

Ferraresi, Franco. *Threats to Democracy: The Radical Right in Italy After the War*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

The electoral success of the neo-fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* in Italy in 1994 came as a surprise to many Italians, argues Franco Ferraresi, only because contemporary right-wing movements have received little scholarly attention in Italy since 1945. Few should have been surprised by the electoral outcome of 1994, because the pre-cursor of the *Alleanza Nazionale*, the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI) had proven itself to be "the most enduring neofascist organization in any advanced industrial country." (p. 3) The parliamentary MSI had been paralleled by an extra-parliamentary radical Right between the 1940s and the early 1980s, which established Italy as the only European country with a long history of "social revolutionary" radical-Right terrorism. Ferraresi contends that the development of so significant a radical Right presence was only possible with "the support of elements outside the radical Right proper" which ensured that "moderate and conservative public opinion [has] been sympathetic toward the right-wing groups." (p. 3-4)

While that segment of extreme Right politics which is prepared to subscribe to political violence and terrorism traditionally has been seen as the underground instruments of the parliamentary Right and their allies in the intelligence services, Ferraresi contends that that the radical Right had very much a life of its own, with its own membership, its own ideology and aspirations, and its own way of relating to the other right-wing groups. The historical examination of the Italian radical Right as an independent phenomenon is the purpose of Ferraresi's study.

Ferraresi identifies three chronological phases in the development of the post-1945 radical Right in Italy. The period from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s is significant for the emergence of the "historic groups." The "strategy of tension" took place between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s. With the failure of this strategy of tension, there followed the period of the "armed spontaneity" from 1975 until the elimination of the radical Right terrorist groups in the early 1980s.

Following an initial period of MSI hegemony on the Right while neofascism restored itself as a political force following the defeat of 1945, the radical Right differentiated itself from the MSI in the mid-1950s with the formation of the so-called "historic groups," *Ordine Nuovo* (ON) and *Avanguardia Nazionale* (AN). These "historic groups" split from the MSI because they believed that the strategy of the MSI leadership in collaborating with the Christian Democrats (DC) in an anti-Communist front was doomed to failure. This became evident with the decision of the DC to join the Socialist Party (PSI) in the "opening to the left" of the early 1960s.

One of the elements that set the radical Right apart from the parliamentary MSI was the former's intense interest in its ideological stance. While drawing some of its ideology from the Fascist period, the radical Right was selective, identifying primarily with the early revolutionary thrust of pre-war Fascism and with the rejection of democracy in favor of "the values of élitism, natural hierarchies, and strongly enforced authoritarian

rule." (p. 32) Underlying much of the ideology was a "disproportionate overevaluation of the spiritual dimension of man," (p. 34) from which came an affinity for the mystique of violence and a search for heroes and validating myths. The 1922-43 period of Fascist rule did not provide as much by way of usable myth as did the 1943-45 period of the Italian Social Republic, with its legionary fighters in a losing cause for a doomed regime. The ability to endure and expect death as well as to deliver death were obsessions of the radical Right which also admired the German Nazis who were perceived to have been in a continuous revolution for renewal.

The writings of Julius Evola (1898-1974), "by far the most important intellectual figure for the contemporary radical Right," (p. 43) fused these scattered items into a coherent ideology for the radical Right. Ferraresi claims that Evola's thought "can be considered one of the most radical and consistent antiegalitarian, antiliberal, antidemocratic, and antipopular systems in the twentieth century." (p. 44) Evola sought to "construct a model of man striving to reach the 'absolute' within his inner self," (p. 44) rejecting all of modern society as decadent and declining into a morass of materialism. A regeneration of the state was necessary, to be led by a male elite imbued with spiritual values and prepared to fight for these values. The true man must act in a decadent world by following the dictates of his inner law.

The "historic groups" provided the link between the veterans of the wartime Italian Social Republic and the terrorists of the 1970s. During its existence, the ON involved itself in street-fighting but also linked up with international revolutionary agencies, such as the OAS in Algeria. It also had links with the CIA and elements within the Italian state apparatus, such as the intelligence services, which wanted to bring about political change in Italy. The AN, founded in 1959 and dissolved in 1976, was primarily a terrorist action squad, often infiltrating left-wing student action groups.

The "strategy of tension" was developed with the radical Right groups in the 1960s in reaction to the "opening to the left" of that decade. Both the radical Right and certain elements within the state apparatus, including sections of the army, the judiciary, and members of the business and financial community wanted, by any means, to halt the advance of the political Left. They came together at an organizational conference in 1965 and developed the strategy of tension, which involved challenging the Left on the subversive and revolutionary level until such time as the army and the police would be able to stage a *coup d'état* to reestablish law and order, secure control of the government and exclude the parties of the Left. The model was provided by the *coup d'état* of the Greek colonels in 1967, and student and worker unrest of 1968 and 1969 provided the opportunity for implementing the strategy of tension.

On 7 December 1970, what appears to have been an abortive *coup d'état* occurred under the leadership of Prince Junio Valerio Borghese and his National Front with the support of the P2 Masonic Lodge. While the action was cancelled at the last minute, the evidence of a thwarted coup was overlooked by state authorities. The participants in the coup and other terrorists of the Right were viewed benevolently by the police and, when these terrorists were put on trial, were treated generously by the judiciary. Occasionally,

members of radical Right groups even carried out terrorist acts with the connivance of segments of the state apparatus, which then provided protection for these terrorists. Ferraresi illustrates his thesis by examining the investigations and trials of members of the radical Right who were responsible for terrorist acts in 1969 and 1970. He demonstrates the way in which the police, the intelligence services and the judiciary conspired to protect the terrorists.

During the early 1970s, the radical Right groups developed an interest in the systematic use of terrorism for revolutionary goals. This phase of terrorism reached its most deadly heights with bombings in Brescia and on the MÛnich-Rome express in 1974, which coincided with a variety of plans for *coups d'état*. The result of this overt radical Right terrorism was the government dissolution of the *Ordine Nuovo* in 1974 and *Avanguardia Nazionale* in 1975, although many of the responsible individuals were protected by their patrons within the state apparatus. As the radical Right reorganized after 1974, their focus became not so much the corrupt party system but, inspired by the now-active Left-wing Red Brigades, the state itself.

The dissolution of the "historic groups" in the mid-1970s introduced the new phase of the "armed spontaniety." The move toward the parliamentary alliance of the "Historic Compromise" between the DC and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) met increased activity by left-wing terrorists culminating in the 1978 kidnap and murder of former Prime Minister Aldo Moro. These developments coincided with a social and cultural phenomenon known as the "1977 Movement" whereby those on the fringes of Left and Right, the feminists, the environmentalists and the unemployed came together in opposition to the anticipated corruption of the "Historic Compromise." The 1977 Movement offered a new pattern of social and intellectual analysis. "Not by chance one of the most important influences was that of feminism, which focused attention on personal life. What now came to the fore was sexuality, self-determination, rejection of authoritarianism, of male-dominated politics. Needs and desires became crucial, the former taken from the Marxist tradition . . . The latter from the psychoanalytical one . . . both, needless to say, vulgarized when not outrightly perverted." (p. 153) As a result of this thinking, "Action was legitimized on the basis of desire, regardless of any notion of responsibility, of political obligation. Desire was seen as the only force leading to personal liberation against the system's suffocating powers." (p. 153)

This cultural shift coincided with the rise of a new generation of radical Right militants who had greater affinity with radical Left militants than with the established powers of the state. Rationality and logical explanations were rejected in favor of the existential terrorism of the armed spontaniety, just as the new militants rejected the leadership of the MSI and also the mythos of the "historic groups." Terrorist action became an end in itself. While the armed spontaniety envisaged disconnected cells in an "archipelago" of radical Right activity, Ferraresi raises the question of whether there may have been a higher degree of organization in existence than has yet been discovered. The new generation of terrorists were no longer linked to groups within the political bureaucracy as had been the case in the strategy of tension. While existential terrorism existed on the Left and caused problems in rationalizing it with Marxist-Leninist principles, it caused no

such problems on the Right, where it could be seen as a return to the purifying actions of the original heroes of Fascism in a new quest for personal and social renewal. The excesses of the armed spontaneity, coupled with more effective police work in the early 1980s eventually brought the period of terrorism to an end and also eliminated the radical Right from the Italian political scene.

Ferraresi concludes his study by indicating that, when the clean hands investigations of the early 1990s eliminated virtually the entire Italian party system, the MSI was available as one of the few parties not tainted with political corruption and, renamed as the *Alleanza Nazionale*, was able to participate in the 1994 government of Silvio Berlusconi. To take the full measure of the Right in contemporary Italian politics, it is essential to understand the political and ideological tradition associated with the Right and the radical Right in Italy.

Ferraresi's discussion of the self-perception of the radical Right is very much in line with the definition of Fascism as a movement for personal and national self-renewal as adumbrated by historians such as Roger Griffin. In fact, by exploring the intellectual underpinnings of Italy's radical Right in the latter half of the twentieth century, Ferraresi not only substantiates the definition by Griffin and others in *International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus* (1998) but also lends credence to the assertion that there is a core intellectual tradition to Fascism which supersedes the traditional "Age of Fascism" between 1918 and 1945.

Ferraresi has based his study on those sources for the activities of the radical Right and their supporters which are available to him. These include primarily the record of investigations and trials associated with the various acts of terrorism of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. He has painstakingly tracked the judicial process through trial transcripts and has noted the contradictions and the dead ends which are evident in those sources. He has also looked at the publications, proclamations and pamphlets of the radical Right and, from these, has been able to piece together the ideology of the radical Right in its various manifestations.

His study is commendable in linking the threads of radical Right activity and exploring this relatively-unknown substratum of Italian political culture. His study provides a context and an insight into Italian neofascism and convincingly establishes its linkage with elements of the state apparatus. His discussion of the underlying ideology of the radical Right is an invaluable contribution to fascist studies. He has made a great deal out of the sources available to him and, if there is any criticism of the book, it rests on the fact that he is limited in the evidence that he can gather on the terrorist groups about which he writes. There is a strong emphasis on the uniting factor of ideology and yet, as we know from the experience of studying Mussolini's pre-1943 Fascism, ideology was not always the motivating factor in understanding fascist behavior. At some future date, one hopes that more sources about the individual radical Right groups will become available, so that the picture which Ferraresi offers can be fleshed out by examining the social context and understanding more the personal background of those individuals who were active participants in the radical Right of this period.

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