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"The Road to Fascism: the Decline of Liberal Italy, 1900-1915"

by

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Some historical personages and periods are just plain unlucky. Take the case of Italy between 1900 and 1915. By economic measures--the ones which are the least a matter of opinion when judging the past--the period represented an extraordinary leap forward. In the grayer areas of life such as political and social development, those fifteen years also represented an advance in the opinion of many observers. Yet, because of Fascism, the period seems eternally condemned to be judged not on its own merits but as "The Road to Fascism"--at least in Anglo-American historiography.

As a historian I believe in the necessity of discovering roots or trends at their beginning in order to establish a context for important developments, otherwise we would be political scientists or sociologists. But I have discovered that we can find origins for everything if we go back far enough--and that does not mean very far. Some of these "origins" later develop into full-blown movements, but others do not; the art of history consists in distinguishing between the two.

In the case of Italy, the tendency among historians is to interpret all developments in a negative light, all pointing to Fascism, to some "failed revolution," or to some other disaster. In Liberal Italy's case, I wonder if historians realize that by doing this they are in fact validating Fascist historiography. Here I can quote no less an authority than Gaetano Salvemini, who complained of the same tendency to a group of exiles during the 1930s.

Take the case of Giovanni Giolitti, whose historiographical character assassination began with Salvemini's Il ministro della mala vita. In the letter I quoted above, in his famous introductory essay to A. William Salomone's Italian Democracy in the Making, and in other works, Salvemini modified his views, but the strongly negative view of Giolitti persists.

By linking the limits of Giolitti's liberalism to those of Italian liberalism, Alexander De Grand makes a particularly subtle argument. One can hardly quarrel with many of the facts he states in his paper. I would agree that Giolitti created nothing new in a political sense, that he was a "rationalist" and a "realist," that "there was nothing of the modern mass politician in him," and that "He governed by sensing quite accurately the mood of his majority and that of the moderate middle class which supported him despite the carping of the intellectual and cultural elite." These, however, seem compliments rather than criticisms.

I also agree that Giolitti did not stick to many of his campaign promises. To cite a harsh critic of Giolitti who, through historiographical sleight of hand has become seen as a "partner," Filippo Turati, who said in 1906 that Giolitti's five years in power represented "a great bankruptcy of hopes and expectations." But while Turati accused Giolitti of neglecting reforms, he still gave credit where it was due, i.e., he praised Giolitti for his past efforts to grant liberty to the Italian masses.

In fact, in judging Giolitti, Alex seems to fall into the same trap as many of Giolitti's contemporaries. Since he managed to remain in power for so long, Giolitti seemed omnipotent, but in fact, he was not. The assumption of many historians is that, had Giolitti really wished to push through reforms such as divorce and fiscal changes, he certainly would have been capable of doing so. But was that the case? Alex has emphasized "the limits of Italian liberalism," and these limits thwarted him. Alex understands these obstacles, but, in effect, makes the argument that since the conditions for these reforms did not exist, Giolitti should have created them. This contention emerges when he argues that Giolitti was a "nineteenth century politician" who did not really achieve much in the four areas he mentions at the beginning of his paper. But let us remember that divorce was not finally adopted in Italy until 1970 and that the Italians are still struggling with fiscal reforms--despite the operation of modern politicians skilled in social policy and mass politics.

Within the limits with which Giolitti had to operate--and these include not only the ones Alex mentioned but a hostile monarch and opponents with too much behind the scenes influence--perhaps we are justified in emphasizing his accomplishments some of which go beyond liberal tenets. Let's ask the Lega Lombarda if it would agree with Giolitti's sending substantially more funds to the South than the region paid in taxes; let's ask American businessmen if they would be willing to sit down with unions as equals in a juridically-recognized organization to discuss problems and future legislation (we could call it the Superior Council of Labor). If you think Giolitti was "conservative," try suggesting to the American people and politicians of the 1990s that they nationalize the life insurance companies (those noted liberals Bill Clinton and Bill Weld might lend a sympathetic ear); try making the vote for illiterates a principle sanctioned by law; try organizing a general strike; see if you can get out alive after occupying some factories.

Above all, I'm tempted to say, see if you can sit down and talk to Sidney Sonnino without losing your cool. Alex contends that Giolitti believed in the "grande partito liberale," but that was Sonnino's pet idea and Giolitti challenged him to prove it, failing to see in exactly what Sonnino's liberalism consisted. Indeed, Sonnino's description of himself as a liberal sends one scrambling for a dictionary. Professor Haywood accurately views Sonnino as a British Protestant

Victorian rather than an Italian Jew, and I agree; only I see that to have been Sonnino's major problem.

Before going on, I feel duty-bound to confess my prejudice. I have always disliked Sonnino; I have tried to be fair by asking scholars who liked him during his lifetime and exactly how many supporters he had, but they have never been able to give me an answer. Alex, if you love to hate the people you write about, let me suggest working on Sidney.

My guess is that it took other antipatici like Humbert I and Victor Emmanuel III to like Sonnino. Professor Haywood's argument that his identification by Catholics and others as a Jew explains his attachment to the Savoy dynasty is probably correct, since many Jews shared the same feelings for the reasons he states. On the other hand, I find it difficult to share Professor Haywood's feelings about how passionately Sonnino felt about the Liberal State, not only because the man seems to me passionless but because his methods of "strengthening" it seem very strange.

Granted that sometimes Sonnino took positions considered leftist, particularly with regard to the southern problem and the vote (but consult "Torniamo allo Statuto" to see what he thought of the vote), but he did little about these issues. Indeed, with the exception of certain key episodes, Sonnino had little influence in general after the beginning of the century--certainly a stroke of luck for the country.

Let's look a bit at his story. For a supposed liberal with an intense commitment to the Liberal State, he certainly behaved in an unusual way. In "Torniamo allo Statuto," he argued that the liberal regime as it had evolved since 1848 had become "unconstitutional," that is, it had evolved ministerial responsibility. He argued that the Statuto conferred upon the King complete discretion to hire and fire his ministers, not on the Chamber of Deputies, where, in fact, this power had come to reside. He was correct; the text of that document did indeed make the monarch supreme, but especially as a lover of British tradition, Sonnino should also have realized that practice modifies law, and from the very beginning Italians were too intelligent to follow the Statuto's outmoded text.

Constitutional development in Britain and France had limited the power of the executive branch and had strengthened the legislature, and the same thing had happened, in substance, in Italy. Sonnino's suggestion of conferring complete power upon the King would have reversed fifty years of Italian constitutional development, perverted the country's evolution, and relegated Italy to the same backwater as Imperial Germany and the Austrian Empire, those European countries with an arrested constitutional tradition. Furthermore, Sonnino's argument against parliamentary representation and its evils would certainly be endorsed by reactionary royalists everywhere, not to mention Fascists. I fail to see how the reversal of a developing democratic tradition, even with its many faults, make Sonnino into a defender of the Liberal

State. The fragility of that state was due to its narrow base, and Sonnino wanted to narrow it still in order to save it. Compared to Sonnino, Giolitti become an ultra-modern politician.

The ideas Sonnino expressed in "Torniamo allo Statuto" help explain his role as floor leader for potentially repressive legislation during the 1898-1900 crisis; the liberties he took with the rules on that occasion illustrate his contempt for the rights of others and alienated the country. The fact that in 1901 he was still a strong contender for Prime Minister almost justifies his own criticism of Parliament, but he did not succeed because the Socialists for the first time voted confidence in a cabinet (Zanardelli-Giolitti), thus touching off a split within the Socialist party. The strong influence of Sonnino and politicians like him limited the possibilities for the reforms Giolitti favored and forced the Socialists to deflect their focus from important reforms to safeguarding basic liberties--with the long-term consequences we all know about.

By 1906, Sonnino had seemingly modified his ideas so as not to appear to present a threat to Italian democratic development. His emphasis on morality and efficiency won him the premiership in both 1906 and 1909, but still needed Giolitti for a majority. This a bit akin to the Republicans supporting a Democratic candidate for president, so this attempt at "alternation" can be considered generous on Giolitti's part. Still, in both cases, Sonnino managed to

survive only three months, so his refusal to take the office again in 1914, as Professor Haywood emphasizes, was quite understandable. His lieutenant Antonio Salandra became Prime Minister, and although Sonnino died in November 1922, Salandra lived on to become a key ally of Mussolini during the crucial period of the Duce's struggle for power. Neither Sonnino nor Salandra were Fascists, but whereas historians tend to agree that had Giolitti been in power in 1922 he would have stopped Mussolini militarily, the styles of Sonnino and Salandra tended to resemble that of Il Duce.

This can clearly be seen in the manner Sonnino, Salandra, and the King dragged Italy into World War I. Professor Haywood rightly alludes to how Italian entrance into the war spelled the end of the regime Sonnino supposedly hoped to reinforce, but there is something to add. The manner in which he negotiated the Pact of London also turned out to be an international public relations disaster worthy of Sonnino's character. In this regard, the Pact itself had indirect implications for the Liberal State's end and the rise of Fascism. The manner in which both he and Salandra maneuvered the country into war also as a means of eliminating Giolitti's influence seems incredible. To give them the benefit of the doubt, it is probably unlikely that either of them understood the massive destruction which the war would cause, although by 1915 their estimate that the conflict would end within six months of Italian intervention appears ludicrous. But the very fact that Giolitti's political elimination entered into their



war calculations illustrates the incredible superficiality of these supposed statesmen.

The questions posed by Professor Miller--the relationship between culture and Fascism--are important ones. The direct link is evanescent, but the distinctive attitudes of Futurists, Nationalists, and Fascists certainly seem related. In the case of musical culture, the connection is even more difficult to fathom, although here as well I believe that attitudes and style are determinant.

Professor Miller argues that the Giolittian period "laid the basis for the musical culture of fascism," and she attempts to illustrate this thesis through four profiles. I'm glad to meet once again Walter Mocchi, whose articles in Avanguardia Socialista I once pored over. A principal financial backer of the newspaper, Mocchi was instrumental in engineering the temporary revolutionary syndicalist triumph over the reformists in Milan between 1903 and 1905. Although in 1899 he conducted a sympathetic interview of Turati and his reformist tactics, by late 1902 he had turned into a bitter enemy as the result of the tactics the reformist leader felt compelled to follow out of fear that Sonnino would become Prime Minister and suppress the basic civil rights of Italians. Avanguardia Socialista's Swiss "correspondent" was Benito Mussolini, who wrote articles illustrating the uselessness of the vote. As is noted, although never a declared revolutionary syndicalist, Mussolini always remained close to the movement which influenced him and many of whose members became Fascists.

The connection between Mocchi and Fascism in the terms pointed out by Professor Miller, however, seems tenuous. Mocchi's movement into the impresario business antedates Fascism, and the attempt to exploit the Italian lyric tradition by creating a consortium of theatres in Latin America, in itself, smells more of smart business than of Fascism. In what way is Mocchi's enterprise different from the movie industry then, or Hollywood today? I have no doubts that Mocchi joined the party and took advantage of any governmental connections he may have had, but I don't see an intimate connection between liberalism and Fascism because of his business activities.

My initial inclination is to say the same about Mascagni. This composer was lucky enough to have composed one masterpiece, but I suspect he was frustrated at not being able to do it again. His attack on Wagner was not unusual. Arrigo Boito had done it long before him and had composed Mefistofele as an example of an Italian music drama. He had attacked Verdi and had compared Italian music under his domination to "the soiled walls of a brothel." But are we to take all these literary arguments seriously? Boito went on to write the libretti for Verdi's Otello and Falstaff, both of which integrated the Italian and Wagnerian traditions.

As far as the search for roots is concerned--italianita'--similar searches went on in other countries and go on all the time. Clearly, exasperated nationalism was a crucial element of Fascism, and exasperated nationalism can be found during the liberal era in Italy and in other countries. The same is true

with regard to rebellious artistic movements such as Futurism, which litter the belle epoque. But do the existence of these elements constitute "the road to Fascism"? That particular road, I think, is not so long nor so winding but leads straight through the conflict known as the Great War.