiftieth anniversary of the liberation has seen a concerted effort in both France and Italy to pit liberal democrat against communist strands of antifascism in order to highlight the role of the former and discredit, if not exclude, the latter.[1] Indeed, it could be argued that antifascism — as a form of intraclass alliance — is in many respects the last example in European history of the fusion of the bourgeoisie and the people. In that sense, antifascism signals the last embodiment of the Jacobinism Furet took such care to exorcize in his studies on the French Revolution. In Italy this new, revisionist trend may have found a more immediate and concrete political expression. For example, *Il Corriere della Sera*, one of Italy's leading newspapers, provides it an important forum.[2] Clearly, political interest in this debate is due to the legitimating status the neofascist party acquired overnight by becoming part of the governing majority. By shifting to the right, the moderate center seems to wish to cancel or forget the "plebeian" component of postfascist democracy.

This political and cultural development merits attention since it reflects the close of a historical cycle that began at the end of World War II.

The weaknesses of antifascism as a political tradition or as democratic rhetoric have become a common object of historiographical criticism.

1. It is no coincidence that in France historians such as François Furet have eagerly embraced this line. See his *Le passé d'une illusion : essai sur l'idée communiste au XXe siècle* (Paris: Robert Laffont, Calmann-Levy, 1995). For a fuller account of Furet's perspective, see his *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981).

2. A special emphasis has been put on the theme of two "opposite" antifascisms.

With the "nationalization" of Nazism's victims,[3] antifascist political discourse has tended to outline a patriotic epic, centering on the figure of the male combatant hero and martyr — as idealized, e.g., in Beppe Fenoglio's novel from the late 1950s, *Partigiano Johnny.*[4] Also along these lines, the deeds of active minority groups have been extended to all of society. In one partisan's memoirs, a female neighbor who occasionally fed combatants was thus transmuted into a "woman of rare courage — resolutely antifascist."[5] The upshot of this portrayal is a highly selective historical memory, in which complex and ambiguous situations that fit uneasily, if at all, the basic premise of heroic armed conflict have been conveniently swept under the carpet. Witness the difficulty of antifascist culture in coming to terms with the other victims of fascism, specifically the victims of the holocaust.[6]

Far more open and complex is the question of antifascism as a historical movement dominating the transition between two profoundly different Europes — the focus in this essay. Taking Italy as the main reference point, I want to reflect on two related questions: a) the significance of antifascism as a politically "interclass" mass movement between 1943 and 1947; and b) its legacy in terms of consensus for a new kind of state and economic development. These two points will inform my subsequent approach to the conservative reinterpretation of antifascism.

I

In Italy antifascism dates from the birth of fascism. Unlike Hitler, Mussolini did not come to power with landslide victories, but only by means of a relentless, armed assault, in 1921 and 1922, on both socialist and Catholic mass organizations. Those two years were crucial in determining the subsequent course of Italy's political traditions. In

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3. See Peter Lagrou, "The Uniqueness of Genocide from the Perspective of National Memory. The Historical Context of a Collective Amnesia. France, Belgium, The Netherlands 1945-1965," *In Memory: Revisiting Nazi Atrocities in Post-Cold War Europe*, International Conference, Arezzo (Italy), June 22-24, 1994.

4. Beppe Fenoglio, *Johnny the Partisan* (London: Quartet, 1995). See also his diaries, *Appunti partigiani 1944-45* (Torino: Einaudi, 1994). For a typically left representation of women's involvement in the resistance, see Renata Vigano, *L'Agnese va a morire* (1952; Torino: Einaudi, 1982).

5. Luciano Gambassini, "La resistenza aretina vista da un medico condotto," *Fuochi sui monti dell'Appennino toscano*, ed. Antonio Curina (Arezzo: 1957) 307-21.

6. For the French case, see Henry Russo, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991).

many communities, Italian wartime resistance simply resumed a confrontation with fascism rudely interrupted twenty years earlier. Sadly, I don't have to look far for examples. In my own village, Civitella della Chiana, in 1944 the partisan chief adopted the pseudonym Renzino, in homage to a small farm of that name whose peasants had been butchered in 1921 by a fascist band. Yet it was only with the Nazi occupation that antifascism in Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, crossed the boundaries of class conflict, embodying the struggle for national liberation and later signaling a profound crisis in the hegemony of the governing classes responsible for World War II.[7]

German expansionism plunged Europe into a state of emergency aptly expressed by Carl Schmitt's phrase "world civil war."[8] In individual countries the Nazi occupation triggered the total delegitimization of the bourgeois state. In many respects, the collapse of the Nazi "new order" also marked the beginning of the end of European bourgeois society. An article in *The Economist* of 1 December 1945 reads as follows: "The maxim of French socialism in the 19th century was Proudhon's '*la propriété c'est le vol.*' The corresponding maxim during the Resistance era was '*La propriété c'est la collaboration*'."[9] Hardly a phenomenon imposed by foreign occupation, collaborationism throughout Europe was a desperate remedy, an attempt by the ruling classes to defer the day of reckoning of a "stalemate society" (Stanley Hoffmann's term for the Third Republic)[10] — i.e., a society incapable of offering any new prospect of economic and social development and, with the hardship and sacrifice caused by total war, finding itself with an ever more acute exacerbation of class relations.

The curious mix of centrally planned, reformist pretensions and the exaltation of old rural France that typified the Vichy regime reveals the utmost historical limits of European collaborationism. But the Italian social republic of Salò offers the best example of the transition to an all-

7. For a reinterpretation of Italian resistance as a final outcome of three overlapping and intertwined wars (class, patriotic, and civil war) see Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità della resistenza* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991).

8. See Carl Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europeum* (Cologne: Greven, 1950). Ernst Nolte uses this phrase in a totally different way. He presents the European civil war as result of a fascist "imitative reaction" to the Russian revolution. See his *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917-1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1987).

9. "Post-fascist Politics," *The Economist* 149.5336 (1 Dec. 1945): 781.

10. Stanley Hoffmann, "Paradoxes of the French Political Community," *In Search of France* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 1-117.

out civil war that finally and irrevocably finished off the *Ius Publicum Europeum*. The continuation of the republican model proclaimed by De Gaulle on 25 August 1944, the day of his reentry into Paris — which historical research today rightly deems an artificial political invention[11] — would have been inconceivable in Italy. What took place there was not just the end of the fascist regime but of the state as such — reflected by the unprecedented collapse on 8 September 1943 not only of a regime but also of the entire military machine.[12]

Far from being an action by a few groups, antifascism in Italy expressed the urgent and widespread need to provide a broader and deeper basis for state legitimacy. Hence the presence within its ranks of radically different classes and political traditions — an original, if not unique, synthesis whose desired decomposition seems particularly absurd today.

In the industrial North, the vast majority of the working classes joined the antifascist cause, a commitment in March 1943 that began their struggle to recover their basic industrial rights. In the four central regions of Italy (Emilia, Tuscany, Umbria and the Marche) the great share-cropping world, for centuries synonymous with social peace and stability, launched a protest resulting in the extinction of this feudal institution. From the summer of 1944 to 1950, in southern Italy the poorest members of the peasantry occupied the uncultivated land, an act marking the irreversible crisis of the old agrarian block which had inhibited spontaneous popular support for the emergence of a unitary state. Thus in liberated Italy the peasantry, which had not participated in the resistance, also contributed to the antifascist break with the past.

In these various social movements the Communist Party found fertile ground for development, not least through its capacity to alternate and forge the dual concepts of class and nation. But the large sphere of Catholic antifascism offered little or no place for talk of armed struggle

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11. See *Le modèle républicain* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992).

12. The amazing failure of the Italian high commands in dealing with the extremely complicated situation created by the armistice with the Allies, generated the first signs of an openly antifascist and anti-Nazi rebellion in the army. What happened in Cephalonia (Greece) is typical of a broad tendency. The division "Acqui," isolated on the island, decided on its own to reject the German request to surrender. Besieged from the air by the *Luftwaffe*, the Italian division collapsed after seven days of ferocious fighting. Hitler ordered an "exemplary punishment," i.e., the mass killing of Italian soldiers. The few hundred survivors joined the Greek resistance already active in the mountains. See *La divisione Acqui a Cefalonia: settembre 1943*, eds. Giorgio Rochat and Marcello Venturi (Milano: Mursia, 1993). I wonder where the supporters of the two "opposite" antifascisms theory would locate this event.

against fascism or fierce social protest against old hierarchical structures; and these Catholics were to play a more important role than the communists in changing people's notions of what constituted state legitimacy. As in Germany, the Italian Christian tradition displayed an extraordinary capacity to offer a convincing alternative to the totalitarian logic of fascist dictatorship: antistatism and the categorical refusal of any kind of expropriation of the prerogatives of civil society; peace and antimilitarism; the rejection of any kind of mass mobilization; a profound sense of privacy rooted in a growing tendency to pit family values against state intrusion; social solidarity, as well as a free hand in participating in individual entrepreneurial initiative, in line with what was an essentially laissez-faire economic program.

The cold war resulted in the immediate break-up of the antifascist government coalitions. When the left was excluded from the government in May 1947, Italy was thrown into extreme political and social tension. Thus, in July 1948 an assassination attempt on the charismatic Communist Party leader Palmiro Togliatti triggered several spontaneous insurrections. These events fell within the framework of an international rift in which, only two years after the end of World War II, the sinister language of total war reared its head once again — the foe branded a criminal to be annihilated. That Italy did not meet the same fate as Greece cannot simply be ascribed to the political moderation and farsightedness of De Gasperi and Togliatti, who respectively led the two Italies in their tenacious confrontation during the postwar years.[13] The antifascist pact, sanctioned by the new constitution in February 1948, marked a point of no return.

In Italy there was nothing so radical as the new departure embarked on by countries as disparate as Britain and Germany: a new middle ground within which the workers' movement was integrated and recognized once and for all as an indispensable interlocutor and partner in governing an advanced industrial society. Nevertheless, however bitter the social and political conflict, Italy too experienced a shift in the bases of state consensus as postwar reconstruction got under way. The neomercantilist state, which saw the production of wealth as the basis of its influence abroad (in blithe disregard of the well-being of its subjects) gave way to the trading state, which depended completely on the international market;

13. For the presentation of De Gasperi as a major moderate architect of the post-1945 Italian political system, see Pietro Scoppola, *L'Opera politica di De Gasperi* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1977).

increasingly high levels of domestic consumption were reached without any attempt to restore military power. After all, the military catastrophe that engulfed the civilian population only confirmed the grim truth of the appalling massacres of World War I — that the nation-state had neglected its historical duty to protect its citizens. The paradoxical upshot was that the philosophy of state violence gave way to that of solidarity. And so the soldier-state became the mother-state. Social protection became a right for everybody, in Italy as elsewhere.

II

With the crisis of fascism, relations between state and civil society were thus completely redefined. For the first time, the citizen's well-being became the measuring stick of a system's legitimacy. Hence the other great historical legacy of antifascism. With the collapse of a hierarchical society, still based in many respects on the social tenets of the anciên regime, a new concept of citizenship came to the fore: citizenship, to use T. H. Marshall's classic definition, as "full membership of the community" — a kind of membership that, beyond the formal juridical plane, can only be guaranteed if the citizen is allowed to enjoy a high degree of well-being and consumption.

And here we come to a point of cardinal importance in Italian and European history between 1945 and 1968: the forging of a close link between mass consumption and democratic life. This is the theme of Alexander Geschenkron's famous essay *Bread and Democracy in Germany*, published in 1943.[14] A new level of consumption can only be obtained, says Gerschrenkon, if there exists a democratic movement strong enough to break political bottlenecks that block the way to more advanced modes of production. In other words, a powerful democratic break with the old order is the precondition for a new developmental model founded on higher levels of mass consumption. The failure of eastern European planned economies to jettison the developmental model based on high investment in capital goods, and the resulting low consumption levels were due to the lack of adequate democratic pressure, ruled out in principle by a Soviet-type political system.

Of course Gerschenkron's 1943 essay thematizes bread as the basic survival commodity, and social relations in the historically more backward

14. Alexander Geschenkron, *Bread and Democracy in Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989).

German agricultural areas as its basic problematic. However, the spread of consumer durables as the hallmark of postwar European development does not belie his thesis. On the contrary, the extraordinarily rapid evolution of consumerism accentuates the question of genuine citizenship, as a frantically competitive and emulative spirit arose between different social groups. No one was prepared any longer to be "second class citizens" — an increasingly familiar refrain of the peasantry in Italy and in other economically less developed areas of Europe.[15]

The democratic urge to achieve full community membership was crucial in determining not only the dimensions of the welfare state, but also the levels of private consumption. The figure of the citizen interacted dynamically with that of the consumer, and important categories of shared consumer goods were established, running from apex to base of the social pyramid. The old system of social inequality, based on the compartmentalization and hierarchization of different classes with their different consumption levels gradually gave way to a society that is infinitely more culturally unified and in which diversification depends largely on differing income brackets. In terms of the advent of a mass consumer market, Europe differs from the United States because in that the whole process was mediated by an acute social and political crisis as well as by the consequent need to redefine the criteria determining state legitimacy.

III

Having occurred over a decade at least, rather than in one moment of armed conflict and political mobilization — the work therefore of many hands, not just of the armed resistance — the antifascist break with the old order could rightly boast two major achievements. These achievements were to become the hallmarks of postwar, postfascist Europe: 1) the creation of a new middle ground which included a substantial portion of the reformist program of the workers' movement; and 2) a new concept of citizenship as full community membership.

This characterization of the legacy of fascism brings me back to my starting point — the current, neoconservative, revisionist interpretation of the antifascist legacy. The *anti-antifascist* cultural and political trends of the last few years, by contesting this legacy, are also contesting these two

15. For a still compelling description of the sudden collapse of the French peasantry see Henry Mendras, *The Vanishing Peasant: Innovation and Change in French Agriculture* (Cambridge: MIT, 1970).

achievements. To my mind, the first signs of an attempt to normalize the memory of fascism are found in what the British sociologist John Goldthorpe called the crisis of Keynesian compromises:[16] the failure of the vast social and political coalitions that rallied round the banner of economic growth just after the war. It was no coincidence that the debate about Germany's past was revived in the mid-1980s when Ronald Reagan visited the cemetery of Bitburg and its SS graves. On the economic plane a virtuous circle, linking development, employment, the reinforcement of trade-union bargaining power, and the redistribution of income has been broken. On the political plane, there is a growing insistence on a reformulated agenda that gives very short shrift to ostensibly the most uncontestable points of the reformist program.

By disregarding the real legacy of antifascism (to which, obviously, I have given a very different connotation), this new conservative strategy can go two steps farther: a) relieving the word "democracy" of its multiple postwar connotations acquired through direct involvement with the people; and b) reestablishing a continuity within the histories of single nations, to re-create a space for a respectable right-wing tradition, which was for so long denied any kind of legitimacy.

The reestablishment of national continuity has, as we all know, been a major issue in Germany since the mid-1980s. In Italy, the arguments of the foremost revisionist historian, Renzo De Felice, follow much the same lines. Ever since the 1970s, he has been arguing for the local and Italian nature of Italian fascism. Furthermore, he has insisted on the prominence of Mussolini's regime as a modernizing force. Implicitly at least, he has thereby avoided passing historical judgment on the catastrophe to which fascism led; his interpretation also plays down the discontinuities not only between post-1945 Italian democracy and fascism, but also especially between post-1945 Italy and the society that existed before fascism.

But what most distinguishes the Italian from the German debate is the rapidity with which historiographical arguments in Italy have taken concrete political form. De Felice's political conclusion — that the fascist/antifascist antithesis "no longer makes sense either in the public mind or in the day-to-day political struggle"[17] — echoed today by the

16. John Goldthorpe, *Order and Conflict in Contemporary Capitalism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

17. See the interview with Renzo De Felice in *Il Corriere delle sera* 27 Dec. 1987 and 8 Jan. 1988. Reprinted in *Il fascismo e gli storici oggi* (Bari: Laterza, 1988) 3-8.

arguments used by the neofascist party to explain its transformation into the "National Alliance."[18]

The idea, then, is to normalize fascism, to neutralize the democratic antibodies deposited against it in Italy's political tradition, and to open the way for a new right. This right may no longer call itself fascist — indeed, it is openly and explicitly postfascist — but its self-declared aim is nonetheless to call into question the historical achievements of antifascism. Precisely because it is so keen on repressing antifascism, the new Italian right deliberately eschews an identification with historical fascism — though it still attempts to give the latter a good name as a normal phase of Italian history.

How likely is the success of this operation? To answer this question we need to go beyond the boundaries of conventional intellectual debate and to remember that two new symbolic factors are already conditioning the political confrontation currently taking place. First and foremost, there is the rapid dissolution of what Pierre Nora has called "the locations of memory" — those patterns of collective memory and identity that are the cornerstones of any country's civil religion. There is no doubt that as a location of memory, antifascism today appears to be threatened, not least by virtue of the weakness of its modes of self-representation in a previously mentioned heroic and Manichean struggle. These modes are completely out of step with the mentality of an advanced consumer society.

Secondly, the politics of memory has now slipped out of the hands of the intellectual classes (until the late 1970s to some extent its depositaries), and taken up residence exclusively within the sphere of the mass media. Political public space has now become completely permeated with a spirit of spectacularization which induces an irreparable divorce between past and present. The result is memory without praxis, memory without politics. The past is dehistoricized and slotted into any consumer device to become part of the eternal return of the same.

This politics of deliberate forgetting, physiologically linked to a postmodern society founded on the contraction of space and time, poses the urgent question of how to find an adequate symbolic reformulation in

18. For a critical reconstruction of this debate, ambiguously shifting from politics to historiography and vice versa, see Giovanni De Luna and Marco Revelli, *Fascismo antifascismo. Le idee, le identità* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1995). Strong support for the idea of an Italian democracy "without" antifascism is given, on the contrary, by Gian Enrico Rusconi, *Resistenza e postfascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995).

step with the present-day reality of democracy.[19] On this score, the Italian right seems at present to have most of the cards in its hand.

In conclusion, I want to make three points to sum up the broad questions I have addressed.

First, the relationship between antifascism and resistance. The left had traditionally conflated these two terms, thereby simplifying the historical complexity of the phenomenon of antifascism. The current liberal democratic response, however, advances a procedural interpretation of democratic antifascism that has little to do with real historical processes. European society left behind the experience of fascism only as it eliminated the system of social inequalities that obstructed the path to economic and social development.

Second, the relationship between antifascism and postfascism. The debate around the legacy of antifascism will inevitably remain ideological and abstract unless it goes beyond the temporal limits posed by the end of World War II, in order to thematize the nature of the new society and new state that emerged in Europe with the elimination of fascism. It is significant that in Italy (as well as elsewhere) the new right tends to present the major postwar transformations in European societies as the consequence of some artificial American colonization. The new right thus asserts the need to reconstruct a truly national tradition. This would connect pre-antifascist society — or the interwar right — with presently emerging so-called postfascist society.

Third and finally, the relationship between historical antifascism and European democracy today. We are currently experiencing the political tensions of a postindustrial society, in which technological unemployment outweighs cyclical unemployment. The economic development of the past decade, just as it calls into question Keynsian politics, calls into question the antifascist constellation to which it was tied. Given the radical change of all social and symbolic references, it is difficult to hypothesize any continuity in the antifascist political tradition unless it is completely reinvented on the basis of today's world.

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19. I am refering to David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).