Emmanuel Macron & Mario Draghi: On the Arrests of Italian 1970s Militants in France

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An interview with Enzo Traverso by Andrea Brazzoduro. Originally published by Zapruder [1].

Andrea Brazzoduro :On 28 April, seven militants of the 1970s Italian revolutionary left were arrested in France, in the so-called "Red Shadows" sting operation. The Italian justice system accuses them of a series of crimes, allegedly committed between 1972 and 1982, ranging from subversive association to murder. Grey-haired men and women, each between 60 and 78 years of age — exiles who have been living in refuge in France for years — they were put in handcuffs at dawn and taken off to anti-terrorist strongrooms. La Repubblica tells us that this was about "closing the book on the twentieth century" — is that the case?

Enzo Traverso : The twentieth century came to an end back in 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. Since then, the world has changed — and so, too, Italy, which is no longer that of 32 years ago. In many regards, things are a lot worse: what the media usually call the "second" and "third" republics make us miss the first republic (1946-1994), created by men and women who had fought fascism and created a new Italy. Yet the legacy of the twentieth century remains a burden and many structural ills continue to afflict our country. We need only think of such examples as the Mafia, the Southern question, racism and corruption. Some of these problems have got even worse, for instance youth unemployment and postcolonial racism, which has become much stronger since Italy became a land of immigration. During the second half of the twentieth century, Italy joined the wealthiest clutch of Western countries, but over the last three decades it has been falling behind. It has seen a constant demographic decline but it does not want to integrate immigrants, refusing to grant citizenship even to the second generation; its elites are getting older but the young remain excluded; the peninsula is experiencing an impressive intellectual diaspora, similar to what we see in the countries of the global South; and economic elites have enriched themselves enormously, without bringing development. La Repubblica is one of the most faithful mirrors of these elites — the CEO at FIAT-Chrysler now publicly nominates the paper's lead editors. "Closing the book on the twentieth century" would imply dealing with this tangle of problems. But for La Repubblica it seems that it means the extradition of Marina Petrella, Giorgio Pietrostefani and a few other refugees.

Unsurprisingly, there was a unanimous response across the whole spectrum of institutional politics and the Italian press, speaking of "the duty to settle accounts with history" (as Ezio Mauro put it), the "particularly painful wounds" that were left (Marta Cartabia), and so on. For many years you have worked on the relationship between memory, justice and politics (for instance with your very useful The Past: A User's Guide, published in Italian by Ombre corte in 2006). What do you think of this use of memory? Is there really a wound

that needs to be healed?

For people from my generation who lived through those years, there's no doubt that these are painful wounds that have not yet healed. The exiles arrested in France would be the first to admit that. The problem is, how to come to terms with history. Mario Calabresi, the son of the police commissioner who was murdered in 1972, said that the news that Giorgio Pietrostefani had been arrested didn't give him any sense of relief, satisfaction, reparation or justice — just pain and embarrassment. In Italy the media and official culture — what Althusser called the "ideological state apparatuses" — have never been able, indeed never wanted, to process the memory of the Years of Lead. Rather, they have provided a backing chorus for a series of special laws and arrests, painting the "enemies of the state" as monsters. The pentiti ["repentant" ex-terrorists who provided evidence against their former organisations] were obviously cogs in this machine. Former terrorists, as well as a handful of historians (among whom I'd like to mention Giovanni De Luna) are probably among the few people who have made any real contribution to an awareness, an understanding, and the construction of a critical memory of those years. Ex-Red Brigades (BR) members have admitted their wrongdoing — and sometimes crimes; they have reflected on their errors and sought to understand and explain why they made the choices they did. The interview that Rossana Rossanda and Carla Mosca did with Mario Moretti in 1994 is much more useful in this respect than all the articles published by la Repubblica or the Corriere della Sera over the last half-century. I've not read Ezio Mauro's article, but anyone with the slightest intellectual honesty has to acknowledge that the "duty to settle accounts with the past" means something very different to a delayed-action repression that comes over two generations after what happened. It seems to me that terrorism and the political violence of the 1970s are still viewed with the same blind and vindictive gaze of that decade. Terrorists are depicted as monsters who should pay for what they have done. This is, in my view, the worst way to "come to terms with the past" and to explain history to the two generations that followed the Years of Lead.

Another chapter of the book which I mentioned is dedicated to the relationship between "truth and justice". The "judicialisation of the past" (as Henry Rousso put it) is inversely proportional to the collapse of the horizon of expectation, and to the refrain about the "end of ideologies" — the key theoretical underpinning of the "capitalist realism" discussed by Mark Fisher. Is this how we should read the Paris sting operation?

The idea that the murders of commissioner Calabresi, Aldo Moro and his bodyguards can today be answered with a judicial response — by jailing the last of the exiles — is first and foremost an expression of the blindness and incomprehension of which I just spoke. But this blindness, this incomprehension, are not the product of naivety — this has been going on for decades. It is anachronistic to think that in 2021 we can offer a judicial response to things that happened in the 1970s. If we accept the principle that no statute of limitations applies here — thus putting these actions on the same level as crimes against humanity — we get caught up in an inextricable tangle of contradictions. Are Pietrostefani and Petrella the same as Eichmann? In 1946, Palmiro Togliatti, minister of justice and pardons in the first republican government, declared an amnesty for those who had tarnished themselves with the worst fascist crimes during the civil war. So how can we justify such unrelenting persecution, decades later, of leading figures from the Years of Lead who have taken refuge in France?

Ever since ancient times — we need only think of the Peloponnesian wars — civil wars and political crises inflected with violence have always concluded with an amnesty. The amnesty law Togliatti promulgated in 1946 was part of a general tendency: there were equivalent measures across Europe. Up till the 1970s, interior ministries, police stations and government offices across the continent were full of collaborationists and ex-fascists. Historian Paul Ginsborg (2003) has highlighted the fact that at the beginning of the 1960s, all of Italy's police prefects were former top functionaries in the Fascist regime. In Spain, during the transition to democracy, there was an amnesty for both antifascist exiles and the officials of the Franco regime.

The end of the twentieth century saw a new, different perspective on trying to "working through the past" and heal its wounds, with the case of South Africa. After the end of Apartheid, that country set up truth and justice commissions that ruled out judicial inquiries and criminal sentences in exchange for being able to establish the truth. The South African example has been followed by many countries, especially in Latin America, from Peru to Colombia. Obviously, these historical experiences are hardly identical to one another. But the principle is still a useful one, for finding a way out of a crisis and "working through the past". In Italy there has never been a discussion of this principle. The Italian paradox is that the only ones who have provided an account of their experience are the ex-members of the Red Brigades and other armed left-wing organizations, not their enemies. The state has done little or nothing to shed light on the coup plots, the neofascist infiltrators, the "deviations" by the secret services, the deployment of the "strategy of tension", the neofascist violence that enjoyed cover from within the state apparatuses, and which had far more victims than leftist terrorism ever did. No one has ever asked the state to explain the hundreds of people killed by the police in those years (militants, young people, students, workers…). Whoever insists on the "duty to settle accounts with the past" ought to be asking about that.

But this Italian "disease" isn't so hard to explain. The state is inflexible in combatting its enemies, but highly accommodating or indulgent toward the violence perpetrated by its own agents and representatives. The coup plots and the state apparatuses' collusion with neofascist groups who put bombs on trains are to be hidden; conversely, persecuting leftist terrorists reinforces the institutions' own solidity. This isn't only true of Italy. Many studies have shown how in the BRD (West Germany) the sentences handed to members of the Red Army Faction were far longer than the ones handed to ex-Nazis between 1949 and 1979. When we speak of "memory" we are always simplifying things: for memory is complex, heterogeneous and divided. There is the memory of the ex-terrorists and their victims (and the "post-memory" of their children); there is the collective memory, now muffled or extinguished, of the social movements; there is the cultural memory that moulds the public sphere; and there is also an institutional, state memory, which is probably the most unforthcoming when it comes to this affair. This also explains why those who took refuge in France some decades ago did not want to hand themselves in to a justice system that made no mystery of its determination to persecute them and offered very few guarantees of impartiality. As Carlo Ginzburg demonstrated in a famous book on the trial against Adriano Sofri (1991), this justice didn't seem credible. We need only think of the role that the pentiti played in so many of these trials. I do not think we can simply say that these refugees "escaped justice".

In the last lines of the introduction to another very important book of yours (2017) you briefly refer to your experience as a "revolutionary activist" in the late twentieth century, when it seemed the world was hit by a new "civil war". In the unanimous narration of the recent arrests, weren't we missing the other side, the context? That is, who these people were fighting against and why?

Yes, the context was missing. This was a discussion of events dating back more than forty years ago, two generations back, but which still haven't been "historicised." They are not set within a past whose profile is already known and — even more importantly — which is properly attributed some meaning. Amidst great difficulties the refugees have reconstructed their own existence; they have reflected on their experience, and they continue to come to terms with their own consciences. The victims and the families are left with their pain. But historicising things — working through the past to being it onto the terrain of history — means going beyond feelings alone. This is a condition which simply has to be met if these same feelings are to be integrated into a collective space, into a historical consciousness, into the awareness that a cycle of history is now over. My impression is that in Italy justice has been an obstacle to this processing of grief — an obstacle to a process reconstructing the past that would finally allow us to grasp it historically.

The political violence of the 1970s was part of a political era that concluded with a defeat of the Left, of the workers' movement, of alternative movements. This defeat has never been processed. Rather, this past has been repressed. At three decades' distance, the congress at which the Italian Communist Party decided to change its name does not appear as its "Bad Godesberg" moment [the German Social Democrats' formal abandonment of Marxism] but as an exorcism. We could call it "repression", in the psychoanalytic sense. The Years of Lead have been swallowed up by this repression and they have entered into the world of journalistic story-telling (and incomplete or unexplored archives) rather than our historical consciousness.

I'm not trying to avoid your more personal question, though it's wholly secondary, here. I remember the 1970s, the years of my youth, very clearly. I took part in my first demo in 1973, when I was 16. I never felt tempted by terrorism and I always criticised the choice in favour of armed struggle, not for reasons of principle but because I thought it was strategically and tactically mistaken. From 1979 onward a good part of my political activity consisted of taking part in assemblies and demos against repression. I didn't like the slogan "neither with the BR or with the state" because it established an equivalence between two incomparable bodies that couldn't be fought using the same methods. In retrospect, I think it's obvious not only that opting for armed struggle was harmful and suicidal, but also that it significantly contributed to undermining the protest movements and subduing the diffuse condition of political conflict. The BR had emerged in a period of struggles, as a fragment of the workers' movement, a group that considered itself a "vanguard" and practiced "exemplary action" or the "propaganda of the deed" to radicalise the social antagonism. Similar tendencies had already emerged in various countries already a century or more beforehand, especially within anarchist ranks. Mike Davis is one historian who has provided an impressive inventory of such tendencies (2017). In Italy these practices passed through the filter of the memory of the Resistance and Communist culture, and that is why the Red Brigades did not set off bombs, but rather selected their targets. Gradually, in the bid to escape police repression — and thus for practical reasons that were theorised only a posteriori — the BR transformed into a clandestine organisation, separate from the movements, which waged its war against the state by itself. It was thus drawn into a downward spiral which could only result in its elimination by the state. Part of the radical left was under the illusion that it could "take advantage of" or "ride on the coat tails" of terrorism: the BR were undermining the solidity of the state, so we had to ready ourselves for the uprisings that would follow. Such calculations were mistaken, and a very high price was paid for those errors. But here I'm speaking with the benefit of hindsight. I was a Trotskyist, meaning, I made up part of a movement critical of the armed struggle. Unlike in other countries, Trotskyism was very much in the minority in Italy, where it remained intellectually insignificant compared to the theoretical creativity of operaismo, and politically marginal compared to movements that experimented with new practices, like Lotta Continua. Trotskyism did, nonetheless, have a deeper historical awareness that warned against certain dangers, like a sort of vaccine. But to say that is not to boast of its virtues. In those years, joining one political group or another was not only a consequence of ideological choice; it depended on myriad circumstances, which often weren't immediately ideological (emotions and forms of socialisation play a very important role in politics) and was sometimes purely accidental. I have no problem admitting that in different, but entirely plausible, circumstances, I'd have been on demos not only wearing a helmet but with a pistol in my bag. So, I cannot feel wholly uninvolved in this affair and I believe that, if they have the slightest intellectual honesty, some tens of thousands of people from my generation would have to say the same about themselves.

You lived in France for many years before again emigrating, to the United States. Did the April 28 sting operation have more to do with the coming French presidential elections, or

with the internal logics of Italian politics?

I think the Italian refugees in France are the object of some rather petty political chicanery. Mario Draghi wants to establish his legitimacy as a statesman and prove that in a few weeks he can secure something that Italian governments have been requesting for years. This is a shrewd move, with a view to his future bid for election to the Italian presidency. Macron wants to provide further evidence of his own authoritarian turn, which is today leading him to show a more repressive face than the right and even the far right, with a view to his possible re-election. So, there can be no indulgence toward “terrorists”, even ones who ceased to be terrorists more than forty years ago, who have never hid themselves away, and who respect the laws of France, the country where they have been legally resident for decades, where they have laid roots and received hospitality. No one, not even Marine Le Pen, was asking Macron to extradite the Italian refugees. He probably thought this measure would add greater credibility to his struggle against “Islamo-gauchisme”. Like the vast majority of the politicians who govern us, Macron is concerned with opinion polls and certainly not with “working through the past.” He’d be ready to pursue any “memory policy” so long as it helped him win the elections.

Enzo Traverso

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https://fourth.international/en/europe/347

Footnotes

[1] http://storieinmovimento.org/2021/05/07/la-retata-intervista-con-enzo-traverso/