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Public space at stake: competing forms of territorialisation and the construction of a democratic public space in the first years of the Italian Republic

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Abstract

The end of the civil war, the fall of the Italian Social Republic, the allied occupation and the gradual transition to the new Italian Republic not only set Italy on the path to democracy, but also gradually gave Italians access to a new public space. This article proposes to revisit the classic question of the legacy of Fascism by looking at the question of space and the difficult construction of a genuine democratic space. During the *ventennio*, opponents were largely denied access to common spaces, both symbolically and physically. The article raises the question of violence and the exclusive appropriation of space, showing that the representations and practices inherited from Fascism did not disappear overnight. But these practices of space were not always violent: by looking at aspects that are often neglected (graffiti, manifestos, noises and singing), the aim is to show that the transition took time and was sometimes complicated, despite the political leaders of the Italian Republic claiming to have opened up a completely new era.

Keywords: history; Italian Republic; public space; repertoire of contention; policing; political violence

The end of the civil war, the fall of the Italian Social Republic (the last avatar of Fascism), the allied occupation and the gradual rise of the National Liberation Committee (CLN; the coalition of the main antifascist parties), not only set Italy on the path to democracy, but also gradually gave Italians access to a new public space. Part of the population had been excluded from the nation's public space under Fascism, depriving Italians of a forum for the open and collective performance of a wide range of political and social activities.

Looking at the various experiences that coincided with the aftermath of war[1] through a spatial lens can yield new insights into this period, as we discover how the actors of the period attempted to recreate – or indeed create, since it is unclear whether Italy really had a public space during the liberal period[2] – a democratic public space. How does a genuinely public space operate? And to what extent can different actors operate legitimately in public spaces? These questions were central concerns during the republican

period. Rather than understanding 'public space' to mean the public sphere – i.e. the sphere of public debate – like Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1962), I take the phrase in its spatial sense. I examine how different actors attempted to take over public spaces, projecting onto them their competing visions. This leads me to examine what these actors had to say about the consideration that is owed to a political opponent – i.e. how much space one should make for a rival – which allows me to rethink the turbulent aftermath of Fascism and Italy's rather thorny path to democracy (Forlenza 2019).

I wish to show that the fall of the Fascist regime did not immediately put an end to the appropriation of public space by some groups at the expense of others. Although newly reconquered, common spaces – i.e. spaces that were not private – were slow to become genuinely public. Defined by its *openness* and *accessibility* (Lévy 2003, 336), public space can be described as a space of exchange that political opponents have a legitimate and uncontested right to access in order to express themselves. This definition of public space shares some of the characteristics of Habermas's sphere of public debate, notably the citizens' right to use it for political protests, without resorting to the usual mechanisms of political representation. While the common spaces of postwar Italy provided the background for a number of political actions made possible by the country's emerging democracy, they were also – if not more so – literally at stake, because Fascism had convinced Italians that occupying and appropriating them was a sign of power. These practices obviously did not begin with Fascism, as the great collective rites of the French Revolution and the republican rituals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries demonstrate (Ozouf 1976; Ihl 1996). While it continued the policy of public monumentality of the liberal era, Fascism nevertheless brought it to an unprecedented level by organising the masses and adding its own practices of exclusive appropriation and, above all, exclusion. The legacy of the *ventennio* is thus crucial to understand this mindset: under this regime, the exercise of power, the marking of public space and the participation of the masses in public life became more closely entwined than almost ever before. The opponents of Fascism were banned from common spaces and cities became places that needed to be kept under especially close watch. Indeed, the regime was initially so wary of cities and the urban working classes that in 1928 it issued a call to 'evacuate the cities' (*sfollare le città*) and gave prefects the power to curb the urban growth of certain localities on a whim (Dogliani 2014, 145). Although the Fascist vision of Italy as a rural utopia was short-lived, it reminds us of the regime's initial wish to limit public interactions to those that could take place in villages, which were considered less perilous than cities. Similarly, the repression of opposition activists involved banishing them to the periphery or sending them to prison, symbolically and physically barring them from public space (Poesio 2014).

Nothing showcased the totalitarian project of Fascism better than its public architecture: the new Fascist city was meant to promote the education of the masses and celebrate the regime's own power through the fascisation of urban spaces. In other words, there was a clear link between the regime's totalitarian project and the fascisation of common space (Nicoloso 2008, 104–105).[3] Right from the start, Fascist spatial practices were exclusionary and closely associated with violence. During the *Biennio rosso* (1919–20), several political movements vied with each other for control of public space. Fascism won that contest, sowing terror on the streets – even as it was perceived by some as a force for order – and saturating public spaces with its symbols. When the movement of the *Fasci di combattimento* became a political party, during its fractious third congress in Rome in November 1921, Fascists from all over Italy defiantly marched through the Italian capital, which, up until then, had remained somewhat wary of them. This march dramatised a 'symbolical battle between two incompatible versions of Italy, the nation and the anti-nation, unworthy Italians and those worthy of governing the country by force' (Gentile 2007, 11). This first march and the March on Rome that followed less than one year later helped

to build a form of government based on the exclusion of political opponents from common spaces and on the violent political practices that would become characteristic of the exercise of power during the *ventennio*. The ceremonial celebration in Rome, on 28 October 1923, of the government's first anniversary confirmed this: it sought 'to warn antifascists and Italians and show them that the rise to power of Fascism was based on force and could not be revoked through the legal procedures of a parliamentary state' (Gentile 2007, 63). From the *squadristi* to the consolidation of the Fascist Party's hold on power, the rise of Fascism, with its increasingly violent takeover of public space and the exclusion of the party's political opponents, can thus be read as a negation of public space.

Twenty years of Fascist spatial practices could not be expected to disappear in a few weeks, even if the news of Mussolini's deposition did coincide with attempts to destroy the symbols of the fascisation of common spaces, as people hammered out the *fasci* that hung on public buildings (Pupella-Noguès 2023, 443–453; Baioni 2020). The defascisation of spatial practices took a long time, despite Resistance actors who hoped to break once and for all with their recent past. Many spaces with an ambiguous, neither private nor public, status – for example, the *case del fascio* or the branches of the *gruppi rionali fascisti* – were devolved to the community and turned into police stations or *questure* headquarters (Nicoloso 2008, 281). This practice put an end to the privatisation of common spaces, while also providing new institutions with the premises they needed to operate properly. But did it lead to the creation of a functional public space? No. All the speeches celebrating the return to democracy were not enough to spur the concrete spatial practices and negotiations between different actors that this would entail.

If we consider, like the geographer Jacques Lévy, that 'a space becomes public the moment those present can and must think that they might be standing next to any other member of the society' (Lévy 2003, 336), then public space, at the liberation and during the first few months of the fledgling Italian Republic, was not yet completely public, because the political harassment and exclusion of political opponents was still widespread by groups wishing to take over and control common spaces.[4] Lévy continues:

> Thus, every time a reputedly public space is encroached upon, this tends to privatise it; every time its functions are subverted, this does not produce new possibilities for its uses, but curtails freedoms (the boundary between these two situations is not always easy to determine) and that place loses some of its public character. (Lévy 2003, 338)

My ambition, in this article, is to examine some of these encroachments on common spaces and show just how difficult it was, in the immediate aftermath of Fascism, for Italians to develop collective practices in the spaces that had been returned to them. The fact that different groups competed to take over common spaces, sometimes claiming them for their exclusive use, is evidence that public space in Italy was still a work in progress. Although a public space can, of course, never quite match the purity of theoretical models, it seems to me that, at the liberation, Italian common spaces, with their simmering tensions, point to the complexity of the democratisation process. As such, they present us with a new way to explore the legacy of Fascism, complementing other, more familiar, approaches to this period that focus on continued state practices, the question of the rule of law and the persistence of high levels of political violence.[5]

We can rethink the transition to democracy if we look at this process through the lens of the period's uses of public space as a space of appropriation, competition, territorialisation and exclusion. Political conflicts ranging from the customary disagreements to outbursts of physical violence can thus be seen as evidence of the competition for, and different uses of, public space by political groups whose goals were not necessarily

aligned. Of particular interest to me here are the disputes that arose between the different republican parties, and the ways in which they shared common spaces from the transition to the elections of 1948. What was the legacy of Fascism? And, on a more general level, what conditions had to be met for a democratic public space to become possible? My aim is to show that, despite the rhetoric about the return of democracy, a close observation of spatial phenomena shows that certain exclusivist and exclusionary conceptions fostered by Fascism still hold sway. This is in keeping with the rich historiography that has examined the political violence of the postwar years, but by introducing a spatial dimension, which has very often been neglected in studies of violence.

My work is essentially based on police sources conserved at the Archivio Centrale dello Stato[6] as well as various documents from the *archivi di stato* and the archives of different political parties. The study of violence was not my main objective: much has already been published on this subject, including – to mention only two of the more recent studies – Acciai et al. (2017) and Dogliani and Matard-Bonucci (2017). Instead, my research focuses on a number of minor incidents that have often been neglected or gone unnoticed by historians, but that show just how difficult it was to share common spaces with people of different views. These incidents also reveal that, far from merely being spaces where political forces clashed and vied for power, public space itself was often at stake in these conflicts.

The thorny path to pluralism

The legacy of Fascism on public space found its clearest manifestation in attitudes towards the headquarters of local political party branches. The archives of the Italian ministry of the interior show evidence of a massive campaign to inflict damage on such premises in 1945 and 1946. There were so many acts of vandalism that it is not possible to list all the reports of battered doors, shattered or paint-splattered party nameplates, lacerated or stolen flags and broken windows, not to mention those describing the furniture, logbooks and wall hangings that were destroyed in the dead of night by intruders.[7] These many acts of violence against property – for the most part incidents that occurred at night and did not involve physical assaults – are evidence of a refusal to allow certain political groups in public spaces. How could one disagree with Angelo Ventrone's assessment, in his analysis of political discourse, that the figure of the enemy had become a pervasive obsession (Ventrone 2006)? To deny a political party's right to open a branch in a city is to turn a political 'opponent' – whose legitimacy and right of expression would be recognised in a democracy – into an 'enemy' who must not be debated but fought.

A few examples of the damage inflicted on such premises should be enough to support this point, especially when a single branch endured multiple attacks. The emblems and nameplates of political parties were particularly common targets, confirming that there was a will to symbolically erase maligned parties from urban spaces. Such degradations were reported in the South of Italy in 1944 and 1945 – while the civil war raged in the rest of the peninsula – and after 1945 in the country as a whole. Although the offices of Marxist political parties – the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity (PSIUP)[8] – were especially frequent targets, all political denominations seem to have been vulnerable to such degradations, suggesting that no single party escaped condemnation or accusations of illegitimacy.

Some of these incidents were part of larger chains of events, notably in the province of Bari. In the autumn of 1945, attacks against the PCI and its socialist allies escalated following the rumour that the local popularity of communism was curtailing American support to the region.[9] During the night of 22–23 September, someone tore off the nameplate of the youth branch of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) in Barletta; on 24 October, the hammer and sickle were hacked off the door of the PCI headquarters in Torre a Mare; two days

later, a group of people broke into the PCI branch in Noicattaro, stealing its red flag and burning it on the streets, while the offices of Action Party (PdA) were also attacked and vandalised; on 7 November, the headquarters of the PCI in Marietto, a neighbourhood in Bitonto, were broken into and furniture was set on fire. On 26 November, a group of Communists responded to this series of events with a protest and destroyed the nameplate of the branch of the Uomo Qualunque (the Common Man) in Riva di Puglia, after pelting it with stones.[10]

The headquarters of all party political branches were vulnerable to these acts of vandalism, which fell into four broad categories: stolen or destroyed party nameplates (this type of attack was the most common); slanderous graffiti; break-ins, often a prelude to wrecking the premises and smashing the furniture; and the use of explosives (although less common, this type of assault unsurprisingly caused more of a stir).[11]

Political parties understood that these acts could symbolically exclude them from public spaces and undermine the free competition allowed in democratic elections. Thus, when the nameplate of the Terni branch of the Christian Democracy (DC) was smashed one night, that party protested with a public notice. Posting its notices on the walls of the city allowed the DC to stake its symbolic claim to the city's public space and affirm the legitimacy of its right of expression. The notices read:

> The population will now be aware of the unconsidered and anticivic act committed by anonymous vandals under the cover of night, smashing the marble nameplate of our headquarters and tearing off Christian Democracy posters advertising our 1st Provincial Congress … We protest these acts committed and inspired by a lack of civic virtue and a slavish mindset. The perpetrators imagine that such demonstrations of intolerance towards those who do not share their views will allow them to subject the Italian people to the shackles of a new tyranny.[12]

The key point here is to position the vandals outside the democratic sphere: they did not act in the light of day but under the cover of night, and their mindset was not civic but tyrannical. The authors draw a clear parallel between their left-wing opponents and the Fascists as they denounce their assailants' perversion of the rules of democracy, which theoretically should allow everyone access to public space.

However, such acts of vandalism could also exhibit the spitefulness of political rivals vying for the headquarters of former Fascist organisations, notably those of the National Fascist Party (PNF). The same sources at the ministry of the interior regularly mention how much competition there was for such premises.[13] Whereas in other countries – notably in France (see Cirefice 2022a, 330) – local party branches would often meet in a café, Italian political parties seemed to have inherited the PNF's preference for housing their local branches in premises entirely dedicated to their activities. Providing local branches with semi-public offices in city centres allowed political groups to demonstrate their hold on individual cities as well as on a wider territory; a party with low membership could not afford to provide its local branches with offices in so many cities. In fact, it was not unusual for two or more political parties to share the same offices. These arrangements ranged from fairly unsurprising alliances – between the PSI and the PCI, for example – to more surprising groupings. In Grumo Nevano (Naples), for example, the PCI shared its premises with the Labour Democratic Party, the PdA and the Italian Liberal Party (PLI)![14]

Unsurprisingly, then, 20 years of spatial practices did not disappear overnight. The legacy of Fascism was twofold. First, the wish of political parties to provide their branches with premises, even in very small towns, recalled the PNF's visible but incomplete attempt to open offices throughout the Italian territory. Local branches were thus

instrumentalised as markers of the presence of a political party in a given city, symbolically signalling both its hold on a local area and its democratic legitimacy. As such, it is hardly surprising if party headquarters were the key target of those who wished to strip a given political party of legitimacy in the democratic life of the country. This denial was the second legacy of Fascism: some political actors wished they could deny any visibility to their opponents, and sometimes gave in to temptation, attacking the symbols of rival parties. As a result, public spaces struggled to become genuinely democratic – that is, fully shared spaces. In other words, the Fascist notion that a party could take over a common space had not completely disappeared.

Political violence

The political meetings that took place in the months following the end of the war were also clear evidence of this. The contrast with France is particularly striking. On the other side of the Alps, it was common practice to allow dissenting voices to be heard at political meetings: the election of a chair was customarily followed, at the end of a meeting, with the chair inviting others to respond to the arguments that had been presented. Police archives show that it was not unusual for someone to take up the challenge: indeed, political parties encouraged their members to attend their opponents' public rallies. While this practice should not be idealised – counterarguments were often greeted with hostility and jeers, and could not always be heard above the chants, hollers and boos – it does suggest a conception of democracy based on shared spaces and collective debate (Cirefice 2022a, 340–341). In contrast, this practice was almost unknown in Italy: indeed, sources show that disturbances were not that rare. While the majority of police reports describe orderly political meetings, it is nevertheless clear that some activists actively sought to disrupt public political rallies, or even bring them to an early conclusion. The archives of Arezzo's Socialist Federation show a group of activists congratulating themselves for successfully interrupting a meeting of the Christian Democracy in Carda. Whereas heads of political parties generally sought to dissociate themselves from such incidents, or at the very least refused to issue a statement, the Federation declared itself 'delighted' (*compiaciuta*) with the news.[15] Interrupting a political meeting was thus not merely part of an activist's repertoire of contention: it was a practice that was endorsed, if not encouraged, by the local head of the party – and in writing to boot.

This helps to explain why the sources describe so many political rallies being brought to an abrupt end. In June 1945, for example, a public meeting organised by the PLI was interrupted by a hostile crowd of communists and libertarians. According to a police report, the speaker was unable to resume his presentation and the PLI had to bring the meeting to an abrupt conclusion.[16] A few months later, in November, in Venice, around 300 people interrupted a speech by the editor of *Il Nuovo Risorgimento*, a monarchist weekly, as they burst into the room with flyers against the monarchy.[17] In yet another incident, one that took place in Pisa, a priest and elements of his congregation interrupted a Socialist meeting, accusing that party of spreading lies about the DC. In his report to the ministry, the prefect wrote that the 'tense debate' that followed 'degenerated into a scurrilous slanging match', effectively drawing the public rally to a close.[18] These interruptions were not confined to the first months of the postwar period but continued well into 1946, only to surge again in 1947–8, as tensions rose following the collapse of the CLN and the start of the Cold War. The sources abound with examples of such interruptions by activists from all parts of the political spectrum. In fact, they seem to have been especially common on the left, but it is difficult to determine whether left-wing parties were genuinely more disruptive, or if they are mentioned more often because the authorities kept a closer eye on them.

A similar dynamic was at play behind these disturbances and the acts of vandalism committed against the premises of local party branches: political opponents were seen as enemies, not as citizens who could legitimately and freely express themselves. As such, they were denied a place in the city, and tended especially to be barred from the highly symbolical communal and deliberative space of the *piazza* (Isnenghi 2004). When these incidents took place during an electoral campaign – they were particularly numerous during the bitter electoral campaigns of 1948 (Novelli 2008; Gundle 2000) – they showed how difficult it was for some actors to let go of an exclusionary vision of public space in which political opponents might be tolerated only if they could not be silenced. In this sense, there was not so much a democratic public space as there were spaces at stake, as political parties vied with each other to take them over and exclude their rivals. The policies of the government did not always help: as tensions rose between the DC and its allies, on the one hand, and Marxist parties (PCI and PSI), on the other, the government repeatedly prohibited political meetings, sometimes on shaky legal grounds. The PCI and the PSI, for example, were regularly denied permission to hold public rallies on the grounds that they would 'breach the peace'. These decisions were part of a wider attempt to curtail the activities of the opposition. The failure to repeal Fascist laws was not an issue as long as antifascists saw eye to eye: while the law was not revised, new democratic practices, including the sharing of common spaces, had prevailed. After the Marxist parties (PCI and PSI) were ousted from the government in May 1947, however, the DC, rediscovering the advantages of repressive legislation, allowed the minister of the interior and prefects to police the political posters of the different parties, at the expense of the left. While most Western democracies require that political parties obtain permission for their posters from their local authority, such requests are generally formalities for parties with seats in parliament; and when a party is denied permission to put up its posters, it is presented with a clear explanation. This was not the case in Italy, suggesting that the exclusive and exclusionary approaches to public space already described found an echo within the state apparatus itself. The language the prefects used in their reports to the minister of the interior bolster this observation: it was not unusual for them to use phrases like 'the healthy segment of the population' to describe those who did not identify with left-wing parties.[19] This language of illness and health is yet more evidence of the fact that political opponents were viewed as enemies who should be barred from accessing public space.

Historians have also long pointed out that Italian police officers used more firearms and killed far more people than the police forces of other Western European democracies (Della Porta and Reiter 2003; Dogliani 2017; Labanca 2022). Mario Isnenghi also notes that the sharing of public spaces was a challenge. There were some in the state apparatus who still believed that Italy's public space belonged to them. Instead of regulating the democratic space and guaranteeing free access to all citizens, they arbitrated between them, deciding who could legitimately enter this space and who could not. Those who were perceived to have no legitimate right to public space were vulnerable to violent acts of repression:

> Although the balance of power and the proportions of parties in government shifted in the second postwar period, the city square was still a place where public ceremonies and demonstrations of strength characterised social interactions; however, when the veil that hung over reality suddenly lifted, there could be violence and killings. (Isnenghi 2004, 430–431)

Bells, songs and sounds: taking over sound spaces

This attitude towards public space could also have milder manifestations and as such has often been overlooked by historians. Attempts to take over the space could also take the

form of minor but repeated infringements of the principles governing a democratic public space. While the latter is theoretically a shared space regulated by the state in order to ensure free access to all, the sources show that competition for public space intensified through the use of sound and the written word.

Various actors marshalled the use of sound to saturate public spaces with their own symbols, associating them with their politics. This could take many forms, notably the performance of songs and brass bands at processions and parties. However, I wish to focus on bells and loudspeakers: while their symbolical resonances were varied, their uses were often similar.

Police reports flag up large numbers of incidents featuring church bells. We only have to remember the symbolic and political impact of church bells since the French Revolution – at the very least – to know that the ringing of church bells is far from insignificant (Ihl 1996). Church bells, a symbol of the power of the church over time and space, since they chime across cities and villages, have often been the focus of political attempts at instrumentalisation. This was still true of Italy in the postwar period. As tensions mounted between the Marxist parties (PCI and PSI) and the DC, some priests, openly siding with the DC, took part in the conflict through their church bells. The ringing of church bells thus became a way to reassert the sovereignty of the church over the space of a town and the collective life of its residents.

In 1945 Ravanusa (Agrigento), for example, a priest decided to ring the bells just as a socialist was to deliver a political speech in the square outside his church. What better example of the battle for control of public space? When a political, indeed Marxist, party decided to hold a rally outside a church, a decision that can seem provocative – whether it really was meant as a taunt or whether, as seems more likely, this square happened to be the village square – the priest's response was to saturate public space with noise, interrupting the speaker. The public meeting could not proceed, despite the outcry in the square.[20] All too aware of the symbolic weight of church bells, left-wing activists sometimes attempted to seize control of them in order to break the hold of the church over their use. Thus, on 1 May 1946, a group of activists went to the church of San Giuseppe, in Livorno, demanding that the bells be rung in honour of the workers' movement. When the priest refused, they went up the bell tower to ring them themselves and flew the red flag from the top of the tower, where it remained for part of the day – demonstrating their wish to symbolically appropriate the space of the church.[21] The same dynamic was at work in the town of Turi, in Puglia, when left-wing activists demanded to be allowed to go up the bell tower and ring the bells to celebrate the victory of the republic and the defeat of the monarchy on 2 June 1946. Once again, they prevailed despite the priest's refusal to comply.[22] Bells thus seem to have been perceived as symbols of sovereignty and various groups battled to seize control of them for their own purposes.

This was even clearer in town halls, which often had a civic bell tower: to wit, an incident that took place in Arezzo and is well documented because it led to a protracted dispute between the municipal and prefectural authorities. The mayor of Arezzo, faced with a large crowd of demonstrators making social demands, seems to have emboldened the protesters, who went on to attack the prefecture. As the crowd became larger and angrier outside the town hall, the mayor had the bells rung and the red flag flown on the civic tower. This incident sparked heated exchanges between the prefect, the minister of the interior and the mayor. The first two reminded the mayor of his duties: the civic bell was public property and could not be used for partisan ends. The mayor, meanwhile, wondered at the fuss caused by the ringing of a bell that had been debased for '20 years by the Fascist regime', providing us with yet more evidence that Fascist approaches to the use of space endured in the political imagination, even when politicians wished to distance themselves from them.[23] This incident, which was not an isolated case, allows us to see

that the ringing of church or civic bells was a powerful way to assert control, even if only temporarily, over a public space. In this way, the use of bells was similar to the widespread practice of flying the red flag outside the town halls won by the PSI or PCI, despite the regular outbursts of outrage caused by this improper takeover of a public building.

Loudspeakers were at the centre of similar conflicts: perceived as symbols of modernity, they rapidly became ubiquitous, causing a headache to the authorities. The competition between the different political parties was so fierce in many cities that they used their loudspeakers at top volume in order to try to drown out the speeches of their opponents. The residents would then complain about the noise to the authorities, who would remind the culprits of the regulations: the use of sound devices in public spaces had to be authorised. The point of such regulations was to limit the use of these devices, thus ensuring that all political denominations had free access to public space and barring any one party from taking it over. However, several incidents show that this democratic rule was not easily accepted by political actors. In Naples, socialist activists complained that some churches had affixed loudspeakers outside their walls and that their broadcasts could be heard across the city.[24] Similarly, Bari's *questura* felt compelled to remind the city's political parties of a few basic rules, deploring the use of 'loudspeakers by various parties in order to trade accusations, attacks and personal insults, which is not without consequences'. The frequency of such reminders shows that political parties chose to ignore them.[25]

While there is, of course, no such thing as a perfect public space whose shared access is flawlessly regulated, these various examples show that political parties often encroached on it and resisted the rules regulating its access. Behind these behaviours lies the same dynamic – albeit in a minor key – that led to attacks on party headquarters and the violent interruption of political meetings: namely, the refusal to fully accept the presence of political opponents in public spaces. This suggests that the rules of the democratic game eluded many across the political spectrum.

The process is much the same for political graffiti. All the political parties denounced the writers of graffiti for their refusal to play by democratic rules. The regulations only permitted political parties to put up posters after they were granted permission by the authorities. Writing on walls thus allowed practitioners to bypass this rule and overstep the limits of their democratic rights. While political parties protested against the use of graffiti, this practice was nonetheless strikingly widespread in the months that followed the war. Extolled, under Fascism, as a way of circumventing the regime's stranglehold on public space, the practice of writing graffiti did not die down overnight. Street writing did become less ubiquitous around 1946, which seems to indicate that republican values were becoming relatively ingrained under the influence of the various political parties. However, the start of the Cold War coincided with a recrudescence of graffiti, suggesting that these infractions are a good barometer of the political struggle for public space (Cirefice 2022b).

Conclusion

All these elements clearly show the influence of Fascist conceptions and practices on the political actors of the transition and republican period. Contrary to what the parties of the CLN liked to claim, a properly democratic public space, governed by the same rules for all and a peaceful relationship with other political forces leading to the sharing of space, emerged only with difficulty.

Competition between political forces is obviously a part of democracy. However, what we observe in Italy in the years following the Second World War goes beyond simple democratic competition: this article has highlighted the continuation of exclusionary

tendencies, sometimes even through violence. Opponents are often seen as illegitimate competitors, and the objective of exclusively appropriating space – by occupying it, saturating it symbolically, or marking it temporarily or permanently – remains central to many political forces. Yet, as we have seen, what characterises democratic public space is theoretically its 'non-appropriable' nature (Lévy 2003), because democratic power must remain an 'empty place' (Lefort 2007, 465–466). This suggests that political opponents were still being delegitimised (Pombeni 2003) and seen as enemies (Ventrone 2006). This article is thus a contribution to the study of the legacy of Fascism. Indeed, the transition period between Fascism and the republic has often been studied from the point of view of continuities in law or political personnel. However, the spatial point of view, which has sometimes been neglected, makes it possible to characterise these continuities in terms of repertoires of contention and political violence. The article has shown that the representations and actions of political actors at the liberation were marked by the experience of Fascism. The desire to map out the territory along the lines of the PNF, or the desire to demarcate areas of influence or challenge the supposed hegemony of the opposing party, led the actors to engage in a high degree of conflict. The legacy of Fascism is evident here, as the link between power, sovereignty and space had been promoted by the regime during the *ventennio*. However, other very real causes should not be overlooked, as social phenomena are rarely monofactorial: the classic thesis of the brutalisation of European societies since the First World War (Mosse 1990) and the very high tensions associated with the Cold War are also explanatory factors. It seems to me, however, that this link between space, the desire for appropriation and political violence is particularly characteristic of post-Fascist Italy.

A comparison with other European countries makes this clear. The case of the Federal Republic of Germany is well known and shows a much lower level of political conflict in the postwar years, something that has often been emphasised. However, the absence of a major Communist Party could explain the lower level of conflict; but even in countries where the Communist Party was strong, there was nothing comparable to Italy. If we look at the case of France, the difference is obvious: despite the presence of a strong Communist Party and the very high tensions linked to the Cold War, the degree of violence never reached that seen in Italy and violent confrontations at the local level between political forces were rare. There was very little damage to premises or political symbols, few deaths in demonstrations and a public debate that – while not always peaceful – leaves more room for the adversary (Cirefice 2022a, 340–341). Similarly, in Belgium, where the presence of a strong Communist Party and the great tensions of November 1945 between the Allies and the Resistance led to fears of violence or even civil war, the situation quickly returned to normal and political conflict diminished (Conway 2012). There are therefore clear differences in the degree of conflict that ran through Western European societies in this period. On the other hand, there is greater convergence on the role of the state in managing space. Theoretically the arbiter of the use of public space, the state is supposed to guarantee free competition and access to public space for all. However, as soon as Cold War tensions developed, particularly from 1946 onwards, the states of the four countries tended to restrict the ability of some political opponents to express themselves in the public space. This took the form of restrictions on demonstrations and on the display of posters in public spaces. These elements demonstrate the difficulties democratic societies have in maintaining the balance of their principles, even when the political situation becomes more tense. Attitudes to public space can thus help us to rethink two major aspects of contemporary Italian history: the continuities between Fascism and the republic, and the problem of violence. I have tried to show that, whether the competition for public space was violent or not, the perception – indeed, the collective representation – of the figure of the political opponent as an enemy

had immediate consequences for the practices and actions of activists. The notion of a democratic public space thus allows us to measure the distance separating fully democratic spaces from their progressive democratisation during the transition. And indeed it seems hardly surprising that such changes should have taken time.

Finally, it should be noted that the opposition between violence and democracy cannot be absolute. Indeed, some episodes of eruptive violence, even the most violent, may reflect the growth of a political sensibility that democracy could, over time, channel and absorb. This is particularly true of certain episodes of political violence in the countryside of southern Italy, which some historians have shown to be evidence of the development of a political sensitivity and awareness that could subsequently nourish democracy (Forlenza 2021). Salvatore Lupo and Enrico Acciai have shown that people gradually fell into line over time (Lupo 2004; Acciai 2017). In spite of tensions and occasional outbursts of violence, political parties undeniably had a pacifying influence over the long term, progressively helping to spread republican practices. Lupo notes that the PCI and the PSI gradually 'moderated subversive Italy' (Lupo 2004, 22), helping to integrate these new political subjects into Italian democracy. While Fascist attitudes to public space and the rules of political engagement did not disappear overnight, they did slowly fade away.

Notes

1. On the importance of this concept and the significance of this periodisation, see Reinisch (2008).
2. There is a rich historiography on the subject, which has highlighted the spatial and collective constructions of the Italian liberal state (see in particular Tobia 1991; Brice 1998; and, for a regional study, Baioni 2010). However, it cannot be denied that restrictions on the right of association or demonstration and on universal suffrage cannot lead us to consider the public space of the period as fully shared and freely accessible to all.
3. On celebrations, see also Baioni, Conti and Ridolfi (2012) and Porciani (1997).
4. In the same way – although applied less to a physical space than to a symbolic space comparable to that of Jürgen Habermas, as already mentioned – the philosopher Claude Lefort theorised democratic power as that of the 'empty place': it belongs to no one and cannot be appropriated. This obviously does not prevent competition, which is the very essence of democracy, but this empty space is opposed to any idea of exclusive appropriation (Lefort 2007, 465–466).
5. On the rule of law, see Cassese (2014). On representations of political opponents and the omnipresence of violence, see Ventrone (2005), Dogliani and Matard-Bonucci (2017), Dondi (2004), Storchi (2007) and Woller (2004).
6. These files are kept in several series (1944–6 and 1947–8): those devoted to monitoring political parties and those concerning 'incidents of a political nature'. In both cases, the files are organised by province and contain an average of between ten and several dozen incidents per province per year. I have read all the documents and the examples used below were all chosen because they were representative of a certain trend – in other words, there are several similar occurrences in the sources.
7. The files for 1945 and 1946 at the ministry of the interior record more than 40 such incidents (Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Ministry of the Interior (MI), Directorate of the Pubblica Sicurezza (PS), 1944–6, b. 7 and 8, *incidenti di natura politica*).
8. In 1947, it became the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI) following a split that also gave rise to the Partito Socialista dei Lavoratori Italiani (PSLI), a social democratic party.
9. The president of the council, Ferruccio Parri, felt compelled to deny the rumour and ordered the prefects of Puglia to follow suit in a letter dated 30 October 1945 (ACS, MI, PS, 1944–6, b. 8, f. Bari).
10. Ibid., b. 7, f. Bari; various reports, 1945.
11. For example, explosives shattered the windows of the headquarters of the DC on 14 October 1945 in Udine (ibid., b. 8, *carabinieri* telegram, 16 October 1945); four hand grenades were detonated at the headquarters of the PSI on 27 May 1946 in Sesto San Giovanni (Milan) (ibid., b. 46).

12. Ibid., b. 8, Terni, *carabinieri* report, 6 September 1945.

13. There are several examples of this competition in the archival files already mentioned above. The CLN usually had the upper hand.

14. ACS, MI, PS, 1944–6, b. 8, report, 15 April 1945.

15. Fondazione di Studi Storici Filippo Turati, Florence, f. Mauro Ferri, b. 63, letters exchanged on 5 December 1947.

16. ACS, MI, PS, 1944–6, b. 7, f. Bari, report, 6 July 1945.

17. Ibid., b. 8, f. Venice, *carabinieri* telegram, 11 November 1945.

18. Ibid., f. Pisa, report, 15 October 1945.

19. See, for example, ACS, MI, PS, 1944–6, b. 7, f. Avellino, report, 29 August 1945.

20. ACS, MI, PS, 1944–6, b. 7, f. Agrigento, 11 November 1945.

21. Ibid., b. 81, f. Livorno, 1 May 1946.

22. Archivio di Stato (AS) Bari, prefettura, gabinetto, III versamento, riordinato, b. 263, f. 1, *carabinieri* report, 3 June 1946.

23. For a full account of these exchanges and relevant police reports, see AS Arezzo, prefettura, b. 136, 1947.

24. Fondazione Nenni, Rome, carteggio, UA 2034; 'Lettere di sezioni e federazioni socialiste, parlamentari', unsigned letter, Naples, 29 May 1948.

25. AS Bari, prefettura, gabinetto, III versamento, riordinato, b. 263, f. 10, letter from the *questore* to the various political parties, 21 March 1948.

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Italian summary

L'articolo affronta la classica questione dell'eredità del fascismo attraverso il prisma nuovo dello spazio pubblico. Il legame tra potere, sovranità e spazio è stato portato a un livello mai raggiunto prima dalla politica fascista che ha contribuito ad abituare gli italiani ad una concezione dello spazio pubblico basata sull'appropriazione esclusiva e l'esclusione dell'avversario. Queste concezioni non scomparirono da un giorno all'altro ed è possibile, con un approccio spaziale, dimostrare che il modello imposto dal PNF rimase fortemente radicato – pur incoscientemente – nell'immaginario collettivo. Infatti, numerosi furono i tentativi nel dopoguerra di escludere gli avversari dallo spazio comune: le sedi locali dei partiti furono oggetto di numerosi attacchi senza eguali in altre parti d'Europa, che possono essere analizzati come un rifiuto del pluralismo. Concentrandosi sulla violenza contro le sedi dei partiti, sull'uso di graffiti e sulla saturazione dello spazio sonoro (altoparlanti, canzoni, campane), questa ricerca mira ad analizzare, sulla base di confronti con altre realtà europea, la difficile transizione tra fascismo e democrazia.