

Bread and Wine

Brot und Wein

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***Pane e vino* traces Italy's social transformation in the aftermath of the First World War and on the eve of the Second. Focusing on traditional communities in the southern province of Abruzzo, it depicts the Catholic Church's alliance with Mussolini's regime and shows how – inevitably, as the novel perhaps suggests – society ushers in Fascism. Signs of this restructuring permeate every sphere of life – friendship, love, family, communal bonds, work and property, religion, and politics – conveyed through the story of a socialist determined to bring change but thwarted even in the most modest ambitions.**

Living undercover as a priest in the Abruzzese village of Pietrasecca, young revolutionary Pietro Spina, alias Don Paolo Spada, observes the everyday life of ordinary people steeped in Catholic tradition and marked by superstition and an illiterate world view. In his diary, Don Paolo reflects on the possibilities of resisting the Fascist, corporatist state, weighing them against the obedience required within the anti-Fascist movement organised by the Communist Party. His central concern is neither a blueprint for restructuring society nor a utopian vision of an ideal state, but rather the possibility of freedom – a core tenet of political liberalism.

The first part of the novel, before Don Paolo sheds his cassock to revive the remnants of the socialist movement, brims with humour and subversive laughter at the absurdities of both peasants and the petty bourgeoisie who help entrench Fascist power. Episodes on the value of money – illustrated on the use-value of playing cards for *tresette*, *briscola* and *scopa* – or the mocking of a fascist schoolmistress's patriotic metaphors are highlights of spontaneous popular subversion. Here, the peasants, driven by poverty and reinforced by patriarchal disdain for women in teaching positions, counter lofty nationalism with a deadpan, materialist suggestion: namely, to sell off the homeland in order to rise above poverty. Yet Don Paolo cannot imagine how this popular subversiveness may be transformed into progressive political action – which he attributes to the impossibility of meaningful communication with an essentially illiterate populace.

One such attempt involves a coded distinction between official and unofficial speech – the sanctioned language of public discourse versus the “entre nous” vernacular (158). In public, antagonistic phrases like “fairy tale of Bolshevism” or affirmative ones like “restoration of religious morality and private property” are expected; in private, words like “hunger”, “uncertainty” and “corporatist system” appear. When speaking of Fascist rule, the villagers (so-called “cafoni” – a derogatory term for southern peasants) use the evasive phrase “the thing” (rendered in German as ‘Dingsda’ or in English as ‘whatchamacallit’). This underscores that the struggle against Fascism is also a struggle over language, communication and interpretation, and is fought not in academic debates or salon conversations but in the material, everyday fabric of words.

At the same time, the novel undercuts this linguistic struggle. In Chapter Eight, the *cafoni* are shown to trust only “facts” (coded as masculine) over “words” (coded as feminine): “The cafoni accept the dictatorship, not because they are convinced by what the official propaganda claims, but because the dictatorship is a fact. As long as the cafoni have to choose between a fact, albeit a despicable one, and the most beautiful words, they will stick to the facts.” (186)

Once Don Paolo returns to direct action – moving between the underground anti-Fascist network in Rome and the villages of Abruzzo – the tone of the novel darkens. The prospects for resistance appear far bleaker than the peasants’ naïve hopes in Duce’s promises.

The novel offers no optimistic counter-history from which one might imagine alternative futures. Instead, its dialectical structure – confronting (Fascist) idealism with (Marxist) materialism – makes it a potent tool for political education on historical Fascism. By staging dilemmas such as “revolutionary terror or accommodation to circumstances” in the voices of emblematic characters, *Pane e vino* works not only as a novel of social realism but also as a *negotiation novel*: a political narrative whose most vital element is not the outcome of events nor a static social analysis, but the concatenation of political conversations and debates – showing that politics, and the results of political action, is based in words and, more precisely, in communication and agitation. The novel is also valuable from a theoretical perspective: for contemporary debates on Fascism, it serves as a highly relevant case study of corporatism – a concept that connects today’s corporative capitalism with its historical roots in Fascism.

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This title was not censored before publishing