

FUTURIST FANTASIES OF THE FAR-RIGHT

Italy: fascist sci-fi

Demonstrations at the G 8 summit in Genoa and a brutal response by the authorities put Italy in the news. But Italians are increasingly turning away from politics. In this vacuum, the far-right has co-opted the fantasy genre to express its darkest dreams.

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Translated by Barry Smerin

I have long maintained that science fiction tells us more about the real world than mainstream literature¹ and two books just published in Italy confirm this. The first, *Fantafascismo*², is an anthology edited by Gianfranco De Turrís. Apart from a couple of ironic pieces, all the contributions are just what the title says - fascist fantasies. De Turrís is a leading member of a foundation named after the antisemitic philosopher Julius Evola³, and his publishers, Settimo Sigillo, specialise in the works of rightwing extremists. The second book, *Occidente*⁴ by Mario Farneti, sets out to show how much stronger Italy would have been if Mussolini had survived.

It is only a few months since these books came out and already Italy's government is a democratic nightmare. Gianfranco Fini, the deputy prime minister, and Umberto Bossi, minister for institutional reform and devolution, are proposing to criminalise illegal immigration - to loud applause from the popular press, which calls for Italian society to be "purified", praises colonialism and racial segregation, and readily excuses police brutality.

Fini's National Alliance (AN) wants homosexual teachers banned. Members of Bossi's Northern League have let pigs urinate on a mosque building site, sprayed black prostitutes with disinfectant, unbolted park benches to stop immigrants sitting on them, and sent their activists to guard the borders. One of its leaders, Mario Borghezio, a former member of the Nazi group Ordine Nuove and a convert to Catholic fundamentalism, has proposed the authorities take the footprints of Africans entering Italy and keep them on file.

The minister of justice, Roberto Castelli, is an example of the League's drift towards fascism. His first response to the events in Genoa this July was to recommend that the courts go easy on the young soldier on military service who shot dead a 23-year-old protester, Carlo Giuliani, during the G8 summit [as the authorities were responsible for drafting the conscript into a violent situation]. Then he offered to be a witness and testify that the violence never took place. Meanwhile, the minister of the interior, Claudio Scajola, likened the clashes in Genoa to the battle of Algiers, as if to justify resort to the brutality of General Massu.

We were wrong to write fascism off. Although the ideology was officially abandoned when the former Italian Social Movement (MSI) transformed itself into the National

¹ See Valerio Evangelisti, "The truth is in here", *Le Monde diplomatique* English edition, August 2000.

² *Settimo Sigillo*, Rome, 2000.

³ Evola criticised the fascist regime's racial legislation as too lenient.

⁴ *Nord*, Milan, 2001.

Alliance, it is fast re-emerging in Fini's party. AN youth organisations brandish Celtic crosses. Homosexuals are insulted and assaulted. In 1999 the Viareggio section of the AN, its leaders in the forefront, broke up a stage performance by a gay theatre troupe. The AN demonises immigrants, campaigns to get rid of school books favourable to the Resistance, and names party offices after well-known fascists. Berlusconi's government is now an uneasy mix of his own free-market fundamentalism and the frantic authoritarianism of his allies, Fini and Bossi. Such a mix was bound to give rise to the scenes we saw in Genoa, which shocked television viewers throughout the world.

Not just fantasy

Against this background *Fantafascismo* and *Occidente* - plus others like *Il volo dell'aquila* (Flight of the Eagle), *Il ritorno del re* (Return of the King) or *Le maschere del potere* (The Masks of Power) - confirm that sci-fi is more than fantasy about a distant future. It is closely bound up with present reality. In Italy it is not just a critical metaphor for the present. It is a subculture advancing hand in hand with the resurgence of an abhorrent ideology. In the years when the far right was beyond the pale of mainstream Italian culture, it used sci-fi, then neglected, to sneak in through the back door. Hence the overlap between the managing board of Italy's Tolkien Society and the directors of the Julius Evola Foundation. Italy must be the only country where Tolkien's name has been monopolised by the far right. In the 1970s there were even training camps for young fascists with names like Camp Hobbit⁵.

The Rimini-based association Il Cerchio⁶, which combines Catholic fundamentalism with traditional fascism, has organised meetings of sci-fi fans for years. Il Cerchio is run by a member of the Evola Foundation, Adolfo Morganti. And Milan's most popular sci-fi bookshop is home to Barbarossa publishers, whose monthly magazine *Orion* focuses on antisemitism and holocaust denial by writers such as Faurisson, Thion, Irving, Rassinier.

Sci-fi may be a marginal culture with a limited circulation but it has a big impact on youth. The banners of Italian football hooligans feature barbarians in winged helmets, with runic symbols and feathered axes. The lunatic fringe can often find solid "respectable" sponsors, too. For its annual meeting last year, the powerful Catholic fundamentalist movement Communion and Liberation⁷ commissioned Morganti and the Catholic extremist pamphleteer Rino Cammilleri to mount an exhibition directed against the Risorgimento. The Cardinal of Bologna, Mgr Giacomo Biffi, had already convened a symposium on the subject. An outspoken critic of the Pope's "repentance" for the excesses of the Inquisition, Biffi fiercely opposes marriages between Catholics and Muslims and the building of mosques. His violent sermons often appear in *Cristianità*, the magazine of the extremist Catholic Alliance⁸, whose editorial team includes the present under-secretary of the interior, Alfredo Mantovano, as well as Rino Cammilleri, Massimo Introvigne⁹ and Vittorio Messori.

⁵ The great science fiction writer JRR Tolkien is best known for his *Lord of the Rings*, a film version of which will soon be released.

⁶ Website at www.ilcerchio.it

⁷ Website in English at www.comunione-liberazione.org

⁸ Website in English at www.alleanzacattolica.org

⁹ See Bruno Fouchereau, "Secular society at stake", *Le Monde diplomatique* English edition, June 2001.

Il Cerchio distributes works by the French collaborationist writers Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach¹⁰, Holocaust denier Arthur Butz and Romanian fascist leader Corneliu Codreanu. It also publishes a series of textbooks for secondary schools that contain essays by distinguished academics attacking the theory of evolution and all revolutions from the American Revolution to the Italian Risorgimento, but especially the French Revolution, the time-honoured bugbear of the far right.

Take Franco Cardini. During the first Berlusconi experiment, this brilliant Catholic mediaevalist was a member of the board of directors of RAI, the Italian state broadcasting network. At that time RAI was chaired by Letizia Moratti, now education minister, who made an astonishing speech at the annual meeting of Communion and Liberation calling for virtually total privatisation of schooling. Cardini apparently has no qualms about featuring in a series of books alongside fascists and Holocaust deniers. In fact, he wrote a flattering introduction to a book by Rino Cammilleri that sings the praises of the Inquisition and twists the writings of the mediaeval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides in such a way as to lend credence to the hoary myth of Jewish ritual murder¹¹.

Not all the political forces in the present government are influenced by fascist ideology. Berlusconi himself advocates a very different kind of anti-communism. But he and his allies are up to their elbows in a mire of xenophobia, religious fanaticism, authoritarian nationalism, male chauvinism and obscurantism that made the orgy of violence in Genoa entirely predictable.

The left to blame

The blunted edge of fascist ideology has been sharpened by the revisionism permeating contemporary Italian culture. But it is no use pointing the finger at the political right: the left is to blame. In 1996 former investigating magistrate Luciano Violante, speaker of the Chamber of Deputies under centre-left governments and leader of the Left Democrats, put members of the Resistance and volunteers for Mussolini's Italian Social Republic on the same moral plane - as if the deportation of Jews after 1943 had been nothing more than youthful exuberance.

The seeds of revisionism were sown by Renzo De Felice in his monumental biography of Mussolini - a classic case of a historian falling more deeply in love with his subject with every volume he writes. The philosopher Massimo Cacciari had already campaigned for the cultural rehabilitation of Ernst Jünger, Julius Evola and other intellectuals dear to the far right. He and other "leftists" helped free the MSI of historical guilt and paved the way for the emergence of Fini's National Alliance as a legitimate political party combining fascists, monarchists, Catholic extremists and mainstream conservatives.

When a Belgian socialist minister accused the Italian government of promoting fascism, it was former prime minister Massimo D'Alema of the Left Democrats who, with the president of the republic, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, a former member of the Resistance, set out to reassure the international community. There were virtually no fascists left in the Italian parliament, they said, and those who remained were

¹⁰ Executed in February 1945.

¹¹ *La vera storia dell'Inquisizione*, Piemme, Milan, 2001.

completely tame. Thus D'Alema and Ciampi successfully shielded Italy against the anger unleashed in Europe against Austria.

The floodgates of revisionism are now wide open. Former ambassador Sergio Romano, a journalist who appears on all the TV news programmes, has begun a campaign of praise for Franco, glorifying the caudillo's fight against communism. Another former left-wing intellectual, Ernesto Galli Della Loggia, has written an introduction to a collection of essays extolling the virtues of Julius Evola - in between two furious editorials denouncing the ideas that Evola used to propound. Right-wing journalist Indro Montanelli, who died recently, was liked by the left for his hostility to Berlusconi. Yet he denied, in the face of all evidence, that Italian troops had used poison gas in the African colonies. The former managing editor of the daily newspaper *La Stampa*, ex-socialist Paolo Mieli, now spends his time writing books and articles criticising every period in Italian history when fatherland, family and religion were called into question.

This revisionism is now firmly entrenched in the universities and regularly defended in the press. Those responsible may not have succeeded in replacing one truth by another but they have managed to discredit the whole idea of historical truth, leaving an empty field on which anything can be constructed. This has allowed intellectuals to rehabilitate the unspeakable leading to a rapid decline in moral standards.

Racist propaganda, fascist apologetics, contempt for minorities, exultation of the colonial past, praise for authoritarian systems, rehabilitation of reactionary intolerance and the cult of power: these no longer shock. The bitter truth is that they have become the stuff of daily life. The behaviour of the police in Genoa is unsurprising.

What kind of future do the government ultra-conservatives want for Italy? The answer lies in the sci-fi novel *Le maschere del potere* by Errico Passaro, a former air force officer who writes for the AN's magazine *Il Secolo d'Italia*. Passaro describes a distant future in which the balance between three kingdoms and three powers - army, church and craftsmen - has kept the peace for a thousand years. A misguided attempt to upset the balance almost leads to catastrophe. The heroes' mission is to thwart the rebels and restore the three powers. The "heroes" who clubbed demonstrators in Genoa have something similar in mind. Time will tell whether they make it a reality.