

# Unspoken Legacies of Fascism in Italy

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What are we referring to when we use the “f-word”—fascism—in current political debates? This question is even more compelling after Giorgia Meloni and her Brothers of Italy party won the September 2022 Italian elections, considering that this party has never concealed its attachment to the country’s fascist legacy and neo-fascist parties. In October, Italy also observed the centenary of the March on Rome, the day the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini was born in October 1922. This important historical commemoration was marked with publications, debates, and public events.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that current popular discussion on the topic of fascism derives solely from Meloni’s victory or the anniversary of the March on Rome. These two elements are not isolated. The fascist legacy never really disappeared from Italian political life, and its current high profile points to the importance of interrogating its multifaceted practices and contemporary meanings.

In historical scholarship, it is common to spell Fascism with a capital “F” to indicate the Italian regime of Mussolini between the two world wars. There is still no consensus among scholars as to whether this definition can be extended to include other authoritarian regimes. Historian Roger Griffin has attempted to develop a definition capable of providing a shared understanding of what should be labeled “fascism,” delineating its “palingenetic” quality—its basis in myths of national rebirth.

Another eminent historian, Roger Paxton, rejects any static, singular definition of a “fascist minimum.” Paxton insists on the importance of viewing Fascism, in its historical form, as a process that takes shape and form across time, space, and the people engaged with it more or less spontaneously. As with any other social phenomenon, he

suggests, we cannot understand Fascism without looking at its concrete forms, actions, and actors: who does what, when, how, and why. This approach is indeed crucial, especially when looking at the contemporary manifestations of such a legacy.

From 1946 until 1994, one of the political parties active in Italy was the Italian Social Movement (MSI), a party explicitly attached to the country’s fascist legacy. For that reason it was excluded from the governmental alliances of the leading party Christian Democracy, even if it could be instrumentalized for anticommunist purposes. Together with multiple other groups, the MSI formed what was referred to as the neo-fascism of the second half of the twentieth century.

The groups formally or informally connected with the MSI party were leading actors in the political violence of the 1960s and 1970s. This violence culminated in the 1980 bombing at Bologna’s central train station, which killed 80 people and injured 200. The connections between neo-fascist activists, the Italian secret services, and some upper echelons of state power comprise a historical truth that is still undergoing the process of being recognized as a legal truth, via ongoing trials—in particular for the Bologna train station bombing.

In January 1995, at a party conference in Fiuggi, the MSI formally dissolved and was replaced by the National Alliance (AN), a party with a nationalist and conservative spirit, at least symbolically erasing the explicit continuity with the fascist legacy. The inclusion of AN in Silvio Berlusconi’s coalition government was a major event in European politics. “For the first time since 1945 a neo-fascist party enters a government coalition,” political scientist Piero Ignazi wrote in his 1994 book *Postfascisti?* AN was deemed “post-fascist” in that it accepted democracy; however, Ignazi argued that “post-fascism” was an empty word without a critical examination of fascism and its ideals.

In 2009, together with Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, the AN established a new party, People of Freedom

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(PDL), a further step in trying to distance itself from the neofascist past. In 2013, a group of former AN members, including Giorgia Meloni, decided to split from the PDL and establish a new party, reclaiming the symbols of the MSI and thus an explicit reference to the neo-fascist past. This party is the Brothers of Italy we find in government today.

Another important turning point took place on the eve of the millennium, when a group called CasaPound (in tribute to the American poet Ezra Pound, who made pro-Fascist radio broadcasts from Italy during World War II) claimed a new definition for its members: “third-millennium fascists.” This movement revived the use of the “f-word,” appropriating it for a new identity appealing to young people and composed of specific practices—especially rock concerts. It also engaged in violence, which represented a continuum with the fascist legacy through symbolic and physical actions against political opponents, migrants, and journalists.

The fascist legacy has maintained a key role in Italian political life over time, in one way or another; it has never really disappeared. The contexts in which that legacy has been reasserted and the actors claiming to uphold it may have changed, but it has proved capable of updating and renewing itself to the present moment. The formation of Meloni’s government provides an emphatic example of the presence and potency of this legacy. But Meloni did not appear out of nowhere. In this context, questioning the real meaning of this f-word is a central task. We need to better understand what we are talking about when we talk about fascism in contemporary times.

Anthropologist Peter Hervik has said that practitioners in his field should be able to speak with people, not categories. This suggests the importance of ethnography as a tool of research and knowledge production that is capable of stepping back from pre-established truths in order to understand phenomena such as the current widespread circulation of references to fascism. This word carries more layers of meaning than are evident when it is used simply to accuse somebody of being a fascist or to assume that the Fascist past was defined by a singular personality.

Historian Emilio Gentile has pointed out the perils of what he calls “a-historiography,”

referring to the practice of comparing different historical epochs to identify similarities and continuity with the Fascist past. Such scholarship, he warns, risks rendering Fascism banal, an empty word. The past never repeats itself in the same way, and it is necessary to avoid simplifying the complexity and violence perpetrated in history, as well as to avoid banalizing current manifestations of this legacy. One reason for the continuity of the fascist legacy in the institutions and political life of the Italian republic is the fact that Italian society as a whole has never effectively analyzed and concretely taken responsibility for that past.

### WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY?

In light of these premises, the question is not whether the Meloni government represents a fascist resurgence, as if this were some kind of unprecedented novelty. The more important task at this point is interrogating the practical manifestations of such references and legacies, and the instrumental use of this category by politicians. We also need to question the existence of real differences in political practices across the party

spectrum, and ask how we can challenge the continuity of racist and authoritarian politics in governments over time.

It is perhaps worth recalling that recent agreements with North African dictatorships to prevent migrants from coming to Italy were signed by Interior Minister Marco Minniti of the center-left Democratic Party (PD), who held office from 2016 to 2018. The Jobs Act, a law abolishing many fundamental rights for workers and increasing employment precarity, was developed by Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who headed a PD government from 2014 to 2016. And we should not forget the recent management of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the technocratic government headed by Prime Minister Mario Draghi, supported by the PD, acted as a notably authoritarian regime in suppressing basic rights written into Italy’s constitution, such as the fundamental right to work. Hardly anyone condemned this betrayal of the country’s so-called anti-fascist constitution.

The similarities between the political practices of the PD and the Brothers of Italy are more numerous than a superficial glance at their ideological profiles might suggest. The PD’s electoral campaign in 2022 was built around the supposed dichotomy

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between fascism and antifascism; the party presented itself as a force for good taking a stand against evil, the supposed evil being Meloni's party. But where does the need for this kind of categorization come from? When used to erect an ideological barrier, such categories risk obscuring rather than effectively giving a sense of what is happening.

The fascist legacy is always treated as somebody else's responsibility. Commemorations of the March on Rome held up the face of Mussolini as the unique identifier of the regime. Italy missed out on yet another opportunity to face its own responsibility. Just as it was not Mussolini alone who built the Fascist regime in the past, so today it is not Meloni alone who is causing fascism to resurface. We need a much deeper process to analyze the political and social responsibilities for this continuity, a process capable of shedding light on the ways in which attitudes and practices attached to that legacy appear across the political spectrum of the Italian Republic.

In 2006, filmmaker Nanni Moretti produced and directed *Il Caimano*, in which the protagonist

wants to make a movie about Berlusconi and his governments. In one scene, Moretti himself appears as a character driving through the tangle of Rome's traffic. He notes that Berlusconi, through his television empire, had already won the most important battle: that of changing Italian society. It is true that the legacy of the Berlusconi governments definitely did not end with his last period in office. His personality, his television channels and programs, and his trials have changed public life and helped to shape a new generation. The values he personified circulate widely as a shared element in Italian society, no matter the specific role he plays as an individual.

And if we think about fascism as a phenomenon of twentieth-century history, or about neo-fascism as the continuity of this phenomenon in different forms since the end of World War II, or about post-fascism as well as today's third-millennium fascists, it is evident that this legacy never really disappeared. Similar to Berlusconi's enduring presence, the fascist legacy has exerted a pervasive influence in this society, even when it is not named as such. ■