

DisCrit and Anti-Fascist Education

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DisCrit and Anti-Fascist Education: Lessons from Gobetti's Story of Sebastiano the Rooster, Otherwise known as the Thirteenth Egg

DisCrit e Educazione all'Anti-Fascismo: Lezioni da *Storia del Gallo Sebastiano* di Ada Gobetti

Call • L'eredità dei maestri e delle maestre. Un dialogo attivo e critico che rimarrà aperto

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical analysis of Ada Gobetti's *Story of Sebastiano the Rooster, Otherwise known as the Thirteenth Egg* through the lens of Disability Critical Race Studies in Education (DisCrit) (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013), and particularly DisCrit Solidarity (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). The focus of our analysis is on Gobetti's lessons about the importance of educational interventions to challenge fascism—lessons that remain eerily relevant to the present socio-political moment. The paper focuses on three key themes in the text: (i) critiquing anxiety and shame of difference and disability; (ii) interrogating ableism and eugenics; and (iii) resisting the pressure for conformity. We conclude by affirming the relevance of *Sebastiano* as an educational tool for Western nations, where we currently witness similar fears of difference (e.g. sexuality/trans*, race/ethnicity, immigrant/refugee), within educational institutions and the larger society.

Keywords: Gobetti; Disability Critical Race Studies in Education; Anti-Fascist Education

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Introduction

Born in 1902 in Turin, Italy, Ada Prospero Gobetti was an Italian translator, educational reformer, civil rights activist and anti-fascist partisan during the Italian Resistance Movement (*Resistenza*), which aimed to counter fascism and German occupation during the Second World War (WWII). As a partisan, Gobetti was instrumental in organizing women, who despite social, cultural, and political obstacles, became a key (though often unacknowledged) political force in the Italian resistance (Alano, 2016). In recognition of her role and influence, she became the first woman to serve as vice-mayor of Turin after the war (WWII).

In her book, *Diario Partigiano* (1956), which was later translated into English as *Partisan Diary: A Woman's Life in the Italian Resistance* (Gobetti, 2014), Gobetti offered an almost daily chronicle of anti-fascist organizing and resistance carried out by women workers, peasants, housewives, intellectuals, and others from 1943 to 1945 during the German occupation. An early cover of the book featured a photo of Gobetti wearing a belted, white sleeveless dress with heavy-duty boots. She is on one knee and aiming a handgun. Working collectively, she documents how partisans (including her own son) carried out bombings of crucial infrastructure and engaged in armed combat. Partisans also typeset and disseminated pamphlets and delivered secret messages to help coordinate movements. They smuggled weapons and dynamite and secured much needed provisions and sustenance, such as clothing and food, and offered shelter in a series of safe houses (Thomson, 2014). Gobetti's diary chronicles all of these many acts of resistance.

Gobetti's Early Activism

Although Gobetti's adult life was very much a "life of resistance" (Alano, 2016), her interest in revolutionary ideas and political organizing began much earlier. By the time Ada attended *Liceo* (high school), Italy was entering WWI. Ada spoke four languages and was an accomplished musician. Her final thesis focused on American pragmatism. During this time, she met a well-known anti-Fascist activist, Piero Gobetti¹, whom she later married. As her relationship to Piero deepened, so did her knowledge of revolutionary politics and ideologies. Ada began to publish articles for student periodicals and underground publications—some of which she and Piero co-edited. To augment her income and disseminate critical works to Italian intellectuals, she also wrote reviews and translated a number of books into Italian.

Among the books she translated were works of political history and literature, but with a clear intention to challenge Italian fascists, who were gaining influence at the time. In 1938, for example, Gobetti translated Zora Neale Hurston's (1937) *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, just as the Fascist regime in Italy increasingly and more openly embraced racism and antisemitism. A number of her translations were suppressed by Mussolini for challenging fascist propaganda. Still, her work as a translator and teacher sustained her financially after Piero's untimely death just three years into their marriage. Piero Gobetti died in exile in 1926, at age 24 after complications he suffered as a consequence of extreme beatings he received from the fascists.

Crafting a politics grounded in an "inclusive ethic of liberation" (Salvio, 2018, p. 346), Gobetti understood the need to dismantle interlocking systems of oppression. A single mother for 11 years after Piero's death, Ada's politics extended to promoting progressive educational reforms and women's rights. She critiqued, for instance, traditional patriarchal structures of Italian family life, which, she insisted, prepared children to be subservient to other forms of domination (Salvio, 2018). A strong promoter of democratic and progressive education as a way to fight fascism, Gobetti advocated for educational reforms that focused on creative expression and critical thinking—seeking a pedagogy that promoted both constructivism and active learning. In 1940 Gobetti (under the pseudonym, Margutte) published an antifascist children's

1 Piero Gobetti was a well known Italian anti-fascist intellectual and activist. He and Ada were married in 1923 in Turin, Italy. Their home would become a center of underground resistance.



book titled *The Story of Sebastiano the Rooster, Otherwise known as the Thirteenth Egg*². In the storybook, Gobetti depicts the main character *Sebastiano* as a non-conforming rooster, deviating in every way from the compulsory norms imposed on his family and community (McRuer, 2010). Sebastiano is different in terms of his learning, his corporality, and his ability to do things that are expected of him by his society—because of his difference he is often seen as a problem to manage, shun, segregate, and even hide. A subtext of the story aims to counter these messages and teach children about the importance of solidarity across difference and learning to value and celebrate individuality, diversity, difference, disability, and inclusion as a means to rejecting Fascist dictates for conformity and enforced normalcy. In this way *Sebastiano* is not simply a charming story, but an intentional extension of Gobetti’s anti-fascist work—connected to her other forms of activism and resistance against the fascism but delivered in a way that would appeal to children and parents alike.

In the remaining sections of this article, we provide a critical analysis of *Sebastiano*, the first of several children’s books by Gobetti. We adopt a Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) framework (Annamma et al., 2013), and particularly DisCrit solidarity (Annamma & Morrison, 2018) to shed light on the lessons that Gobetti has to teach us through *Sebastiano*, particularly the importance of educational interventions in the face of fascism—lessons that remain eerily relevant to the present socio-political moment. We begin with a brief synopsis of the book and Gobetti’s intention to promote anti-fascism through education. We follow the synopsis with an overview of DisCrit and DisCrit solidarity and their affordances to Gobetti’s anti-fascist educational aims. Our analysis of *Sebastiano* through a DisCrit solidarity lens focuses on three key aims in the text: (i) critiquing anxiety and shame of difference and disability; (ii) interrogating ableism and eugenics; and (iii) resisting the pressure for conformity. Quotes from the original manuscript have been translated from Italian to English by the third author of this paper. We conclude by affirming the relevance of *Sebastiano* as an educational tool for Western nations, where we currently witness similar fears of difference (e.g. sexuality/trans*, race/ethnicity, immigrant/refugee), within educational institutions and the larger society.

Resisting Fascist Ideology with a Rooster Named Sebastiano

In 1940, Gobetti’s, *The Story of Sebastiano the Rooster, Otherwise known as the Thirteenth Egg*, offered a subversive and critical analysis of fascist dictates of conformity and compulsory normalcy. The story was first conceived in 1938, as Ada shared the adventures of the unconventional rooster with her 12-year-old son Paolo and her second husband Ettore Marchesini, who drew the original illustrations in the book. The story took shape during their family hikes into the mountains, taken to distract themselves from Mussolini’s visit to Turin and fascist rallies that were gaining momentum in the surrounding areas at the time. Gobetti’s aim in publishing the story was to assert that children have a genuine need for non-conformity and understanding diversity, including disability, using the character of Sebastiano to encourage their ability to resist the dictates of fascist ideology. We also see in Sebastiano Gobetti’s use of what we might recognize as DisCrit solidarity to enact these anti-fascist and anti-ableist lessons. For example, Gobetti describes the protagonist, Sebastiano, as a celebration of diversity, non-conformity, and non-normativity, teaching children the value of friendship, self-reliance, and optimism. She describes the book as a “survival manual for children living in very difficult times” (Alano, 2002, 154). She writes:

2 The story was first published by Gobetti in 1940 as an antifascist children’s book under the pseudonym Margutte. It was subsequently published in 1963, with Gobetti as the author, by Einaudi, Torino. A French translation by Henri Louette titled, *Un Coq pas comme les autres (A Rooster Unlike the Others)*, was published in 1977. The current publisher, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Roma, published the most recent version in 2019. The third author of this article translated the text into English, since there has never been an English translation.



The strange little rooster, who never succeeded in walking in step with the others, who always did exactly the opposite of what was expected of him, on the contrary embodied in himself a symbol of the need for nonconformity that has been alive in all children since the beginning of time. It assumed a particular meaning and value in that period of almost absolute and complete conformity because Sebastiano was born at the height of fascism (Gobetti in Alano, 2016, p. 84).

In the book, Gobetti uses humor to expose absurdities of life under fascism, but also as a means to express critique. Disguised as a funny little story about a norm breaking rooster, Gobetti mocks fascism and its need for absolute conformity, its unquestioning adherence to rules and regulations, as well as the shallowness of bourgeois society more broadly. Gobetti purposely chose children³ as her audience, whom she believed to be essential in convincing Italians to resist fascism. She focused on education, as a key site of political struggle. Right wing and authoritarian political regimes, such as fascism, often seek to reformulate curriculum, enact book and curricular bans, and remake teaching practices in order to consolidate power, challenge liberal democracy, and amplify their message and influence future generations. As Giroux (2022) explains, authoritarian regimes often enact,

reactionary educational policies that range from banning books and the teaching of ‘critical race theory’ to forcing educators to sign loyalty oaths, post their syllabuses online, give up tenure, allow students to film their classes and much more (112).

Conversely, democratic education focuses on critical thinking, individual and collective agency and resistance, an ethics grounded in a concern and care for others, and fostering imagination and creativity, according to Giroux. Gobetti, too, understood the need to offer a counter argument to this influence from the right by offering a critique of its underlying assumptions and dictates and by offering an alternative vision and world view that celebrated all that the fascist regime was condemning.

Importantly, unlike the well-known story of the “Ugly Duckling,” (Andersen, 1971), which shares certain features of Sebastiano (both characters face ostracism for not conforming to norms), Gobetti’s Sebastiano teaches an appreciation and love of difference, rather than celebrating his eventual assimilation to predetermined norms. Gobetti also completely eschews the “super crip” trope (Schalk, 2016; Shapiro, 1994) so common in disability representations, whereby the disabled character succeeds against all odds or compensates with extraordinary abilities. Instead, Sebastiano is a celebration of individuality, nonconformity, difference, and understanding disability⁴. Through her description of Sebastiano’s relationships throughout the story, especially with the old sage, Calisto, Gobetti privileges disability solidarity and epistemic insights of minoritized perspectives rather than an assimilation. In the following section of the article, we illustrate DisCrit Solidarity as the theoretical lens adopted for the analysis of Gobetti’s manuscript. We shed light on the pedagogical affordances of DisCrit Solidarity as an intersectional, interdisciplinary framework to critically examine the main themes emerging from the story of Sebastiano. We also emphasize the contributions of DisCrit Solidarity to contemporary inclusive education practices in Italian schools.

- 3 Hoping, perhaps, that the book might be used in classrooms or read by parents, the story included an appendix of exercises for children to complete after reading the book, including creating sentences with adjectives to describe Sebastiano: “absent-minded, awkward, timid, negligent, out-of-tune, critical, capricious, terrible, courageous, and happy” to allow children to fully appreciate the non-conformist little rooster. Another activity asked children to consider the lessons the author was trying to teach them.
- 4 We see disability as a construct that is defined by a particular moment-time/context. Often linked to deficit thinking, disability status signals that one has failed to meet pre-determined norms set by the dominant group, which challenges ones standing in the community and puts one at risk of exclusion and segregation. We believe Sebastiano embodies disability in terms of corporeal difference and in the way that he struggles to learn basic skills expected of him as a young rooster. He is seen as trying hard to conform and meet expectations, but always seems to not quite measure up to his peers/siblings. Calisto is also described as disabled.



DisCrit Solidarity: affordances for contemporary anti-fascist education

Given Gobetti's enactment of a critical, resistant solidarity to resist normalcy and able-bodiedness, we have chosen DisCrit solidarity as the theoretical framework to guide our critical analysis of *Sebastiano*. We believe that such lens can highlight the counter-hegemonic pedagogical approaches that are necessary to challenge new forms of fascism spreading rapidly in most western democracies⁵. DisCrit solidarity can inform pedagogical philosophies and practices aimed at addressing some of the most pressing issues that teachers face in contemporary Italian schools, such as the inclusion of migrant and forced migrant students. In this way, we argue that *Sebastiano* remains relevant and timely to the present moment.

Disability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) exposes the interdependent constructions of race and ability. It shows how historical conceptualizations of human differences, developed in the fields of phrenology, eugenics, racial anthropology and physiognomy, has been used to justify slavery, segregation, unequal treatment, violence and murder (Annamma, et al., 2013). DisCrit emphasizes that the experiences of marginalized, diverse and disabled communities is not a product of singular markers of identity, but rather the amalgamation of these labels (Crenshaw, 1991). We come to understand that regardless of whether (or not) *Sebastiano* adopts mainstream norms, he is still subject to exclusionary practices on account of his status as disabled. This allows us to explore ways in which other animals in the story position *Sebastiano* as outsider, regardless of his effort to assimilate. The first tenet of DisCrit centers on the idea that both race and disability are social constructs that allow powerful majorities to pathologize minoritized people, to maintain historical distributions of power. As such, labels and performative expectations, set out by the characters and the microcosm of the chicken coop in Gobetti's story, function to subvert any attempt *Sebastiano* makes to become part of what it is believed to be mainstream society. Translated within the contemporary pedagogical context of Italy, the first tenet of DisCrit presents how prescribed identities for racialized migrant students with disabilities – vis-à-vis assigned labels – function to uphold both racist and ableist ideology (Migliarini & Cioè-Pena, 2022). Said differently, *Sebastiano* and any other non-conforming students, such as disabled migrant and forced migrant students in Italian classrooms, are not only performing an identity, they are also beholden to its expectations and limitations. DisCrit also allows us to understand the 'material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or disabled, which sets one outside of the mainstream cultural norms' (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). These labels are weaponized in order to manipulate power relationships and uphold systems of oppression in meaningful and tangible ways. It is because of his very positioning, as non-conforming and disabled by the majority of the characters in Gobetti's story, that *Sebastiano* remains an outsider throughout the story.

DisCrit also pushes us to privilege the voices of students who have been marginalized because of said labels (Annamma, et al., 2013). Drawing on the disability rights mantra of 'Nothing about us, without us' (Charlton, 2000), DisCrit pushes researchers to include the experiences of marginalized people with disabilities in ways that focus not on their perceived deficits but on the strengths, contributions, and knowledge practices of these communities. DisCrit 'invites understanding of ways students respond to injustices (i.e. being constructed as deficient, or being segregated and stigmatized) through fostering or attending to counter-narratives and explicitly reading these stories against the grain of master narratives' (Annamma, et al., 2013, p. 14). We also draw from Lewis (2022) to define ableism as "a system assigning value to people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in eugenics, anti-Blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism" (§ 3). Rather than specifically attending to the impact of ableism on students who are explicitly classified as disabled, this broader definition of ableism helps us to capture the interdependent ways in which notions of dis/ability and race are con-

5 Articles on far-right parties ruling in Europe: Italy, <https://www.ft.com/content/530de94d-6aef-45d7-aa8e-a1211284745c>; Sweden and Europe, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/sep/18/observer-view-dangerous-rise-of-far-right-europe>



structured in specific contexts. We see clear connections between this aspect of DisCrit and Gobetti's narration on Sebastiano, his views of the world around him, his friendships, and his difficulties in being accepted as non-conforming.

DisCrit solidarity has its roots in the DisCrit framework, and it seeks to promote healthy ecologies in educational contexts, whereby all students are valued and seen as integral to the "health" of the entire educational system (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). Just as Gobetti does through the story of Sebastiano, DisCrit solidarity views the actions and reactions of marginalized communities to hegemonic education norms as strategies for resistance and recognizes them as meaningful (Migliarini & Stinson, 2021). DisCrit solidarity, like Gobetti's Sebastiano, counteracts the hegemonic forces of racism, capitalism, and neoliberalism, and their impact on historically marginalized students and communities (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). To commit to understanding resistance and building solidarity in education and in society is to explicitly reject ableist social and cultural practices that reproduce inequities and dehumanize different bodies. In Gobetti's book, DisCrit solidarity figures at different stages of the story, but mostly through the relationship between Sebastiano and Calisto, the old and wise disabled rooster. Calisto always understands *Sebastiano* and his actions, and throughout the story pushes him to challenge ableist ideologies, and to resist and reject conformity to the world is living in. In doing so, Gobetti attempts to show alternative ecologies where relationships are based on the necessity of creating counter-spaces against dominant social experiences (Ross et al., 2016).

Transferred within the context of contemporary Italian schools, DisCrit solidarity can help teachers and school professionals to re-think and reframe inclusive tools, such as the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) and the Personalized Didactical Plan (PDP) (Migliarini et al., 2022). DisCrit solidarity can enrich these tools with person-centered and culturally relevant strategies that address the intersecting needs of all students, and especially disabled migrant and forced migrant students. Finally, DisCrit solidarity can help teachers and school professionals dealing with their own dysconscious biases: challenging pathological views of disability, diversity, and dominant constructions of "normalcy" used to rank, categorize, and pathologize students (Broderick & Lavani, 2017). The remaining sections of this article focuses on some of the themes that emerge from our analysis of Gobetti's manuscript and its relevance to DisCrit solidarity.

Critiquing Anxiety and Shame of Difference and Disability

Piumaliscia [/Puma lee sha/], Sebastiano's mother, is named for the smoothness of her feathers. Perfection, it seems, has been passed down from her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother, who all share the same name and characteristics. Piumaliscia's family has always lived and fit in a society, where absurd pressure for absolute conformity, unquestioning adherence to rules and regulations, as well as the shallowness of external appearance are greatly valued. Given this family history, the monstrous birth of a 13th 'deformed', irregular, and ugly egg, who comes to be named Sebastiano, generates abject panic in Piumaliscia. Gobetti emphasizes Piumaliscia's anxiety and shame towards difference, preoccupies her every thought, especially when she has to introduce the egg to the rest of the animals on the farm:

No doubt about it—ugly is ugly... crooked is crooked... and then the thirteenth! How can I present it to all those curious eyes? Imagine how Aldagisa would run her mouth with gossip!... What should I do now, what should I do? (p. 26)

Displaying her dysconscious bias, Piumaliscia fears that the perfection and dignity of her family would be jeopardized by the 'deformed' egg. She is under the normalizing pressure of society, and is anxious about other animals' judgment and gossip. Due to the pressure for conformity and normality, she is convinced that this ugly egg is a personal tragedy for her and her family, causing eternal disgrace and embarrassment. She is haunted, too, by the specter that this misshapen egg might signify another stain on the family tree, as exemplified by her mentioning another nonconforming member in the family tree,



Acadia, whose story is told to the young hatchlings to warn them of the danger of being different:

And she, precisely she, would dishonor the name of the Perbenino family—the fault of that wretched egg—in the future, instead of Arcadia’s story, they would tell the chicks the story of Piumaliscia and her crooked egg... No! It was impossible! (p. 26)

Through Piumaliscia’s anxiety, Gobetti channels Italians’ attitude towards diversity as a personal, individual tragedy and ‘disgrace’, to be dealt mostly through acts of compassionate charity (D’Alessio, 2011). Within the Italian context, the pressure generated by the individual tragedy ideology of disability is made worse by the pressure of the public opinion, which according to DisCrit solidarity, represents society’s normalizing force. In the book, Piumaliscia is afraid of what other animals may think of the ‘deformed’ egg, and she feels extremely embarrassed when hearing the comments of Nicomede:

These are misfortunes that happen,” the baritone voice of the pheasant Nicomede was meanwhile saying, “and nothing can be done about them... surely, surely... But what a dishonor for a family! What a stain on its name! (p. 26).

According to Nicomede and other animals of the farm, the ‘deformed’ egg would bring embarrassment to Piumaliscia’s family and interrupt the tradition of perfection and conformity that characterized the family name for generations. To escape such humiliation, Piumaliscia considers hiding the egg, even abandoning it. However, even when driven by anxiety and fear of difference, Piumaliscia’s maternal instincts eventually prevail. As she considers her options, she hides the strange looking egg and darts off to consult Calisto, an old rooster who is described by Gobetti as nearsighted, hearing impaired, distractible, and absent-minded. Speaking with a stutter, Calisto’s crip status contributes to (or at least does not disqualify him from) being revered as wise:

I think that it was these exact flaws of his that obtained him respect and admiration among the virile and accomplished roosters—he [Calisto] appeared to them as a creature from another world and another time, who possessed within himself something extraordinary and miraculous (p. 13).

As the story explains, everyone turned to Calisto when they needed advice on an important matter. Right from the beginning of the story, Calisto shows an inclusive attitude and a display of solidarity towards the ‘deformed’ 13th egg. In fact, he advises Piumaliscia to sit on the egg, to hatch it like all her other eggs, and to name it Sebastiano (which is not a family name or a name that the mother recognizes at all)—foreshadowing that Sebastiano will “belong” to a wider notion of family/community. Embodying the principles of DisCrit solidarity, such as resisting able-bodiedness and centering the experiences of marginalized people, Calisto is the first and only character who challenges Piumaliscia and the normalized social practices of the hencoop, embracing and nurturing Sebastiano’s identity. Despite Calisto suggesting that the mother embrace Sebastiano for who he is, throughout the book, Piumaliscia’s fears of diversity, which align with discourses of ableism and eugenics, drive her actions and disapproval. The following section explores sections of the story in which ableism and eugenics are applied to explain Sebastiano as a very different “type” of rooster.

Critique of Ableism and Eugenics

In the first part of the book, Gobetti tells the reader that Sebastiano’s family name is “Perbenino” [*per ba nino*], which literally means to “do good.” This name symbolizes the family’s long standing reputation of “doing the right thing,” by conforming to social norms and expectations. Everyone in the family seems to be beautiful and smooth, and particularly Piumaliscia. In one of the first illustrations in the book, Piumaliscia is represented leaning over a low vanity with various grooming products: a perfume mister, small



scissors, and other small bottles. She is powdering her beak with a large puff as she examines her image in a large ornate mirror. One can guess that she takes extreme care of her external appearance and is committed to maintaining the family's beauty standards. Besides her looks, the mother is most revered for the "regularity and precision" of her egg laying:

Piumaliscia bent over the eggs and lightly pecked one with her beak. Suddenly the shell opened into two exact halves and out came a little yellow chick, all groomed with a tiny blue tassel around its neck. It bowed graciously to the guests and positioned itself to the right of the Peacock. The operation was repeated eleven more times, among silence and customary attention. [...] At the end, no less than twenty-four half shells remained in the cradle that were then distributed to the guests as good luck charms, and at each side of the Peacock's armchair, six chicks were lined up, perfectly identical, ordered and composed. Piumaliscia, tired but happy, handed the Peacock a roll of parchment, that he unrolled and from which he read the names that were written on it, alternately touching the head of a chick on the right and one on the left, with an artificial plume that he wore attached to his train with an automatic button to use for such occasions. (p. 28).

In these excerpts we see Gobetti's attempts to show a parallel between Piumaliscia's world view and the valuing of conformity and normativity that characterized Italian society during the fascist era. As described by Gobetti, each and everyone of Piumaliscia's chicks, and indeed every member of the family, must go through a process of depersonalization and adherence to compulsory normativity in order to fit into the mainstream society. The picture that Gobetti describes is a creative co-mingling of ableism and eugenic "fitter family contests," made popular during the eugenics era in the U.S., the debutante "coming out" balls of bourgeois society, and the fascist military-style parades that were spreading across Italy at the time. But, as Piumaliscia is parading her perfect brood of chicks, she has purposely left the 13th egg back at the farm contrary to Calisto's instructions. It is here that Sebastiano experiences his first brush with danger:

Meanwhile, back at the farm, the farmer's daughter finds the odd-looking egg and decides to cook it for her lunch. Dropping it in boiling water, the egg cracks open and out steps a "bewildered and very badly shaken Sebastiano." Emerging from his inauspicious beginning, Sebastiano is described as having a "tiny little body with two thin legs and an enormous head (pp. 31-32).

In addition to a feminist critique of bourgeois women, valued only for their appearance (like Piumaliscia's smooth feathers) or their reproductive capacity, ableist and eugenic ideologies clearly haunt the family tree—a haunting so central to the family's identity that the family crest features the story of two aunts—the disorder(ly) Arcadia and the non-conforming Serafina, thus linking the appearance of Sebastiano and the problematic and unfit stain that haunts the family bloodline.

Back in the barnyard, Sebastiano has ongoing difficulties meeting the simplest of expectations, further aligning him with the rogue Arcadia and Serafina and cementing the idea that his physical difference is tied to his diminished mental capacity. Trying to make the best of an otherwise worrying situation, Piumaliscia embraces the supercrip trope, believing that Sebastiano will grow up to be exceptional, extraordinary, and "*maybe even a genius*" (p. 39) Piumaliscia is committed to build an identity for Sebastiano, which would compensate for his obvious differences:

Why couldn't he be an extraordinary rooster, a genius, destined to leave a profound mark on the life of the entire, to give new splendor the Perbenino coat of arms. He could have a phenomenal memory and become the Pico della Mirandola [Renaissance philosopher] of the hencoop. He could be a new Archimedes and step out of his bath one day shouting a prodigious word that would be remembered across the centuries—or he could have the soul of a poet, the flair of a musician, the creativity of an artist! (p. 39).

Admitting to herself that her son was, "*Truly a desperation!*" (p.39). Piumaliscia continued to repeat



to herself that all the geniuses, the true and great ones, are disorganized and distracted—that they do not know how to deal with the practicalities of life. The general rules, therefore, cannot be applied to them—or by association Sebastiano. This narrative is again an example of how Piumaliscia fails to embrace DisCrit solidarity. Contrary to Calisto, who accepts Sebastiano for who he is, Piumaliscia tries at all costs to make Sebastiano fit societal and educational norms, without fully grasping his personality and natural attitude. When this seems like an impossible reality, that is when Sebastiano fails to conform to such norms, she decides that maybe he will be exceptional—and thereby worthy of acceptance. The contrast between Piumaliscia and Calisto’s response to Sebastiano mirrors the tensions between the resilience of ableism and eugenic ideology and the resistance to these discourses through authentic solidarity. The following section illustrates the pressure that Sebastiano experiences to conform to exclusionary norms.

Critique of the Pressure for Conformity

In the book, Gobetti chooses education as the field in which Sebastiano is most pressured by his mother and brothers to conform to social norms and expectations. It is not surprising that Gobetti dedicates an entire section of the manuscript to the educational pressures that the young nonconforming rooster has to face. In fact, it seems the perfect metaphor to illustrate the purpose of education during the fascist era in Italy: creating submissive and obedient citizens that would fear authority, and thereby sustain oligarchic power. Since he was born, Piumaliscia attempted to make him a more good-looking and well-behaved rooster, by teaching him literacy, poetry, music, math and etiquette—all the compulsory subjects for a complete education in the story. Although she was trying to convince herself that Sebastiano’s strange behavior could have been justified by the fact that he might be a ‘genius,’ in the second part of the book Piumaliscia is quick to express her biases and to affirm the impossibility for Sebastiano to be educated or to ‘fit in’ to society:

However, educating him was a hopeless endeavor. Not that he didn’t want to be well mannered—on the contrary he made unheard-of efforts to behave like the others—but he was so naturally distracted and clumsy that every one of his moves was a calamity, every gesture a disaster. If he walked, he stomped on everyone’s feet. Wherever he passed, he hit his head against the doorjamb and remained stunned for a good ten minutes. If he picked up a fragile object with his claw, he dropped it on the floor without fail. If he leaned against a curtain, he became caught in it with the stump of his tail and tore it. If he even slightly touched a carpet, he pulled it behind him. Consequently, as soon as he moved everyone looked at him with terror, and since he moved continually, you could imagine what an ongoing party it was for the whole family! (pp. 40-41)

Sebastiano pushed himself really hard to try and learn alongside his siblings and to please his mother-teacher. However, most of the time his real personality would show through and he would once again be seen as a failure. In part 2 of the book, Sebastiano endeavors to learn poetry and math, but he would just be bored due to the repetition and the constraining atmosphere in the “classroom”:

Yet it couldn’t be said that Sebastiano was mindless, that he didn’t understand, that he didn’t have memory. On the contrary he understood and remembered everything perfectly and in the most unexpected and ill-timed moments shouted out the sentence or rule that had been studied on that day. But it was enough to ask him to repeat it, to make him take on the usual sleepy air and forget how to respond or correlate things.

And it couldn’t even be said that he did it on purpose! Rather, he was full of good will—he would have given who knows what to not be continually scolded. But he was made that way. Not even he knew why—he had to always do and say the absolute opposite of what others expected of him! (p. 47)

As it happens with multiply-marginalized students, living at the intersections of multiple oppressions,



in the context of contemporary Italian classrooms, Sebastiano's actions and efforts were subjectively judged by Piumaliscia against the standards of education that she had set for all her chicks. Rather than following the tenets of DisCrit solidarity by being inquisitive and responsive to Sebastiano and questioning her own pedagogical approach or accommodating his difference, she locates the problem in Sebastiano as an individual, and attempts to 'fix' him instead.

The one aspect that becomes even more problematic to Piumaliscia is Sebastiano's critical approach to the subjects taught and the education he is receiving:

"But as soon as the little game was no longer a novelty, a new peculiarity emerged—a tendency to doubt and to critique, that was truly worrisome.

Sebastiano would start to get agitated at his desk as if he sat on burning coals. He would cough, raise his leg, do everything possible to draw attention from his mother who finally was forced to ask him: "Well, Sebastiano, what do you want? Is something the matter?"

"Why does two times two always have to equal four? Can't it equal five for once?"

"But, Sebastiano, what goes on in your mind? Who ever heard it said that two times two equals five?"

"I could say it now... and you would be the first to hear it..." insinuated Sebastiano with the sweetest smile, bowing his little head towards his shoulder to make himself seem even more endearing.

And the arithmetic lessons became a succession of continuous arguments and quarrels between Piumaliscia and Sebastiano, while the others who didn't understand a thing, watched them, alternating their beaks towards one and then the other, without wrapping their heads around which one they should give credence". (pp. 49-52)

As in fascist educational regimes, questioning the order of things was not well received by Sebastiano's teacher/mother. When education is about conformity and control, students who exhibit a natural curiosity or critical thinking often end up being subjected to disciplinary actions and exclusion from educational settings. The legacy of this regime is reproduced in contemporary classrooms where Black and Brown and disabled students are subject to harsher forms of discipline, as well as temporary and permanent forms of school exclusion (Migliarini & Annamma, 2019). Gobetti makes this parallel very clear in the book when she describes Sebastiano's actions and how they were received by his mother/teacher. Throughout the second part of the book, we see Piumaliscia's ambivalence towards Sebastiano: on the one hand she pushes him to stop being overly critical and questioning everything and, on the other, she eventually comes to accept his uniqueness. A key moment in the text occurs when Piumaliscia's pedagogy finally prevails and Sebastiano (after much practice) learns how to walk and march with the correct rhythm. Yet, ironically, it is the practicing of the standard way of marching that inadvertently leads Sebastiano far from his mother and brothers, as he marches absentmindedly right out of the farm and into the wider world:

"And Sebastiano continued to walk with his heart swollen with pride, happy—he was satisfied with himself, with his family, with the cuckoo, the world and life in general. His mother was right to say that it was beautiful and easy to walk that way! And he who for so long had not succeeded... Now though, he had become excellent—one-two, one-two... cu-cu, cu-cu...

But what long exercises they did that day! They had never walked that much! Wasn't it time for an afternoon snack?

Sebastiano opened his eyes as if awakening. He looked around—he was alone." (p. 63)

In the second half of the text, we see Sebastiano encountering a whole new world where he has the opportunity to gain new perspectives and insights, further separating himself both figuratively and spatially from the dictates and expectations of his former life.

The Outside World



As stated, a key moment in the plot begins on a day that was like every other day in the young rooster's life, in "school." Formal education for all the chicks in the Perbenino family involves homeschooling, taught by their mother, Piumaliscia. Their lessons, very much in line with fascist ideals of education at the time, sought to instill in the young a "sound mind in a sound body" (Alano, 2012, p. 167). On this day, Sebastiano is thoroughly engrossed in practicing his marching skills, trying with great difficulty to achieve perfect rhythm and step with his siblings. Sebastiano, who often has trouble in school, was finally feeling the correct rhythm of his steps, when he absentmindedly marches right out of the hencoop. As he marches away from the safety of the coop and his family, he inadvertently embarks on a kind of "tour of the world," encountering a host of new animals, and an all too familiar experience of rejection for being perceived as different.

In his first encounter, Sebastiano arrives at a school for calves. Timidly, Sebastiano enters and addresses the teacher to ask permission to join the school. The teacher quickly dismisses him for not conforming to expectations. Try as he might to fit in and respond in expected ways, he is not and never will be a calf. Next he encounters a shoe factory filled with a workforce made up completely of rabbits. Time has passed since he left the hencoop and he has become hungrier and hungrier, so he decides to ask the foreman for work. Once again he is rejected, this time for not being a rabbit. The foreman suggests that the place for Sebastiano is a hospital—presumably to seek a cure for his obvious difference. Once at the hospital, however, the sheep briefly examine him before redirecting him once again, this time to a psychiatric hospital. Sebastiano receives the message that he is not fit for school nor work, and because his "ailments" cannot be cured or remediated, the only place left is an institutionalized setting—a psychiatric hospital. But on his way to find the psychiatric hospital, he accidentally offends a couple of pigs building a house who chase after him with their shovels. Tired, hungry, and suffering from all of the various rejections he has experienced, Sebastiano is dejected and homesick. Filled with grief, he lies "*crumpled on the ground like a heap of rags*" (p. 87) and despairs:

"They treated me worse and worse..." he said to himself crying. "The Steer didn't want me, but at least he was kind and it was clear that he was sympathetic; the Rabbit said he didn't care about me; the two Goats hit me with the little hammer and sent me out the door by mocking me: and the Pigs even ran after me to kill me! By now who do I dare turn to? I am too afraid! I might die of hunger! And my house, my mother are always farther away... I will never find them again!" (p.87)

He has all but given up when just as he reaches his lowest point, he meets up with a blue butterfly who sings him a sweet song that encourages him to look to the sky and be hopeful about finding happiness (Alano, 2002). The song ends with a message of hope, which lifts Sebastiano's spirits:

"And the song repeated, sweetly, on its heartfelt rhythm, ending with a shout of hope. Oh, but sure! said Sebastiano incurably optimistic; and proudly standing upright, looked around, puffed out his chest. If no one wants me, if I am not able to find my way home, I can try to rely on myself" (p. 88)

The butterfly helps him to see that he can make his own way in the world, but also that there may be new joys for him to find in self reliance.

Although the butterfly is Sebastiano's first friend, he eventually makes others. But not before he experiences some tests of his resolve as he learns to make his way in the world on his own. He is captured and sold at a market to a woman who is fooled into believing that he is a hen that will lay eggs. While there he is befriended by the woman's son who finds him trapped in the pantry of their gleaming apartment. The boy befriends Sebastiano—visiting him daily and bringing him inappropriate "treats," like chocolate and socks to help him walk across the slippery floor of their kitchen. Eventually the boy decides he must set Sebastiano free to save him from the fate of being cooked for their dinner for failing to lay an egg each day. This bold act of selflessness and love sends Sebastiano back on his journey to discover other like minded friends.

The boy abruptly brings Sebastiano to the edge of the balcony and urges him to fly to freedom. Se-



bastiano musters all his courage and takes flight from the balcony barely crossing the perimeter wall only to plummet to the ground and sprain his ankle. Despite the excruciating pain Sebastiano crows to signal that he is fine to relieve his young friend of worry. At frigid dawn he painfully limps to a close by hedge when he is accidentally struck in the head by a giant paw. The Saint Bernard, Bernadoco, is just as stunned to find the strange little rooster under his large paw. Like Sebastiano, Bernadoco is homeless and a bit of an outcast. Neither animal can seem to meet the normative expectations others have for them—Bernadoco who was bred to rescue wayfarers lost in the high mountains, hates winter, ice, and snow and Sebastiano who could never meet or follow expectations either. Bernadoco offers to carry Sebastiano on his back to try to find someone to fix his leg. Along the way they encounter a “brainy” snail who is completely unhelpful, a sly fox who tries to trick them, and finally, an arthritic goose who they dig out from a huge mound of snow. The goose is grateful but obviously distressed at her situation. Sebastiano reassures her and the kindly Bernadoco lifts both of them onto his furry back:

“Oh, but we won’t abandon you!” shouted that bighearted Sebastiano. “We’ll stay together, we’ll help each other. Unity is strength: onward let’s go!” (p. 131)

The three head out, suffering from pain, exhaustion and hunger—making their way through heavy snow and fog until Bernadoco can not summon the strength to push on. Collapsing in a big heap, his two friends try to encourage him and find something that will convince him to keep going despite his exhaustion and hunger. As the three animals collapse against a stone wall, a gray cat appears, promising them safety and comfort—and inviting them into the warmth of the house of a kind elderly woman, just steps away. Once inside, the old woman, Teresacarolina, drew on her lifetime of experiences to foster an “*eager tenderness for all living things*” and set about meeting each of her new charges needs—nursing them back to health, feeding them, and just offering a place to rest, recover, and regain their strength. All winter long, the three guests, the cat and the old lady lived harmoniously and happily together.

This, however, is not the “happily ever after” ending to the story. It is true that Sebastiano finds happiness and contentment with his new friends. Their journey together taught them important lessons about the value of reciprocity and interdependence—values that are foundational to a disability justice framework (Sins Invalid, 2016). Despite being seen as not measuring up, they each use their gifts—Sebastiano helping to lift their spirits when the group is flagging, Barnadoco using his generosity and strength, and when Bernadoco is at his lowest and insists that the other two go on without him, Miranda the goose and Sebastiano vow that they will stay together refusing to abandon their friend, even if it means they will die together. Despite their differences, they forge a lasting friendship—resolving difficulties and conflicts by acknowledging that despite their differences, their relationship is forged with true affection and love for one another and a solidarity that cannot be broken despite challenges or difficulties. And, yet, it seems that Sebastiano’s trials and tribulations are not over.

Sebastiano faces one more challenge—one more near death experience that tests his creativity and resolve. This last challenge requires that he use his own abilities, assess his situation, realize that he is in danger, and find just the right moment to escape. One early spring morning while his mates were playing outdoors, Sebastiano becomes mesmerized by his reflection in the large pot of water sitting on the stove. Curious about the image of a strange rooster staring back at him, he accidentally falls into the pot only to be discovered when Teresacarolina returns from the garden to throw in some fresh herbs. After multiple attempts to revive him fail, they all believe their dear friend has drowned. A neighbor convinces the grieving woman to let her take the “dead” rooster back to her house to feed her hungry children. Feeling deep sympathy for the woman’s hungry children, Teresacarolina reluctantly gives the lifeless Sebastiano to her. Later that same day, Sebastiano finally stirs only to realize that he is once again to be plucked and cooked for dinner. Determined that this will not be his fate, he escapes just in time. It seems that through his many challenges, he has indeed learned to rely upon and trust himself. Over and over again, whether he finds himself in a “safe” haven or literally in hot water, his journey is neither safe nor fully finished—each test prepares him for the next journey. Now he must make a very difficult decision. Does he return to his



happy life with his friends in the tiny but loving house of Teresacarolina or is he being pulled in another direction?

An inexplicable force seemed to pull Sebastiano towards those walls, pushing him to walk through the large open gate, and enter the farmyard.

And suddenly, he seemed to find himself in a familiar place, and a thousand memories crowded his mind: when had he first seen that pyramid-shaped house that couldn't be confused with any other? And hadn't he already run along that path that ran between the little multicolored houses? (p. 157)

A Homecoming

Deciding to follow that internal force, he finds his way back to his family and the familiar hencoop. With the wisdom and confidence he has gained, he decides that although he still doesn't fit in, he doesn't actually want to anymore. His mother, too, realizes that she has always loved Sebastiano in a very special way—perhaps more so not despite his difference, but *because* he was different. In other words, she reflects on the fact that she has raised so many “perfectly normal” chicks, but it was Sebastiano who had a special place in her heart because he was an individual, with his own path to follow. She loved him not for fitting in or conforming, and not for being exceptional, but just because he was who he always and still was Sebastiano!

Yet, I don't know exactly why, I've always held you in my heart more than the others. Maybe because the others are alike, year after year, so alike that they almost get confused in my memory, while you are so different and I never know what might happen with you!” (p. 159)

She also soon comes to understand that Sebastiano had seen the larger world and could no longer be contained by “*the confines of the hencoop,*” (p. 175). His homecoming is a reminder to them both about how, despite all of his challenges and triumphs, despite making many friends along the way, he can never seem to say the right thing or do the right thing when it comes to conforming to expectations of the hencoop—even now. She laments, “*Oh, poor me, you've learned absolutely nothing living out in the world*” (p. 166). Realizing that Sebastiano is never going to fit into the tiny world of the hencoop and its restrictive expectations, she once again, seeks out Calisto for advice.

When Sebastiano and Piumaliscia arrive, however, Calisto, in a sign of respect for Sebastiano, insists that he only wishes to talk to Sebastiano. He invites the young rooster, who has been through so much, to come and tell him his story. The old rooster quietly listens and only after he is through, he asks Sebastiano, “And now?” (p. 176). Sebastiano laments,

“Now I don't know what to do. I want so much to remain here with my family: but I feel like a stranger around them. It seems that there is something that divides us, like they reject me.” (p. 176)

Sebastiano explains that he didn't feel the same kind of isolation with his friends. Calisto helps him see that although his family members are “*good, pleasant creatures,*” they are afraid of difference, whereas his friends see the differences between them as creating a beautiful harmony of voices—a harmony of friendship. When Sebastiano wonders what he should do next, Calisto offers,

“Stay with me, little Sebastiano! I will teach you many things; and you can ask me as many questions as you would like. Then maybe you'll go back to search for...[your friends] or maybe you could take my place when I'm gone. Who can know the future? But in the meantime, do you want to stay with me?” (p. 179)



They live in peace and Sebastiano gains much wisdom from his older mentor, but indeed, after a time, Sebastiano decides it is not the time for him to settle down prematurely. On a summer night a shooting star inspires him to realize that he has been happy with Calisto, but still wants to go in search of “*unknown roads*” and “*unexplored worlds*” (p. 187). As he starts on the next journey, a nightingale sings him a sweet song telling Sebastiano, “Go, continue on your way: the song is not finished” (p. 187). Calisto’s caretaker (a frog) sees Sebastiano head on his way and predicts that, “*Eh, he’ll be a great mind too, like Calisto!*” but for now his story is still unfinished (p. 187).

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to present a critical analysis of Ada Gobetti’s *Story of Sebastiano the Rooster, Otherwise known as the Thirteenth Egg*, through the lens of DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013), and particularly DisCrit Solidarity (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). With this analysis, we intended to highlight the relevance of Gobetti’s anti-fascist values and respect for diversity, as expressed in Sebastiano, for contemporary pedagogy and practice. At a time when far-right and nationalist ideologies are on the rise again in most western democracies, Gobetti’s critique of ableism, fear of difference and disability, and of the pressure to conformity to educational and societal normativity is of great value to current teachers and school professionals, both in Italy and internationally. The DisCrit Solidarity lens helps to highlight three key themes in *Sebastiano*: 1) a critique of anxiety and shame of difference and disability; 2) a critique of ableism and eugenics; and 3) the need to resist pressures for conformity.

Through the character of Piumaliscia, Sebastiano’s mother, Gobetti emphasizes family and society’s pressure to conform to canonical forms of beauty, perfection and able-bodiedness. Piumaliscia displays her dysconscious bias and anxiety towards diversity at the sight of a deformed egg, and later rooster, that would have brought her disgrace and negative comments of all other animals in the hencoop. Piumaliscia also displays extreme care of her own external appearance and is committed to maintain the family’s standards of ‘regularity’ and ‘precision’. Through the practice of publicly presenting new chicks in a parade, Gobetti channels a combination of ableist and eugenic ‘fitter family contests’, made popular during the eugenic era. In her critique of ableism, Gobetti shows the contrast between the character of Piumaliscia, who is ashamed of her deformed 13th egg and Calisto, the wise and old rooster, who embodies a DisCrit solidarity and acceptance for difference. Finally, Gobetti chooses education as the field in which Sebastiano is most pressured by his mother and brothers to conform to social norms and expectations. During the fascist era, the purpose of education was to create submissive and obedient citizens that would fear authority, and thereby sustain oligarchic power. Similarly, Piumaliscia tried to teach Sebastiano all the compulsory subjects and etiquette. When this failed, she hoped that Sebastiano’s strange behavior might be compensated by some exceptional talent or ‘genius.’ In the second part of the book, Piumaliscia comes to see the impossibility of Sebastiano being educated or to ‘fit in’ or assimilate into the narrow parameters of the hencoop.

By the end of the story, readers are left to consider important points that are still relevant to challenge contemporary fears of difference in society and educational institutions. Gobetti’s first lesson is that forms of ‘excess’ or difference, identified within specific cultural contexts, tell us much about the ideological views, priorities, and fears prevalent in a society. Each historical time elects its own object of ‘monstrosity,’ terror, and fascination—its own disturbing ‘other.’ Consequently, a negative social and cultural stigma built up over time catalyzes these disturbing differences, dissects them, exposes them, and shows them as that which is outside of the reassuring world order. Sebastiano, and all those perceived as dangerous or deficient ‘others’ must be subjected to the powerful forces of normality to ‘fit in’ or assimilate into the social order. In the case of Sebastiano, like many students like him, it is through education that he is supposed to be assimilated into the world around him.

However, as we see in the development of Sebastiano’s story, his personality does not align well with



the ‘normal’ world of Piumaliscia and his siblings, and indeed with the outer world. At every occasion, he tries hard to belong and conform to the shared rules and expectations before him—and each time he fails miserably. It is in these very moments that the reader can witness the reactivation of the idea of deformity, and almost monstrosity, embodied by the character of Sebastiano. As Giuliani (2020) puts it, monstrosity as a bio-political imaginary, that activates itself when the body (and mind) to be cured is not disciplined. Throughout the story, Sebastiano lives at the margins of monstrosity and becomes a symbol of oppression, deprived of his own subjectivity. Only through his relationships with friends and then with Calisto, and through practices of DisCrit Solidarity, Sebastiano’s perceived monstrosity is challenged and countered with an alternative vision of who he is and what he has to offer his larger community. In the last part of the book, Sebastiano finally accepts and learns that he no longer wants to live within systems of oppression. His mother, too, realizes that he must live with Calisto to learn how to conserve and sustain (rather than eradicate) his individuality and difference. Representing DisCrit Solidarity, Calisto helps Sebastiano understand that the hencoop might be a safe haven after a long journey in the outside world, but it can also be limiting. Like the popular adage, “a ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for” (Shedd, 1928, p. 20), Gobetti leaves readers with the most important lesson from the manuscript: freedom is not assured, but must be actively sought and won.

In conclusion, we hope that the DisCrit solidarity analysis of Gobetti’s Sebastiano can be useful to contemporary teachers in schools in Italy and internationally, who are struggling to reconceptualize inclusive education through an equity lens. DisCrit solidarity has the potential to encourage teachers to be critical of existing inclusive education practices, which perpetuate micro- and macro- exclusion of students living at the intersection of race, ability, language and migration. DisCrit solidarity offers the potential for teachers to address their biases, as well as giving them a theoretical frame to redesign existing inclusive tools such as the IEP and the PDP (Migliarini et al., 2022) in ways that foster belonging, friendship, and culturally sustaining inclusive practice. As we see in the character of Calisto, there is much wisdom shared in the story about how to encourage and sustain difference, foster solidarity, and center minoritized perspectives and wisdom. Finally, the text can help teachers to question the medical/positivist epistemology informing the “functioning” model of disability and counteracting deficit-based constructions of difference within our educational systems. By applying DisCrit solidarity and the lessons from Gobetti’s book, teachers can better understand how to ensure that students who are multiply marginalized are accepted, welcomed, and taught in ways that are culturally sustaining and inclusive. In this way, Sebastiano is a lesson in how to create spaces of radical belonging that do not require assimilation or conformity to ableist and hegemonic norms. In this way, Sebastiano, who was born into a world rocked by facism, continues to hold important lessons for resisting the reemergence of authoritarian forces today.

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