Reply to De Grand: But Did Reform Fail?

PAUL CORNER

I am indebted to Alexander De Grand for taking the time and trouble to comment on my article, although I am sorry that he seems to have read it principally as an attack on Giolitti and Giolittian policies. While I can see that it is possible to read this into the paper, it was certainly not my intention to lay the responsibility for the development of Fascism at Giolitti's door. My concern was rather to seek to identify some of the reasons for the dramatic clash between left and right in 1920 and 1921 which led to the affirmation of Fascism; it was in this light that I attempted to assess the Giolittian period, which has always seemed to me the great moment of democratic possibilities between one form of repressive government and another. I agree, of course, that the great radicalising and polarising event in Italy was the First World War. My point – put very simply – was that the experience of the war might have been much less devastating for Italy if the political situation in 1914–15 had not already been characterised by profound lacerations within Italian society. To put it another way, I was interested in seeing why, as De Grand himself says, 'the great hopes for reform that marked that [Giolittian] period gave rise to little structural reform' and in assessing the consequences of that lack of reform for the subsequent period. The central question of the article, therefore, is that of Fascism as breach or continuity rather than the culpability of Giolitti.

That said, I accept many of the points Professor De Grand makes, and where I differ it is often a question of emphasis and degree. Essentially De Grand argues that Giolitti – the political realist – did as much as could be expected of him, given the conditions of the time, and that no one in other countries in continental Europe really achieved much more, particularly in terms of building bridges towards popular participation in establishment politics. I argue that, although Giolitti undoubtedly did a great deal, ultimately he did not do enough. No one would contest that Giolitti was a political realist, but whether political realism is a virtue or a limitation is, of course, debatable. Presumably it depends very much on the circumstances. Here I have suggested, for example, that in abandoning tax reform in 1901 – in adopting what De Grand himself refers to as 'the politically easiest course' – Giolitti did miss a golden opportunity (as he was to do on several occasions subsequently, often because of contingent and short-term considerations) to indicate at least a willingness on the part of government to go some way to meet popular protests about living standards.

A closely related but more substantial difference perhaps is that concerning the condition of Italy in 1914 and the question of the legitimacy of the state. De Grand is obviously right to say that a stable alliance of middle-class reformers and socialists was not formed anywhere in Europe before the First World War. Yet the behaviour

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of the majority of socialists in France, Germany and Britain both at the beginning of and during the war would suggest that the state had achieved a much greater degree of legitimacy in the eyes of those who were, at least formally, its opponents than was the case in Italy. This difference was fundamental both for the way the war was lived by the people who had to fight it and for popular attitudes to the state in 1919.[1] It could be said, for example, that, if the German Social Democrats were 'a state within the state', to use a conventional definition, by 1914 the Italian Socialist Party was already 'a state outside the state', and would remain so. It is highly significant that, in Germany in 1914, General Erich von Falkenhayn could write of the Social Democrats that he was convinced that they would behave 'as befits any German under the present circumstances'. The same conviction that the SPD could be kept under the patriotic umbrella was reflected in Bethmann Hollweg's persistent proposals (usually frustrated by the High Command) for democratically oriented reforms.[2] In France, in the same way, disgust at the horrors of the war did not undermine the popular determination to win the war. As one historian has written of the army mutinies of 1917, 'Nothing about the mutinies is more striking than the contrast between the depth of soldiers' anger at what the war had wrought and their continued adherence to what were essentially their commanders' war aims.'.[3] Recent research on Italy and the Great War suggests that it is virtually inconceivable to think of such statements being made, or such positions being adopted, in respect of Italy, where socialists consistently denied their support to the war effort, where they were cast as 'the internal enemy' and where many of their leaders were tried and imprisoned. What is impressive in the Italian case is the depth of division provoked within Italy by the war – but it is a division, I would argue, which was exacerbated by the war, not created by it. This is to say that the war was not the determining factor in the breakdown of the Giolittian system. It does not seem to me justified to see 'the foundation of the liberal parliamentary state [as] still relatively solid' in 1914 and undermined only by the war itself (as De Grand puts it) when 'Red Week' – by any standards a remarkable expression of widespread popular disaffection with the liberal state – occurred two months before the outbreak of the conflict.

Of course it is legitimate to suggest that in many ways Italian politics differed little from those of other Continental countries and even that Italy's experience of the war was, in many respects, similar to that of other belligerent nations. The other version of the same argument, which invites us not to expect from Italy what was not happening elsewhere, is also entirely justified from certain points of view. But

[1] On these differences see my 'State and society in Italy under the impact of war: an international comparison', in *Ricerche storiche*, 3 (1997),455–63; now in P. Corner, *Liberalismo e fascismo* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2002), ch. 3.

[2] See W. Deist, 'The German Army, the authoritarian nation-state, and total war', in J. Horne, ed., *State, society and mobilisation in Europe during the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 163, 165.

[3] L. V. Smith, 'Remobilizing the citizen-soldier through the French army mutinies of 1917' in Horne, *State, society and mobilisation*, 158.

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the problem we are left with is that, if Italy was not significantly different from other European countries in her political problems before and during the First World War and should not be required to be, we are forced to find the origins of what is indisputably the great Italian difference – Fascism – in the postwar period (where, if one wanted, it would be equally possible to point to similarities between the Italian situation and that in other countries). Many historians would accept this view of Fascism as essentially contingent on the postwar crisis, but those who do so end up almost inevitably accentuating those features of the biennio rosso – in particular socialist maximalism – which are themselves symptoms of the radicalisation of pre-existing divisions rather than causes of those divisions. We cannot really explain satisfactorily why the Italian left behaved as it did in 1919 on the basis of what happened in 1919; Reggio Emilia in 1912 has to come into the picture somewhere, with all that lay behind it. More significantly perhaps, we cannot explain the behaviour of certain sections of the right simply in terms of the postwar crisis.

It may be more useful for our understanding of the development of Fascism to suggest, very obviously, that in Italy we have the same forces at play and the same problems as in other continental European countries, but in a different mix and to a different degree. It is true, therefore, that we can recognise similarities with other countries all along the way, but we should not allow the recognition of similarities to obscure significant differences. If I am right in suggesting that what is specific and special about the Italian case is the type of conflict which developed in the Po valley, it has to be said that this conflict became special because the political class, well aware of the problem from at least the turn of the century, either did not want to deal with it, or was unable to do so. Agrarian interests at the political centre simply made impossible any government action which might have seriously weakened those interests. This does seem to have been one of the decisive factors in prewar politics. It was certainly one of the principal conditioning factors in Giolitti's reforming activities – something which might appear to confirm the thesis of Arno Mayer.[4] Yet what is special about Italy in this period is perhaps not so much the persistence of the old regime (in part, after all, the agrarian interest was northern, dynamic, capitalist and, from many points of view, aggressively modern) as the exceptional capacity of the variously formed conservative right to block certain fundamental forms of social mediation which had begun to take shape, albeit hesitantly, in other European countries before the outbreak of the First World War.

[4] The reference is to A. J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to The Great War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

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