

# H-Net Reviews

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Piero Gobetti. *On Liberal Revolution*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. lvi + 241 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-08118-3; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08117-6.

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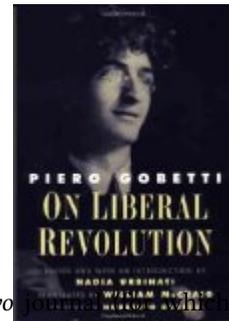
Few political scientists or theorists in the United States will have heard of Piero Gobetti and that is to be regretted. Gobetti (1901-1926) was the precocious boy wonder of Turin in the early 1920s. His anti-fascism earned him the enmity of the blackshirts, while his trenchant criticism of the liberal state as it evolved after the Risorgimento meant that he was ineligible for the pantheon of national heroes. In his brief but brilliant burst of light, Gobetti fashioned as formidable a critique of Italian history, culture, and society as his contemporary, Antonio Gramsci. While a cottage industry developed around Gramsci (deservedly so), Gobetti remained unclaimed except by a small but highly articulate coterie of intellectuals and political theorists.

English-language readers can now discover for themselves what drove Mussolini to send a telegram to the police prefect of Turin demanding that the authorities “make life difficult” for Gobetti. The result was a vicious beating and a death in exile in Paris. Nadia Urbinati, professor of political science at Columbia University, has edited a valuable collection of Gobetti’s more representative essays (a genre he mastered) while translator William McCuaig has rendered the original Italian into graceful English. The volume is part of the Italian Literature and Thought Series edited by Paolo Valesio for Yale University Press. Urbinati and McCuaig previously collaborated to edit and translate Carlo Rosselli’s 1929 manifesto *Liberal Socialism*. As in that earlier project, Urbinati supplies a detailed and rigorous introduction, clearly placing Gobetti’s thought in its historical and intellectual context.

Gobetti was completely immersed in the culture of early-twentieth-century Turin—and what a culture it was. A university that was in intellectual ferment, FIAT’s fac-

ories and Gramsci’s *Ordine Nuovo* (Gobetti wrote theater reviews), a cosmopolitan city that produced Norberto Bobbio, Gramsci, Cesare Pavese, Augusto Monti, and those two astonishing Levis: Carlo and Primo. Gobetti first made a name for himself at the ripe old age of seventeen with *Energie Nuove* (the title of the journal revealing not only the editor’s youth but the city’s willingness to experiment with new ideas). Gobetti and his young fiancée, Ada Prospero, studied Russian together so as to be able to read the texts of the revolution. (Ada Gobetti went on to become a major protagonist in the anti-fascist movement and the armed Resistance of 1943-45, and was eventually elected vice-mayor of Turin). One of his great legacies, the journal *La Rivoluzione Liberale*, published its first issue in February 1922. By 1924, Gobetti had arrived at the conclusion that the working class was the only economic and historical hope for a successful revolution against fascism. For this, he is often paired with Gramsci, but as Urbinati makes clear in her introductory essay, Gobetti was committed to the idea of a revolution that had deep roots in the classical liberalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The political theorist and philosopher Norberto Bobbio concludes his short and succinct foreword to this collection of essays with Gobetti’s astounding remark, “Fascism is the autobiography of the nation.” But Bobbio fails to include the second part of Gobetti’s quote which is just as astounding as the first. For Gobetti, Italy was a nation that “rejects the political contest, that worships unanimity, and shrinks from heresy.” That idea was from the provocatively titled essay “Elogio della ghigliottina” or “In Praise of the Guillotine” (pp 212-215).[1] Elsewhere Gobetti wrote that fascism “offers immature Italy a cradle that may be the tomb of civil consciences turned private” (p. 219). In another justly famous essay, “Our Protes-



tantism” (pp. 137-140), first published in the Protestant journal *Conscientia* in December 1923, Gobetti laments the lack of a Protestant Reformation in Italy and cites that lack for the political and intellectual immaturity of the nation. As Gobetti insightfully points out, the period of greatest heresy in Italy was the period of the medieval communes, when “free and prosperous” economic activity was accompanied by a corresponding intellectual audacity.

Gobetti did not confuse liberalism with capitalism or the free market (*liberismo*), as many of his time did and many still do. While recognizing the value of trade and competition, he did not fall into the trap of making a fetish of the market. As Urbinati writes, for Gobetti “liberalism was the most radical alternative to both socio-economic corporatism (fascism) and protective state socialism (*etatism*)” (p. xvii). And unlike theorists such as Francis Fukuyama who see (or saw) in free-market liberalism the end of conflict and hence history, for Gobetti liberalism was in essence a theory of perpetual con-

flict. In fact, the end result of Gobetti’s liberalism is self-government and freedom from all forms of subjugation. Or as Urbinati writes: “In his mind, liberalism was born revolutionary because it articulated that the individual’s autonomy of judgment and the individual’s equal value in relation to others are the underpinning of modernity” (p. xxi).

In the *enfant terrible* of Gobetti, Italy had one of its most original and creative thinkers; one who was willing and able to criticize the development and evolution of the liberal state after the *Risorgimento*, demonstrating how that liberal state was responsible for the political birth of fascism. Unfortunately and tragically, his thought seems to be another of those intellectual and political “roads not taken” in twentieth-century Italy.

#### Note

[1]. *La rivoluzione liberale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), pp. 164-166.

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