

# Learning From Italian Antifascism

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
MARCO BRESCIANI

You cannot understand antifascism if you don't understand fascism, both in its contemporary guises and historically in countries like Italy.

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CHRIS MAISANO

The Italian antifascist movement *Giustizia e Libertà* (“Justice and Liberty”) reminds one of Brian Eno’s quip about the first Velvet Underground album: it sold just ten thousand copies at the time, but everyone who bought it started a band.

It was not a mass movement, but it attracted many of the leading antifascist intellectuals of the time, many of whom went on to play key roles in postwar Italian intellectual, political, and cultural life. Its leading figure, Carlo Rosselli, did not live to see the longer-term impact of his movement’s influence. French fascists, acting under direction from agents of Benito Mussolini’s regime, assassinated Carlo and his brother Nello in Paris in 1937. Their funeral brought 100,000 mourners into the streets, testifying to the brothers’ (but especially Carlo’s) status as antifascist militants in the eyes of their contemporaries.

Despite this, the memory of *Giustizia e Libertà* has largely been forgotten outside of Italy. This has been a loss for antifascists and socialists around the world, because *Giustizia e Libertà* left behind a treasure trove of ideas and inspiration for a new generation facing resurgent fascist and radical right-wing movements on every continent.

Happily, an English translation of the Italian scholar Marco Bresciani’s study of *Giustizia e Libertà*, *Learning from the Enemy: An Intellectual History of Antifascism in Interwar Europe*, begins the work of recovering its memory for a new audience. *Jacobin* contributing editor Chris Maisano recently spoke with Bresciani about his book, the history of *Giustizia e Libertà* and its leading figures, and the movement’s relevance to our own time.

**CHRIS MAISANO** Tell me a little bit about the origins of the project. Why write a book about Giustizia e Libertà?

**MARCO BRESCIANI** This is the outcome of a long trajectory starting in the late '90s. The original interest was in the complex relationship between antifascism and communism. My main interest was trying to figure out how to rethink antifascism in new ways. Back then, there was a lot of public debate in Italy about antifascism with a special regard to Giustizia e Libertà and the Partito d'Azione.

Then I got interested in Andrea Caffi, a Russian-born intellectual and revolutionary who was part of the network of Giustizia e Libertà but had a fascinating life, mostly in exile in France. He was involved in the Russian revolutionary movement and took part in the Bolshevik experiment before opposing Mussolini's movement and regime, while always being very critical of [Joseph] Stalin's Soviet Union. So I wrote his biography, and this was my take on the debates, history, and experiences of Giustizia e Libertà.

Then the 2008 economic crisis and its geopolitical backlash, with the rise of new nationalist-populist forces, arrived. In light of these new problems, the original interest in the relationship between antifascism and communism became much more complex. The idea was to think about how, in the '30s, a major economic, political, civilizational crisis was understood and which tools were figured out to cope with that. The idea of the book was to put together the history of the group itself, along with some of the major biographies of the people taking part in the group – firstly, of course, Carlo Rosselli – and then to situate the history of the group within the context of interwar Europe.

**CHRIS MAISANO** Carlo Ginzburg talked about Vittorio Foa's need to learn from the enemy: in this case, the need to learn from fascism. This is where you get the title of your book from. What did Foa and his antifascist comrades think that they could learn from fascism?

**MARCO BRESCIANI** My ongoing conversation with Carlo Ginzburg was very much part of this rethinking of the book. As I said, I thought that Giustizia e Libertà provided an excellent case study for rethinking antifascism more realistically. The idea of learning from the enemy reconceptualizes the relationship between fascism and antifascism in many ways. This is a book not only about antifascism but also about fascism.

The idea here is that you cannot really understand antifascism if you don't understand fascism. You really can't understand fascism and antifascism if you don't think of them as part of a dynamic process, as phenomena that have different interactions and connections that change over time.

Fascism was a major break in European history. Giustizia e Libertà rejected and fought against fascist solutions to the European crisis, but their idea was that in many ways fascism catalyzed some of the main features of the political, social, economic, intellectual crisis of Europe stemming from the Great War (World War I) and its legacies. The idea was to accept questions posed by the fascist challenges while rejecting and combating the fascists' solutions.

Accordingly, many places in the book try to explain a kind of ideological and anti-ideological attitude, a rhetorical and antirhetorical attitude, and a moralistic and antimoralistic position because Giustizia e Libertà knew that fascism was a possible, even plausible, but terrible answer to the European crisis, and they rejected it.

**CHRIS MAISANO** What was Giustizia e Libertà's sense of the questions fascism raised?

**MARCO BRESCIANI** First of all, we have to specify that this was a group of distinctive, strong personalities. It

had very different perspectives and very different attitudes vis-à-vis fascism, although there was common ground that unified the group.

For instance, whereas Caffi argued that the Great War and the Russian revolutions were a major break in European history, Carlo Rosselli thought that the rise of fascism had been a turning point in postwar Italy. According to Rosselli, the social, political, and economic order of liberal Italy had thus to be reshaped to provide a kind of answer. The idea was to draw on their own interpretation of the Italian nationalist tradition and combine it with the liberal, democratic, and socialist perspective. They had to reshape the national state toward a liberal socialist and then increasingly federalist perspective, and wrestle the idea of the nation from the fascists.

But they were also very attentive, as were the fascists, to how an idea of Europe might also provide a set of solutions to the problems and conflicts arising from the Great War, the breakdown of continental empires in Central and Eastern Europe, and the crisis of liberal democracy. In some sense, this entailed putting themselves on the ground imposed by fascists and then looking for different solutions.

Another example is Giustizia e Libertà's interest in corporatism. They analyzed and discussed the ways in which authoritarian and illiberal governments tried to fix the economic slump after 1929, but they looked for creative ways of intersecting politics and economics as the bases for new, postfascist Italy and Europe.

**CHRIS MAISANO** What did Rosselli, Foa, and others see in the Italian national tradition, in what it meant to be Italian, that was of potential use for antifascists in the fight against fascism?

**MARCO BRESCIANI** They looked back at the thought of Giuseppe Mazzini and Carlo Cattaneo as reference points for a new idea of Italy. At the same time, they were trying to establish new relationships between the state and society in democratic, liberal, socialist terms. Mazzini was a common ground for both fascists and antifascists, but antifascists had to struggle to appropriate Mazzini's ideas and make them a foundational source for their own political project by taking him away from the fascist interpretations.

Cattaneo's thought became important as they were trying to rethink and reshape the centralist Italian nation-state in a federalist way, at the same moment when the fascist culture was trying to legitimize the authoritarian transformation of the state and to strengthen its centralizing trends. However, even more important in this regard was the lesson provided by the postwar experiments with collective actions in the factories and countryside, workers' and peasants' councils, and new forms of popular participation from below, like the example of the Soviet from revolutionary Russia, etc. All these revolutionary energies were channeled into new ideas of social federalism, like in the case of Leone Ginzburg, Carlo Ginzburg's father.

On the other hand, not everyone associated with Giustizia e Libertà agreed with this approach. Andrea Caffi, for example, really questioned this attempt to appropriate the tradition of Italian Risorgimento away from the fascists and saw no revolutionary, antifascist potential in nationalism. A passionate reader of [Alexander] Herzen and [Pierre-Joseph] Proudhon, he developed a very critical idea of the nationalist approach to the European crisis. Notably, he drew on his experience of the imperial collapses in post-1918 Central and Eastern Europe, and he knew that only a federalist resettlement might work much better than the nation-state in order to prevent a new, catastrophic war. When he approached Giustizia e Libertà, Nicola Chiaromonte kept with Caffi's critical attitude toward nationalism and the two clashed with Rosselli's attempt to appropriate the Italian nationalist tradition.

**CHRIS MAISANO** Let's take Mazzini as an example of these struggles over the meaning of Italy's national history. What did each side see in Mazzini, and how did they incorporate him into their conception of what Italy should be?

**MARCO BRESCIANI** The Great War was considered a powerful trigger for overcoming the limits of the Risorgimento and completing Italy's nation building, and this became in fact a common ground for both fascists and antifascists.

The scholarship on antifascism has somewhat neglected these common grounds. The fascists took the idea of a national revolution from Mazzini, the idea that an Italian nation-state could be accomplished when all the community was involved in nation building. They were convinced that after the Great War, it was high time to finish the Risorgimento with a national Republican revolution, and this was Mussolini's task.

Antifascists were also interested in this idea of national revolution, and they were also convinced that the Risorgimento was a process still to be accomplished. This was also part of Rosselli's thinking. He was born and raised in a Jewish and Italian nationalist family, involved in the interventionist campaign for Italy to take part in the Great War. But he thought this process should come from below in Italian society. The idea was to collect all these forces to create a new nation-state, and in Rosselli's perspective this was to be a liberal socialist nation-state.

**CHRIS MAISANO** As you say, Rosselli and other *giellisti* had this idea of completing the Risorgimento while taking it in a socialist, liberal, and democratic direction. This reminded me of Antonio Gramsci's ideas about the "national-popular," of building a movement that is rooted in the working class but strives to provide leadership to the nation as a whole.

**MARCO BRESCIANI** Like Rosselli and others from *Giustizia e Libertà*, Gramsci was also part of this early-twentieth-century culture that tried to radically renovate liberal Italy. He was very immersed in this avant-garde, idealistic culture where a figure like Georges Sorel also played an important role. The idea of elites — moral, political, and intellectual elites especially — trying to renovate the social and political order was a major issue.

At the same time, of course, the paths were increasingly divergent in many ways, at least in the '20s. Gramsci did most of his thinking on these questions in his prison notebooks in the '30s, so he could not have much of an exchange with the external world. Rosselli rejected the idea that this radical renovation, this avant-garde project of looking for a new Italy, might be implemented by political parties, let alone the kind of party Gramsci advocated.

In terms of the political means for renovating Italy, there was a real difference. *Giustizia e Libertà* and the Communists had some harsh conflicts in the early '30s, especially at the moment of the Communists' "Third Period." *Giustizia e Libertà* strongly attacked the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, while Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti thought they were a "bourgeois," "social-fascist" movement. However, in the mid-'30s, in the new context of the Popular Front antifascist politics, *Giustizia e Libertà* got closer to the Communists, but their contacts didn't really end up in concrete agreements, while Rosselli's attitude toward the Soviet Union became more sympathetic.

**CHRIS MAISANO** Let's talk more about Carlo Rosselli. We've mentioned him a few times, and he's such an important figure in this history. Who was Rosselli? What role did he play in the story of *Giustizia e Libertà*, of Italian and European antifascism?

**MARCO BRESCIANI** It's a really hard question, because he changed so much over time. We have so many Rossellis.

**CHRIS MAISANO** There's a page in the book where you list six different sets of views Rosselli had over a couple of years.

**MARCO BRESCIANI** Yes, exactly. He played a crucial role in this story in many ways. What I try to do in the book is to show all the connections between Rosselli and *Giustizia e Libertà*. But at the same time, *Giustizia e Libertà* was much more than just Rosselli. He was an intellectual and an academic, a professor working at the university. His major book, *Socialismo Liberale (Liberal Socialism)*, was in many ways the outcome of several years of hard work in economic theory, history and theory of trade unions, and the history of

liberalism and socialism.

He started as an intellectual, and then because of the pressure of the historical context, he became increasingly a politician, especially in the '30s. He was involved in the first clandestine antifascist editorial projects in Florence and Milan, then he was a protagonist alongside Sandro Pertini in organizing the escape of the socialist leader Filippo Turati from Italy to France. He was arrested and sent into confinement, where he was able to spend some years studying, reading, and writing, although in very harsh conditions. He spent this time in conversation with Emilio Lussu, who is another important figure in this story. Lussu and Rosselli made an incredible escape from the prison island of Lipari to Marseille and then to Paris, where they founded *Giustizia e Libertà*.

Rosselli's intuition was to create something completely new. The common ground for the new group he looked for in order to collect as many forces as possible within his group was a perspective of antifascist revolution, which is not exactly the same as liberal socialism. So this idea of emphasizing a revolutionary antifascist perspective responded to the game of trying to mobilize different political cultures and traditions: republican, democratic, and socialist.

Furthermore, *Giustizia e Libertà* was a group of politicians and intellectuals in exile. From exile, they started with a periodical journal (*Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà*) and then a weekly newspaper (*Giustizia e Libertà*) to stimulate conversation and debate about the shape of the future postfascist order and of all the other related topics concerning the European crisis of the '30s: the idea of Europe and of the nation, the search for a socialist, but not Marxist, perspective, and so forth.

But from the very beginning, Rosselli personally thought that the real battle against fascism could only be fought in Italy. He was able to establish a clandestine network in Italy with groups in Milan, Turin, Rome, and Trieste. They were trying to mobilize the people still willing to show themselves as antifascist within the increasingly hostile conditions in Italy — and at the same time, to organize some forms of struggle against the Mussolini dictatorship.

Antifascist studies often take for granted what antifascism meant and implied in the interwar period. However, if we consider the case of *Giustizia e Libertà*, we realize that antifascism constituted a very flexible, very creative, experimental set of answers to continuously changing challenges from fascist movements and regimes but also from authoritarian and illiberal governments.

These were European challenges. Accordingly, the year 1933, with the ascent of [Adolf] Hitler to power in Germany and fascism's gradually expanding reach all over Europe, marked a turning point for *Giustizia e Libertà*. They thus tried to figure out what kind of politics can answer that fascist type of hyperpolitics, and they kept on discussing potentially new meanings and implications of politics at that time of crisis.

**CHRIS MAISANO** That relates to the point you made before about how fascism and antifascism are so interrelated and how they change over time. In the debate over whether Trump is a fascist and MAGA is fascism, we often encounter the argument that because Trump and the Republican Party don't appear in exactly the same way as Mussolini's Fascist Party in Italy or Hitler's Nazis, they are not fascist. But fascism changes, it mutates, it shape-shifts. It follows that antifascism would do the same thing.

**MARCO BRESCIANI** Yes, that's very important, although I don't want to establish too direct links between the 1930s and today, and the challenges of fascism back then and those of the current far right. Furthermore, ongoing changes in the antifascist perspectives of *Giustizia e Libertà* were particularly shaped by their connections with European, and especially French, cultures.

In this regard their experience of the exile in Paris, in France, was crucial. Their own positive conceptions of antifascism — the will to confront fascist solutions and go beyond them — drew on broad analysis of middle classes and the state in the meltdown of the '30s, as well as a critical reconsideration of socialism in European history with its contradictions and ambiguities. Their dialogue with historian Élie Halévy, a friend of Carlo Rosselli's, was particularly important in this respect.

**CHRIS MAISANO** Rosselli and others in Giustizia e Libertà resisted party politics, but after Carlo Rosselli and his brother Nello were assassinated in 1937, Giustizia e Libertà morphed into the Partito d'Azione, which had some impact in the immediate postwar moment before disappearing from the scene. Tell us a little bit about the Partito d'Azione.

**MARCO BRESCIANI** First of all, in this search for new political meanings and tools, the conversation with other European political cultures and experiences was very important. In the early '30s, Carlo Rosselli and the other members of Giustizia e Libertà realized that most of the pre-1914 political parties and institutions were in crisis. The idea of trying to figure out a way of making politics without using the old means of the political party or party organization was also an attempt not to follow the same path that had brought Europe to that kind of crisis. In this regard, they shared once again the same elitist culture that shaped their enemy, the fascists.

However, as you said, there was an attempt to organize some form of party after the death of Carlo, but especially in the middle of World War II, during the Italian Civil War. But I would stress that Partito d'Azione was a special party, a kind of antiparty party. It was a party of intellectuals who were aware that all those dramatic special circumstances could bind them together and push them to use some typical tools of party organization. However, the party was very much divided by disagreements and different positions, between more liberal currents and more socialist currents.

During the Resistance, it was able to fight better than others, maybe because within Giustizia e Libertà's internal debates was the idea of civil war as a kind of final showdown between fascists and antifascists, a showdown that shouldn't take place only in Italy but all over Europe. They were ready for this fight in a chaotic context of collapse of the Italian nation-state while trying to rethink the foundations of a new national and European community.

Intellectually, they were very ready to take up arms against the fascists. For instance, they had already done it in Spain in 1936 and 1937; Rosselli and others fought in the Spanish Civil War on the Republican side. But most of them were not politicians and most of them, not incidentally, went out of politics after the end of World War II and the beginning of the Italian parliamentary republic.

**CHRIS MAISANO** If you look at the list of people who are involved in Giustizia e Libertà or Partito d'Azione, it's like a who's who of the biggest postwar intellectual and cultural figures: Norberto Bobbio, Nicola Chiaromonte, Vittorio Foa, Ginzburg. It's staggering.

**MARCO BRESCIANI** Yes. Quite obviously, one of the recurrent questions for anyone interested in Giustizia e Libertà is what would have been if Rosselli survived. One can wonder how he would have been able to affect the post-1945 landscape. But the intellectual legacies were much more important than the political legacies in the strictest sense of the term.

Despite the formal end of the organization in 1946, I think they had a significant impact on the postwar years because of their ideas concerning the relationship between nationhood and Europe, the role of public intervention in mixed economies, the importance of the middle classes in constitutional democracies, and the comparison between different totalitarian experiments as part of a liberal socialist, antifascist reflection. They were able to transfer all these ideas, which were at the core of many of their internal debates in the '30s, to the post-1945 debates and policymaking. They were able to directly or indirectly affect the building of new democratic systems and cultures, even though they weren't operating as a formal party.

**CHRIS MAISANO** In many respects, this is a very Italian, very European story. Why should an American audience be interested in Giustizia e Libertà?

**MARCO BRESCIANI** In general, we tend to think of democracy in Western Europe as easily and immediately

coming out of World War II, as an inevitable consequence of the fascist defeats and collapses, or even as a “return of democracy” after a temporary suspension in the interwar period. I have the feeling that this kind of thinking is also a trend in the American audience. From a historical point of view things were much more complex and unpredictable. Looking back at the ’30s means exploring a vibrantly rich host of ideas — of liberalism and socialism, of nationhood and Europe, of state and society — that contributed in many ways to shape and legitimize the post-1945 resettlements. This is what I try to suggest in the book.

Furthermore, we tend to take for granted the meanings of words we currently use (and misuse) in the public debate, like “antifascism.” I think that *Giustizia e Libertà* can offer important lessons also for the American audience in at least two respects.

First, their history can help understand what politics was and could be in a time of deep, systemic crisis like the 1930s (historian Adam Tooze has called it a “polycrisis”). The way *Giustizia e Libertà* disentangled the fascist solutions from the questions the fascists themselves were trying to address in interwar Europe is still relevant.

Second, they tried to put together different traditions and different cultures to come up with something new. It’s always tempting to try to recover and reenact all the good old solutions. But we have to think about our possible futures starting from the present, and we have to avoid thinking that what we don’t like about the present is an irrational wave — something that could easily and quickly disappear.

It’s critical to understand that threats to rule of law and democracy don’t emerge out of the blue. They have their own roots in politics and society. If we want to fight the former, we need to acknowledge the latter in order to move beyond them. This is one of the possible implications of “learning from the enemy” in the present. And this is what *Giustizia e Libertà* pushes us to come to grips with.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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