*Modern Italy*, 2019
Vol. 24, No. 2, 123–138, doi:10.1017/mit.2019.9

# The anatomy of controversy, from Charlottesville to Rome

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(*Received 27 September 2018; final version accepted 11 February 2019*)

This article compares two recent memory controversies in the United States and Italy – the removal of the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the *Legge Fiano,* the abortive ban on Fascist propaganda proposed by Emanuele Fiano and the Partito Democratico – in order to identify a common set of challenges now confronting liberal democracies on both sides of the Atlantic. While acknowledging the *longue durée* of memory politics surrounding the Confederacy and Fascism respectively, the article argues that disputes over their monuments and symbols must also be situated in terms of contemporary debates over national identity, race, populism, citizenship and speech.

**Keywords:** Italy; Fascism; memory; United States; Confederacy; monuments; populism

## Introduction

In October 2017, Ruth Ben-Ghiat posed a provocative question on the culture blog of *The New Yorker*: 'Why Are So Many Fascist Monuments Still Standing in Italy?'[1] A distinguished scholar of Mussolini's regime, Ben-Ghiat reflected on the persistence of Fascist art, architecture and iconography in the postwar era and its significance for contemporary society. Unlike Germany, where Nazi symbolism was eradicated from the public sphere, the Italian landscape remains littered with reminders of the *Ventennio*. Some lie ignored; some have become objects of far-right pilgrimage and veneration; and some are celebrated as contributions to national patrimony (Malone 2017; Arthurs 2010). While Ben-Ghiat did not call for the monuments' removal, she expressed unease over Italians' 'comfort with living amid Fascist symbols' and their apparent willingness to overlook troubling historical associations while lauding aesthetic achievement. The inscription on Rome's Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana – 'a people of poets, artists, heroes, saints, thinkers, scientists, navigators, and transmigrants' – derives from Mussolini's 1935 speech announcing the invasion of Ethiopia; yet few today would associate it with the mass murder of African civilians. Italian prime ministers have held press conferences against the backdrop of the 'Apotheosis of Fascism' mural at the Foro Italico (Carter and Martin 2017); as Ben-Ghiat noted, '[i]t would be hard to imagine Angela Merkel standing in front of a painting of Hitler on a similar occasion.'

Within minutes of the article's publication, Ben-Ghiat received an online barrage of anger, misogyny and anti-semitism. The vitriol – often crudely stated – played upon common refrains: what could a *professoressa americana* possibly know about Italian culture? Why did she want to erase history? Was there no end to the excesses of political correctness? The condescension and

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https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2019.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

abuse were by no means confined to the darkest recesses of the internet. Marco Ventura of *Il Messaggero* accused Ben-Ghiat of 'American cultural racism' and a 'pseudo-cultural clobbering' (a '*manganellata'* – a turn of phrase not lost on students of Fascism).[2] In his blog for the conservative *Il Giornale*, the art historian Carlo Franza suggested that 'this lady professor … an American Jew' was colluding with 'the PD Jew Emanuele Fiano.'[3] More thoughtful interlocutors eventually emerged, and Ben-Ghiat ultimately succeeded in sparking a conversation about Italy's complicated relationship with the aesthetic legacies of the *ventennio*.[4] Nevertheless, the furore demonstrated – not for the first time – the extent to which the Fascist era remains a 'third rail' of Italian life.

While Ben-Ghiat's article did not elicit the same reaction in the United States, its implications could hardly have been lost on *New Yorker* readers. Only six weeks earlier, a coalition of far-right groups had assembled in Charlottesville, Virginia to protest the removal of a statue of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee from a public park. The rally degenerated into anarchy, resulting in scores of injuries and arrests as well as the deaths of an anti-racism protester and two police officers. While only the latest episode in a much longer conflict over Confederate symbolism, the tragedy propelled the issue to the forefront of the national conversation, which was further polarised by inflammatory interventions from President Donald Trump. Like Italian disputes over Fascist monuments, the conflict over Lee's statue revealed the profound fault lines – political, cultural, racial, religious, geographic and generational – crisscrossing American society.

This article places current memory debates in Italy and the United States in dialogue with one another. Of course, controversies in both countries reflect distinct historical trajectories. The Confederacy was a short-lived insurgency defeated more than 150 years ago; the Fascist regime lasted over two decades and is only now starting to disappear from living memory. Structures of white supremacy remain firmly entrenched in American politics, culture and society; by contrast, while Mussolinian Fascism was never fully expunged from Italian life, and is increasingly being rehabilitated by sympathisers, it has been marginalised as a political force since 1945 (Raniolo and Tarchi, 2015).[5] At the same time, there are also fundamental commonalities to emphasise. In both cases, contemporary divides stem from internecine conflicts over the defining principles of nationhood: the war between Northern and Southern states (1861–1865) and the bloodletting that bookended the Fascist *ventennio* (not only the 1943–1945 'civil war' between the Italian Social Republic and the anti-Fascist Resistance, but also the Blackshirts' conquest of power in 1919–1922) (Pavone 1991; Fabbri 2008). Even though these wars ended with clear 'winners' and 'losers,' the defeated parties were soon reabsorbed into the fold, whether through rituals of reconciliation and the restoration of white domination in the South (Blight 2001) or, in the Italian case, through half-hearted epurations, amnesty, and Cold War political expediency (Domenico 1991). As a result, both the Confederacy and historical Fascism birthed persistent 'cultures of defeat', centred on mythologised narratives that celebrated a 'lost cause' and promoted identities in opposition to those promoted by the victors (Schivelbusch 2003; Goldfield 2002; Germinario 1999).

Beyond these historical resemblances, memory controversies on both sides of the Atlantic are also animated by shared logics and rhetorical strategies that speak volumes about contemporary society and politics. Particularly striking is the extent to which these debates have become polarised, zero-sum contests, in which the inclusion of one narrative requires the exclusion of the other. Concession and compromise are unthinkable, with adversaries defining their core values in absolute opposition to one another. Defenders of the Italian Republic cannot permit the rehabilitation of Fascism, while Fascist sympathisers protest their exclusion from the bounds of legitimacy (Chiarini 2001). African-Americans regard Confederate symbols as attacks on their humanity,

https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2019.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

while Confederate apologists deny the centrality of racism to their cause (Holmes and Cagle 2000). As Michael Rothberg (2009) has argued, a 'logic of scarcity' (2) predominates: memory is envisioned as 'a pregiven, limited space in which already-established groups engage in a life-and-death-struggle' (5).

While Rothberg employs spatial metaphors to describe memory in general, they are particularly apt when considering controversies over visual and material culture. In such cases, the 'real-estate' (2) can indeed be finite. Monuments are erected in prominent locations to project hegemonic ideas and convey 'desired political lessons', in the process displacing subaltern identities (Levinson 1998, 10). The same holds true for more ephemeral objects like flags and place names, and could even be extended to gestures (for example, the Fascist salute) that govern interactions in public space (Azaryahu 1986; Allert 2008). By the same token, purging the dominant symbolic order announces a rupture in time, the rejection of the values of the *ancien régime*, and a 'reordering [of] the meaningful universe' (Verdery 1999, 26). Understood in terms of occupying physical space, removal or preservation literally become zero-sum games with dramatically elevated stakes. The destruction of an object – eliminating its materiality and visibility – seemingly condemns it to oblivion: as a consequence, even mundane or long-neglected artefacts assume tremendous importance when targeted for erasure (Gamboni 2006).

It is no accident that the landscape of memory appears especially fraught at present. As Dan Stone (2012), Martin Evans (2006) and others have suggested, the end of the Cold War unleashed long-repressed memories and undermined master narratives that defined the postwar order. This shift has had some salutary effects, like giving voice to Eastern Europeans whose experiences had been silenced by decades of Soviet rule. However, 'the loosening grip of such myths' (Stone 2012, 718) has also enabled the return of illiberal and anti-democratic forces. As never before, the consensuses that underpinned the liberal social contract since 1945 – the defence of democratic norms and institutions, the rejection of totalitarianism and racial hatred, the commitment (admittedly, often more rhetorical than practical) to equality and human rights – seem threatened, obsolete, or open to renegotiation. For decades, for example, recognition of the Holocaust was a non-negotiable value, an 'entry ticket' to the community of nations (Tony Judt quoted in Stone 2012, 725); today, tropes previously confined to the fringes – denialism, conspiracy theories about 'globalist' cabals, the renunciation of guilt – are openly espoused by leading public figures (Rensmann and Schoeps 2010). In Italy, this same trend is evident in the crisis of resistentialist anti-Fascism, which has come under sustained attack by voices seeking to rehabilitate Mussolini's legacy (Mammone and Veltri 2007, among many others). In the United States, the current occupant of the White House has publicly assailed the freedom of the press and judicial independence; renounced orthodoxies that have governed American foreign policy since 1945; and proposed the repeal of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution, which guarantees birthright citizenship (on Trumpism, see Mudde 2018).

The 'return' of unsettling memories, while drawing on deep historical wellsprings, must also be situated in terms of what Hans-Georg Betz describes as a 'new politics of resentment,' a populist backlash against perceived liberal-cosmopolitan elites, globalisation, and the disorienting 'acceleration' of economic, cultural, and social change (Betz 2017; Berezin 2009). In Italy, the United States and beyond, this new brand of radical right politics positions itself in explicitly democratic terms – as expressing the 'true' voice of the 'real' people – while simultaneously rejecting liberalism and pluralism. Grounded in identitarian and nostalgic claims to rootedness and national greatness, it posits a defensive struggle against the corrosive deracination of multiculturalism, immigration and political correctness, evoking nightmares of 'white genocide' or 'demographic swamping' (Betz and Johnson 2017). In playing upon fears of replacement, stigma

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or exclusion, this discourse again echoes the logic of 'competitive' memory: the supplanting of previously hegemonic narratives, especially when incarnated in material artefacts, is seen as equivalent to the supplanting of 'the people'. The 'real estate' of memory, in other words, has become a battlefield upon which the current tensions between populism and liberalism, nativism and cosmopolitanism, and ethnocentrism and multiculturalism are playing out (for a related discussion, see Cento Bull 2016).

In this struggle for 'survival,' opponents of liberal pluralism not only profess to defend embattled heritage but enlist historical referents that deliberately provoke or terrorise their adversaries. The 'Roman' salute and the 'Stars and Bars' function as 'master symbols', instantly recognisable 'collective representations' that express social relationships, though with the deliberate aim of dividing rather than uniting (Wolf 2001, 146). As Malcolm Quinn (1994) has argued with regard to the swastika, such symbols are 'not so much read as reacted to' (5); whatever their (real or imagined) provenance, they possess an 'arresting power' (24) defined by a history of violent antagonism and exclusion. This emotional resonance once again raises the stakes in contests over controversial material culture. Those embracing the offensive symbol see it as both a weapon and a shield; those targeted regard its very presence as an assault and believe that its eradication will also eliminate the threat that it represents.

In what follows, I trace these interwoven logics across two cases: the contest over the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, VA, and the Italian debate over the *Legge Fiano*, which proposed to ban the public dissemination of Fascist propaganda and symbols. I focus primarily on public discourse – in city council meetings, parliamentary hearings, and public demonstrations – to uncover the arguments and rhetorical strategies employed by the interlocutors and understand their competing claims to history and memory. In so doing, rather than frame these controversies primarily in terms of the *longue durée* of Italian and American memory, I emphasise the contingent circumstances in which they emerged. I conclude by considering points of intersection and divergence between these two cases, and ultimately the role of historians in clarifying these debates.

## 'You Will Not Replace Us': History, Race and Hate at Charlottesville

On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof murdered nine worshippers at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The gunman hoped to spark a race war and purge non-whites from American soil. His online manifesto evinced an obsession with the past: he had chosen Charleston 'because it is the most historic city in [his] state', and he rejected the 'historical lies, exaggerations and myths' taught in schools, which only presented the '"bad" things that Whites have done in history'.[6] Roof also posted photographs of himself standing in front of plantation houses and slave quarters, and sitting at home surrounded by Confederate battle flags.[7]

The Charleston shootings provoked a national outpouring of grief and intensified long-simmering debates over Confederate symbolism in American life. In South Carolina, controversy had raged for decades over a flag located on the capitol and its grounds (Prince 2004); within a few weeks of the massacre, the legislature voted overwhelmingly in favour of its removal. Cities across the country – not only in the South, but as far away as California and New York – announced their intention to take down monuments to the 'Lost Cause'. One such community was Charlottesville, Virginia, home of the University of Virginia (UVA) and widely considered a progressive, cosmopolitan island in a conservative corner of the state.[8] In March 2016, city leaders called for the removal of statues of the Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, along with the renaming of the parks that bore their names. Soon thereafter, they established a Blue Ribbon

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Commission (BRC) on Race, Memorials and Public Spaces, charged with finding 'options for telling the full story of Charlottesville's history of race and for changing the City's narrative through our public spaces'.[9]

While the BRC aimed at a wholesale reappraisal of Charlottesville's historic sites, public attention focused on the equestrian statue of General Lee. The 26-foot-high monument stands in a prominent downtown location, surrounded by the eponymous Lee Park. At its unveiling during a reunion of Confederate veterans in May 1924, speakers celebrated 'the greatest army the world has known', the ideals for which they fought ('the right of self-determination') and the general whom they served, 'the greatest man who ever lived' (Patton 1924, 9; 34; 70). The memorial was presented as a counterweight to the 'biased history' promoted in the North; rather than being 'ashamed of its past and denying its heroes', the South was rediscovering 'its old spirit of pride in its history … its old traditions of truth and honor and loyalty and right' (Patton 1924, 42; 20–21). Such language was emblematic of the 'Myth of the Lost Cause', the revisionist narrative that excised slavery from the Civil War and replaced it with a romanticised vision of the antebellum South (Nolan 2000). In this retelling, states' rights, tariffs and cultural differences were the causes of sectional conflict, not human bondage; secession was a constitutional right; and consequently, the outbreak of hostilities in 1861 was an act of Yankee aggression, not Southern treason. Within the constellation of the Lost Cause, Robert E. Lee stood as the apotheosis of military genius and Southern honour: his admirers insisted that the general had personally abhorred slavery and only sided with the secessionists out of loyalty to his home state of Virginia (Nolan 1991).

The Myth of the Lost Cause rose to prominence after Reconstruction in the late 1870s, as Southern whites worked to reimpose their dominance over African-Americans (Brundage 2008). The majority of Confederate monuments date from this period, which extended into the early decades of the twentieth century (Martinez and Harris 2000). Whereas memorials built immediately after 1865 were funereal and confined to cemeteries, these newer constructions were triumphant, featuring heroic soldiers and generals on horseback. They were also situated in front of courthouses, government offices, town squares and other venues from which African-Americans were to be excluded. In the years leading up to the erection of the Lee statue, at the height of the Jim Crow era, the state of Virginia disenfranchised black voters with poll taxes and literacy tests; Charlottesville enacted segregation ordinances; and a Ku Klux Klan chapter was established by the town's leading citizens. In the days following its unveiling in May 1924, the Klan went on a weeks-long rampage through the area, burning crosses and detonating bombs outside African-American churches and homes.[10] The Lee monument and its brethren, in other words, are best understood not as relics of the Civil War but as expressions of the Jim Crow regime, which invoked a mythic Confederate past to legitimise terror and discrimination.

The link between Confederate nostalgia and racist violence was revived during the Civil Rights struggle of the 1950–1960s (Coski 2006, 131–181). In defiance of federal desegregation orders and court rulings, several Southern states incorporated the battle flag into their state emblems or flew it over their capitol buildings. Public schools – one of the principal flashpoints of the era – were renamed not only for Lee and Jackson, but for the likes of Nathan Bedford Forrest, one of the founders of the KKK. The Lost Cause was resurrected once more, now by pro-segregationists who embraced it as a defence of 'states' rights' and the 'Southern way of life' against Northern aggression and federal intervention. This connotation – of 'rebel' defiance against an intrusive government and the self-righteousness of urban elites – has also made the flag a marker of rural identity, even in Northern states; however, even this use is not devoid of racial overtones. Whatever else they might have meant in the past, Confederate motifs are now overwhelmingly associated with neo-Nazi skinheads, Klansmen, and other racist organisations

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(Martinez 2000, 269–272). Not only do these groups regard the Confederacy as the fullest realisation of white supremacist ideals, but they recognise its symbols' enduring capacity to intimidate and outrage opponents.

When Charlottesville officials and residents demanded that Lee's statue be taken down, they referenced these multiple strands of history: slavery and the Civil War, but also the past within living memory of cross burnings and angry mobs blocking schoolhouse steps. At the same time, they voiced more contemporary concerns. In public testimony at the BRC, members of the black community linked historical segregation to contemporary forms of discrimination, including gentrification, inequitable community investment, and repressive policing practices. In their view, removing the Lee monument and restoring African-American heritage sites were an 'opportunity to change the narrative and be inclusive', affirming both black residents' historic presence in Charlottesville and their right to occupy public space in the present.[11] This remedy seemed all the more urgent in the heat of the 2016 presidential campaign, especially with regard to the candidacy of Donald Trump, which channelled white resentment and flirted with the extreme fringes of the far right. By addressing minority concerns about representation, the city leadership hoped to counter what it saw as an increasingly hostile political climate. The hundred-year-old statue of General Lee, in short, had come to symbolise many things: the legacies of slavery and segregation; the failure of white Charlottesvillians to right these wrongs; enduring structures of institutional racism and white supremacy; and a new rising tide of intolerance.

Those who opposed the statue's removal similarly represented a variety of positions. Some voiced concerns over cost or aesthetics, while others acknowledged its racist overtones but suggested counterbalancing it with new monuments to illustrious African-Americans.[12] However, these arguments were secondary to racially-charged denunciations of 'PC revisionism' and historical ignorance. The statue was presented not as a commemoration of the past but as its material incarnation, a vessel of historical transmission that had 'been there way before we even thought about being born'. Tearing it down therefore meant 'destroying history much like ISIS and Al-Qaeda … to sustain some kind of utopian ideology'. Many claimed to have ancestors who fought under Lee; they were the 'real Virginians', whose longstanding attachment to the land was under attack by outsiders who wanted to 'wipe out everything American'. Respect for one population's historical experience, they believed, necessarily entailed the denigration of another's. 'No-one's heritage and dignity deserve to be elevated at the expense of anyone else's', argued one man, referring not to the marginalisation of African-Americans but to his own Confederate ancestry. Yet even as they proclaimed their veneration of the past, it was clear that many of the statue's defenders more motivated by presentist concerns. 'Who here has been slaves?' asked one resident. 'No-one. Slavery ended 156 years ago. It is a done issue, nobody should be responsible for what happened back then.' Another rejected the claim that institutional racism existed in Charlottesville and asked why the council, instead of focusing on 'white on black crime from 200 years ago', was not addressing 'black on white crime of today'. Claims of contemporary white victimhood, then, functioned as a counterweight to the historical oppression of African-Americans; anyone who invoked the town's long history of racial injustice was vilified as a 'white-shaming' opportunist who suppressed their opponents' free speech and '[tore] people apart'.

Opponents of removal coalesced into the Monument Fund, which in October 2016 filed a lawsuit to block removal. While avoiding explicit references to race, the Fund sounded the familiar refrains of the Lost Cause. Monuments were 'like mirrors: they reflect back what you expect to see. If you are inclined to admire Lee or Jackson or the military you will see dignity and honor and valor. If you are angry, looking for reasons to be angry, then you will see only those who fought for slavery, and imagine a cheering crowd in KKK costumes.'[13] Removal was

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tantamount to erasing 'a tangible connection to the past, a catalyst for memory…. if we remove the monuments we are trying to hide our own history.' The other side was engaging in political posturing, not historical truth-telling: 'Politics wants to dictate what you think. History invites you to think for yourself…. Don't assume the way you see it is the only way or the right way – or even that there is a right way.' For all its stated reverence for history, the Fund did not suggest measures to contextualise the statue; rather, it maintained that the monument spoke for itself and that viewers could draw their own conclusions. Just like the statue's critics, then, its defenders blurred their rationales and temporal frames. They were protecting a marker of local (i.e. Southern white) identity against an intrusive city council; defending history and tradition against the insensibility of political correctness; and, simultaneously, rejecting the other side's unhealthy fixation on distant grievances. Just as their opponents argued that the monument's presence excluded African-Americans from full citizenship, they believed that its removal would signal expulsion from the land of their forefathers.

In December 2016, the BRC issued its final report. While concluding that the statues 'belong in no public space unless their history as symbols of white supremacy is revealed … in ways that promote freedom and equity in our community', it stopped short of recommending a practicable solution.[14] In February 2017, the council voted to take down the Lee statue and rename the site 'Emancipation Park'. This move propelled a local dispute into the national spotlight. At the centre of the escalation was Jason Kessler, a UVA graduate and self-styled 'white civil rights advocate' who accused the city council of demonising 'right-wing people, white people and Confederate supporters…. [W]hite people have a right to organize and advocate for our rights as well. You people are implementing policies which are displacing us in our home countries and we will not be allowed to survive. You don't even recognise our right to exist.'[15] His confrontational style attracted both media attention and the support of hate groups around the country. In May 2017 Kessler was joined by Richard Spencer, one of the most visible figures in the contemporary extreme right and a fellow UVA alumnus, for a torchlit march in support of the Lee statue; the scene was repeated in July, when fifty KKK members rallied and clashed with anti-racism activists.

These earlier events, however, were dress rehearsals for a much larger enterprise: the Unite the Right rally which, as its name suggested, aimed to attract a factious array of far-right organisations to Charlottesville. Some – like the KKK, the neo-Confederate League of the South and the skinheads of the National Socialist Movement – belonged to established currents within the white supremacist movement, with long histories of violence; others, like Spencer and groups like Identity Evropa and Vanguard America, represented a new generation, often termed the 'Alt-Right'. Whereas the older incarnations espouse an ideology of racial struggle and embrace historical symbology (deriving from the Confederacy, the Third Reich and other sources), many within the Alt-Right prefer to project a more contemporary and mainstream image: eschewing the label of white supremacy, they prefer to call themselves 'race realists' or 'identitarians', dedicated to the promotion of white racial consciousness and the defence of 'their people's' interests against other ethnicities (Main 2018, 166–194).

This diversity notwithstanding, the attendees of Unite the Right shared an ideology of white victimhood for which the Lee monument was the perfect symbol. Its removal, in Kessler's words, was 'about white genocide. It's about the replacement of our people, culturally and ethnically.'[16] Whereas locals were concerned with protecting as a marker of personal and parochial identity, the rally participants (predominantly outsiders to Charlottesville) saw the struggle in existential terms: according to the event's Facebook page, the threat to the statue was part of a 'totalitarian Communist crackdown' driven by 'displacement level immigration policies in the United States and

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Europe' (Spencer 2018, 147). These claims took centre stage on the night of 11 August 2017, when dozens of white supremacists marched through the UVA campus bearing tiki torches and firearms, flashing straight-armed salutes and chanting slogans like 'You will not replace us', 'Jews will not replace us' and 'Blood and soil'. The spectacle deliberately evoked the pageantry of National Socialism to terrify minorities (members of the local Jewish community gathered in the synagogue for unity and protection) and goad militant anti-racists into violent confrontation. Unite the Right thus represented a cross-pollination of racist and far-right tropes: Confederate flags and swastikas, segregationism and anti-semitism, Southern heritage and pan-European identitarianism (Biemann 2018). The common denominator was a nativist claim to rootedness, in which only whites were legitimate residents of the land. The statue now functioned not just as a marker of regional pride but as a bulwark to be defended against the onslaught of 'globalist' elites and hordes of African-Americans, immigrants and refugees.

If the torchlit rally of 11 August shocked public opinion, the events of the following day would make Charlottesville synonymous with tragedy and racial violence. Armed far-right demonstrators rampaged through the city centre toward Lee Park; along the route, they clashed with thousands of counter-protesters; and, amidst the chaos, a Unite the Right attendee rammed his car into the crowd, killing the anti-racism activist Heather Heyer. For Mayor Mike Signer, 12 August added yet another layer of significance to the city's Confederate statues: '[their] historical meaning now, and forevermore, will be of a magnet for terrorism. With the terrorist attack, these monuments were transformed from equestrian statues into lightning rods' (Spencer 2018, 99). Yet even as the attack shocked American public opinion, it failed to inspire any movement toward national reconciliation. In the ensuing days, President Donald Trump refused to denounce those responsible. When he eventually intervened, it was to suggest that there were 'very fine people on both sides', blame the '"alt-left"… [for] charging at the alt-right' and ask whether, if Lee's statue were removed, 'is it George Washington next week? And is it Thomas Jefferson the week after … where does it stop?'[17] This moral equivalency, and the uncritical parroting of extreme-right talking points, infuriated liberal opponents and delighted white nationalists. Rather than calling for reflection and unity, the president conscripted Charlottesville into the culture war that had propelled him to office, further exacerbating fault lines between rural and urban, 'Red State' and 'Blue State', and white and black.

## 'The monsters of today': the *Legge Fiano* debate

On 16 April 2015, throngs of elderly partisans descended on Italy's Chamber of Deputies to mark the seventieth anniversary of the nation's liberation from Nazi-Fascism. Chamber President Laura Boldrini expressed her gratitude 'to the women and men of the Resistance for their efforts to keep alive the memory and ideals that animated the struggle for democracy', and invited them to sit at parliamentarians' desks 'not as guests but as masters of the house'.[18] At the reception that followed, the veterans cajoled Boldrini into a rendition of the anti-Fascist anthem *Bella ciao* and peppered her with suggestions. One declared that 'after everything that we've talked about, I think that we should do something to cleanse all of Italy's streets of Fascism, which is coming back'. Boldrini nodded noncommittally, but the man persisted: 'and above all, we should tear down that column at the Foro Italico with the disgraceful inscription "Mussolini Dux". It's time to tear it down!' The monument in question is a 120-foot-high marble obelisk, inscribed with the Duce's name, which looms over the Foro Italico in Rome. In addition to serving as a local landmark, it also serves as a memorial for neo-fascists, who lay wreaths on Mussolini's birthday and other anniversaries (Arthurs 2010, 121).

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For those who fought for the liberation of Italy, the obelisk was an affront to their sacrifice and a thorn in the side of Italian democracy. Confronted with their insistence, Boldrini tried to extricate herself by agreeing that 'at least [we should] erase the inscription'. The exchange was filmed and posted online, and the denunciations were as swift as they were predictable. Some likened her statement to the iconoclastic violence of the Taliban or ISIS;[19] a Facebook group launched a 'selfie bomb' campaign, encouraging people to photograph themselves on 25 April (Liberation Day) performing the Fascist salute in front of the offending obelisk. Even Boldrini's allies voiced their disagreement. As Matteo Orfini, the head of her Democratic Party (PD), put it, 'We do not need to erase our memories, even when they are sometimes controversial. I believe that *damnatio memoriae* is a sign of weakness, not of strength, from those who carry it out.'[20] Ultimately, Boldrini was forced to qualify her comments, explaining that 'it seemed legitimate to me that some people felt uncomfortable seeing [the Fascist inscription]. Some were saying to tear this monument down, others were saying to tear that one down, but I distanced myself from any talk of destruction.'[21]

The dispute had only begun to die down when, a few months later, the government proposed new legislation banning the circulation of Fascist and Nazi propaganda. The bill's author was Boldrini's colleague Emanuele Fiano, the son of a Holocaust survivor and a prominent figure in Italy's Jewish community. His proposal – the *Legge Fiano* (Fiano Law) – would punish with six months' to two years' imprisonment 'whoever promotes the images or content of the Fascist Party or the German National Socialist Party, or their respective ideologies, even if only through the production, distribution, dissemination or sale of items depicting persons, images or symbols clearly referencing these, or who publicly recall their symbology or gestures.'[22] The bill sought to bolster existing anti-Fascist legislation: the *Legge Scelba* of 1952, which prohibited the reconstitution of the Fascist Party and the glorification of 'exponents, principles, deeds or methods of [Fascism]', and the *Legge Mancino* of 1993, which criminalised the incitement of hatred on 'ethnic, national, racial or religious grounds', including the promotion of neo-fascism.[23] Over the decades, these measures were largely successful in reducing the extreme right to a marginalised minority; however, Fiano argued, they allowed many 'behaviours, sometimes very simple or extemporaneous' to 'slip through their net'.[24] Performing the 'Roman' salute at a football match or selling a calendar of Mussolini could not convincingly be prosecuted as attempts to reconstitute the Fascist Party, but could sow social discord; such spectacles also caused 'discomfort among tourists travelling to our country, who find themselves in front of shop windows that publicly display objects or images that invoke these ideologies'. Of additional concern was the proliferation of far-right voices on the internet, which could never have been anticipated in 1952 or 1993.

The *Legge Fiano* was also inspired by a spate of recent incidents that thrust Fascism back into the public eye. The mayor of Affile, near Rome, used public funds to erect a mausoleum for Rodolfo Graziani, the convicted war criminal and Nazi collaborator. The owner of a beach club near Venice attracted notoriety by declaring his establishment 'an anti-democratic and [pro-] regime zone' and decorating it with Fascist iconography. To the bill's proponents, these and other episodes could not be dismissed as the work of eccentrics; rather, they were evidence of a gathering storm of racism and xenophobia. The clearest manifestation of this threat was CasaPound, the neo-fascist movement founded in 2003 that attracted young people with its blend of punk aesthetics, anti-immigrant sentiment and Mussolinian symbology (Cammelli 2018). Though electorally insignificant, the group's following was expanding steadily, thanks to savvy social media tactics and violent incidents that garnered widespread news coverage. CasaPound and other far-right factions were emboldened and constantly in the public eye. Indeed, illiberal and anti-democratic forces were on the march across Europe, from France's Front National to Greece's Golden Dawn; Norway's Utøya Massacre, perpetrated by Anders Breivik in 2011, had

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demonstrated the tragic consequences of far-right radicalisation. Now, more than ever, Fiano argued, the 'terrain was fertile for the rebirth and spread of these ideologies of death, violence and discrimination'.[25] What was at stake, then, was less the past than the present. The law would 'provide a means of confronting something that is alive and current today', a modern Fascism that threatened to 'reappear, pure and simple, as intolerance, racism and contempt for the norms of democracy'. The anti-Fascist struggle had to be extended into the twenty-first century, to safeguard the founding principles of the Italian Republic and counter the rising tide of extremism.

In parliament, Fiano's proposal was attacked by the major opposition parties: the Berlusconian Forza Italia; the anti-immigrant, anti-EU Lega Nord; the populist Movimento 5 Stelle; and especially Fratelli d'Italia (FdI, Brothers of Italy). The latter is the latest incarnation of the 'post-Fascist' current in Italian politics – the project, begun in the late 1980s, of distancing the Italian far right from its Fascist roots, emerging from the radical fringes, and obtaining democratic respectability (Ignazi 2005). While some observers remain unconvinced as to the depth and sincerity of this transformation, many situate the FdI (and its precursor, Alleanza Nazionale) 'within the European centre-right mainstream' (Fella and Ruzza 2009, 181), especially when compared with the likes of CasaPound.

Nevertheless, this lineage presented the FdI with a delicate balancing act in the *Legge Fiano* debates. While voicing their opposition to the prosecution of philo-Fascist sentiment, its representatives had to avoid any semblance of apologia for totalitarianism and remain within the democratic mainstream, all without renouncing the party's ideological forebears (a move which would have alienated many of their core supporters; see Vignati 2001). For this reason, FdI deputies scarcely referenced Mussolini's regime, and instead presented themselves as defenders of liberal values. One repeated refrain was that the PD was criminalising behaviours that constituted free speech: as Fabio Rampelli put it, 'whoever believes in liberal democracy cannot be frightened by the opinions of others'.[26] His colleague Ignazio La Russa provocatively performed the Fascist salute to demonstrate that the law

> not only bans speech … not only writing, thinking, representing, drawing, painting or sculpting things that this political regime doesn't like … but [even] gestures…. From now on, be careful not to raise your hand above your shoulder…. If you stick out your chin, you can end up with two years in jail! Because sticking out your chin is reminiscent of that monster, Benito Mussolini.

By framing the policing of Fascist nostalgia as authoritarian, critics rhetorically turned the tables. The 'post-Fascists' were the real democrats and the PD effectively the new Fascists; the advocates of pluralism and inclusion were intolerant of divergent views. To make its point, Fratelli d'Italia introduced an amendment (summarily rejected) to expand the bill's scope to include 'all ideologies which propagandise and pursue anti-democratic ends', namely Islamic fundamentalism and Communism. This move aimed to put the government in a double bind. Including Islamism would legitimise the Right's Islamophobic agenda, but excluding it would signal weakness on terrorism; including Communism would mean a repudiation of the PD's resistentalist roots, but excluding it could lead to charges of inconsistency: wasn't Stalin responsible for more deaths than Hitler? Hadn't partisans carried out reprisal killings during the war? By relativising the crimes of Nazi-Fascism, the opposition sought to undermine the moral authority upon which the *Legge Fiano* rested.

The PD, then, was accused of opportunistically 'planting an ideological flag', of exploiting the 'tears of the twentieth century' for political gain. Fratelli d'Italia repudiated the charge that Fascism was returning – 'that chapter of history is already closed' – and insisted that debates over the past be confined to 'encyclopaedias, reflections [and] research … without a political tinge'. This

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apolitical 'colour-blindness', however, did not mean that the Right was invested in a dispassionate examination of the facts (Mammone and Veltri 2007); rather, its goal was historical revisionism. 'In Rome, why not bomb the EUR, the bridges over the Tiber … Stazione Termini, the much-maligned Stadio dei Marmi and Foro Mussolini?' exclaimed La Russa, 'why not flood the Agro Pontino … why not bring back the mosquitos, and put them back where they were ignominiously eradicated?' In lieu of a moral stance that repudiated Fascism in all its forms, the Right proposed a historical ledger in which the 'good' of Mussolini's regime could be counted alongside the 'bad', once again undercutting the moral absolutism of anti-Fascism.

Even as they presented themselves as defenders of free speech and historical accuracy, the bill's opponents revealed motivations that had little to do with pluralism or scholarly objectivity. One recurring claim was that the government had more important business to address than the policing of images and gestures; foremost amongst these were immigration and terrorism, issues inextricably connected in the eyes of the Right. How could the PD be 'afraid of artefacts', argued Forza Italia's Fabrizio Di Stefano, when 'we find ourselves with the Islamic State … at our gates, which often, all too often, even enters our home'. Why was it defining new criminal categories when it failed to enforce existing laws against clandestine immigration? The Lega's Barbara Saltamartini accused the government of 'telling Italian citizens that today's monsters are not criminals, not those who might enter your home and kill you … but the monsters of today … are those who sell bottles with Mussolini's face on them'. The persecution of patriotic Italians who nurtured Fascist sympathies, in other words, not only distracted the government from real crises but was itself a weapon for undermining national identity and promoting the PD's globalist agenda. In this regard, it is worth noting that on the same day that the Chamber debated the *Legge Fiano*, another PD bill – the *Ius soli*, which would have extended citizenship to children born to immigrants on Italian soil – was blocked in the Senate; to the Right, both laws were expressions of the same social engineering project.

The *Legge Fiano* passed the Chamber of Deputies on a party-line vote but – like the *Ius soli* – stalled in the Senate. The legislature dissolved in December, sealing the law's fate, and the rancour that marked the parliamentary debates extended into the 2018 elections. The Left – with little to show for four years in power – sounded the alarm over a Fascist resurgence, manifested in both the rhetoric of prominent right-wing politicians and the actions of the extremist fringe (most infamously, the February shooting of African immigrants by a neo-Nazi in Macerata). For its part, the Right – especially the Lega's Matteo Salvini and the FdI's Giorgia Meloni – played a double game, voicing exasperation over being branded Fascists while at the same time courting far-right voters with denunciations of multiculturalism, political correctness and European integration. The manoeuvre proved successful. While neo-fascists like CasaPound performed dismally at the polls (as did the 'post-Fascist' FdI), the more 'mainstream' right captured over a third of the popular vote. The populist and nativist orientation of the new government – dominated by the Lega and the Movimento 5 Stelle – seemingly confirmed fears that the ghosts of Italy's past had indeed returned.

## Conclusion

Clearly, the cases under examination differ in important respects. The first was a local dispute that exploded into physical violence; the second, a legislative debate between political parties. At least on its surface, the Charlottesville episode centred on a single, century-old monument; the *Legge Fiano* focused on contemporary invocations of Nazi-Fascism and did not apply to historical objects. At the same time, as their detailed anatomisation has suggested, the two controversies also

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bear some striking similarities. In both Charlottesville and Rome, advocates of 'removal' represented the liberal establishment, and cast themselves as champions of multiculturalism and inclusivity. They positioned their adversaries as illegitimate and existential threats to the prevailing order, an argument that also entailed a collapsing of the temporal distance between past and present. 'The Fascists' or 'the Confederates' had either returned or never left, and were now reappearing in twenty-first-century guises. From this perspective, symbolic and material artefacts served as conduits through which these noxious ideals were transmitted to modern society, and therefore had to be erased. The 'defenders' of contested symbols, on the other hand, assumed a stance that played upon themes of grievance and victimhood. The existential struggle, in their view, was not against populist authoritarianism but against cultural elites bent on demonising and, ultimately, destroying the historical core of their identity. They too saw material objects as vehicles, not for the transmission of a historical bacillus but for the survival of a mythic, timeless essence, rooted in blood and soil. Destruction meant denial and erasure of their collective existence. Yet even as they claimed the mantle of historical consciousness, they counter-intuitively insisted on a caesura between past and present ('that chapter is closed'; 'no-one alive today has been a slave'; 'stop dredging up history'). 'Respect' for history, in other words, meant the preservation of a single, exclusive narrative at the expense of others.

At stake in both Rome and Charlottesville, then, were not just opposing political agendas but competing conceptions of the relationship between past and present: continuity and discontinuity, 'new' and 'old', criticism and veneration. It is here that historians are best equipped to make meaningful interventions (though, as Ruth Ben-Ghiat's recent experience demonstrated, they must proceed with extreme caution). They can challenge the 'zero-sum', competitive logic underpinning these controversies, and clarify the complex relationship between history and memory – between 'what happened' (the ever-flowing stream of past events, individuals, processes and products) and 'that which is said to have happened' (the stories told about those events, individuals, processes and products) (Trouillot 1995, 2). Removing a statue or banning the sale of memorabilia does not 'destroy the past' so much as it disrupts one particular commemorative discourse and allows new ones to emerge. Historians can also contribute to the elaboration of new collective identities by positing 'multidirectional' (Rothberg 2009) or 'agonistic' (Cento Bull and Hansen 2016) memories. Rejecting Manichaean oppositions (between fixed demographic or political groups, moral categories, or 'presence' and 'absence') these encourage dialogue between multiple narratives and emphasise points of convergence – for example, by highlighting the shared features and reciprocal influences of Southern and African-American culture (e.g. in cuisine, language, religion and music), or acknowledging the vast spectrum and complexity of Italians' political allegiances under Fascism.

Historians' emphasis on context and causality can also help disentangle what is 'new' and 'old' in these debates. On the one hand, they can excavate the deep roots of social cleavages and crises ('divided' memories, the 'eternal return' of illiberal 'spectres', deeply rooted structures of inequality) (Foot 2009; Mammone 2009). They can unpack the particular resonance of historically-derived symbols; demonstrating, for example, the threats inherent in the 'Roman' salute, chants of 'Blood and Soil', or veiled terms like 'globalism'. On the other hand, this same attention to contingency must also emphasise discontinuities and reveal the ways in which the 'new' is often clothed in the garb of the 'old'. Historians can challenge the reification of mythic narratives – e.g. the 'Lost Cause' or Fascist 'achievements' – and explain that claims to 'depoliticised' history often mask the desire to whitewash or exclude alternative perspectives. They can point out the ways in which contested symbols, far from being relics transmitted intact from the past, assume new meanings over time (Quinn 1994, 1–19). The Lee statue, while commemorating

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the Civil War era, was erected sixty years after the fact (making it a rough contemporary of Fascist monuments), and took on its current significance in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. Seen from this perspective, its difference from the artefacts at stake in the *Legge Fiano* is not actually so stark. In both cases, historical objects and images – whether 'original' or newly 'manufactured' – were recycled and enlisted as weapons in new culture wars over demography, inequality and cultural representation.

## Acknowledgments

Many thanks to my colleagues Jason Phillips and Malayna Bernstein for their suggestions, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback.

## Notes on contributor

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## Notes

1. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/why-are-so-many-fascist-monuments-still-standing-in-italy (accessed 5 October 2017).
2. http://www.ilmessaggero.it/primopiano/esteri/razzismo_culturale_americano_non_capisce_nostri_monumenti-3289172.html (accessed 10 October 2017). All translations are by the author.
3. http://blog.ilgiornale.it/franza/2017/10/12/ruth-ben-ghiat-ebrea-americana-delluniversita-di-new-york-si-scaglia-contro-il-fascismo-in-maniera-non-scientifica-ma-con-una-visione-monolitica-aprioristica-e-atemporale/ (accessed 10 January 2018).
4. See for example http://eastwest.eu/it/cultura/monumenti-fascismo-italia-significato (acccessed 10 January 2018).
5. By 'Mussolinian' or 'historical' Fascism, I mean the historical movement and regime, and to some extent its direct political heir (the Movimento Sociale Italiano), rather than neo-fascist movements that sometimes employ the symbols and language of the *ventennio*.
6. https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2108059-lastrhodesian-manifesto.html (accessed 17 July 2018).
7. With the term 'battle flag' I refer to the familiar red banner with a blue St Andrew's cross and 13 stars (the so-called 'Stars and Bars'). While this flag was never the official political symbol of the Confederacy, it has become the primary flag associated with the cause; as a result, I sometimes use the generic term 'Confederate flag'.
8. For a well-researched journalistic account of the events in Charlottesville, from which much of this summary is derived, see Spencer 2018.
9. http://www.charlottesville.org/home/showdocument?id=43143 (accessed 18 April 2018).
10. http://www.charlottesville.org/home/showdocument?id=49037 (accessed 23 April 2018).
11. http://charlottesville.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=1145&meta_id=21885 (accessed 7 September 2018).
12. The arguments and quotations presented in this section all derive from meeting of Charlottesville City Council, 18 April 2016: http://charlottesville.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=1145&meta_id=21885 (accessed 7 September 2018).
13. https://www.themonumentfund.org/faq (accessed 6 September 2018).
14. http://www.charlottesville.org/home/showdocument?id=49037 (accessed 23 April 2018).
15. http://charlottesville.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=1234 (accessed 16 September 2018).

https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2019.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

16. https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/08/08/jason-kessler%E2%80%99s-unite-right-rally-must-move-different-park-according-charlottesville (accessed 29 August 2018).
17. http://politi.co/2CL3YrT (accessed 21 September 2018).
18. http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2015-04-16/partigiani-montecitorio-boldrini-non-siete-ospiti-ma-padroni-casa-112901.shtml?uuid=ABgWOUQD (accessed 6 April 2018).
19. http://www.iltempo.it/politica/2015/04/17/news/la-talebana-boldrini-via-dux-dallobelisco-973982/ (accessed 6 April 2018).
20. http://roma.corriere.it/notizie/politica/15_aprile_17/ripulire-l-obelisco-mussolini-bufera-parole-boldrini-079c8ae4-e50d-11e4-845e-5bcd794907be.shtml (accessed 10 January 2018).
21. http://www.ilmessaggero.it/primopiano/politica/boldrini_obelisco_roma_foto_italico_mussolini_dux-984915.html (accessed 23 January 2018).
22. *Proposta di legge n.3343* available at http://documenti.camera.it/_dati/leg17/lavori/stampati/pdf/17PDL0034860.pdf (accessed 21 September 2018).
23. *Legge n.645*, 20 June 1952, http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1952/06/23/052U0645/sg (accessed 23 June 2018); *Legge n.205*, 4 April 1993, http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1993/06/26/093G0275/sg (accessed 10 September 2018).
24. *Proposta di legge n.3343* available at http://documenti.camera.it/_dati/leg17/lavori/stampati/pdf/17PDL0034860.pdf (accessed 21 September 2018).
25. Chamber of Deputies, session 830, 10 July 2017, http://www.camera.it/leg17/410?idSeduta=0830&tipo=stenografico#sed0830.stenografico.tit00070.sub00010 (accessed 16 January 2018).
26. The arguments and quotations presented in this section derive from the Chamber of Deputies, session 848, 12 September 2017, http://www.camera.it/leg17/1008?idLegislatura=17&sezione=documenti&tipoDoc=assemblea_file&idSeduta=0848&nomefile=stenografico&back_to=0 (retrieved 16 January 2018).

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## Italian summary

Attraverso un paragone tra due controversie recenti negli Stati Uniti e nell'Italia – la rimozione della statua del generale sudista Robert E. Lee a Charlottesville, Virginia e il dibattito sulla Legge Fiano contro l'apologia del fascismo – questo articolo esamina una serie di sfide affrontate da democrazie liberali da entrambi i lati dell'Atlantico. Anche riconoscendo la 'lunga durata' della politica della memoria, sia del sudismo che del fascismo, l'autore colloca queste polemiche nel contesto di dibattiti attuali attorno all'identità nazionale, il razzismo, il populismo, e i diritti di cittadinanza e di libera espressione.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2019.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press