Chapter 17

A Petit-Bourgeois Fatherland

The Rise and Fall of the Petite Bourgeoisie

Fascism represented the most coherent attempt to create an Italian civil religion—a homogeneous body of values, feelings, and behaviors to be shared among all the peoples of the peninsula.¹ But everyone knows how catastrophically this turned out: in 1945, after two years of civil war, with Italians on both sides swapping accusations of betrayal, all mentions of the nation, the fatherland, or any other symbol even remotely suggestive of the Fascist experience were abandoned.²

After the question of national identity resurfaced in Italy following the political crisis of the 1990s, many people said that it was fascism and the war that had kept it on a back burner for more than forty years. Fewer dared to link this “disqualification” of a sense of identity to the successes achieved earlier by the Mussolinian regime in attempting to forge such a sense: a social compromise with the petite bourgeoisie founded on promises that could not be kept.

It may seem paradoxical that the petite bourgeoisie should have become so politically important at the precise moment when it was starting on a downward curve in economic and social affairs—that is, when large numbers of peasants were abandoning the countryside to become hourly laborers, and when small-scale production and distribution were hit by the first big processes of concentration. Historically the petite bourgeoisie has been the first to benefit from the gradual enlargement of political institutions in newly maturing capitalist societies, making it a mass base for liberal democracy, and an unavoidably pivotal social element. Its political importance has helped slow its downward curve, socially and economically, as have legislative initiatives; this braking action has grown more decisive as social and economic decline have become more pronounced.

In Italy, the growth of the political strength of the petite bourgeoisie largely took place in just a few years, between the repression of the Milanese riots of 1898 and the entry into World War I in 1915. The group’s arrival on the political scene was marked by a pronounced hostility toward the old ruling classes, which the petit bourgeois wanted to replace, and by an equally sharp hostility toward the proletariat, whose demands were seen as a direct threat to the economic well-being and social prestige so recently acquired. Let us not forget that from 1901 to 1913, while average income increased by 17 percent, workers’ salaries rose by 26
percent, strengthening the petit-bourgeois conviction that industrial employees were privileged in their own way.³

In a 1923 essay, Luigi Salvatorelli explains that this class was democratic and Socialist leaning so long as it thought it had found, in democracy and in socialism, the idealized forms of its interests, and it abandoned them the moment they began to transform into reality and embody its worst nightmares: industrialization and a workers’ coalition. In the years of Giolittism, the petite bourgeoisie aligned with nationalism because, Salvatorelli continues, it was “too weak and inconsistent as an organic class—that is, one holding power and economic function”—to measure up to the haute bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Its “class struggle,” according to Salvatorelli, consisted in the negation of the very concept of class, replacing it with that of “nation.” In the case of the fascist movement, he concludes, “the petit-bourgeois element” is numerically dominant, but above all is “distinctive and directive.”⁴ Along with Salvatorelli, numerous witnesses of the period—including Gobetti, Gramsci, Ansaldo, and Tilgher⁵—and nearly every historian of the post-Fascist period has insisted on the dominance of the petit-bourgeois element in fascism, as much in social terms as in moral or intellectual terms.

The haute bourgeoisie, for its part, was uninvolved in fascism’s birth or its direction, but used it precisely because of its character as a mass movement, able to promote its interests as an “organic class.” A similar attitude had been adopted toward nationalism in the period before World War I. From August 1914 to May 1915, the industrial and agricultural sectors, battling for international market share, had remained faithful to Giolitti in the conviction that there was more to gain through neutrality than through war, and in the fear that war would strengthen the protectionist alliance between high finance and heavy industry. They finally gave in when it appeared that Italy would participate in the conflict regardless, for fear of being excluded from what was thought to be the imminent work of defining a new postwar order.

The mass of peasants had always opposed the war. The urban petite bourgeoisie—shopkeepers, artisans, intellectuals—believed that the conflict would mean an end to the Giolittian system, to the tyranny of the trade unions, and to usurious banking practices, and would allow it to satisfy its thirst for a “gentle” patriotism, learned from De Amicis’s books, and also its thirst for an aggressive and vengeful patriotism, learned from D’Annunzio’s speeches on the war, “the most fertile matrix of beauty ever to appear on Earth.”⁶ The Italian war, in its three and a half years, would show that the petit-bourgeois were right only in judging that the Giolittian system was a thing of the past.

The Death of Liberal Transformism

The European war immediately transmitted to Italy the effects of the stock market collapse, the interruption of credit and foreign trade, and the consecutive failure of banks and of enterprises, and it caused numerous emigrants to return home.⁷ In December 1914 the state created an entity—the Consorzio per le sovvenzioni sui valori industriali—to inject capital into troubled banks and industries. The