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THE SHADOW OF FASCISM OVER THE ITALIAN REPUBLIC

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Abstract: The Italian Republic was created at the close of World War II by the political forces that had taken part in the Resistance, with an explicitly anti-fascist ideological foundation. However, the official commitment to anti-fascism and democracy was belied by the continuing role of neo-fascist parties and organizations in the political system. This role was firstly as a potential alternative source of support for the ruling Christian Democrats, and secondly as the key element of a hidden network ready to use violent and undemocratic means to condition the normal political process. This network moved into action at the height of the "strategy of tension" (1969-80). Analysis of this period leads us to reassess the nature of post-war Italian democracy. In the "Second Republic" (post-1994) Silvio Berlusconi has promoted a revisionist approach to Fascism and the Resistance as part of his own strategy to maintain himself in power, while also espousing a plebiscitarian conception of democracy that presents certain analogies with the methods and style of the Fascist regime.

Keywords: Italy, Neofascism, terrorism.

The post-war Italian Republic was created by the anti-fascist parties that had formed the Committee of National Liberation (CLN) during the Resistance: together, in the Constituent Assembly, they drafted a new Constitution that embodied the values of the anti-fascist movement: democracy, human rights, and political and socio-economic rights, as well as the rule of law and constitutionalism. It also declared the republican form of government was not subject to amendment (Art. 139), and forbade the reconstitution of the Fascist Party (Transitional Provision XII) (Ambrosini 1975). The Resistance struggle was elevated to the status of a founding myth in a patriotic narrative in which the Italian people freed themselves from foreign oppressors and established a democratic regime. The Communist Party, which had been the most active in the partisan movement, in particular promoted this interpretation, inspired by Gramsci's account of the ideological power of the events of the French Revolution in his *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971, 77-79).

The Post-War System

While the Resistance and Constitution were thus supposed to mark a sharp break with the past, in reality the new Republic displayed many elements of continuity. Very few civil

servants, judges, or police officers were purged after the war, so that for decades the upper reaches of the state apparatus were dominated by officials formed under Fascism. The Fascist legal codes remained in force, and the Constitutional Court, established to guarantee the new freedoms, was not set up until 1956. In the economy, the large firms that had prospered under Fascism, including the chemical and electrical monopolies that it had fostered, continued to dominate, and the large state sector it had created remained intact. The ideal of a progressive, democratic and anti-fascist Republic remained a fond hope more than a real achievement.

In the political sphere, the post-war system, while obviously a significant departure from the totalitarian aspects of Fascism, was not a model of a well-functioning democracy either. The Christian Democratic Party (DC) remained in power as by far the largest (and sometimes the only) governing party for forty-nine years, from 1945 to 1994. While it only once received an absolute majority of parliamentary seats (in 1948), it was able to stay in office with the help of smaller coalition partners. Its electoral support, which ranged between 48.5% (in 1948) and 29.7% (in 1992, when its decline was well advanced) (Ginsborg 2003, 347 and Amyot 1988, 34) rested primarily on three pillars: the Catholic vote, the conservative and anti-communist vote, and the support that it was able to purchase through patronage and public spending (Amyot 1988, 35-36). The last element became more important as the regime aged, and it marked an important element common to all Italian regimes since Unification: the ruling party used its control of the state to create a party from the top down, rather than relying primarily on a pre-existing party organization created in civil society. In this way, the DC regime looked back to the Fascist and liberal states, but also foreshadowed the "cartel party" model presented by Mair and Katz as the latest phase of the evolution of political parties, in which parties collude with each other to obtain and share resources from the state that will allow them to operate above forces and movements in the broader society (Mair, Katz 1997).

The obverse of permanent DC control was the "conventio ad excludendum," the unwritten rule that the principal opposition party, the Communist Party (PCI), could not be admitted to government. This was the result both of the rooted hostility of domestic conservative forces, and of Italy's Cold War ties to the United States, which continued to oppose any Communist participation in the government of a NATO ally. The combined effect of DC dominance and the "conventio" was to block any alternation in government. This was hardly a sign of a healthy democracy, but the issue was never put to the test: in spite of vigorous campaigning, the PCI never attained the largest share of the votes, much less a majority. Its best result was in 1976, when it attained 34.4% of the vote—but even then it was admitted only to external support of a single-party DC cabinet (Amyot 1981, ch. 13).

The Role of Neofascism

The foregoing is a conventionally accepted account of the DC "regime." However, it is incomplete, as it ignores the role of Italian neofascism in this political system. The small neofascist party, the Italian Social Movement (MSI), founded in 1946 (Ignazi 1989 and 2003), was allowed to exist in spite of the constitutional ban, but never attained more than 8.7% of the votes (in 1972), and was excluded from participating in national government by another "conventio ad excludendum," since the party was not only neofascist but rejected

the republican Constitution itself. After the MSI's shift from its radical Fascist roots towards a more moderate stance in the 1950s, several extreme right groups broke away from it—notably Ordine Nuovo (New Order) in 1956, and Avanguardia Nazionale (National Vanguard) in 1959—but there were always links between them and the MSI, and indeed the leadership of Ordine Nuovo returned to it in 1969 (Ferraresi 1996, ch. 3). Most accounts of the DC regime (often referred to as the "First Republic," because 1992-94 marked a revolution in the party system and some institutional changes as well) treat neofascism as a peripheral force, excluded from real power (except in some local governments), and, despite its real success in building a base in some regions, its platform and adherents are often dismissed as mainly "nostalgic," extras on the political stage (LaPalombara 1987, 121; Pasquino 1985, 444).

Such accounts, however, omit another important feature of the First Republic which distinguishes it from most Western democracies in the same period: beyond the official democratic political system, we can perceive another layer of power, largely hidden from view, which includes leading members of the armed forces, the security services, and the bureaucracy, as well as some leading figures from business and other walks of life. (An apt label for this hidden layer of power would be the Turkish expression, the "deep state.") These individuals, all sharing an extreme right-wing ideology, have at various times prepared contingency plans to replace the democratic system by a more authoritarian one, with the goal of preventing a Communist "take-over." Moreover, they have been behind several episodes, such as terrorist bombings, which have been part of such overall plans to alter the democratic system, and which failed to achieve that objective but did significantly condition the actors in the open, democratic system. Many of these episodes have by now been well documented, but political scientists have so far not integrated them into their treatment of the political system as a whole. We must begin to view Italian democracy in the First Republic as a democracy limited not only by the DC's permanent tenure of power, but also by the existence of the "deep state" (cf. Commissione parlamentare, quoted in Ginsborg 2003, 147). And the neofascist movement was an essential component of this deep state.

The SIFAR Affair

A first indication of the existence of a hidden power network was the SIFAR (Armed Forces Information Service) affair, which came to light in 1964. In 1960, the MSI's legalitarian strategy seemed to bear fruit when the Christian Democratic government of Fernando Tambroni took office thanks to the votes of the neofascist deputies in Parliament. When rioting by anti-fascists at the site of the MSI's Congress in Genoa forced Tambroni to resign, the Christian Democrats had no alternative but to seek a coalition with the Socialists, who had hitherto been the Communists' junior partner in opposition. This "opening to the left" caused grave apprehension in conservative circles in Italy, and opinion within the American government was divided (Ferraresi 1996, 78). The commander of the para-military *Carabinieri* police force, General Giovanni De Lorenzo, who had commanded SIFAR from 1955 to 1962, prepared an emergency plan (the Solo plan, as only the *Carabinieri* were to be involved in carrying it out), ostensibly to forestall a left-wing takeover (Ferraresi 1996, 78-80; Ginsborg 1990, 276-78): his forces would occupy major government buildings, television and radio stations, and left-wing party and union offices; a list of some 800 "dangerous"

elements, who were to be rounded up and deported to a camp in Sardinia, was prepared. To assist the *Carabinieri*, De Lorenzo had recruited retired members of the Force and groups of civilians, composed of members of the neofascist radical right. The entire plan was prepared in secret, without government authorization; but it is highly unlikely that the American CIA was unaware of it: De Lorenzo himself, as head of SIFAR, had participated with the CIA in the establishment of the clandestine Gladio network, intended as a "stay-behind" organization in the event of a Communist take-over. The Solo plan bore striking similarities to the "Prometheus" plan implemented three years later by the Greek colonels.

At the height of delicate coalition negotiations between the Socialists and the Christian Democrats, in July 1964 the President of the Republic, Antonio Segni, summoned De Lorenzo to a meeting in his Quirinal Palace. Segni himself, a conservative Christian Democrat hostile to the opening to the left, was contemplating forming a "technocratic" government instead of a multi-party coalition. While the full extent of the Solo plan came out only some time later, there were enough rumours and private meetings for the Socialists to become seriously worried. After De Lorenzo's visit to the Palace, they returned to the negotiations and quickly backed down on their most aggressive demands for left-wing reforms. As a result, a new government was quickly formed and a potential major crisis was averted, but from that point on the "centre-left" coalitions, comprising Christian Democrats and Socialists, did not advance any reforms that seriously threatened major established interests; indeed, the Socialists were gradually absorbed into the system of power-sharing and patronage already created by the DC. De Lorenzo went on the become Commander-in-Chief of the army, then a deputy for the Monarchists and subsequently for the MSI.

The Strategy of Tension

A second period in which the conditioning of Italian politics by the "deep state" was extremely important was the aftermath of the student and worker unrest of 1968-69. The student revolt of May 1968 spread to the factories in 1969: the tensions and distortions of Italy's rapid but uneven economic growth were coming to a head, and the structures of the established order—political, economic, and cultural—were under threat from a wave of *contestazione.* As a response, elements of the "deep state" organized the "strategy of tension," a wave of bombings and other violent acts that could be blamed on extreme left-wing groups, and that would lead public opinion to support an authoritarian response by the state (Ferraresi 1996, 86-87). This strategy had been fruitfully by Greek intelligence service prior to the *coup d'état*, and had been theorized by Pino Rauti, the principal leader of Ordine Nuovo. The plan involved both infiltrating leftist groups and attributing to the left bombings that had actually been carried out by neo-fascists.

During 1969, there were 145 explosions throughout Italy from January 3rd to December 12th, the majority of which have been traced to the extreme right (Ferraresi 1996, 90). The most serious bombing took place on the latter date at the Banca Nazionale dell'Agricoltura in Piazza Fontana in Milan: 16 people died, and many more were injured. The police and the conservative press were quick to follow the "anarchist lead," arresting two local anarchists, Pietro Valpreda and Giuseppe Pinelli. Pinelli died from a fall from the third floor of the Milan police headquarters, in circumstances that have yet to be fully clarified. Only very

gradually did the true authors of the crime come to light: the Piazza Fontana bombing, and many others, was the work of the Padua neofascist cell led by Franco Freda, who had been a member of both the MSI and Ordine Nuovo (Ferraresi, 94 ff.). Two other men who were eventually indicted for the crime along with Freda were Giovanni Ventura, who claimed to have infiltrated the group on behalf of the SID (Defence Information Service, the successor to SIFAR), and Guido Giannettini, a SID officer who was Ventura's handler. After the bombing, the SID did all it could to obstruct the investigation of the neo-fascists' involvement, for instance spiriting Giannettini out of the country in 1973. Its commander at the time, Gen. Vito Miceli, was arrested the next year for membership in a conspiratorial right-wing organization, "Weathervane" (see below).

The Borghese Coup

The following year, another episode of the "strategy of tension" took place: the attempted *coup d'état* led by Prince Junio Valerio Borghese (Ginsborg 1990, 334-35; Ferraresi 1996, 19-20 and 117-20). Borghese, from a famous Roman noble family, had led a notorious anti-partisan unit under Mussolini's infamous Salò Republic (the "X MAS"). Known as the "Black Prince," he subsequently joined the MSI, then in 1968 founded the Fronte Nazionale (National Front), dedicated to "the defence and restoration of the supreme values of Italian and European civilization" (quoted in Ferraresi 1996, 117). The Front appealed to old Fascists, the officer corps, and conservative business and professional men, and gained the enthusiastic adherence of Avanguardia Nazionale and many members of Ordine Nuovo. On the night of 7 December 1970, The Front mobilized a few hundred militants in Rome, plus a convoy of cadets and officers from the Forest Rangers school, led by another veteran of Sal ; Borghese's forces occupied the basement of the Ministry of the Interior for a few hours (apparently without being discovered), but then the *coup* was suddenly called off—likely because of a failure to obtain wide enough support within the military and bureaucracy. Nevertheless, Gen. Miceli and at least three other generals were aware of the plot (they were acquitted when subsequently tried for their involvement), as was the CIA. It is this wide network of complicity, beyond the actual strength of the forces attempting the *coup*, that makes the episode particularly disturbing.

"Weathervane": the Strategy of Tension Continues

After the failure of the Borghese *coup*, many of those who had been behind it, including intelligence and military officers, regrouped in a new organization, the shadowy "Rosa dei Venti" (Weathervane) (Ginsborg 1990, 349). Rumours of a *coup* planned for August 1974, promoted by Count Edgardo Sogno and Luigi Cavallo (the so-called "White Coup"), and investigations by Padua magistrates led to the discovery of a well-financed secret group whose aim was to foment a climate of disorder and unrest to prepare the ground for a *coup*. Some of its members claimed that Weathervane was a legal organization, sanctioned by secret NATO agreements (this would be a parallel to the organization within which the Greek colonels operated) (Ferraresi 1996, 135-37). General Miceli was arrested for his role in Weathervane, but never convicted, and soon was elected as an MSI deputy.

Members of the historic neofascist groups, following the legal dissolution of Ordine Nuovo in 1972, came together under the new label Ordine Nero (Black Order). This group claimed responsibility for about 45 bombings in the 1973-75 period: the worst were a bomb at a trade union rally in Brescia on 28 May 1974, which killed four, and another bomb on the Munich-Rome "Italicus" train on 4 August, which killed twelve people and injured many more (Ferraresi 1996, 128-34). These atrocities were committed, as their participants stated, with a view to preparing the ground for a *coup*; the leaders of Weathervane and Ordine Nero had long been in contact.

Consequences of the Strategy of Tension

The *coup d'état* projected by the neofascists in this period never materialized. However, the various episodes outlined above had a significant effect on the "official" political sphere. For a time, large segments of public opinion were prepared to believe the anarchists were responsible for Piazza Fontana; the left's campaign to liberate Valpreda was long and difficult, though eventually crowned with success. More important, events like the Borghese attempt (which became public the following March) created a climate of fear and apprehension among many politicians of the left and centre. As the parliamentary committee of inquiry into the P2 Lodge concluded of the Borghese *coup*:

The attempted coup, even though unsuccessful, did attain its political aims. Operationally the plot failed; politically it succeeded because from then on the existence of groups and forces ready to carry out such steps had to be considered a realistic possibility (Senato della Repubblica, 100).[1]

In particular, the Italian Communist Party, which was to be the electoral beneficiary of the events of 1968-69, took the threat of a fascist *coup* seriously. The Party was, in truth, predisposed to do so: since 1935, its strategy had been based on the idea that the primary, immediate task was not the installation of a socialist regime, but the formation of a broad alliance of progressive forces that would block the way to a fascist takeover (Amyot 1981, 35-51). The strategy was based not only on the Comintern's shift to the "Popular Front," but also on the Party's analysis of the Fascist seizure of power in Italy: the PCI censured the sectarian errors of the Socialist and Communist parties of the time, which indulged in revolutionary rhetoric and failed to form alliances with crucial intermediate groups, including the liberal middle classes, progressive Catholics, etc. The actions of the neofascist right in Italy became a more vivid threat in the light of Gen. Pinochet's *coup* in Chile: the Communist General Secretary, Enrico Berlinguer, at this point proposed the strategy of an "historic compromise" between the Communist, Socialist, and Catholic strands of the Italian "people's movement" (Amyot 1981, 201-05). This marked a clear announcement that the Party would adopt a very moderate stance if it increased its vote, seeking a coalition with the DC and the Socialists, rather than a purely left-wing government. Communist leaders at this time considered a neofascist *coup* a real possibility, and in some cases took to sleeping away from their homes for days on end. When, in 1976, the PCI did score major electoral gains, winning 34.4% of

[1] Quoted in Ferraresi 1996, 121.

the popular vote, it agreed to support a one-party DC cabinet in parliament by not voting against it (the government of "non-non-confidence"). It thus tacitly accepted the "conventio ad excludendum," and after the 1979 election, a new DC-led government was able to survive without its support. Hence the possibility of a major program of progressive reforms, which the PCI's victory seemed to herald, was stifled, and for the rest of the First Republic, the DC and PSI governed in tandem, sharing the spoils of office, without any further threat from the left, while in society workers and unions were put on the defensive by the advance of neoliberalism. This did not mean that neofascist terrorism immediately came to a halt: indeed, the worst massacre of all, the bomb at the Bologna railway station that killed 85 people on 2 August 1980, was carried out by one or more splinter groups that had acquired a dynamic of their own, and theorized violence as a way of aggregating the dispersed forces of the extreme right (Ferraresi 1996, 159-60 and 177-79). Hence neofascism continued to condition the official political system.

Assessment

Political scientists and historians have had difficulty in incorporating the above features of the post-war Italian political system into their accounts, as they are extraneous to their normal conceptual frameworks, such as "polarized pluralism" (Sartori) or consociationalism (Lijphart). Paul Ginsborg, in his widely praised *History of Contemporary Italy*, devotes only a couple of pages to the strategy of tension and the Borghese *coup* (1990, 333-35). Many commentators have noted the latter's comic-opera features. Ginsborg refers at slightly more length to the secret P2 (Propaganda 2) Masonic Lodge, discovered in 1981, whose head, Licio Gelli, was certainly involved in the *coup* attempt. He writes: "It is all too easy to exaggerate the significance of this secret history…." (2003, 144). Yet, as we have hoped to show, this ignores the profound effect that the presence of a shadowy, but very real, "deep state" had on the visible, official political system. It made its power felt precisely at the moments during the First Republic when the dominant economic and social groups (along with elements of the American state) felt most threatened by the advance of the left towards political power: first the centre-left experiment, then the student and worker unrest of the late '60s.

In each episode discussed above, there were clear links with neofascism: Gen. De Lorenzo recruited fascist auxiliaries for his Solo plan, and later revealed his extreme right political sympathies publicly; Prince Borghese was a noted neofascist, and his National Front was composed of members of the extreme right neofascist groups; these same groups executed the strategy of tension. But we must still establish the specific role of neofascism in the "deep state," which embraced a wide group of sympathizers who yearned above all for a state that would control the left, limiting or abolishing democracy in the process. This group included ultra-conservative business circles, civil servants, and military, police, and intelligence officers. Were the neofascists simply pawns of more powerful forces (e.g. the P2 Lodge), who were then called to heel or discarded when they were no longer useful?

What such a conspiratorial interpretation ignores is the significance of the Fascist experience and neofascist ideology as a bond between these many disparate forces. Many of the people involved had served the Fascist regime, and indeed many had also served the Salò Republic; often they had been comrades-in-arms. The youth, who had not of course shared

these experiences, were attracted by the ideology (especially in the more extreme and elitist form propounded by Julius Evola, the recognized *maître penser* of Italian neofascism [Evola 1967]) as well as the symbolism and bravado of the movement. Neofascism formed a *milieu*, a "habitus" in Bourdieu's sense (Maton), and as such was the necessary glue which allowed the formation of such far-flung networks with branches in many parts of Italian society and state. It was also a suitable ideology for the parasitic, privileged social groups whose interests the "deep state" was concerned to defend. Neofascism was the logical, and indeed obligatory, reference point for this whole sub-culture.

The Second Republic

The reduction of social tension and the end of the Cold War have reduced the importance of the "deep state" in the Second Republic. However, since even before the end of the First, historians have been engaged in a re-evaluation of the simplistic contraposition of the Resistance and Fascism (Foot 2009, ch. 8). With the entry of the MSI's successor, Alleanza Nazionale (AN), into Silvio Berlusconi's first cabinet in 1994, Berlusconi and his followers have seconded this historical "revisionism," downplaying, for instance, the celebration of Liberation Day (25 April). At the same time, AN officially jettisoned much of its Fascist baggage, accepting the democratic system without qualification. Its leader even criticized the Fascist regime and the Sal Republic, and forthrightly condemned racism and anti-Semitism (Ignazi 2003, 48). While Berlusconi attempts to appeal to the minority of Italians who still harbour sympathy for the regime, including those who support the small neofascist parties that left AN after it rejected the Fascist tradition, his historical revisionism is primarily a part of his ideological hostility to the left and all it stands for, including (crucially) its interpretation of Italian history. He recognizes the important role of the Resistance in the legitimating myth of the PCI (and its successor parties, down to today's Democratic Party), and wants to destroy that myth. Hence talk of "healing historic divisions" between Italians is mystifying, as it exaggerates the support for Fascism among the people today.

Berlusconi's re-evaluation of Fascism also is consistent with his own conception of democracy, which has more in common with plebiscitarian presidentialism than the parliamentary democracy common to most Western states. He has often announced plans to revise the Constitution in this sense. This would be in addition to the other regime-like features of his rule, such as the near-monopoly over private television coupled with attempts to control the content of the state channels, and the sophisticated use of media and public relations techniques to gain consent. Underlying his success is the rooted conservatism and lack of democratic sensitivity of a large part of the Italian population. While the "deep state" may have faded, the shadow of Fascism still hangs over the Italian Republic.

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