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## Dossiê: Fascismos, 100 anos depois

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### **Genealogy and Phenomenology of Fascism. Between history and interpretation**

*Genealogia e fenomenologia do fascismo. Entre a história e a interpretação*

*Genealogía y fenomenología del fascismo. Entre la historia y la interpretación*

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**ABSTRACT:** Fascism, of which Italy had the primogeniture between the 1910s and 1920s, was a political-ideological phenomenon that can only be understood in the light of a detailed and aseptic reconstruction of its genealogy, that is, its history. Its history provides, at least in part, its interpretation and, in any case, helps to understand the phenomenon. Genealogy and phenomenology are the criteria that guide this essay as an introduction to understanding fascism, especially for those who know little or nothing about Italian history.

**Keywords:** Fascism. Genealogy. Phenomenology. Civil war. Totalitarianism

**RESUMO:** O fascismo, do qual a Itália teve a primogenitura entre os anos 1910 e 1920, foi um fenómeno político-ideológico que só pode ser compreendido à luz de uma reconstrução detalhada e asséptica da sua genealogia, que então significa a sua história. A sua história já fornece, pelo menos em parte, a sua interpretação, e em qualquer caso ajuda a compreender o fenómeno. Genealogia e

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fenomenologia são os critérios que guiam este ensaio como uma introdução à compreensão do fascismo, especialmente para aqueles que pouco ou nada sabem sobre a história italiana.

Palavras-chave: Fascismo. Genealogia. Fenomenologia. Guerra civil. Totalitarismo

RESUMEN: El fascismo, del que Italia tuvo la primogenitura entre los años 1910 y 1920, fue un fenómeno político-ideológico que sólo puede entenderse a la luz de una reconstrucción detallada y aséptica de su genealogía, lo que significa entonces su historia. Su historia ya proporciona, al menos en parte, su interpretación, y en cualquier caso ayuda a comprender el fenómeno. La genealogía y la fenomenología son los criterios que guían este ensayo como introducción a la comprensión del fascismo, sobre todo para quienes conocen poco o nada de la historia de Italia.

Palabras clave: Fascismo. Genealogía. Fenomenología. Guerra civil. Totalitarismo

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Without reconstructing its genealogy, that is, its history, a political-ideological phenomenon such as fascism, of which Italy had the primogeniture, between the 1910s and 1920s, can never be fully understood. Partly, its history provides the interpretation, and in any case, helps to understand the phenomenon. Genealogy and phenomenology.

In the beginning, was the Great War (1914-1918). After the conclusion of the war, Italian society experienced a period of strong social and political turmoils. Some elements of this vast "crisis" were common to all of post-war Europe: first of all, a very serious economic and financial situation characterized by the need for industries to reconvert to a production system appropriate to times of peace. Hence, unemployment and high inflation. The first protests that shook many Italian cities between June and July of 1919 were due to the high cost of living, i.e. a staggering and unjustified increase in prices that triggered a series of riots not always guided and controlled by trade unions. Second, the war had taken away workforce from the land and, as a result, had caused a decrease in agricultural production. The import of foodstuffs, on the other hand, was more difficult than ever due to the tightening of credit from producer countries. In addition, the state budget amounted to 23,345 million in 1918-19, while it had been around 214 million in 1913-14.

## 1. The postwar crisis. The social conditions of cities and countryside

Other elements of the post-war crisis were specific to the Italian situation, both at the economic and political-institutional levels. The war had laid bare the backward reality of many rural areas of the peninsula. Especially in the countryside of Central and Southern Italy, in the autumn of 1919, there was a real “assault on the latifundia”, which led to the occupation of uncultivated lands and latifundia by poor farmers, especially former combatants. These had been promised the concession of land at the acme of the war effort, that is, in the aftermath of the defeat of Caporetto, when it was necessary to find strong motivations to mobilize troops that were generally in disarray. In the Centre-North, on the other hand, the economic-productive structure of the agricultural world had already been centred on sharecropping and small property for some time. These forms of agricultural management found their union representation mainly in Catholic organizations, the so-called “white leagues”. In the Po Valley, on the other hand, farm labour prevailed and here the so-called “red leagues”, i.e., the socialist trade unions, dominated. Between the two leagues, the watchwords and objectives of the union struggle were profoundly different: for the Catholics, it was a question of giving the “land to the peasants”, that is, encouraging the spread of direct cultivation, a productive model halfway between labour and large absentee ownership; for the socialists, the declared objective was the “socialization of the land”.

Therefore, both cities and the countryside were crossed by a social conflict that exploded with virulence between 1919 and 1920, the so-called “*biennio rosso*” (red two-year period). It was a period of turmoil and strikes. If in 1913 there were about 465,000 strikers in agriculture and industry, in 1919 there were more than 1,480,000 and almost 2 million the following year. The climax was reached with the occupation of the factories in September 1920. Promoted by the F.I.O.M. (Italian Federation of Metallurgical Workers), adherent to the C.G.d.L. (General Labour Confederation), the initiative saw the rise, outside of the trade unions and limited to the “industrial triangle” (Turin, Milan, Genoa), the experience of the factory councils, internal bodies elected by the workers and formed within the Turin group of “Ordine Nuovo”, a periodical founded by Antonio Gramsci with the help of Angelo Tasca, Palmiro Togliatti and Umberto Terracini. The model was the Bolshevik Soviet. This revolutionary wing clashed with the reformist line of the C.G.d.L. and the conflict that arose within the workers’ movement paralyzed its action, compromising its results (Tasca 2021).

Giolitti, back in government since June, operated as he had done at the time of the 1904 general strike and avoided calling for the police. His mediating action with the C.G.d.L. led to an agreement, which provided salary improvements and the “technical and financial control of the

companies” by the workers. This last point remained a dead letter and the outcome of the occupation of the factories disappointed many of the expectations nurtured during the weeks of struggle, especially the revolutionary hopes.

## 2. The fascist squadristism

It was in the autumn of 1920 that a political player, born on March 23, 1919, in Milan, was given up for dead after the elections of November 1919: the Fasci Italiani di Combattimento movement. Benito Mussolini, a former revolutionary socialist who had become an interventionist in 1914, had thought he could translate the experience of interventionism into a mass political formation, to which he had provided a forum through the newspaper he had founded and directed, “Il Popolo d’Italia”.

To understand the genesis of Fascism, it is necessary to consider it against the backdrop of the First World War and its outcome. The “backdrop” is here the socio-economic context outlined above, but also the cultural context and the mentality of the veterans, on the one hand, and that of the workers who remained in the factories to produce weapons, ammunition and basic necessities, on the other. It was precisely the distinction between “combattenti” (combatants) and “imboscanti” (who evaded or deserted military service; more generally, all non-combatants) that became a discriminating factor in the political language and, therefore, in the public opinion that grew after the partial and temporary “nationalization of the masses” produced by the war. The whole vocabulary of political polemics was affected by the militarization of public life and by the enthusiasm that the mere pronouncement of the word “revolution” generated among both ex-combatants and workers. These two social categories, fundamental for understanding the immediate aftermath of war, were not always clearly distinct, but sometimes tended to overlap. In general, however, it can be said that the two groups could be told apart on the basis of two parameters:

- 1) social extraction;
- 2) myths and values of reference.

In general, ex-combatants who did not fully recognize themselves in any of the political and trade union formations existing at the end of the war belonged predominantly to the lower and middle classes. This was especially true for military officers and non-commissioned officers. Many of them then adhered to fascism, although the transition was far from obvious and automatic. A large part of the simple soldiers belonged to the peasant class.

The ex-combatants who had with roles, in the military hierarchy, from non-commissioned officers upward had suffered more than others the fascination with the exercise of command, had

acquired a hierarchical mentality and focused on honor, loyalty, discipline and sacrifice. They had also been educated through a powerful “civil religion of the Fatherland” that patriotic rhetoric and political-military propaganda had created and nurtured to a great extent as support for the war effort. The myth par excellence of these veterans was the Victory, understood also and above all as the completion of the Risorgimento struggles, the conquest of the irredent lands and the affirmation of Italy in the international arena. The “mutilation” of the victory, according to the controversial but famous expression that D’Annunzio coined in November 1918 (“mutilated victory”), was nothing but the disappointment for some expectations matured during and immediately after the conflict, in particular as a result of war propaganda. Disappointment turned into the conviction that the war was not over, at least in terms of a Risorgimento struggle that, in addition to national unity and independence, was to produce internal political and social recognition of the role played by a given social strata as well as to see affirmed, externally, the Italian primacy in Europe and the world.

The workers, as we have seen, had their own representative bodies in the PSI (Italian Socialist Party) and the C.G.d.L., but above all, they found in October 1917 a myth of great driving force. “Fare come in Russia” (do as they – the Bolsheviks – did in Russia) became the watchword of the socialists, and it was in the reference to the Soviet model that first the turmoils and then the split within the PSI occurred. The Bolshevik myth was at the antipodes of that of the “mutilated victory”: internationalist, neutralist (with reference to the Great War), and hinging on class struggle. The anti-bourgeois character, on the other hand, was not a strong discriminator, since “the bourgeois” was an enemy even for the former nationalist fighter, insofar as this term was used to indicate the scheming, fearful and petty materialist, who had enriched himself on the back of the youth called to the front line. Even for the worker who militated in the socialist ranks, it was necessary to oppose the imperialist and bourgeois war with class warfare, and therefore the clash was not at all over - if anything it had just begun.

This context of real “civil war”, where each side had clearly identified its internal enemy (within, that is, the national territory), is what distinguished the political and social life of the years 1918-1922 (Ventrone 2005). From a political and institutional point of view, two main factors contributed to the crisis of the liberal system and its subsequent collapse: the rise of mass parties and the introduction of a proportional electoral system. In the first place, the mobilization of the lower classes that the necessities of war had encouraged (promises of rewards for workers and especially peasants sent to the front; promotion of status for the small and middle bourgeoisie as military officers and non-commissioned officers; involuntary social promotion of women called upon to replace men in the factories) determined the decline of individual politicians, of the

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notables of the old liberal ruling class, and decreed the establishment of modern mass parties, much more deeply rooted in the territory and therefore able to establish a closer contact with the emerging masses.

### 3. The institutional crisis: proportionality and governability

The elections of November 1919, the first to be held with a proportional system based on party lists, recorded the success of the PSI, which obtained 156 seats, and the Popular Party (PPI), a newly formed Catholic party led by Don Luigi Sturzo, which won 100 seats. If we also take into account that the age for the right to vote was lowered from thirty to twenty-one years (and from twenty-one to eighteen for those who had been drafted during the war), it is easy to understand the disruptive and fragmenting effect that the electoral reform produced within the Italian parliament. The old political formations, both progressive and moderate and conservative, found themselves crushed and powerless in the face of a situation of incipient civil war.

On the level of social struggle, the ebb of the workers' movement, in the autumn of 1920, was accompanied by a counter-offensive of the entrepreneurial class, aimed at ending the long period of instability and uncertainty concerning the relationship between capital and labour. The same happened in the countryside, where the agrarian owners wanted to end land invasions, expropriations and the domination of the red and white leagues. A similar counteroffensive found in the fascist movement a real "armed wing". The "Fasci di combattimento" (fighting leagues or bands), in fact, had organized themselves, on the local level, following a paramilitary structure under the guidance of leaders (the *ru*) who found economic support, especially in the agrarians, and frequent complicity on the part of the judiciary and law enforcement agencies.

Violent action, with the destruction of newspaper offices, cooperatives, Chambers of Labour, and union associations, with attacks on individuals and groups belonging to the PSI and PPI, had marked Mussolini's movement from its first months of life. The intensity and extent of the use of violence grew when the "great fear" of the urban bourgeoisie and rural owners (not only large landowners, but also small farmers, tenants, sharecroppers) sought refuge and protection with the "Camicie nere" (Blackshirts, i.e. fascists, who were distinguished by their black uniforms, modelled on those of the "Arditi", Italy's elite troops of the First World War).

Thus was born the phenomenon of "squadismo", that is, groups of fascists (squads) who, armed with sticks, knives and firearms, carried out punitive expeditions in the countryside, especially in Tuscany, Emilia, Romagna and Veneto. Thus, from an originally urban phenomenon, Fascism acquired a strong agrarian connotation that also won the adhesion of those who, having returned from the front to the countryside, had found the labour market monopolized by the

socialist leagues with their action made of boycotts, fines for those who broke class solidarity and the so-called “taxable labour” (a practice that forced the owners to employ landless peasants according to the amount of land they owned and not according to their real needs).

Weakened on the electoral level and therefore producing unstable governments, the old liberal ruling class tried, with Giolitti, to instrumentalize the fascist violence to weaken the socialist and popular opposition and thus attract more moderate currents in the name of social pacification. This process took place in May 1921, when during the elections for the new Chambers, dissolved by Giolitti to gain a stronger parliamentary majority, the “national blocs” obtained 275 seats. Such a result, however, was not enough to give Giolitti the desired majority and, hence, he resigned. Within this electoral bloc were also nationalists and fascists, who had attained 10 and 35 seats respectively.

After the electoral defeat of November 1919, Mussolini decided to orient his political movement decisively to the right, in an anti-socialist and anti-popular sense, but without losing sight of the objective of undermining the ruling political class. To achieve such aim, Mussolini operated on the legal level of parliamentary politics as well as the illegal one of extra-parliamentary violence, exploiting the weaknesses and contradictions of a system and a political class in deep crisis.

The 1921 elections saw the debut of the Communist Party of Italy (PCdI), born as a result of the split of Gramsci and Bordiga’s pro-Bolshevik wing during the XVII Congress of the PSI, held in Livorno from 15 to 21 January 1921. Adhering to the conditions dictated by Lenin for the adhesion to the III International, the extreme left of the PSI demanded the expulsion of the reformists from the party and the parliamentary group, the taking on the name “communist” and preparing the imminent final clash against a capitalist system in agony. In a minority position, the communist wing could not change power relations within the PSI and, hence, it seceded. The most immediate consequence was the weakening of the Italian left in a very difficult moment, marked by the advance of fascism that, within a year, saw its ranks grow enormously. By the end of 1920, the Fasci counted 200,000 members; at the end of 1921 they amounted to 249,000, thus surpassing the PSI and counting on a tendentially interclassist following, in which the small and middle bourgeoisie (the so-called “middle classes”) and the younger generations prevailed.

Mediating between a PSI in difficulty and a growing Fascism, Ivanoe Bonomi, who succeeded Giolitti, favored the stipulation of a “pacification pact” (August 3, 1921) between Socialists, CGdL and Fascists, which put Mussolini in difficulty with the intransigent wing of the Fascists led by *ras* such as Roberto Farinacci from Cremona and Dino Grandi from Bologna. To avoid a dangerous internal rift, Mussolini left the decision of whether or not to apply the pact to

individual local Fasci, case by case. He then offered his internal adversaries a sort of counterpart (*quid pro quo*): to set aside the "pacification pact" in exchange for the transformation of the Fasci di combattimento into a real party. In November 1921, the National Fascist Party (PNF) was born, Mussolini being its undisputed leader. On institutional issues, the program of the new party proclaimed the "most unprejudiced agnosticism" and the restoration of the authority of the state (Gentile 2021).

Shortly afterwards, in February 1922, Bonomi's government collapsed and was replaced by an even weaker government led by Facta. On the parliamentary and institutional level, there were increasing opportunities for the Fascists to enter the government. The conquest of the extra-parliamentary front remained to be completed. The spring of 1922 saw an increase in squad violence in central and northern Italy and in Puglia. At this point, the risk for Mussolini and Fascism was to tire out a bourgeoisie that by now had less need for defensive and offensive actions against a much-weakened socialism. The proclamation of a "legalitarian" general strike, promoted by the reformist socialists and by the Alliance of Labour (a temporary coalition of the major trade union organizations, including the CGdL) and proclaimed on July 31, 1922, had the sole effect of bestowing onto Fascism the role of irreplaceable guarantor of an order periodically threatened by anarchy and by "scioperomania" (strike mania). Having the strike immediately failed, even before taking off, the PSI was further torn apart, internally, and in early October 1922 the reformist wing led by Filippo Turati seceded, forming the United Socialist Party (PSU).

#### **4. The March on Rome and the "authoritarian government"**

At this point, the opposition was fragmented and powerless, while Facta's lack of personality made the formation of a more authoritative, if not authoritarian, government desirable. This was the hidden wish of the economic, military and political ruling classes. Mussolini reassured them in this regard, presenting himself as the right man in the right place. He himself had contributed to the creation of the right climate, fuelling the widespread political and social instability. At the end of August 1922, the PNF adopted an economic-financial program with a clear liberalist imprint. From the "Popolo d'Italia" the declarations of friendship, esteem and solidarity towards the army multiplied. To them the Blackshirts were presented as natural allies, while the "republican tendencies" of fascism was set aside. Having the Facta government fallen for the second time the government, Mussolini attempted the very final gamble. On October 28, 1922, a demonstrative action was organized that included the mobilization and calling to Rome of numerous fascist squads from various parts of Italy. Many telegraph offices and prefectures were occupied and trains were requisitioned, in many cases with the condescension of the police

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authorities. What has gone down in history as the “March on Rome” was intended to simulate a seizure of power, but above all to put pressure on the king to call Mussolini to form a new government.

Facta, although he was resigning, posted on the walls of Rome the proclamation of the state of siege, which gave the army full power. What was missing was the signature of the decree by the king. Vittorio Emanuele III refused, perhaps fearful of the uncertain outcome of a clash between forces that were in part sympathetic towards one another such as the army and the fascists, the possible return of a state of civil war, but especially by the absence of a valid and more attractive alternative than a strong and authoritarian government led by Mussolini. On October 30, the king summoned the head of Fascism and gave him the task of forming the new government. Thus, a coalition government was born. It included not only Fascists (who obtained important ministries, such as those of the Interior Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Justice and Finance), but also nationalists, liberals, popular and demo-nationals. There were also technicians, such as the two military Armando Diaz (War) and Paul Thaon de Revel (Navy) and the philosopher Giovanni Gentile (Education), who shortly after would join the PNF becoming one of the main ideologists of the nascent fascist regime (Gentile 1925).

The new government gained the vote of confidence of Parliament (in the House: 429 votes in favor, 116 against and 7 abstained; in the Senate: 196 votes in favor and 19 against) and Mussolini, having obtained the interim of Foreign Affairs and Interior Affairs, was entrusted with full powers in tax and administrative matters. Meanwhile, the PNF more than doubled its members, raising from about 300,000 members in October 1922 to 782,979 at the end of 1923.

Between 1922 and 1926, the premises were laid for the shift from an authoritarian government to a totalitarian state, capable of removing any form of opposition and dissent, whether an organized as a party, a trade union or means of information (newspapers, magazines, press agencies, etc.). Even the new instruments of communication, in particular the radio, were used to control and shape public opinion in favour of the regime. Some measures at the institutional level were decisive. First of all, on January 16, 1923, the Great Council of Fascism met for the first time, a new consultative body that was supposed to establish a closer operational link between the party and the government (Mussolini’s expression “dominant party” appears in all circulars to the prefects of that period). In the same month, the *Milizia volontaria per la sicurezza nazionale* (MVSN; Volunteer Militia for National Security) was created, which included all the paramilitary forces that had made up the fascist squads. Presented as a “normalizing” operation, it was another step towards the creation of a dictatorship based on a party with a private army, thus stripping the state, at least partially, of its prerogative as the sole (and legal) holder of force. On February 26,

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1923 there was then a merger between PNF and ANI (Italian Nationalist Association), which saw the nationalists formally adhere to fascism. In the meantime, a reform of the electoral law was initiated under the direction of Giacomo Acerbo, undersecretary of the Presidency of the Council. The text of the “Acerbo law” established a strong majority prize: the list (single party or coalition of parties) that reached 25% of votes would obtain two-thirds of the seats in the Chamber. On July 21, 1923 the law was approved by the House with 223 votes against 123. The Parliament having been dissolved on January 25, 1924, the elections were set for April 6 of that year (Breschi 2012).

## 5. The Murder of Matteotti and the Aventine Hill

The electoral campaign took place amidst intimidation and violence against all opponents, in particular socialists and communists but also popular and liberal anti-fascists. The so-called “listone” (the big list), which included the PNF and its allies (that is, the majority of liberals, but not Giolitti), obtained 64.9% of the vote and 374 seats. The Parliament was now in the hands of Mussolini and his party. During the ratification of the election result, the political secretary of the PSU, Giacomo Matteotti (1885-1924), denounced in a speech to the House of Deputies the violence of the fascists before and during the election campaign and so contested the electoral outcome. A few days later, on June 10, 1924, the socialist parliamentarian was kidnapped and murdered by a team of fascists (the so-called “Fascist Cheka”), convinced that they were interpreting Mussolini’s will. The body was found in the outskirts of Rome on August 16. The day after the kidnapping the government was overwhelmed by a chorus of harsh criticism from the public, well beyond the circle of opposition. For a moment, Mussolini’s power faltered, even temporarily losing the support of those circles, such as the Confederation of Industrialists, who from allies turned again into detached observers. On June 14, the ministers Oviglio, Federzoni, De Stefani and Gentile offered their resignations. Among the suitable substitutes Mussolini pointed to men close to the Vatican, as the former Cesare Nava, personal friend of Pope Pius XI. On June 27, the oppositions, with the exclusion of the Communists, decided not to return to Parliament until legality had been restored and the Militia dissolved. Turati, to emphasise the moral character of this protest said, referring to the secession of the plebeians on the Aventine in ancient Rome, noted that the oppositions had withdrawn “on the Aventine of their consciences” - hence the adjective “Aventinian” given to the socialist and liberal opposition led by Giovanni Amendola. Moreover, on June 13, the President of the Chamber, Alfredo Rocco, having approved provisional exercise until December 31, adjourned the parliamentary proceedings without setting a date for resumption.

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## 6. The turning point of 3 January 1925

In the meantime, clashes flared up again in the country between the squadrists and the surviving anti-fascist formations (in particular, communists and “Free Italy” ex-combatants). It was precisely from the ranks of the Fascist Militia that came the extra-parliamentary support that gave Mussolini the strength to make a speech in the Chamber of Deputies, on 3 January 1925, in which he declared his moral and political responsibility for everything that had happened since Matteotti’s murder. It was the final declaration of war on all opposition parties. There were other resignations by liberal members of the government, who were replaced by men of assured Fascist faith, including Rocco, who was appointed Minister of Justice.

Alfredo Rocco himself, who advocated an authoritarian and nationalist turn in Italian state policy and structures, was the architect of the Fascist regime (Rocco 1927). A further crackdown silenced the remaining free press, which had already been largely suppressed in the previous two years. On 2 October 1925, the Palazzo Vidoni agreement between Confindustria and the Fascist Confederation of Corporations deprived the CGdL of its power. The latter disappeared in January 1927. The fascist trade union thus became the only union. Internal factory commissions were also abolished. On 20 November, the Senate passed a law against secret associations, primarily Freemasonry. On 27, the fascist Roman salute between subordinate and senior employees was introduced in all civil administrations. On 24 December 1925, a law was passed amending the 1848 Statute turning the Prime Minister into “head of government”, subordinating the role of ministers, whose appointment and dismissal remained the prerogative of the king but “on proposal of the head of government”. Individual ministers were no longer “responsible” to the legislature and legislative initiative passed into the hands of the head of government.

In January 1926, another law empowered the head of government to issue the necessary legal rules to regulate the execution of laws, the organisation and functioning of state administrations, and the organisation of personnel and public bodies and institutions. The depletion of the role of parliament and the cancellation of the division of powers were thus accomplished. The law of 3 April 1926 abolished the right to strike and lock-out. As further confirmation of the strengthening of central power, and in particular of the head of government, on 12 October 1926 Mussolini took command of the MVSN. And, finally, on 5 November 1926 the Council of Ministers approved a series of measures for the security of the Fascist regime and for the “defence of the state”. These included the dissolution of all parties, organisations and associations opposed to Fascism; the revision of all foreign passports and the cancellation of recently issued ones; the suppression of the press opposed to the regime; the institution of police

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confinement; the introduction of the death penalty for anyone threatening the life and personal integrity of the king, queen, crown prince and head of government, as well as for a number of other offences against the state; imprisonment from three to ten years for anyone reconstituting dissolved parties or organisations.

The Special Court for the Defence of the State was set up to judge crimes of espionage, incitement to civil war, reconstitution and propaganda in favour of dissolved parties. The court applied the rules of the military penal code of war and its verdicts could not be appealed. Exiles were punished by confiscation of property and loss of nationality.

## **7. The consolidation of the regime and the Concordat**

This set of measures adopted between 1925 and 1926, known as the “leggi fascistissime” (super-fascist laws), marked the end of the rule of law in every respect. At this juncture, a new phase in the history of the Fascist regime began. Its totalitarian vocation emerged clearly in the manoeuvres that, beginning at least in 1925, led on 11 February 1929 to the agreements between the state and the Catholic Church. The Lateran Pacts (signed at the Lateran Palace in Rome) consisted of three parts: a treaty, a financial convention and a concordat. The treaty established the recognition by the Italian State of both Catholicism as the “only state religion” and the fully sovereign and independent Vatican City State. The Vatican, for its part, recognised the Kingdom of Italy and Rome as its capital. The financial agreement set at 1 billion 750 million lire the sum with which the Italian State extinguished all compensation due for the loss of temporal power and the revenues of the former Papal State. The Concordat established, among other things, the protection by the Italian government of the clergy in the exercise of their functions, the sacred character of the city of Rome, the exemption of clerics from military service and the commitment of the government to remove apostate priests or those censured by the ecclesiastical authorities from public offices. For its part, the Vatican would only appoint bishops after the approval of the government, committing them to swear an oath of loyalty to the Italian government. In addition, all the civil effects of religious marriage were recognised, i.e. marriage as a sacrament governed by canon law, and the teaching of Catholic doctrine became compulsory in state schools. Lastly, Catholic Action organisations were recognised as long as they did not take on “semi-military status” or the form of a political party and remained under the direct control of the Church hierarchy. The long-standing “Roman question”, started with the breach of Porta Pia, on 20 September 1870, was thus resolved, certainly not in the spirit of Cavour’s principle, which wanted the government to be secular and independent of any connection with religious authorities.

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Although Mussolini was described by Pope Pius XI as the “man of Providence”, 1931 saw the outbreak of a strong conflict between Fascism and the Church over Catholic Action which claimed full autonomy in the education of young people. The conflict, which in May of that year also saw Fascist violence against Catholic offices, was resolved in September with an agreement that reduced the role and aims of Catholic Action, after purging its cadres of anti-Fascist and a-Fascist elements. In spite of this strict crackdown, Catholic associationism in the 1930s was an area of “nicodemitism”, i.e. a distinction between what was affirmed in public and what was nurtured as intimate and private feelings. Moreover, the 1931 clash pitted two institutions against each other which, albeit through different means, both aspired to attain a complete control of the education and training of the younger generations. Having consolidated as an authoritarian regime, Fascism was now taking the path of totalitarianism.

### **8. The institutions of Fascism. An embryonic ‘welfare state’**

With the signing of the Lateran Pacts and the plebiscite of 24 March 1929, the Fascist regime was fully consolidated. Thanks also to the “conquest” of Catholic public opinion, 98,4% of the electorate voted in favour of the single list of 400 candidates drawn up by the Grand Council and presented to the voters. The “no” votes amounted to 1,6%, but this was no longer an election but the registration of a “consensus” in a political and social context that did not allow the slightest form of dissent. The plebiscite was the result of a new electoral law approved in 1928 and was the expression of Mussolini’s totalitarian aims.

Since 1925, the role of the state had been growing and it was becoming increasingly interventionist, first and foremost on a social level. With the aim of both political control and the organisation of leisure time, on 1 May 1925 the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND; National Workers’ Pension Organisation) was established by decree, a body that would gradually come under the direct management of the PNF. On 10 December 1925, the Opera nazionale per la maternità e l’infanzia (ONMI; National Maternity and Childhood Home) was set up with the task of integrating and coordinating the various forms of assistance to mothers in need and abandoned children. In particular, the ONMI was responsible for nutrition, hygiene and prophylaxis. In April 1926, the Opera nazionale balilla (ONB; for the care and physical and moral education of youth) was set up, with boys aged between eight and twelve as “balilla” and young people aged between twelve and eighteen as “avanguardisti” (avant-gardists). In May 1929, compulsory insurance against occupational diseases was introduced. In the mid-twenties the construction of residential settlements for the care and holidays of young people, i.e. the so-called summer camps at the seaside and on mountains, which hosted thousands of children and young people every year,

increased. The colonies grew from about one hundred in 1926 to over 3,000 by the mid-thirties, welcoming more than half a million children of Italians living in Italy and abroad during the summer months. In 1931 the Ente opere assistenziali (Welfare Agency) was set up, with contributions from both the ONMI and the ONB. It was created through the unification of the provincial welfare funds for Fascist charities and assistance (managed by the PNF Federations).

As for the social security and welfare system, this was completed in March 1933 with the creation of the Istituto nazionale fascista assicurazioni infortuni sul lavoro (INFAIL; National Fascist Industrial Accident Insurance Institute) and the Istituto nazionale fascista della previdenza sociale (INFPS; National Fascist Social Security Institute), which were the outcome of the restructuring of the Cassa nazionale infortuni sul lavoro (National work accident fund; established in 1883) and the Cassa nazionale di previdenza (established in 1898). In 1935, the National Maternity Fund, set up in 1911 and intended mainly for working mothers, came under the control of the INFPS. From that moment, alongside industrial workers, office workers, teachers and shop assistants too were included as contributors and beneficiaries. The aim of these institutions was to extend insurance conditions and maternity leave to working mothers. Mothers were the object of a massive campaign to increase the birth rate, according to a demographic and pro-natalist policy that Mussolini gave increasing importance to from the end of the 1920s. This included the introduction of harsh penal legislation on abortion, punishable by up to twelve years imprisonment, according to the 1931 Penal Code, drafted by Rocco (Melis 2018; Cassese 2016; Aquarone 2003).

## **9. The regime's relationship with the economic world**

The crisis on the New York Stock Exchange, on 24 October 1929, did not spare Italy, which, like the rest of Europe, recorded from the end of 1930, a sharp increase in prices, unemployment and a drastic fall in foreign trade. If the crisis did not have similar effects to those it had in Germany, this was also due to the direct and massive intervention of the state in defence of the companies and credit institutions most affected.

The Fascist regime's relationship with the economic world can be divided into four phases. The first, from 1922 to 1925, was led by Alberto De Stefani, the Minister of Finance, and was characterised by a liberal approach aimed at reducing state control over the economy. Private initiative was promoted, so much so that the management of telephone lines and life insurance was entrusted to private companies. Even the state's workforce, particularly in the railways, was substantially reduced.

The second phase began with the decision to combat the inflationary process triggered by the fact that the volume of imports of raw materials far exceeded the volume of exports. The value

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of the currency began to fall after a period of stability, thus losing its purchasing power. The exchange rate for the pound went from 120 to 153 lire. On 18 August 1926, Mussolini decided to launch the “battle of the lira”, which was to bring the exchange rate with the pound to 90 lire (hence the term “quota 90”). More than a strictly economic and financial issue, it was a question of prestige and the aim was to demonstrate how the will of the Head of Fascism (and of the nation) could be translated into concrete political acts. In 1927 the lira stabilised at the level desired by Mussolini (to be exact: 92.45 lire) and this was a sign of strength addressed to the industrial world, which was sceptical about the advisability of stabilising at 90 lire (preferring, if anything, 120 lire).

While this second phase, in which the figure of Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata as Finance Minister stood out, was essentially inspired by two criteria, deflation and protectionism, the third phase was inevitably marked by the “great crisis”.

A first step was the creation of the Istituto Mobiliare Italiano (IMI; a medium- and long-term credit institution) on 9 November 1931, with the task of organising the Italian banking world, which had already been shaken by a series of dangerous crises. The Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, INA, Cassa Nazionale Assicurazioni Sociale, Banco di Napoli and Banco di Sicilia, as well as various insurance companies and savings banks, all partook to the creation of the IMI. The main purpose of the new institution was medium-term credit: it had to collect savings, through ten-year bonds, and direct them towards the financing of rescue and recovery initiatives for industries in difficulty. Among the first companies to receive help were Italgas, which obtained a loan of 140 million, and the Terni steelworks, which were granted a loan of 200 million. A second, even more significant step was taken on 23 January 1933 with the creation of the Institute for Industrial Reconstruction (IRI). Still conceived of as a public body, IRI’s task was to save banks and industries on the verge of financial collapse. Taking control of the largest Italian banks (Banca Commerciale Italiana, Credito Italiano, Banco di Roma), it took over their share packages, thus also gaining control of enterprises in sectors of strategic importance, such as iron and steel, mechanics, shipbuilding and shipping. In fact, IRI became a mixed capital banking-industrial body, but it is clear that the state increasingly became an owner and industrial entrepreneur, resulting in a unique case in Europe and not entirely dissimilar to the Soviet case.

The fourth phase was marked by an economic policy characterised both by autarchy, i.e. the search for full and total self-sufficiency in resources and production, and by an increase in spending on armaments. The reasons for this policy can only be fully understood in the light of the foreign policy choices made by the Fascist regime from 1935 onwards.

## **10. The Ethiopian war and the characteristics of Italian imperialism**

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Around 1934, Mussolini developed the idea of conquering Ethiopia. The quest for a colony had long been an objective of Fascist foreign policy. The motives driving Fascist imperialism were many: the desire for personal prestige that Mussolini sought at every opportunity; the war enterprise that would have tested old and new Fascist levers, but also give an impetus to industrial production; assign a “place in the sun” to the Italian nation in the international arena and give an outlet to the unemployment that the great crisis had produced. The idea of empire had long been circulating in Fascist and nationalist culture but had almost always been declined in spiritual terms as a synonym for a “civilisation” that Fascism had to create within the peninsula and then export. In 1935 came true military and colonialist expansionism. The agreement of 7 January 1935 between Pierre Laval, the French prime minister, and Mussolini had brought France and Italy closer together in an anti-German aim. In return for modest territorial concessions to Italy, Laval obtained a commitment from Mussolini to defend the integrity of Austria, which had fallen under the expansionist sway of Hitler’s Germany. A secret clause also gave Italy French authorisation to conquer Ethiopia. In April 1935, therefore, representatives of Great Britain, France and Italy met in Stresa, again for anti-German purposes. The so-called “Stresa front” condemned German rearmament and reiterated the need to defend Austrian independence. While this meeting did not produce any results with regard to the objectives set, it did persuade Mussolini that the time was right for the invasion of Ethiopia.

Having sent troops since the beginning of the year, Mussolini ordered the invasion of the country ruled by Negus Haile Selassie on 3 October 1935 without any prior declaration of war. Ethiopia was a full member of the League of Nations (SDN). Fascist aggression provoked the reaction of 52 SDN countries which decided, on the initiative of the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, to impose financial and commercial “sanctions” against Italy (10-11 October 1935). Faced with the embargo and the boycott of Italian products, Mussolini’s regime embarked on the path of “autarchy”, aiming for the rapid achievement of full economic autonomy. In fact, the League of Nations sanctions did not include coal, steel and oil, and the USA and Germany had not joined the initiative as they were both outside the SDN. This was one of the reasons that favoured Italy’s rapprochement with Nazi Germany, which found its fulfilment in the Spanish war that broke out in the summer of 1936.

Another effect of the sanctions was to allow Fascist propaganda to fuel national pride, making Italy a victim of the “plutocratic” powers that denied it what they reserved for themselves. To the peasant masses, the regime presented the new colony as the solution to their hunger for bread and land. Both during and after the war in Ethiopia, the fascist regime received a very broad “consensus” and popular and mass support.



Militarily, the Ethiopian venture ended in May 1936. The Fascist commitment in terms of troops and armaments (including gas) was huge and overwhelming against the Ethiopian forces. On 3 May 1936 the negus fled into exile and on 5 May General Badoglio, commander-in-chief of the Italian army, entered Addis Ababa. On 9 May, Mussolini was able to proclaim the foundation of the Ethiopian Empire and greet King Victor Emmanuel III as a new emperor.

### **11. The public works of Fascism: Reality and rhetoric of the ‘bonifica integrale’**

This success on an international level strengthened the image of power and dynamism that the fascist regime had acquired on a domestic level too, in particular with the “bonifica integrale” (integral land reclamation). Launched in full with the law of 24 December 1928, the integral reclamation plan was completed on 13 February 1933. The aim was to reclaim entire swampy areas, where malaria and other infectious diseases were rife. The state took on the responsibility for irrigation, canalisation, reforestation and the creation of road links to make vast areas of the peninsula, which had remained unused until then, cultivable and habitable. Around 5 million hectares were invested in the reclamation plan (Alfieri 2014).

The largest reclamation project involved the Agro Pontino, near Rome, a marshy and malarial area that, for centuries, others had tried to make cultivable and habitable. More than 65,000 hectares of land were recovered and divided into about 3,000 farms, equipped with a farmhouse, stable and well. They were assigned by the Commissariat for Migration and Internal Colonization to those families who had contributed to the “redemption” of the land, as the propaganda of the regime put it. These families came mainly from the Veneto and Emilia regions, and in particular from the Ferrara area. They were chosen to form family and residential nuclei that met the requirements of order and discipline pursued by Fascism. Compared to the labourers of the Lazio countryside, these sharecropper families were to be exemplary settlements in terms of obedience, hard work and all those values on which Mussolini and Fascism intended to forge the Fascist “new man”. To this end, between 1932 and 1938, five “new towns” were founded (Littoria, Sabaudia, Pontinia, Aprilia and Pomezia) which were supposed to skilfully blend a rural lifestyle with a rational organisation of urban space. In reality, however, there were many difficulties in acclimatising the settlers, both because of the precarious hygienic conditions of the area and the economic treatment reserved for them. Having contracted a debt for the purchase of tools and fertilisers with the reclamation consortium managed by the Opera Nazionale Combattenti, the farming families did not receive an adequate income to go beyond subsistence level (Pennacchi 2018).

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## 12. State, party and leader in Fascism

The “imperial” image that Fascism took on concretely with the Ethiopian enterprise had already been pursued in the previous years with the urban and monumental restructuring of Rome. The myth of Romanity became a component of Fascist ideology in the 1930s and was mainly used by the PNF leadership to give Mussolini and his regime the appearance of an absolute personal tyranny. Although the institution of the monarchy persisted and while the king was given the title of emperor, effective power was increasingly concentrated in Mussolini’s hands. Even the Fascist party, which had directly controlled the entire parastatal structure built between the 1920s and 1930s, was effectively ousted from the state structure that had its cornerstone in the prefects. Since the circular letter of 5 January 1927 to the prefects, Mussolini had put into practice his motto “Everything in the State, nothing against the State, nothing outside the State”. Through the institution of the prefecture and the action of bodies such as the OVRA, Mussolini systematised the hierarchical and anti-democratic principle according to which every decision could only come from the top, and descend along a pyramid at the top of which was always the “duce”, i.e. the head of the government and fascism. Since Fascism had been presented, since 1921-22, as the party of the nation (i.e. the party that did everything) and as such imposed by the regime, Mussolini was also the head of the nation, much to the king’s annoyance.

In fact, Mussolini’s totalitarian aspirations clashed with the overt, or more frequently hidden, resistance that the monarchy and the Church expressed by their mere presence. Although emptied of meaning, the Statute had never been abrogated and so the king retained, for example, the right to appoint and dismiss the head of government. The Church, for its part, enjoyed a prestige and mass following that went beyond the contingent political vicissitudes. The rituals and liturgies of mass politics, made up of uniforms, rallies and military parades or celebrations for the foundation of “new cities”, could certainly not obscure or even suddenly replace the Catholic religious tradition of the Italians.

## 13. The cultural world and Fascism

A regime with a strong totalitarian vocation, Fascism could not fail to take the cultural world seriously. Since April 1925, the philosopher Giovanni Gentile had fashioned himself as the main ideologist of the nascent regime by promoting the drafting of a “Manifesto degli intellettuali fascisti” (Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals). To this ensued, as a reply, on 1 May 1925, a manifesto drafted by Benedetto Croce and published in Giovanni Amendola’s “Mondo”. This was the last real opportunity for cultural confrontation. With the definitive establishment of Mussolini’s

dictatorship, the problem became that of giving a clear and univocal statute to the ideology underlying the Fascist government (Papa 1978). To this end, in 1932, in the *Enciclopedia Italiana*, an initiative promoted by Giovanni Treccani and directed by Gentile, former Minister of Education, an entry on “Fascism” was written jointly by Mussolini and the Gentile himself.

The cultural matrices of the early fascist movement had been the most varied, from Futurism to revolutionary syndicalism, from nationalism to liberal radicalism. With Gentile, who was to play a prestigious role until the mid-1930s, symbolised by his presidency of the National Fascist Institute of Culture (INFC), neo-Hegelian idealism, with its central idea of the “ethical state”, became the semi-official philosophy of a Fascism that, in any case, always kept its ideological status uncertain and vague. Corporatism was the other strand of thought and study that flourished under the regime and, in its name, the “Labour Charter” was promulgated in 1927, the law of institution and legal recognition of 22 corporations of 5 February 1934 and the Chamber of the Fasci and Corporations was established with the law of 19 January 1939. The entry into force of the latter law sanctioned the end of all elective criteria and the parliamentary institution as an emblem of representative democracy. From an economic and trade union point of view, corporatism was hailed as the watchword of the Fascist “revolution”. It outlined an alternative socio-economic structure to both liberal capitalism and communist collectivism, focusing on collaboration between the classes of employers and workers and encouraging, for the latter, forms of profit-sharing. This, at least, was what was largely worked out in theory, but then remained a vague ideal with no concrete translation into practice. In essence, Mussolini’s primary objective was the extinction of labour disputes.

In terms of its relationship with the institutions responsible for education and the dissemination of culture, Mussolini’s regime opted, once again, for a general “fascistisation”. This began in February 1929 with the imposition on primary school teachers of the obligation to swear an oath of loyalty to the regime. This obligation was then extended to secondary school teachers and in 1931 to university professors. In the face of this last measure, only a dozen academics refused out, of a total of about 1,200. But Fascism did not limit itself to demanding loyalty and conformity and exerting control over cultural institutions, creating new ones such as the *Accademia d’Italia* in October 1929 (whose members included Luigi Pirandello, Pietro Mascagni, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Enrico Fermi, who took over as president in September 1930). It promoted - or more often than not tolerated - the spread of a series of magazines and initiatives such as the *Littoriali della cultura* which, especially in the youthful world of the fascist university groups (GUF), gave voice to new literary and journalistic talents that emerged after the Second World War (e.g. Bilenchi, Vittorini, Montanelli, Alvaro). Later, the expression of these voices that

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declared their dissatisfaction with the direction taken by the regime in various artistic forms and pressed for the recovery of the revolutionary dimension that would have been characteristic of the original Fascism was called the “fronda”. In any case, in the second half of the 1930s, accentuating the fascist turn of culture grew in line with political events. In March 1935, political preparation courses were set up at PNF headquarters and a new subject, “History and doctrine of Fascism”, was introduced into the curricula of law and political science degree courses.

In 1936, Gentile lost the presidency of the National Institute of Culture and he was accused of “ecumenism”, because he was too open to confrontation with other cultures and collaboration with scholars not clearly aligned with the regime. Significantly, the name of the institution was changed to the National Institute of Fascist Culture, indicating a clear desire for fascistization (Breschi 2022). In this sense too, the last years of Fascism before the outbreak of the war saw a turn towards totalitarianism and, at the same time, personalization, thanks to a cult of the leader (i.e. Mussolini) brought to a climax by the PNF secretary, Achille Starace (Duggan 2013).

#### **14. The racial laws**

Nationalism had been one of the constituent ideologies of Fascism from the outset, well before the merger of the PNF and ANI. Mussolini’s desire to place Italy among the world’s great powers was strong. The very idea of power was one of the cornerstones of the Duce’s foreign policy, which aimed above all to consolidate his personal prestige as a dictator, which had enabled Italy to achieve what other European nations, England and France above all, had long since conquered, namely an empire. From a political culture and a governmental practice inspired by colonial expansionism, there could not but arise an idea of the superiority of the Italian people as civilisers of semi-abandoned lands ruled by populations that were little more than primitive. The concept of race had been circulating in Fascist publications since the early years of Mussolini’s rule; it was the indirect consequence of the nationalism of a young country (“proletarian” in the terminology of Enrico Corradini, a nationalist writer and ideologist who would enthusiastically join Fascism; a terminology later taken up by Mussolini himself).

Being the “late-comer” in the international competition for the control of non-European markets of raw materials, Fascist Italy needed to justify its colonialist aggressiveness with the myth of the “civilising race”, of the evolved people who brought progress and order where only chaos and barbarism reigned. This occurred before, during and even more so after the Ethiopian war, in such a way as to activate in a racist sense a notion hitherto evoked in rather vague and mainly rhetorical terms. Few groups, not among the most influential in the regime, such as the one gravitating since 1934 around the Roman newspaper “Il Tevere”, directed by Telesio Interlandi,

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had nurtured a racist and more precisely anti-Semitic ideology before the rapprochement between Mussolini and Hitler. The sanctions of the League of Nations after the invasion of Ethiopia and above all the war in Spain had sanctioned the alliance between National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy. When Hitler paid an official visit to Italy in May 1938 (from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup>), all public ceremonies extolled the great affinity between the Nazi and Fascist regimes. In other words, what most of the Fascist culture had contested since 1933, namely the ideal and ideological closeness between Nazism and Fascism, was now proclaimed as dogma. Not everyone, even at the very top of the regime's politics and culture, agreed with state anti-Semitism, but this was the result of the demands of foreign policy and the aim of giving new life to the fascist mobilisation of the new generation of the Italian population.

On 14 July 1938, a Manifesto of Racist Scientists was published in the "Giornale d'Italia". The text was unsigned, but the list was published on 25 July, after the authors of the document were received by Achille Starace, secretary of the PNF, and Dino Alfieri, minister of popular culture, who approved its content. The list included biologists, anthropologists, pathologists and psychiatrists. On 28 July Pius XI expressed the Catholic Church's concern about the racist attitudes that were manifesting themselves in the country, but on the same day Galeazzo Ciano informed the apostolic nuncio, Cardinal Francesco Borgoncini Duca, of the government's determination to proceed decisively with the racial question. This intention was reiterated two days later by Mussolini himself and took shape on 1 September 1938 with a series of anti-Semitic measures passed by the Council of Ministers. Foreign Jews were expelled and Italian Jews who had obtained citizenship after 1918 were deprived of it. They were excluded from teaching in state schools of all levels and their children were forbidden from attending state secondary schools. In primary schools, they were grouped and placed separately in special sections (Sarfatti 2018). The anti-Semitic persecution in Italy would take on a wide dimension of terror after the outbreak of the war and especially after the occupation of northern Italy by German troops (i.e. after 8 September 1943), resulting in deportations across the border to extermination camps in Central and Eastern Europe. At this point, the territory of the peninsula would be torn apart by two wars, both fought internally, from Rome upwards: on the one hand, the North American Allies against the German occupiers and, on the other hand, Italian partisans of the antifascist Resistance against Italians who had joined the Italian Social Republic (RSI), a neofascist regime set up in the north with Nazi support, and thus chose military collaboration with those who had become the new enemy after the armistice of September 1943 (Peli 2015; De Felice 2020a; De Felice 2020b).

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## 15. Conclusion

Among the many dramas caused by Fascism to the Italian people was that of splitting the link between nation and freedom, between nation and democracy. This split was triggered from the very beginning of Fascist rule and worsened after 1938 when the nation was conceived and proposed according to biological-racial, almost tribal, characteristics. The country that will emerge from the twenty-year Fascist dictatorship would suffer such a profound split that it would not recover for many decades to come. The words “fatherland” and “nation” seemed to have been kidnapped by the anti-democratic and anti-liberal culture. On the other hand, the hegemonic political cultures in post-fascist Italy, Christian Democrat and Communist, both would call for internationalism and universalism, albeit with divergent reasons and aims. However, this is the risk of any nation that emerges from a long period of dictatorship: not reconciling the demands of freedom and democracy with a spirit of community co-belonging, that kind of patriotic sentiment lived as the platform on which conscious and active citizenship can be built more easily and durably (Breschi 2020).

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