



The Mussolini Contradiction - Boston's North End "Street Corner Society"

Tom Verso (October 01, 2010)



"The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones..." Shakespeare

The Mussolini Contradiction



In my experience, I find a contradiction between the mass culture 'characterization' of Mussolini and the 'opinions' of first generation southern-Italian immigrants and their American born sons who fought in Italy during WW II.

There is a contradiction between school and media representations of Mussolini and my memories of conversations heard on the street and at dinner tables in my southern-Italian American urban village during the post WW II years.

This contradiction flashes vividly whenever I see the picture of Mussolini hanging upside down from a meat hook in a Milan gas station. Invariably the immortal lines of Shakespeare's Mark Anthony comes to mind:

"The evil that men do lives after them;
the good is oft interred with their bones..."

This is not to say I mean to play the role of Mark Anthony tacitly denying Mussolini's crimes (sins) and celebrating him in anyway.

Rather, mine is purely an historiographic interest in the opinions of southern-Italian Americans about Mussolini in the years before and after the war, and how those opinions contradict the generally accepted representations of the man.

Oral History - Rochester, NY

In the conversations I remember from my youth, the men never outright and totally condemned Mussolini, as they categorically condemned Hitler. Whereas Hitler was unequivocally 'evil' with absolutely no redeeming qualities, Mussolini was criticized-with-qualification. Typical comments:

He did a lot that was wrong, but he also tried to do some worthwhile things for Italy...

Invading Africa was wrong; but what about all the other European countries that have been doing it for centuries - the French still own Algeria...

He spent a lot of money on public works projects - so did Roosevelt...

They make fun of his train projects like he was a little kid playing with trains. But, how can you have industry without trains. Look at all the New York Central train yards in Rochester...etc.

Also, and importantly to my mind, the children of the immigrants, men who fought in Italy, men whose brothers and friends died in Italy, did not categorically condemn Mussolini. Rather, he was thought of as a man who made mistakes and was a victim of his ambition (i.e. human frailty).

I found this contradiction between Rochester's southern-Italian American oral history and school/media history intriguing. I wondered if there was any basis for generalizing to the southern-Italian American population as a whole.

The historian comes to know a society by critically analyzing the documents created by or about the society. I wondered if there was documentary evidence corroborating my oral anecdotes; thus, providing a basis for generalizing about southern-Italian American opinion of Mussolini in the years proximate to WW II.

I found such documentation in William Wythe's renowned anthropological study of the late 1930s Boston North End neighborhood - "Street Corner Society."

"Street Corner Society"

William Wythe lived in the North End from February 1937 until July 1940. Using the anthropological method known as 'Participant-Observation', he befriended and integrated himself into various



groups ('participation') and systematically recorded notes about events and conversations ('observation').

The North End at that time was, in the author's words, "inhabited almost exclusively by [southern-] Italian immigrants and their children." Needless to say, after three and a half years of observation and note taking, the book contains an enormous amount of information about the southern-Italian Americans living in the North End; including two fascinating reports about Mussolini opinions.

First, there is a report similar to mine of an oral tradition expressing a sympathetic view of Mussolini. Second, and especially interesting, there is documented voting records corroborating both oral histories. For an historian, when documented statistics corroborate oral history - 'it don't get better than that!'

Oral history - North End

Wythe reports:

"Chick Morelli expressed a very common sentiment when he addressed his Italian Community Club:

'Whatever you fellows may think of Mussolini, you've got to admit one thing. He has done more to get respect for the Italian people than anybody else. The Italians get a lot more respect now than when I started going to school. And you can thank Mussolini for that.' " (emp+)

Document history

This oral claim of a "very common [positive] sentiment" about Mussolini correlates with North End voting patterns for Franklin D. Roosevelt. Whyte reports:

"In his first two campaigns Roosevelt had been tremendously popular in [the North End]. At this time Roosevelt and democracy did not conflict with Mussolini and fascism in the minds of [North End] people. They would say, 'Mussolini for Italy; Roosevelt for the United States.'

However, after Roosevelt attacked Mussolini in his famous "stab-in-the-back" University of Virginia speech on June 10, 1940, North End sentiment turned precipitously and measurably against Roosevelt. Whyte writes:

"[The effect of the speech] can be roughly measured by the following [North End] votes in the elections of 1936 and 1940.

1936 Election

Roosevelt	89%
Landon	11

1940 Election

Roosevelt	51%
Willkie	49

"In 1936 Roosevelt carried [the North End] by 3,278 votes; in 1940 his margin was 117 votes. The Democratic candidate for Massachusetts governor...was able to poll 63 per cent of the [North End] vote to Roosevelt's 51 per cent"

Conclusion

Two oral traditions from two southern-Italian American neighborhoods in two different cities corroborated by objective voting statistics is strong evidence (albeit not conclusive) that the Mussolini sentiment of southern-Italian Americans during the years surrounding WW II may be characterized with Shakespeare's "Evil that men do..." verse.



Final Thought

I have little knowledge about the history of Fascist Italy. I have even less understanding about the concept of Justice.

Accordingly, I leave it to historians, philosophers, theologians and morally confident people to judge the appropriateness of the brutally vicious dehumanizing mob vengeance the Communist exacted from Mussolini.

However, there is one indubitable fact I believe all Americans of southern-Italian descent should keep in mind.

The shot, kicked, stoned and spat upon trophies
at the center of the Milanesi celebration

- hanging upside down from meat hooks -

were the mutilated carcasses of...Italians!

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