

The Road to Fascism: An Italian Sonderweg?

Author(s): Paul Corner

Source: *Contemporary European History*, May, 2002, Vol. 11, No. 2 (May, 2002), pp. 273-295

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20081832>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Contemporary European History*

JSTOR

The Road to Fascism: an Italian *Sonderweg*?

PAUL CORNER

Explanations of the origins of Italian Fascism have traditionally oscillated uncertainly between the extremes of total breach and total continuity. Benedetto Croce's famous 'parenthesis' thesis, postulating an almost complete breach between Fascism and the liberal past, seemed to let liberalism off the hook and encouraged the idea that, after Fascism, Italy would be able to take up where liberalism had left off in 1922. Conversely, Giustino Fortunato's view of Fascism as 'revelation' promoted the idea of Fascism as the consequence of problems stretching as far back as unification, and thus stressed the elements of continuity between Fascism and Italy's past. Other historians – indeed the great majority – have found the origins of Fascism in the postwar crisis of the 'red years', when revolutionary socialism, radical nationalism and a newly emerging political Catholicism combined to create that chaotic situation which is usually defined as 'the crisis of the liberal state'. More recently, research into the impact of the First World War on Italy has suggested that Fascism would have been impossible without the trauma of the war, a view summed up in the dictum, 'No war, no Fascism'. And there is certainly no difficulty in finding those who see the beginnings of Fascism in the interventionist crisis of 1914–15, when Italy divided dramatically between those who supported neutrality and those who, for a whole variety of reasons, urged participation in the conflict. So how far back should we go in the quest for the causes of Fascism?

The risk which is always run in seeking 'origins' is, of course, that of going back and going back until the linkage between events and their causes becomes so distant as to become virtually meaningless. Certainly the advent of Fascism, in as far as Fascism saw its role as suppressing the bitter divisions within Italian society, was in part a reflection of some of the longstanding problems of united Italy. Since 1861 Italy had been a deeply divided society – divided between rich and poor, between north and south, between liberals and Catholics, to say nothing of the frictions caused by the arrival of militant socialism. Violent protest and equally violent repression of that protest had been a characteristic, to a greater or lesser degree according to the period, of the entire prewar history of liberal Italy. But to see in these conflicts and divisions the antecedents of Fascism is to suggest an inevitability about history which it is best to avoid. After all, most industrialising societies have, at one point or another, experienced moments of profound social tension and

conflict, without necessarily embarking for this reason on the road to Fascism. And nothing in the history of Italy prior to the First World War can be evinced to demonstrate that Fascism was inevitable. To think otherwise is to embrace the 'revelation' or 'continuity' thesis, by which more or less everything which happened in Italy after 1861 is seen as leading inexorably to Fascism; it is to postulate a kind of Italian *Sonderweg* to disaster, paralleled, it would seem, only by the inevitable progress of imperial and republican Germany towards Nazism.

Inevitability is one thing, possibility another. The identification of possible origins of Fascism in the decades before 1922 is a very different matter from suggesting that these origins had a necessary and inevitable outcome in the March on Rome. In this sense, the reference to an Italian *Sonderweg* may not be totally misplaced. Yet, given that over recent years many historians of Germany have done their best to deny any German 'exceptionalism', and hence to reject the theory of the *Sonderweg*, it may seem strange to reintroduce the concept in reference to Italy. With respect to Germany the argument has been that the persistence of pre-capitalist elements in imperial Germany, the alleged weakness of the developing bourgeoisie, and the pressures of the rapid and distorted industrialisation of a 'latecomer' may certainly have existed but did not constitute aspects of a special path which led necessarily to Nazism.¹ All of these factors have also been prominent in writings on Italy. Traditional Marxist interpretations of Fascism saw the origins of the phenomenon in the long-term 'faults of origin' of Italian industrial capitalism – also very obviously a 'latecomer' (Grifone), in the persistence of 'feudal residues' in agriculture (Sereni), or in Italy's 'passive revolution' at the moment of unification, reflected subsequently in the development of a weak bourgeoisie (Gramsci).² But it is noticeable that in Italy, as in Germany, long-term views on the origins of Fascism would seem to have fallen out of favour, substituted by more highly articulated and detailed accounts of economic and political change in the years immediate preceding the Fascist takeover. This is due no doubt in part to a rejection of Marxist schematics which, seeming to explain everything, sometimes explain nothing, but also – and this is probably the case with Gramsci – to the difficulty of applying general schemes in a satisfactory way to the very specific events of the First World War and the 'red years' of 1919–20. This does not imply that the insights relating to unequal class relationships and 'distorted' economic development have necessarily been rejected as mistaken; it is simply that the jump from the general to the specific becomes more difficult, the answers less satisfactory, as Fascism approaches. Interpretation risks falling victim to teleology if too much attention is paid to long-term trends. So, how far back can we go without simply producing a history which runs on rails? We return to the old question of breach or continuity.

¹ See D. Blackbourn and G. Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

² P. Grifone, *Il capitale finanziario in Italia* (Rome: Einaudi, 1945); E. Sereni, *La questione agraria nella rinascita nazionale italiana* (Rome: Einaudi, 1946); A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, edited by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).

Here historians part company, and many answers have already been given. But if Fascism is (fairly obviously) neither total breach nor total continuity with the past, what are we left with? The answer is complex. Many of the features of Fascism were undoubtedly linked to the experience of the First War and the social and political crisis which followed the war. It is equally clear that the cultural crisis which had become evident in certain quarters after the turn of the century had been exacerbated by the entirely novel experience of the horrors of world war and mass destruction. Which is to say that much in Fascism was contingent on the precise circumstances of war and postwar. Yet it is also arguable that the failure to find democratic solutions to Italian problems between 1919 and 1922 is to be attributed to the consolidation of blocs, positions and attitudes which were already formed before the outbreak of war. Our attention may profitably be directed therefore towards the formation of these blocs, positions and attitudes and not simply to their expression in the post-war crisis. This takes us back to the Giolittian period (1901–14), undoubtedly a period of remarkable economic and, in some ways, social and political progress, but also a moment when many of those divisions and contrasts in Italian society which would eventually lead to Fascism became clearly delineated. And in respect of the Giolittian period some fundamental questions do still remain unanswered. The extent to which Italy was ‘in the process of creating a national, liberal and social democracy’³ on the eve of the European war is still unclear. Was it, in fact, a flourishing and progressive society which was somehow then thrown off course by the impact of war? Or had reform failed in bringing social groups closer together and were the fissures already unbridgeable? To return to the question of the weak bourgeoisie, why was it that the Italian bourgeoisie did not develop in both strength and attitudes in such a way as to be able to control the postwar crisis and resolve it within the democratic arena? In other words, what was different about Italy, which produced this novel phenomenon of Fascism, compared with other countries which did not? Almost all belligerent countries saw severe unrest at the end of the war; only Italy produced the Fascist solution. Is there therefore an Italian ‘exceptionalism’ which has to be taken into account in the explanation of Fascism? It remains surprising, given the political weight of Italian socialism, that there was no Weimar in Italy after the war, no great reformist experiment. Certainly the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) was left holding the baby after military defeat, something which did not happen to Italian socialism (which was able neither to exploit victory nor to profit from defeat), but the space for political dialogue in Germany in 1919 seems nonetheless to have been much greater than it ever was in Italy.

Given the benefit of hindsight, it may seem perverse to ask the question: ‘Why was Italy not more like Germany?’ Yet the answers may be illuminating. Here it is argued that Fascism is best understood from a medium-term viewpoint, one which looks back at the fifteen years before the First World War as well as at the impact of

³ L. Salvatorelli, *Pensiero e azione del Risorgimento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1960), 182, quoted in A. Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973), 5.

war and the *biennio rosso* of 1919–20. Perhaps this is not exactly time enough for the identification of a *Sonderweg*, but it is an extension of the timespan usually accorded to the question of the origins of Fascism. It is an attempt to identify certain factors which do ultimately play a fundamental part in provoking that dramatic social conflict which led to Fascism and to ask why more was not done before the war to eliminate, or at least to moderate, those factors. A corollary of this analysis will be to suggest that Nazism, rather than Fascism, was more contingent on war, economic crisis, and the immediate social problems of the 1920s for its formation and affirmation.

The agrarian roots of Fascism

The argument starts from the consideration that, in the struggle between left and right during the *biennio rosso*, the clash which determined the rise of Fascism occurred not in industry but in agriculture. This is not to underestimate the importance of the working-class movement in giving rise to great anxieties among the bosses and the bourgeoisie; if there was fear of revolution, a *grand peur*, to which many reacted in a hostile fashion, it was undoubtedly due in part to the organisation and the projects of the northern working class in 1919 and 1920. But it is also necessary to recognise that the occupation of the factories and the movement for factory councils were not defeated by Fascism. At the moment of the decisive battle in Turin and other northern cities – September and October of 1920 – Fascism had still to assert itself as a significant political force. This much is suggested by the fact that Benito Mussolini even attempted some kind of mediation on behalf of the workers, precisely with the intention of attempting to gain a foothold in the conflict, which saw him without any influence at all. The northern working class was defeated by what can be termed ‘normal’ methods of class struggle, methods which showed the impossibility of creating an island of workers’ control in a world of capitalist relations, and certainly not by the Fascist squads. Giovanni Giolitti’s threat to bombard the occupied factories called the bluff of the owners, but in a way this exchange also highlighted the attitude of employers to their workers. Qualified and experienced workers were in reality an asset; they had to be disciplined and rendered as powerless as possible, but not treated in such a way as to expel them permanently from the productive process. Consequently the efforts of large employers went more into breaking the unions, revising work methods, and reorganising skill categories in order to destroy worker solidarity, than into the support of open violence. This was a long process and the defeat of the occupation of the factories was the first step in a gradual reconquest of positions lost, a process which would go on to 1925 and 1926.⁴ Fascist intimidation could be useful, but it was not the essential feature which determined the outcome of the struggle. It seems to have played a more important part in areas where small industrial employers

⁴ On this process see the essays in *Annali della Fondazione G. Feltrinelli*, XX, 1979–80 (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981).

reacted against socialism – in Emilia and in Tuscany, for example. Here the squads were used to greater effect. But this was essentially a secondary phenomenon, important in consolidating Fascist gains in areas where small industries and agriculture were intertwined; it was hardly the phenomenon which turned Mussolini into a political figure of national importance.

Rather, as is widely recognised, it was the explosion of agrarian Fascism in the Po valley in the closing months of 1920 which changed the uncertain political fortunes of the Fascist leader. The recognition accorded by historians to the importance of agrarian Fascism is often somewhat muted, however. While everyone acknowledges that Ferrara and Bologna launched Mussolini on the road to power, it is also suggested that crude class violence could never have supported a national political movement and would inevitably have lost its impetus in the course of 1921. Agrarian Fascism is seen essentially as a vehicle, without significant content. This is undoubtedly true, at least in part; if agrarian Fascism had not found its very able political representative in Mussolini, it would probably have exhausted itself in the course of 1921. Yet the reverse is also true; if Mussolini had not had the opportunity which agrarian Fascism offered him, it is extremely doubtful that his struggling Milan-based movement would ever have got off the ground and that he would have succeeded in drawing together the many and varied factors which did eventually coalesce into Fascism. The degree to which agrarian Fascism was instrumental to the Fascist leader is shown very clearly by the way in which he initially condemned the Ferrara movement as pure reaction, only to revise this view and embrace that reaction when the extent of its success became evident.⁵ Certainly Fascism became much more than agrarian Fascism – we should not mistake the particular moment for the whole phenomenon – and did so very quickly; but the chance to do so was offered by the force of the rural movement and the support of the large commercial farmers, the *agrari*, the first solid social grouping to back Fascism unconditionally. It was agrarian Fascism which formed the backbone of the Fascist reaction in the first critical months. Italo Balbo may not have been the brains of Fascism – far from it – but he undoubtedly created the political space in which much better brains were able to operate successfully.

If this reading of events is accepted, it becomes necessary to try to explain why the struggle in agriculture assumed such dramatic levels and why solutions other than the violent Fascist solution were not available. Here it is essential to go back beyond the *biennio rosso*. Violence had been endemic on the large agricultural estates for almost all of the period following 1880; the appalling conditions in which the landless workers (*braccianti*) were forced to live and work were such that anger and rebellion were never far below the surface. What is striking, however, is the degree to which this sore had been allowed to fester and worsen over the years. Before the outbreak of the First World War successive governments might shed crocodile tears over peasant ‘massacres’, but the *carabinieri* continued to shoot protesting *braccianti* on

⁵ P. Corner, *Fascism in Ferrara 1915–25* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 129–36; Lyttelton, *Seizure*, 61–5.

a more or less regular basis. Unsurprisingly, anti-state (not just anti-government) feeling increased rather than decreased in the areas worked by the landless labourers. Existing political institutions were seen by them, and more particularly by their organisers, as being totally extraneous to the solution of their problems. This goes very much to the heart of the problem. Whereas, for all its revolutionary theory and organisation, in the crisis of 1920 the urban working class still saw the state and the employers as interlocutors, thus permitting negotiation and the eventual non-violent resolution of conflict (even if on terms very unfavourable to the workers), in agriculture the impression is that of protest and rebellion which rejected any institutional mediation because it denied the very legitimacy of the state which those institutions represented. In the first case government had succeeded in establishing channels of communication; in the second, those channels had never really been formed. Fascism got its chance because of this failure.

The failure of reformism

This failure constitutes one of the critical failures of Italian politics in the period preceding the Fascist takeover of power. It is a failure all the more surprising for the fact that the need for some kind of conciliation with popular protest had been evident to many ever since the turn of the century. The return of Giolitti to a position of power in 1900 (he had been Prime Minister briefly in 1892–3) has often been hailed as a ‘turning point’ in the history of unified Italy, precisely from this point of view. His reappearance followed ‘the crisis of the 1890s’, with its banking scandals, disastrous imperial ventures and extreme social unrest, which found its expression first in the 1893 rising of the Sicilian Fasci and then in the bloody food riots in Milan in 1898, when the army used artillery against the crowd. Increasing the level of repression was seen briefly as one way out, but the advent of the Giuseppe Zanardelli–Giolitti government in 1901 represented a clear rejection of the move towards more authoritarian government implied in Baron Sydney Sonnino’s 1897 plea to reinforce the executive and to place more power in the hands of the king through a ‘return to the [Piedmontese] statute’ of 1848.⁶ All the signs were that parliament would finally respond to the challenge and that much-needed reforms could be approved. Yet, fourteen years later, social protest had reached fresh heights in key areas such as the Po valley, and *Giolittismo* lay, at least temporarily, in ruins. What had happened in the interim?

Giolitti clearly hoped to replace a policy of exclusion and repression by one of inclusion, of incorporating new social groups into the framework of the state. This was an operation with essentially conservative aims, designed to render the state more stable and less subject to disorder, but the methods proposed were very radical. The decision in 1900 to legalise strikes and to guarantee government neutrality in labour disputes was indicative of the belief, now shared by the majority,

⁶ Anonimo [S. Sonnino], ‘Torniamo allo Statuto’, in *Nuova Antologia*, 1 Jan. 1897, reproduced in B. F. Brown (ed.), *S. Sonnino, Scritti e discorsi extraparlamentari* (Bari: Laterza, 1972), vol. 1, 575–97.

that it was better to arrive at the resolution of disputes through mediation rather than through confrontation. By removing the legal obstacles to socialist agitation, and by announcing that in future the state would not interfere in disputes between employers and labour, Giolitti effectively opened the door to dialogue with his principal opponents – the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI) – and encouraged, at parliamentary level, the formation of a loosely linked progressive block, including left-liberals (among whom there were many of the more enlightened industrialists), socialists, radicals and even anarchists. It was an informal alliance which represented an understanding of the most pressing problem facing government – the need for reform in order to realise a greater integration of the popular classes into the Italian state and to reconcile the deep divisions between groups and classes in Italian society.

But, important as the legislation relating to strikes was, the real thrust of government proposals revolved around the question of fiscal reform, intended to permit some redistribution of wealth and to remove, or at least to reduce, many of the (often local) taxes on essential articles of consumption (salt, sugar, flour, bread, pasta, petroleum) which were the cause of so much resentment and hardship among the working classes. A reduction in these taxes seemed to offer the possibility of at least some relief from the negative consequences for food prices of continued protection of wheat, one of the principal columns on which the conservative political alliance was formed. By 1900 state finances were fairly healthy and there appeared to be some room for manoeuvre. Giolitti, Minister of the Interior in Zanardelli's government, had presented himself at the elections as a strong supporter of fiscal reform (he described the existing system as 'upside-down progressive taxation'), clearly seeing it as a way of both dampening protest and reinforcing the process of social modernisation required by accelerating industrialisation. In his opening address to the new Chamber, Zanardelli put the question of fiscal reform at the centre of the government's programme.⁷ The problem was that the money for 'democratic finances' had to be found somewhere (principally to compensate communes for loss of locally raised revenue through taxes on consumption) and appeared to threaten the very high level of military expenditure.⁸ Many considered fiscal reform more important even than military spending; the journalist F. Papafava commented, 'People who are hungry don't love their fatherland and no enemy army is more terrifying than misery,'⁹ but others evidently thought differently. Thus, in 1901, the radically redistributive proposals of the young Finance Minister, Leone Wollemborg, met immediate and intransigent resistance from conservative –

⁷ See the contemporary account of the journalist F. Papafava, *Dieci anni di vita italiana (1899–1909)* (Bari: Laterza, 1913), who wrote 'with the re-opening of the Chamber the fundamental issue is fiscal reform' (131).

⁸ At this time Italian military spending was, per head of the population, the highest in Europe, constituting some 30 per cent of public spending and around 12 per cent of GNP. See, in general, R. J. B. Bosworth, *Italy the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy before the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁹ Papafava, *Dieci anni*, 150.

largely agrarian – interests in parliament, on the orthodox liberal grounds of the need to balance the budget (without cutting military spending). In reality those interests feared (rightly) that fiscal reform would necessarily increase the tax burden on themselves.¹⁰ Wollemborg was forced to resign, amid general indifference, given that the defeat had long been a foregone conclusion.

In the event (and rather surprisingly after his previous declarations) Giolitti did little to defend Wollemborg, even within the government. Aside from a personal antipathy to his colleague, Giolitti seems to have recognised very early on that the hard core of his majority would never accept reform if it implied the recognition of the principle of progressive taxation on personal income. This led many to question his sincerity,¹¹ but in reality the perception of impossibility was general. Even the socialists appear to have connived at the defeat of the Finance Minister and to have left him to his fate. The link that had been established (unhappily, by antimilitarist elements in the majority) between fiscal reform and a reduction in military spending induced the socialists to conclude that reform was highly improbable, given the composition of the majority in parliament and the presumed position of the king on the question of defence spending. They decided, therefore, that it was better to exploit those ‘reforms for the people’ relating to the regulation of labour organisation and labour disputes, which promised immediate results. Direct action on the part of labour also offered greater opportunities for socialism to assert itself with its supporters at the local level, and fitted better with the view of many more intransigent socialists that improvements should be the consequence of popular struggle rather than ministerial concession. Yet in abandoning Wollemborg the socialists also gave up the fight for the recognition of the principle of progressive income tax, something which would cost them dearly in later years. The judgement of Paolo Favilli is significant: ‘We now know that this episode marked both the beginning and the end of any serious attempt at an equalising modification of the mechanism of public finances before the catastrophe of the war.’¹² The ‘reforms for the people’ had obvious attractions for socialism, but the accompanying risk was that exploitation of the increased freedom for organisation and agitation which now existed would simply mean the organisation of misery rather than its elimination, and in the end this was the case.

The significance of Wollemborg’s defeat was not immediately obvious, except in the sense that it indicated to many the degree to which government was conditioned

¹⁰ Papafava’s comment on this defeat is illuminating. ‘Why? First because . . . the reform proposed by the ministry dries up communal resources and increases excessively the load on the communal taxpayer (read: prevents the communes from taxing the poor and forces them to tax the rich more heavily); second because the State, in order to repay the communes, will have to introduce new taxes and the proposed new taxes are not suited to the purpose (read: we don’t want anything to do with an increase on inheritance tax): *Dieci anni*, 154.

¹¹ Papafava puts Giolitti’s good faith in question, suggesting that ‘fiscal reform was a stratagem for getting into power’: *Dieci anni*, 187.

¹² P. Favilli, *Il labirinto della grande riforma* (Milan: Angeli, 1990), 274–5. It is to be noted that the (probably unintentional) implication of this phrase – that such measures were realised during the war – is misleading. Indirect taxation in fact increased notably during the course of the conflict (see note 14).

by Italy's great power pretensions, with the consequent priority given to military rather than social expenditure.¹³ For the socialists, in the immediate circumstances of 1901–2, the strategy of direct action appeared to be very successful. Given freedom to organise and to strike, northern workers did gain wage increases as a consequence of a wave of successful disputes, and these gains seemed far to outweigh the few *centesimi* which fiscal reform would have given them through a redistribution of the tax burden. Wage rises undoubtedly had some limited redistributive effect, but the moment was short-lived. By the end of 1902 trade union energy was running out and the employers had successfully reorganised their opposition to strike activity. In reality, a policy which relied on the formula 'higher profits–higher wages' had its drawbacks and did not really represent a coherent alternative to fiscal reform. One very significant limit of the policy was that to leave the improvement of living conditions to the results of agreements between employers and organised labour was to exclude the south from any benefits, given the absence of an organised working or peasant class on any significant scale. The south was compensated by a great increase in expenditure on public works, a palliative of poverty rather than a solution. Another weakness was that certain categories of the urban petty bourgeoisie, reluctant to organise on lines which implied identification with the proletariat, were also excluded from benefits. Just as important, reliance on agreements between capital and labour were predicated on a favourable economic cycle, which disappeared with the world crisis of overproduction of 1907.

Single-cause explanations of events are best avoided, but the defeat of the Wollemborg proposals does appear to have represented a crucial defeat for those who saw that the resolution of some of Italy's social problems lay through greater fiscal justice. In the words of Giampiero Carocci, 'The golden period of Italian reformism, the era in which it was perhaps possible to believe that it might have achieved successes analogous to those of German social democracy, ended in the space of a few months.'¹⁴ In later years other proposals were introduced, always without the slightest hope of success; usually they were purely instrumental proposals designed to influence parliamentary voting and the substance would hardly be discussed. Reformist socialist hopes of '*la Grande Riforma*' – effectively the introduction of progressive personal income tax – led them to reject half-measures based on limited adjustments on taxes on consumption, with the consequence that the situation in fact deteriorated notably between 1900 and 1913. Whereas indirect taxation on consumption had represented 49 per cent of government income at the beginning of the century, by 1913 the percentage had risen to 56 per cent.¹⁵ Increased public spending did something to redress the balance, but very little to

¹³ Papafava was extremely critical, for instance, of the fact that there were 2,000 Italian troops stationed in China to protect 300 Italian nationals: *Dieci anni*, 116.

¹⁴ G. Carocci, *Giolitti e l'età giolittiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962), 68. Thereafter Carocci, *Giolitti*. See also on this phase A. Aquarone, *L'Italia giolittiana (1896–1915): le premesse politiche ed economiche* (Bologna: Il Mulino 1981).

¹⁵ Figures from Favilli, *Labirinto*, 271. According to the liberal economist A. de Johannis, writing in 1911, landed property had seen its tax bill reduced in the previous fifteen years from 128 to 82 million

redress the perception that the poor were taxed far more heavily than the rich and that state expenditure was in large measure dedicated to items which were of no advantage to the poor. As economic conditions became less favourable and the international situation worsened after 1908, room for manoeuvre became less and tax reform became one of the issues for which the moment was never ripe.

Giolitti's position on the issue is strangely ambiguous. In his memoirs, written more than twenty years afterwards, Giolitti skates over the topic, observing more or less that in 1901 there was a young minister who made some tax proposals, but that they were defeated immediately. Much more space is dedicated to the legislation on labour organisation and on strikes, all seen in terms of public order rather than redistribution of wealth. This was hardly the perception of onlookers at the time. Evidently, because of failure, Giolitti preferred not to dwell on the question, but some uncertainty remains about the extent of his commitment to reform. In his words he appeared convinced, but his failure to press the point when in government suggests that it was not his highest priority. Essentially this reflects the fact that reform was always instrumental to the end of state stability; the objective was that of the absorption of the socialist thrust into the framework of the state. It was obvious, therefore, that attempts at social reforms should not reach the point at which the governing majority threatened to disintegrate in the face of the challenge. In a sense, this was the real limit of the Giolittian strategy; the narrow conditions of immediate political survival seem to have precluded the wider objectives of that survival. Always a realist, Giolitti ended as the captive of his own highly fluid and volatile majority. The irony was that this was a majority which he spent a great deal of time creating and manipulating, often through openly corrupt means. No doubt he hoped that astute manoeuvring among parliamentary groups and the gradual erosion of opposition would at some point permit him to overcome entrenched resistance to his projects, but that point never arrived. Certainly the task was far from simple; in his efforts he was not helped by the fact that monarchist liberals, socialists and Catholics were ideologically opposed to each other and far from united among themselves. In particular, divisions between socialist reformists and revolutionaries, which were to dog the party until the war, meant that Giolitti's approaches to the socialists – undoubtedly the principal object of his attentions – were always made on uncertain and rapidly shifting sands.

In fact the defeat of fiscal reform in 1901 was crucial in precisely that way. To go forward successfully, enlightened liberalism – the liberalism of Giolitti – needed desperately to draw at least some support from the newly emerging social groups. Expanding the political base of liberalism through a programme which could attract wide-scale support was the condition of a successful evolution of the liberal state. Instead, the failure to realise fiscal reform resulted in the break-up of the progressive bloc which had been temporarily formed and pushed the PSI back towards a position

lire, while taxes on consumption had increased from 300 to 900 million; *L'Economista*, 1911, p. 225, quoted in Favilli, *Labirinto*, 357. On a rough calculation, the situation worsened dramatically during the war and in 1919. By 1920 indirect taxation accounted for some 70 per cent of government intuits: B. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics 1750–1970* (London: Macmillan 1978), 114.

of confrontation. As reformist leaders – Filippo Turati in particular – hesitated on the fringes of government, fearful that full collaboration would be disowned by the dissatisfied masses of socialist supporters, the initiative passed to their maximalist opponents within the party, making any chance of the integration of socialism into the liberal system impossible.¹⁶ For much of the period between 1903 and 1912, the PSI moved from one foot to the other, as maximalists and intransigents temporarily lost credibility, allowing the reformists to regain the upper hand only to lose it again as frustrations and impatience among workers and, more particularly, landless agricultural workers once again came to the fore. The general move towards the radicalisation of the party was unmistakable. In the absence of those crucial reforms, which would have meant some kind of even very limited redistribution of wealth, refusal of any kind of collaboration with the government became the rallying cry of maximalist socialists and revolutionary syndicalists alike. The failure of Giolittian mediation was evident well before the outbreak of the war. In 1912 the Socialist Party conference in Reggio Emilia voted overwhelmingly for the line of revolutionary confrontation with government, provoking the withdrawal from the party of two of the more prominent reformist leaders (Leonida Bissolati and Ivanoe Bonomi), and permitting the appearance for the first time in a position of power within the Socialist Party of the young republican firebrand, Benito Mussolini.

Fiscal reform foundered not only on the hesitations of the socialist leadership but, more significantly, on the iron resistance of the majority within parliament, intent as always on protecting rents, property and military expenditure. Agrarian interests remained extremely strong, even if increasingly under attack. Redistribution of wealth, or of land, through government intervention was still anathema to the majority in the chamber.¹⁷ In effect, the system was blocked; efforts to constitute a different majority through collaboration with reformist socialism (or indeed with Catholic sentiment) always had the effect of alienating the central core of the existing majority on which any eventual new majority was bound in part to depend. In times of economic expansion, as between 1901 and 1907, this majority could at least be put under pressure by the desire of more progressive industrialists to reach some kind of stable agreement with the PSI and the unions. But with the onset of economic crisis after 1907, room for concessions was dramatically reduced, provoking a renewal of hard-line resistance on the part of landowners and industrialists alike. As a consequence, the increased stability of the state, at which Giolitti had aimed, was again put at risk. Far from realising a broader social base for liberalism, the Giolittian experiment had succeeded only in improving the organisation of popular opposition and in increasing its expectations, while at the same time seeing that opposition move ever further away from the legal and constitutional arena. As a consequence the political struggle became ever more polarised and

¹⁶ Turati was fully aware of Giolitti's intention to in effect, compromise socialism through collaboration with government in order to reduce the party to a straightforward economic organisation of the workers. See Carocci, *Giolitti*, p. 69.

¹⁷ The judgment of de Johannis in 1911: 'It is inevitable that the wealthy, who pay little at the moment, have no desire to introduce any principle of justice in taxation': *L'Economista*, as note 15.

increasingly bitter. After 1907 recession made industrialists unwilling to make further wage concessions and the unions reacted accordingly; strikes and lock-outs became common in much of the north. In rural areas of the north, particularly in the Po valley, tensions grew enormously before the outbreak of the war. Between 1912 and 1914, Italy was to witness some of the most bitter strikes and lock-outs in its short history, with agricultural labourers and industrial workers expressing open hostility towards a state which had become synonymous with misery and repression. In 1913 and 1914 alone Italy saw strikes and lock-outs which cost more than five million working days. The spiral of violent protest and violent repression was resumed, reaching new levels of brutality and culminating in the open insurrection against the state which was 'Red Week' of June 1914, when large areas of central Italy were taken over by anarchists, revolutionary socialists and syndicalists. The authority of the state was resumed only through the intervention of the army.¹⁸

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, for all his great ability in parliamentary manoeuvring and in playing off one force against another, Giolitti ultimately failed to resolve what was at that time the central problem of Italian politics, that of giving the state legitimacy in the eyes of its people. It is true that many significant reforms were passed. Indeed the formation of parliamentary groupings prepared to support some kinds of reform did not end with 1901; 'reform' was very much the order of the day for much of the prewar period, and many important modernising reforms were passed (although often not put into operation), particularly in the field of working conditions in the factory. A notable innovation was the institution in 1902 of the Consiglio superiore del lavoro, a body which had the task of supervising labour reform and which even included representatives of the workers. But really significant redistributive reforms, or reforms of agricultural contracts (proposed by the brief government of Sonnino in 1906 and again by Giolitti in 1909) which could have changed popular attitudes towards the Italian state were always defeated by the conservative majority in parliament. Alternatives to redistribution were attempted. Francesco Saverio Nitti, with his projects for extensive public works in the south and, above all, his piloting through parliament a state social insurance scheme in 1912, was perhaps the best expression of this kind of modernisation, which envisaged the use of technicians and direct state intervention in order to resolve specific problems.¹⁹ The same approach was reflected in administrative modernisation, through a great extension of the state bureaucracy and of the areas in which that bureaucracy operated, and in the pursuit of urban improvement through municipal reorganisation. This was intended to create a more efficient state, as indeed it did, and the extension of 'municipalism', which permitted local authorities to run local gas, electrical and transport services directly, served to some extent to

¹⁸ The best-known work on 'Red Week' is L. Lotti, *La settimana rossa* (Florence, Le Monnier, 1972), but for detailed information on the violence of the agricultural strikes in the Po valley, see also A. Roveri, 'Socialismo e sindacalismo (1870-1915)', in *Annuario dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per l'Età Moderna e Contemporanea, XV-XVI 1963-1964* (Rome: Istituto storico italiano, 1968).

¹⁹ On this phase of Nitti's political career, see F. Barbagallo, *Francesco Saverio Nitti* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), in particular ch. 14.

compensate socialism for its lack of influence at the centre by giving it the opportunity of asserting itself in local government. But there were also disadvantages in administrative reform. In so far as greater bureaucratic efficiency represented in some ways an alternative to democratic reform, it risked having the effect of counter-posing administration to politics and bureaucracy to parliament, something which was later to have unhappy consequences. And, whatever its undoubted modernising effects in permitting greater state control of both society and the economy, the streamlining of the bureaucracy signified neither an extension of democracy nor a less vexatious presence of the state for the mass of the population. On the contrary, bureaucracy was notoriously exempt from parliamentary control and constituted a kind of parallel form of government,²⁰ and, for this reason, it soon became the object of accusations of corruption, nepotism and a biased employment of its (very wide) discretionary powers.

In some senses Giolitti ended up having the worst of both worlds. His hopes of attracting at least some socialist support into his very flexible majority were never to be realised; but the constant overtures made to the socialists, and the concessions made to them in many areas of legislation concerning factory conditions and labour organisation, served to antagonise many non-socialists who felt in some way threatened by emergent socialism and either inadequately protected or too much neglected by central government. As has been observed, it was a case of ‘reformers without reforms’²¹ – too little to satisfy the left, too much to allow the centre and right to sleep easily at night. This had the effect of pushing those seeking radical change towards the political extremes – extremes which positioned themselves outside the existing constitutional spectrum and dedicated their existence to attempting to destroy the centre.

The reconciliation of extremes was the task of government, but in this respect the picture which emerges is bleak. Italy’s dramatic failure to develop that synthesis of imperialism and social reform which was so effective before the war in consolidating and reinvigorating German liberalism provided Italian liberalism with little to glory in.²² Instead, as is well known, Italian imperialism produced the opposite effect. Disillusionment with Italian progress at an international level, combined with a general crisis of positivist and liberal positions, engendered a rejection of parliamentary and democratic values which eventually crystallised around dynamically expansionist nationalist sentiments. This nationalist movement, hierarchical, anti-parliamentary, anti-bureaucratic, anti-socialist, spoke from the first of ‘producers’ rather than workers, something which made it particularly attractive to those groups within the growing mass of the urban petty bourgeoisie who were both frightened of socialism and resentful of the attention paid to it. But the nationalist appeal was not linked only to frustration and resentment relating to the

²⁰ G. Melis, *Storia dell’amministrazione italiana 1861–1993* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), ch. 3.

²¹ The phrase is that of the socialist professor Ettore Ciccotti, who also observed that Italy had ‘revolutionaries without revolution – an Italian speciality’; quoted in Favilli, *Labirinto*, 276.

²² See, for illuminating comments on Germany, G. Eley, ‘Liberalism, Europe and the Bourgeoisie 1860–1914’, in G. Eley, ed., *The German Bourgeoisie* (London: Routledge, 1991), 311–12.

present.²³ For many middle-class intellectuals, nationalism represented a hope for the future, an almost religious conviction that Italy should in some way rise above the mediocrity of *Giolittismo* in order to fulfil the idea of national mission which Giuseppe Mazzini had stressed so strongly.²⁴ Integration of the masses into the nation – Giolitti's aim – was also an objective for some of these, but 'the proletarian nation' was to be very different from the nation built either around liberalism or an eternal compromise with socialism. Again, it is to be noted that Italian nationalism spoke in the name of a new Italy, not in that of a reformed liberal Italy.

Attacked from both left and right, Giolitti's ambition was clearly that of eventually reinforcing the centre in such a way as to permit stable administration. Yet the failure of Giolitti to realise this objective has to be considered one of the critical failures in post-unification politics. If there was a period in which Italy might have moved forward towards a more democratic form of government, it was surely in the period between 1901 and 1914. The formation of some kind of popular liberal-socialist coalition – a kind of Italian Lib-Lab pact on the British model of 1906 – might have permitted a radical transformation of Italian politics and brought Italy more into line with what was happening in many other European states, where reformist socialism, for all its anti-collaborationist dogma, was slowly being drawn into often informal involvement with government. An agreement of this kind might have enabled those reforms to be passed which could have fundamentally altered the attitudes of the population towards the state and served to close the divisions within Italian society which had widened ever since 1861. This could have meant – and this is of extreme importance – that Italy would have met the challenge of the First World War with a very different political configuration, one less disposed to almost automatic repression of dissent and more ready to seek consensus. Even more crucially, it might have laid the foundations for some kind of progressive Weimar-type coalition for the postwar period, based on a new level of popular mobilisation generated by the war which was not fundamentally opposed to the existing state.

The reasons for the failure to form a grouping of this kind are many, and go to the centre of the weakness of liberal Italy, but such a formation was still possible in the first decade of the century. In part, it has to be said, the incentives to collaboration were less than they might otherwise have been in a more developed democratic political system. As long as majorities could be formed through corruption, through the intervention of the Minister of the Interior and through electoral manipulation, and as long as peasants did not have the vote – and this was certainly the case up until the elections of 1913 – government was not stimulated to

²³ The dynamic, rather than reactionary nature of Italian nationalism is one of the central themes of D. Roberts, *Mussolini and the Italian Syndicalist Tradition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979). For much the same emphasis, see also the more recent book of E. Gentile, *La Grande Italia. Ascesa e declino del mito della nazione nel ventesimo secolo* (Milan: Garzanti, 1997).

²⁴ It is highly significant, for example, that Papafava – a convinced supporter of reform and the realisation of greater social justice in 1901 – should by the end of the decade be described by his friends as ever more nationalist. According to them he showed 'an increasing belief in the vitality of the Italian fibre, an ever greater lack of confidence in the actions of parties': *Dieci anni*, Introduction, 111.

broaden its political base and to make a play for the popular vote by entering into alliances. Such alliances as were formed remained essentially part of the parliamentary game of shifting balances. In this sense there was a marked hiatus between parliamentary politics and those of the country. Yet it is not the case that by 1900 the Socialists were so firmly established as a party within some kind of 'class ghetto' that the door to dialogue was already closed. At the turn of the century the party was of fairly recent formation and still involved in lively internal discussions on the line to be taken towards government. An agreement between Giolitti and reformist socialism remained a distinct possibility until at least 1911, when Bissolati was clearly tempted to enter a government led by Giolitti. In fact, progressive liberalism had many points of contact with moderate socialism, as municipal reform in the first decade of the century made clear, but the kinds of progressive social reforms which were realised under Giolitti touched only a fraction of the population²⁵ and, most seriously, failed to take the sting out of the rural social protest. The extension of the suffrage in 1912 to include almost all males was something at which socialism had traditionally aimed and appeared to represent a very significant extension of democracy, but it was a reform which was put through at a time when intransigent socialism was already moving away from any interest in parliamentary politics in order to concentrate on purely corporative, economic objectives, and it failed to bring them back towards the centre; and the entry of the Catholics into politics with the 'Gentiloni pact' of 1913, while it undoubtedly constituted an extension of popular participation in politics, served only to destabilise parliamentary majorities in the immediate prewar period. Indeed, almost the first effect was to provoke the resignation of Giolitti in March 1914, as radicals withdrew their support for him in disgust at his collaboration with the Catholics.

Employers and the state

The growing severity of social conflict in the years before 1914 was in reality symptomatic of a further problem which concerned both agriculture and industry. As the response to the strike of *braccianti* in Parma in June 1908 had shown,²⁶ if it was clear that the state was no longer going to intervene specifically on their behalf, landowners greatly preferred to solve disputes through their own devices rather than risk government mediation. The same was true of many industrialists, particularly the representatives of those heavy industries which enjoyed some kind of monopoly position in the market and were guaranteed government contracts and financial support. This was a fairly logical position for employers in a country which had a

²⁵ In 1913 union organisations had only 500,000 members out of around 10 million workers; Carocci, *Giolitti*, 70.

²⁶ Landowners reacted to a strike by employing 'volunteers' – young men from the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy of Parma, who, according to Papafava's highly approving account, were often armed, 'Certainly the volunteers are not followers of Tolstoy, they are people who want to defend their rights by the use of law and, where law does not operate, by force – and they are right': Papafava, *Dieci anni*, 704.

massive problem of underemployment and in which the natural working of the forces of the labour market were always going to be in favour of those who were hiring labour. Direct confrontation with workers always had a fair chance of being successful, precisely because of the pressures the market exercised on labour. In other words, there was, in general, no built-in tendency among large landowners or industrialists to support reform as a factor in to economic progress. Particularly among the capitalist agrarians of the north, there was very little sense in which labour was seen as a valuable resource to be treated with due regard. At best, and as much of the more enlightened literature of the period makes clear, the way forward in successful labour relations was seen to be through paternalism and the enforcement of respect for hierarchy rather than through reform. Most employers were convinced that they could manage much better without any kind of regulation, a position which, in their own strictly private terms and in the immediate circumstances of prewar Italy, may indeed have been justified. From their point of view, what was to be avoided was, precisely, legislation and the involvement of government in the regulation of labour relations, because in this way what was perceived of as an essentially private question concerning bosses and workers would be brought into the public sphere, where there was the risk that resolving problems would lie beyond the immediate control of the employers themselves.

This was a reflection of a fairly generalised view of the meaning of liberalism as interpreted by employers. State intervention was welcomed if it operated in their favour but fiercely resisted if it threatened in any way their capacity to control local situations directly. This attitude was to be seen clearly in later years, both during the war, when many employers initially showed great diffidence when asked to accept government arbitration boards in labour disputes (immediately dismantled at the end of the conflict), and after the war, when industrialists would strenuously resist any right of Fascist functionaries to exercise authority within their factories. It was an attitude which was not, of course, confined to Italy; but in Italy it represented a particular problem because of the fact that government in pre-First World War Italy was itself a fairly amorphous grouping of sectional interests rather than the expression of a disciplined political party. Only a strong central government, with a clear reforming majority, could have circumvented the resistance represented by the positions of landowners and industrialists, yet no such government could ever be formed against the will of those interests. Government was, as a consequence, always essentially weak; the political process itself reflected the uncertain relationship between public and private spheres, in which, on many issues, the local and the private were always likely to dominate. Against this background, it was only if moderate socialism could be induced to collaborate with government in such a way as to form part of a radical and reforming majority that there was the possibility for government to realise significant redistributive reform and thus to broaden consensus in favour of the state. However, given socialist division and the unhappy failure to identify clearly the differences between the economic and the political struggle, this possibility remained extremely remote.

Rural unrest and rebellion among the *braccianti* constituted a thorn in the side of

all governments, probably the most serious problem faced by government.²⁷ In part this was determined by the nature of the productive process itself. While in industry production can be suspended while mediation takes place, in agriculture sowing has to be done and the harvest brought in or else all production is lost, something which imposes urgency and raises the stakes for all involved. But in part it was also a consequence of deliberate policies followed by the capitalist leaseholders of the large estates of the lower Po valley. Their profits were linked to the extremely low wages they were able to pay their workers – wages which were in turn a reflection of a dramatic overpopulation in the area relative to the amount of work available. The misery of the landless workers and the enormous success of the modern commercial farms were different faces of the same coin, therefore. This was demonstrated by the fact that, before 1914, the commercial farmers had consistently opposed any suggestion that emigration could be a solution to the social problems of the area. A reserve of desperate workers prevented labour organisations from exercising any effective control of the workforce before the war. The continuing vulnerability of the socialist leagues was reflected in their inability to force up wages or distribute work more evenly, and the ensuing desperation meant that employers could continue to divide the workforce and impose the wage rates suited to them. In this system, there was really very little room for channels of communication between employers and workers; the conditions of the labour market determined that control, on either side, had to be complete to be effective. Employers, of course, had a significant advantage. From the point of view of the farmers one *bracciante* was exactly like another (here there was an important difference with the industrial labour force) and it was not necessary to select or to discriminate; the *agrari* relied on the simple numbers of the labour market to ensure their dominance. They had, in fact, a built-in interest in *not* solving the problem of overpopulation in agriculture so long – and this is an important proviso – as they could control the political consequences of worker desperation.

In the context of the eventual explosion of agrarian Fascism, it is important to note that the increasing tensions in the Po valley owed much to the hardening of the positions of the capitalist farmers during the Giolittian era. Far from reflecting other more moderate and progressive aspects of the belle époque, the politics of paternalism in capitalist agriculture disappeared with frightening rapidity, to be replaced by strategies which accepted, indeed even provoked, a head-on collision with socialism and had few qualms about the use of violence in defence of established privileges. Well before the outbreak of the war, squads of armed ‘volunteers’ were employed in the provinces of the Po valley to intimidate strikers and protect blackleg labour. Lino Carrara, a fairly typical capitalist farmer from Parma and founder in 1907 of the Interprovinciale organisation which recruited thousands of farmers throughout the region, explicitly rejected Giolitti’s appeals for

²⁷ The extent to which rural poverty and unrest represented a permanent running sore in the body politic of liberal Italy is stressed in A. Lyttelton, ‘Landlords, peasants and the limits of liberalism’, in J. A. Davis, ed., *Gramsci and Italy’s Passive Revolution* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 104–35.

concessions. Particularly serious was the subversive nature of the philosophy which justified this resistance. Arguing that his investments in property gave him the right to use direct and violent resistance to the socialist leagues, *already* defined as anti-national and unpatriotic, Carrara rejected all ideas of class collaboration, called for the re-establishment of social hierarchies, invoked strong government not bound in any way by parliament, and looked forward to a period of 'bourgeois renewal'. This was, of course, not only the total negation of the general thrust of Giolitti's policies but also a bitter indictment of liberal Italy. Before the war both the Interprovinciale and the National Confederation of Agrarians which sprang from it in 1910 were very successful in breaking up strikes and defeating labour protest, attracting widespread support for their methods and promoting de facto local alliances between agrarians and industrialists. It seemed that they had found an answer where central government was impotent.²⁸

In fact, liberal governments had few answers to the seething unrest of many rural areas beyond continued repression and the meeting of violence with violence. And the fact that it proved so difficult to find any kind of lasting understanding with peasant protest, and more particularly with the protest of the landless labourers, had disastrous political repercussions. Repression of open discontent by the authorities in the more highly inflamed areas of the Po valley served to make moderate socialism extremely wary of participation in government; it was difficult to form an alliance with the repressors at the centre without losing face at the periphery. As a result, Giolitti was forced to continue to rely on a conservative majority, and remained incapable of pushing through those crucial reforms which might have permitted some kind of firm class alliance. When, in 1911, one of the items on Giolitti's hidden agenda – the division of the socialist movement between reformists and intransigents – was realised, it was painfully obvious that the splinter-group reformism of Bissolati and Bonomi had no following in the country at large, and was therefore of little use to government. Giolitti's claim to have 'put Marx in the attic' proved to be very wide of the mark. Division between governmental majority and country remained as wide as ever. Certainly it is arguable that, had the war not broken out, Giolitti's resignation in early 1914 would have been no more than a temporary withdrawal. But it remains questionable whether he could have continued to govern in the way to which he had become accustomed. As we have seen, even the compromise with Catholic sentiment, represented by the Gentiloni 'pact' prior to the 1913 elections,²⁹ had severely shaken the anticlerical support on which he usually relied.

Judgments on the Italian situation in the immediate months before its entry into the First World War tend to vary markedly. Some would argue that, despite severe

²⁸ A. Cardoza, *Agrarian Elites and Italian Fascism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), chs. 3, 4.

²⁹ The Catholic Electoral Union, led by Count Vincenzo Gentiloni, advised Catholic voters to support their own Catholic candidates only where they had a clear chance of success; otherwise they were to vote for candidates who accepted a written list of principles and proposals (clearly the Giolittians).

problems, the realisation of universal male suffrage and the admission to the political scene of Catholic opinion, so long excluded, represented major steps towards the democratisation of the political process. At a formal level, this can hardly be questioned. Nonetheless, the massive social agitations of 1913 and 1914, culminating in 'Red Week', suggest that what was essentially a crisis of legitimacy of the Italian state had become more, rather than less acute. While so many of the elements of a democratic society were either present or developing, they were doing so in a political context which appeared to have ever less space for democracy. For example, acquisition of the vote was of limited significance for people who had ceased to believe in the value of parliamentary politics, just as it was of limited value in a democratic sense when given to those, socialists and Catholics, who, for one reason or another, rejected the legitimacy of the liberal state. Inclusion had not replaced exclusion in the years after 1900; many were still excluded from most of the benefits of an industrialising society, as high levels of emigration continued to testify; others had decided to exclude themselves from the workings of a state for which they had increasing and openly expressed contempt. Behind the facade of increasing democracy, many of the major problems Italian society had still to be resolved.

Irreconcilable divisions?

Anti-state sentiment, always a characteristic of popular feeling after 1860, was the most serious feature of social conflict. Here the argument is that the lines of battle, those lines which would form again after the First World War, were largely drawn up before the conflict. The interventionist project of Antonio Salandra, Prime Minister when the war began, was to use Italian participation in the war in order to realise a social re-composition of Italy along the lines permitted by authoritarian and repressive legislation justified by the exceptional circumstances of the war. This suggests very strongly that matters had already come to a head and that the war, in fact, offered a way out of a very rapidly deteriorating situation of internal disintegration. Patriotism was to replace poverty as the prime mover of popular politics. In the event, the war did none of this. There was never even a hint of a *union sacrée* or a *Burgfrieden*. The disastrous conduct of the conflict at the front combined with the harsh and repressive conditions in the factories to produce a vast increase in resentment against authority and a corresponding decrease in respect for the state. At the same time the war destroyed the standing of parliament and saw the fragmentation of state authority as public functions were farmed out to private individuals and organisations.³⁰ Popular, as opposed to middle-class, reaction to the 1917 defeat at Caporetto is extremely instructive of attitudes towards the state.³¹

³⁰ Giuliano Procacci, 'Appunti in tema di crisi dello Stato liberale e origini del Fascismo', *Studi storici*, 2 (1965), 221–37.

³¹ Reports from most areas of Italy (not just the north) spoke of people celebrating the news of the defeat, in part because it was assumed that defeat would mean peace, but principally because of generalised sentiments of hostility towards the Italian authorities, considered responsible for the

Certainly the war saw a heightening of both class and political divisions, between officers and soldiers, between ever-more frenetic interventionists increasingly grouped under the nationalist banner in their witch-hunt for neutralist socialists (termed 'defeatists', the internal enemy), between employers and workers. The radicalisation of middle-class opinion and the formation of a virulent anti-socialism among a section of that opinion, particularly those aged between 17 and 25, were features produced by the war and undoubtedly constituted fundamental components of the first Fascism; but this polarisation occurred along lines already formed before the war, serving essentially to weaken further a political centre already seriously compromised. It is no accident that the words most commonly used in respect of the war are 'accentuation' and 'acceleration', largely in relation to positions and attitudes already assumed before the conflict.

But even if we accept that political divisions were already virtually irreconcilable by 1914, we are still left with a big question. Could a more energetic reformism, in particular a thorough-going overhaul of the taxation system, of the kind proposed by Leone Wollemborg in 1901, have prevented the development of a situation of open social conflict? It is a counterfactual question, but nonetheless worth considering. In strictly economic terms the redistribution of the tax burden might have made some appreciable difference to the extremely low levels of popular consumption, even if other factors such as unemployment and underemployment were also very important in determining these levels. But politically the consequences could have been very significant. A reformist socialism which had seen its hand strengthened by success in parliament might have had a much better chance of resisting the challenge of intransigent and revolutionary socialism in the country. In the same way, a reduction in levels of popular discontent would have meant that revolutionary syndicalism found less fertile terrain for agitation. It was, after all, because of the dreadful conditions in which they lived and worked that the *braccianti* of the Po valley represented God's gift to subversive politics. And other important consequences might have flowed from a successful collaboration with reformist socialism. At the point where government was no longer forced to pursue socialist support so determinedly, often at the apparent expense of other social groups, *Giolittismo* might have gained a greater consensus among those elements of the urban petty bourgeoisie who resented the repeated overtures made to the workers and became increasingly anti-socialist for this reason.

This is not to say that Giolittian politics were a total failure. The northern working class, the group which did benefit from Giolitti's factory legislation and policies on the regulation of labour disputes, did become integrated into the system to some degree, as the resolution of the postwar confrontation demonstrated. In 1920 workers were forced to recognise that revolution was impossible and that the political control of production was beyond them – but these recognitions came to people already very much involved with the mechanisms of capitalist industrial

sufferings generated by the war; see Giovanna Procacci, *Dalla rassegnazione alla rivolta* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2000), 132.

production. If anything, the principal mistake of the workers who occupied the factories was to attempt to play by the same rules as their employers, who inevitably held most of the cards. In the areas of agriculture which produced Fascism – the lower Po valley and the large estates of Puglia – the situation was very different. Here poverty and unemployment produced movements which completely rejected the mediation of the state and sought to overthrow and to supersede the liberal state. The responsibility of the modern, capitalist, commercial farmers in the creation of this situation has already been mentioned; it was a situation which seemed to them to be controllable because, although strikes were legal, they inevitably degenerated into violence and disorder, which was not legal, and it was at this point that the farmers could rely on the intervention of the state. Their determination to continue with what was really an untenable relationship with their workforce was shown even in 1919, when proposals for the introduction of unemployment insurance for *braccianti* were blocked in parliament by the *agrari* (and would continue to be blocked until the first Fascist government dropped the proposals in late 1922).³² Government might have done more to intervene to alleviate tensions,³³ but evidently the *agrari* were too powerful politically to permit central government to contemplate intervention in order to lessen the severity of what was always a potentially explosive confrontation. The explosion came when the political repercussions of the extremely heavy exploitation of the landless workers could no longer be controlled by traditional mechanisms, in any case always verging on violence and illegality, and the *agrari* were forced to organise open and explicit subversion of the rules of the liberal state. But it is to be stressed that in late 1920 the landowners were doing no more than employing systematically tactics which had been utilised sporadically before 1914.

To see Fascism as born from the failure to resolve the structural problems of capitalist agriculture risks seeming reductive. Of course there were many other elements which went to produce what was an extremely composite phenomenon. One of the clear distinguishing features of the Fascist movement was that it was a political snowball which gathered heterogeneous elements to itself as the ball rolled and increased in size, but that snowball was set rolling by agrarian Fascism. The clash which occurred in the Po valley was crucial for the further development of the movement. Fascism was not a generic ‘bourgeois response to the working class revolutionary threat’, as the textbook version sometimes puts it; it was something which was very specific to Italy and to relatively limited areas of Italy, where the all-or-nothing nature of the struggle between employers and labour made mediation impossible (only Andalusia and other parts of southern Spain had comparable problems, and found very similar solutions). Here it is argued that a different political approach to the problems of these areas – poverty, overpopulation, unemployment –

³² See E. Campese, *L'assicurazione contro la disoccupazione in Italia* (Roma: Libreria del littorio, 1927), 46–7.

³³ Before the war Giolitti repeatedly deprecated the methods used by the northern landowners in meeting strikes and labour unrest, but to no effect at all. See, for example, Cardoza, *Agrarian Elites*, 184–7.

might have drawn the sting of the conflict and permitted the avoidance of the final and decisive clash of late 1920. And the period in which this different approach might have been taken was in the first years of the century, when conditions were ripe for significant reform. Instead the Giolittian period sees the progressive delineation of politics into three camps – liberal, socialist and Catholic – each extremely reluctant to work with the others, and the clear migration of an increasing political protest to the anti-liberal, anti-parliamentary and anti-state extremes.

But (and finally) how far can this failure be linked to any argument about the origins of Fascism? Does it make sense to go back beyond the institutional paralysis of 1919 and 1920 or the radicalisation of politics provided by the war? It can of course be objected that some reformist solutions were on the table during the *biennio rosso* – supported by certain sections of all three main blocs – and that the determining factor in the rise of Fascism was the inability of these groups to form some kind of collaborative alliance.³⁴ But it is difficult to avoid the impression that matters had already gone beyond the control of parliament and the parties represented there. The cost-of-living riots of 1919, D'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume, the agricultural strikes of spring 1920 and the occupation of the factories – all indicated that the political struggle had changed its ground and was no longer responding to the control of parliament. Yet this loss of control was the extension of a situation already developing before the war, amply exemplified by the extremely bitter strikes and lock-outs of 1913–14 and the events of 'Red Week', suggesting that it was becoming increasingly difficult to govern democratically a country in which there were still enormous social and economic differences and, perhaps more important, specific regions in which these differences were particularly accentuated. These were problems with which Giolitti had attempted to come to terms. His error lay perhaps in assuming that the main threat to stability came from the industrial working class and not from the time-bomb represented by the landless labourers. Fascism cannot be said to have been the inevitable outcome of this error, but very serious social conflict in these areas characterised by a very particular kind (indeed almost a unique kind) of economic development was virtually inevitable. And these were long-term problems which had faced successive Italian governments and cannot be linked to the limited period of the postwar years.

The problem of forming a popular political coalition under a new kind of liberalism was one which faced many European countries during the first years of the century. In Britain the Liberals were more successful than their German counterparts; but even in Germany, the speed with which the SPD voted war credits suggests strongly that the limited and informal parliamentary collaboration of prewar years had paved the way for a future understanding of the kind witnessed by the first Weimar coalition of 1918.³⁵ By 1914 the situation in Italy was dramatically

³⁴ G. Sabbatucci, ed., *Le riforme elettorali in Italia (1848–1994)* (Milan:Unicopli, 1995), Introduzione.

³⁵ The SPD had already voted for the Army Bill in 1913. The very different position of German and Italian socialists emerges from the words of Gordon Craig: 'the Socialist leaders were aware that a negative vote would not be understood by large sections of the working class, who, thanks to the integration process that had been taking place since 1890, were just as patriotic and just as vulnerable to

different; the moment for an accommodation between liberalism and socialism had clearly passed and on both right and left the struggle had already assumed a very different tone. In fact it is inconceivable to think of the main body of Italian socialism rallying to the flag in 1914–15, particularly when majority moderate opinion in the country was also against intervention. In these circumstances, participation in the war was always likely to exacerbate division, as indeed it did, with a radicalisation of both socialist and anti-socialist camps. That unrealistic and exaggerated sense of Italy's place in the world, present in much Italian thinking since 1860, or shortly thereafter, would inevitably clash with the ideas of those who had a very negative concept of the nation.

It is in this sense that it is possible to argue that the conditions which produced Fascism had their origins before the First World War. By 1914, liberalism – the old politics – found itself facing a new politics and was unable to adjust. Certainly 'total' war injected many essential elements into the picture: mass mobilisation and politicisation, radicalisation of opinion, weakening of the institutional structure of government – above all, perhaps, an accentuation of that aggressive nationalism which had been present in Italy since the first disappointments following unification. Many of the characteristics of Fascism as a new kind of mass movement emerged from the experience of the war and, without the war, the Fascism which we now know and recognise is largely inconceivable. It is still possible, therefore, to accept the dictum 'No war, no Fascism' if by that is meant that the specific and politically novel form assumed by Fascism reflected the severe crisis provoked by the disastrous conduct of the war. But it is equally possible to suggest that if Italy had entered the war with different relations between social groups and a different political formation, where severe social conflict was no longer the characteristic feature of the politics of certain regions, the experience of the war would also have been very different and the consequences possibly less divisive. It is in this respect that the failure to form a political coalition capable of significant redistributive reform prior to 1914 was central to future developments. While this is a long way from constituting an Italian *Sonderweg* to Fascism, it may be enough to persuade us that, in the continuing battle between breach and continuity (which, it should be repeated, is *not* about inevitability), the emphasis should be placed fairly heavily on the side of continuity.

military influence as anyone else, particularly when . . . there seemed to be a real possibility of a war to defend Germany against the menace of Slavdom. A year later the same feeling would dictate the voting of the war credits by the Socialist delegation.' See G. Craig, *Germany 1866–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 296–7.