Issues in Contemporary Civilization

Fascism	Renzo De Felice
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TRANSACTION ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY CIVILIZATION

Fascism

An Informal Introduction to Its Theory and Practice

Renzo De Felice

An interview with

Michael A. Ledeen

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Introduction

This book originally appeared in Italy at the beginning of July 1975 entitled: *Intervista sul fascismo*. By the middle of the month it was the best-selling paperback in the country, and at this writing (mid-October) it is still number one on the best-seller list. It has sold over fifty thousand copies (a remarkable figure in a country with a population of sixty million, an illiteracy rate of over thirty percent, and where only one person out of ten reads a daily newspaper). It has been the object of long diatribes from several of the country's leading intellectuals, and the subject of front-page editorials in the official newspapers of both the Communist and Neofascist parties. It has twice been the subject of primetime programs on the national television network. Renzo De Felice has been called everything from "soft on Mussolini" to "depraved," and has been accused of trying to "rehabilitate fascism." In short, it is the most controversial book of the year in a highly charged political atmosphere.

It will not be immediately obvious to the American reader that this short volume warrants such an emotional reaction. Fascism is not nearly as important an

issue to us as it is for Italians, and the American intellectual world is not, happily, as sharply divided along ideological lines. For Italian intellectuals, the terms *fascist* and *antifascist* continue to be the hard currency of contemporary political debate (one might almost say that if you are not one, you are automatically the other in the present Italian atmosphere). When De Felice suggests that fascism describes a moment in the Italian past—and only that—he is challenging the very heart of current orthodoxy. The nature of his analysis of the recent Italian past is itself at odds with the traditional version, and represents a radical departure from conventional wisdom.

De Felice's ideas about fascism have a broad significance, quite apart from their importance in the contemporary Italian scene. Perhaps no one knows as much about fascism, and no one has given the subject such rigorous historical analysis (his biography of Mussolini has progressed to 1936 in four long tomes, and will eventually run to some five thousand pages). In the course of our discussion, De Felice observed that he had been the first to consult the documents of the Fascist Regime, and had consequently had a distinct advantage over every other analyst: He alone was able to base his studies on a careful scrutiny of Fascist records. This in itself would have been sufficient to guarantee his importance in the scholarly community, but as his work continued, De Felice discovered that there were vast quantities of documentation that had not been turned over to the state, and remained in private hands. It is a tribute to the objectivity of his work that many of those people who held these documents came forward with them. De Felice therefore based his work on the most thorough documentation possible. As a by-product of his research, Renzo De Felice has today an important

archive, and anyone wishing to research the fascist period must touch base with him. Happily, he is not jealous of his private collection, and dozens of volumes on fascism—written by both Italians and foreigners—have been made possible by De Felice's help and encouragement.

Given his preeminence, one is inevitably driven to wonder why he has been so intensely attacked in Italy. He is Italy's best-known historian of the contemporary period. He commands international esteem. Yet Italians give him far less credit than non-Italians. In order to understand the controversial nature of De Felice's work, we must first look at his analysis of fascism.

FASCISM RECONSIDERED

Fascism has been variously interpreted during the course of the past half century, and we are far from arriving at a consensus. Roughly speaking, there are two broad groupings of students of the fascist phenomenon: Those who embrace an external explanation, and those who believe that one must study it from within. The first group propounds that fascism was a means of manipulating the masses, and that its content was inconsequential. The second group believes that fascism was in part a mass movement, and that one must examine the beliefs of the fascists in order to understand its success. In the first group one finds the Marxists and the cynics, like, for example, A. J. P. Taylor:

> Everything about Fascism was a fraud. The social peril from which it saved Italy was a fraud; the revolution by which it seized power was a fraud; the ability and policy of Mussolini was [sic] fraudulent. Fascist rule was cor-

rupt, incompetent, empty; Mussolini himself was a vain, blundering boaster without either ideas or aims.[1]

This view of fascism is common to many scholars who seek the explanation for fascist successes either in techniques of mass manipulation or in the mechanism of repression. Marxists, for example, view fascism as the reaction of industrialists and large landowners to the threat of a socialist revolution, and as the means by which the ruling class of capitalism crushed revolutionary forces and kept them in check for twenty years. The content of fascism is beside the point to such an analysis, for whatever fascists themselves might have had to say about their intentions, their actual historical role was to bring about the triumph of the counterrevolution.

Many Western political scientists adopted this external perspective. Some distinguished students of mass movements, such as Hannah Arendt, Carl J. Friedrich, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, have viewed fascism as a form of mass control unique to the twentieth century—a form of totalitarianism—that embraces not only Italian and German fascisms but also Stalinist Russia and perhaps some other dictatorships as well (Perónist Argentina, Communist China, and so on). This model helps to put the form of fascist government in broader perspective, but it ignores the content of fascist ideology, and reduces it to a mere technique of power. By concentrating on the techniques and institutions of totalitarianism, these analysts frequently obscured profound national differences among the various regimes, and left the question of their origins and internal characteristics largely unexamined.

In recent years some scholars have preferred an internal explanation of fascism, attempting to

analyze its success in each separate country rather than searching for a general model. They have tried to explain fascist triumphs in terms of emotional appeal, effective programs, charisma of fascist leaders, and use of repression. While most everyone who studies fascism believes in the class-bound nature of its origins, the new generation of analysts has insisted that fascism became a national phenomenon and eventually embraced all classes in its mantle. This latter development calls for clarification, and cannot be explained away by continuing to call fascism a counterrevolutionary regime. Many workers were recruited to the fascist cause, and little in the way of effective antifascism emerged from the proletariat (or anywhere else) before the bankruptcy of fascist foreign policy became evident. If one tries to explain fascism's success in coopting the masses in terms of mere techniques of manipulation, one is left with a dismal theory of human nature: Man is readily duped by his leaders. Many scholars prefer to look for fascism's success in the minds of its supporters, and have found that there was indeed a basis for its mass appeal.[2]

De Felice's work on fascism is one of the most important contributions to an internal understanding of Mussolini's Italy. His mammoth biography of the Duce has revealed a remarkably talented demagogue who, for all his many insights into Italian character and his mastery of the Italian masses, never possessed sufficient coherence of vision to establish a viable basis for a fascist regime. Despite the many accusations of sympathy for his subject that have been directed against De Felice, Mussolini has emerged from the four volumes published to date as a profound failure. He never managed to create a new ruling class for his country, never had enough confidence in

the Italian people to permit them a genuine participation in fascism, and wasted his time in a constant, almost paranoid surveillance of every detail of daily events. Nonetheless, Mussolini remained in power for over twenty years, while very few Italian governments in this century have managed anything remotely resembling that tenure. De Felice has attempted to understand fascism's durability in terms of a political consensus, fragile to be sure, but no less real for its feebleness. The nature of this consensus lies at the heart of the debate over De Felice's interpretation of fascism.

There has long been a general agreement among scholars that Italian fascism represented a sort of pretorian guard for Italian industry and organized agriculture against the menace of revolutionary forces. Those people who joined Fascist squads and fought the Socialists in the streets of Italy from 1920 onward have been viewed as members of the lower-middle class, who fought the leftists because they were afraid of being proletarianized. Trapped in a desperate economic situation, menaced by loss of property and status by the postwar crisis and by enswampment from below by the Socialists, these members of the petite bourgeoisie are said to have provided the muscle for fascism's street fights against their class enemies. Advocates of this theory insist that these elements were threatened with proletarianization, and that this menace accounts for the counterrevolutionary aspect of early fascism. De Felice does not view the matter exclusively in this light, suggesting that there was a sizable element within Fascist ranks that was not threatened at all, but was rising. In his view there was a revolutionary element within fascism that embodied the desires of emerging sectors of the middle class seeking to assert

themselves. If De Felice is correct about this—there is a growing body of sociological data that suggests that he is—conventional wisdom will have to be abandoned.

This theory has important consequences. If emerging sectors of the middle class were crucial in the formation of the Fascist movement, it would help explain a certain radical element present within fascism throughout its life span. There were always those people who believed that fascism was revolutionary—indeed, the only truly revolutionary phenomenon in the country. These fascist "revolutionaries" believed that fascism would eventually transform Italians, Italy, and the entire West. They continued to believe this for quite a long time, until the reactionary nature of Mussolini's regime became so plain that even they had to recognize it. But from the march on Rome until the Spanish civil war, many fascists believed they were participants in a revolution (and that they would play a major role in the new society of the future). De Felice calls this the "Fascist movement," and it was a constant thorn in Mussolini's side. In the end, many of those who participated in the Fascist movement opposed Mussolini and the regime, believing they had been betrayed. Many joined the ranks of antifascism and then of the Resistance. Others remained loyal to Mussolini, embracing fascist anti-Semitism in a last desperate attempt to transform fascism.

The Fascist movement was part of the fascist consensus, but by no means the most numerous. The consensus of which De Felice has written, which extended roughly from the concordat to the Ethiopian war, was primarily based on a popular view of Mussolini's government as having protected Italy from many of the ills that beset Western Europe: The

threat of war, a grave economic crisis, and social violence and instability. Fascism was valued not so much for what it had given Italy, but for the perils it had avoided. This was no small feat in a period that saw government after government fall in Western Europe, and the United States plunged into the Great Depression.

Here again De Felice is at odds with most scholars of fascism, who have viewed Mussolini's mass support as based on a spurious appeal to Italian grandeur and military prowess. De Felice claims, for example, that Italians were exceedingly concerned about the outbreak of the Ethiopian war, fearing that England and France might decide to oppose Italian colonialization of Ethiopia and thus involve their country in war. This is a far cry from the traditional view of Mussolini orchestrating a frenzy of imperialistic fervor prior to the invasion, and it suggests that Italians were not quite so easily manipulated as has been previously maintained. Fascist consensus was quite fragile, especially considering the growing desire of the regime to demonstrate Italy's might on the world stage. De Felice claims (although as yet his analysis has not been published) that consensus was fractured at the moment when fascism took on an explicitly imperialistic stance, joined with Hitler, and entered the Spanish civil war.

One might expect De Felice to argue that Italy's entry into World War II was not popular with the people, but the reverse is true. He paints a picture of Mussolini as indecisive, wondering when to enter, and even which side to join! The fact of primary importance, according to De Felice, was that once the fall of France was assured, Mussolini felt further delay might risk long-term reprisals from the

Führer, and at the same time Italian public opinion swung sharply behind entry into the war alongside the victorious Germans. One is forced to rethink old "truths": The Axis turns out to have been not an ideological alliance between two fascist dictators but a tactical decision based on both foreign and domestic considerations. According to De Felice, there were profound differences between fascism and nazism; so much so as to raise serious doubts about the utility of applying the term *fascist* to both.

With this claim, De Felice challenged not only a commonplace of Italian historiography, but an important political tradition as well. The Italian Resistance was waged more against nazi forces than against Italian fascist ones, and political rhetoric has labeled this struggle one against "nazifascism." Such concepts are not easily abandoned, and no single claim of De Felice's has caused so much turmoil as this. Yet here De Felice is at one with a large body of literature in the United States, France, and Germany, which has taken great pains to distinguish between the two regimes.

As if to rub salt into the wounds of his critics, De Felice claims that the Fascist movement was linked, albeit spuriously, to a Western radical tradition going back to the days of the Terror in the French Revolution. Fascism, he argues, contains both a well-defined theory of human progress and a conception of the popular will that ties it to the extremist Rousseauian themes of the Terror and the "totalitarian democracy" that it spawned. For those who viewed fascism as the archetype of a reactionary system of government, this was too much to stomach, and it was called "an affront to common sense" by some critics. Yet most scholars of fascism would agree

with this claim, and the most recent textbook on fascism in the United States makes the very same statement.[3]

This book was quite controversial (and deliberately so) within the context of the Italian historiographical and political traditions. The intensity of the response was so great that one must consider yet another of De Felice's provocative claims: That fascism left antifascists with a certain intolerant mentality as part of its heritage.

THE STORM OVER DE FELICE

Attacks against De Felice started even before the book was published, when the publishing house gave galleys of the text to the editors of Italy's most widely read weekly magazine, *l'Espresso*. The theses of the book were immediately distorted ("was that Mussolini over there a bit left-wing?"), and Giuliano Procacci, a leading communist historian, claimed that antifascist attitudes were absolutely necessary for an understanding of fascism. This was demonstrated, he said, by the fact that the first serious analyses of fascism came from Marxists, and even those (few) non-Marxists who wrote well on the subject had been opponents of the regime (such as Don Sturzo).

Leaving aside for the moment the embarrassing detail that most fascist intellectuals started out as Marxists, this "objection" (which was a common one) stems from the very core of Italian intellectual tradition. Italian intellectuals (like many French and German scholars) believe that scholarship is not simply an empirical exercise in organizing data in a coherent way, but rather must be based on an already elaborated ideology. A proper world view—whether it be Marxism, Freudianism, Catholicism, or

whatever—is not only essential for understanding the past, but also for present and future actions. Analysis of the past is thus ineluctably tied to present activity. For Marxist intellectuals—and the majority of contemporary Italian intellectuals seem to be Marxists—a proper world view involves the conviction the fascism was the product of a class struggle between the proletariat on the one hand, and agrarian and industrial classes on the other. There is also the conviction that everything about fascism was (and is) evil, to be condemned and rejected and fought on all fronts. In a certain sense, further research on the subject was redundant, since the conclusions were already known.

From this point of view it was clear that De Felice must have had some Machiavellian motives for his writing, and in short order various critics attempted to identify them. A young Marxist, Nicola Tranfaglia, wrote: "Italian and international circumstances which need not be recalled here . . . have reignited, in a manner one would not have believed a few years ago, the debate . . . on the Fascist phenomenon."[4] With this ominous beginning, Tranfaglia went on to suggest that De Felice's ideas might cause grave damage among the young and uninitiated, and that De Felice had undertaken "a rehabilitation of Fascism." Tranfaglia said that all serious work in the field showed how nonsensical De Felice's arguments were, and he closed by asking rhetorically whether it was productive to reopen discussion on points that had already been fully resolved, "unless, to be sure, the entire operation is purely political, and has very little to do with historiography."[5]

This was paradigmatic of many attacks against the book. Since "everybody knew" the correct interpretation, why was De Felice challenging it? The "only"

explanation was that he was attempting a political maneuver, designed to undermine the forces of antifascism (in Italy today, political rhetoric has divided the world into two groups: fascists and antifascists). There was no such thing as pure scholarship. A later attack by another radical intellectual made this clear: "If one believes that being an 'objective' historian of fascism today in Italy means . . . undertaking a dispassionate intellectual adventure, one may also believe that writing history is only an elegant academic profession. But it is not."[6]

What is it then? It is a "polemical" activity, according to Giovanni Ferrara, author of these lines. He suggested that De Felice was rather perverse. Had he not spent hours and months interviewing squalid individuals to discover "something which, all in all, one could have discovered without so much discomfort, namely, that 'they, too, are men'"?[7] For Ferrara, De Felice was to be held responsible for the fact that there was no good analysis of Italian antifascism. Calling De Felice's work a kind of historiographic monument to fascism, he closed his case.

There was a good deal more of this sort of attack, designed to discredit De Felice without ever really grappling with his theses. It is one thing to condemn a man, and quite another to confront his ideas, and there was a general unwillingness (or perhaps inability) to deal with his hypotheses seriously. Predictably, intellectuals from the Center and the Right rallied to De Felice's defense, accusing his critics of ideological lynching. Debate over the book showed signs of becoming a reflection of political divisions in Italy. Help came from a most unexpected source. In a front-page article in a Sunday edition of *l'Unità* (the official communist newspaper), Giorgio Amendola, perhaps the most widely respected communist intellectual, rejected such attacks as Tranfaglia's and Ferrara's and called for a serious discussion of fascism and antifascism.[8] While he began his article by announcing his disagreement with De Felice, in the body of his text Amendola embraced virtually all of De Felice's major themes, which suggested that he may have had more than one motive for writing the article. It seems as if he was saying "this book is no good" to those who had not followed the debate, yet delivering a stern lesson to those who had.

Such is the cultural power of the Italian communist press that Amendola's article almost immediately calmed the waters, forced many critics to reconsider their positions, and a rather more serious discussion ensued. On a television program dealing with the book, Paolo Spriano, author of the "official" history of the Italian Communist party, praised De Felice, as did most of the other historians who appeared on the program.

There are several important lessons to be drawn from this debate, but one looms above all: De Felice is unfortunately right when he speaks of the legacy of a fascist mentality. The generation that destroyed fascism in Italy was itself indelibly stained by the enemy, and has carried the stains with it. It is perhaps too early to expect Italians to undertake a systematic examination of their recent past (oddly enough, the Germans, conquered from without, have been able to accomplish this task faster). Fascist residues are strong, precisely among those people who consider themselves to be the most fervent in their antifascism.

In his short story about Italian fascism, *Mario and the Magician*, Thomas Mann suggested that in the act of willing not to do something, there was not enough room for the idea of freedom. Freedom requires more

space, along with a certain tolerance, a willingness to give and take and compromise, which comes with a civil society. One does not automatically become a democrat by joining the ranks of antifascism.

NOTES

1. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (New York), 1964, p. 59.
2. Cf., for example, P. Cannistraro, *La Fabbrica Del Consenso* (Bari), 1975; J. Thayer, *Italy and the Great War* (Madison), 1964; E. Weber, *Varieties of Fascism* (New York), 1964.
3. Alan Cassels, *Fascism* (New York), 1975, p. 19.
4. Nicola Tranfaglia, "La pugnalata dello storico," in *Il Giorno* (Milan), 6 July 1975. Tranfaglia is professor of history at the University of Turin.
5. Ibid.
6. Giovanni Ferrara, "La pugnalata dello storico," in *Il Giorno*, 9 July 1975. Ferrara is a noted translator of English-language historical and philosophical works.
7. Ibid.
8. Giorgio Amendola, "Per una nuova storia dell'antifascismo," in *l'Unita*, 20 July 1975. Amendola is a member of the Secretariat of the Italian Communist Party.

1
Historical and Theoretical Background of De Felice's Work

Ledeen: Where and with whom did you study Italian history? Who have been the major influences in your development?

De Felice: It is difficult to say who the major influences upon me have been. It is much easier to say with whom I have studied. I studied with and earned my degree with Chabod. I continued to study with him in Naples and then in Rome in the last days of his life. Having said this, however, I must add that I do not believe there are such persons who can be considered the professors or masters of their students: If someone is a student in the strict sense of the word, he is a person with no intellectual autonomy. It is possible to speak of a series of influences. Chabod's influence has been very important in shaping the way I study history, both from the standpoint of methodology and the way in which he posed empirical problems. I knew the Chabod of the lectures, of the seminars in Rome, of the courses in Naples, who worked on the [French] Revolution or on the Renaissance. The "contemporary" Chabod—the Chabod of