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Post-war Societies (Italy)

By [Andrea Baravelli](#)

Post-war Italy was the only country that proved unable to use victory as a rhetorical device to consolidate its political system. Internal divisions rendered the old liberal ruling classes incapable of closing ranks in response to the post-war socio-economic crisis, which was soon to lead to the turmoil of the *biennio rosso* (1919-1920). The ineptitude of the liberal elites was compounded by their refusal to contemplate an alliance with the Italian Socialist Party or with the Italian Popular Party, the two new mass parties to have loomed large on the post-war political scene, a stance reflecting the liberal reluctance to envisage the necessary transition to a democracy featuring modern political parties. In this fashion, the Italian ruling classes paved the way for the seizure of power by a radical nationalism which then led to fascism, a political force forged in the experience of war.

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Introduction

Once hostilities had ended, the first issue every state had to address was that of demobilising the

troops.^[1] In the turmoil of the post-war period the reintegration of soldiers was not, however, the main problem to be resolved. Alongside the fibrillations of a free market system regulated by the gold standard,^[2] the massive process of mobilisation accompanying the war years represented the most serious obstacle to any rapid restoration of pre-war conditions.^[3] At the end of the war, the masses, having become far more conscious of their own political strength, manifested their reluctance almost everywhere to entrust the representation of their own specific interests to the traditional liberal parties. Although the process destined to lead to a “corporatist” recasting of the bourgeois order was already under way, in the short term this novel reticence or mistrust caused the political map to be redrawn in numerous countries. The strategy of according popular forces some political responsibilities, with a view to turning the traditional liberal parties into factors conducive to the stabilisation of the existing political system and institutional framework, served to inaugurate an intense period of reformism.^[4] If the political establishment in [France](#) and [Great Britain](#) resisted,^[5] in the majority of defeated countries, and especially in [Germany](#) and [Austria](#), it was by contrast necessary to follow the path of compromise.^[6] This was still more the case in Eastern Europe, where [revolutionary impulses](#) and aggressive [nationalisms](#) plunged the region into chaos.^[7] Likewise the Italian liberal ruling class, less confident than the country’s former allies were of their capacity to exploit the legitimising potentialities of the memory of the war,^[8] initially reckoned that it had no choice, once a new electoral law embodying the principle of proportional representation had been adopted, and various welfare measures had been introduced, but to promote a policy entailing the greater involvement of the popular parties in the momentous choices to be made at that particular juncture.^[9]

Italian Anxieties in the post-war Period

In the immediate post-war European political panorama, the Italian case featured prominently, and not only because the crisis of the political institutions was resolved through the installation of the [fascist regime](#) but also because [Italy](#) was the only victorious country unable to exploit the positive effects – in the political, economic and social sphere – of the military victory. What were the causes of this failure? In the particular circumstances prevailing in post-war Italy certain problems, also faced in these same years by other European nations, ended up becoming intertwined with specific historical and national shortcomings; the resulting chaos and confusion precipitated the final crisis of the liberal institutions and the consolidation and triumph of the movement led by [Benito Mussolini](#) (1883-1945).

Foreign Policy and the Nationalist Mobilisation

In the spring of 1915 it was a foreign policy issue – that is, the decision regarding Italy’s [intervention](#) in the conflict – that triggered what would subsequently prove to be the final crisis of the Italian political system. The manner in which the interventionist option had been imposed, through pressure

exerted by public demonstrations fomented by the [government](#) itself, in fact opened up a serious fissure within the constitutional political class.^[10] This same division, the domestic objectives entertained by [Antonio Salandra \(1853-1931\)](#) - to derive advantage from a short war, patriotic in character, in order to shift the axis of Italian politics to the right - having been thwarted, was consolidated as the conflict wore on, giving rise to unfamiliar and unanticipated political configurations. Through the agency of committees of public safety, which experimented with the application of welfare models inspired by the values of hierarchy and envisaged having recourse to the intimidation of political opponents,^[11] markedly different political experiences – right and left, corporatist and syndicalist, liberal and democratic – were intermingled, and to such an extent that they defined a new political culture, namely, national radicalism.^[12] That experience was not only at the origins of fascism,^[13] but also had a fundamental role to play in hampering the recomposition, in the aftermath of the conflict, of the fragmented liberal camp.^[14] The close relationship between foreign policy issues and nationalist mobilisation characteristic of the events of 1915 was still in evidence in 1918; a very specific combination of domestic political interests did in fact coalesce around the constantly reiterated nationalist lament over the so-called “mutilated victory.”^[15] Just as in the spring of 1915, mobilisation around the Adriatic question in fact enabled militants to imagine and to organise an extra-parliamentary solution to the political crisis.^[16] Moreover, the occupation of [Fiume](#) by mutinous army units, led by [Gabriele D’Annunzio \(1863-1938\)](#), had as its declared objective the provoking of a government crisis that would drive [Francesco Saverio Nitti \(1868-1953\)](#) from office and lead to the formation of an executive leaning sharply to the right.^[17] The diplomatic solution – through the Treaty of Rapallo in 1920 – achieved by [Giovanni Giolitti \(1842-1928\)](#), Nitti’s successor and the figure who most fully exemplified the traditional authority of parliament, thus represented a grave setback for national radicalism. From then onwards, the latter, intent upon a mobilisation that would serve to dismantle a political system centred around parliamentary manoeuvring, turned its attention to the complex domestic situation.

Economic Difficulties and Social Conflicts

Alongside the problem of the mobilisation of national radicalism through the deliberate manipulation of foreign policy issues, the basic question to be addressed in the post-war period concerned the restructuring of the economy and production. The [economic costs of the war](#), in the main addressed by arranging a massive expansion of the public debt, were a heavy burden for the Italian state.^[18] Some sectors had suffered significant damage, in particular [transport](#) and agriculture (on account of the sheer number of men called up, and likewise the requisitioning of animals and the exhaustion of the soil); in addition the important exports sector was reduced almost to zero. The war had also set in motion largescale processes of redistribution. Thanks to official supply contracts and the relaxed wartime procedures not only was it possible for some to [amass huge fortunes](#), but an extraordinarily concentrated industrial system – revolving around FIAT, Ansaldo, Ilva and Montecatini – had taken shape.^[19] The changes in the [rural areas](#) were just as momentous. While casual agricultural

labourers shared with industrial and clerical workers the grave problem of the fall in real wages, the surge in agricultural prices enabled all those whose income derived from the produce of the fields – above all the big tenants and owners of capitalistic agricultural concerns, but also landowners who were farmers, small tenant farmers and sharecroppers – to prosper. This process of accumulation, in combination with the particular social and psychological conditions of the period, was what lay behind the vertiginous property transfers that characterised the first years of peace.^[20] A swift return to normality, an objective that was especially hard to attain, and not least on account of the febrile mood following the long years of enforced suppression of free speech and civil liberties,^[21] would have involved painful choices. This was especially true of economic policy, as Nitti, the statesman with the most expertise in this area, was soon to discover.^[22] The measures taken by his government, in a political climate hardly conducive to them and beset by the extreme social tensions of the “*biennio rosso*”,^[23] turned out to be piecemeal, or in any case, like the economic policy of his successor, Giovanni Giolitti, far from achieving a decisive break with the past. In the rural areas the second half of 1919 witnessed an unprecedented wave of **strikes**, with bitter disputes over agricultural contracts and widespread occupations of the land.^[24] In the cities, by contrast, confrontation occurred in several distinct phases. Whereas in the summer of 1919 numerous Italian urban centres were hit by violent protests against the high cost of living, the spring of 1920 saw massive industrial strikes. In September 1920, there followed an event more freighted with implications, though as much for the symbolic value of the type of action undertaken by the workers as for any concrete results, namely the occupation of the factories by the steelworkers.^[25] The manner in which the crisis was handled by Giolitti, who did not heed the loud calls to show no compunction in resorting to force in order to restore the right of property that the occupiers had violated, occasioned a lasting breach between the liberal political institutions and moderate political opinion.^[26] Short-lived though it was, one of the main effects of the economic crisis afflicting the country in 1921 was to undermine the will to fight of the organisations of the working class and of the landless labourers. When the socialist mobilisation faltered, particularly in the Po Valley, the way was clear for a fierce bourgeois reaction, and for the expression of a desire for revenge on the part of the property-owning classes, who found in the fascist movement their principal standard-bearer.

The Political and Parliamentary Crisis

Though numerous and closely intertwined, the problems faced by the country in the immediate post-war period were not peculiar to Italy. As in the Italian case, so too the governments of the other victorious nations had in fact to confront the difficulties raised both by the complex economic and social situation and by the manifest consolidation of extremist political forces. What was really peculiar to Italy was in fact the evident incapacity of the political system properly to address the problem of adapting the parliamentary system to fit the new multi-party democracy.^[27] This failure hampered every serious attempt to reorganise procedures at Montecitorio and, impeding the assertion of a political culture that was not prejudicially hostile to the new dynamics that the advent of

parliamentary groups controlled by party secretaries were introducing, ended up entrenching divisions which otherwise could have been overcome.^[28] The end result was the exacerbation of the weakness of the governments, their ever greater loss of authority and, in the end, the complete paralysis of the parliamentary system. The failure of the liberal ruling class did, however, happen by degrees, fuelled by inveterate prejudices towards the political representation of social groups deemed to be dangerous, and deriving sustenance from an unjustified faith in its own pivotal status at the centre of the system.

The prevailing myopia was accentuated, paradoxically enough, by the fact that for some years, on account of the lack of a genuine constitutional party and owing to enduring internal divisions, the liberal leaders, in order to form governments and retain parliamentary majorities, fell back upon the crucial support of the Catholic world.^[29] Failing to perceive the shift that had occurred in the balance of forces, a process evidently under consolidation since the electoral contest immediately preceding the outbreak of the global conflict (1913), the principal liberal protagonists were swayed by the misguided conviction that they could continue to draw upon the reserves of consent offered by political Catholicism and at the same time retain the role of uncontested leader of moderate clericalist forces. The founding of the Italian Popular Party in January 1919 therefore represented something of a shock. It then became a matter of urgency to devise new solutions, so as to mitigate the predictably serious consequences of that event. At the same time it seemed clear that one could not hesitate any longer before adjusting the liberal world to fit the demands of mass politics.^[30] One example of this awareness was the approval, in August 1919, of the new electoral law introducing proportional representation along with a party-list system. The deputies voting for the law in question intended proportional representation to function both as a powerful “external” stimulus - a sort of “time bomb”, capable of forcing the various constitutional currents to embark upon a rapid and credible process of concentration, in accordance with the procedures of a mass party - and as an instrument capable of safeguarding the divided constituencies in the many electoral colleges at risk in the Centre-North of Italy.^[31] The election results were far worse even than had been feared: the liberals fell well short of a parliamentary majority, the recently created Italian Popular Party relished setting aside moderate clericalism, and the Italian Socialist Party – by this time won over by the maximalist logic of its leader Nicola Bombacci (1879-1945)^[32] – achieved remarkable electoral success.^[33] Although liberal weakness represented a temptation for the reformist tendency led by Filippo Turati (1857-1932),^[34] the latter finally resolved to join forces with Angiolo Cabrini (1869-1937), Ivanoe Bonomi (1873-1951) and Leonida Bissolati (1857-1920) – the key representatives of the reformist Right, expelled from the Italian Socialist Party in 1912 – but only when the die was already cast, namely, between the summer and the autumn of 1922. Once all chances of an accord with the Left were gone, though it could perhaps have assembled a credible progressive majority under liberal leadership, the only course left open to it was the narrow path of an alliance with the Italian Popular Party. This trajectory, rendered uneven and difficult by the bitter clash over leadership between liberals and Catholics, would have given rise to too many political fibrillations and would have proved ill-adapted to the aim of achieving the stabilisation of the system.

Conclusion

The problems faced by the country in the immediate post-war period were not peculiar to Italy, but only the Italian ruling class failed so miserably in its task, being unable to not manage the positive outcome of victory. Above all, it displayed a grave inability to adapt to changing political circumstances. Even bearing in mind what happened on the other side of the Alps, it could have resorted as a last desperate measure to constitutional patriotism, thus appealing to the eternal rallying cry of the “defence of the besieged citadel” from the enemies – the reds and the blacks – defined in the course of the Risorgimento.^[35] In order to do this, in order, in other words, to give life to a concentration at the heart of the political system, a compactness would have been required that the liberal world, still devastated by the events of May 1915, was still very far from having recovered. Paradoxically enough, Italian liberals did regain their unity between 1922 and 1925, trooping mournfully and in good order into the ranks of a victorious fascism.

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Notes

1. ↑ On all aspects of demobilisation and of the reintegration into Italian society of those who had served in the armed forces, see Rochat, Giorgio: *L'esercito italiano da Vittorio Veneto a Mussolini*, Rome-Bari 1967. For a general survey of the problems attending demobilisation see Feldman, Gerhard D.: *Die Demobilmachung und die Sozialordnung der Zwischenkriegszeit in Europa*, in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 9 (1983), pp. 156-177.
2. ↑ In this regard the observations of Polanyi, Karl: *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of our Time*, Boston 1957, first edn. 1944 remain fundamental, as well as opening up many illuminating lines of thought.
3. ↑ See Gibelli, Antonio: *Nefaste meraviglie. Grande Guerra e apoteosi della modernità*, in *Guerra e pace in: Barberis, Walter (ed.): Annali vol. 18, Storia d'Italia*, Einaudi 2002, pp. 549-589.
4. ↑ For the concept of “corporatism”, which offers an original interpretation of the dynamics of the period, see Maier, Charles S.: *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany and Italy in the Decade after World War 1*, Princeton 1988, p. 15.

5. ↑ In France and in Great Britain the stabilisation of the political and institutional framework was achieved through the intense exploitation of the sense of moral obligation that radiated from the formula – at once political and rhetorical – of the *Union sacrée*. In this regard see: Roussellier, Nicolas: *Le parlement de l'éloquence. La souveraineté de la délibération au lendemain de la Grande Guerre*, Paris, 1997; Turner, John: *British Politics and the Great War: Coalition and Conflict, 1915–1918*, New Haven 1992; Ward, Stephen R.: *The British Veterans' Tickets 1918*, in *Journal of British Studies*, 1/8 (1968), pp. 155-169.
6. ↑ For the German case see Preller, Ludwig: *Sozialpolitik in der Weimarer Republik*, Stuttgart 1949.
7. ↑ For a convincing synthesis see Mazower, Mark: *Dark Continent. Europe's Twentieth Century*, London 1998 especially chapter 2, "Empires, Nations, Minorities". In addition see the reconstruction of the different national cases in Audoin-Rozeau, Stéphane/Prochasson, Christophe (eds.): *Sortir de la Grande Guerre. Le monde et l'après-1918*, Paris 2008.
8. ↑ On the limited weight attached to the legitimising theme of the memory of the war, and therefore of the rhetorical and political formula of the *Union sacrée*, see Baravelli, Andrea: *La vittoria smarrita. Legittimità e rappresentazioni della Grande Guerra nella crisi del sistema liberale (1919-1924)*, Rome 2006.
9. ↑ By contrast with what happened in France and in Great Britain, In Italy the worker's movement greeted the reforms attempted by the government of Nitti with indifference, if not with outright hostility. On the social reforms of the immediate post-war period in Italy see Castellino, Onorato: *La previdenza sociale in Italia: quanto sociale e quanto previdente?*, in *Rivista di politica economica*, 2 (1981), p. 140; Cherubini, Arnaldo: *Storia della previdenza sociale in Italia (1860-1960)*, Rome 1977, pp. 236-248.
10. ↑ According to Nicola Tranfaglia in May 1915 a veritable "coup d'Etat" was consummated, thereby establishing the preconditions for that of 1922. Tranfaglia, Nicola: *La prima guerra mondiale e il fascismo*, Turin 1995, p. 49.
11. ↑ On the First World War as an experience with a propensity to reconcile divergent political sensibilities and to steer them towards authoritarian political models, see Ventrone, Angelo: *La seduzione totalitaria. Guerra, modernità, violenza politica 1914-1918*, Rome 2003.
12. ↑ On the defining characteristics of national radicalism see Gentile, Emilio: *La grande Italia. Ascesa e declino del mito della nazione nel ventesimo secolo*, Milan 1997.
13. ↑ See Gentile, Emilio: *Storia del Partito fascista. 1919-1922. Movimento e milizia*, Rome-Bari 1989.
14. ↑ On the importance of the fracture of 1915, and of wartime divisions, for the failed recomposition of the liberal world in 1919, see Baravelli, Andrea: *Il nemico nelle campagne elettorali del primo dopoguerra*, in: Cammarano, Fulvio / Cavazza, Stefano (eds.): *Il nemico in politica. La delegittimazione dell'avversario nell'Europa contemporanea*, Bologna 2010, pp. 103-109.
15. ↑ The deliberations at the Versailles peace conference were accompanied in Italy by strident nationalist mobilisation around the myth of the "mutilated victory". The demand that complete respect be accorded to the clauses of the Pact of London and the concomitant claim on the city of Fiume had scant hopes of being heard, yet nonetheless the expected scaling down of Italian claims led the radical Right to foster a devastating sense of victimhood in national public opinion. On the myth of the "mutilated victory" see Sabbatucci, Giovanni: *La vittoria mutilata*, in: Sabbatucci, Giovanni/Cafagna, Luciano/Galli della Loggia, Ernesto/Sabbatucci, Giovanni: *Miti e storia dell'Italia unita*, Bologna 1999, pp. 101-106.

16. † On the subversive plots hatched by various senior army officers, see Mondini, Marco: *La politica delle armi. Il ruolo dell'esercito nell'avvento del fascismo*, Rome-Bari 2006, in particular pp. 28-51.
17. † For an analytic reconstruction of the Fiume adventure, and its political consequences, see Alatri, Paolo: *D'Annunzio*, Turin 1983, pp. 411-490; Barbagallo, Francesco/Saverio, Francesco: *Nitti*, Turin 1984, pp. 335ff.; Vivarelli, Roberto: *Storia delle origini del fascismo. L'Italia dalla grande guerra alla marcia su Roma*, Bologna, 1991 [first edn., 1967], vol. I, pp. 491-587.
18. † The financial cost of Italy's involvement in the Great War amounted to around 157 billion lire, in the period 1915-1919 equal to 73 percent of the total of the current expenses on our budget. In this regard see Repaci, Antonio: *La finanza pubblica italiana nel secolo 1861-1960*, Bologna 1962, p. 76 and pp. 244-245. For a general survey, see the still classic volume by Einaudi, Luigi: *La condotta economica e gli effetti sociali della guerra italiana*, Bari 1933.
19. † In this regard see for example the complex relations between Nitti, in his role as Minister of Finance, and the Perrones, owners of Ansaldo, in Monticone, Alberto: *Nitti e la grande guerra*, Milan 1961, pp. 199-253.
20. † On the transformation of the peasant world, especially that of the Po Valley, see Crainz, Guido: *Padania. Il mondo dei braccianti dalla fine dell'Ottocento alla fuga dalle campagne*, Rome 1994.
21. † For a lucid analysis of this contradiction see a newspaper editorial by Einaudi, Luigi: *La febbre del vivere e la necessità delle rinunce*, in «Corriere della Sera», 11 April 1919, p. 1.
22. † On Nitti see Barbagallo/Saverio, Nitti 1984.
23. † On the "*biennio rosso*" see Maione, Giuseppe: *Il biennio rosso. Autonomia e spontaneità operaia*, Bologna 1975; Abrate, Mario: *La lotta sindacale nell'industrializzazione in Italia 1906-1926*, Turin 1968. From a comparative and diachronic perspective see also *I due bienni rossi del '900: 1919-1920, 1968-69. Studi e interpretazioni a confronto*, Rome 2005.
24. † On the causes of, and the forms taken by social conflict in 1919 see Bianchi, Roberto: *Pace, pane, terra. Il 1919 in Italia*, Rome 2006. An important reference point is provided by the reflections of Vivarelli, Roberto: *Storia delle origini del fascismo* 1991, in particular pp. 436-460 (vol. 1) and pp. 647-907 (ch. 2).
25. † On the factory occupations see the reflections of Vivarelli: *Vivarelli, Storia delle origini del fascismo* 1991, vol. II, pp. 592-645; as well as the classic work by Spriano, Paolo: *L'occupazione delle fabbriche: Settembre 1920*, Turin 1964.
26. † At that juncture Giolitti's show of neutrality "appeared to Italian public opinion, and to the more important newspapers that helped to formulate it, as an abdication of responsibility by the government and consequently by the liberal State for its own fundamental tasks, such as safeguarding private property and respect for the prevailing legislative order". In Tranfaglia, Nicola: *La prima guerra mondiale e il fascismo* 1995, p. 231.
27. † On the different aspects of the Italian political crisis in the post-war period see Grassi Orsini, Fabio/ Quagliariello, Gaetano (eds.): *Il partito politico dalla grande guerra al fascismo. Crisi della rappresentanza e riforma dello Stato nell'età dei sistemi politici di massa 1918-1925*, Bologna 1996.

28. † From this point of view the most convincing demonstration of the incompatibility between the liberal vision of a quest for majorities within Parliament and that, characteristic of mass parties, of extra-parliamentary bargaining between party secretaries, is represented by the vetoes that Don Sturzo placed upon the return of Giolitti to power, in February and in October 1922. In this regard see De Rosa, Gabriele: *Storia del movimento cattolico in Italia*, vol. II, *Il partito popolare italiano*, Bari 1966, pp. 196-197.
29. † On clerico-moderatism see Confessore, Ornella: *Il clerico-moderatismo*, in: Malgeri, Francesco (ed.): *Storia del movimento cattolico in Italia*, vol. II, *Il Poligono*, Rome 1980, pp. 149-182; Trinchese, Stefano: *Governare dal Centro. Il modello tedesco nel cattolicesimo politico italiano del '900*, Rome 1994; Serena Piretti, Maria: *Una vittoria di Pirro. La strategia politica dei cattolici e il fallimento dell'intransigentismo cattolico*, in *Ricerche di Storia Politica*, 1994, pp. 5-40. Finally, see Scornajenghi, Antonio: *L'alleanza difficile. Liberali e popolari tra massimalismo socialista e reazione fascista. 1919-1921*, Rome 2006.
30. † Ullrich, Hartmut: *Dai gruppi al partito liberale (1919-1922)*, in Grassi Orsini/Quagliariello (eds.), *Il partito politico dalla grande guerra al fascismo* 1996, pp. 493-529.
31. † The system of proportional representation combined with a party-list system, entailing considerably larger electoral colleges than had been the case in the past, favoured parties that were better organised, had a centralised leadership and were widely distributed across the whole national territory. Although the long term aim was the constitution of a single constitutional party, it was abundantly clear that at that precise moment it was impossible – on account of the bitter animosities between leaders and the great rift caused by the interventionist choice of 1915 – to expect the process of reunification to be completed before the elections of 16 November 1919. On the electoral law of 1919 and its political implications, see Noiret, Serge: *La nascita del sistema dei partiti nell'Italia contemporanea. La proporzionale del 1919*, Manduria-Rome-Bari 1994.
32. † On Bombacci, Nicola: *Civitella di Romagna 1879 – Dongo 1945*, as also on the maximalist and revolutionary turn of the Italian Socialist Party, see: Noiret, Serge: *Riformisti e massimalisti in lotta per il controllo del PSI, 1917-1918*, in *Italia Contemporanea*, 190 (1993), pp. 65-103; Noiret, Serge: *Massimalismo e crisi dello stato liberale. Nicola Bombacci (1879-1924)*, Milan 1992.
33. † In the elections of 16 November 1919 the Italian Socialist Party, which at the elections of 1913 had obtained 7.5 percent of the ballot papers returned (equivalent to forty-seven seats), achieved 32.3 percent (equivalent to 156 seats); the many, quite diverse liberal lists, which in 1913 had racked up 55.8 percent of the ballot papers returned (equivalent to 300 seats out of a total of 508), stopped short at 35.4 percent (equivalent to 197 seats). The newly created Italian Popular Party obtained 20.5 percent of the ballot papers returned (equivalent to 100 seats).
34. † In these months many thought that, if the split between the maximalist majority and the reformist element in the Italian Socialist Party had occurred, it would have been possible to engender politically robust liberal-progressive majorities; the influential role of Turati in such governments would then probably have made it possible to launch a serious politics of social reform. For comments on just how widespread hopes were, in Nittian and Giolittian milieux, that liberal weakness itself would allow a solution to the political crisis of the system, see Barbagallo/Saverio, Nitti 1984, pp. 350-352.
35. † Cammarano, Fulvio/ Cavazza, Stefano (eds.): *Il nemico in politica. La delegittimazione dell'avversario nell'Europa contemporanea*, Bologna 2010.

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