

BOOK REVIEW

Fascism, the War, and Structures of Feeling in Italy, 1943–1945: Tales in Chiaroscuro

by Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, New York, Oxford University Press, 2023, xiii + 338 pp., £83.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-01-9288-750-4

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Between the summer/autumn of 1943 and the spring of 1945 Italy underwent a series of events – the fall of Fascism and the armistice, the emergence of the Resistance movement and civil war, foreign occupation and endless episodes of traumatic violence – that generated a condition of unprecedented uncertainty.

With *Fascism, the War, and Structures of Feeling*, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi explores how ordinary Italians lived through such an extraordinary time. Inspired by Raymond Williams’s concept of ‘structures of feeling’ and working on more than one hundred private diaries of ordinary citizens – stored in the Archivio Diaristico Nazionale (Pieve Santo Stefano, Tuscany) and in the Archivio della scrittura popolare (Trento) – she undertakes a hermeneutical investigation of how Italians negotiated their historical situatedness after 20 years of dictatorship. Unhinging Italians from fixed categories – active and passive choices, guilt and innocence, partisans and passive observers – she effectively delivers a phenomenological analysis of how individuals generate cultural meanings in the everyday and with real effect on history. The argument is that the failure of Italians to work through their past and the ‘misguided decisions’ (p. 43) they took between 1943 and 1945 blazed the trail for the reemergence of fascism in postwar Italy, ‘including more recent “flirtations” with it’ (p. 300).

Falasca-Zamponi applies the concept of ‘structure of feeling’ to engage with a challenging methodological task for historians: how to see the past not as a fixed object and a reality separated from the present but as fluid process, experienced as the present for those who lived in it. Therefore, she examines diaries not simply as a manifestation of feelings and thoughts of ordinary people or as the reaction of subordinate individuals to historical changes; rather, she sees them as the ‘means through which to gauge the pulsating tensions between official discourses and practical consciousness’ (p. 12), the discrepancies between the former and the latter thus capturing the ‘spillover of existence that occurs when we confront an inexhaustible horizon of decisions’ (p. 13). By delving into the existential richness of these documents, she effectively assesses how Italians, in the midst of turmoil, confronted their present and negotiated their past. Their individual experiences reflected the range of responses to the past, as well as the cultural mode that shaped their interpretations of what they were going through. Ultimately, the book shows that the ‘banal’ power of everyday experiences can have real and lasting impacts that reverberate at individual, familial, and national levels, as well as on political culture.

The introduction carefully lays out the analytical objectives, historiographic debates, and primary sources. Chapter 1 examines popular reactions to the three major episodes of summer/autumn 1943: Mussolini's 'resignation' from power in July 1943, the armistice between Italy and the Allies in September 1943, and the declaration of war against Germany in October 1943. Chapter 2 analyses the semantic challenge presented by the 'enemy'. Chapter 3 zooms in on the intimate level of diaries, unravelling people's historical subjectivities through fear, hopes, and cynicism. The reader discovers that these diaries touch only lightly on topics such as the Resistance and the partisan struggle. This is, the author argues, a further signal of the distance between official narratives and the lived experiences of ordinary Italians. Yet, rather than relegating these voices to a 'grey zone' or to a lifeless dimension permanently defined by its non-choice or passive choice – as in Claudio Pavone's masterpiece *Una guerra civile* and in more recent and much less remarkable works of pseudohistory – Falasca-Zamponi tackles the myriad and often contrasting ways Italians came to terms with the past, exposing their *chiaroscuro*.

Chapters 4 and 5 switch the focus to what the author calls 'intellectual diarists', prominent figures who turned their private reflections into potentially public record. Falasca-Zamponi argues that these diaries attempted to artificially separate Italy from Fascism and Fascism from fascists – and perhaps, like ordinary diarists, themselves from Fascism. However, intellectual diarists raised the question of the responsibility of Italians in the success of the regime. The choice to separate intellectuals and ordinary diaries effectively serves to illuminate the latter with the former. Yet analytically the choice is quite problematic. Elites and members of a political community share a wider cultural existence, which includes the phenomenological background of 'inventory experience' (Karl Mannheim). A juxtaposition between these texts could have revealed more deeply the circulation, overlaps and exchanges between elites and ordinary people, low and high culture.

Falasca-Zamponi engages with complex, amorphous topics with grace and interdisciplinary composure. Her dedication to documenting the feeling of ordinary Italians could have resulted in a series of disconnected stories. In her hands, instead, individual efforts and struggle are woven together in a tapestry of heartbreak and healing, conflict and closure, pain and cure. For scholars, capturing human emotions and feelings can sometimes feel like trying to build on quicksand. With this book the scaffolding holds and readers get glimpses into the experiences and lives of individuals that are nuanced, intricate, and authentic.

The book, however, could engage more extensively with the existing scholarship. Falasca-Zamponi claims that no studies 'have focused on how ordinary people experienced the events of those years as opposed to how they later remembered them' (pp. 3–4). Yet my *On the Edge of Democracy* (Oxford, 2019) tackles precisely such lived experiences and is based on the very same sources. Liminality, the concept that my book operationalises, encapsulates powerfully the fluidity, uncertainty, and the disorientation as well as the process of meaning formation that marked this critical juncture of Italian history. It could have helped the author to escape the theoretical dilemmas vis-à-vis the loaded concept of 'experience', which she, in line with Williams, does not embrace fully but finds hard to discard completely. In short, liminality might have strengthened the basis of her argument.

Despite this criticism, *Fascism, the War, and Structures of Feeling* is a joy to read. It might be less innovative than it claims. But it offers a rich rendering and a sensitive analysis of the entanglement of lived experience with history and a valuable contribution for a deeper understanding of wartime Italy.