

INTRODUCTION

18 April 1948: Italy between continuity and rupture

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In the first months of 1948, Italy witnessed one of the fiercest electoral campaigns in its history, which saw the mobilisation of all sectors of society and the involvement of numerous international actors. In the end, the Christian Democrats and their political allies gained the majority of the votes at the first post-war general elections of 18 April 1948, thus officially inaugurating the history of the new Italian Republic.

The 1948 elections are often seen by scholars and by the public alike as a watershed between wartime Italy and the return to ‘normality’. This view is often based on the widely held yet erroneous assumption in Italy that Fascism was a parenthesis in Italian history, an abnormality that is not truly part of the history and culture of the country. Thus, in terms of Italian collective memory the 1948 elections marked the launch of new political institutions and of a new way of life. This process also facilitated a new-found love for foreign literature, the foundation of new publishing houses, cultural influences from the USA, the arrival of new products, the shaking up of old values and ideas in general, and the emergence of a young generation of artists, movie directors and actors. Every aspect of the Italian way of life changed forever. Yet, closer inspection reveals that underlying continuities with the pre-war era exerted a strong impact on the cultural, historical and economic development of Italy after 1948. The North/South divide, a backward economic structure that relied on heavy and highly centralised industries, administrative centralisation, legal traditions and the central role of the Catholic Church were only a few of the most important examples of the legacy of the pre-war period.

In order to explore the balance between continuity and rupture in twentieth-century Italian history, an international conference was organised in Reading on 18 and 19 April 2008 by the Departments of History and Italian (‘18 April 1948: Italy between continuity and rupture’). Through a multidisciplinary approach which brought together scholars working in history, politics, literature, legal studies and international relations, the conference re-examined the significance of the events surrounding the elections of 18 April 1948. It also assessed the ways in which the legacies of the Second World War, the fascist regime and Liberal Italy influenced the foundation of the new Italian Republic and to what degree 1948 could really be seen as a ‘watershed in the history of Italy’.

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The conference was of course part of a wider historiographical debate on the origins of the Republican era that took place in the years which surrounded the sixtieth anniversary of the 1948 elections. This introduction does not seek to recall all the contributions made to this debate as they are already discussed in the articles contained in this special issue. Yet, it may be worth mentioning here some key contributions that had an important impact on the debate which developed during the conference itself. In particular, Robert Ventresca's book, which was published in 2004, caught the attention of the scholarly community for its use of new archival documents kept in numerous American archives. For the first time, Ventresca gave a precise sense of the actual involvement of the Truman administration in support of the Italian Christian Democracy.¹ On the same lines, the work of David Ellwood (1998) and of Kaeten Mistry (2006) reiterated the need for a combined use of American and Italian archival material to assess the role of exogenous and endogenous factors in the shaping of the Italian republic. Since then, 1948 – and not 1945 – has been seen more consistently as the real beginning of the Republican era. While previous accounts such as Ginsborg (1989), Lanaro (2001) and Scoppola (1997) – just to mention a few – used 1945 as a new starting point in Italian history, more recent works, like that by Andrea Di Michele (2008), see 1948 as the 'new beginning'.² The idea put forward by Di Michele is that the period 1943–1947 was a transition phase, independent of the Fascist period that preceded it and the Republican era which followed. According to historians such as Di Michele, therefore, the years 1947–1948 mark the beginning of the interference of external actors in Italian home affairs. Thus, 18 April 1948 is seen as the start of a new historical phase that would last until 1992, during which the Italian political system was notoriously blocked (*sistema bloccato*) with the presence of a strong and well-organised Communist Party that could not gain power and the Christian Democratic-led coalition that remained in government throughout the Cold War.³ Other interesting publications that appeared in the same period and which are particularly helpful to mention here – because they put forward ideas discussed at our conference and in the papers that appear in this issue – include the work of Edoardo Novelli (2008) on the use of propaganda imagines in that electoral campaign, and of Andrea Argenio (2008) whose article looks at the relationship between the Italian government and the army.⁴

Building upon this renewed interest in the events of 1948, this special issue of *Modern Italy* gathers together five articles that stem from papers presented at the 2008 conference in Reading. The authors are all young academics who work in the fields of History, Education Studies, History of Ideas, International Relations and Legal History. The articles tackle the issue of the balance between continuity and rupture and bring to light new evidence to show that what has often been perceived as a clear break with the past is in fact a much more confused and complex process. They also look at how the legacy of Liberal Italy and of the fascist Regime had such a strong impact in the construction of the new Italian Republic and how underlying continuities did play a crucial role in the post-1948 period. A good example of such continuities is offered by the articles of Grazia De Michele and Michela Ponzani. De Michele's article looks at how the Italian colonial past was portrayed in post-war high-school textbooks. Grazia argues that there was an attempt in these textbooks to ignore or justify crimes against humanity committed by the Italians and to perpetuate stereotypes and outright clichés regarding the local population alongside a depiction of an Italian 'civilising influence' in Africa. According to De Michele, these biased portrayals contributed to the creation of a self-absolving mentality towards Italy's colonial past. On similar lines, Michela Ponzani brings new light

to the meaning of 18 April 1948 by examining the judicial prosecution of Italian partisans in the Republican era. Through a reappraisal of some of the trials that took place between 1945 and the early 1950s, Ponzani shows that continuities in the bureaucratic apparatus of the State and widespread anti-communism led to a failed purge of former Fascists and to the prosecution of partisans and left-wing political leaders.

Guido Tintori's article moves on to the field of intellectual history and history of ideas. Through a detailed analysis of Gaetano Salvemini's public writings and private correspondence, Tintori offers a new insight into the impact that exile in the USA and the influence of the academic environment of Harvard had on Salvemini's conception of democracy and politics. Thus, through the eyes of Salvemini, Tintori too challenges the significance of the 1948 elections as a watershed in the history of Italy.

Leo Goretti and Kaeten Mistry look at the electoral campaign itself and particularly at the role of political communication, propaganda and use of images and the media. Goretti examines the representations of political enemies in the Communist press between the 1948 elections and the electoral campaign of 1953. By focusing in particular on how the Communist press portrayed the Italian and American ruling classes as well as the Catholic hierarchy, Goretti highlights the persistence of stereotypes and imagery taken from Italy's past history. Finally, Kaeten Mistry takes a more international approach and focuses on the role of the Truman administration and on American involvement in the Italian elections. In the light of new archival information, Mistry argues that the outcome of the election fostered a 'perception of success' within the American political and intellectual elites. Most importantly, the article considers the wider ramifications of this mind-frame for future US–Italian relations and broader American approaches in the Cold War.[†]

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[†]Editors' Note: This issue of *Modern Italy* also contains an article by Gianluca Fantoni which analyses in detail an industrial dispute in one of the 'Red Zones' of Tuscany which ran from 1948 to 1953. In view of the clear relevance of this paper to the themes discussed in the Special Issue, we have decided to include it as a sixth article.

Notes

1. Some preliminary findings were published in Ventresca (2003). Ventresca participated in the conference with a paper on 'Defining political identity after fascism: Catholics, Communists and the Democratic Process in the Italian Election of 1948'.
2. For example Di Michele (2008).

3. Other publications that adopted 1948 as a starting point are Parlato (2006); Martinelli (1995) and Martinelli and Gozzini (1998). Di Michele is, however, the first to put forward a proper theorisation of the need to differentiate the 1943–1947 years from the beginning of the History of the Italian Republic. In 2007, *Ventesimo Secolo* dedicated a special issue to the year 1947 (12/2007) as an *anno di svolta* (year of change) in terms of both domestic and international politics.
4. Other publications that offered ideas for a stimulating debate at the conference were Invernizzi (2007); Casella (1992); Gedda (1998); as for local examples, it is worth remembering Cerchiello (2006); Bonini (1990) and Fedele (1978).

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