

## Memory and the Public Use of History in Today's Italy

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By the mid-1990s, Italy was, in many respects, at the tail end of a long epoch that had begun in 1945 with the demise of Fascism and the formation of the Italian Republic (1946), which emerged from the combined legacies of the Resistance and antifascism. From the beginning, the “republic of parties,” as the historian Pietro Scoppola (1997) called it, engaged in a laborious process of political and moral rehabilitation of the nation for the construction of democratic citizenship: a kind of “expiatory patriotism” (Schwarz 2010), after the pervasive ideologization of State and Nation during Fascism (Gentile 2006). In the first post-war decades, and despite the many contrasts caused by the Cold War, the major antifascist political parties—the Christian Democrats (DC), the Communists (PCI), and the Socialists (PSI)—played the essential role of “memory entrepreneurs” (De Luna 2011). This was especially the case in the 1960s and 1970s when antifascism and the Resistance became the fulcrum for the legitimization of the republican system. Anniversaries of April 25, commemorations of Nazi atrocities, and the reorganization of urban space, as well as a wave of memory production in cinema and television, testify to the centrality of an official antifascist memory that, underneath its public institutionalization, was the subject of contention and controversy, as in the case of the sharp division within the left between the image of the “tricolor” Resistance, which the PCI shared with the parties of the “constitutional arch,” and that of the “red” Resistance, around which coalesced all the movements of the new left with a revolutionary inspiration (Focardi 2005; Cooke 2011).

The collapse of the USSR and the wave of protest triggered in Italy by the emergence of corruption in the so-called “Tangentopoli” scandals accelerated the crisis of the historical parties. With their disappearance or mutation, the erosion of consensus also affected the historiographic and symbolic paradigms that had hitherto been hegemonic. This is not surprising, considering the country’s new political geography. The 1994 elections rewarded a coalition formed by parties on the right led by Forza Italia, the party founded by Silvio Berlusconi, Lega Nord, and the post-fascist party Italian Social Movement (MSI) that in 1995 renamed itself Alleanza Nazionale. Once in power, these political parties were quick to show their common interest in rewriting history and affecting the tools (school textbooks, first and foremost, but also television dramas, toponyms, museums, etc.) through which that revision could be transferred into public discourse (Focardi 2020; Falsini 2020), although their respective motivations differed. In this respect, and seen from a comparative European perspective, the Italian case stands out for a pronounced specificity: despite having been part of the Western alliance that emerged victorious from the Cold War, Italy shows some similarities with the countries that, having left behind the experience of “real socialism,” were committed to replacing the long communist hegemony with a new narrative of their own past (Focardi, Groppo 2013).

Over the last thirty years, history has been more than ever at the center of a debate that has largely transcended the narrow field of historical and memory studies, becoming central to public discourse. The public debate over the Risorgimento, fascism and antifascism and, more recently, also Italian colonialism may, in fact, be regarded as a sort of seismograph of the evolution of political life and society in all of its various articulations of contemporary Italy. The public use of history that prevails in the political and media arena shows positions that, while projecting history into the present with nonchalance, seem to reflect, with few exceptions, the “liquid” dimension of the political and communication cultures of this early millennium (Bauman 1999).

## The Risorgimento

A preliminary consideration must be made regarding the Risorgimento, the founding myth of the united nation. This is a polysemic myth, indeed, not reducible to the celebratory and oleographic model that has also played an important role in “making Italians” in various historical periods through schools, monuments, museums, and public rituals (Ascoli and Von Henneberg 2001; Baioni 2009 and 2020). Despite its polyvalence, the Risorgimento remained entangled in the crisis of the 1990s, subjected to a mostly summary “trial” by a composite array formed by the “neo-Bourbon” movement, the Northern League, and sectors of traditionalist Catholicism. It was firmly “defended” by the Presidency of the Republic (first Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, then Giorgio Napolitano), with the support of the center-left political alignment. Considering the controversy and climate of distrust that had preceded it, the 150th anniversary of the Unification of Italy, which was celebrated in 2011, was, in many ways, an unexpected and popular success. Controversy had not been absent in the other two significant anniversaries of 1911 and 1961, but this time, the expectation seemed marked by indifference and pessimism (Isnenghi 2011; Ridolfi 2013; Baioni 2017). Observed in hindsight from a distance of a dozen years later, the response that a substantial part of Italian society gave on that occasion, re-appropriating city spaces and national symbols (the tricolor flag, monuments, and sites of memory), probably helped to curb certain excesses in the revisionist use of history. The iconoclastic fury that had pervaded the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, proved less and less convincing. The accusations against an alleged “official” historiography showed all their inconsistency: it was impossible to deny that the historiography on the Risorgimento and the “long nineteenth century” was committed to studying the most sensitive knots of that history (Betri 2010). For many decades, there hadn’t been any place for hagiographic interpretations or teleological readings, according to which the pre-unitary states had been regarded as the predestined victims of Italian unity. The evolution of the Northern League is significant. The party led by Umberto Bossi had led the most virulent attacks on the Risorgimento and its classical icons, in particular Garibaldi (Patriarca 2010), going so far as to question the very unity of the country. But with the changing situation and the emergence of new priorities on the political agenda (first and foremost, the fight against emigration), the secessionist propositions, based on the exaltation of a mythical Padania, were gradually abandoned; by 2017, the party with its new leader Matteo Salvini was ready to change its name to “Lega” *tout court*, thereby eliminating the geographical reference to the North and claiming an Italian character based on ethnic-religious grounds.

The same polemics of the most radical sectors of the Catholic world, whose roots go back to the intransigent positions of the nineteenth century, no longer seem to find the attention they received in the 1990s (Casalena 2013). The circles that retain a prominent position are those that belong to neo-Bourbon revisionism with highly successful popular publications such as Pino Aprile’s book *Terroni* (2010) and a massive presence on the web that feed a reinterpretation of national history hinged on the image of the South as a victim of northern interests and Savoy “colonization,” going as far as to speak of “genocidal” intentions (Benigno, Pinto 2019; Labanca, Spagnolo 2021).

## The Knot of Fascism

While the public debate on the Risorgimento seems to be toning down, greater tension continues to surround the confrontation with fascism and, by extension, with antifascism. On this terrain, an important confrontation is taking place in the current debate on the past and on the politics of memory involving both institutions and civil society. The victory of the center-right front led by Fratelli d’Italia and Giorgia Meloni in the 2022 elections, along with the nationalist wind blowing in many European countries, have greatly affected the re-emergence of a judgment on the “Ventennio nero” that can be at best described as aseptic, if not indulgent. The mass media report striking cases

of pro-fascist demonstrations that cannot leave us indifferent. Over the past few years, an increasing succession of local episodes, not infrequently violent, have explicitly glorified Fascism, its symbols and rituals, involving minority formations of the extreme right. These episodes have been largely tolerated or viewed with relative indifference by the governing right-wing parties. Senate President Ignazio La Russa has even boasted of his personal collection of Mussolini busts without being jarred by a role that places him in the second institutional office of the Republic. While many affirm that the prohibition towards any form of “apology” of Fascism was never applied even in the past, the air of impunity with which even the fascist salute has become acceptable on social media, has no precedent in earlier historical phases of the Republic. On several occasions, Giorgia Meloni and other Fratelli d’Italia members have expressed their detachment from fascism, stating that it does not represent a horizon of ideas and values in which a modern right-wing party can recognize itself. The fact that such (self) criticism has never led to the explicit recognition of antifascism as a constituent element of the Constitution and of April 25 as the symbolic date *par excellence* of the new democratic Italy should come as no surprise. There are significant sectors of that political world that are not willing to abjure ideas, myths, and symbols that have shaped an entire political culture, as studies on right-wing iconography testify (Mammone 2015; Cheles 2023). The Italian far right, irrespective of its internal divisions, traces its genealogy to the MSI and is nourished by nostalgic memories of its leader Giorgio Almirante, to whom they would like to dedicate city streets. There is no doubt that these legacies have made the transition to a fully-fledged post-fascist right wing less smooth and by no means a *fait accompli* despite the fact that the post-fascist operation began in the mid-1990s with Gianfranco Fini and the birth of Alleanza Nazionale and continued, with mixed results, with the current organization of Fratelli d’Italia (Ignazi 2023; Macry 2023).

Still, it would be myopic and improper to evaluate these tendencies solely on the basis of the present political conjuncture. The mistrust of antifascism, besides being linked to blatant political opportunism and unremoved ideological constraints, is rooted in a tradition that has distant origins. Moods attributable to a sweetened view of the Ventennio and positions anticipating the characteristics of an anti-antifascism attitude were widespread in Italian society from the 1950s onwards. Popular publications, memoirs of hierarchs, weeklies, and popular magazines ensured a wide circulation for sympathetic narratives of Fascism, its phases and protagonists (Baldassini 2008; Martini 2023). Components of moderate society and culture did not hesitate to replace the antifascist paradigm inherited from the Second World War and the unitary experience of the Resistance with the anti-communist paradigm established by the Cold War. In this way, a reading spread that had *in nuce* the constituent elements of an indulgent interpretation, which in fact had never disappeared even in public discourse (Lupo 2004). Although relegated to the margins during the most successful years of institutionalization of the memory of antifascism and the Resistance, that reading has periodically returned to the fore during moments of crisis of the system, revealing all its pervasive influence (Bernardi 2019; Héry, Pane, and Pirisino 2019).

Historiography also had its impact on the formation and survival of this indulgent attitude towards the fascist past. In particular, Renzo De Felice’s scholarly production, from the monumental biography of Mussolini to the famous *Intervista sul fascismo* (published in 1975), had contradictory effects. On the one hand, especially in the 1980s, his work stimulated and sometimes “forced” scholars to move away from the Crocean reading of Fascism as a “parenthesis” of national history to place it instead within the flow of Italian history and to study the mechanisms of its firm rooting in Italian society. A prolific historiographical season ensued and, from that moment onwards, scholars have not stopped questioning the characteristics, phases, and aspects of Fascism, moving along the thread of the relationship between history and public memory. On the other hand, in terms of the public impact conveyed by the mass media, the delicate issue of “consensus,” raised by De Felice’s scholarship and school, authorized or projected an image of Fascism as a form of low-intensity authoritarianism, which only the introduction of the 1938 Racial Laws would shift towards full totalitarianism and subalternity to the national-socialist model. Still, a non-antifascist image of the regime emerged, focused on its modernizing traits and on its distance from the racist and genocidal

violence of the Germanic ally. The public confrontation with the anti-democratic and tendentially totalitarian nature of Fascism and its legacies was thereby postponed without an end date. Along with the anti-fascist trend in the historiography on Fascism, other reticent attitudes inevitably arose around the crimes perpetrated in the colonies by Italians before and during Fascism, and those in the countries of occupation during the Second World War. Despite recent works that have made in-depth investigations on the fascist crimes and dismantled the stereotype of the “*bravo Italiano*” (Fogu 2006; Focardi 2016; Deplano and Pes 2024), a certain image of “Italianness” as the victim of external abuse, almost always decontextualized, arose for example in the public debate on the tormented and tragic events of the upper Adriatic at the end of the Second World War, from the “Foibe” to the Istrian exodus. In other cases, a “heroic” perspective prevails, as in the emblematic case of the battle of El Alamein or the role of the Alpine soldiers in the Russian campaign, where the soldiers’ actions and sacrifices are expunged from the ideological affiliation and sense of the fascist war.

### **The uncertainties of antifascism**

Thus, a real problem arises again: the gap between the results of historical research and public memorial discourse. In recent years, the field of public history has been organized robustly in Italy as well. Numerous initiatives promoted in collaboration with communities and associations have sought to make historical knowledge a fundamental instrument of democratic citizenship. However, it does not seem that this commitment has so far succeeded in bridging the gap referred to above. The results of research, which on the subject of fascism, antifascism, and colonialism, have been notable and in dialogue with international historiography have not easily transferred to the public sphere. Or better, what passes is a rough simplification of that debate, in which the past is constantly divorced from its contexts, bent to the instrumental needs of the present or evoked to satisfy the identity claims of individual groups based on the dominant victim paradigm.

On the one hand, in recent decades, the valorization of memory has made it possible to release energies that had long been confined to silence and to open up essential research areas, but on the other hand, an overlapping of meanings between history and memory has imposed itself, in which the “excesses” of the latter have triggered short circuits that have not been always effective even in terms of their ethical-political purposes (Traverso 2006, Pisanty 2020). In reaction to the political success of the right, a revival of the memory of the protagonists and values of antifascism is taking place. This process, however, is far from monolithic. It should not be forgotten that antifascist memory has always had a very articulate character and is composed of different and sometimes fiercely competing political cultures. Still, the defense of antifascism and the Resistance as pillars of republican democracy seems to reflect the fundamental weakness of the components that refer to it. The Italian left, in the aftermath of the end of the PCI and its transformation into a new political entity, has travelled a long path marked by hopes, contrasts, and disappointments (Possieri 2007) and, of course, by solid divisions, which is a fact that belongs historically to this political field. These conflicts have also weighed heavily on the relationship with the past. The Democratic Party, born in 2007 with the aspiration of representing the country’s various reformist perspectives, has shown itself open to dialogue on the issue of pacifying memory. However, the results have not always been coherent or convincing, mainly because adherence to the new paradigm of anti-totalitarianism has inevitably left a margin of ambiguity concerning the judgment on the role of Italian communism in republican history. It is significant that the memorial days established by law — and improperly placed close together in time (January 27, in memory of the Shoah; February 10, the day dedicated to the victims of the Foibe and the exile of the Italians of Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia) — end up being a pretext for political polemics rather than an opportunity for genuine cultural reflection.

The polarization of positions has become sharper over time, in a pendulum that swings between trivialization and sacralization of memory. To the left of the PD, the various formations orphaned by more radical politics have entrenched themselves in an intransigent defense of antifascism, often making it a shield for their own modest political and electoral consistency. They

give the impression of being stuck in a somewhat dated debate on antifascism, using a language that may have been appropriate to mobilization in the 1970s, but that today seems to be worn-out and distant, especially from the world of contemporary youth. Even within the public discourse on antifascism, a certain static nature is evidenced by the difficulty of absorbing the most important results from the last decades' research. The Resistance is still seen as the “Second Risorgimento” by those who defend it, according to an outdated interpretative scheme (Fogu 2006, Cooke 2011). The Italian historiography on antifascism has perhaps not reached the quality and international profile that can be found in studies on Fascism. It has, however, highlighted some key points well: among others, the analytical distinction between antifascism and the Resistance, the variety of political cultures expressed since the 1920s, the relationship with Italian society, and the weight of antifascism on the institutionalization of public memory in the republican decades (Fulvetti and Ventura 2024).

The reaction to the attacks against the antifascist tradition carries within it an understandable (and shareable) ethical and political charge, which is also expressed at times by adhering to the reasons of those who would like to demolish monuments and symbols of the past regime still present in urban space (Ben-Ghiat 2017; Montanari 2024). The risk is that this reaction will end up encouraging some form of historiographical regression. It is no coincidence that in recent years, there has been a resurgence of studies on fascist violence, which have reached considerable levels of insight. To stay on current issues, the centenary of the assassination of Giacomo Matteotti has given rise to a dense series of initiatives, including conferences, books, and exhibitions. These are all important occasions to recall a watershed event in the country's history, the lowest point of fascist political violence during the early 1920s and, at the same time, the mirror of the divisions and weaknesses of the political opposition. The knot of violence can in no way be eluded, as it is a qualifying aspect of the ideology and practice of fascism, but pointing public attention solely to this dimension can be misleading. In fact, it ends up identifying historical interpretation with political and moral condemnation, obscuring the other fundamental results of research in understanding totalitarian regimes, namely the novelty represented by organization, mobilization, and mass indoctrination, which not surprisingly has also had a lasting impact and legacy in terms of cultural and moral inheritance on contemporary Italian society.

Finding the way and the language to transfer the nuances of historiographical complexity to the level of public discourse, while at the same time managing to clothe the latter with some “ethical” and civic substance in the construction of democratic citizenship, seems today more than ever a challenge that deserves to be accepted. And this extends to the politics of memory and the resemantization of places and symbols inherited from the Ventennio (Albanese and Ceci 2022). A tricky gamble, to be sure, which requires a willingness to dialogue and be in confrontation among all the actors moving in the space of the communication of history. Perhaps, however, it could also be the most reasonable alternative to the treacherous paths of cancel culture and iconoclastic fury.

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