Fascism in America and Italy: Does History Repeat Itself?

Jerry Krase (September 10, 2018)



Given the rise of intolerance at the highest levels of government in America and Italy, it makes sense to think about its illogical causes and potential effects.

Lots of my intellectual friends like to quote some version of Philosopher George Santayana's aphorism "Those who canno t remember the past are condemned to repeat it." The most frequent iteration is "Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it." If Santayana is right -- that history does repeat -- then ignorance is neither its cause nor its effect, according to me. In other words, if it happened in the past, it is guaranteed to happen again, and of course it has. The best thing you can do is duck when you see it coming.

Most think of the aphorism as only referring to the latter two words of "The Good, Bad, and the Ugly," as in Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, and you know who (or take your pick). But sometimes history has a Good side. An optimistic version of the saying is that knowing history can make contemporary society better because people won't make the same mistake twice. This rosier view is based on the False News that people are rational, if not intelligent, enough to try to change the (inevitable) course of history. Unfortunately, half of the population is below average intelligence, and right now the wrong half seems to be in charge.

The positive potential for using UGLY history is another story. In a recent Time magazine article, "How the South Memorializes — and Forgets — Its History of Lynching,"Sherrilyn Ifill employs the

horrific history of lynching in America for a good purpose. The impact of her text is enormously magnified by Johnathon Kelso's powerful images from his series, "A Song Without Words." As they both retell the shameful history, between 1877 and 1950 more than 4,400 African Americans were victims of this, largely ignored, "systematic" reign of terror. Since the perpetrators controlled the public square, lynchings have rarely merited explanatory markers. Despite their invisible history, lynching's psychic devastation still impacts on the local, and national community. Infill encourages locals to do the difficult research, which might help repair the damage and bring to wide attention "our past's darkest chapters." She ends the article with a prayer: "By embracing that history — by being honest aboutwhere we have fallen short of our professed ideals — we can draw closer to a futurewhere every American enjoys equal protection of the law." To which I say "Inshallah!"

Less poetically, lynching is merely the practice of "extrajudicial" execution. Most often they were committed by an angry mob; often with the help of local political authorities. Although they took place before the Civil War, their heyday was after Reconstruction in the South when the White losers sought to reassert their dominance over Blacks. According to several sources, about 4,743 people were lynched between 1882 and 1968. Victims included 3,446 African Americans and 1,297 "others." Almost three-quarters of all lynchings took place in the South, but per capita, they were also common in the Old West, especially of Latinos. As might be expected, Native Americans and Asian Americans were also victims. Rounding out the recorded list were Finnish, Jewish, Irish, and Italian-Americans.

The well-deserved reputation of intolerance of too many Italian-Americans today is unexpected given the numerous parallels between the African-American and Italian-American experiences. For example, after seeing Sicilian fieldworkers and sulfur miners in 1910, Booker T. Washington wrote: "The Negro is not the man farthest down. The condition of the colored farmer in the most backward parts of the Southern States in America, even where he has the least education and the least encouragement, is incomparably better than the condition and opportunities of the agricultural population in Sicily." As explained by Samuele F. S, Pardini, Washington, feared their mass immigration to the United States would undermine the already precarious condition of African Americans who at the time were only a few decades out of slavery. The suffering of Italians in America pales in comparison to that of African Americans. Mostly, because they eventually attained a pseudo-white status for which they are eternally grateful. Becoming White however, required acceptance of the American white supremacist racial ideology. In any case, some examples of their long-forgotten history are worth recalling.

At the turn of the 20th Century defenders of the nation warned that Slavs, Italians and Jews because of their high birth rates would "degrade" the "American race." Other critics of Southern Italian immigration warned that Italians were not even "white" at all. The New York Herald wrote about "Italian Slave Children," sent by Italian padrones out to beg in the streets. In one cellar "home" for the children the police and reporters found "an abominable place, the breeding ground of disease and the abode of roaches and vermin." Dixie plantation owners thought Southern Italian peasants might replace freed slaves. The Italian government saw this an opprounity to export them and benefit by their remittances, but were unsuccessful as they were too difficult for their new masters to control. The late 19th and early 20thcentury press spread the message that "dagoes" were "dangerous," "lazy," "filthy," "cruel," "ferocious," and "bloodthirsty." For one Irish-American critic "The Italian was all too ready to ask for public assistance.", and lacked of "manly qualities."

Like African Americans, the best indicator of racial hatred is the American custom of lynching. Although many other Italians were lynched by racist mobs, the most (in)famous was in New Orleans. On March 14, 1881, according to Italian American scholar Patrick Gallo: "a mob of 6,000–8,000 people, led by prominent citizens, descended on the parish jail to get the "Dagoes." State and local law officers, and the governor who was in the city at the time, stood by and did nothing, the mob hanged two of the suspects from lampposts, and lined nine of them up in front of the prison wall and blasted their bodies with rifles, pistols, and shotguns, taking less than twenty minutes for their grim work." The victims were accused of killing the New Orleans Superintendent of Police whose dying words were "The Dagoes shot me . . . the Dagoes did it." The Mayor then ordered the police "to arrest every Italian you come across." About 150 were arrested. When the courts began to find them innocent, the New Orleans Times-Democratcalled for "All good citizens . . . to attend a mass meeting . . . to take steps to remedy the failure of justice," resulting in the largest mass lynching in American

history. Theodore Roosevelt considered the lynching of eleven “rather a good thing” and the New York Times agreed that, “the Lynch Law was the only course open to the people of New Orleans.”

If history was a lesson, what did it teach Italian Americans? Given that the racist, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic current President was supported by Italian America at the ballot box, and Italian Americans such as Mike Pompeo and Rudy Giuliani are his prominent advisers, it seems to be “Do unto others as has been done to me.” They seem to have forgotten, or didn’t know in the first place, that for Anglo-Saxon America, Italy was once a "shithole country."

As might be expected, the return of Fascism in America is mirrored in the “home” country where Italians have forgotten Mussolini’s co-towing to Hitler, who said Italians were ”tainted with negro blood.” Obviously, they don’t recall how fascism destroyed their country. Even though Italians were once the “niggers of Europe,” their past history of mass migration has not deterred them from racist expletives and immigrant bashing today. Such shameful behavior is shared among many, more Aryan, European countries like German. Italy’s far-right Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, is hardly the worst of the worst. Stephen Kirchgaessner reported from Rome that Salvini “…vowed to turn “words into action” in his drive to root out and expel thousands of nomadic Roma from Italy as he shrugged off critics who said the far-right interior minister was adopting illegal policies reminiscent of the country’s fascist past.” While it is true that most “non-Italians” in the country are non-white, historical hatred toward the Roma “…provides the easiest appeal to Italian bigotry.” As a result, Salvini’s approval rating jumped.

Thankfully, such clearly racist appeals are not every Italians cup of espresso. For Gomorrah author, Roberto Saviano, “Italy’s war on migrants makes him fear for his country’s future. A wave of hatred has been whipped up, threatening the civil rights of all of us.” He sees a battle being waged between Italians and migrants whereby Italians disregard the rights of others. As a result, the society is going backwards with an “upsurge of nationalism that displays racist animus against anything perceived to be an alien body.”

Last but not least, as I was writing this non-anonymous Op-Ed, Jason Horowitz wrote “The most powerful figure in Italy’s new populist government signed up on Friday with Steve Bannon, President Trump’s former chief strategist, to help bring about a continentwide populist takeover during European Parliamentary elections next spring.” Salvini joined Bannon’s “The Movement” which is billed as an opportunity for right-wing populist leaders across Europe to form alliances. I can only hope that our guy in White House doesn’t feel left out. Whether he sees this on Fox Cable News or not, millions of progressive Italian Americans and Italians will have a difficult task ahead trying to guide their misguided co-ethnics away from the Dark Side by teaching them the lessons of their own history. If Santayana is right, it might be a waste of time, but it will be time well-spent.

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