

INTRODUCTION

Gaetano Salvemini: profile of a transnational intellectual

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Abstract

Gaetano Salvemini (1873–1957) is one of the most influential intellectuals of Italian and European twentieth-century history. As 2023 marks the 150th anniversary of Salvemini's birth, this special issue of *Modern Italy* aims to attract the attention of an international readership and contribute to filling the gap in scholarly publications in English, offering a tool to approach Salvemini's intellectual production and biography. We have chosen to focus on four aspects of Salvemini's life that we consider particularly suitable for introducing his personal trajectory and the evolution of his thinking, adopting a transnational approach: his interpretation of the Great War and the Adriatic question; his antifascist exile in Great Britain and, from 1934, in the United States; and the publication of his most important studies on Fascist Italy. The choice of these topics aims to shed light on Salvemini's contacts and stimulating exchanges with foreign scholars, his international experiences, and how these transformed his ideas on Liberal and Fascist Italy.

Keywords: Salvemini; antifascism; exile; transnational studies; intellectual networks

Salvemini and the history of modern Italy

Gaetano Salvemini (1873–1957) is one of the most influential intellectuals of Italian and European twentieth-century history. A large part of his career as a scholar and antifascist took place away from Italy: in 1922, he made his first journey to Britain. He came back there in 1925 when, persecuted by the Fascist regime, he began his long exile, settling in London, but travelling frequently between Britain and France. In 1927, he visited the USA for the first time, returning there on several occasions as a visiting professor (in 1929, 1930 and 1932). These experiences allowed Salvemini to gradually expand his network of academic and scientific acquaintances to a transnational level. In 1934, he settled permanently in Cambridge (MA), where he obtained a lectureship at Harvard University.

To introduce the complexity of Salvemini's personal and intellectual path and situate some of the key moments of his biography, it seems relevant to refer to those that, in a letter written in 1935 to his friend Mary Berenson, he forcefully described as his 'four lives' (Origo 1982, 146–147).

Salvemini was born in 1873 in Molfetta, a small town north of Bari, into a modest family. As a young boy in his small Apulian village, he never felt at ease, but rather 'physically, intellectually and morally miserable'. His second life began as early as at the age of seventeen, when he had the opportunity to move to Florence: a scholarship allowed him to attend the prestigious Istituto di Studi Superiori, where he was introduced to the study

of history. While completing his degree, one of his professors, the historian Pasquale Villari, allowed him to rapidly join an influential and stimulating intellectual circle; at the same time, with some of his university colleagues, he approached and discussed political militancy from the Socialist ranks. Political engagement and fine studies on medieval Florence resulting from his dissertations (Salvemini 1961a and 1972) rapidly earned him a reputation as a political commentator and historian; however, his professional path started with teaching in several *licei* across Italy. This experience fostered his interest in discussing the situation of Italian schools and the need for reform (Salvemini 1966a); moving in between Southern and Northern Italy also allowed him to reflect on the Southern question (Salvemini 1963) which he discussed, not without engaging in polemics with the Socialist party, in Filippo Turati's periodical *Critica Sociale*. Just when his personal life and career seemed to be steadily progressing – in 1897 he had married Maria Minervini and in 1901 he had been appointed professor of Medieval and Modern History at the University of Messina, while in 1905 he had published two fine studies on the French Revolution and Mazzini (Salvemini 1962 and 1961b) – a tragedy forced him to start life again from scratch. In the 1908 earthquake which devastated the city of Messina he lost his wife, his sister, and his five children. Such a tragedy, which also deprived him of his job, left a permanent scar on him and forced him to relocate to Florence, where he had to start life all over again for the third time. He drew solace from old and new friends, including Carlo Placci and Mary and Bernard Berenson; a few years later, in 1916, he would be married again, to the French intellectual Fernande Dauriac. The universities of Pisa and Florence provided him with new job opportunities, and he managed to gather new energy to devote to political engagement. During those years of intensive activity, Salvemini became Giovanni Giolitti's harshest opponent (Salvemini 2021a) and unsuccessfully ran for parliamentary elections in 1910 and 1913. Placing himself on the left of the Socialist party, he pushed for reforms, including universal suffrage. From 1911, the rift with the Socialists became too deep on the matter of foreign policy, especially concerning the Triple Alliance and the Libyan war, which also led him to withdraw his collaboration with the journal *La Voce*. After this, he founded his own journal, *L'Unità*, which between 1911 and 1920 (with only brief interruptions) discussed the need for key reforms and tackled international politics with a concrete approach, also becoming a reference point for a generation of young intellectuals (including Piero Gobetti) who drew inspiration from Salvemini's teaching and methodology.

As a democratic interventionist – his view was grounded in the need to oppose the power of the Triple Alliance – Salvemini briefly volunteered in the First World War, further distancing himself from the Socialists. In the aftermath of the war, his views on the Adriatic question and his support of Wilsonian ideals of self-determination (Salvemini 2016) made him a target of nationalists' criticism and harsh attacks following the so-called 'mutilated victory'. The year 1919 marks the highest point of Salvemini's political engagement, as he managed to be elected to parliament from a list of '*combattenti*'. However, this disappointing experience determined a slow but steady detachment from political commitment, to the point that the rise of the Fascist dictatorship found him initially disillusioned and demotivated (Salvemini 2022). However, within a few years, he managed to carry out a strenuous opposition to the regime: his engagement in antifascist activities, including the publication of the political journal *Non Mollare*, forced him to leave Italy in 1925. As mentioned, his fourth life took place in exile between France, Great Britain, and the USA, where he carried out extensive antifascist activity, delivering lectures and publications, and progressively expanding his network. In 1934, to commemorate the Italian antifascist Lauro De Bosis, US actress Ruth Draper endorsed Salvemini's appointment as lecturer in History of the Italian Civilisation at Harvard University. He obtained a fixed-term lectureship, renewed year by year until 1949, when, after much consideration

(in 1942 he had become a US citizen) he decided to return to Italy: he was 76 years old. He resumed his Italian career, and concluded it where he had left it, at the University of Florence, as a supernumerary professor. His ‘fifth’ life – as he would have probably defined it – was devoted to finalising some of his scholarly works and playing the role of critical voice of the newborn Italian Republic, commenting on politics in the pages of prestigious journals such as *Il Mondo*, *Il Ponte* and *Critica Sociale* (Salvemini 1957 and 1959). He was a reference point for those intellectuals wishing to pursue a ‘third force’ – such as Ernesto Rossi (Franzinelli 2004) – who often visited him in Sorrento, where he retired to spend the last years of a long and prolific life.

A review of the scholarship on Salvemini

Salvemini’s biography and wide-ranging scholarly production have been studied thoroughly, from multiple, and sometimes contrasting, perspectives (Grasso 2019). His collected writings were first published between 1961 and 1978. This encompasses 18 volumes arranged in nine sections, covering Salvemini’s main fields of expertise: medieval history; early modern and modern history; foreign policy; the Southern question; school reform; works on fascism; and studies on Republican Italy. His correspondence has been published both chronologically (Gencarelli 1968; Tagliacozzo 1984, 1985a, 1985b; Bucchi 1988, 1997, 2001, 2003, 2004) and in volumes dedicated to exchanges with prominent intellectuals (Merola 1967 and 1968, Galante Garrone 1984; Signori 1996; Franzinelli 2004; Grasso 2009; Signori 2009; Teodori 2010; Camurri 2015, this latter devoted to the American years). In addition to the publication of primary sources, such a long-lasting interest has resulted in an impressive scholarship (Cantarella 1986; Grasso 2019), which continues, even in the most recent years, to be updated with innovative interpretations of his thinking and life experiences (Gussoni 2020b; Camurri 2015), vital reappraisals (Bucchi 2023), and revised editions of his writings, memoirs, and new pieces of correspondence (Salvemini 2020; 2021a; 2021b; 2023; Ceresa and Mosca 2023).

Salvemini followed a personal and intellectual path which made him a transnational scholar par excellence. Well before the Fascist dictatorship forced him to leave Italy and go into exile, he had begun networking with influential intellectuals to secure future opportunities for collaboration; after 1925, he started publishing historical and political analysis on Fascist Italy in Britain and the USA, submitting his writings to prestigious newspapers and publishing houses. His most important books were published in English, to appeal to an international readership: these included fine studies on Fascism, such as *The Fascist Dictatorship in Italy* (1927 and 1928) and *Under the Axe of Fascism* (1936a and b); a methodological reflection, *Historian and Scientist* (1939); a discussion of Italy’s institutional future, *What to Do with Italy* (with George La Piana, 1943); and a revised version of the study of Mussolini’s foreign policy, *Prelude to World War II* (1953). Furthermore, towards the end of his career, Salvemini decided to pick up again two of his earlier studies of 1905, *La Rivoluzione francese* and *Mazzini*: he revised them thoroughly and entrusted his close friend Marion Rawson with the task of publishing the English translation (Salvemini 1954 and 1956).

Despite such a remarkable publication record, any non-Italian speakers aiming to approach the study of Salvemini would find the task hard. If, on the one hand, primary sources in English are available in the form of books and newspaper or journal articles, on the other hand, a collection of Salvemini’s writings in English has not been published thus far. Paradoxically, they are more easily available in their Italian translation, as the most significant articles have been published in the second volume of Salvemini’s *Scritti sul fascismo* (Salvemini 1966b). Moreover, the scholarship on Salvemini – even as far as most recent studies are concerned – is mostly written in Italian: not only does it

remain confined within the linguistic borders of Italy, but it also denotes a dearth of international dissemination. To this day, only a handful of studies have been published and made accessible to an international readership – one in German, and the others in English (Bütler 1978; Killinger 2002 and 2010; Tintori 2011, Tortarolo 2016; Gussoni 2020a and 2022, Fantarella 2023). It seems relevant to summarise their content briefly.

The first study completed outside the borders of Italy was published in German in 1978 by the Swiss historian Hugo Bütler, who analysed Salvemini's political views until 1915, dealing with his socialism, his opposition to Giolitti, and his interventionism. Despite some breakthroughs – including a thorough analysis of primary sources – Bütler's study addressed a limited period of time and did not tackle the evolution of Salvemini's thinking after the First World War. A more comprehensive study was published outside Italy more than 20 years later, in 2002, by the US historian Charles Killinger, who made use of Italian and US sources, providing a compelling image of Salvemini's biography and political thinking. Killinger began to dismantle one of the most common stereotypes about Salvemini, showing that at Harvard he did not live as 'a medieval monk' secluded in an 'enchanted island', as had been described by his pupil Enzo Tagliacozzo (Tagliacozzo 1963), but rather in an 'operational base in the eye of the storm' (Killinger 2002, 241–266). Killinger's analysis of Salvemini's experience in the USA was then complemented by an essay published in 2010, in which he stressed how the debate carried out by antifascists in exile impacted the political discourse which led to the shaping of the Italian Republic. Renato Camurri has furtherly reassessed the experience of Salvemini's American exile, analysing it within the broader context of European exile between the two wars and exploring the extent of Salvemini's relationships with other prominent Italian exiles who landed in the USA during those years (Camurri 2009a and b).

Following this path, one year later Guido Tintori (2011) – in the pages of *Modern Italy* – analysed the impact that the exile experience in the USA had on Salvemini's views on the 1948 elections in Italy: as an 'outsider' – Tintori claims – he was able to lucidly identify the flaws of Italian democracy, polarised as it was between the PCI and the DC, although the third force that he wished for was destined to remain marginal, marking a setback in his political plan. Exile is also relevant to Edoardo Tortarolo's study on Salvemini's historical method (2016): Tortarolo compares two methodological pieces completed in 1901 (Salvemini's inaugural lecture at the University of Messina) and in 1938 (a series of four lectures delivered at the University of Chicago, then published as *Historian and Scientist*), and concluded that, although Salvemini was exposed to the influence of US historical method, he did not radically change his approach. Salvemini's exile is the subject of two other works published in English in 2020 and 2022, by Alice Gussoni: the former (Gussoni 2020a) is a study of Salvemini's experience between Britain, France and the USA, shedding light on the transnational features of his exile; the latter is a biographical account which describes Salvemini's experience of mobility throughout his life, in Italy and abroad. Lastly, the most recent publication in English is a translation of Filomena Fantarella's (2023) study of Salvemini's relationship with his second wife, Fernande Dauriac, and particularly his stepson, Jean Luchaire, who collaborated with the Vichy government.

Profile of a transnational intellectual

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For this special issue, we have chosen to focus on four aspects of Salvemini's life that we consider particularly suitable for introducing his personal trajectory and the evolution of his thinking adopting a transnational approach: his interpretation of the Great War and the Adriatic question; his antifascist exile in Great Britain and, from 1934, in the United States; and the publication of his most important studies on Fascist Italy. These topics are addressed with the aim of shedding light on Salvemini's contacts and stimulating exchanges with foreign scholars, his international experiences, and how these transformed his ideas on Liberal and Fascist Italy.

In the first essay, Andrea Frangioni explores Salvemini's approach to foreign policy during the First World War, focusing on his interactions with a group of so-called 'trouble-makers' – as described by A.J.P. Taylor's essay of 1958 – who gathered around Robert Seton-Watson's political review *The New Europe*. Frangioni's essay introduces us to Salvemini's interest in British political and cultural circles and shows us the evolution of the collaboration with Seton-Watson and his group between 1917 and 1919, drawing on writings and correspondence. Their dialogue reveals similarities and differences: Salvemini championed *The New Europe's* fight for subject nationalities in the Habsburg Empire, though he criticised their support of Yugoslavian claims to Istria, Trieste and Venezia Giulia.

The second essay also explores Salvemini's interest in British intellectual circles, moving to the analysis of his exile in London from 1925. Alice Gussoni presents us with an overview of Salvemini's British experience, showing that his antifascist activities were supported by an influential intellectual network which allowed him to reach a broader audience. By analysing a selection of texts and publications such as the antifascist series of pamphlets *Italy To-day*, Gussoni's essay claims that Salvemini carefully singled out topics that were able to attract the attention of a foreign audience, particularly British public opinion, and that being part of a British intellectual network transformed Salvemini's approach to the antifascist struggle.

Political militancy and historiography are at the core of the third essay, written by Mirko Grasso, who analyses Salvemini's most important studies on Fascism published in Britain, the USA and France between 1927 and 1936: *The Fascist Dictatorship in Italy*, *Mussolini Diplomat* and *Under the Axe of Fascism*. Grasso's essay focuses on the methodology adopted by Salvemini and highlights the events which led to the publication of these works. On the one hand, it sheds light on Salvemini's use of sources and his mastery in combining social sciences and economics; on the other hand, it shows us Salvemini's ability to move within intellectual networks to promote the publication and dissemination of his works.

In the last essay, Renato Camurri offers a comprehensive interpretation of Salvemini's exile, considering it as the consequence of a crucial twist happening in his life between 1919 and 1925. Camurri analyses the origins of Salvemini's relationship with the USA and focuses on the remarks written on the spot after the 1927 trip across the Atlantic, considering it a critical turning point. These remarks show that Salvemini clear-headedly realised that the exiles had to take responsibility and carry out duties in the countries that hosted them. Therefore, Camurri reconsiders the importance of Salvemini's American exile highlighting his adaptability to the US academic milieu, and the extent of his network and collaboration with US colleagues and European exiles, as much as his strenuous efforts in the field of research – with works devoted to the study of Fascism – and in the antifascist struggle, adopting different strategies and means.

In conclusion, this special issue does not claim to present an exhaustive profile of Salvemini: rather, it configures itself as a starting point towards a comprehensive reassessment. By offering new perspectives for the study of Salvemini, it aims to foster the international dissemination of Salvemini's writings, also hoping for new publishing

initiatives, such as updated editions of his books in English, or collections of his articles and essays published during his exile, which can contribute to the rediscovery of such an influential European intellectual.

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