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To cite this article: Kate Ferris (2024) Paul Ginsborg (1945–2022), Journal of Modern Italian Studies, 29:1, 16-26, DOI: [10.1080/1354571X.2023.2285115](https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2023.2285115)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2023.2285115>



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Published online: 16 Jan 2024.



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ABSTRACT

Paul Ginsborg was an academic historian, public intellectual and grass-roots political activist. He began his academic career at Queens College, Cambridge, as an undergraduate in 1963 and as a Research Fellow from 1968 to 1971, where he completed a doctoral thesis on Daniele Manin and the Venetian revolution of 1848–1849. He became a lecturer at the University of York in 1972 but relinquished this position to teach temporarily in Milan and Turin before returning to Cambridge in 1980 as a fellow of Churchill College and Lecturer in Politics as part of the Cambridge Social and Political Sciences Committee, later promoted to Reader. In 1991 Ginsborg was appointed Professor of Contemporary European History at the University of Florence where he remained until (official) retirement in 2015. He was an editor of *Passato e Presente* from 1993 to 2002 and was a founder member of the Association for the Study of Modern Italy; at the time of his death in May 2022 he was its honorary president.

RIASSUNTO

Paul Ginsborg fu uno storico accademico, un pubblico intellettuale e attivista politico di base. Iniziò la sua carriera accademica al Queens College di Cambridge, come studente universitario nel 1963 e come Research Fellow nel 1968–1971, dove completò una tesi di dottorato su Daniele Manin e la rivoluzione veneziana del 1848–1849. Nel 1972 diventa docente all'Università di York, ma lascia questa posizione per insegnare temporaneamente a Milano e a Torino, per poi tornare a Cambridge nel 1980 come fellow del Churchill College e docente in Scienze politiche nell'ambito del Cambridge Social and Political Sciences Committee, poi promosso a Reader. Nel 1991 Ginsborg viene nominato professore di Storia dell'Europa contemporanea all'Università di Firenze, dove rimane fino al pensionamento (ufficiale) nel 2015. Fu membro della direzione di *Passato e Presente* dal 1993 al 2002 e membro fondatore dell'Associazione per lo Studio dell'Italia Moderna, di cui era presidente onorario al momento della sua morte, nel maggio 2022.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 7 November 2023; Accepted 8 November 2023

KEYWORDS Paul Ginsborg; Italy; Risorgimento; contemporary history

PAROLE CHIAVE Paul Ginsborg; Italia; Risorgimento; storia contemporanea

The sad news of Paul Ginsborg's passing in late spring 2022 was swiftly followed, as one would expect, by the writing of obituaries and remembrance pieces surveying the breadth and depth of his work and life. Many of these were written by the historians who knew him best, who were his peers and his students, and thus were more intimately acquainted than most of us with his humanity, his ideas and writing (Gundle 2022; Foot 2022; Asquer 2021). They document the quality and evolution of his scholarship from Risorgimento to contemporary Italian politics and society, his committed political activism and public engagement work, his careful, inspirational teaching and generosity of academic spirit toward his students and early career scholars. As someone who met Ginsborg only a handful of times, I recognize in those experiences the many attestations made to his kindness and attentiveness towards junior colleagues. As a historian whose own research focuses predominantly on the period in modern Italian history – the period of fascist rule – that Ginsborg directly addressed only in his last major, comparative work on *Family Politics* in the first half of the twentieth century, I am probably not an obvious candidate to comment here on the influence of his scholarship on historians of modern Italy. However, just as my relatively fleeting in-person encounters with Ginsborg illustrate the breadth of that generosity of academic spirit, what my attestation here of the enormous impact of Paul Ginsborg's work may offer, is testament to just how far the reach and influence of his ideas and writing extends. In his many books of historical scholarship on the Risorgimento and on the period from 1943 to the turn of the twenty-first century, all of them considered required reading and highly cited, and in his more activist writings on contemporary politics and society, like *The Politics of Everyday Life. Making Choices Clanging Lives* (2005), Ginsborg showed the way to new themes of historical research and new ways of thinking about the past (and present) which have shaped the field of modern Italian history fundamentally and continue to do so.

There are many threads one could trace through the trajectory of Ginsborg's academic and activist work. Many of these comprise vital reminders of the intertwining of what are to my mind among the most important subjects of and approaches to modern history: the inseparability of society from politics; of the structures of major political-social-cultural-economic transformations from popular agency and the ability of 'ordinary' people to make choices and shape their world (to whatever extent); of the everyday from the extraordinary; of approaching history 'from below' from the view of historical events and transformations 'from above'; of the past from the now. On the latter, of course, Ginsborg exemplified the connection between writing about the past and engaging with the world in the present, a connection that is – or should be – natural, symbiotic and imperative. As a genuine (for all the right reasons) public intellectual, he used a range of media – including

books aimed at non-academic audiences, television appearances and debates, public events, and grass-roots political organization – available to him in order to ‘actively champion’ and to actively work towards bringing into being ‘the very rebirth of civil society that he had identified and worked towards in his books’ (Gundle 2022, 196).

One key and sometimes dominant thread woven through Ginsborg’s work is that of the family, its place, functioning and connection to society and politics. Already, in the preface to *A History of Contemporary Italy 1943–1980*, Ginsborg spelled out the two interlocking themes of the book as tracing the continuities amid the transformations of Italy’s ‘dramatic passage to modernity’ and examining one of these ‘constants’, namely ‘the relationship between family and society’ (Ginsborg 1990). In his later work on the Risorgimento, Ginsborg and Alberto Banti stressed the bonds of identification with the nation as ties of *parentela*, kinship and family relations (Banti and Ginsborg 2007). With respect to the role of the family in modern Italian history, Ginsborg of course intended to question and to complicate the idea that modern Italy was beset by ‘amoral familism’, that is, in Edward Banfield’s problematic but deeply persistent reading, that the poverty and supposed ‘backwardness’ of Italian rural life, particularly its economy, and the state’s failure to thoroughly modernize society–state relations, could be traced to the phenomenon of ‘amoral familism’ or the prioritizing above all else of the (perceived) interests of the immediate family (Banfield 1958). In *A History of Contemporary Italy* Ginsborg plotted the profound changes undergone by family units and their components resulting from processes of migration and urbanization, the economic ‘miracle’, civil liberties reform including the legalization of divorce and (with limiting caveats) abortion, through to the political crisis, terror and violence of the years of lead: changes in size and composition, location and dislocation, economic means and potential. Above all, he charted not a consistent according of primacy to familial interests but rather the vacillations between ‘Individualism and solidarity, family and collectivity’ over the course of almost five postwar decades, during which ‘family strategies and collective action’ moved between coincidence and conflict (412–413). If at certain times and places – Ginsborg noted environments as diverse the 1940s peasant movements in the South, the cohesion around Catholicism in the north-east through the 1950s and the social movements unleashed from 1968 – the interests and aims of family and wider social groups could coalesce into pushing collective ideas and action, then at other times and places, the ‘collective aspects of social life’ can be seen to have taken a back-seat to the pursuit and prioritizing of family interest, notably during the economic miracle and in urban areas of the South. By the turn of the twenty-first century, Ginsborg saw increasing and additional transformations in the reproductive, employment and consumer practices and relational roles of family members, in both their internal

interactions and public-facing aspects. As Mark Seymour notes, the tensions that shaped Italian discourse on divorce from unification to the 1974 referendum, were reflective of the tensions identified by Ginsborg as characterizing the rival 'models' of the Italian family that (still) predominated in the early twenty-first century, between a vision that saw the family as 'mainly self-regarding and inward-looking, insulated from the wider world and concerned above all with itself' and an opposing view of the family as focused outwards, 'porous rather than impermeable, open not closed, curious, and willing to intermingle' (Ginsborg 2005, 92; Seymour 2006, 228–229).

In demonstrating how 'the relationship between family and collectivity is almost certainly more complex and less one-sided' than Banfield's and Tullio-Allan's diagnosis of pathological 'amoral familism' in modern Italy would suggest, Ginsborg was in the good company of other scholars whose writing on Italian families was often focused through the lenses of women's history and gender history, including Chiara Saraceno, Anna Rossi-Doria, Perry Willson, Victoria de Grazia and Enrica Asquer, and led them to emphasize the enormous pressures and processes of change which Italian family structures experienced in the century or more following unification (Saraceno 1990, 2004; Rossi Doria 1999; Willson 2004, 2010; De Grazia 1992; Asquer 2007; Di Biagio et al. 2010; Corner and Bull 1993). De Grazia, for example, refashioned Banfield's 'amoral familism' into the conceptual tool of 'oppositional familism', which she used to denote those families and their strategies that were, or sought to be, 'unresponsive, if not resistant' to their mobilization by the state as basic building blocks of fascism during the interwar years (De Grazia 1992). For her part, Enrica Asquer took up the mantle of examining the renegotiation of family life and domestic roles around the postwar 'economic miracle' of the late 1950s and early 1960s between changes and continuities in gender identities, domesticity and femininity, material culture and domestic spaces, the development of mass-marketed domestic consumer products and processes of Italian post-war socio-economic modernization, all of which entailed a certain privatization of Italian families and female domestic labour (Asquer 2007).

In Ginsborg's last major work, he recovered the place of the family in European society and politics from its relegation 'off stage' in most histories of the twentieth century, to 'assume its proper place' at the very heart of the tumults of the first half of the twentieth century in Russia, Turkey, Spain, Italy and Germany (Ginsborg 2016, xvi). *Family Politics. Domestic Life, Devastation and Survival 1900–1950* is a comparative tour de force that demonstrates with clarity, exquisite detail and engaging prose, the centrality of the family in Europe's wars, revolutions and dictatorial regimes, both in terms of what Ginsborg dubs family *policies* – the ideologies, policies and laws directed by governments and allied agents at families, with the intention of shaping,

mobilizing, co-opting and sometimes destroying them – and family *politics*, by which he intended the broader ‘place of families in the social and political life of the nation state’ and to imply the agency and capacity for impacting power structures and exerting (often limited) political power of families themselves. As key historical ‘subjects as well as objects’, family units and those who thought and wrote about them also comprised for Ginsborg a valuable lens through which to examine the wider political, social, cultural and economic transformations and trends of the early twentieth century (Ginsborg 2016, xiii). Family may not be ‘the explanation of everything’ (nor is any solitary category of analysis), but as – imagined and real – entities that were variously, sometimes simultaneously, radically re-conceived, fêted, mobilized for national renewal, war and sacrifice, bypassed and annihilated by the revolutionary movements and dictatorial regimes under examination, families were undoubtedly vital units of experience and agents in ‘the convulsive history of the first half of the twentieth century’ (Ginsborg 2016, xvi).

The Italian chapter of *Family Politics* stands out in Ginsborg’s *oeuvre* in addressing directly the period of fascist dictatorship (Ferris 2017).¹ Here, Ginsborg used Marinetti’s pronouncements on the *passatista* bourgeois family set-up, which had no place in the new ‘fatherland’, and Gramsci’s altogether more measured discourse on the family as a potential educator and ‘torch-bearer’ of civilization, as conduits into his discussion of the family under Fascism. He noted the relative resilience of Italian family structures and ties in the face of industrialization and urbanization in comparison to pre-revolutionary urban workers in Russia, suggesting that Italian workers, housed in peripheral city suburbs like Borgo San Paolo and Sesto San Giovanni, managed to maintain ‘some semblance of “normal” family life’ in the move from countryside to city and thus, in combination with other factors, perhaps felt they had just a little more to lose than their chains (54). He traced Mussolini’s family policy through the Rocco penal code, the demographic campaign and pronatalism, the O.N.B. youth groups which ‘pulled out’ Italian children from time with their family, and the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro’s (O.N.D) *treni popolari* which gifted families holiday time together, through surveillance and propaganda, to the dismantling and dismembering of families in the Fascist empire and at home, via the race laws and war. ‘Family’ may not have merited an entry in the 1932 *Enciclopedia italiana*, but it remained an important, if not coherently theorized, area of concern for Mussolini’s Fascists. In the end, Ginsborg concluded that ‘Fascism never put family life at the centre of its politics’ (Ginsborg 2016, 167). The reasons for this were three-fold: in the first place, this was due to the failings of the regime itself to assert control over all areas of family policy in all areas of the peninsular – to rule totally, in short. Secondly, it was because the

regime could never hope to supplant the moral authority of the Catholic Church over Italian family life in the space of twenty years. Thirdly and finally, it was because 'a profound divide separated the imperial and expansionist ambitions of the regime from the pacific, inward-looking and self-interested nature of Italian family strategies and culture' (Ginsborg 2016, 223).

As Ginsborg declares in the conclusion to *Family Politics*, the question of the place of families within the political systems of the dictatorial regimes of early twentieth century Europe is not just the question of the 'intentions of regimes' but also of the 'intentions of families'. In seeking to live their lives in tumultuous political times, families drew upon 'the peculiar qualities and resources that families have – flexibility, solidarities, networks, well-kept secrets and so on' (Ginsborg 2016, 436). Whilst there is no systematic exploration of how such family resources operated across all the regimes examined in the book (though the exploration of 'typologies' of families' tactical responses to civil war violence in Spain and the inter-generational and spousal relational responses to Stalinist terror are both fascinating and important in this respect), we know from historical research conducted both before and after the publication of *Family Politics* how the deployment of 'family strategies and cultures' could function in practice. Already in her pathbreaking study *Fascism in Popular Memory* first published in 1984, Luisa Passerini observed that family members in Turin, especially women, often interceded on behalf of their relations, whether to allow them to 'save face' with the regime or to gain its favour. As she states, families were particularly adept 'mediators' between the individual and the state precisely because of the family's 'persistent ambiguity in relation to power' (Passerini 1987, 2). The outcome of these mediations was usually decidedly ambivalent also, entailing negotiations between achieving distance, benefit, compromise, and acceptance. In my own research, drawing not only on Ginsborg and Passerini but also on Sheila Fitzpatrick and Alf Lüdtke's writings on the mobilization of 'social bonds' in Nazi Germany and the Stalinist U.S.S.R. among others, we see evidence of how the most intimate human bonds and relations, including those connecting parents and children as well as spouses, were leveraged both by representatives of the dictatorship and by individual Italians in the processes of mediating interactions between the state and individuals in the Italian Fascist dictatorship just as in other twentieth-century Southern European dictatorial regimes (Ferris 2017; Fitzpatrick and Lüdtke 2012, 266). Whilst the regimes instrumentalized the affective bonds between family members to increase political engagement or acquiescence – for example using teachers (and children) to apply pressure on parents to enrol themselves and/or their children into party organizations in order to access educational or work opportunities – family members themselves also often made recourse to the same affective bonds as they negotiated day-to-day

life in the dictatorship to various ends, for example to seek economic or political advantage, to evade censure or complicity with the regime or even to express opposition towards it. At other times, individuals actively sought to involve the regime and its agencies in their relational affairs, perhaps to settle family scores or to address familial disfunction (including domestic violence) (Ferris 2022, 31–41).

As scholars we are all too aware that historical debates are dynamic, they move and move on, and no one of our works can ever have – nor really should wish to have – the last word on how a given event or phenomenon is interpreted or explained. Ginsborg welcomed new interpretations and ways of thinking about well-worn topics, being himself part of the drive to reinvigorate Risorgimento history in the early 2000s, exemplified in the 2007 work he co-edited with Alberto Banti drawing on cultural history and the history of emotions (Banti and Ginsborg 2007). In the preface to the second edition of his very first work on *Daniele Manin e la rivoluzione veneziana del 1848–49* (1978; English edition 1979), written in 2007, Ginsborg observed how ‘in the decades since the first edition of this book, historiography and Italian history itself have progressed’ and availed the opportunity to appraise the ‘strongly narrative approach’ taken in his first work as well as to point himself to some of the ‘absences and silences in my volume’ (Ginsborg 2007). (Notable for a fellow anglophone academic aficionado of Venice, in the preface he also beautifully articulates the experience of researching and writing on that city, in that city.) His evaluation of these early ‘silences’ include the kinds of reading of the ‘cultural construction of [Italian] nationalism’, its symbols and imaginings which informed Risorgimentalists and their contemporaries, that are now very familiar in the wake of the ‘cultural turn’, the gendered dimensions and the gender histories of 1848 in Venice (and more widely in Italian unification) as well as the history of the family and of relations between public and private spheres.

Of course, many of these historiographical gaps have since begun to be filled by other scholars, as well as in Ginsborg’s own subsequent work in the case of the familial ties of kinship seen to be at the heart of imaginings of nationhood and national belonging among Risorgimento actors. For example, we now have rich seams of work exploring many of the gender dynamics of the Risorgimento, including the role of ideals and practices of patriarchy and masculinity, and recovering women’s widespread and varied contributions to making (or opposing) unification (D’Amelia 2011; Riall 2007, 2011, 2015; Moore 2021).

History-writing around the themes of Venice and Venetia before, during and after 1848 has moved in many other respects and dimensions. David Laven, for example, has redressed earlier generalized assumptions of Austrian Habsburg rule as that of cruel and inept dominance. Laven counters the ‘black myth’ of Habsburg repressive and regressive governance of the

Venetian lands it ruled after 1797, demonstrating the (relatively) organized, effective and not especially unwelcome governance (aside from the taxation regime) exercised under Francis I. As such, he suggests that the Venetian revolutionary events of 1848 'were not born of a long-standing hatred of Habsburg domination' (Laven 2002, 26).

More recently, the historiography of the Habsburg monarchy and empire and the nationalities that comprised its land and people has developed towards positions that complicate the assessments of post-1989 studies which tended to see the Habsburg empire as inevitably doomed to 'decline and fall' as an anachronism in the face of the inexorable rise of (modern) nationalist movements and drives to constitute independent nation states founded on (assumed) ethnic-nationalist homogeneity. New bodies of work, in the words of Axel Körner, 'underline the hybridity of national identity, as well as the constant exchanges between nationality groups, which were not always conflictual' within and across the territories ruled by the Habsburg monarchs (Körner 2018, 516–553). A sense of national belonging jostled (sometimes uneasily) with class, regional and imperial identities and monarchical loyalties, such that the 'national diversity' of the Habsburg lands, whilst presenting often significant challenges, was not incompatible with imperial rule (Judson 2016; Körner 2018). As part of this historical trajectory, the 1848 revolutionary movements in Europe, and within this context the events, ideas and protagonists of the Venetian 1848, have received renewed attention. The predominance of calls for reform rather than solely rejection of Austrian rule by the revolutionary leaders who pursued 'a range of nation- and state-building projects' rather than a singular, and nationalist goal, have been underscored by scholars including Pieter Judson (Judson 2016, 205). For her part, Dominique Kirchner Reill has unveiled the pluralist principles of 'Adriatic multi-nationalism' that were espoused – and concretely worked towards through associations of *fratellanza* (brotherhood) – among many Adriatic intellectuals in the run-up to 1848, including Niccolò Tommaseo, who would become Manin's co-revolutionary and second in command in Venice, even if the outcome of their revolutionary experience would be one of splintering political partnerships and the shifting and hardening of nationalist ideas (Kirchner Reill 2012).

The most recent historical appraisal of the *Revolutionary Spring* of 1848, including that of Venice, was published only in the spring of 2023 (coinciding with the 175th anniversary of the events) by Christopher Clark (2023). Clark's interpretation eschews the Marxist explanatory model of 1848 'as a paradigmatic episode of the bourgeois revolution' to which Ginsborg in 2007 remained committed as still containing 'considerable explanatory and comparative value', at least in terms of the 'great arch', as he, following E. P. Thompson, put it of bourgeois revolution (Ginsborg 1979; Thompson [1965] 1978). Like Ginsborg, though, Clark engages closely with the Italian sources and reads the Italian events within a wider frame, albeit Clark's scale

of analysis surveys the revolutions across their full continental spread, situating the Venetian experience within the interconnections of the wider revolutionary and counter-revolutionary European centres and forces that buffeted and shaped it. In the end, the Manin family is one of thousands across Europe 'made emigres of 1848–9'. As Clark says, 'there were as many roads out of revolution as there were into it', although Manin's option for an impoverished but autonomous and dignified exile in Paris is striking; for Ginsborg, of course, the 'road out of revolution' chosen by so many Italian 48-ers to prioritize national unification over a commitment to radical republican and democratic principles represented the most enduring and consequential 'failure' of the 1848 revolutions in Italy (Ginsborg 1979 378–379).

The historiography of 1848, as of the Risorgimento, of post-war and contemporary Italy and of the place of Italian families in politics and society, continues of course '[to] progress'. What is worth remarking on, by way of conclusion, is how, as it does, Ginsborg's expansive legacy of scholarship continue to constitute must-read touchstone works in all of these fields, and will continue to influence and shape that progression. Christopher Clark's pronouncement with respect to his work on 1848 Venice, that 'Ginsborg's is still the best account of these events', will not be the last of its kind (Clark 2023).

Note

1. The remainder of this paragraph and parts of the following paragraph were first published as part of my review of *Family Politics* published on H-Italy in July 2015. The terms of the creative commons license allow for author re-use of the material. For the full review, see: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43326>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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