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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The end of fascism?

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Abstract

When did fascism end? Did it end in July 1943, with the fall of Mussolini from power, or in April 1945, with Liberation Day? The argument of this article is that fascism was not simply a historical experience but a political form that attempted to transcend Italy's social and political fractures with fantasies and unrealistic but nevertheless captivating expectations. Its hypnotic contagious power cast a mimetic spell that can be continuously reloaded: by blurring the boundaries between truth and lies; by exploiting crowd irrationality; by establishing boundaries between outsiders and insiders; by perpetuating negative sentiments of hostility, fear and envy within society; and by manipulating time. The argument, therefore, is that fascism has never ended, not merely in the sense of political and cultural continuity, but in the deeper sense of immanency within the body politic of Italy's democracy. As such, it is meaningless to wonder whether fascism might come back. It is here and now, in the only form that current historical circumstances allow it to exist – and yet it might be countered by a process of rejection that individuals and political communities can and should exercise in their everyday life, adopting the political form generated by the Resistance.

Keywords: fascism; transcendence; trickster; political form; enemy; politics of time

On the night between 24 and 25 July 1943, the Grand Council, the highest body of the fascist regime, voted to return full constitutional power to King Vittorio Emanuele III. The king dismissed Benito Mussolini from his position of prime minister, ordering the arrest of the Duce as he exited the royal residence after their last meeting. The fascist regime had disappeared unexpectedly, after more than two decades, with a whimper and not with a bang, leaving the Italians utterly dumbfounded. News of the 'resignation' and subsequent arrest of the Duce spread across the country, unleashing an outburst of popular enthusiasm quickly followed by the removal of some of the regime's iconography: the symbolic erasure that typically marks the end of a political order (Forlenza 2019, 23–24).

The announcement was welcomed as liberating and cathartic news by Italians, not necessarily because they were antifascists but because they expected the end of the regime to mean the end of fascism and, above all, the end of war. In fact, the war did not end; it turned instead into a traumatic and brutal civil war. Likewise, the bygone regime revived, albeit in altered form and under strict German control, in the Italian Social Republic (RSI). The events of 25 April 1945 and the liberation, the end of war, and the desecration of the body of Mussolini as a sort of failed divinity in Piazzale Loreto, Milan, seemed to bring about the eventual end of fascism. In fact, fascist

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ideology, as well as its outward signs and iconography, continued to circulate in Italy and elsewhere after 1945. Men of the defunct fascist state found their place in the structures and institutions of new republican and democratic Italy. Former fascists reunited in the neofascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement) – a party that, despite the republican Constitution of 1948 explicitly prohibiting the reconstitution of fascism, was legally admitted to the democratic political struggle of postwar Italy. When did fascism end? Or, rather, what came to an end in July 1943 and in April 1945? Did fascism ever really end? Is there room for the return of fascism in today's global world?

To answer these questions and understand when fascism ended, it is first necessary to understand what fascism had been for Italy's body politic for the preceding two decades and especially at the moment of its emergence. The main argument of this article is that fascism was not simply a historical entity and an experience of government and power but also, to adopt the vocabulary of French political theorist Claude Lefort, a political 'form' that attempted to transcend Italy's social and political fractures with fantasies and unrealistic if not utopian, but nevertheless captivating, expectations. Whereas the regime, its institutions and its outward symbols collapsed between 1943 and 1945, a new political form and, therefore, a *model* had been created by historical fascism in its totalitarian attempt on Italy's body politic. As a political form, fascism worked as a 'social organism in gestation' (see Wydra 2007, 2013, 5), generating symbols and meanings that remained alive in narratives, rituals and political practices. It worked as a karstic river flowing underneath structures and institutions – it might therefore erupt whenever there is a crack in current social and political reality. Ever since 1945 it has offered itself to a mimetic mechanism that allows for repetition and difference. Parties, movements and narratives might continue to proliferate by replicating the political form of fascism in different contexts, promising certain social groups and individuals dissatisfied with the current state of democracy a symbolic 'appeasement' that is eerily reminiscent of the past. The ambition of this article is theoretical rather than historical. It does not aim to establish unlikely parallels between past and present, or to trace continuities and discontinuities between 'old' and 'neo-' or 'post-' or 'aspirational' fascism (Traverso 2019; Connolly 2017), or to indiscriminately extend the label 'fascism' in time and space; instead, it aims to highlight the mimetic power of historical fascism and diagnose forms of twenty-first-century politics that adopt its constellations of practices, meanings and ideas. They might remain or become marginal forces and never reach power in the future; that would not make them less dangerous. After all, outcomes were not predictable, let alone inevitable, even on the eve of 1914. Who would have expected in 1913 that some years down the line Soviet communism would have taken over the Russian Empire, or that the upstart Mussolini would have marched on Rome and usurped power? Who could have predicted that Germany, the most advanced industrial society on the European continent, would be in the hands of a regime whose ideology, based on blood, race, anti-individualism and warmongering, would so obviously oppose the rationalism of the age?

In what follows, I first posit an analytical distinction between fascism as a historical experience and fascism as a political form. Subsequently, I go back in history to unravel the distinctive innovations that historical fascism in the early 1920s introduced in the realm of modern politics and in the history of the twentieth century. Next, I return to the years between 1943 and 1945, engaging with how Italians coped with the collapse of the regime and with the memory of the recent fascist past. I then deal with the emergence of democracy after the Second World War, teasing out the difference between the first and second postwar periods, and with the writing of the republican Constitution. I conclude by discussing the power of fascism as a political form to spill over from a specific historical context through imitation, while pointing out that individuals, political communities and leaders can reject and interrupt that spiral of imitation. The format is essayistic and not at all linear.

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Fascism as a political form

Fascism was a historical system of domination, a regime, and a structure of power endowed with an ideology that was an unlikely mix of nationalism, corporatism, militarism and racism. As such, fascism was a historical experience limited in time that ended between 1943 and 1945. Its death was not a single event in history but a ramified sequence of occurrences, recognised as notable by contemporaries and able to produce a structural transformation (for the theoretical implications, see Sewell 1996, 844). The collapse of the dictatorship in the summer of 1943, the armistice of September 1943 – followed by the ignominious exit of the king from Rome – and the end of the war and liberation in 1945 were great ruptures. They sharpened perceptions of the past as a bygone period, a historical stage in time, often referred to as a legacy in terms of institutional continuity (*la continuità dello stato*) or architectural and iconographic heritage (Pavone 1995; Malone 2017).

If fascism is seen as a historical regime, with its ideology, within a specific time and specific space, the foregone conclusion is that, tautologically, fascism was the political regime that dominated Italy for two decades, coming to power in 1922 and ending between 1943 and 1945. Any attempt to employ the word and the concept of 'fascism' outside the specific historical context in which it emerged is necessarily problematic, and it would be too simplistic to say that any form of authoritarianism is fascism. Already at the beginning of the 1960s, Ernst Nolte argued that the defining elements of generic fascism (such as, for example, the longing for war and a society characterised by violent exclusion) had no place in the interdependent and complex world that emerged after the Second World War (Nolte 1966, 412–423). More specifically on Italian fascism, Richard Bosworth and Victoria De Grazia have argued that individualistic consumerist culture subverted the obligatory community of fascism and the fascist ideal of subjugated womanhood (Bosworth 1998, 67–68, 150, 179; De Grazia 1992, 10, 15–16) – and this became even more evident in the postwar era. These and other crucial postwar developments – such as the globalisation of the economy, the increasing prosperity of the *trente glorieuses*, and the repugnance towards an aggressive nationalistic culture of war – created further obstacles to fascism. The historical conditions for the emergence of fascism in Italy and elsewhere seemed no longer to exist after 1945.

This, however, is only part of the story. Fascism was not simply the regime that declared itself totalitarian and ruled Italy from 1922 to 1943. The historical experience of fascism crystallised in a new 'political form'. *Pace* Lefort, a political form is the symbolic order that sustains the external world of structures and institutions of power (Lefort 1986a, 1986b, 1988, 2007). It is the flesh of the external world, the invisible that institutes and is veiled in the visible.

The 'visible' of fascism was the structural and the institutional level, the power and violence exercised through actions and organisations, a confused constellation of ideas and ideological definitions, and a mesmerising combination of signs and gestures. What was veiled in the visible was a political form that appealed to transcendent frames of authority, of which the identification of the enemy, the invention of a new beginning and a manipulation of time, and the cult of the leader were the most crucial. The distinctive 'innovation' of fascism was to turn a confused and uprooted human community into a new body politic, by transcending the fractures and brokenness that devasted postwar Italy: the Great War, a latent civil war,[1] social and economic conditions marked by social atomisation and growing deprivation, and the experiences of revolution and counter-revolution. It is precisely this attempt at a politics of transcendence (see Wydra 2007, 43–58) that made fascism a distinctive and ultimately dangerous political form, blazing the trail not only for its political monopoly in the governing of the state apparatus, but also for its conquest of the political imagination of large sectors of Italians. The following section examines the three transcendent frames of authority that fascism tried to impose on Italian society.

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Transcending fractures

A vast body of literature has examined the political, socio-economic, cultural and existential uncertainty lived by Italians, and by all other Europeans, during the Great War and its aftermath. The war drew millions of peasants, workers, employees, young adults and fathers into the trenches, becoming a foundational generational experience – perhaps the very first to reach every family in society (Gibelli 2007). The political goals of fascism cannot be understood without the trenches of the war. The slaughter of the First World War became a laboratory for the re-evaluation of all values. Mussolini and his followers constantly highlighted how the values and moral strength of fascism stemmed from the sacrifices in the trenches and urged Italians to erect monuments to the fallen, feeling themselves bound in one community with the dead. Fascists should become the aristocracy born in the trenches – the *trincerocrazia*, as Mussolini wrote in *Il Popolo d'Italia* on 15 December 1917 – that would replace democracy and lead the new Italy. The formal ending of the war did not give rest to society, as elsewhere in Europe, and war continued in peace (Gerwarth 2016; Gerwarth and Horn 2012; Traverso 2007; Albanese 2006). The de-mobilisation of troops from the front coincided with radical demands for social and economic change but also revealed the moral collapse of the authorities. The success of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia became a beacon of hope for the workers' movement and revolutionary attempts ensued.

Against the backdrop of socio-political turmoil, unprecedented economic upheaval and political radicalisation, fascism attempted to transcend the fractures within value hierarchies and political structures through political imagination and wide-ranging social engineering. Fascism proposed fantastic projects of collective redemption from social disorder and political collapse, with the aim of binding people to the political community as a source of identity and existential security. Three frames of authority of the fascist politics of transcendence were most consequential: the cult of the leader, the nation and the enemy, and time.

First, fascism reversed the emptying of the place of power – which, following Lefort, before the advent of modern democracy with the French revolution was occupied by the body of the king – by re-embodying power through the cult of Mussolini (see Passerini 1987; Gundle, Duggan and Pieri 2013; Falasca-Zamponi 1997). Against the problematic and highly misleading interpretation of Emilio Gentile (1998a), Mussolini was not a charismatic leader. He had almost none of the features of Max Weber's concept of charisma, which applied to quasi-supernatural individuals, deprived of vanity, who can solve extraordinary crises by channelling affective mobilisation towards concrete causes. Mussolini did not balance passion with 'matter of fact-ness', nor did he avoid 'sterile excitation' of the masses, as Weber wrote in his 1919 *Politik als Beruf* (*Politics as a Vocation*) with reference to a genuine charismatic authority. Quite the opposite. He was instead a political trickster.[2] He was a trickster in the sense of the pretend politician, the lack of existential commitments befitting his position halfway between a man of the people and a Caesar who put himself above the state. He was a purveyor of false charisma, and, above all, an outsider who presented himself as the solution to the crisis. The fulcrum of a trickster tale is that people are duped into feeling empowered for a while, but soon that feeling dissolves into nothingness. Before that happens, however, entire societies can drive themselves to destruction – which happened with the Second World War. As political outsiders, tricksters have enormous capacities for violence. Mussolini, and the other dictators of the twentieth century, can be understood as a trickster who was brought to power by crisis, telling Italians what they wanted to hear, and none of his promises were sustainable except through violence (Forlenza and Thomassen 2024; Armbrust 2013). Crucially, as a political trickster, Mussolini, while presenting himself as a solution to the crisis, perpetuated insecurity by blurring boundaries and undermining the very sense of distinction and judgement. As a trickster, he was not really interested in

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solving the crisis. His real interest was in perpetuating conditions of confusion, which is the quintessential habitat of the trickster, by keeping society in a constant state of flux, constantly changing ideas (on Rome, on the monarchy, on the Catholic Church, on Germany), in search of new, unrealisable and toxic dreams.

Second, fascism transcended individuals, elevating them, Mussolini explained, to become 'conscious members of a spirituality community': the new nation, the new fascist *Patria* (Mussolini 1932, 847; see Gentile 2009, 143). The establishment of the nation relied primarily on the identification of the Other, i.e. those who did not belong to the community. Such outsiders were primarily the 'internal enemies' who were held responsible for the crushing defeat of Caporetto and the disorder in the aftermath of the war. For the fascist squads, violence against internal enemies was seen as a regenerative act that should cleanse the body of the nation from contamination by impure elements (Forlenza and Thomassen 2025, 103-106). Labelled as *sovversivi*, internal enemies were typically dehumanised. The violent reaction against them was for fascists a crusade of regeneration, purification and liberation of the nation from the 'reds' inclined to 'stain' Italy with the 'image of Jewish Asiatic Russian Lenin', as a fascist wrote in his 1922 memoir (Banchelli 1922, 29). The imaginary Other was crucial in two respects: on the one hand, the definition of the enemy was constitutive of the identity of the people-as-one; on the other hand, this enemy permanently threatened the people's unity and had to be removed. 'Enemies of the people' were a kind of social prophylaxis ensuring an insider group's identity by expelling its waste matter. Resorting to the nation as a transcendent frame of authority kept fascism in check and made violence acceptable, even attractive, channelling it against a scapegoat and a sacrificial victim.

Third, as a political movement with the ambition to transform society deeply, fascism had to manipulate the past for the purpose of justifying the promises of a new future. Thus, fascism engineered public and private time regimes in the everyday lives of citizens (Griffin 2007, 2008; for the case of Germany, with important reflections on Italy, see also Clark 2019). Such manipulations of time included a claim to origins, the totalising control of society by denying liberal time, and promises of redemption in the future. This new chrono-politics used narratives, symbols and representations to recast past, present and future. Fascism used various techniques, including cultural artefacts, museum exhibitions, archaeology, historical narratives and public rituals, in order to manipulate the past. The new beginning, which fascism claimed to be, required going back in time, bringing to the fore its historical origins, making fascism the carrier of historical meanings. The new fascist era took Rome as its 'paradigmatic archetype' (Gentile 1998b, 146–154). Rome was not a site of remote glories; instead, it should become a blueprint for contemporary life and values. In 1922, for *Natale di Roma* (the festival of the foundation of the city by Romulus on 21 April 753 BCE), Mussolini declared that such a celebration meant 'laying a foundation in the past to move into the future', so that 'much of the immortal spirit of Rome rises again in fascism' (Mussolini 1922). The inner contradictions of the fascist transcendence of time are obvious. On the one hand, the nation was resurrected through Roman origins. On the other hand, the nation's birth took place in the present, in the trenches of the war. In this sense, the fascist experience of time management should obliterate the old self by making a new, collectively organised conception of time prevail over the individual self: in short, keeping the self in a constant state of flux.

Back to the future, 1943–5

On the eve of its collapse in the summer of 1943, fascism was not only a regime that had run Italy through violence and organisation. It was also a new political form that had attempted

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to overcome and pacify the brokenness of social and political reality with transcendent frames of authority.

In the end, fascism did not transcend the country's fractures in the sense of pacifying society and in the pursuit of social peace. Rather, it required more and more internal and external enemies and its obsession to create new beginnings kept citizens permanently off balance. As such, its intention was anything but effectively performing the task of pacifying society and protecting citizens. Its polities were sites of existential insecurity, and not only for those minority groups that had been targeted as 'enemies'. The politics of transcendence was in fact a politics of impotence. The cult of the leader and the sacrificial internal logic of fascism turned elites of the system into potential victims of violence. The logic of identifying the enemy, the framing of conceptions of time and the perpetuation of negative sentiments of hostility, fear and envy in patterns of leadership prevented the pacification of social relations and the creative, calm and long-sighted construction of a social reality. In this sense, as with other totalitarian experiences in interwar Europe, fascism contradicted 'the oldest wisdom of mankind concerning the rhythm of growth and decay which is the fate of all things under the sun' (Voegelin 1987, 166).

Italy between 1943 and 1945 lacked a critical engagement with the past. In the midst of the devastating experiences of bombings, displacement and traumatic violence, coming to terms with the past turned out to be a problematic endeavour. The public memorialisation of the war and the emergence of the trope of the Resistance as a second Risorgimento – a combination of political institutional strategies and a narrative of victimisation and resurrection deeply felt at the grassroots level – fostered a process of removal that tended to obliterate the first war (1940–3) and the entire fascist period from public memory (Forlenza 2012, 2019, 139–177; Forlenza and Thomassen 2021; Falasca-Zamponi 2023). The narrative of the second Risorgimento was the historical and political tool brandished by antifascists and was largely accepted by most Italians. Liberal historian Rosario Romeo was the first to highlight, in the early 1980s, that such a narrative facilitated a 'fairly rapid' adoption of the regime, silencing the responsibilities of Italians, which were 'quickly and reciprocally recognized as excusable' (Romeo 1981, 197–198). It was a process of removal, which, for the dominant political parties of republican Italy – the Christian Democrats and the Communists – reflected their political strategies, their need to boost their national credentials, their struggle for the integration and creation of a new body politic. Ironically, the Allied war propaganda, with the aim of weakening the internal front, contributed to this narrative. Even before the collapse of fascism, the Allies ascribed responsibility for the war to fascism, accusing the Duce of putting the country's fate in the hands of Italy's German ally. Italians were not guilty of anything and could be easily redeemed and converted to democracy (Focardi 2014, 3–14).

The continuity of the state from fascism to democracy, a much-discussed question in literature, was almost inevitable. The idea of a democracy that represents a complete break with the past (a democracy from scratch) is highly problematic. The interpretive judgements of elites and members of a political community in a moment of transformation are situated within a wider cultural memory that also includes the phenomenological background of their inventory of experiences. The democratisation of Italy after the war, like other cases of political transformation, was a process in which the old contained the new and the new was built on the old (Forlenza 2019).

As a political form – with the constellations of meanings created through its attempt at transcending society's fractures, thus offering impracticable yet appealing solutions to a political and existential crisis – fascism did not end in 1943, nor in 1945. On 25 April 1945, Italians might have liberated themselves and Italy from Nazi occupation and from the republic of Salò, from war and from the racial laws, from the *Tribunale Speciale della*

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Stato and from the Duce. Yet, they had not liberated themselves from a new political form that had attempted to organise social life in a specific and unprecedented way. As a political form, fascism surpassed and outlived the historical time in which it emerged and collapsed. This holds true for all political forms. Democracy emerged in Athens from the fifth to the fourth century BCE. While the historical experience of Athenian democracy is long gone, democracy as a political form that attempts to shape society in a certain way is still here and constantly imitated and replicated, although with both differences from and similarities to the original form. Similarly, fascism as a political form is not only, as it has been argued, a transnational (Finchelstein 2010) but also a transhistorical and mimetic phenomenon.

Democracy in post-Second World War Italy

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a new political order emerged in Italy, one that was radically different from fascism. Yet, the Second World War created destruction and horrors incommensurable with, and on a much greater scale than, the First World War. As much as the first, the second conflict engendered hope for a transformation and radical revolution, hope that swept across Italian society (Forlenza 2021). Yet, the fractures, the violence and the expectations for radical change were channelled into a different outcome, which took the form of an effective, albeit fragile, democracy. The political leaders emerging from fascism and from the Second World War – who had lived through the foundational experience of exile, prison and struggle and therefore were imbued with existential commitment – rejected the politics of transcendence and rather worked for the calm, judicious and careful healing of social and political fractures within Italy's body politic.

They rejected an *Italianità* and a *Patria* grounded in an original act of violence and in the *trincerocrazia* as the symbolic basis for aggressive policies of racism, war and more violence. They discarded revolutionary transformations understood as a radical break with the past and as an attempt at transcending the reality with unrealisable dreams and fantasies, opting instead for a long-sighted construction of a new social and political reality. They embarked – vis-à-vis complex and complicated socio-economic, institutional and cultural challenges – on a politics of socio-economic reforms that attempted to transcend divisions and fractures in the here and now. In retrospect, the leaders of Italy's fledgling post-Second World War democracy might be seen as a set of grey politicians. They might not have been a charismatic authority. However, they were not trickster politicians who wanted to perpetuate the crisis and the fractures of society. Such a politics was perhaps too pragmatic and lacked imagination, and it certainly paled in comparison with the lofty ideals that swept across significant sectors of Italian society between 1943 and 1946. Yet, it offered a solution to the historical crisis that rejected transcendence in favour of immanence, as it was shaped by a deep awareness of the real historical conditions of Italy after 20 years of fascism and a destructive war.

True, the international context played a pivotal role in shaping the different outcomes of the two World Wars. At the end of the First World War, Italy was still a world power, although a second-rank power, with potentially unlimited possibility (Wilcox 2021). After the Second World War, Italy had limited sovereignty and the American intervention in European affairs and the incipient Cold War helped to stabilise Italian democracy (Forlenza 2019, 102–138). However, the political class of post-Second World War Italy saw the opportunities, limits and hazards of the situation with clarity and humbleness – much less so the liberal elites, the monarchy and then the fascists after the Great War. And it is such a rejection of transcendence and deep engagement with immanence that made the second postwar period of the twentieth century more stable and richer, and ultimately brought Italy into democratic political modernity.

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In the understanding of Lefort, the generative principle of totalitarianism departs from the generative principle of democracy precisely on the issue of the leader. In democracy, the place of power is empty, nobody occupies it, and it is continuously open to competition and tension. In totalitarianism, the empty place of power is occupied by the leader of the party – even with the leader's physical body. In interwar Italy, the restitution of a body to the flesh of the social created a new system of representation in which the distinction between law and knowledge collapsed, uncertainty and indeterminacy disappeared, and the body politic was reunited in the will of the egocratic leader – a 'previously unknown and unimaginable mode of domination' (Lefort 2006, 21). A fixed body replaced the otherwise indeterminate and shapeless flesh of the social. The political leaders of post-Second World War Italy went in a different direction, changing history.

In this process, the role of the Resistance was crucial. Interpreted somewhat problematically as a second Risorgimento – a new national and patriotic war of liberation – the Resistance provided the ideological and political foundations for the post-fascist period and allowed the antifascist forces to build their political legitimacy and elaborate their goal and vision for a new Italy. It was celebrated by a political and intellectual class that had taken a leading part in it, and which drew from it a source of legitimacy as the country's ruling class. All the major political forces embraced the Resistance as a second Risorgimento narrative – from the communists to the Catholics, from the socialists to the liberals, from the *azionisti* to the monarchists – even though differing and inherently ambiguous interpretations of the past coexisted. Yet, despite these differences and tensions, such a narrative recreated a national imaginary that had been dramatically crushed by the war and fascism. The Resistance became the origin of the new Italy and a rupture with the past, as well as a confirmation of the continuity of national history, thus providing the symbolic foundation for the reconstruction of the national community. While certainly creating a distorted version of history – as any myth of foundation or origin story entails – it ensured that the crisis of Italy's body politic could be overcome and that the empty place of power generated by the collapse of fascism and the disintegration of national unity of 8 September could be refilled with new markers of certainty.

Memories of the past could only be divided in postwar Italy. This was inevitable after decades of authoritarianism and a civil war (Pavone 1991). As a nation, Italy found itself in a liminal figuration in the sense that the country had lost the war (1940–3) and won the war (1943–5), had been occupied and had invaded other countries, with some of its citizens celebrating peace while others were still fighting. Seen and presented as a new rebirth of the nation, the Resistance became the constellation of meanings in which divided memories could be recomposed, and in which almost all Italians could recognise themselves.

This process of re-composition and passage from chaos to order found its ritual manifestation in the festival celebrating the liberation, on 25 April, which commemorated the Resistance as simultaneously a period of chaos and a golden age, and the last two years of the war as a disruptive and violent period but also as a meaning-giving series of events. The most defining characteristic of the festival in the immediate postwar years was the reference to the Risorgimento, which populated speeches and commemorations coming from every political and ideological background (with the obvious exception of the fascists). In 1946, Liberation Day was explicitly referred to as the day of 'our second Risorgimento', while the 'Exhibition on the First and the Second Risorgimento' opened in Milan. Changes in the names of public sites – such as in Asiago, where a square was renamed after the second Risorgimento (Piazza II Risorgimento) – operated at the level of a re-semanticisation of public spaces. In 1947 and 1948, with the political confrontation of the postwar era replacing the antifascist collaboration of wartime and its immediate aftermath, the atmosphere of unity was challenged but the references to the Risorgimento continued to permeate the

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narrative of all political parties (Forlenza and Thomassen 2021, 539; Cooke 2011, 2012; Cenci 1999; Chiarini 2005; Ridolfi 2003).

Ritual mourning was the central aspect of the first celebrations of Liberation Day. In many ways, the festival of 25 April was the symbolic second reburial of partisans (see Forlenza 2019, 172; Cenci 1999, 348–351; Schwarz 2010). The rite of symbolic reburial rendered manifest that the dead had finally died. The moment of chaos, communitas and revolution that their experiences brought to mind was over once and for all. The political lives of their dead bodies had been normalised, their liminal nature anchored to a fixed entity. The disturbing memories of their revolutionary experience and the civil war that they had fought and won, a threat to the stable structures of society, needed to be removed from current politics. The partisans had been closer to death than others, which made them more powerful but also more dangerous; they needed to be celebrated as dead martyrs, not living victors. They had opened up the path to the future and indicated new possibilities. They had been indispensable for the transformation, but needed to be forgotten. The Resistance was the founding experience for the new social order and the source of legitimacy for the new democratic Italy. However, this experience needed to be excised from memory and to cease influencing the sphere of government and party politics, because it evoked the civil war and the hopes for radical social change and a realm of pure possibilities that were no longer viable. The fate of partisans in the public memory of postwar Italy – the at times harsh treatment to which they have been subjected ever since the end of the war – was inscribed in the very liminal nature of their struggle, incompatible with any fixed status or structured society.

The writing of the Constitution

One of the most, if not the most, important achievements of the political leadership that guided Italy from fascism to democracy was the writing of the Constitution. From the perspective of political anthropology, a constitution is the closing act of the crisis and at the same time its resolution (Thomassen and Forlenza 2016). Two decades before, Mussolini and fascism did not write a constitution. The trickster-like politics of fascism, which thrived in ambivalence and in arbitrariness, rejected the idea of a founding act anchored in a series of universal and constant principles to which the entire body politic – elites and members of the political community, rulers and ruled, rules and laws – should obey and submit. The term 'constitution' harbours a double meaning: it is not only a written document and the rules and laws which emanate from it, but also an act that precedes the creation of a regime and constitutes a people as a political community (Arendt 1962, 142–145). Fascism did not lay a stable act of foundation. Law was subjected to the will, whims and arbitrariness of the ruler, and therefore exposed to ambivalence, fluctuation and unpredictability. Lacking stable constitutional forms, fascism was a regime permanently undermined by contradiction between the utopian myth of a unified people in a nation (people-as-one) and a need to seek out internal enemies to maintain a perpetual state of emergency.

Conversely, the political elites of Italy after 1945, despite their profound ideological differences and in the context of a harsh political struggle as well as formidable political, social and economic challenges, sat and wrote the Constitution together. They agreed on writing a pact that became the founding act of the new republican and democratic Italy. Such a founding act was 'sacred', in the etymological sense of being 'separated' from current politics. The republican Constitution that came into force in 1948 closed the situation of crisis by healing the fractures and violence of society, making possible the reintegration of all clashing yet constituent segments of Italy's body politic. Even the fascists were reintegrated into the new Italy. Sure, the Constitution forbade the reconstitution of the fascist party. But the

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defence of the 'inviolable' dignity and rights of the person, the equality between people and the rejection of violence and war codified in articles 2, 3 and 11 meant that there were no enemies to pursue and that everyone was a legitimate component of the same community.

Events and crucial junctures of history preceded the institutionalisation of Italian democracy, generating meanings, interpretations and aspirations that crystallised in the republican Constitution.

First, 8 September 1943 saw the death of the *Patria*. This was not, as Ernesto Galli della Loggia has argued (1996), the original crisis of the idea of nation that was to haunt post-Second World War Italy, ultimately weakening Italian democracy. It was instead the death of the liberal and fascist *Patria* based on a sacrificial logic, on *trincerocrazia*, on the aggressive nationalistic venom, on revanchism and on the imperialism of the Treaty of London (1915). It was the death of the cowardly monarchical *Patria* that had been unable to face the social, economic and political crisis that followed the First World War and had given Italy to the Duce in 1922. After Mussolini failed and fell from power in July 1943, Italians redirected their hopes again to the king. Their disappointment was to be profound, as Vittorio Emanuele once again abandoned them to their fate. The path was open, therefore, for rethinking a new kind of democratic *Patria* as an uncontrollable adventure and, in the understanding of Lefort, as an empty place of power constantly open to experimentation and competition and deprived of ultimate transcendent meanings.

Second, the Resistance and the liberation of 25 April 1945 generated multiple meanings of democracy and a reorientation towards community-focused democratic values. The spirit of primitive egalitarianism and of direct democracy flourished briefly in many areas of the country in the period leading up to the moment of liberation. Hitherto silent protagonists of the *longue durée* of Italian history vociferously found their voices and placed themselves in the limelight as citizens in the making: women, workers and *mezzadri* in the North and in the centre, peasants in the South, and various minorities. For young and no longer young men and women – Catholics, liberals, socialists, communists – the Resistance became a highly transformative moment that pushed them to think politically, often abandoning their previous indifference or political commitment in favour of direct involvement. They came to embrace a new political imagination. They became protagonists in previously unimaginable performances. Between 1943 and 1945 there were democratic moments, possibilities and actions that created a new popular consciousness, changing relationships between individuals, and between individuals and political power (Forlenza 2019, 178–211). Experiences during this period of uncertainty and liminal existential creativity generated new meanings and interpretations, hopes and aspirations. These possibilities, moments and actions helped to create and shape post-fascist democracy and the Constitution; they should therefore not be forgotten or ignored, or have their democratic nature denied just because they occurred during the war and before democracy was formally enshrined. To suggest that 25 April and the Resistance contained a democratic potential that helped to shape the Constitution and post-fascist democracy is not to suggest – as much of the antifascist and leftist culture does in response to the attack on the Resistance coming from the right – that the Resistance was a mass movement, a unitary movement of all Italians without ideological and other distinctions: partisans of all kinds, women, civilians, Jews, *carabinieri*, nuns, priests and internees. Quite the opposite. The Resistance was in fact fought by a minority of Italians against the old *Patria* of *trincerocrazia*, imperialism and war – a creative minority that blazed the trail for the emergence of a democratic imagination and a subjectivity that was instrumental and decisive for the creation of democracy and for the elaboration of the Constitution. History and transformation were made by such a creative minority from the margins. Italian democracy was the result of a quest for meaning and

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self-grounding in response to the traumatic lived experience of Italians between 1943 and 1945 – a historical mosaic of individual reactions to war, revolution and dictatorship. It was far from a snap change of system resulting from the interplay of impersonal social forces. It was a contingent and potentially reversible civilising process (Elias 1982), which involved the gradual elimination of violence from human experiences.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the Resistance – despite of being, or perhaps because it was, a minoritarian movement – was indispensable in the resignification and re-semanticisation of the democratic imagination of postwar Italy. The article has also shown that fascism has never ended, not simply in the sense of political, institutional and cultural continuity, but in the deeper sense of immanency within the body politic of Italy's post-fascist republic. As such, it is meaningless and positively misleading to wonder whether fascism might come back in Italy, or elsewhere. It is here and now, and will be forever, as a transnational and transhistorical political form or model created by historical fascism. At the same time, it can be countered and contrasted with a different political form that implies completely different if not opposing constellations of meanings and practices: a political form that in the historical context of Italy between 1943 and 1945 was generated by the Resistance.

Political forms and models are not abstractions, mind games or objective realities. They grow or fade in attraction. They are always usable for imitation, even unconsciously, unleashing passionate interests that transcend the dichotomy between individualism and the collective action of institutional logic. Since the end of the Second World War, there have been parties and regimes that have exhibited fascist traits across the globe, without officially embracing or even negating fascism in terms of ideology and outward symbolism. Such parties and narratives cannot reproduce and replicate the historical circumstances, the institutions and the ideology that unfolded in the specific context of Italy between 1922 and 1943. They certainly might adopt the signs and iconography of fascism (the fasces, the songs, the motto and slogans of the Duce). Time and again, in post-Second World War Italy, so-called neofascist groups and movements have directly and explicitly reclaimed the legacy of interwar fascism. However, from a perspective of political anthropology, these claims might be considered a superficial, though not insignificant, corrugation of history. What is, however, much more important is that these parties, movements and narratives might replicate and imitate the 'form' of fascism, thus mobilising techniques of affective contagion and mythical identification, encouraging the emergence and formation of organic communities that stand in the way of democratic pluralism.

Ever since 1945, fascism has offered itself up to the possibility of being imitated, though such an imitation is sometimes not acknowledged enough. This is because imitation is not necessarily conscious. Humans are, for better or worse, eminently mimetic creatures. They are formed, informed and transformed by models, including political models. Imitation, in its conscious and unconscious manifestations, is a fundamental aspect of individual, social and political life (Szakolczai and Thomassen 2019; Farneti 2015).

Public and collective memory – or forgetting – might create the link between a historical experience and its public political usage in the present. Mimetic politics or (not necessarily conscious) imitation of the past, a combination of repetition and difference, might well do the same. The hypnotic, contagious power of fascism cast a mimetic spell that could be continuously reloaded in the present and future in a variety of ways: by blurring the boundaries between the private and the public, reality and fiction, truth and lies; by exploiting crowd irrationality and appealing to a frustrated middle class; by

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establishing boundaries between outsiders and insiders; by creating social imaginaries that represent the future; and by perpetuating negative sentiments of hostility, fear and envy, thus preventing the pacification of social relations and the creative, calm and long-sighted construction of a social and political reality. Nativist leaders such as Viktor Orbàn are better understood as trickster politicians. They exploit crisis situations of political and existential magnitude (in the case of Hungary, the end of communism and accession to the EU), channelling popular fears, expectations and aspirations towards unrealisable aims. Social, political and cultural problems are transcended in frames of authority that express the feeling of being besieged. Once again, their politics of transcendence is, in the end, a politics of impotence – as it does not, and cannot, offer concrete and effective solutions to real problems.

The fascism of the future might emerge out of an emergency response to a crisis that is hard to imagine or predict. It would not necessarily bear a resemblance to the fascist regime, in its constellations of symbols and signs, in its ideological theorisation, or in its system of power and government. History does not repeat itself and historical fascism was shaped by the political space in which it grew and by the alliances that were essential for it to grow into a regime. However, to say that Italy (or any other country) is a democracy does not mean to presuppose the identity of its political system, much less to affirm that Italian (or other) democracy is equal or the same to democracy in Athens at the time of Pericles or in the USA at the time of Lincoln. Fascism in the twenty-first century quite likely will not have a Mussolini and will not call for the *battaglia per il grano* nor require the *sabato fascista*. Its enemies would not necessarily be Jews or communists. The obsessive and stereotypical evocation of external enemies who allegedly endanger the indigenous national community obscures the fact that democracy can be destroyed from within – as historical fascism destroyed liberal democracy after the Great War. If fascism is not understood in terms of its deeper anthropological roots, as the denial of indeterminacy and the rupture of unity on which democracy thrives, the radical potential of democracy is hardly understandable. Democracy as a fixed form – fully implemented and realised once and for all – does not exist. As the historical experience of Italy after the Second World War shows, democracy is a process of meaning formation. A democracy that renews itself is a possibility, but also, and perhaps more crucially, the real challenge of our time. Breaching the sacrificial logic of fascism requires rejecting the identification of the enemy, the symbolism of a new beginning through manipulation of time, and the fascination of an absolute leader. This process of rejection might spread in the body politic but, in the end, it relies on individual acts in everyday reality, from both elites and common people. Much of the liberal elite and of the public of post-First World War Italy tolerated and then cultivated the *squadristi* and Mussolini as weapons against the internal enemy, allowing them to become rooted in the political system as significant players. Christian doctrine demands truly aristocratic qualities for salvation. Democracy demands the aristocracy of mind.

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Notes

1. I do not understand civil war as a conflict between two classes that are unequal in power and social status, but as mass-scale political violence that led to the breakdown of social relations and many premature deaths (see Fabbri 2009; Traverso 2007).

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2. The trickster is a universal figure, appearing in myths across cultures, which sociologist Agnes Horvath brought into political science (see Horvath 2013; Forlenza and Thomassen 2016).

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Italian summary

Il principale argomento di questo articolo è che il fascismo non fu semplicemente un'esperienza storica ma una forma politica che tentò di trascendere le fratture sociali e politiche dell'Italia con fantasie e aspettative irrealistiche, ma comunque accattivanti, che sono state poi nel tempo riattivate e imitate e che possono essere ancora riattivate e imitate nel futuro. Da questo punto di vista, il fascismo non è mai finito, non solo nei termini di continuità politica e culturale, ma nel senso più profondo di immanenza all'interno del corpo politico della democrazia italiana. Tuttavia, il processo mimetico che garantisce la sopravvivenza del fascismo può essere contrastato da un processo di rifiuto che individui e comunità politiche possono e devono attivamente esercitare nella vita quotidiana a partire dalla forma politica inaugurata nella storia d'Italia dalla Resistenza.

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