We know a great deal about the forced migration of Jewish academics and scientists from Nazi Germany, but not as much about those who fled Mussolini’s Italy. The prevailing view has always been that Jewish scholars in Italy were not as vexed as their German colleagues, and that the racial laws approved by Mussolini’s government in 1938 were just a dramatic twist in an otherwise more sensible approach to racial issues. Guarnieri’s book offers an opportunity to seriously reconsider these assumptions by looking at the trajectory of academics marginalised, dismissed or expelled by the regime from the mid-1920s onwards. She focuses in particular on a cohort of psychologists based at the University of Florence who had developed an innovative line of enquiry based on modern experimental practices. The group was dismembered partly because of the mounting
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Book Review


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Psychology, Guarnieri argues, was thus victim of the ‘creeping Fascistization’ that hit the public administration in Italy and especially the universities. It increasingly deprived the researchers based in Florence of opportunities, eventually leading to their dismissal or (forced) departure. The group’s leader, Francesco De Sarlo, was already marginalised in the late 1920s when he publicly stated his reluctance to embrace Fascism, and in the 1930s all his pupils had to look for employment abroad. The child psychologist Enzo Bonaventura found it at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he stayed throughout the Second World War. He meant to go back to Italy at the end of conflict, but his re-appointment fell through and he died in tragic circumstances during the Arab conflict. Her colleague Renata Calabresi moved instead to the USA where she became part of an emergent network of Italian anti-fascists which also included the renowned historian Gaetano Salvemini. Calabresi struggled, however, to find employment while her contributions were being virtually ignored within Italian academia even after the end of the Second World War. Following dismissals and exiles, psychology was demoted as a discipline; perceived either as second-rank or useful only to the army’s psychometric tests.

The treatment of these lesser-known cases certainly caters for a better understanding of the injustices perpetrated in Italian academia under Mussolini’s regime, but it is Guarnieri’s reconstruction of what happened following its fall that is particularly intriguing. Those who, after the purge of its Jewish component, were put at the helm of Italian psychology retained key posts in academia. They even succeeded in re-writing the discipline’s recent history so as to bury evidence regarding pre-war discriminations; something that still haunts its past. In the post-war years its main figurehead in Italy, father Agostino Gemelli, managed to cast himself as a rescuer of victimized scholars; something that Guarnieri’s newly found evidence allows us to dispute. Meanwhile psychologists who had promoted racist theories moved higher up in the academic ranks and escaped eviction notwithstanding their controversial views (and that their career benefited from the racial laws).
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