Abasso l’antagonismo? Poststructuralist Reflections on Ideologies in Modern Italy

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Introduction

Can we live without antagonism? Arguably, in a ‘post-ideological’ age it is precisely this prospect that we face. The declining salience of class conflict, the end of the Cold War and the proliferation of issue-based politics and non-ideologically aligned demands has, not for the first time, activated a desire to look ‘beyond antagonism’, particularly that of ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ (Mouffe, 2000). The emergence of ‘third way’ or centrist doctrines within the camp of social democracy suggests, at very least, that the beginning of the twenty-first century will be marked by an ideological fluidity and a not little opportunistic idea-borrowing amongst the major political organisations into whose ranks ideologies typically flow (see Bastow and Martin, 2003). Whilst it is doubtful that social democracy is as innovative, or indeed consensual, as it is sometimes claimed, the bigger picture nevertheless suggests that an underlying exhaustion with the grand ideological narratives continues to haunt western democracies. To rephrase the original question, then: if ideologies are on the move, what can we say of the political significance of antagonism?

This paper is concerned with the question of antagonism as it applies in the context of modern Italy. As we shall see, Italian political life has been widely understood to have suffered from ‘too much’ ideological antagonism, a debilitating lack of agreement about the parameters of the state and the political culture inscribed within it. After considering some aspects of this ‘problem’ of ideology in Italy, I want to discuss the contribution of poststructuralist ideas to the debate. The importance of poststructuralism lies in the understanding, common to many of its otherwise contrasting variants, that a ‘surplus’ always remains in any social or symbolic field, one that is impossible to domesticate within the confines of a foundational logic: this is what Michael Dillon calls a ‘radical non-relationality’ whose intractable nature ‘continuously prevents the full realization or final closure or rationality, and thus the misfire that continuously precipitates new life and new meaning’ (Dillon, 2000: p. 5). In the ‘discourse theory’ of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, this surplus is understood as antagonism. For them, antagonism is not merely a difference of opinion that can be neutralised within some higher-level rationality. On the contrary, antagonism has an ontological dimension; it discloses the very impossibility of an objective identity. In short, we can only have a stable identity by repressing alternatives and figuring others as inimical to ‘our’ being.

As a piece of research in progress, the paper is inevitably rather sketchy and speculative in its observations. After reviewing some key aspects of the debates about ideology in modern Italy I will then set out an agenda for thinking through the fundamental ideological role of antagonism.
Finally, I will consider briefly the recent debate concerning the decline of anti-fascism in Italy. In this debate, particularly, the enduring importance of antagonism but also the perceived dangers of its loss are usefully exemplified.

The ‘Problem’ of Ideology in Modern Italy

In his comprehensive study of modern Italian political thought in the twentieth century, Giuseppe Bedeschi (2002: p. v) begins by noting how Italian thought ‘is profoundly saturated by political myths and therefore by ideologies’. By ‘myth’ Bedeschi, following Ernst Cassirer, understands emotive expressions which are then formulated as powerful visions of society and history able to mobilise social groups. It is for this reason, he suggests, that liberal democracy, with its sober and realistic examination of society, has ‘always led a wretched life in our country’. As the title of his book indicates, for him political theorising in Italy has been a ‘factory of ideologies’ producing myths for mass consumption and not, presumably, a source of nuanced, rational dialogue.

Leaving aside for now the issue of how ideology is defined here, we should note that Bedeschi’s point is a common one. For many commentators, Italy’s failings as a modern democratic state stem, to a great extent, from the preponderance of opposed ideological systems that dominate its political culture and hinder the development of sober, reasoned dialogue. Too often, reasonable communication has been sacrificed on the alter of ideological allegiances that command popular and political respect over and above the commitment to moderate and gradual reform. Moreover, these ideologies have been deeply antagonistic, invoking visions of social order that are radically incommensurable: revolutionary socialism, Catholic social doctrines, Fascism, regional-based secession, to name just a few.

Whilst it might be said that Italy has had, and continues to have, a generous helping of competing political ideologies, the ‘problem’ of ideology in Italy testifies to the absence of a stable ground for political ideology as such. This problem—which might be called a problem of legitimacy—means the parameters of ideological contest have not been effectively embedded in a stable institutional order. As a consequence, ideological antagonisms have been free to expand into highly emotive grand narratives—which Bedeschi calls myths—aimed at reconstituting the society and the state as whole.

There are three, related aspects of this problem worth considering here: the idea of an incomplete national subject; a tendency towards political crisis fostered by ideological antagonism; and an anxiety over the proper boundaries of ideological alignments, particularly of Left and Right. Let us consider each of these aspects in turn.
The Incomplete National Subject

Historical and political commentary in modern Italy has been informed by an acute awareness of the incompleteness of the nation-state. The many failings of the post-Risorgimento regime—its lack of popular legitimation, its heavy-handed use of force against its citizens, and so on—are typically traced back to an original failure of the polity to be constituted on the basis of a unified national subject. In the ideals of the Risorgimento, particularly those of Giuseppe Mazzini, a unified Italy was imagined as a moral unification of its peoples. In the aftermath of unification, however, the evident hostility of the majority of Italy’s new citizens towards the state engendered a profound sense of disappointment that fed back into intellectual and political culture as a lingering aspiration to fully complete the national project by, in Massimo D’Azeglio’s phrase, ‘making Italians’.

Of course, the ideologies aspiring to define the unfinished national project differed radically. Yet liberals, socialists, syndicalists, anarchists, Fascists, communists, liberal-socialists etc, commonly recognised that the Italian state had failed to fulfil its mission and the ground for political reconstitution remained open. As Emilio Gentile (1996: pp. 3-14) argues in his study of Fascism, post-Risorgimento disappointment bequeathed a language of politics oriented towards the production of a ‘civil religion’, that is, a secular moral framework that would finally unify its diverse citizenry. Liberals and Fascists alike conceptualised their projects as the formation of a certain religiosity, a sacred bond that would grip its adherents not purely (sometimes not at all) as rational subjects but as believers in a new ‘faith’ that would disseminate as a form of ‘common sense’. Perhaps the most significant exponent of this outlook prior to Fascism was the idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce, whose humanist philosophy of spirit aimed precisely at supporting a national culture by affirming the creative value of subjects and reconciling individuals to their historical circumstances, which he recognised as ‘political in the widest sense’ (Jacobitti, 1981: p. 88).

Whilst Croce aspired to disseminate a religion of liberty, his influence extended into a wide range of ideological outlooks that also looked forward to a new religiosity. The diagnoses of Italian politics proffered by numerous Croceans were harsher on the merits of the Risorgimento than was Croce. For the young, self-styled ‘revolutionary liberal’, Piero Gobetti, Italy lacked a bourgeoisie of any clear or noble political ambition and as a consequence Italian political culture had degenerated into swamp of elite compromise (Gobetti, 1919, 1923). Like many others, Gobetti was contemptuous of the divided, undisciplined, overly rhetorical—what we might call ‘ideological’, in a rather crude sense—tendencies of Italian political life. Similarly, the communist Antonio Gramsci traced the failings of the Italian state to a small and divided bourgeoisie unable to secure its own ‘hegemony’ (Gramsci, 1971). The national-popular hegemonic project he
theorised in his prison writings aimed to complete this unfinished project by mobilising the working class as a cultural vanguard. As many scholars have rightly pointed out, ‘ideological hegemony’ functions in Gramsci’s thought, less as a sophisticated sociology of consent in late capitalist societies, and more as a normative framework to conceptualise ‘the political’—that is, the constitution of the polity as a whole—through which differences might unify around a common project (Bellamy and Schecter, 1993; Martin, 1998).

The lingering fascination amongst scholars of history and ideology for Fascism derives in good part from its relative success in undertaking systematically the quest for spiritual unification where liberalism and revolutionary socialism so clearly failed. Whilst the nature of this success is disputed, increasingly it has become difficult to argue that Fascism constituted an exception, discontinuity or rupture in Italian history. Rather, Fascism emerged from the failings of the liberal order and in its own distinctive ways sought to provide an ideological horizon against which a unified national culture might be conceived. Of course, as Gentile points out, this was more than a civil religion. It was a ‘political religion’, a ‘sacralization of politics’, in so far as it sought a total identification between the national public and its state. Fascism’s answer to the disruptive force of social antagonisms was, for the most part, to eliminate them and affirm by brute imposition the unity of the national culture. What is perhaps disconcerting about this effort was not so much its internal consistency and conceptual coherence, but the degree to which it may have achieved a working ‘consensus’ despite its lack of consistency and coherence.

From Antagonism to Crisis

Problems of ideology and antagonism emerged again in the wake of Fascism’s defeat. The dominant role of political parties, in particular the Christian Democrat (DC) and Communist (PCI) parties, in organising mass democratic politics in the post-war period has been widely noted. As Aurelio Lepre points out, however, the parties effectively stepped in to take over the ‘total’ ideological role previously adopted by the Fascists (Lepre, 1993: pp. 52-7). Each with their own subcultural networks—trade unions and party cells for the communists, the Church and lay Catholic organisations for the DC—and identifying in broad terms with the ideological oppositions in play at an international level—Communist East vs Capitalist West—the parties brought back to public life, in a more focussed way, the disruptive effects of profound ideological antagonism. Pietro Scoppola argues that instead of competing party programmes both the DC and the PCI mobilised powerfully ‘utopian’ visions, looking beyond the present order to a world without the presence of the other. For the DC, a Christian civilisation was to be built upon an ‘objective order of Truth’ possessed by Catholic Church; for the PCI, a revolutionary refoundation of the state would install an organic, classless society (Scoppola, 1997: pp. 21-2, 65-77). For the DC, the PCI represented, at worst, an agency of total social breakdown fuelled by a revolutionary extremism
backed by a major superpower. Thus they were excluded as a legitimate partner in coalition government. Equally, the PCI regarded the DC as, at worst, a conservative defender of US interests whose popular support amongst the Catholics of Italy needed to be won over to the radical ambitions of communism.

These opposing visions of social and economic order continued afresh the problem of ideology and antagonism in modern Italy. Crucially, however, the dynamic of their opposition was directed towards the defence of the post-war institutions. For all their disagreement over the ideal social order, neither the PCI nor DC permitted their antagonism to degenerate into social and political disorder. The paradox of Italian democracy, then, is that for all its undoubted failings in channelling popular choices into programmatic outputs, it remained relatively stable, often in the face of violent popular hostility. The short-term answer to the stalemate of ideological antagonism was elite compromise, a situation that reached its apotheosis in the governments of ‘national unity’ in the late 1970s.

The end of this ‘consociational’ approach to politics in Italy was finally announced with the crisis of the party system following the Tangentopoli scandals and ‘clean hands’ investigations between 1992 and 1994 (McCarthy, 1995). Prior to this, of course, the PCI had dissolved itself and formed a new party of the left in response to the end of the Cold War and the collapse of East European Communism. The ideological antagonism that had characterised post-war democracy ended, then, not in the success of one side over another but in the dissolution of the party system in general. No longer the defenders of ‘the faith’, neither communists nor Christian Democrats could justify their continued presence with any effect: the PCI chose suicide, the DC had to be pushed.

Like elsewhere, then, the end of the Cold War forced Italy into an ideological malaise, of sorts. The old antagonists had lost their purchase but the new party system—the regionalist Lega Nord, the ‘post-Fascist’ Allianza Nazionale, the post-communist Democratic Left, Berlusconi’s Forza Italia!, various splinters of the DC—was more fragmented than ever before. Whilst most did not seek to entirely reconstitute the Italian state as a whole, the parameters of the ‘Second Republic’ were, and to some extent remain, uncertain.

The crisis and collapse of the party system, and the end of the wider international opposition between capitalism and communism raised important questions concerning the role of ideology and antagonism in Italy. In an incisive analysis, Massimo Salvadori (1996) claimed Italy’s post-war ‘blocked’ democracy represented a tragic continuation of a structural fault in the unified state: namely, the failure to institute a form of alternating governments according to which competing party programmes function as adversaries within the context of a consensus over the institutional order. Instead, governments within Italy’s succession of regimes have typically treated opposition parties as subversives and excluded them from power. Likewise, opposition parties have adopted
an ‘anti-state’ role by directing resistance against the regime as a whole. This implacable opposition leads to stalemate, immobility and eventually crisis in the regime itself. Thus Salvadori explains the rise and fall of successive regimes: Liberal Monarchy, Fascism, the ‘First’ Republic. The question was, could the Second Republic produce the alternating system that previous regimes failed to institutionalise?

*Which Left and Right?*

The end of the Cold War produced in Italy, as it did elsewhere, much reflection on what ought to be understood as the proper boundaries between ideological formations. In Italy, however, there was a particular awareness that the distinction between the polarities of Left and Right had never been firmly established. For many, Left and Right serve as the natural modern parameters of a democratic political culture, the one balancing the other in a stable antagonism that is reflected in a broadly even distribution of values across the electorate and within parliament. Where there is a coherent Left and Right, it is assumed, policy choices alternate with governments consisting of different parties (or coalitions of parties) that self-identify as alternatives to each other. However, where the antagonism is raised to the level of alternative forms of state and society, the boundaries of political ideology do not fit into a clear classification. As Giampiero Carocci (2002) has argued, in Italy the Left/Right antagonism has been weak and often ideologies simply overlap according to this spectrum. Whilst it is not uncommon for ideologies to have an ‘internal’ spectrum, in Italy the tendency to ideological ambiguity has been especially marked. Mussolini, for instance, was adept at drawing support from both left (e.g. reactionary syndicalists) and right wings (e.g. reactionary landowners, nationalists). Later, under the First Republic, the DC’s forty-year dominance in office was achieved, in part, by ruling from the centre and shifting coalition composition to the Left and Right as circumstances required.

In 1994 the distinguished political philosopher Norberto Bobbio published his own theoretical reflections on the continuing validity of Left and Right as a political distinction (see Bobbio, 1994), doubtless in part to underline the importance of alternating governments for the emerging Second Republic. Whilst other distinctions sometimes hold sway in political life, he argued, the struggle over equality remains the core of modern political argument, even if Left and Right cannot be given any absolute values in this regard. However, despite Bobbio’s defence, ideological conflicts in Italy continue to operate within a party system that does not lend itself easily to a clear Left/Right spectrum. The spectacular rise of populist movements and parties in recent decades testifies to this. The three current governing parties—Silvio Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia*, Umberto Bossi’s *Lega Nord*, and the *Allianza Nazionale*—each display typical populist features that prevent their simple allocation on the side of the ideological Right (see Canovan, 1999). In different ways, each seeks to mobilise ‘the people’ against an established power-bloc and the
elites who support it. In the case of Berlusconi and Bossi, particularly, we can see a common populist emphasis on charismatic leadership and an enthusiastic ‘revivalism’ aimed at redeeming national (or regional, in the case of Bossi) virtues sullied by years of corrupt government (Tarchi, 2003). Berlusconi, of course, has been outstandingly successful at projecting himself through his own, vast media empire (Ginsborg, 2003). Nevertheless, by definition, this strong populist orientation speaks to a people presumed already constituted and in need of emancipating, rather than to sectoral needs whose interests must be balanced. The Left/Right distinction is deliberately evaded in an appeal ‘over the heads’ of such differences.

From Ideology to Antagonism

It would be easy, on the basis of the three issues sketched above—the incomplete national subject, the tendency to crisis and regime change, and the ambiguous boundaries between Left and Right—to argue that Italy suffers from some intrinsic cultural malady that prevents it from developing a ‘proper’, balanced ideological system. A good part of post-war political science has tended to lean this way. Even when Italy’s specific historical conditions are taken into account, many commentators assume that an absent national identity is the underlying cause of its ideological pathology. Salvadori, for instance, indicates the absence of ‘national spirit’ as the basis of both incessant cultural particularisms and, equally, projects of total refoundation of the society. This spirit, he suggests—echoing Gramsci, Gobetti and plenty others—is missing because there was no hegemonic ruling class (Salvadori, 1996: pp. 158-9).

My intention here is not to dwell on the validity of these claims but, rather, to shift attention from the question of ideology to that of antagonism. Trying to specify the proper ideological, or meta-ideological framework within which specific political ideologies might be regulated—be it national identity or some renewed civil religion—merely returns to the very source of dispute. Ultimately, it is to suggest that the problem of ideological unity can only be solved once we have agreed a unifying ideology! Instead, I want to suggest that the question of ideology be approached from a theorised perspective of antagonism. For, crucially, it is this negative other that articulates the relationship between specific ideologies.

Theorising Antagonism

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have made a powerful defence of antagonism as an ineliminable dimension of political life (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; 1990; 1993; Laclau, 1996; Mouffe, 2000). Treating antagonism as an ontological condition of identity formation, they challenge the view that power and conflict can ever be fully erased from social orders. In whatever guise it comes, such an aspiration, they argue, leads inescapably towards authoritarianism and the forced subsumption of difference under appeals to ‘consensus’ or
‘rational’ accord. Instead, they promote a theoretical rehabilitation of antagonism, in the form of a radical democratic politics designated by the term ‘hegemony’.

Let us unpack some the arguments in their work before considering its relevance to the Italian case.

**The Discursive Constitution of Identity**

Taking their cue from Marxist debates on the relationship between class and ideology, Laclau and Mouffe set out to dispense, once and for all, with the essentialism that seeks out core economic identities beneath a ‘superstructural’ guise. The result is an expansion of the concept of ‘discourse’ to denote not merely ideas and speech but the way that political identities are constituted through open-ended chains of symbolic action. Rather than separating out ideology (the symbolic world) from, and subordinating it to, socio-economic structure (the material world), Laclau and Mouffe employ discourse to denote the interdependence of thought and action. Discourses are not merely the linguistic ‘frames’ through which ‘pre-discursive’ or ‘material’ entities (e.g. class interests) are viewed; they are partially constitutive of materiality itself (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: pp. 108-9; 1990).

This is not to say that the world is wholly constituted through spoken language, and hence it ‘is’ whatever ‘we say’ it is. Discourse denotes both linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena. Thus material practices are themselves discursively organised in so far as they are inserted within a meaningful frame (e.g. the unspoken rules of game); but, importantly, this discursive organisation is intrinsically open to alteration. Laclau and Mouffe underscore the fluidity by which identities are formed, highlighting the essential unfixity, overlapping and mutually modifying character of discursive formations. Drawing upon and extending Saussure’s idea of the arbitrary nature of the sign, according to which meaning is produced through the correspondence of ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ rather than through an external reference, they understand social identities as contingently formed identifications. To ‘have’ any identity is an act, conscious or not, of taking up ‘subject positions’ (man, woman, owner, French, etc), ascribing oneself a subjectivity that has an intrinsically ‘ambiguous, incomplete and polysemical character’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: p. 121). Because identities are conventions with no ultimately ‘necessary’ foundation, they may exhibit an infinite number of permutations.

This eminently ‘post-structuralist’ reading of identity firmly renounces the rationalist ‘topography’ (as they call it, referring to the base and superstructure metaphor) by which politics is referred back to a foundational instance of whose unfolding logic it is merely an internal moment: “‘Society’ is not a valid object of discourse. There is no single underlying principle fixing—and hence constituting—the whole field of differences’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: p. 111). In place of
‘social’ explanation, Laclau and Mouffe argue that political struggles temporarily cement social formations into relatively unified ensembles of diverse, often contradictory social practices, institutional forms and social identities. This, of course, was one of the meanings of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony: the ongoing assemblage, dissolution and reassemblage of social forces around a common project into whose worldview social differences were more or less unified. Politics, according to Laclau and Mouffe, is to be read in terms of hegemonic struggles over meaning and identity, not in the trivial sense of competing lifestyle choices and aesthetic preferences (as some Marxist critics like to insinuate), but as efforts to inscribe diverse social practices and competing, contradictory demands within symbolic horizons: as Anna Marie Smith puts it, ‘political struggles are primarily struggles to produce subjects’ (Smith, 1998: p. 68). By conceiving politics as struggles for hegemony at various levels rather than as reflexes of fixed, paradigmatic interests, they argue, permits us to expand the field of the political to include not only class struggles but also those of other social movements and identities whose demands are not adequately grasped from within a Marxist paradigm.

It is within this ‘post-Marxist’ theoretical framework that Laclau and Mouffe highlight the experience of antagonism: that is, ‘the presence of the “Other” [that] prevents me from being totally myself’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: p. 125). Antagonisms—the conflicts and oppositions between social groups and against phenomena that prevent subjects from being ‘themselves’—are understood as fundamentally symbolic, not objective, oppositions. Conceptually, antagonism discloses the essential unfixity of social identity and its reliance upon a metaphorical ordering that grants the subject partial coherence by repressing and condensing the surplus of meaning. It marks the limit of objective relations and reveals those relations as ‘partial and precarious’ objectifications. Antagonism helps suture together the various arbitrary elements of a discursive field into a relatively coherent totality by drawing a limit beyond which ‘objectivity’ is threatened. This limit assigns an enemy that threatens ‘us’ and in so doing it supplies the ‘us’ with an illusory sense of its own unity; illusory because it invokes an identity as already and spontaneously present, but which exists only by virtue of the hostile other that threatens it. This ‘logic of equivalence’ aligns various discursive elements against the enemy despite observable differences. At its most extreme, social space is divided according to a simple ‘them/us’ antinomy and subjects are compelled to disregard their differences in favour of an underlying unity.

The Other, or enemy, may be a person, a country, an idea, or an object. What is fundamental is that we identify it as a threat to destroy or undermine us, to steal from us our integral identity and undermine the very basis of social order. Thus we find antagonisms producing in their wake a whole variety of mythical associations with evil, impurity, uncontrollable desire, and so on. As Laclau points out, it is because antagonism is the ‘limit of all objectivity’ that it cannot be conceived simply as another difference and neutrally represented. As a universal and total threat,
the enemy is likely to take on a caricatured representation, symbolising as it does the total annihilation of meaning and order.

The place of antagonism in Laclau and Mouffe’s work cannot be underlined enough. Its significance derives from the role it plays in forming subject identity. If identity is produced through contingent discursive articulations and not through natural necessity, then what limits are there to the kinds of identities that may be formed? A simplistic ‘postmodern’ reading of Laclau and Mouffe might suggest that identity is totally fluid and open to constant reformation. But this was not their argument. Identities are formed in a context of power and conflict, in material environments already permeated by the ‘sedimented’ effects of other discourses. It is the presence of already existing hierarchies and associations, forms of conduct and expression, themselves products of earlier antagonistic discourses, that delimit and partially structure the decisions and struggles within which new antagonisms may occur. What constrains any new discourse, however, is not the material world (conceived as a pure, unmediated reality) but the presence of other discursive practices that partially hegemonise any concrete social environment.

**Antagonism and Negativity**

Since publishing *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), Laclau and Mouffe have developed their theoretical apparatus further. The concept of antagonism has continued to play a significant part in their work but it has been readjusted to take into account some criticisms and also to cope with a changing political environment. The result has been an effort to forward a political ontology in which antagonism, conflict and negativity (which all circulate around the same theme) have a central place.

In recent works, for instance, Laclau has adjusted his analysis of hegemony in response to Zizek’s Lacanian-based critique of subjectivity. Cutting a long and complex story short, Zizek notes that *Hegemony*’s ‘real achievement … is crystallized in the concept of “social antagonism”’ which shares with Lacan the idea that ‘the socio-symbolic field is conceived as structured around a certain traumatic impossibility, around a fissure that cannot be symbolized’ (Zizek, 1990: p. 249). But for Lacan, this impossibility that for Laclau threatens and constitutes an ‘us’ is traceable to the self-blockage of the subject, its own lack of an essential identity. As Zizek explains:

> it is not the external enemy who is preventing me from achieving identity with myself, but every identity is already in itself blocked, marked by an impossibility, and the external enemy is simply the small piece, the rest of reality upon which we ‘project’ or ‘externalise’ this intrinsic, immanent impossibility (Zizek, 1990: pp. 251-2).
Antagonisms therefore are manifestations of a negativity inherent in the subject itself, one that it tries to overcome by identifications with social causes. Thus Zizek asserts that we ought separate concrete social antagonisms (clashes between specific subject positions) from the experience of antagonism understood in a ‘pure’ (Lacanian) sense as self-blockage. Not to do so would overburden concrete social antagonisms with a subject-forming function. Instead, the subject exists ‘beyond or before subjectification’, not as a discernible essence but as a void that marks the impossibility of any subject position fully ‘seizing’ its identity (Zizek, 1990: p. 254). It is precisely this ‘constitutive antagonism’ that Zizek has pursued to great effect in his own work on ‘fantasy’ and ‘enjoyment’ in its myriad, ubiquitous manifestations (see, for example, Zizek, 1999).

Laclau responds to Zizek’s critique by incorporating a stronger element of Lacanian reasoning in his analysis. Without losing sense of the importance of antagonism, Laclau explored further the logic of negativity that imbues antagonistic relations. This is visible in his work on ‘dislocation’ and on the function of ‘empty signifiers’. The concept of dislocation answers Zizek’s demand for a theory of the subject prior to subjectification, but it also construes the subject in terms more amenable to neo-Gramscian political analysis. The subject is dislocated in that it is never fully itself but is brought into effect by the differential relations that simultaneously distinguish and limit it (Laclau, 1990: pp. 39-51). At certain moments, the accumulation of dislocations (unemployment, poverty, loss of status, personal breakdown) produces an intensification of these limitations and a disorientation that heightens the desire to identify an enemy that might explain away the subject’s lack of coherence. The illusion of antagonism is, of course, to ‘relocate’ the subject by externalising its own impossible identity. However, both prior to antagonism and following the defeat of the enemy (if at all) the subject remains within the realm of more or less intensely-felt dislocation. This way the Lacanian subject of lack is refigured as an entity forced, at certain moments, to choose an identity.

In Emancipation(s) (1996) Laclau explores the function of empty signifiers and it is here that Zizek’s emphasis on fantasy is responded to. For Zizek, fantasy is conceived ‘as an imaginary scenario the function of which is to provide a kind of positive support filling out the subject’s constitutive void’ (Zizek, 1990: p. 254). Laclau discerns this activity of ‘filling out’ in a more directly political sense as the mobilisation of concepts such as ‘order’, ‘peace’, ‘justice’ and so forth. Signifiers such as these are ‘empty’, he claims, because their hegemonic function is to unify a range of differential identities, not as positive goals as such, but as symbols of an ‘absent fullness’ that permeates all dislocated subjects (Laclau, 1996: pp. 36-46). By discarding all positive content, they serve to represent a mythical fullness, a transcendent universality-to-come.

However, Laclau also underlines the political struggle involved in mobilising empty signifiers. They do not always work and this is because to become empty—since universals must not be
contaminated with particularity—they have to lose any positive content. However, in practice, losing this content is tied to the process by which a particular demand, agent or principle is metaphorically transformed into the ‘incarnation’ of the essentially empty place of the universal (Laclau, 1996: pp. 56-65). Thus in revolutionary discourse, the working class is often portrayed as the agent of universal emancipation. The danger, however, lies in the return of the particularity of a demand/agent/principle. Once the universal signifier is identified with a narrow, corporate interest, the agent ceases to be effectively hegemonic. This ‘dialectics of universality and particularity’, argues Laclau, is central to the rise and decline of hegemonic discourses.

Without wishing to overstate the similarities between Laclau and Mouffe (on this topic, see Wenman, 2003), we should also note that Mouffe has continued to develop insights from her collaboration with Laclau that expand upon the importance of antagonism. In particular, she emphasises the danger in contemporary political philosophy of pursuing consensual, ‘post-ideological’ political strategies aimed at eliminating the presence of antagonism, power and conflict. With the demise of socialism, the decline of the Cold War and the steady generalisation of liberal democratic capitalism, she argues, the risk is run of assuming conflict to be defunct. Third Way social democracy, like Habermasian and Rawlsian political philosophy, currently extols the virtues of consensus as the basis of political community. Such aspirations, however, mask a deeply anti-political impulse that threatens to undermine social difference in favour of an imposed, if benign, unanimity (Mouffe, 2000).

Like Laclau, but with less emphasis on ontology, Mouffe underscores the ineliminable place of negation in founding political communities. Political life needs its passion and its conflicts, she argues, since these supply identities with their ‘political’ character (i.e. their fundamental contingency and that of the community in which they are placed) (Mouffe, 1993). The important distinction, she suggests, is not between antagonism and consensus (with liberals favouring the latter over the former) but between antagonists and ‘adversaries’. To transform an antagonist into an adversary is to include them in the political game and yet still disagree with them. But to keep them outside the game, and build political order exclusively on consensus leads to authoritarianism and the marginalisation of antagonists. In such a scenario, groups outside the consensus will find themselves opposed to the whole system and not challenged to account for themselves within it. Thus Mouffe rejects the left-liberal tendency to refuse all ‘far right’ political parties any legitimacy. In so doing, she argues, the far right will be compelled to oppose democratic politics per se.

Rethinking Antagonism and Ideology in Modern Italy

How can Laclau and Mouffe’s work illuminate our understanding of the modern Italian context? The most critical aspect of their approach lies in the view that the stability of any social formation
stems from the extent to which it succeeds in preventing the differences that permeate it leading to its own dissolution. This is achieved by the hegemonic articulation of those differences around a radical exclusion that aligns differential elements in a chain of equivalence. The emphasis here is not on the emergence of a positive essence—national identity, for instance—but on a negative essence—the enemy—that generates a common frontier and structurally generates space for an agency to embody the collective will, articulating its various elements around a key 'nodal points'. Notoriously, in the work of Laclau and Zizek there is scarce concern for the actual content of this agency in so far as its structural function is under examination. Whilst this has been a controversial issue, it does permit us to understand how a range of agencies can fulfil the function of universality. What is crucial here is less the positive content of the ideological agency that represents the universal, and the more the manner by which it excludes, includes and mediates different identities.

Let us consider briefly this approach in relation to the three areas of ideological pathology discussed earlier:

**The incomplete national subject:** Italian political thinkers have been uniquely aware of the contingent political preconditions for a unifying national identity; however, there has remained a strong aspiration to tie this unity to an agency that was itself the incarnation of a certain historical objectivity (Togliatti’s Communist Party, the Catholic Church, etc). Our emphasis on antagonism, however, rejects the aspiration to find some rational basis for this approach. Instead the national subject is understood as necessarily incomplete, a project whose realisation could never be achieved because its non-achievement is precisely the condition for its hegemonic function. The question is no longer what must we be to realise our national subjectivity but, rather, what must we fail to be in order to live together?

**Crisis and Regime Change:** there is no doubt that post-war democracy in Italy has been singularly unsuccessful in channelling public demands into policy outputs. However, a more generous view would be one that understood the deep ideological divisions upon which this democratic order was established. What is remarkable about post-war democracy in Italy was the ability of its leaders, for the most part, to avoid violent social breakdown. Where institutional stability is prized over efficiency, it is no surprise that corruption is the outcome. This is not to suggest, as some do, that there is merely an 'Italian style' of democracy that works well enough. Rather, it is to underline that, if ideological antagonisms are viewed as unexceptional part of politics, regime crisis in some form will be an ever-present possibility. Given the presence of populist parties in the current Italian government, it is evident that when the status of regime is itself no longer so intensely in question, the desire for 'something beyond' the current state simply
transmutes into something else. The issue is no longer how crisis can be averted by consensus but how antagonism can be managed as a conflict between adversaries and not sworn enemies?

**Left and Right:** finally, the ‘slippage’ and ambiguity of Left and Right identified in Italy underlines Mouffe’s point that the primary political distinction is that of Friend/Enemy. This agonistic dimension which is distinctive to political community may well turn to a great part on questions of equality, but it is clear that in a context where questions of material equality are bound up with those of immigration, state corruption, and regional secession, the primary signifiers in politics are those that succeed in articulating a number of separate demands and minor antagonisms around signifiers that represent the community as a whole. Whilst Left and Right remain key signifiers in contemporary politics, a discourse-theoretical approach underlines their unavoidable fluidity and their overdetermination by political logics. The issue here is less how can Left and Right be defended as the primary structure of political antagonism but, rather, how can that distinction be reinscribed within the wider political antagonism of Friend/Enemy?

**The Loss of the Loss: the Decline of Anti-Fascism**

Whilst debate continues in contemporary Italy as to the exact dividing line between Left and Right, as exemplified in the current party system, and the degree to which the Second Republic has stabilized or remains ‘in transition’, here I want to consider briefly the question of the national subject which, from one particular perspective, has been vigorously discussed in recent years. In many ways, anti-fascism and the debates that ensued in the 1990s over its relevance exemplify the continuing discursive significance of antagonism as conceived by Laclau and Mouffe. I want to sketch out how anti-fascist discourse temporarily unified a number of contradictory demands born from dislocations of the Resistance but then went into decline as a key signifier of the absent fullness of the Italian nation.

By its very nature anti-fascism signifies antagonism: its enemy is, of course, Fascism. The simplicity of this opposition, however, belies the complex hegemonic function it sought to fulfil. Anti-fascism did not indicate a common goal or set of values as such; rather it established a frontier against which a number of different, sometimes contradictory aspirations could be projected at different times and in different places. As Lepre (1997) indicates, anti-fascism began with forms of opposition not to the dictatorship but to the presence of the fascists in government from 1922 onwards when they still operated, broadly, within the parliamentary system. Whilst liberals, socialists and others opposed the presence of Mussolini’s party, they did not for all the same reasons or under a common project. For some that opposition was directed at a return to the liberal institutions, for others it involved looking forward to a new order altogether. These differences had no small part to play in the failure of the parties opposed to Fascism to agree a unified strategy. During the period of the dictatorship, however, when it became clear that any
opposition to Fascism was opposition to a totalitarian regime with an accompanying ideology, anti-fascism remained a distant band of exiles and intellectuals unable to significantly expand their opposition into a systematic worldview (Ganapini, 2000).

It was only with the initial collapse of the dictatorship in 1943—a profound and widespread dislocation of the Italian state, in response to which the Resistance movement proper began to organise—that a widespread anti-fascist organisation could come into effect. Anti-Fascism then expanded into a symbolic frontier behind which a variety of demands and groups could identify. This included the various liberal opponents of the regime, the Resistance movement (including its different parties, the communists, liberal-socialists, etc), the Church and its lay members, monarchists and elements of the military. None of these groups shared exactly the same ideals, forms of organisation or detailed objectives. Because of the division of the country into a half occupied by Nazis and Fascists and another half occupied by the Allies, the South of Italy remained largely outside the anti-fascist experience and its discourses of mobilisation and renewal. Nevertheless, for the first time in Italy, a vast section of the population were actively involved in a common project to reconstitute the state (see Battaglia, 1970). Through the Committees for National liberation, the anti-fascist parties coordinated their efforts with those of the Allies. Though not well organised nor particularly experienced (unlike other Resistance movements, that in Italy existed for only two years), the period of resistance involved many and various acts of courage and sacrifice (see Bocca, 1995).

The experience of the Resistance and the complicated set of ideals articulated within the discourse of anti-fascism were, and remain, viewed by many as the legitimating ideology of the post-war regime. Within anti-fascism, it is believed, lies the ideal of an order yet-to-come, a space within which Italy’s diverse communities can identify a common hostility to a totalitarian state and authoritarian system of government. It is, as some have tellingly put it, ‘another Italy’, one of equality and liberty that is yet to be fully realised but which marks the distance between the present and future. Here, then, is the fantasy space of which Zizek writes. It is less an object of fetishistic enthusiasm than a banal presupposition, an ideological fantasy within which a civil life can be lived out.

However, in recent years the limitations of anti-fascism as a legitimating ideology have been asserted from a number of quarters. As Gundle (2000) points out, although anti-fascism served as a set of general ideals against which the mass parties of the First Republic might, in the early years of the Republic, mobilise their constituencies, the Resistance failed to become a ‘civil religion’ or hegemonic worldview. Anti-fascism was less powerful a state ideology than anti-communism, the primary antagonism that unified Christian Democrat ideology and which achieved a virtual hegemonic position throughout the administrative apparatus they dominated. In
the face of this antagonism, which pitted an aggressive, foreign-based communism against the virtuous Christian nation, alternative discourses could not effectively compete. Whilst various groups sought to embody the ideals of the resistance (the Communist Party, for instance, but not exclusively) they never succeeded fully in shedding their own particular identity nor embedding anti-fascism within the institutional order. Anti-fascism remained primarily an ideology of the Left and associated with the radical institutional reforms they sought. In the South, and increasingly amongst new generations all over Italy, the ideals of the Resistance and opposition to fascism were not immediate or salient concerns. Moreover, a great deal of historical research has begun to open up anti-fascism and the Resistance as a partial, contingent phenomena (on which, see Peli, 2004). As Franco De Felice (1995) argues, on examination there were evidently different anti-fascisms and different Resistances depending on geographical location. Likewise, Claudio Pavone’s powerful analysis of the Resistance period in Italy (1943-5), Una guerra civile (Pavone, 1991), further opened up the idea of the Resistance as a complex, overlapping set of conflicts irreducible to a single anti-fascist struggle: it was, he argues, simultaneously a civil war (between Italians), a class war and an anti-fascist war.

The gradual deconstruction of anti-fascist discourse into competing debates over the relative partiality and contingency of its components signifies its dissolution as a hegemonic discourse, if only ever a partially successful one. Whilst some continue to defend its status as a legitimating ideology (see, for example, De Luna and Revelli, 1995), it seems increasingly evident that the Second Republic is being formed within a post-anti-fascist context, where those ideals no longer spontaneously or sufficiently inspire the public and its leaders (Rusconi, 1995; Rapone, 1996). For some commentators, the time is ripe to find an alternative set of identifications, a new civil religion to regulate social and political differences within a common framework (Rusconi, 1999). However, the lesson we take from these developments ought to be a different one, namely that the problem of post-anti-fascism lies not in the loss of an ideology but in the ‘loss of the loss’, that is, the deprivation of antagonistic horizons against which universal ideals might be projected and contested.

Conclusion

I have argued that the negative function of antagonism illuminates the problem of political ideology in Modern Italy. Rather than seek out some positive object of identification such as the nation or national identity, antagonism—when viewed from a poststructuralist perspective—helps us conceive collective identity in terms of an ‘absent fullness’ whose very distance and lack of full realisation serves as a horizon against which numerous demands may be hegemonically articulated. The implications of this outlook are that we eschew the search for a rational, ‘natural’ or essential content to serve as a common identity and recognise the plurality of contents that
may fulfil that role. The universal voice of the community cannot therefore be identified exclusively with nationality, rationality or even spirituality: it can in principle be all these things but is, therefore, a site of permanent contest.

All this is to say that politics will inevitably be overdetermined by ‘the political’. That is, the day-to-day bargaining and competition between sectoral interests, political parties and state agencies—even when conducted in a context of agreed rules-of-the-game—will be permanently vulnerable to the contest over the parameters of the political community as a whole. Italy’s dilemmas might be said to stem from a lack of supportive alignment between politics and the political, between its elite compromises and the mythical narratives through which its parties have justified themselves to their constituencies. However, the end of those grand narratives may have reduced the international dimension of ideological conflict, but it has not wholly displaced the willingness to invest desire in fantasies of fulfilment. These days such fantasies often may be intrinsically ‘anti-politics’ in as much as they point away from public institutions and towards a heightened sense of individual lifestyle or geographical separateness, but they are no less ‘political’ for that. The post-ideological challenge, we might say, lies not in the loss of competing ideological outlooks, which seems unlikely, but in the refusal to find a common point of antagonism from which to disagree.
References


