Book review: ‘Italian Psychology and Jewish Emigration under Fascism. From Florence to Jerusalem and New York.’

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Perhaps the most shocking part of this book are the stories of what happened to these Jewish psychologists after fascism had fallen during and after World War Two. Unfortunately, as with many other Jews who had been discriminated against or sacked in a variety of sectors, their reintegration and rehabilitation was neither easy nor straightforward. Would these people simply be offered their former jobs back? Some were happy to stay where they were, but others tried to return to Italy. Others appeared lost – nobody seemed to know where they were or what they were doing. Should those who ‘replaced’ these people be themselves sacked or moved on?

July 27, 2016
Patrizia Guarnieri, *Italian Psychology and Jewish Emigration under Fascism. From Florence to Jerusalem and New York*


by John Foot

This is a difficult and at the same time a fascinating book. It has many sites of focus and can also be read as a set of collective biographies or individual pathlines through the worlds of psychology, fascism and Jewish identity in Italy and elsewhere. The overall analysis of the book is linked to the study of psychology and psychologists in Italy – and the way this nascent and marginalised discipline developed in that country before, during and after fascism – and in particular in the city of Florence. Thus, Guarnieri tells us a number of important stories of individuals who carried forward this discipline and taught and research within various areas of psychology. Within this world, in Italy, we quickly come across the all powerful role played by Agostino Gemelli in the private Catholic University in Milan. As Guarnieri points out, Gemelli had institutional resources behind him. Gemelli, a friar, turns up time and time again in this book as a kingmaker, able to create or destroy careers – and someone who, within Italian psychology, it was very difficult to avoid.
For me, the most fascinating parts of this volume are those linked to the pernicious effects of Italy’s anti-semitic laws of 1938. These laws led in most cases to the expulsion of all Jews from academic posts in Italian universities. These people were forced to find another job – not easy in a country which officially discriminated against Jews and where psychology itself was hardly a major discipline. Guarnieri then takes up individual pathways of certain key psychologists. There is the detailed and extraordinary story of Enzo Bonaventura, who emigrated to Palestine in March 1939 and became Professor of Psychology in the Hebrew University.

But perhaps the most shocking part of this book are the stories of what happened to these Jewish psychologists after fascism had fallen during and after World War Two. Unfortunately, as with many other Jews who had been discriminated against or sacked in a variety of sectors, their reintegration and rehabilitation was neither easy nor straightforward. Would these people simply be offered their former jobs back? Some were happy to stay where they were, but others tried to return to Italy. Others appeared lost – nobody seemed to know where they were or what they were doing. Should those who ‘replaced’ these people be themselves sacked or moved on?

In 1947 a national competition was opened up for a Professor of Psychology (in reality this was for three prestigious Chairs). Bonaventura was an obvious candidate for one of these posts. But Gemelli was to play a key role in deciding who got these jobs, despite his (to put it mildly) co-habitation with fascism. In the end Bonaventura did not even put himself forward. Guarnieri argues that this was thanks to political and personal manoeuvres designed to keep him out and assign these jobs to others. This is also – for Italy – a sad and depressing tale of half-truths and conspiracies, of the re-writing of the past and of continuity with fascism (something which was particularly true within academic institutions). Bonaventura died in April 1948 during clashes with what Guarnieri calls ‘Arab forces’ in Jerusalem. A street there is still named after him.

More controversially, Guarnieri also points the finger at the role played by Cesare Musatti in this story. Musatti was a legendary public figure in Italy – the first intellectual to bring psychoanalysis to the masses and a frequent presence in the press and on television during his lifetime. He was also, very clearly, a man of the left and someone with – it seems – impeccable anti-fascist credentials. Guarnieri does not pull her punches concerning Musatti – and it is surprising that this ‘case’ has not been taken up in the Italian press in any way. In short, Guarnieri accuses Musatti of having re-invented his own past – both before and after obtaining the coveted chair of psychology in Milan’s Statale University. Worse, Guarnieri argues that Musatti had ‘not made any bones about collaborating with the promoters of racist theories’ under fascism. This is explosive stuff to say the least. It is to be hoped that a debate and further historical research will follow these revelations about Musatti’s role before and after fascism.

This is a book packed to the brim with interesting material for further study and pathways to be followed. It is intensely multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary – touching not just on psychology, but also on social history, trans-national history, cultural studies, Jewish studies, politics and memory. However, the text itself is a major hindrance to an understanding of the arguments made within the book. Much more copy-editing was needed and I can find no reference as to whether this is a translation or was directly written in English. Either way, it needed an extensive re-write to clarify much of what is included here. And this is a great pity, because this book sheds light not just on the history of academic psychology in Italy, but also on a complicated and painful past which has remained hidden for some time. In that sense, it is a brave and important book.

John Foot is professor of modern Italian history at Bristol University. His most recent book, The man who closed the asylums: Franco Basaglia and the revolution in mental health care, is available now from Verso.
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24 Oct

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