

Universal Fascism

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF THE

FASCIST INTERNATIONAL, 1928-1936

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TO MY FAMILY

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INTRODUCTION

Λ.Λ.Λ. The past five to ten years have seen a great resurgence of interest in the study of fascism. Scholars from a widely diverse range of countries and disciplines have been attracted to this fascinating and still largely unanalyzed phenomenon of our century. For many of these scholars, fascism is interesting because it seems to represent a dramatic and mysterious break with Western traditions and political behavior, and stands, as a momentary plunge into darkness by an otherwise civilized and rational world. Such was the view of Benedetto Croce, who for years regarded his own country's adventure with fascism as a temporary interlude in Italian history, representing a momentary imposition of foreign ideas on his people.¹ For those who hold to such a position, fascism is considered an aberration of the "normal" flow of history, something to be studied as one studies abnormal psychology, as an example of the potential for deviance of the human animal.

Other students of fascism have come to view this phenomenon as a vastly successful movement which dominated European politics between the two wars to such an extent that the period warrants the label, "the fascist epoch." Scholars like Ernst Nolte, Stuart Woolf, and George L. Mosse² have attempted to show that fascism became the characteristic form of political behavior for a significant proportion of the European populace between the wars, and have argued further that such

a widespread phenomenon cannot be understood unless it is viewed as part of a long tradition directed against earlier modes of thought and behavior. Consequently, these men have treated fascism as a part of the Western political tradition rather than as a radical break with the past.

This dispute is a serious one, and the adoption of one position at the expense of the other affects the kind of scholarship one pursues in attempting to understand fascism. If we accept the view that fascism was imposed upon various European peoples, or represents a break in the continuity of a people's history, then the focus of the analysis will perforce be directed towards an understanding of fascist leadership (in the early stages of the movement) and government. For this sort of investigation, the problem to be solved is how the fascist leaders were able to win support for their movement and regime, how they were able to discipline the population, and how they were able to maintain power. To a great extent the problem becomes one of biography, and many of the traditional analyses of fascism were directed primarily, if not exclusively, toward understanding the personalities and techniques of fascist leaders like Hitler and Goebbels in Germany, Mussolini and Ciano in Italy, and various quislings throughout Europe.

If, on the other hand, one views fascism as an integral part of the Western political tradition, then the question is much broader and more complicated, for one must attempt to explain why great numbers of people turned away from one set of political and ideological beliefs and adopted a different world-view. In this context, we are less interested in the oratorical skill of fascist leaders than in the emotional impact of fascist ideology and ideals. By stressing fascism's continuity with the past rather than its aberrant nature, one is compelled to deal with such elusive concepts as "national traditions," "popular culture," and finally the "climate of opinion" or, as Burckhardt called it, the "spirit of an age."

These are often dangerous tools for an historian to use, yet in the present case such an approach seems to be the only acceptable one. The shortcomings of the traditional methods, dealing primarily with the various pronouncements of fascist leaders and the biographical details of the lives of "great men," have long since been demonstrated. If fascism is to be properly understood, we must attempt, in our imperfect and groping way, to explain its popular appeal. Millions of Europeans enthusiastically embraced fascist doctrines in the period between the two world wars, and one would have to hold a dismal view of human nature to believe that so many men marched to their deaths solely because they had been hypnotized by the rhetoric of gifted orators and manipulated by skillful propagandists. It seems more plausible to attempt to explain their enthusiasm by treating them as believers in the rightness of a fascist cause which had a coherent ideological appeal to a great many people.

In what follows we shall examine one of the most important elements in the appeal of fascism, the notion that the world was about to undergo a complete transformation, and that this transformation would be brought about in the name of, and by the energies of, European fascist youth. In dealing with the history of this element of fascist rhetoric, we are making the assumption that fascist ideas were in fact taken seriously by many in the period between the two wars.

The content of fascist ideology will be discussed more thoroughly in what follows, but since this question has been hotly debated between scholars of the period, it is necessary to clarify my own position at the outset.

Denis Mack Smith, to take the case of one of the most distinguished historians of Italy, has suggested that "the only original contribution of fascism to politics was probably the technique of castor oil."³ Mack Smith has deliberately exaggerated the lack of any major intellectual innovation within fascist rhetoric, yet his argument is a serious one. If one looks only at the

speeches and writings of fascist leaders, one is hardpressed to find anything resembling the major political philosophies of the past: liberalism, socialism, or even the reactionary ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet fascism's followers believed that it represented a new outlook and a new spirit, and they attempted to piece together the often contradictory and incoherent observations of their leaders into a consistent worldview. Our primary concern in what follows will be with the ideas and enthusiasm of these devotees. Since the focus of this book is on the world-view of the followers of fascism, the claims of fascist leaders and the writings of fascist philosophers will often be relegated to a position of secondary importance.

This means that little space has been devoted to the theories of the leading philosophical figures in the history of Italian fascism, such as Giovanni Gentile and Ugo Spirito. Figures like Spirito and Gentile will enter our story only insofar as they served as centers for the crystallization of support for, or resistance to, the regime. In other words, we will be concerned more with the effect that their ideas had on fascist opinion than with the "pure form" of their ideas *per se*. Indeed, very few people had read the variations of Hegelian Idealism professed by these two philosophers of fascism, and fewer still were capable of understanding them.

The focus of this study, then, is on a particular segment of Italian fascist society, and the effects of the ideas it advocated. We will be primarily concerned with educated young fascists, mostly intellectuals, in the late twenties and thirties. These young Italians and their ideas have received very sparse treatment from scholars, especially non-Italian intellectuals. Even in Italy, with the exception of two polemical volumes written by members of the generation which came of age under Mussolini,⁴ the literature on the attitudes of fascist youth is virtually nonexistent. This lacuna is a serious one, for the first generation

raised by the Fascist Regime offers the historian a unique opportunity to test the viability of the regime itself. What better way is there to gauge the popularity of the Fascist State than to see if it was successful in indoctrinating its young people?

An investigation of this "fascist generation" reveals a striking failure by Mussolini's Italy to win the unqualified allegiance of young fascist intellectuals. This is all the more significant when it is recalled that the court philosopher of fascism, Giovanni Gentile, had himself organized the educational reforms in the early twenties which were to have guaranteed the effective "fascistization" of the Italian schools, and thus provided for the assimilation of Italian youth into the fascist order.⁵ Furthermore, as we shall soon see, these young Italians were not only discontented with the actual structure of the regime but considered fascism's most signal failure to have been the inability to generate a meaningful doctrine, a philosophy of fascism which would enable them to pursue the path of a genuine transformation of the modern world. They therefore attempted to formulate such an all-encompassing doctrine themselves, which they called the doctrine of *fascismo universale*—the theory of universal fascism.

Before considering the framework within which this transformation of fascism was proposed, a few words must be said about the significance of the rhetoric in which such a reconstitution of the world was couched. As we shall see, the adherents of *fascismo universale* argued that fascism had failed to liberate the creative energies of the Italian people. Their complaint was that fascism had not provided a spiritual unity, a coherence of vision, which could offer the Italian people a feeling of cohesion and creative strength and so enable them once again to civilize the world. This fascist mission was repeatedly linked with what fascists took to be the civilizing heritage of Italy. Again and again fascist intellectuals argued that Italy had provided the West with Roman law, Roman Catholicism, and the intellectual

vision of the Renaissance, and that fascism must take its place in that chain of heroic contributions to Western civilization.

These attacks on fascism's failure to provide a meaningful world-view for Italians, and the parallel claim that it had failed to liberate the creative energies of the Italian people, were not new either to Italian history or to western European politics in the modern period. Indeed, this kind of cultural criticism of political organizations is one of the fundamental strands of the intellectual history of the modern era. Fritz Stern has called the phenomenon "the politics of cultural despair,"⁶ and what is so interesting about its appearance in Italy is that this sort of criticism has traditionally been linked to the *origins* of the fascist movements throughout Europe. Consequently, its existence as a critique within fascism in the second decade of its rule warrants some consideration.

The ideology of cultural despair made its appearance in western Europe as an attack upon the failure of national unification to achieve more than a merely institutionally coherent national community. In Italian historiography this question has become known as the problem of the continuity of the *Risorgimento* and, as John Thayer has shown, the charge that Italy abandoned the heroic ideals of the Garibaldian epoch once unification had been achieved played a major role in driving Italy into an interventionist position in the First World War.⁷ Further, the notion that post-*Risorgimento* politics were in some sense a betrayal of the heroism of Garibaldi and the Thousand and of the martyrs of the wars of the *Risorgimento* played a pivotal role in mobilizing popular support for the First World War, for D'Annunzio's exploits afterwards, and for Mussolini's young fascist movement.⁸ In a very significant sense, fascism was supposed to have been a vindication of the *Risorgimento*. And just as national unification had failed to satisfy the demands for cultural elevation and creative liberation after the struggles of

the *Risorgimento*, so the establishment of fascist hegemony failed to satisfy the very same demands for many young Italians.

Mussolini's problems were even deeper than those of the post-*Risorgimento* politicians, for Giolitti and his allies had never claimed to be the leaders of a revolution, let alone a revolution of the Italian spirit. Indeed, the entire emphasis of the Giolittian era had been on a normalization of Italian life and a definite toning down of the tempo and intensity of politics. Mussolini, however, had been swept into power by a group of disgruntled *emagés*, many of whom insisted that the very spirit of Italy be restored to its former greatness. Thus, while the leaders of the post-*Risorgimento* could call for normalization, Mussolini was forced to make constant obeisance toward those who, like the futurists, demanded a creative explosion in Italy. The mood of this heady enterprise has been captured very well by Nolte:

... there was more to fascism than *only* castor oil and truncheons; it also meant, once victory had been achieved, the enthusiasm of reconstruction, the zest of going to work, in which many of the best energies of the young people's urge to action found a home. That Italian life needed a profound renewal, that Italy must at last become a modern state, that there must be an end to bureaucratic dilatoriness, had been repeated much too often during the past thirty years for this new outlook not to have also inspired fascism.

Bold words are sure to find an echo in young hearts—and was not Mussolini's promise, "In ten years, my comrades, Italy will be unrecognizable" truly a bold one?⁹

Mussolini's words were indeed bold, but all too many could see that the Fascist Regime in the late twenties and early thirties was far removed from that vision of heroic grandeur which animated so many fascists. We shall have occasion to investigate the results of their protest against a fascism which they felt had grown old and stale in power, and which consequently

needed the rejuvenating force of youth to restore it to its state of revolutionary health.

The protest against an aging and unsuccessful Fascist Regime was not to be limited to a restoration of Italian fascism's revolutionary spirit. The young fascists who agitated on behalf of *fascismo universale* were convinced that fascism represented the destiny of the world, and that in the act of rejuvenating Mussolini's Italy they had to provide a doctrine for the rest of Europe. This represented a demand for a real transformation of the goals of the regime, for Mussolini had repeatedly voiced his belief that fascism was a uniquely Italian phenomenon, tied to Italy's experiences during and immediately after the Great War, and therefore not "merchandise for export." The thirties saw a renunciation of this slogan, and an adoption of many of the goals originally put forward by the spokesmen for universal fascism. Indeed, not only did the regime change its views on the scope of fascism's relevance, but it finally embarked upon a path of cooperation with foreign fascisms, and attempted to organize a Fascist International in the middle thirties.

The doctrines of universal fascism therefore gained a place within the policies of Italian fascism, and also exerted a certain effect outside the boundaries of the Italian peninsula. It even appeared for a while that a Fascist International might become a significant force in Europe, for when an international congress of fascist movements was held in Switzerland in the winter of 1934, representatives from all over the continent attended. Support for the organization of a Fascist International was widespread, and the story of this attempt tells us much about the nature of fascism, both within and beyond the confines of Italy. A consideration of fascism as an international movement helps us to step outside the context within which it has been traditionally analyzed, and suggests, among other things, that fascist leaders were sometimes unaware of the true popularity and dimension of their movements.

Neither the doctrines of *fascismo universale* nor the attempt to organize a Fascist International have received any extended treatment by scholars of fascism. One possible reason is that much of the material on these questions has only recently become accessible in Italian archives, and that such material as was available to scholars was scattered throughout the country. They do, however, represent important components of both the Italian Fascist Regime and fascism as a European movement in the 1930's. Further, an investigation of these phenomena enables us to set fascism in better perspective as a European event, since the Montreux Congress, and the debates over the Fascist International throughout Europe, exposed several intense conflicts between various schools of fascism. These differences have often been obscured by attempts to present European fascism as a coherent movement, based on common beliefs, and as a common reaction to the European crisis of the period. Our investigation suggests rather that there were some very basic differences between various kinds of fascism, differences which will be discussed at some length.

The attempt to create an organization for the advancement of international fascism points to a significance which many historians have denied to Mussolini's venture in Italy. In the thirties, the Italian Duce often claimed that a new cycle was opening up in the history of Europe, and he believed that the new period would be characterized by a move toward fascist principles and institutions throughout the continent. The "fascistization" of the old continent did not take place, but before Hitler's Germany emerged as a dominant force in Europe one might well have foreseen such a development. The appearance of fascist movements in virtually every European country pointed to the attractiveness of the new ideology, and the majority of these movements pointed in turn to Mussolini's Italy as their major inspiration.

The ideology which inspired many European fascists was the

product of a revolt against fascist institutions and leaders in Italy, and much of the appeal of fascism as a model for other national movements stems from the heavy redrafting of fascist doctrine in the late twenties and early thirties. The youthful criticism of fascism, the subsequent elaboration of the doctrines of *fascismo universale*, and the attempt to organize a Fascist International together represent a significant episode not only within the boundaries of Italian history but in the broader context of European society.

All of this will no doubt seem bizarre to those who share the traditional conception of fascism as *opera buffa*, a phenomenon linked intimately with the basic theatricality of Italian politics and the personality of Mussolini, seen as the great chorus master of a political melodrama. Those who, like Mack Smith, consider fascism to have been nothing more than a facade for the ambitions of the leaders, render a more serious conception incomprehensible.¹⁰ Yet it should be noted that one of the greatest Italian historians, Federico Chabod, believed that there could have been genuinely revolutionary elements within fascism, and that the possibility for a profound reconstitution of Italian society existed within Italian fascist doctrines:

The two themes contained in both the laws and the speeches of Mussolini [in the early thirties], that is, "social justice" and "the expansion [of fascism] in the world," in fact lend themselves to two different interpretations. Must the new system be used as an instrument in the struggle for a nationalist politics, or can it really serve to provoke a radical transformation of the structure of Italian society, that is, to realize the social justice of which so much was spoken? . . . [Fascist Corporatism] ended by provoking and reawakening a new interest in fascism, especially among the young. Can fascism therefore contain within itself elements of growth which permit it to go beyond the purely dictatorial phase? . . . What is at its base? Is it only words, or something new. . . ?¹¹

Chabod noted that all hopes for this social transformation ended when Mussolini embarked on foreign adventures in the late thirties. But he was not able to conclude that the potential for change which fascism seemed to contain was therefore a mirage. Rather, it does not seem unreasonable to argue that fascism contained various potentialities and that it might well have developed in another direction. Its final incarnation as a partner in the Axis with Hitler's Germany must not blind us to the significant voices within Italy calling for quite a different development.

In what follows, then, we shall examine the development of the movement for *fascismo universale* from the beginnings of the ideology to the attempt to organize a Fascist International, and beyond that abortive attempt to the dissolution of the movement in the late thirties.