INTRODUCTION

Dealing with difficult heritage: Italy and the material legacies of Fascism

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Introduction: difficult, undesirable and dissonant heritage

This special issue examines the 'difficult heritage' of Fascism in postwar and contemporary Italy. Borrowing from Sharon Macdonald (2009), we use the term (the twin of 'undesirable heritage' [Macdonald 2006]) to refer to a historically significant past that remains materially visible through sites, buildings, artworks, monuments and other artefacts, but which is difficult to reconcile with 'a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity' (Macdonald 2009, 1). Difficult heritage is also a form of 'dissonant heritage' (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996) in that, as 'history that hurts', it inevitably involves 'a contrast of meaning and value systems between past and present' (Nauret 2017, 16). Our preference for 'difficult' over 'dissonant' heritage lies in its specificity – all difficult heritage is 'dissonant' but not all dissonant heritage is 'difficult' – and in its broader relevance. While dissonant heritage focuses on disputes over how the past is presented and commodified for public consumption (for example, in museums, exhibitions, and heritage sites), 'difficult heritage' is more concerned with questions of legacy and reception: how a society deals with the physical reminders of a discredited – and often very recent – past; and how (and why) that relationship changes over time.

As we have argued in the case of Italy – and as events in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 vividly and tragically demonstrated – how a society deals with its difficult heritage can tell us a great deal about how that society has internalised, understood, or attempted to 'come to terms' with the past that heritage represents (Carter and Martin 2017, 340). Historians of Fascism and memory in Italy, however, have been surprisingly slow to examine how and why Italians have ignored, confronted or negotiated the country's difficult Fascist heritage, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that the material remains of Fascism are to be found virtually everywhere in Italy: their very ubiquitousness has seemingly rendered them almost invisible to the historian's eye. This has begun to change in the last few years – a historiographical shift that the contributors to this special issue have all played their part in – but there is still much work to be done: for example, there is as yet no Italian equivalent to Gavriel Rosenfeld's ground-breaking study of the

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interplay between architecture, monuments and the memory of Nazism in postwar and contemporary Munich (Rosenfeld 2000) or Macdonald's landmark monograph on the difficult heritage of Nazi rally parade grounds at Nuremberg (Macdonald 2009). This special issue is intended as another small step along that path.

Contents

The articles presented here examine a range of difficult heritage examples, but for the most part they seek answers to the same questions. Why were they built (what was their intended meaning and original purpose in Mussolini's Italy)? How did they survive the fall of Mussolini (1943), the final defeat of Fascism (1945), and the subsequent creation and consolidation of Italian democracy? How did Italian authorities (and ordinary Italians) deal with these physical reminders of the regime in the first decades after the war? And how and why have official and popular attitudes and approaches to Fascism's material remains changed overtime? What becomes apparent from these studies – and supports our own work in this area – is how rarely the material heritage of Fascism has been used in Italy as a means to interrogate and discuss the Fascist era, its legacies and its relationship to the present. This is not to say that Fascism's material heritage is ignored in Italy – as the studies here show, the trend since the 1980s has been very much in the direction of preservation and restoration of Fascist art and architecture – but rather that it is presented primarily or solely as 'cultural heritage': its 'Fascistness' is forgotten. There are some notable examples of 'critical preservation': Forlì's sensitive reappraisal of Fascism's architectural and artistic legacy in the city, and Bolzano's *BZ '18–'45* exhibition, housed in the basement of the recently-restored (and highly controversial) Fascist Monument to Victory, spring to mind; but these are the exceptions rather than the rule.[1]

Simona Storchi's contribution to this special issue, which examines the postwar history and reception of the ex-Casa del Fascio (Fascist party headquarters) in Predappio, Mussolini's birthplace and the site of his tomb, points us towards one explanation. From its construction in the 1930s, as part of the glorification of Mussolini, the monumentalisation of the regime and the creation of a tourist industry in the town, through to the present day, the high-profile building has provoked strong emotions. As Storchi reveals, however, despite its heavy and domineering presence within Predappio, for many years the problems associated with the building were practical and financial (the need to restore it; the lack of funds to do so) rather than ideological. This began to change once plans for the building's restoration began to include proposals for a study centre or museum of Fascism (the first proposals date from the late 1980s). For the town's solidly left-wing council, the objective was (and remains) to restore an important example of Rationalist architecture while at the same time recontextualising the building as a site for critical reflection on, and historical investigation of, the Fascist era. This would also, in theory, enable Predappio to shake off its undesirable reputation as a neo-Fascist tourist/pilgrimage site and rebrand itself as a town with an important, albeit difficult history and architectural heritage. Instead, as Storchi notes, the most recent plans to repurpose the building along these lines have 'mobilised deep-seated anxieties about national identity and its narratives as well as a fear that an incorrectly handled museum-based representation of Fascism could lead to a distortion of the historical understanding of the *ventennio* and to celebratory evocations'. The questions raised by the ex-Casa del Fascio with regard to Fascist legacy, and the national controversy this has generated, indicate just how 'difficult' difficult heritage can be in a country still struggling to 'come to terms' with its totalitarian past.

The postwar afterlives of other former local Fascist Party headquarters are explored by Lucy Maulsby in her contribution. Focusing on four Rationalist style *case del fascio* built in northern Italy by Giuseppe Terragni, Luigi Carlo Danieri and Luigi Vietti, Maulsby shows how the practical value of these large, recently-vacated and centrally-located buildings assured their survival at war's end, quickly becoming home to local left-wing parties and organisations. Through 'adaptive re-use' (Benton 2010, 129) involving the removal of Fascist symbols and inscriptions, and some internal redesign to conceal or disguise obviously 'Fascist' spaces (for example, *sacrari*), these groups were able to change or at least obscure the original political meaning of the buildings. Now acknowledged as part of Italy's rich architectural heritage – Terragni's Casa del Fascio in Como was recognised by the Ministry of Culture as a national monument as early as 1986 – the political-ideological origins of these buildings are largely ignored. In part, Maulsby suggests, this is because buildings 'have a limited capacity to carry meaning', but it also reflects a widespread view (in Italy and outside) that great works of art and architecture transcend history and politics. As the American architect Peter Eisenman commented some years ago of Terragni's Como masterpiece: 'You can never say that anything is apolitical, but this work deserved to be situated outside the historical context' (*New York Times*, 12 October 2003).

The articles by Flavia Marcello and Hannah Malone examine the postwar histories of Fascist sites linked to the First World War: respectively, Rome's Casa Madre dei Mutilati, the headquarters of the National Disabled Veterans Association (ANMIG); and the military ossuaries constructed by the regime in the 1930s along Italy's former frontier with Austria. Described by ANMIG president Carlo Delcroix as a 'fortress and temple', a place for 'battle and prayer', the Casa Madre's extensive decorative programme – statues, murals, inscriptions and so forth – shouted Fascism's obsessions with war, sacrifice and death. Yet, as Marcello notes, most of the building's artistic works survived untouched and uncensored into the post-Fascist republican era. Marcello reveals how artists' use and appropriation of familiar religious symbols and nationalist tropes within these works meant that, once shorn of their immediate Fascist context, they could, for the most part, be reinterpreted in non-political terms. The exceptions – Mario Sironi's murals of 'Dux' (Mussolini) and 'Rex Imperatore' (Victor Emanuel III) dating from the mid-to-late 1930s – were covered but not destroyed after the war, a not unusual solution to the problem of what to do with discredited regime art. These were 'rediscovered' and restored in the late 1980s by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage as items of historical and artistic interest and have since been celebrated as important works by one of the leading Italian artists of the twentieth century. The ANMIG website, however, suggests a certain reticence in dealing with the murals' Fascist content: a photograph of 'Dux' on the organisation's website shows only the mural's lower half; Mussolini, portrayed on horseback by Sironi in the upper half, is conspicuously absent.[2]

In her article, Hannah Malone demonstrates the multivalence of Fascist ossuaries in the postwar era and advises against using the term 'difficult heritage' in these cases, given how completely the ossuaries have been integrated into republican Italy's national heritage and commemorative landscape. As Malone shows, the fact that the ossuaries commemorate the fallen of the First World War meant that it was relatively easy for Italian authorities after 1945 to focus on the sites' connections to that conflict (and the sacrifices and losses to the nation that this entailed) rather than dwell on their Fascist origins. In fact, as Malone points out, the ossuaries were used after 1945 by politicians not only to remember the fallen of the Great War, but also as proxies to commemorate the dead of the Risorgimento, the Second World War and the Resistance. In this sense, Malone writes, 'the postwar uses and meanings of the monuments have altered rather than reversed the symbolic functions attributed to them by their creators'.

Malone reveals, however, that while the ossuaries have operated primarily as repositories of national memory, they also have played an important role as places of memory at the local, regional and international levels, whether as symbols of oppression (for example, of non-Italian speaking populations in north-east Italy), or sites of reconciliation (such as the meeting of Italian and Austrian leaders at the Redipuglia ossuary in 1995). Their function and identity as patriotic commemorative sites preserving the memory of the dead has also evolved: they have become cultural heritage, popular with tourists and school trips; and even their overt militarism has been subverted by peace campaigners who use them for their meetings. Malone suggests that the ossuaries are best understood as palimpsests, that is, as sites of multi-layered and ever-changing memories, with the Fascist 'layer' but one element.

The special issue begins and ends with two comparative articles that address and connect issues of commemoration, memory, and identity in Italy and the United States. In the opening article, Joshua Arthurs analyses the controversy linked to the proposed, now defunct, *Legge Fiano* (2017) which sought to ban the circulation of Fascist and Nazi propaganda in Italy, and the recent bitter conflict in the United States over the fate of Confederate monuments. Despite their obvious differences, Arthurs highlights how both cases reflect 'current tensions between populism and liberalism, nativism and cosmopolitanism, and ethnocentrism and multiculturalism'. Arthurs shows how liberal cosmopolitan elites in both countries have often framed the threat posed by the rise of contemporary right-wing populism in historical terms (as the 'rebirth' of 'ideologies of death' in Fiano's words) and have consequently attempted to shut down 'conduits', such as Confederate monuments or even Mussolini memorabilia, through which dangerous ideas and ways of thinking from the past might be transmitted. For the populist right, however, these same material artefacts serve not as 'transmitters' but rather as important symbols of a shared historically-rooted identity, to be defended at all costs. In these circumstances, concession or compromise on either side was (and remains) impossible.

The battle over Confederate statues ignited or reopened debates over the fate of other monuments in the United States. One of the more unusual cases concerned the presence in Chicago of two monuments, a road and a column, dedicated to the leading Italian Fascist Italo Balbo. (The monuments had been inaugurated with great fanfare in 1933–1934 to commemorate Balbo's second mass-formation aerial crossing of the Atlantic in July 1933. The outward leg had concluded with stops in Chicago and New York.) As Nick Carter shows in the concluding article of this special issue, by 2017, the Balbo monuments had acquired multiple negative meanings, fuelling calls for their removal. The monuments survived, however, thanks to the resistance of local Italian-American organisations. Carter argues that, for these groups, Balbo's arrival in 1933 marked the birth of the modern Italian-American community in Chicago; the moment when Italian migrants, for so long marginalised and discriminated against, finally 'belonged' – a fact confirmed by the contemporaneous inauguration of the two Balbo monuments. To argue for the monuments' removal, then, was to question the history, identity and legitimacy of the local Italian-American community – hence the long-standing resistance of community leaders even to the idea of renaming Balbo Drive after a more 'deserving' local Italian American. When, after Charlottesville, it appeared that Balbo Drive might be lost entirely and renamed in honour of an African-American civil rights activist, Italian-American community representatives went as far as to threaten to chain themselves to the old street signs if the renaming went ahead.

Carter contrasts the Chicago case with the situation in Italy where since the 1990s Balbo has been subject to new commemoration. As he shows, while Italy's postwar political class preferred to forget Balbo *fascista*, the memory of Balbo's great aerial 'cruises', and thus the

memory of Balbo *aviatore*, lived on in magazine features and at the highest levels of the Italian air force, where many senior officers were also veterans of the transatlantic flights. Carter argues that the collapse of the anti-Fascist consensus in Italian politics in the early 1990s, and the post-communist left's subsequent efforts to construct a common Italian history which acknowledged the conflicts of the recent past, has pushed the 'balance' of national memory in the direction of Balbo *aviatore,* in turn legitimising (under certain circumstances at least) his re-commemoration.

Conclusion

In a recent article, Sharon Macdonald suggests that Nazi heritage in Germany is no longer 'difficult' in the sense that Germans now regard open engagement with the material remains of Nazism as 'the obviously right and proper thing to do'; 'a sign of moral cleanliness and honesty,' rather than a potential 'disruption to positive identity formation' (Macdonald 2016, 13, 19). Moreover, in her view, this is a trend that extends beyond Germany: 'self-disclosure and self-reprimanding', she writes, 'have, in themselves, come to be widely regarded as a positive development by those inside as well as outside the societies that are performing them' (Macdonald 2016, 19). Where does this leave Italy, where the relics of Fascism are rarely confronted in a spirit of critical reflection? It is tempting to follow, as some historians have, the logic of Macdonald's position and interpret Italy's failure to confront its difficult Fascist heritage as an act of collective dishonesty and a sign of moral weakness: for example, the architectural historian Max Page has written of the 'deafening – and troubling silence' around restored Fascist architecture, which he connects to the 'newfound power' of the Italian hard right (Page 2014). Page is not the only one to see the unmediated material remains of Fascism as a gift to a resurgent right. Joshua Arthurs, for example, has argued that '"heritagizing" fascism's monumental remains' in Italy 'offers uncritical legitimation and the valorization of a deeply troubling past', while also creating 'a space – both discursive … and physical – for the re-emergence of illiberal, xenophobic and nihilistic currents in Italian society' (Arthurs 2010, 124–125). Similarly, in an article in the *New Yorker* magazine in 2017, Ruth Ben-Ghiat warned that 'If monuments are treated merely as depoliticized aesthetic objects, then the far right can harness the ugly ideology while everyone else becomes inured' (Ben-Ghiat 2017). (Interestingly, and perhaps not entirely coincidentally, Page, Arthurs and Ben-Ghiat are all American scholars.)

As the articles in this special issue indicate, however, there are many reasons, not all necessarily 'troubling', why Italians have generally chosen to ignore, failed to remember, or simply forgotten, the 'Fascistness' of Fascist heritage. Moreover, it is by no means certain that without the historicisation of Fascist sites, 'visitors may well come away [from them] with an uncritical if not outright positive view of the regime' (Bull and Clarke 2017) or, the reverse, that their historicisation will prevent (or will not actually encourage) such 'inappropriate identification' (Macdonald 2006, 16). This is not to downplay the importance of historicising Fascist heritage as a means of encouraging critical reflection on, and greater awareness of, Italy's totalitarian past but to be realistic about what this process can achieve.

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Notes

1. On Forlì, see Leech (2018). On Bolzano, see Hökerberg (2017); and the 'BZ Light on Dictatorships' website http://www.basrelief-bolzano.com/en.html. The Bolzano example conforms to the idea of 'agonistic memory activism' as proposed by the European Union-funded 'Unsettling Remembering Social Cohesion in Transnational Europe' (UNREST) research project. See http://www.unrest.eu/home/; Bull and Clarke (2017)
2. http://www.anmig.it/luoghi/

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