

*De Felice:* I have made an effort to write a kind of synthesis from this point of view, but it has not been published yet. I have written a section on fascism for a new major undertaking of the *Italian Encyclopedia*, the *Encyclopedia* of the nineteen-hundreds. The section is an attempt—presumptuous and modest at the same time—to put together my thoughts on fascism. One can undertake this discussion, but I do not know to what extent it is proper.

What is the point of this conversation of ours? What is it good for? Does it serve to fossilize, to freeze, to photograph Renzo De Felice and what he thinks about fascism in February 1975? Or does it contribute to the discussion of these themes? I wish to high heaven that it were this; until now, the only timid attempt at discussion was undertaken in 1967 in the *Rivista Storica Italiana*, between Vivarelli and Valiani.<sup>16</sup> From that moment on, any real analysis has ended. There have been reviews in scientific journals, newspapers, magazines, and other publications. There have been endless reviews of this sort. But no one in Italy has undertaken a serious discussion either of my *Mussolini* or of my *Interpretations of Fascism*. From a certain point of view I find this very satisfying, because it means that (notwithstanding all the insults, challenges, the yelling; notwithstanding all the accusations even of fascism that have been aimed at me by people who do not understand either the way things are or that a criticism of Mussolini today must be directed not polemically but historically) no one has wanted to undertake a serious discussion at a scientific or at a political level. That is to say at a really profound political level, not on that oversimplified level of fascism or antifascism that is unacceptable for an analysis of this type, but serves only for those speeches and comments that one makes in piazzas and at mass rallies.

### 3 General Characteristics of Fascism

*Ledeen:* The moment has come to undertake a discussion of the major themes of fascism—first of Italian fascism, then of fascism in general. In the literature on fascism, many historians have made a distinction between fascism as movement and fascism as regime. What is your opinion?

*De Felice:* This is an important theme that must be developed both to undertake a comparative analysis of the various fascisms and as an extreme case to discuss neofascism. Indeed, it is the fundamental problem. But there is a long series of distinctions that must be made. To start with, you say this is a problem that has been raised by many people. Where? Outside Italy! Italian historiography has not faced the problem of fascism as movement and fascism as regime. It is a theme that Italian historical culture and Italian political culture have never faced, or at most, they have only touched on it. Do you not agree?

*Ledeen:* Yes. However, the fact remains that in the literature and in the historiography on fascism in

France, England, Germany, and the United States, it is one of the fundamental themes.

*De Felice:* It is necessary to make a distinction between Italian historical culture, Italian culture as such, and that of the other countries. It is important because there is a different conditioning with regard to these problems in Italy compared to that which exists abroad. This theme is fundamental, because fascism as movement is a constant in the history of fascism; a constant that loses importance as time progresses, it loses hegemony and becomes secondary; but it is always present. Fascism as movement is the "red thread" that connects March 1919 with April 1945; fascism as regime, fascism as party, is something quite different. As far as fascism as movement is concerned, there are certain phases, periods, elements, but they are a continuum, notwithstanding their diversity. Within fascism as regime there are fractures of a more fundamental sort. Fascism as movement is that part of fascism that has a certain vitality. With this I do not want to present a positive evaluation of it, an evaluation of merit; I simply want to make a statement of fact about the vitality of fascism, while the party, the regime, represents its negation in certain respects.

*Ledeen:* Could you please expand on this?

*De Felice:* Fascism as movement is the impulse to renew, to interpret certain needs, certain stimuli, and certain themes of renovation. It is that spark of revolutionary fervor that there is within fascism itself, and that tends to construct something new. It is a collection of elements, above all cultural (conscious and unconscious) and psychological, which in part belong to the intransigent fascism that predates the

march on Rome, but in part represent something new and different, which developed only afterward. These elements constitute the self-representation of fascism projected into the future, above and beyond the actual conditions it brought about, the fears, the defeats imposed by the regime, above and beyond even the life of Mussolini himself. In this context it is the fundamental component for the understanding of the consensus; it is the moral component, alongside the material one (that of security, which I analyzed in my last volume). Fascism as regime, on the other hand, is the politics of Mussolini, it is the result of a political program that—whether desired or not—tended to make fascism just the superstructure of the personal power of a dictatorship, of a political line that in many ways became merely the inheritance of a tradition.

This discussion of continuity and fracture, which today is used so often for the history of Italy with regard to prefascism, fascism, and postfascism, is elaborated through the discussion of fascism as regime. Fascism as movement jumps the entire problem. It has a line that constitutes a clean break between fascism and postfascism. Fascism as movement is fracture. The regime is continuity. Postfascism is a continuity of the regime and not of the movement. This may be a play on words, but I do not believe so.

*Ledeen:* No, I agree that this is a very important distinction. But could you please be a bit more precise about exactly what you have in mind when you speak of fascism as movement?

*De Felice:* Fascism as movement was the idealization, the desire of an emerging middle class. Here lies the point on which I differ from many other scholars

of these problems: An emerging middle class that tends to activate its own political desires in first person. I say "emerging" because in general this discussion—which has been pursued at great length (I think of *Nazionalfascismo* by Salvatorelli,<sup>17</sup> or of Cappa,<sup>18</sup> or of all the literature that has developed around this thesis from the first years of fascism and afterward)—has been based upon one fundamental presupposition: That middle classes were becoming déclassé, proletarianized, and to avoid this fate, they rebelled. Fascism was conceived of as a movement of those people who were being pushed down, a movement of failures. I do not question that there were many people of this sort involved in fascism, but they were the fringes. Fascism as movement was in large part the expression of an emerging middle class, of bourgeois elements who, having become an important social force, attempted to participate and to acquire political power. As its ranks swelled, fascism opened up to all social classes, but its backbone—both quantitatively and insofar as its leadership and the elements that were most active politically and militarily are concerned—is characterized as a petite bourgeois phenomenon, giving to the whole movement (and to the party that followed, at least up until the purges conducted by Augusto Turati in the second half of the twenties) the character of a phenomenon with class aspects.

This explains the insignificant penetration that fascism had in the more traditional regions of Italy, where the petite bourgeoisie was not a modern one, and was therefore more integrated. This class character gave to fascism as movement the possibility of providing the most important point of reference and attraction for those sectors of the petite bourgeois that desired a greater participation in and direction of the political and social life of the country. These

sectors no longer recognized the traditional ruling class (and in particular the political class of the country) as capable of governing legitimately and thus, albeit in a confused manner, they challenged the social forces that the ruling classes represented. World War I mobilized an entire sector of Italian society that up until that movement had remained excluded. This sector, mobilized for the war (though excluded from effective power and from political participation), later attempted to acquire and achieve a function of its own through fascism.

*Ledeen:* What kind of world did these middle classes mobilized by the war want to create?

*De Felice:* Salvatorelli is right when he talks about middle classes trapped between proletariat and the grande bourgeoisie; but Guido Dorso<sup>19</sup> is even closer to the truth in his book when he beautifully describes the dynamism of these classes in those years: The dynamism, but also the errors, frustrations, and crises. It is not an accident that Dorso, who, immediately following the Liberation, had great success in Italian culture—look at the publication of his works by Einaudi—today has almost completely disappeared from cultural discussions in Italy, because his analysis does not fit with a certain kind of vision of the Italian crisis of that period.

*Ledeen:* Excuse me if I go back to my original question. Is it possible to briefly summarize exactly what these elements of the middle classes wanted after the war? Is it possible to describe the world that they wanted to create?

*De Felice:* In terms most readily understood by contemporary culture, these elements asserted them-

selves as a class seeking to gain power and to assert its own function, its own culture, and its own political power against both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. To put the matter briefly: They wanted a revolution. The revolution of the middle classes is extremely important. Today, for example, in the Italy of 1974-75, the central problem of the parties—of the Christian Democrats, the Socialists, the Communists—is the middle classes. Not only do they exist, but they are also not marginal, senile, or losing importance, as was said for quite a long time. They are one of the most important forces of a modern pluralistic, industrialized society.<sup>20</sup> This is the problem, not just today, but also in the period that followed World War I, and it is no coincidence that the fascists posed this problem. The only attempt to create a new antifascist party, a truly new party, not an attempt to reactivate some already existing movement or theme—the *Unione Nazionale* of Amendola<sup>21</sup>—is born precisely from the analysis of the middle classes.

It was recognized at a certain point that the battle against fascism would be won or lost on the battleground of the middle classes, and not on other battlegrounds. This problem is not one that concerns only 1924, 1925, or the *Unione Nazionale*: It was raised again following the Liberation by some political forces, and in particular by the *Partito d' Azione*, the Action party. I am not a supporter of the Action party for a thousand reasons, but one of its great merits was that it understood that the political analysis of Italy—and not just of Italy, but of contemporary society in general—hinges on the problem of the middle classes. It is not a problem that is slowly disappearing, as a certain type of Marxism maintains; quite the contrary, it is becoming increasingly important

thanks to the embourgeoisement of large sectors of the proletariat.

Fascism was therefore the attempt of the petite bourgeoisie in its ascendancy—not in crisis—to assert itself as a new class, a new force. Fascism as movement was an attempt to put forward new “modern” solutions and “more adequate” methods. This explains a certain kind of corporativism as well, of “interclassism,” of a modern type. By “modern,” I certainly do not intend to convey a positive evaluation. But you cannot do away with it by saying that it is a medieval kind of corporativism, or a corporativism that comes either from the Renaissance or from Toniolo's corporativism, a Catholic one. Corporativism has a certain ideological and cultural value, which one can either accept or reject—I reject it. But it cannot be simply thrown out and disqualified for the little and the evil it did. One must analyze corporativism itself, and not the fascist corporations as they finally took shape, because if we do this we shift grounds from fascism as movement to fascist as regime.

D'Annunzian corporativism<sup>22</sup> is much more a corporativism as movement than a corporativism as regime; in fact, fascism as regime rejects it and reduces the corporation to a mere administrative instrument that no longer has the importance—even at the level of desires—fascism as movement gave it. But I would like to hear your opinion of these questions.

*Ledeer*: I would make a somewhat different distinction between fascism as movement and fascism as regime. In my opinion fascism as movement is tied very closely to the war, and must be considered as such from an ideological point of view as well. I com-

pletely agree with you that fascism as movement is a movement of emerging levels of the middle class. It does not appear to have been solely a movement of self-defense. It was not—as many have written—merely a movement of defense against the presumed revolutionary menace from the proletariat. Undoubtedly, there was a great deal of fear of the revolution coming from the Left, but there was another perhaps even greater fear in Italy and especially in the Italian government in the years immediately following the war: That of a revolution of those who had fought the war. It was not just a fear of proletarian revolution.

In those years there was a pseudorevolutionary movement in Italy that attempted to impose the values of the war upon the nation. The concept was more or less this: The victory in the war had made it possible to identify the most valid, most virile, and most heroic elements in the population; those who had reacted best to the test of the war were now entitled to take their place in the sun and to assume control of the country. In this connection D'Annunzio's Fiume adventure is typical; I would almost say it is the symbol of the movement. These people—and I agree we are talking about an emerging class—wanted to transform Italy. And I would insist on connecting these with the ideals or the pseudoideals of the war itself.<sup>23</sup>

*De Felice:* I agree entirely. The fact remains that one can undertake a more general discussion on this basis that might be useful in identifying a minimum common denominator among European fascisms. Even if what I am about to say might appear monstrous to some, is Walter Rathenau so very far removed from this discussion?

*Ledeen:* No, not so very far removed.

*De Felice:* At a certain cultural level, when one mentions Rathenau one is talking about a murdered democrat, someone assassinated by the reactionary German Right. But the fact that he was murdered by the Right does nothing to change the fact that his position was similar in many ways to that which we have called *fascism as movement* (it is certainly very far removed from fascism as regime). I do not know if you agree with this.

*Ledeen:* Yes, I agree fully. At this point, we have reached the moment when we have to talk about the fracture between fascism as regime and fascism as movement. We could undertake this on two levels: On the ideological level, and in part we have already started to do that; and concerning the possibility of talking about a kind of betrayal of fascism as movement by the regime.

*De Felice:* But all revolutions have been betrayed, at least from someone's point of view. Thermidor, the Directory betrayed the revolution. Trotsky wrote *The Revolution Betrayed*.<sup>24</sup>

*Ledeen:* Just as the American Constitution betrayed the American Revolution.

*De Felice:* Exactly, you confirm what I am saying. The fascists of Salò said that fascism as regime had betrayed the ideals of fascism as movement. It is all a question of the relationship between reality and the idea of this reality. The movement is the idea of the reality; the party and the regime are the realization of this reality with all of the objective difficulties that

this entails. Fascism as movement had to be realized day by day, at a political level, in a society where the emerging profascist strata of the middle class (a part was antifascist) were not alone, in a vacuum.

Here the personality of Mussolini enters into the game, and it is decisive in understanding fascism. Movement, regime are all true and important elements that must be studied and kept in mind as explanations; but Mussolini is the unifying thread, the element of synthesis. Quite aside from the necessity of picking a line of attack and circumscribing the material, this is one of the principle motives that led me to write the biography of Mussolini, and not the history of fascism, or worse, of Italy under fascism.

*Ledeer:* So do you think it is fair to talk about a betrayal of the fascist movement, as many of the original fascists maintained?

*De Felice:* I do not believe in all of these revolutions betrayed, ideologies betrayed, resistances betrayed, and not just in the case of fascism. All of these generalizations are historically misguided. I do not believe that it is possible to impose generalizations of this sort for phenomena of such complexity. In those historical circumstances (every phenomenon is the result of innumerable causes and components) certain solutions that later on are proclaimed betrayed, could not be put into action, or, if they could be attempted, they did not find someone who was able to do it (and not by accident). To speak therefore, as many of the original fascists did, of betrayal is historically unacceptable, a purely polemical argument.

When Mussolini came to power in October 1922 it was the result of a compromise between fascism and the traditional ruling class. From this compromise

comes the character of the coalition that characterized the Mussolini government until 1925. This compromise was renewed and reinforced at the beginning of 1925, when the bulk of the traditional ruling class decided to support Mussolini in order to avoid the danger of a "leap into the blue" after the crisis produced by the murder of Matteotti. For the traditional ruling class, fascism was not called upon to perform great innovations within the system: It had to reinforce it and "redynamize" it. Above all it was not to subvert it. But this outlook was unacceptable to fascism, at least for a great part of fascism as movement, which not only desired greater participation, but also conceived of itself as a genuine alternative to the traditional ruling class (above all to the traditional-political ruling class). Consequently, throughout the first phase of the Mussolini government, there was a counterpoint between the intransigents (who wanted the "second wave" that would have guaranteed the triumph of fascism as movement) and the flankers (who wanted "normalization"). This conflict created many difficulties for Mussolini, but in the end it saved him politically, since at the time of the Matteotti crisis, the old intransigents constituted the only real force that remained loyal to him. By their very presence, the intransigents helped to force a great part of the ruling class to continue on the road of the compromise realized two years before. Between the "leap into the blue"—which in one way or another would have inevitably compromised their moral, political, and economic positions—and Mussolini, the flankers—preoccupied above all with safeguarding their position and therefore the structures of the traditional system of which they were an expression (and that by now they were no longer capable of defending by

themselves against the attack that was moved against them from other sectors of Italian society)—chose Mussolini. In so doing they attempted to repeat on another level the operations that had failed them between the period of the march on Rome and the Matteotti murder. At that time they had tried to revitalize themselves with a fascism that they had sought in vain to constitutionalize and to absorb into the system; now they attempted to save at least the essential structures of the system, aiming to wrap Mussolini in it and along with him the largest possible part of fascism as movement in exchange for their renunciation of a purely political administration of power.

*Ledeer:* Before one can even talk about betrayal, it is necessary to talk about the reality that was purportedly betrayed. In your view, is it correct to speak of fascism as a revolutionary phenomenon?

*De Felice:* Regardless of what many people say, yes. However, a revolution in the etymological sense of the word, because if one gives the word a moral or positive value, or if one refers to a Leninist conception of the term, then it is clear that fascism was not a revolution. It is a mistake to assign such criteria to all phenomena. Fascism was a revolutionary phenomenon, if for no other reason than because it created a regime, and even more, a movement—and here we have to remember the qualitative difference between the regime and that which the movement wanted it to be—which aimed at the mobilization of the masses and the creation of a new kind of man. When it is said that the fascism regime was conservative, authoritarian, or reactionary, this may be true. However, it had nothing in common with the conservative re-

gimes that existed prior to fascism or with the reactionary regimes that have come after it.

For example, it may be politically useful to define the regime of the Greek colonels as a fascist regime, and the same may be said of the Chilean military government. However, this is useful only as a political slogan. Both the Greek and the Chilean regimes are based on the classic reactionary-authoritarian systems of the nineteenth century and are therefore regimes that tend toward the demobilization of the masses. They seek the passive participation of the masses in the regime. It is not an accident that neither the Greek colonels nor the Chilean military have created a mass party.

The fascist regime has a central element that distinguishes it from reactionary and conservative regimes: The mobilization and active participation of the masses. That this participation later takes a demagogical form is another matter; the principle remains one of active participation, not exclusion. This is one of the revolutionary elements. Another revolutionary element is that Italian fascism wanted to achieve the transformation of society and the individual in a direction that had never been attempted or realized in the past.

Conservative regimes have a model that belongs to the past and that must be recuperated and reinstated, a model that they maintain is still valid and that was only interrupted by a revolutionary act. They desire, therefore, to return to the prerevolutionary situation. Regimes of the fascist type on the other hand want to create something that constitutes a new phase in the history of civilization.

Here we must introduce a differentiation between fascism in its Italian version and German national socialism. While nazism has a revolutionary appear-

ance through its mobilization of the masses, insofar as the transformation of society is concerned it moves on a double path different from the Italian case. It seems to create a new society, but the most profound values on which this society must be created are traditional, antique, and unchangeable. The principle of race is typical, but it is not the only one. All the research and analysis of Mosse on the "new politics" of nazism demonstrate that nazism did not do anything other than recuperate and adapt the "new politics" exactly as it had developed from the anti-Napoleonic wars onward. Nazism sought a restoration of values and not the creation of new values. The idea of the creation of a new kind of man is not a nazi idea.

*Ledeen:* It is a matter of liberating the German man . . .

*De Felice:* . . . from the superstructures he has accumulated in the past. This does not exist in Italian fascism.

*Ledeen:* For the Germans, the man of the future already existed, indeed he had always existed. He had been suffocated by modernity: The last two centuries weighed heavily on Aryan man. The mission of German national socialism was destroying these modern elements and liberating the Aryan man; while the fascists wanted to do something quite different indeed.

*De Felice:* I am in perfect agreement with you. Here lies the fundamental difference between nazism and Italian fascism.

*Ledeen:* Before we go deeper into the subject, I would like to ask you another question about the origins of Italian fascism and of fascism in general. In your book on the *Interpretations of Fascism*, you wrote that the triumph of fascism was not inevitable, that it was certainly not a necessity, and that the ruling classes in both Italy and Germany committed grave errors in dealing with the fascist movement. It would be useful to list these errors and examine the relationship between the political and social forces of prefascist society with the fascist movement.

*De Felice:* Let me take the case of Germany first. The responsibility of the German ruling class for the success of fascism is far inferior to that of the Italian ruling class. The only point at which I consider the German ruling class to be responsible is that in contrast to the Italian ruling class the Germans knew what fascism was, because Italian fascism had already existed for ten years. However, in Germany the objective situation was such that it was much more difficult to contain the drive of nazism toward power. It is enough to think of the crisis of German society, a political crisis in the historical sense, as a result of the defeat in World War I, of the internal political consequences of the period between the end of the war and Hitler's capture of power, of the economic situation as it developed as a result of the great American crisis, and, finally, of the process of nationalization of the masses, in the sense that Mosse uses the phrase.

Let us return then to the Italian case. When I speak of gross responsibilities on the part of the Italian ruling class, and when I deny the inevitability of the part of the Italian ruling class, and when I deny the



seizure of power by fascism, I mean that in 1922, precisely when fascism takes power, all the conditions that favored it and determined its emergence and success were by now in decline. The economic situation was improving; the threat—which had so terrified the Italian bourgeoisie—of seizure of power by the Left had by now vanished; the danger of a rupture of the nationalist bloc was increasingly less real (on the contrary, there were symptoms that could lead one to believe that the nationalist camp could recuperate important fringes of that electorate which in preceding years had been led by the Left and in particular by the Socialist party). There was a very strong possibility that the reformist socialists of Turati and Matteotti could form part of a bourgeois-democratic government.

Here is where the grave responsibilities of the Italian ruling classes lie: In not having had the courage to carry forward a policy that would have been courageous—and that could have been easily realized—and in having fallen back upon a solution that appeared to be easier and more in keeping with Italian tradition. They acted with a complete lack of political imagination and with a complete incapacity of assuming true responsibilities. They adopted a policy of constitutionalizing fascism, of taking a transfusion from fascism, while at the same time attempting to emasculate and deprive it of its subversive and anticonstitutional dynamism. It was the same game that the old liberal state had played in the past, when it constitutionalized the republicans and a part of socialism, reforming it, and when it "Gentilonized"<sup>25</sup> the Catholic opposition.

This policy was one of inserting their opponents one by one in their own ranks, as governing groups. All of these operations were carried out at the level of

leadership; it was among the leaders of these parties that the liberal state created space, certainly not at the level of the masses, but at the base. It is here that one finds the true failure of *trasformismo* and of Giolittism in this maneuver, absorbing the leadership without having the capacity to integrate the masses into the state, masses who at one time identified with this leadership. The old game was tried once again with fascism. It is an operation that we are seeing again today when a sector of the Italian bourgeoisie talks about the participation of communists in power, thinking that this means transforming them into social democrats.

The same kind of reasoning was undertaken for the fascists by the men of 1922, with the mitigating circumstance that aside from sporadic and relatively unimportant cases, the ruling class of the time did not have the vaguest idea of what fascism was and how impossible it was to truly constitutionalize it.

To a certain extent fascism *was* constitutionalized; it was rendered impotent and ineffective. For this reason the power structure at the level of the classes that held power was not substantially modified. However, if the operation of constitutionalizing fascism succeeded in terms of the movement in its entirety, it failed with regard to what the regime proved to be. Notwithstanding all the compromises that fascism had to make with the old ruling class and the political personnel of the regime, in the course of ten years fascism had achieved a virtual monopoly of power, and the old political ruling class that made the compromise with fascism in 1922 was almost entirely excluded. If the war had not brought about the fall of the regime in 1943, this process would have become ever greater and would have established graver difficulties for those centers of effective power that were

still in the hands of the old ruling class at that time. I am referring in particular to the crown, to the army, and to a lesser extent the judiciary. That is to say, to the centers of power that fascism—given the character of compromise of its success—had dominated only marginally.

Roughly the same thing can be said about the Catholic world. The events that followed the fall of fascism should not be permitted to deceive us: Without the defeat, the Catholic world as well would have been slowly eroded by fascism. The crisis of 1931 is significant: It shows well that the Catholic sector was becoming de-Catholicized and nationalized. The great postwar success of the Christian Democratic party was due above all to two facts: The role that the Church had had during the last phase of the war (remember what Chabod has to say about this)<sup>26</sup> and even more, the moderate, anticommunist, and modern face that the Christian Democrats were able to put on at that time.

## 4

## *Italian Fascism: Historical and Comparative Analysis*

*Ledeer:* What do you think about the relationship between fascism, which followed on the heels of World War I, and the political forces of prefascist society? I would specifically like to hear what you have to say about the thesis according to which fascism was a movement for the defense of traditional Italy, or of the industrial class against the presumed revolutionary menace from the Left. Who made the fascist rise to power easier, aside from the strategy of Giolitti and *trasformismo*? How did the fascists manage to arrive at the seat of power in Italy?

*De Felice:* Fascism was unconsciously helped by almost all the political forces of the liberal, democratic type. However, this was not done in an active, deliberate manner. They were helped, for example, in 1922, when they arrived in the government, by the idea that fascism could be constitutionalized and de-radicalized simply by making space for it in the government. That was so because nobody had truly recognized the character of fascism and the profound innovation it represented. They dealt with fascism as they had with the other political forces.