

APRIL

25 Aprile Festa della Liberazione: Resistance, celebrations and collective grief

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Abstract

With the rise and mainstreaming of right-wing politics globally, it is timely to explore the impact that rituals and anniversaries can have on individual political identity. In Italy, the 25th of April is celebrated annually as Liberation Day. In this article, I explore the historical and contemporary context of this, interweaving some of my own history and identity in order to reflect on the meaning this anniversary has in my commitment to social transformation and justice.

KEYWORDS

anti-fascism, collective grief, historical anniversaries, Italian resistance, liberation theory

1 | AWAKENING TO MY OWN HISTORY

Il 25 Aprile non e' una ricorrenza; ora e sempre resistenza! [25 April is not just another day; now and always resistance!]

I am an Italian-English migrant. I have lived in Aotearoa New Zealand for about a decade. This article emerged as part of my reflections on my own culture as it meets and contrasts with the culture of others. One example of this is the different traditions and meanings attached to the same day: in Aotearoa New Zealand, 25 April is acknowledged as ANZAC Day (in honour of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, while, in Italy, where I lived between the ages of 10 and ??, this day is la Festa della Liberazione, Italy's Liberation Day. As both the day itself and the manner in which this day is acknowledged have had a profound impact on my political and cultural identity, I have been inspired to contribute to this special themed issue of *PPI* on anniversaries.

Thinking back to the dawn of 25 April 1997, I was with a small group of young *compagni* and *compagne* (male and female comrades/activists) at Porta San Paolo in Rome. A group from l'Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia (ANPI, the National Association of Italian Partisans) was holding a service to remember their fallen comrades. As I looked into the eyes of one of the older partisans, I saw a kaleidoscope of emotions swirling: pride, grief, a

determination for history not to repeat itself, and a responsibility to pass these notions down to the next generation. The service was solemn. I was moved by seeing these ordinary men and women who had chosen to put their lives on the line for my freedom. Later that day there was the usual protest march. Flags of trades unions, of political parties such as the Communist Party, and rainbow peace flags filled the streets like a colourful snake moving its way through the centre of Rome. Partisan songs accompanied us: "Bella Ciao" and "Siam Comunisti della Capitale" mixed with modern resistance songs from Modena City Ramblers and the 99 Posse. Generations marched side by side, renewing our commitment not to allow fascism to gain power again. Later that night local bands played as we danced. As a 14-year-old *compagna* (comrade), it was in this encounter that the responsibility of my country's history first hit me and struck chords in my heart, an experience that I now connect to my commitment to social justice and anti-fascist activism.

The impact on Italian society and cultural identity of the De Gasperi government's choice, in 1946, to celebrate ordinary heroes who at the right time in history were able to deviate from the hegemonic social norms of the day and act for the greater communal good cannot be underestimated (Zimbaro, 2007).

The symbolism and rituals at la Festa della Liberazione weave and clash under three main themes: (a) the military victory achieved by the civil population organised under the ANPI; (b) the national celebration of liberation from the Nazi-Fascist occupation; and (c) a celebration of the dead through grief and remembrance of lives well lived. Compared to other commemorations connected to the death of soldiers, which are often sombre in nature, la Resistenza (the Resistance) allows Italy to celebrate its liberation, creating a day that allows people to express their resistance through marches, music, remembrance, and engaging new comrades (Dei, 2004). In the article I discuss these three themes, and conclude with some comments on the importance of memory as a collective mechanism.

2 | MILITARY VICTORY ACHIEVED BY THE CIVIL POPULATION

During the last two years of the second world war, i.e., 1943–1945, la Resistenza (the Resistance) was engaged in a civil war in Italy. La Resistenza was a civilian movement of men and women, known as *partigiani* (partisans). They organised themselves through the formation of different committees, associations and groups, all of which fought for freedom from Mussolini's fascist regime. Their ranks included revolutionary Communists and Anarchists, as well as Socialists, Catholics, and Christian Democrats (Armillei, 2016; Dei, 2004).

Italian society is structured around strong familial ties and bonds that extend beyond blood relatives. Relational wealth, group needs, and the common good are often prioritised over individual needs typical of collectivist cultures (Donati, 2005; Dorazio, 2013; Luciano et al., 2012). Two decades of fascist dictatorship and the bombing of civilian populations by English, American, and German armies generated a shift in the activities of la Resistenza during the last two years of the war, from clandestine operations to the emergence of a mass movement and political and personal change. In this article I explore this change with reference to an adaptation of Gramsci's (1949/1996) political theory, and the theory of liberation developed by radical psychiatrists in the 1970s (see Roy, 2006; Steiner et al., 1975).

Gramsci's political theory brings key concepts that support the development of political action and social transformation, concepts that move beyond Marxism's prescriptive economic analysis of class struggle to one of cultural transformation and social change. Critique and transformation of the dynamics of hegemonic control are important to any resistance movement. Gramsci defines hegemony as the means by which one class assumes dominance over the masses in society (Gramsci's (1949/1996; Ledwith, 2011). This dominance not only occurs through coercive and forceful strategies, but also includes the dominant ideology that becomes normalised and naturalised within civil society. According to Gramsci's (1949/1996), for social transformation to occur, counterhegemony must be created. Fostering community and harnessing change is part of the role of organic intellectuals, as their function is to bridge the gap between the felt experiences of the masses and cultural-intellectual expression (Gramsci's (1949/1996; Ledwith,

2011; Mollica, 1985). These ideas contributed to a process of political conscientisation (Freire, 1979). For instance, some of my friends' working-class *nonni* (grandparents) who had been part of la Resistenza, could hold robust political debates with us young activists, much more than my own *nonna* (grandmother) who, during the years of the war, had been focused on farming the family land on the outskirts of Rome, and obeying the dominant rule and common sense of *patria, chiesa e famiglia* (nation, church, and family).

Within the praxis of radical psychiatry, liberation is achieved with the following forms of power: *contact*, *awareness*, and *action* (Roy, 2006). Applying this to the focus of this article, I suggest that the pre-existing sociocultural milieu allowed *contact* in the form of social and familial bonds among the Italian population to be maintained even after two decades of fascist dictatorship. *Awareness* of the oppressive dominance of the fascist dictatorship was generated by the role of many organic intellectuals such as Gramsci, who considered it to be his moral duty to speak out against Mussolini's regime, even at the cost of his own freedom. As the war moved to target civilians through bombings, and both famine and oppression became very real external forces through the Nazi German occupation, Italians took *action* in a variety of forms, both military and civilian, including: workers' strikes, guerrilla-style military actions, the collection and distribution of food and clothing.

In Rossini's (2014) capturing of the voices of the women of la Resistenza, a liberation within the liberation was explored in many ways. Historical revisionism positioned women in non-combat roles, or roles that were more in alignment with the traditionally feminine. However, as in other countries impacted by the war, women in Italy were becoming active protagonists of history in the making. Their *contact* with other like-minded women, and the developing *awareness* of the hegemonic forces that constricted their role in society also lead them to the *action* of moving from the home to the resistance.

3 | CELEBRATION OF LIBERATION FROM THE NAZI-FASCIST OCCUPATION

April 25 was declared a national holiday by the De Gasperi government in 1946. This date was chosen to remember the general insurrection declared by the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale dell'Alta Italia (the National Liberation Committee of Northern Italy). The new anti-fascist government chose to remember its citizens' organised resistance and rebellion against Mussolini's regime rather than commemorating those in the armed forces who died liberating Italy.

At the end of the war there were different forces in play which accelerated Italy's transition to a democratic state and avoided any revolutionary impulses. This is one of the reasons the Italian politicians of the time did not conduct a war crimes tribunal, as was the case in Germany and Japan. At the time, Italy was (still) a relatively new nation, with a fragile identity. It was caught between internal tensions that could have led to a continuation of the civil war, and external pressures, especially from the United States of America, which, given Italy's strategic position in the Mediterranean, was concerned that it should not become part of the communist bloc. The priority of managing this tension meant that many war crimes committed by fascists and partisans went unpunished. Thus, Italians developed both a sense of pride in having liberated themselves and a collective sense of shame at the atrocities of the fascist dictatorship which were not brought to justice (Armillei, 2016; Dei, 2004). As a result of a referendum in which women gained the vote for the first time in Italian history, on 2 June 1946 Italy became a republic. In 1948 a new constitution was created which, amongst other things, prohibited the re-election of any member of the former Fascist Party; and in 1952 la legge Scelba (the Scelba law) prohibited any apologia (the defense of criminal acts) of fascism or fascist political movements. But this was not the end of the struggle against these reactive forces in society. As McLaren, Finschman, Serra, and Antelo (1998) put it:

Gramsci's spectres are whispering to us, reminding us that the struggle ahead is a politics of passionate remembrance, of revisiting anti-fascist struggles of the past, of recognizing the lessons embedded in history's dreams and nightmares, of moving forward into the new millennium, with renewed hope and optimism of the will. (p. 38)

The creation of an annual national day provided an opportunity for collective ritual and a space for communities to remember their own history, and that this is connected to a national victory generates a sense of common solidarity (Ledwith, 2011). However, the achievement and fact of such a space has not been enough to resolve the unresolved historical inheritance of war crimes (Schützenberger, 2009). Since the war, vigilance against neo-fascist movements and political parties in Italian politics has been inconsistent. Right-wing political movements were used in anti-communist propaganda through state terrorism; and during the Anni di Piombo (the years of lead), between the 1960s and 1980s, there were many examples of unresolved history repeating itself through conflict between left- and right-wing political groups as well as in the form of state terrorism—and, according to Gasparrini (2018), over 300 people were killed during these years.

4 | CELEBRATION OF THE DEAD THROUGH GRIEF AND REMEMBRANCE OF LIFE WELL LIVED

The celebration of death through rituals about life is something that contemporary *compagni* and *compagne* have learnt from la Festa della Liberazione. After that first Festa in April 1997, I attended the following commemorations: of Giorgiana Masi, shot by police on 12 May, 1977; of Walter Rossi, shot by fascists on 30 September, 1977; and of Valerio Verbano, shot by fascists on 22 February, 1980: just three among many Roman victims of the Anni di Piombi.

On the morning of 27 August, 2006, I received a devastating call. One of my *compagni*, Renato Biagetti, had been stabbed to death in the early hours of the morning by two fascists. This was not the first time I had experienced the death of a *compagno*, but it was the first time it was someone who was very close to me. I remember 50 of us sitting outside the hospital, in varying states of shock and grief. This inner circle, those who were the closest to Renato, were held and cradled by the larger movement. We were allowed to sob, weep, sit numb, and have outbursts of rage. A week later his funeral was held at the Social Centre (a left-wing political space, held by squatting, which was the site of community-building and politics), and I will be forever grateful to his family for wanting to say farewell to him there as I felt I could say goodbye without compromising any part of myself. In 2006 a new anti-fascist ritual for the Roman left-wing movement was initiated, and each year since then, we have reclaimed the site where he was killed. When a *compagno* or *compagna* dies, the slogan we chant is: “Renato è vivo e lotta insieme a noi; le nostre idee non moriranno mai!” [Renato is alive and fights alongside us; our ideas will never die!]

The social identity connected to membership of this kind of cultural group is described by Liu and Hilton (2005), as are the rituals of commemorating the dead through celebration which provide a container for a collective grieving process. The Italian left, through their Social Centres, have created communal spaces for the community to gather for such processes. These spaces are often conceptualised as a laboratory of social and political experimentation, where the personal and political are encouraged to coexist. Death and grief are universal experiences that affect all cultures and social groups, yet its expressions and meaning are specific and contextual (Valentine, 2006).

Remembering and celebrating life is a form of resistance and liberation. In the same way our *nonni* and *nonne* (male and female grandparents) resisted fascism through contact, awareness and action, Renato has been celebrated through developing music and sports projects aimed to inspire life, creativity, social transformation, and justice.

5 | LA MEMORIA È UN INGRANGGIO COLLETTIVO—MEMORY IS A COLLECTIVE MECHANISM

The purpose of collective anniversaries is so that we do not forget (“Lest we forget” is another name for the Ode of Remembrance that is associated with ANZAC Day), and so that we can entrust in and to a collective memory those atrocities that no one person can take responsibility for remembering alone. In my view this is particularly important in today's political context, in which right-wing ideologies are on the rise and, according to both Gasparrini (2018) and Jones (2018), are becoming more normalised and mainstream. In Italy, the elections earlier this year saw 50% of

Italians who voted supporting fringe populist parties (Kirchgaessner, 2018), whose campaigns were fuelled by racist propaganda. The need to remember and counter these ideologies which increase oppression and alienation is not reserved solely to the radical left. Gramsci's (1949/1996) understanding of the dynamic interplay between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces, and the need to shift resistance and critical action from the state to communities invites us all to play our part. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it also takes a village to stop right-wing ideologies continuing to rise and thrive. *La lotta continua!* [The struggle continues].

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