

# **Populism in Italy in the 20th Century**

*From Giovanni Papini to Mussolini*

By

**Adrian David Cheok and Michele Nardelli**

Populism in Italy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: From Giovanni Papini  
to Mussolini

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## **Dedications**

“God bless all those who helped and comforted me during and after the greatest and most devastating tragedy of my life. All my love to my children Nikola and Angelina”, Adrian David Cheok, Nanjing, China, April 2025

“I dedicate this book to my wife Stefania and to my two beloved sons Antonio and Francesco”, Michele Nardelli, Naples, Italy, April 2025

## Chapter 1

# Introduction - Defining Populism in the Italian Context

### **Part 1: Understanding Populism as a Political Phenomenon**

Populism is one of the most debated and fluid concepts in political theory. It has been used to describe movements of both the right and the left, political figures as diverse as Benito Mussolini and Silvio Berlusconi, and ideologies ranging from revolutionary socialism to nationalist conservatism. Despite its varied applications, populism is commonly understood as a form of politics that claims to represent “the people” against a corrupt or out-of-touch elite. In the Italian context, populism has been an enduring force throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, shaping the nation’s political evolution from the rise of Fascism to the contemporary resurgence of anti-establishment parties.

At its core, populism is not a fixed ideology but a style of political engagement. Unlike liberalism, socialism, or conservatism, which are defined by specific economic and social doctrines, populism is best described as a political strategy that thrives on the idea of a moral struggle between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite.” This dualism allows populist leaders to adapt their rhetoric to different historical moments and societal anxieties, making it a highly flexible and enduring phenomenon.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, populism in Italy emerged as a reaction to economic instability, social discontent, and the failure of traditional political structures. Giovanni Papini, a literary figure with radical

ideas about nationalism and culture, represented one intellectual strand of Italian populism, while Mussolini capitalized on its mass mobilization potential. The intersection of cultural, economic, and political populism in Italy created a unique landscape where intellectuals, demagogues, and ideologues all contributed to the shaping of a populist ethos.

Understanding populism in Italy requires an exploration of its various dimensions—rhetorical, ideological, and structural. It is essential to examine how leaders like Mussolini positioned themselves as the voice of the common man, how media and propaganda played a role in amplifying populist discourse, and how populism has adapted over time to new social and economic realities. From the intellectual radicalism of Papini to the authoritarian mobilization of Mussolini, and later, to the media-driven populism of Berlusconi and the digital populism of the Five Star Movement, the Italian case offers a rich terrain for analyzing the evolution of populism as both a historical and contemporary force.

In this chapter, we will explore the defining characteristics of populism and its intellectual roots in Italy. By tracing its emergence and transformation, we will establish a framework for understanding how Italian populism has shaped—and been shaped by—the broader currents of European political history.

## **Part 2: The Origins of Italian Populism**

Populism in Italy did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it was the product of deep-rooted historical, economic, and social tensions that had shaped the nation since its unification in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike other European countries, Italy's unification was a relatively recent and fragile achievement by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, leaving large portions of the population politically disengaged and economically

marginalized. The tension between a centralized state and regional identities, the economic disparities between the industrialized north and the agrarian south, and the growing frustration with the political elite all provided fertile ground for populist rhetoric to take hold.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian political system was dominated by an elite class that largely excluded the broader population from meaningful participation. The Italian monarchy, alongside a parliamentary system controlled by landowners and industrialists, failed to address widespread grievances, particularly among peasants and workers. The inability of the state to unify the country culturally, politically, and economically left millions of Italians feeling alienated from the institutions that claimed to govern in their name. This disconnect laid the foundation for movements that would claim to speak directly to “the people,” promising a more authentic representation of national interests.

One of the earliest forms of Italian populism manifested in the rise of nationalist movements that sought to define Italian identity in opposition to perceived foreign threats and internal corruption. Intellectuals like Giovanni Papini, whose writings expressed disdain for liberal democracy and a yearning for national rejuvenation, contributed to this growing populist ethos. Papini’s vision, like that of other early 20<sup>th</sup>-century intellectuals, was rooted in the belief that Italy required a strong, centralized authority to overcome its internal divisions and reassert itself on the world stage. His ideas foreshadowed the kind of populist-nationalist discourse that would later be perfected by Benito Mussolini.

In the economic sphere, the rapid industrialization of the north contrasted sharply with the stagnation of the rural south, creating a deep social divide. Southern peasants, many of whom lived in extreme poverty, saw little benefit from the economic transformations that were taking place elsewhere in the country. This imbalance fuelled resentment against the political establishment, which was perceived as serving only the interests of northern industrialists and interna-

tional financial elites. The promise of a leader who could bridge this divide and restore dignity to the common people became an increasingly powerful narrative in Italian politics.

Additionally, the Catholic Church played a complex role in shaping early Italian populism. For decades, the Church had been in conflict with the secular state following the loss of the Papal States in 1870. Many conservative and rural Italians saw the Church as a more legitimate authority than the liberal government in Rome. This religious dimension of populism would later be instrumental in the formation of Fascism, as Mussolini sought to reconcile his authoritarian vision with Catholic support through the Lateran Accords of 1929.

Thus, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the conditions were ripe for a populist movement that could capitalize on Italy's fragmented political landscape. The failures of liberal democracy, the intellectual push for national renewal, economic inequalities, and cultural tensions all converged to create an environment where a figure like Mussolini could rise to power. The coming chapters will explore how this populist foundation evolved into the Fascist state and how figures like Giovanni Papini contributed to its intellectual underpinnings.

### **Part 3: The Role of Intellectuals in Shaping Italian Populism**

Populism in Italy was not merely a political reaction to economic and social instability; it was also an intellectual movement shaped by a variety of thinkers who sought to redefine national identity, political legitimacy, and the role of the state. While populism is often associated with mass politics and charismatic leaders, its foundation in Italy was laid by a group of writers, philosophers, and public intellectuals who rejected liberal democracy, embraced nationalism, and sought to create a new, more unified Italy. These intellectuals—Giovanni

Papini among them—played a crucial role in giving Italian populism its ideological depth and cultural legitimacy.

One of the defining features of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italian intellectual thought was the rejection of parliamentary democracy. Many intellectuals saw democracy as a weak, inefficient system that failed to address Italy's pressing social and economic problems. Inspired by thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Sorel, and Gabriele D'Annunzio, they called for a more radical, action-oriented approach to politics. This new political vision emphasized the need for a strong leader who could embody the will of the people, bypass bureaucratic institutions, and impose a national revival through force and willpower.

Giovanni Papini was emblematic of this intellectual revolt against liberalism. Originally an avant-garde thinker fascinated by literature and philosophy, Papini underwent a dramatic ideological transformation over the course of his life. His early works expressed a deep skepticism toward traditional institutions and an attraction to radical change. He was drawn to Futurism, a cultural movement that glorified speed, modernity, and destruction as necessary preconditions for renewal. His writings reflected a broader frustration among Italian intellectuals who believed that Italy was stuck in a cycle of political stagnation and cultural decadence.

This intellectual climate also provided fertile ground for the development of Fascist ideology. Figures like Papini, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and Curzio Malaparte helped craft the cultural and philosophical justifications for a new authoritarian order. They argued that Italy needed a political movement that could mobilize the masses, destroy the old order, and create a dynamic, nationalistic future. Their work lent an air of legitimacy to the radical politics that would soon follow.

A key component of this intellectual populism was the idea that history was shaped by great men rather than institutions. This belief—rooted in

the writings of Nietzsche and Sorel—suggested that democracy, with its emphasis on collective decision-making, was inherently flawed. Instead, these intellectuals argued that a single leader, capable of embodying the spirit of the nation, should wield power without the constraints of democratic checks and balances. This notion would later become central to Mussolini's rhetoric, as he positioned himself as the only figure capable of guiding Italy through its political and economic turmoil.

Moreover, Italian intellectuals played a crucial role in shaping the narrative of a "corrupt elite" versus "the true people." This populist dichotomy was particularly potent in Italy, where the ruling liberal elites were widely viewed as self-serving and disconnected from the needs of the common citizen. Writers and philosophers reinforced the idea that Italy had been betrayed by weak politicians, and that only through radical intervention could the country be saved. This anti-elitist rhetoric helped pave the way for Mussolini's rise, as he successfully cast himself as the leader who would restore the power of "the people" by dismantling the corrupt establishment.

In sum, Italian populism was not simply a grassroots movement driven by economic and social discontent; it was also an intellectual project shaped by writers, philosophers, and cultural critics. Figures like Giovanni Papini provided the ideological foundation that allowed populist leaders to justify their rejection of democracy, their embrace of nationalism, and their calls for a strong, centralized authority. The fusion of mass politics and elite intellectual thought created a uniquely Italian form of populism—one that would soon evolve into full-fledged Fascism.

## **Part 4: Nationalism and the Myth of the Italian People**

A core feature of Italian populism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was its reliance on nationalism as a unifying force. While populism often presents



itself as a movement of the common people against the elite, in Italy, this ideology became intertwined with a broader nationalistic vision. The idea of a single, strong, and culturally unified Italy was essential to the populist rhetoric that shaped both intellectual discourse and political action. Leaders and thinkers alike positioned themselves as defenders of the “true” Italian people against both internal corruption and external threats.

Italy’s relatively recent unification in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century left deep divisions between its northern and southern regions, its urban centers and rural communities, and its different linguistic and cultural groups. Unlike in long-established nation-states like France or Britain, Italian nationalism had to be actively constructed. Early populists played a key role in this process by crafting a narrative that emphasized Italy’s historical greatness—linking it to the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, and even medieval city-states. This romanticized past was contrasted with the present, which was depicted as a period of national decline brought about by weak governance and foreign influence.

Intellectuals such as Giovanni Papini reinforced this nationalist-populist framework in their writings. Papini, who saw Italy’s political fragmentation as a symptom of cultural and moral decay, advocated for a radical transformation that would restore the country’s strength. His nationalist vision was not just about territorial integrity—it was about creating a new Italian spirit, one that rejected the decadence of modern liberal democracy in favor of bold, heroic leadership. This vision aligned closely with the emerging Fascist movement, which would later position itself as the force capable of achieving this national rebirth.

Another critical aspect of nationalist-populism in Italy was the use of the “enemy” to rally popular support. Just as populist movements thrive on the distinction between “the people” and “the elite,” Italian nationalism framed its struggles against both domestic and

foreign threats. Domestically, the political class was blamed for Italy's economic stagnation, social divisions, and perceived weakness on the world stage. Mussolini, in particular, would later capitalize on this sentiment, portraying the liberal establishment as a collection of traitors who had failed to protect the nation's honor.

Externally, Italian populists invoked historical grievances to strengthen nationalist fervor. The aftermath of World War I provided a perfect opportunity for this strategy, as Italy's territorial gains were seen as insufficient. The so-called "Mutilated Victory" (*Vittoria Mutilata*), in which Italy did not receive all the territories it had been promised in the Treaty of London (1915), was used as evidence that the Italian people had been betrayed by both foreign powers and their own weak leaders. This grievance became a rallying cry for nationalists, reinforcing the idea that Italy needed strong leadership to assert its rightful place in the world.

Nationalist populism also found expression in cultural movements such as Futurism, which glorified speed, technology, and war as tools for revitalizing the nation. Figures like Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who was closely associated with both Papini and Mussolini, viewed conflict as a necessary force for national renewal. This aestheticization of violence and power contributed to the broader narrative that Italy needed a revolutionary transformation—one that could only be achieved by breaking with the past and embracing a bold new future.

In this context, the idea of "the people" was no longer just a vague, populist concept—it was nationalized. Italian populism became less about class struggle and more about defining a collective national identity, one that could be mobilized against both internal and external enemies. The stage was set for a leader who could embody this vision, unify the country, and impose a new order—an opportunity that Benito Mussolini would soon seize.

The fusion of populism and nationalism in Italy proved to be a powerful force, one that would shape the country's political landscape for decades. The next sections will explore how these ideas evolved into concrete political movements, how they influenced the rise of Fascism, and how figures like Papini contributed to the intellectual foundation of Mussolini's rule.

## **Part 5: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy and the Appeal of Populism**

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian liberal state was in crisis. The parliamentary system, inherited from the unification period, was increasingly viewed as ineffective, corrupt, and incapable of addressing the country's growing social and economic challenges. Italian populism, in its early manifestations, was fueled by this widespread disillusionment with liberal democracy, as both intellectuals and political figures sought alternative models of governance that promised to restore national strength and unity.

The foundations of Italy's democratic failure were laid in the post-unification period. Italy was formally unified in 1861, but this political union did not translate into social or economic cohesion. The ruling elites in Rome struggled to integrate the country's diverse regional identities, economic disparities, and cultural divisions. The industrial north prospered while the rural south remained impoverished, fueling resentment among southern Italians who felt abandoned by the state. Furthermore, a significant portion of the population—particularly peasants and workers—had little political representation, as suffrage was initially limited to a small percentage of wealthy male citizens. This democratic exclusion created fertile ground for populist movements that positioned themselves as the true voice of the people against an unresponsive and elitist government.

The failure of the Italian liberal system became even more apparent in the aftermath of World War I. The war had placed enormous strain on Italy's economy and society. Soldiers returning from the front found little opportunity for employment, inflation soared, and political instability became the norm. The promise that Italy would emerge stronger from the war proved to be an illusion. Instead, the country faced what became known as the "Biennio Rosso" (Red Biennium) of 1919-1920, a period of intense social conflict marked by strikes, factory occupations, and fears of a Bolshevik-style revolution. The inability of the liberal government to effectively manage this crisis further eroded confidence in democratic institutions.

It was in this volatile environment that populist leaders and intellectuals found an eager audience. Figures like Giovanni Papini, who had already been critical of the liberal establishment, saw in this crisis an opportunity to push for a new political order. His disdain for parliamentary politics reflected a broader sentiment among many Italians who believed that democracy had failed them. The populist discourse of the time emphasized the need for strong leadership, decisive action, and the replacement of political negotiation with direct governance by a single, charismatic figure.

Benito Mussolini capitalized on this anti-liberal sentiment by presenting himself as the only leader capable of saving Italy from chaos. His early rhetoric skillfully blended elements of populism and nationalism, positioning his Fascist movement as both anti-elite and anti-socialist. He framed his rise as a response to the failures of democracy, arguing that Italy needed a new, more efficient form of governance that could overcome class divisions and restore national pride.

The collapse of the liberal order in Italy did not happen overnight, but the conditions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century made it increasingly clear that traditional democratic structures were unable to withstand the pressures of economic hardship, regional divisions, and mass discon-

tent. In this context, populism became not just an ideological movement but a political strategy—one that sought to mobilize the masses against the perceived incompetence of the ruling elite.

The interplay between intellectual critique and political action was crucial in this transition. Writers like Papini laid the groundwork for a rejection of liberalism, while Mussolini translated these ideas into a political movement that ultimately reshaped Italy's trajectory. The rise of Fascism was, in many ways, the culmination of a broader populist rejection of the liberal democratic system, a rejection that had been building for decades.

As the next section will explore, the transformation from populist rhetoric to authoritarian rule was not inevitable, but it was made possible by the deep-seated flaws in Italy's democratic system. The erosion of faith in institutions, the appeal of strong leadership, and the promise of national revival all played a role in the rise of Fascist populism, setting the stage for Mussolini's consolidation of power.

## **Part 6: From Populism to Authoritarianism—The Road to Fascism**

By the early 1920s, the conditions that had fueled the rise of populism in Italy—economic instability, political fragmentation, and a deep disillusionment with liberal democracy—had reached a breaking point. What had begun as a movement that claimed to represent “the people” against the failures of the elite was now evolving into something far more radical: a push toward authoritarianism. Italian populism, originally grounded in intellectual critiques and mass mobilization, found its ultimate expression in Benito Mussolini's Fascist movement, which merged the language of popular revolt with a centralized, dictatorial power structure.

One of the defining characteristics of Italian populism was its rejection of traditional political institutions. Figures like Giovanni Papini had long advocated for a break with parliamentary democracy, believing it to be weak, inefficient, and disconnected from the needs of ordinary Italians. This intellectual groundwork provided a framework for Mussolini's own rhetoric, in which he positioned himself as the only leader capable of saving Italy from chaos. His movement absorbed and transformed the populist energy of the time, channeling public frustration into a structured political force that promised national renewal.

However, the shift from populism to authoritarianism was not immediate. In its early stages, Mussolini's Fascist movement presented itself as an alternative to both the corrupt liberal establishment and the rising tide of socialism. He portrayed his movement as one of action, in contrast to the perceived passivity of democratic governance. His ability to harness the language of populism while simultaneously building a paramilitary force—the Blackshirts—allowed him to exert pressure on the government and position himself as Italy's political savior.

The turning point came with the March on Rome in October 1922. While much of Mussolini's support came from disillusioned citizens, his movement also benefited from the backing of industrialists, landowners, and segments of the military who feared socialist uprisings. By presenting Fascism as a force of both national unity and social stability, Mussolini was able to bridge the gap between populist appeal and elite support. The Italian King, Victor Emmanuel III, refused to deploy the army against the Fascists, effectively surrendering power to Mussolini and allowing him to form a government.

Once in power, Mussolini initially maintained the appearance of democratic governance, reassuring Italians that his rule was a corrective measure rather than a full rejection of democracy. However, as

his regime solidified, the populist rhetoric that had brought him to power gave way to a more repressive and dictatorial system. The suppression of political opposition, censorship of the press, and the dismantling of democratic institutions marked the transition from a populist movement to a totalitarian state.

This evolution illustrates a broader historical pattern: populism, when left unchecked, can serve as a gateway to authoritarianism. In the Italian case, the very mechanisms that made populism appealing—its rejection of political elites, its call for decisive leadership, and its mobilization of mass support—were ultimately used to justify the concentration of power in the hands of a single leader. Mussolini's ability to shift from an outsider figure to a dictator underscores the dangers inherent in populist movements that prioritize strength over democratic accountability.

By the late 1920s, Italian Fascism had fully transitioned from a populist uprising into a structured authoritarian regime. The promises of empowering the people had been replaced with a system that suppressed political dissent and enforced strict ideological control. Yet, despite this transformation, the populist foundations of Fascism never entirely disappeared. Mussolini continued to present himself as a man of the people, using mass rallies, propaganda, and state-controlled media to maintain the illusion that his rule was still rooted in popular support.

As we move forward in this book, we will explore how the intellectual roots of Italian populism influenced its political trajectory, how Mussolini's rule evolved over time, and how these historical patterns continue to shape modern Italian populist movements. The next chapter will delve deeper into the contributions of Giovanni Papini and other intellectuals who helped construct the ideological foundations of populism and nationalism in Italy, setting the stage for the rise of Fascism.

## Chapter 2

# Giovanni Papini and the Intellectual Foundations of Italian Populism

### **Part 1: Papini's Early Life and Intellectual Formation**

Giovanni Papini (1881–1956) was one of the most complex and controversial intellectual figures in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italy. A writer, philosopher, and literary provocateur, his work spanned multiple disciplines, reflecting a restless search for meaning and identity. Though he would eventually align himself with Fascism, his early intellectual journey was marked by a deep skepticism of traditional institutions, a fascination with radical change, and an evolving relationship with nationalism. Understanding Papini's early life and intellectual development is crucial to tracing the ideological roots of Italian populism, as his work laid the groundwork for many of the narratives that would later be co-opted by Mussolini's regime.

Papini was born in Florence in 1881 to a modest family. His father, an artisan and a staunch atheist, influenced his early rejection of religious and institutional authority (Baldini, 2018). Florence, with its rich cultural and intellectual history, provided the young Papini with a fertile environment for exploration. However, unlike many of his contemporaries who pursued formal academic careers, Papini was largely self-taught, relying on extensive reading and engagement with avant-garde literary circles to shape his worldview. His autodidacticism would later contribute to his reputation as an independent and often iconoclastic thinker.



One of the defining features of Papini's early intellectual development was his deep dissatisfaction with the status quo. At the turn of the century, Italy was still grappling with the consequences of its unification. The promise of a strong, unified nation had given way to political instability, economic disparity, and social fragmentation. Papini, like many young intellectuals of his time, viewed the liberal democratic system as weak and ineffective, a sentiment that resonated with broader populist and nationalist currents in Italian society (Tóth-Izsó, 2019).

In 1903, at the age of 22, Papini co-founded the literary magazine *Leonardo*, which quickly became a platform for radical intellectual experimentation. The journal was influenced by a wide range of philosophical traditions, including pragmatism, vitalism, and anti-positivism. Papini and his collaborators sought to break with the rationalist and materialist traditions that had dominated European thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, advocating instead for a more intuitive, action-oriented approach to knowledge and politics (Adamson, 1993). This emphasis on action over deliberation would later find echoes in Fascist ideology, which privileged force and will over parliamentary debate and compromise.

Papini's early writings also reveal a fascination with individualism and elitism. He was deeply influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of democracy and mass society, as well as Henri Bergson's concept of creative evolution (Reza, 2018). In his work, Papini frequently positioned himself as a visionary outsider, railing against mediocrity and calling for the emergence of a new intellectual and political elite capable of reshaping Italy's destiny. This rhetoric of renewal and transcendence would later become a key feature of Italian populism, particularly in Mussolini's discourse on national rebirth.

At the same time, Papini's intellectual trajectory was marked by constant evolution and contradiction. In his early career, he identified with anarchist and anti-authoritarian currents, only to later embrace nationalist and, eventually, Fascist ideas. His ideological fluidity

reflects the broader instability of Italian intellectual life in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as many thinkers struggled to reconcile modernity with tradition, democracy with authority, and individualism with collective identity (Livorni, 2002).

By examining Papini's early life and intellectual formation, we gain insight into the foundational ideas that would later shape Italian populism and Fascism. His rejection of liberal democracy, his call for national renewal, and his belief in the power of intellectual elites to guide society all prefigured the political shifts that would take place in the 1920s. As the next sections will explore, Papini's transition from avant-garde intellectual to supporter of Mussolini's regime illustrates the broader transformation of Italian populism from a critique of the establishment to a justification for authoritarian rule.

## **Part 2: The Revolt Against Liberalism and Democracy**

One of the defining features of Giovanni Papini's intellectual evolution was his deep hostility toward liberalism and democracy. His critique of these political systems was not merely rhetorical but deeply rooted in the broader intellectual currents of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. Like many of his contemporaries, Papini saw democracy as an inherently weak and ineffective system, incapable of addressing Italy's political and social crises. His rejection of liberalism, combined with his growing nationalism, positioned him as a key ideological precursor to the populist and authoritarian movements that would dominate Italian politics in the interwar years.

### **Papini and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy**

By the early 1900s, liberal democracy in Italy was facing mounting challenges. The parliamentary system, which had been established after unification, was widely viewed as corrupt and unresponsive to

the needs of ordinary Italians. Political elites engaged in backroom deals and clientelism, reinforcing the perception that the system was designed to serve a privileged few rather than the broader population (Morgan, 2004). Italy's failure to modernize at the pace of other European powers further fueled discontent, particularly among intellectuals who saw democracy as a barrier to national renewal.

Papini's writings from this period reflect a deep frustration with the Italian political system. He argued that liberalism had failed to create a strong and unified Italy, instead producing a fragmented society ruled by indecisive politicians. In his early essays published in *Leonardo*, Papini dismissed democracy as an "illusion" that merely disguised the rule of the incompetent and the weak (Baldini, 2018). His disdain for parliamentary politics aligned with the broader anti-democratic sentiment growing in Italy at the time, which saw figures like Gabriele D'Annunzio and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti championing alternative forms of political engagement based on action and willpower rather than deliberation and debate (Adamson, 1993).

## **The Influence of Nietzsche and Sorel**

Papini's rejection of liberalism was heavily influenced by the philosophical ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche and Georges Sorel. Nietzsche's critique of democracy as a system that promoted mediocrity and suppressed the will of the strong resonated with Papini's vision of a renewed Italy led by an intellectual and political elite (Reza, 2018). Papini saw himself as part of this elite, a thinker who could shape the future by challenging the prevailing norms of his time.

Sorel's theory of myth and violence also played a crucial role in shaping Papini's political thought. Sorel argued that political change could not be achieved through rational persuasion or parliamentary debate but required the creation of powerful myths that could mobilize the

masses. Papini adopted this idea, believing that Italy needed a new national myth that could inspire its people and break free from the stagnation of liberal governance (Morgan, 2004). This belief in the transformative power of myth would later be echoed in Mussolini's rhetoric, particularly in his concept of Fascism as a revolutionary force that could restore Italy's greatness.

### **Nationalism and the Rejection of Individualism**

As his intellectual career progressed, Papini's opposition to liberalism became increasingly tied to nationalism. He saw individualism—the foundation of liberal thought—as an obstacle to national unity. In his view, Italy needed a collective identity that transcended personal interests and political factions. This perspective was reflected in his later embrace of corporatism, the idea that society should be organized into functional groups working together for the common good, rather than being divided by class or political ideology (Tóth-Izsó, 2019).

Papini's critique of individualism was not just theoretical but deeply personal. He viewed the modern intellectual, detached from national concerns, as a symptom of Italy's decline. His calls for a stronger, more cohesive society laid the groundwork for the authoritarian vision that would dominate Italian populism in the 1920s. While he was not yet explicitly advocating for dictatorship, his rejection of democratic pluralism and his emphasis on unity made his ideas highly compatible with the emerging Fascist movement.

### **Papini's Role in the Intellectual Climate of the Early 20th Century**

By the 1910s, Papini had established himself as a leading figure in Italy's intellectual landscape. His rejection of liberalism and democracy, combined with his advocacy for a new nationalist ethos, reso-

nated with a generation of thinkers who were disillusioned with the status quo. Though he did not directly participate in politics, his ideas helped to create a climate in which radical change was seen as not only desirable but necessary.

His transition from an avant-garde literary figure to a nationalist thinker mirrored the broader shift in Italian intellectual life, where increasing numbers of writers and philosophers abandoned liberal ideals in favor of more authoritarian alternatives. This transformation was not unique to Italy; across Europe, similar trends were emerging, as intellectuals sought solutions to the perceived failures of democratic governance.

Papini's role in this shift was significant because he provided an intellectual framework that justified authoritarianism as a legitimate response to Italy's challenges. His emphasis on action, unity, and national renewal foreshadowed the rhetoric that would be used by Mussolini and other populist leaders in the years to come.

Papini's rejection of liberalism and democracy was not an isolated intellectual exercise but part of a broader movement that laid the foundation for Italian populism and Fascism. His critiques of parliamentary inefficiency, his embrace of nationalism, and his fascination with elite leadership all contributed to the ideological landscape that Mussolini would later exploit. While Papini himself remained an intellectual rather than a political leader, his ideas were instrumental in shaping the discourse that enabled the rise of authoritarian populism in Italy.

### **Part 3: War, Revolution, and the Call for National Rebirth**

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Giovanni Papini's intellectual evolution had brought him to a critical juncture where his philosophical musings on

action and renewal intersected with the emerging discourse of war and revolution. Like many radical thinkers of his time, Papini viewed war not as a catastrophe to be avoided but as a necessary force for national and spiritual regeneration. His writings during this period reflected a growing belief that Italy could only be reborn through conflict, a conviction that would later be echoed in Fascist rhetoric.

### **The Myth of War as a Purifying Force**

War, in Papini's view, was not merely a political or military event but a transformative act. Influenced by the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche and Georges Sorel, he saw war as a means of breaking with the decadence of liberal democracy and reinvigorating a people who had grown weak under its rule (Adamson, 1993). In this sense, war was not just about national defense or territorial expansion—it was a crucible through which a new, stronger Italy could be forged.

Papini was not alone in this perspective. Many European intellectuals in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly those associated with Futurism and nationalism, embraced war as a creative and regenerative force. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the founder of Futurism, famously glorified war as “the world's only hygiene,” a sentiment that resonated with Papini's own calls for radical transformation (Baldini, 2018). For both men, war was a means of sweeping away the old order and creating something new and vital.

This belief in war's purifying power was deeply tied to the broader themes of Italian populism. By framing war as a necessary step in Italy's revival, Papini reinforced the populist notion that the country's problems stemmed from the weakness and corruption of its elites. War, in this context, was not only a national endeavor but a populist one, representing the will of the “true people” against the forces of stagnation and compromise.