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Political culture from Italian prisons. Antonio Gramsci, Ernesto Rossi, and others *.

One of the general aims of Fascism was to achieve a general, pervasive control of society, and this is especially true for the period of *fascistizzazione* which followed the 1925-26 laws. An essential part of the recipe for the achievement of this goal was the strengthening of political control through imprisonment and political confinement, as well as other minor strategies which enabled a more “informal” control of local *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) organizations.

Another general feature of Fascism was the portrayal of the recent past as a negative period unlikely to return—‘yesterday’s world’ as it has been called—and the identification of these ‘bad times’ with antifascism. The future, by contrast, would undoubtedly be a bright one: the people had recovered from the post-war turmoils, and the nation, no longer humiliated, would soon take off again. This, of course, was Fascist propaganda.

Repressive instruments were ruthless, and at the same time both flexible and well graduated so as to be able to give the highest punishment to the most dangerous and to offer ways out to those willing to publicly renounce their political stance. Even Gramsci himself was repeatedly asked to sign a request for pardon. The *squadristi* were not dismantled, and had been ‘constitutionalized’. Some of them stood in the background, grumbling and waiting for a “second wave”, though they were still able to make a direct contribution by applying the types of “informal” pressure alluded to above.

Fascist Italy was a police state, but it was also a political Regime, and, as such, the question of consensus was the biggest problem to overcome. Prisons and police were now being used to the full, certainly much more than in previous historical periods, themselves not without repression and political persecution towards artists, writers and thinkers [C. Klopp, 1999].

The pre-fascist élite was either emarginated, forced into exile, or imprisoned. Catholic *Popolari* had no difficulty in sheltering discreetly under the Church of Rome, but their leader, Sturzo, went into voluntary exile. Rank and file militants of the working class organisations —

survivors of heavy street violence at the hands of *squadristi*— had fled into exile, as had many of their leaders, and some of these escapes were a political success for the opposition. There were also, however, many who remained, and the presence of clandestine groups and organizations inside Italy became a matter of political debate and contrast between different sections of the opposition. Most clandestines stood before the *Tribunale Speciale*, and many – some eight thousand - received heavy sentences (for an estimated total of twenty eight thousand years), thus entering the circuit of imprisonment and political confinement.

Quite a large number of those serving long prison sentences —anarchists, socialists, communists, and *giellisti*— reacted to their new condition by organizing themselves around their political identities and forming the so-called *collettivi*. A part of their time was devoted -quite understandably- to what might best be called political indoctrination, not separated though from a strong educational and formative quest. Prisoners devoted themselves to well-defined and extensive educational programs, which ranged from basic education through intermediate levels, up to the highest theoretical production, as was the case with Gramsci. Normal education and schooling should have been a reasonable achievement for these (often highly literate) militants, but evidently it was not enough. Vittorio Foa, a prison companion of Ernesto Rossi, in the Preface to Rossi's prison epistolary, tells us about a 22-year-old communist, an apprentice shoemaker, coming back from trial with a radiant face, to be greeted by a sympathetic and embracing Foa: "So, you have been acquitted". "No", was the reply, "I have been given two years in which to continue my studies¹" [V. Foa, 2001, X].

This attitude towards self-education and cultural improvement, with its close links to collective self-promotion, and with its feedback into active political life, was a sort of trademark for that whole generation, both inside and outside prison. We can refer to it as 'militant culture'. It constituted quite an achievement in post-fascist years, and this accounts for the alleged hegemony of leftist culture that has been underlined (and somewhat lamented). But the strict connection between prison culture and post war militant culture is quite evident, and it might explain, if not the hegemony, at least the seminal features of the latter.

This regular teaching and learning in Italian prisons even achieved the rather pompous title of “prison universities”. And though this is a somewhat inflated term, the “universities” in question certainly constituted a sort of academy for the political élite, one which was to give rise to the parties of post-war Italy and which became the model for party “cadre schools” in post-war Italy.

Some of the teachers in these “prison universities” set their sights high. They implemented extensive and comprehensive projects of cultural research, ranging from the search for a new theoretical construct (as was the case with Gramsci), to the planning of a new basis for anti-fascist liberal democratic culture that might be useful in times to come. Gramsci, with his *Quaderni*, was by far the most influential figure. His project was, in fact if not in words, the most ambitious, and the one that had the largest diffusion and influence in the post-war years following his own detention and death [Gramsci, 1947; 1948-51].

However, many other political prisoners also did important work, including Riccardo Bauer, Massimo Mila, Vittorio Foa, and Ernesto Rossi, to name but a few. Prison correspondence became again a literary (and political) genre, and post fascist Italy now has not only Gramsci’s but numerous prison correspondences in print [V. Foa, 1998; M. Mila, 1999]. Antifascists entered prison at a time when Fascism appeared to be going very strongly and when there seemed to be no light at the end of the tunnel. Sandro Pertini, President of the Republic, who also had been a political prisoner under Fascism -and German- occupation, so that a book about him collecting police and prison documents has a title referring to “six sentences and two escapes”, bore witness, in an interview in 1980’s, to the fact that many in the antifascist lot believed that a warless and ruralizing Fascism could never be overcome [Faggi, 1970; Gregoretta, 1984]. Nevertheless they did not give up their struggle, nor did they waver in their beliefs in the midst of such a difficult battle. They were to some extent critical of the Risorgimento detainees —Pellico, the *Carbonari* in Milan, and the patriots in the Bourbonic gaols— believing that they had shown off and vaunted their suffering. Such prisoners were, in Foa’s words, “una lagna, un pianto continuo”. They also mocked the term antifascist ‘martyrs’,

given to them by antifascist propaganda outside Italy. They would joke about it in everyday conversation: “Martyr Rossi, would you like a game of chess?”, “Martyr Foa, would you lend me Hegel’s *Encyclopedia* for a day?” [Foa, 2001, p. XI-XII]. Gramsci did not like to linger upon the negative aspects of his prison life, as he valued himself only an unlucky combatant, a loser at this particular moment in time, and an unconstrained, voluntary and politically aware, combatant was not to be pitied. He also did not want to be neither a martyr nor an hero, but only “an average man, with strong and grounded beliefs, not willing to barter them for anything in the world” [Gramsci, 1965, 126].

Ernesto Rossi did not have the leading role Gramsci had as Secretary of a revolutionary party, nor the backing of an international organization such as the Comintern. He was an intellectual, a journalist, and a professor of Economics, not a revolutionary, at least in the marxist leninist sense. Nevertheless, he did not refrain from revolutionary action against the Regime, nor did he have doubts or waver when he had to face the worst fate [Fiori, 1997].

A number of questions arise when we are faced with the authors of the antifascist prisoner generation. Are examples such as these mainly (or only) models of ethical behaviour, and are they to be considered merely as a few of the many thousands of examples of people fighting suffering and difficulties while keeping a high moral stance, so common in the twentieth century, “age of extremes”? They are certainly ethical models, but they are also more than this. What was the political élite behind prison bars struggling for, if the goal was so far away and if the struggle remained unseen by anyone? And what happens to an isolated and eradicated political élite? Finally, are the material conditions of intellectual work of any importance?

In the history of Italian culture, Gramsci stands side by side on an ideal bookshelf with Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile. But Croce was free, though isolated because of his (albeit less loudly proclaimed) anti-fascist position, and a life member of the King-appointed Senate, Gentile was a Minister of Education, head of *Scuola Normale*, and *maître-à-penser* of the Fascist regime. Gramsci, by contrast, was in a prison cell, with all the limitations that this involved, including severe restrictions on the reading of books and the use of paper, as well as

control over what he wrote in his *Quaderni*. Whether or not the context is of importance depends on how we conceive culture: if one privileges its theoretical, speculative, and even mystical aspects, then all is needed is a free and vigorous mind, which can remain such even in a situation of restraint. If you privilege, instead, the material and organizational aspects of a cultural undertaking, then the context does matter and will influence, to a considerable extent, the project as a whole and its outcomings.

If cultural activity has an “input”, that is the numerous and various influences of the world around us, how does a prisoner obtain them? When affected by limitations and control, what are his reactions? Books and periodicals could enter a prison (although they had to have the hard cover ripped off for security reasons) but *which* books and how many? These decisions were left to the discretionary powers of the prison governor, and there was no appeal, particularly in the case of important prisoners, who were controlled directly by the Ministry or by the Ova police. Ernesto Rossi recalls that it was virtually impossible to use prison libraries: they were made up of a random assortment of books that would otherwise have been disposed of, and which had been expurgated of any “heretical” writings. Twice a week a basket full of books was brought in front of each cell and the detainee had to choose within seconds. Nevertheless, both Gramsci and Rossi, as well as many others, were hungry readers of almost anything, even of the minor literature, partly just to “kill time”, but also to aid in their research. Gramsci considered himself able to ‘rummage’ even in ‘dung-heaps’ and to get blood from a stone. In his search for direct signs or circumstantial evidence about society and the external world, Gramsci even perused law reviews such as *Il Foro Italiano*, which was a far cry from his specialist university preparation in glottology. The right of a detainee to keep books, pens and pencils, in some cases glasses, was strictly limited, and was not in fact a right but the mere result of authorization given by the bureaucratic apparatus of the prison⁴.

There is no evidence that anyone actually pronounced, upon Gramsci’s trial in 1928, words such as “we must stop that brain from functioning”, but certainly one of the aims of his imprisonment was to neutralize him in a very severe way. In prison, Gramsci could not influence

politics and people through personal contact or newspaper articles, and so, after his trial and a period of reflection, he embarked on a project which he repeatedly describes as being “*disinteressato*”, that is unpolitical, impartial, erudite and merely theoretical. One cannot assume that Gramsci, a Marxist, could really believe in culture detached from politics and society, so we must conclude that his real aim was to divert censorship and political control by using the common notion of neutrality of culture. And this was to have a great influence on his work, since Gramsci had to adopt a form of writing and a vocabulary that still puzzles us today [Frosini, 2004]. The use of metaphor is extensive, and, as whoever deals with Gramsci’s prison writings can observe, Gramsci tends to borrow the lexicon of his opponents. He has no worries about rigorous formal definitions, and he frequently uses allusive references which can be understood only in the context of his thought as a whole. This is not to be marvelled at, since totally explicit language would have caused limitations or even a ban by prison authorities.

We do not know if the *Quaderni* were intended to be preliminary notes for one or more books. We can reasonably suppose they were not intended to be a private intellectual diary, (or a mere therapeutical device against prison conditions), but we do not know exactly what Gramsci meant to do with them at the end. They were, as Fabio Frosini and Guido Liguori remark, an “open” work, and perhaps we could also refer to them as “work in progress”. They reveal a dialogic and inquiring frame of mind, diverse theoretical and political aims, and certain shortcomings inherent in an unfinished work: unbalanced coverage, partiality, unilaterality. These factors need to be kept in mind when we examine a text which can now be read again, according to authors of *Le Parole di Gramsci*, with the fullest philological rigour. Gerratana perhaps is over-emphasising when he says that, if the *Quaderni* had been lost, only the memory of a legend would have survived Gramsci [Gerratana, 1975, XXIX]. Gramsci’s writings as a political leader made him well known (and in some way a living legend) even before entering prison. And, within the context of Italian cultural history, the *Quaderni* doubtlessly place Gramsci alongside Croce and Gentile.

The *Quaderni* had quite an adventurous history after Gramsci's death in 1937. Their fame is mainly due to a very early, six volume edition (1948-1951), supervised by Togliatti. This was neatly divided into six sections, each with a full editorial title (the Prison Letters had been in print as early as 1947, although enlarged editions were to follow), but quite lacking the philological rigour mentioned above. Togliatti's edition was well timed to give the *Quaderni* a central role in the founding of a new antifascist and democratic culture. It is also to be noted that Togliatti linked Gramsci's writings to his own political views, bringing to the work his own reflections about the differences between East and West in the organization of society; and the importance of hegemony and many other factors was brought right into the new "national path" ("*via nazionale*") to Socialism which Togliatti endorsed. Only from 1975 onwards have scholars been able to use a four volume edition, edited by Gerratana, in which one can find the *Quaderni* in the raw form left to us by Gramsci [Gramsci, 1975].

By contrast with Gramsci, Ernesto Rossi is still relatively unknown, or at least less known than he deserves to be. Rossi had been a young volunteer in the First World War, during which he was wounded, lost a brother and close friends. His interest in nationalistic affairs (he even wrote for the *Popolo d'Italia*) was halted by no less a person than Gaetano Salvemini⁵. After *Non Mollare*, Ernesto Rossi, already a distinguished economist, esteemed by no less a scholar than Luigi Einaudi, threw himself into underground activity with the group that later became "Giustizia e Libertà". He was arrested in 1930, and tried and sentenced together with Riccardo Bauer to 20 years' detention, even though the allegations of links to the terrorist blast at the Fiera di Milano in 1928 had fallen. He served nine years and afterwards was sent to political confinement in Ventotene.

A non-conformist thinker, Rossi followed an intellectual path of his own, first in prison and then in post-Fascist Italy. He was originally a liberal but became more of a democrat with social reform interests, and of course a resolute opposer of Fascism. His awareness of the social question and original intellectual stance led him into many fields and in many directions. In 1942, together with Altiero Spinelli and Eugenio Colorni, he gave voice, in the *Manifesto di*

Ventotene, to federalist views to be applied in post-war Europe, under the political formula of the United States of Europe.

Ernesto Rossi survived jail and confinement, though at a considerable cost to his health. But in post-war Italy, he did not fall in with the mainstream of *Resistenza*, and of antifascist prison veterans. Rather, he was one of a small number engaged in constant and provocative journalistic activity, centered first around *Il Mondo* and later the 1962 'Partito Radicale' [Cardini, 1992]. His longer works, of which the *Abolire la Miseria* [Rossi, 1946] stands out as one the most original, had a rather limited impact on Italian political culture. The years after prison were for Rossi not the apotheosis of his political career. What he called "clerical" powers, which had grown stronger with Christian Democratic governments, forced him into strict opposition, though without taking sides with social communist alliance, which he also opposed. It is quite difficult, therefore, to compare Rossi, a non-conformist liberal-democrat, with Gramsci, a communist leader and original thinker. Nevertheless there are some similarities.

In prison Ernesto Rossi was never allowed, except in late years, to keep paper, pen and pencil with him. He was classified, due to his many attempts to escape, as one of the most dangerous political prisoners, and in addition, the Regime searched –but never found- evidence of his involvement in the 1928 blast. Microphones were used to bug the cells of Rossi and his companions, and transcriptions even of everyday chat were sent to central police authorities. Reading was for Rossi a strict necessity. "If I – for whatsoever reason - could not read, I would not be able to bear my imprisonment⁶" – he wrote from prison, praising books as a source of comfort when alone and a way to escape (in spirit) from every day reality [E. Rossi, 2001, p. 385]. Rossi also tried to learn mathematics (with his wife as a teacher, by letter) but he could not even jot down formulas, symbols and calculations. He tried using a stick of wet soap on glass, but even this was prohibited and he was punished. Books were necessary companions in detention, instruments for critical reflection, a way to run ahead in time, and also to keep pace with the evolution of ideas outside prison; and many of the readings were foreign books

Quite surprisingly, although ties with his mother and wife were very close, Rossi partially sacrificed family letter space using a part of what he was allowed to write (on numbered sheets, and only on certain days of the week), to take extensive notes, with no second thoughts (drafts were not allowed), of summaries and comments regarding what he was reading and working on at that particular time.

And so, when Mimmo Franzinelli, under the title *Nove anni sono molti* [Rossi. 2001], recently published a major part of Rossi's prison correspondence, he made accessible a new and important part of Italian "prison culture" to a public who had not fullest information on Ernesto Rossi and his works. In this sense, Rossi's prison letters were part of a more general cultural project, developed despite all the adverse circumstances, and under this respect, Ernesto Rossi may be likened to Gramsci as a prison researcher.

Vittorio Foa, Rossi's prison and cell companion, has listed the fields of prison research that were to become the center of Rossi's mature production in post-fascist Italy: European unification, criticism of monopoly and corporative capitalism, the laicity of the State, abolishment of poverty, and the struggle against corruption in the public sector of the economic system; and further broadening horizon, Italian history, Church History, philosophy, and contemporary literature as a whole. It would not have come as a surprise if his thought had developed into an organic whole (though, needless to say, quite different in its conclusions from the *Quaderni*). It was more than simply his much loved political economy, in which he excelled to such a degree that it would have brought him to the top of a university career. He had just been arrested when Luigi Einaudi daringly published a long article by him on Fascist finance in *La Riforma Sociale* [Rossi, 1930]. When he was in prison, Einaudi asked him again and again to attend to a translation of Wicksteed's *The Common Sense of Political Economy*. He translated Lionel Robbins' *The Economic Causes of War* only after 1942 in Ventotene [Robbins, 1944].

But many of Rossi's post-war books, such as *Abolire la Miseria* [E. Rossi, 1946] and *Critica delle costituzioni economiche* [E. Rossi 1965] probably had their origins in the prison years. This opens a problematic window on the Prison Letters now in print. Rossi knew that they

would come under the eye of the censor (though he did not imagine that it was within the offices of the Ovla that letters were read and sometimes partially erased with large ink stains), so he was never free to write exactly what he wished. He knew very well that explicit language might mean that a given letter may never reach its destination, and also that some independent remarks could bring him up to three months in isolation, as happened with spicy comments he once made about Mussolini. Even too much theory could irritate censors. Allusive references might be castigated on the spot, and the same could also occur with “neutral”, “harmless” discourse.

Nor were prison letters faithful sources of the real moods of the prisoners or of the difficulties of prison conditions in 1934 and 1935, since the letters were self-censored for fear of reprisal on epistulary rights. Franzinelli’s book analyses police methods, and succeeds in reconstructing some of the words blanked out by heavy ink. It also recovers the code used by Rossi, a very clever and yet simple way of inserting secret messages within apparently innocent letters. In this case –quite luckily- the censors were completely outfooled.

Vittorio Foa remarks quite convincingly that prison letters to family members were not really private letters at all, nor spontaneous writing, every single word being weighed so as not to irritate the hidden presence of the censor. The letters may therefore be read on more than one level. They have both a “higher moral dimension, untouched as time has passed, and an immediate one, in the realms of family affection, in which every word, and every silence, has a meaning of his own⁷”. So, “private” is not quite so private, when brutally interfered with, and private discourse in public becomes public discourse. Conversely, public discourse on politics and society was to be kept private and was moulded into a private communicative code which sought shelter from the censors [Foa, 2001, p. XIII].

Culture stemming from prison gives a particular twist and a unique taste to an entire national culture, but it may also fail to bring about concrete changes. The political “élite behind bars”, while influencing Italian culture at the highest level, could have been thought of not being able, once free, to forget the conditions in which they had lived in prison and operate consequently. But this did not happen. The emargination of the militant prison antifascists in

post-war politics made so that none of their reform policies were carried out. Nor is there any sign of great involvement based directly on their experience as former detainees, experience which might have led to changes in laws and detention policies, or influence public opinion.

A special issue of *Il Ponte* in March 1949 gathers writings on prison and prison policies by the same *dramatis personae* of the Fascist prison world. Riccardo Bauer, one time prison companion of Rossi, stands out with a very extensive and in-depth study of the Italian prison system [R. Bauer, 1949]. Rossi, on his own, wrote, with great sincerity, that while he was in prison he criticized those politicians who, in other historical periods, had suffered from imprisonment but had not changed the prison conditions when in power; but, as a now free man, he had to acknowledge that also he and his fellow prisoners had been doing very little; he then adds a few ideas about what it might be possible to do at once [Rossi, 1949]. In the country of Cesare Beccaria, prisons were to remain a place of exclusion, and of loss of rights, at least until the 1980s, when a progressive Catholic senator, Mario Gozzini, introduced new laws and regulations, which relieved, at least to some extent, a still unresolved problem.

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¹NOTES

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“Ricordo, quando ero in attesa di giudizio, un giovane comunista di ventidue anni, mi pare un’apprendista calzolaio, che tornò dal processo con il viso irradiato dalla gioia. ‘Ti hanno assolto’ dissi abbracciandolo; ‘No, mi hanno dato due anni, per studiare”.

² “La propaganda di Giustizia e Libertà definiva Bauer e Rossi come ‘i nostri martiri’: erano stati condannati a vent’anni, li avevano falsamente accusati di terrorismo, avevano corso il rischio di una condanna a morte [...]. Eravamo pieni di gioia e di rispetto ma cominciammo presto a scherzare chiamandoli martiri nel linguaggio corrente: martire Rossi, facciamo una partita a scacchi, martire Bauer mi presti fino a domani l’ *Enciclopedia* di Hegel?”

³ “Io non voglio fare nè il martire nè l’eroe. Credo di essere semplicemente un uomo medio, che ha le sue convinzioni profonde, e che non le baratta per niente al mondo” he wrote to brother Carlo in a letter from prison, September 19, 1927.

⁴ Even nowadays almost every act of prison life, however ordinary, requires a proforma written request, a ‘domandina’; Adriano Sofri ironically concluded one his many ‘domandine’, with a prayer for a prompt ‘rispostina’ from the Prison administration.

⁵ Salvemini also suffered, in 1925, a very short period of detention, in Rome and Florence, for the *Non Mollare* trial, and in a letter from the prison remarked wittily, and possibly to alleviate family worries, that “in any case scholars are in a sense volunteer detainees”. “In fondo noi studiosi siamo dei carcerati volontari: la clausura, che deve essere orrenda per un contadino avvezzo a stare all’aria aperta, riesce punto grave per uno di noi” writes (June 18th) to his wife, now in G. Salvemini, *Carteggio 1921-1926*, Laterza, Bari, p. 336.

⁶ E. Rossi wrote to his mother from Regina Coeli, in Rome, (May 17th, 1935): “Se per una qualsiasi ragione dovessi cessare di leggere non credo che avrei la forza di sopportare la galera. La lettura di un libro è un gran conforto: è l’unico modo che abbiamo –quando non siamo in compagnia- per evadere spiritualmente dalla nostra realtà quotidiana”.

⁷ “Pur così familiari, queste lettere non sono dunque leggibili come lettere normali. Esse sono in qualche modo doppie. Hanno una dimensione alta, morale, ferma nel tempo. E poi una dimensione contingente, familiare ed affettiva, nella quale ogni parola, come ogni silenzio, ha un significato suo”

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