Who's Afraid of Mussolini's Ghost?

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'Mussolini didn't scare us when he was alive, and he's not going to scare us now that he's dead'. So, reportedly, answered Egidio Proli, mayor of the tiny Italian town of Predappio in 1957, when Italy's then Prime Minister, Adone Zoli, telephoned him to ask his permission to relocate Mussolini's body to the family crypt in the local cemetery. The Fascist dictator was born in Predappio in 1883, and his family had long demanded the return of his remains, having been buried in secret after his death at the hands of partisans in April 1945. The reason Zoli's government was, twelve years after Mussolini's fall, taking this request seriously was that to survive Italy's unstable parliamentary landscape it required the backing of deputies from the Italian Social Movement (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*, MSI), the successor of Mussolini's National Fascist Party.

At the time, many saw this reliance on the votes of unashamed neo-Fascists as scandalous (Zoli himself nearly resigned rather than accept their support) – despite some attempts on the part of the MSI to make itself look more conservative and respectable. In retrospect, this was only the first in a series of broken taboos around Fascism in Italian politics that culminated most recently in the accession to the premiership of Giorgia Meloni, who cut her political teeth in the youth wing of the MSI, and now leads Brothers of Italy, its direct descendant. Each of these broken taboos has touched Predappio, Mussolini's hometown, burial site, and the place he rebuilt as a monument to himself and the genius of Fascist urban engineering, though in different ways.

The most obvious effect on Predappio of that first broken taboo in 1957 was the reburial of Mussolini's body in the town cemetery. Zoli's government chose to carry out the move during the August holiday, when most Italians would be away, but it still received enormous attention from the press, not to mention from other quarters: the body was accompanied on its journey to Predappio by crowds of neo-Fascists. Photographs from the time show the coffin surrounded by men making the Roman salute. The following Sunday, as historian Sergio Luzzatto records, thousands of blackshirted pilgrims turned up in town to pay their respects, and when the Interior Minister ordered police to prevent anyone wearing a black shirt from entering the cemetery the pilgrims simply stripped down to their vests.

While Proli may or may not have been afraid of Mussolini's corpse, he certainly failed to anticipate the transformative effect it would have on his town. Those first Sunday pilgrimages inaugurated a triannual tradition of neo-Fascist marches in Predappio that still draw thousands of visitors today on the anniversaries of Mussolini's birth, death, and seizure of power. Outside of the anniversary marches the tomb is visited by around a hundred thousand tourists a year, some of whom may come out of simple curiosity, but many of whom are there to genuflect at Mussolini's grave and leave messages in praise of him in the visitors' book that sits in front of it. Predappio has consequently become infamous, its name synonymous in the Italian public imaginary with its most famous son and the men (and some women) who march through its streets in his name.

One might imagine that these visitors would have been uniformly delighted when, in 1994, the next great taboo on Fascism in Italian politics was broken: a coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi that included the MSI (now renamed National Alliance after a merger with former members of the Christian Democrat party) won a majority of seats in the national elections and went on to form a government that for the first time incorporated National Alliance members as ministers. But as local historian (and descendent of Egidio Proli) Mario Proli notes, the 1994 anniversary marches were among the last occasions for violent conduct at the cemetery. And whilst the sixties and seventies saw

occasional pitched street battles between visiting neo-Fascists and local antifascists, the 1994 conflict was an internecine struggle within the far right. Domenico Leccisi, one of the MSI deputies who had helped prop up the Zoli government in 1957, and a man so obsessed with Fascism that in 1946 he stole Mussolini's corpse from its unmarked grave and held it hostage for nearly four months until the government agreed to give it a proper burial, was arrested for punching a fellow former MSI deputy after calling him a traitor.

Leccisi felt that many of his erstwhile comrades had betrayed Mussolini's memory by moving the MSI and its National Alliance successor towards the political centre in an attempt to make it more electorally palatable. Indeed, a few months after the fight in Predappio came a major turning point at the party's congress in Fiuggi during which it endorsed democratic conservatism and explicitly rejected a return to Fascism and revolutionary methods. National Alliance's leader, Gianfranco Fini, would go on to denounce party members for giving the Roman salute. In 1995, as Luzzatto records, Leccisi declared 'I'm not going to Predappio this year … I don't want to meet the hypocrites who, having betrayed that great man, dare to present themselves at his grave'.

Fast-forward to the most recent broken taboo, as Giorgia Meloni accedes to the premiership of Italy in 2022, and Leccisi and many of his generation have been dead for years. Were any of them to have attended the October demonstration in Predappio commemorating the centenary of Mussolini's 'March on Rome', which coincided with Meloni's victory, it is unlikely they would have found any of the senior hierarchy of Brothers of Italy in attendance to punch. Meloni secured her victory in part by making her party's Fascist genealogy seem like a non-issue, and by continuing National Alliance's policy of explicitly condemning the anti-democratic and racist elements of Fascism (whilst nevertheless appealing to the many Italians who think Fascism had its merits). Meloni would never be seen within miles of Predappio. Responding to the October demonstration, she declared Predappio to be 'politically something distant from me in a very significant way'.

The story of these three moments of broken taboos as they played out in relation to Predappio can tell us something significant about Italy's relationship to its Fascist past. Predappio stands as a living icon of Mussolini and his regime (an attendee at a 2018 march was photographed wearing a t-shirt with a mocked-up version of the Disney logo on it, but with Predappio's townscape, and the word 'Auschwitzland' beneath). Whether its erstwhile mayor Proli or indeed any of its current inhabitants like it (many of them do not), its existence is tied up with the man who was born to the local blacksmith in 1883: 'the whole town is the Duce's tomb' is how Roberto Bui, a member of the Bolognese Wu Ming collective, put it to me.

Many commentators point to these broken taboos, alongside Predappio's existence and the ongoing tradition of the anniversary marches, as evidence for the fact that Fascism remains very much alive in Italy, and for the failure of the country to come to terms with this part of its history. That is in part the case, but there is also a more complex story here: on each occasion that taboos around Fascist involvement in Italian politics have been broken, Predappio has served as an index for the relationship between historical Fascism and its contemporary equivalents. In 1957 that relationship was still close, so close that the MSI could make its support for Zoli's government contingent on the return of Mussolini's body to his hometown, and so inaugurate the anniversary marches that continue today. By 1994, however, Fini was pointedly snubbing attendance at Predappio's marches, no doubt wary of receiving the same treatment as Leccisi's 'traitor', but also because his absence was reported on by the press and cited as further evidence of his and his party's transformation into a democratic entity. By the time Meloni had become the first leader of a party with roots in the MSI to accede to the premiership, the idea that she would set foot anywhere near Predappio is preposterous.

In other words, both Predappio and Meloni's election (along with other such broken taboos) may in some ways be evidence for Italy's failure to come to terms with its Fascist past. But they are so in extremely different ways: the people who come to Predappio idolise Mussolini and Fascism as a historical movement; Meloni, and her predecessors like Fini, succeeded in breaking these taboos in part precisely by performatively distancing themselves from Predappio and what it represents. Many of those who attend the marches in Predappio undoubtedly voted for Meloni, and no doubt also she has sought to appeal to them. Yet she has not done so by promising a return to historical Fascism nor endorsing their view of it. Leccisi and his ilk would likely despise Meloni and all she stands for.

None of which is to say there is nothing dangerous about Meloni's accession, or that we should ignore her and her party's Fascist roots. It is only to say that such danger is unlikely to emerge – dank, putrid, and zombie-like – from Mussolini's crypt in Predappio. In focussing so much of our attention on the relationship between the contemporary Italian far right and its historical predecessor we set a very low bar for entry into the realm of political respectability.

Much is rightly made in discussions of Italian attitudes to Fascism of its post-war failures to 'de-fascistise' in the way that Germany was 'de-nazified'. One doomed effort to purge Fascists from the nation's government after Mussolini's fall in 1943 involved the issuing of a survey to all employees of the Italian state asking the respondent forty-three different categories of questions about their relationship with the regime, including whether they had ever occupied the position of Secretary of the National Fascist Party. Unsurprisingly, few people took up the invitation to self-incriminate. In a similar fashion, associating Meloni with Predappio and historical Fascism in some ways only gives her more opportunities simply to deny any such link. If we have reason to fear Meloni and her politics it is not as the embodiment of Mussolini's ghost, but as herself.

About the author:

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