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The Origins of Italian Fascism*

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The label fascism, and the epithet fascist, have been applied to a large number of regimes and individuals who vary widely in their social origins, their goals, their behavior before reaching power, and their deeds after they obtained power. In many cases the use of these terms has been either so ambiguous, or else so precisely tailored to a limited place and time, as to make them meaningless for generalizing purposes.¹

Yet these words were not always so unsatisfactory. In the 1930's there was fairly general agreement as to the nature of fascism. It was considered a conspiracy, its political machinery being purely instrumental to the interests of the bourgeois financial and industrial ruling class. In 1933 the Communist International called fascism the last stage of capitalism. This identification was accepted throughout the decade of the 1930's by orthodox Communists and, in general, by socialists, liberals, and democratic intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic. It was applied not only to Italy and Germany but to other countries, some of which had not yet reached the first, to say nothing of the last, stage of capitalism.

Italians had had the most direct and earliest experiences of the movement which gave the concept to the modern world. The Italian Communist labor leader Giuseppe di Vittorio went beyond claiming that fascism was an instrument of a generalized capitalism. Fascism had been created in Italy by a very specific and well-identified capitalist group, the Confederation of Industry, *Confindustria*, the rough equivalent of our National Association of Manufacturers. He stated in 1932, "*Confindustria* was not created by fascism; it was the creator of fascism."²

A decade of recent scholarship has challenged di Vittorio's thesis. A. James Gregor rejects it outright. "There is scant data . . . to support the thesis that the totalitarianism of the right, Italian Fascism or German National Socialism, is the 'creation' of large-scale capitalist

* Books reviewed in this essay are noted, as appropriate, in the footnotes.

¹ H. R. Trevor-Roper, "The Phenomenon of Fascism," in *European Fascism*, Ed. by S. J. Woolf (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 38.

² Quoted by Roland Sarti, "Fascism and the Industrial Leadership in Italy Before the March on Rome," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, April, 1968, p. 402.

interests."³ I have questioned whether the label "right" is appropriate to fascism at all, especially to the early stages of Italian fascism.⁴ In recent years the authors of a number of books and articles have re-examined the early period of Italian fascism, what it wanted, and who the fascists were. Understandably there emerge certain differences of judgment, but a common feature is the demolition of the "capitalist creation" position so widely accepted in the 1930's. The *Archivio Centrale dello Stato* in Rome has been opened to qualified scholars. A survey of their work with some attention to the general drift of their arguments will indicate the kinds of ideas now emerging.

Fascism comes from the Italian word *fascio*, which can be translated as bundle, block, group, etc. It had been used in the leftist uprisings of peasants and miners groups in Sicily in the 1890's, called the Sicilian *fasci*. Benito Mussolini first used it in the late Fall of 1914 when he created his *Fascio di azione rivoluzionaria*. This Block of Revolutionary Action was a grouping of maximalist Socialists, revolutionary Syndicalists, and radical Republicans who had in common extremist left-wing social goals and opposition to the neutralism and anti-war policies of their parties of origin. (It should be recalled that the opposition of these parties was to international war, not to class war). These origins are recalled by F. L. Carsten in his book on *The Rise of Fascism*.⁵ The new movement was suspended by Italy's entry into the Great War in 1915 and Mussolini's departure for the front, but was revived after he was invalided out of the armed forces toward the end of the war. In March, 1919 he organized the *Fasci di combattimento*. The programs enunciated by the reorganized movement were clearly anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois, anti-clerical and anti-monarchical.⁶ In 1920 Mussolini endorsed the occupation of the factories by the Socialist workers. Although by late 1920 and early 1921 clashes between the Fascist *squadristi* and Socialist peasant leagues in the Po Valley were growing in frequency and intensity, Mussolini was not yet committed to a total break with the left. At the end of July, 1921, the Socialists called a general strike. On August 2, 1921, Mussolini made a pact of rapproche-

³ A. James Gregor, *Contemporary Radical Ideologies: Totalitarian Thought in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 341.

⁴ Norman Kogan, "Fascism as a Political System," in *The Nature of Fascism*, S. J. Woolf, ed. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), pp. 11-21.

⁵ F. L. Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1967).

⁶ The texts of these programs are reprinted in Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario 1883-1920*. (Turin: Einaudi, 1965), pp. 742-745.

ment with the Socialists. The failure of the general strike, the popular reaction against the left, the objections to the pact by many of the leaders of the *squadristi* whom Mussolini was having difficulty in controlling, were apparently the important factors in his decision to look for allies in a moderate direction and make a deal with certain elements in the business community.

Carsten emphasizes the ruthlessness and dynamism of Fascism. Frank J. Coppa ascribes crucial importance to the *squadristi* in giving tone and direction to the Fascist movement in the years immediately before the March on Rome. He considers them to have been agrarian hoodlums, from families of proprietors of small and middle-sized agrarian holdings, not from large landowning families.⁷ They were the sons of agriculturalists who were feeling most severely the attacks of the Socialist peasant leagues and cooperatives, especially in the Po Valley. They used violence against these enemies of their interests, but they hardly defined their interests as the defense of industrial and financial capital.

Serge Hughes, in his survey of recent Italian history, *The Fall and Rise of Modern Italy*,⁸ gives emphasis to the nationalist element which is an addition to, not a substitute for, marxist elements in fascism. In fact he considers Mussolini's basic orientation one of "nationalist socialism" with equal stress placed on both words. Hughes' book is superficial in many respects, and contains numerous errors of detail. He is aware, nevertheless, of the complexity of Fascist origins, and of the importance of national feeling. Only after the Second World War did the Italian Communists recognize the force of national feeling as an element in the victory of fascism, independently of the defense of the "privileged classes." In a speech to the Fifth Congress of the Italian Communist Party in December, 1945, Secretary-General Palmiro Togliatti stated, "After the First World War there were workers' movements [Socialist and, after 1921, Communist] that cut short their development and lost the struggle against reaction because they neglected the national element. The working class cannot think of solving the question of democracy's victory, nor even of socialism's victory, by detaching itself from the national community . . ."⁹

⁷ Frank J. Coppa, "Agrarian Hoodlumism, Mussolini and the Triumph of Fascism in Italy," in *Studies in Modern History*, Ed. by Gaetano L. Vincitorio. (New York: St. John's University Press, 1968), pp. 233-244.

⁸ Serge Hughes, *The Fall and Rise of Modern Italy*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967).

In recent years two Italian historians have made major contributions

⁹ Quoted by Salvatore Saladino, "The Roots of Fascism," pp. 4-5; (typewritten).

In recent years two Italian historians have made major contributions to our understanding of the origins of Italian fascism. Renzo De Felice is producing a monumental multi-volume biography of Mussolini. The first two volumes have already been published: *Mussolini il rivoluzionario, 1883-1920* and *Mussolini il fascista, 1921-1925*.¹⁰ They teem with information and details never before available, since De Felice is one of the first scholars to have access to the *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*. De Felice has difficulty in handling his enormous mass of material, in pulling together the threads of evidence to make a coherent story. The Mussolini who emerges, however, is a revolutionary of the first order, out to emulate the Bolshevik victory in Russia. But abruptly the revolutionary changes. De Felice does not make a convincing case for Mussolini's sudden switch, and some reviewers have legitimately criticized him on this account.

Roberto Vivarelli has produced a more balanced picture. The first volume of his two-volume examination of the postwar period has been published. It ends with D'Annunzio's seizure of Fiume in 1919.¹¹ Vivarelli's is a general history of the period, not a concentrated study of the rise of the Fascists. He devotes his attention to the larger context of foreign and domestic policies, and levels much criticism at the Socialists' sins of commission and omission. The Catholic party, *Partito popolare*, is relatively neglected, but after all, this party was only in its beginning stages during the period covered in volume one. The transition of fascism from an extreme leftist movement to a more moderate one is depicted as more gradual and less abrupt than in De Felice's presentation. Elements of nationalist influence appear somewhat earlier.

The American historian, Edward R. Tannenbaum, has recently completed an article on "The Goals of Italian Fascism."¹² He represents fascism in its beginnings as a "revolutionary alternative to Marxism rather than a mindless reaction against it. The founders of the Fascist movement in March 1919 were almost all former revolutionary socialists and syndicalists At first Mussolini viewed himself as a kind of Italian Lenin, with a desire to continue the war with a revolution."¹³ The influx of the rural *squadristi* introduced provincial

¹⁰ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista, 1921-1925*. (Turin: Einaudi, 1966).

¹¹ Roberto Vivarelli, *Il dopoguerra in Italia e l'avvento del fascismo (1918-1922)* Vol. 1. Naples: istituto italiano per gli studi storici, 1967).

¹² Edward R. Tannenbaum, "The Goals of Italian Fascism." The article is scheduled for publication in the 1969 summer issue of *The American Historical Review*. I was privileged to see a copy of the manuscript.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

and anarchistic elements, interested in their own revolution against "self-righteous liberal 'establishments'." Later, in the last half of 1920 and especially after the merger with the Italian Nationalist Association in 1923, restraining forces began to get control over the more violent *squadristi*, and by 1925 they had been effectively stripped of their power.

It must not be assumed, however, that these growing nationalist elements in the fascist ranks were conservative defenders of the *status quo*. As Sarti points out, their doctrine of "productivism," being inter-class, could make industrialists more palatable to an ex-revolutionary Socialist such as Mussolini, but the doctrine distinguished between the "productive" and "parasitic" bourgeoisie and was dangerous to *rentiers*, absentee landowners, and all those living on investments, as well as to non-productive workers and peasants.¹⁴

Recent historical analysis, in other words, clearly refutes the Comintern judgment which had "reduce[d] Fascism to a capitalist conspiracy from its very beginning."¹⁵ What is interesting about this judgment is that it was pronounced only in the later years, after the fascists in Italy had been tamed by the state.¹⁶

In the early 1920's a somewhat more accurate view had been held. The Fourth World Congress of the Comintern in 1922, under the influence of the Italian Communist delegates, interpreted fascism as the *enemy* of the capitalist bourgeoisie, recognizing that it had progressive class elements as well as reactionary ones. In 1923 the Executive Committee of the Comintern noted that the victory of fascism was in some sense a revolutionary change, and stressed the relation of fascism to the *petit and middle* bourgeoisie, small landed peasants, and the intelligentsia. The final resolution stated, "Although fascism by its origin and its exponents also includes revolutionary tendencies which might turn against capitalism and its State, it is nevertheless becoming a dangerous counter-revolutionary force."¹⁷ By 1924 the Comintern considered both fascism and social democracy as instruments of a capitalist dictatorship. In 1928 the sixth Comintern Congress called fascism the tool of the bourgeoisie. The standard

¹⁴ Sarti, *loc. cit.*, pp. 402-403.

¹⁵ John M. Cammett, "Communist Theories of Fascism, 1920-1935," *Science and Society*, Spring, 1967, p. 156. Italics in original.

¹⁶ This is not the place to enter into a discussion of the Italian regime in the later years, but De Felice has told me that in his subsequent volumes he will defend the thesis that the Fascist Party was never a ruling party, but was shoved to the sidelines by Mussolini and the state bureaucracy.

¹⁷ Quoted by Cammett, *loc. cit.*, p. 152. footnote 5. The material on the evolving position of the Comintern is drawn from Cammett's article.

definition had now been set and would remain unchanged in the years of Stalinist hegemony.

Since *Confindustria* is the classic Italian symbol of bourgeois capitalism, and since it was specifically identified as the power group for which fascism was the mere instrument, it might be worthwhile to refer to two recent studies of this organization.

After an extensive analysis of *Confindustria*, Mario Abrate emphasizes both *Confindustria's* reluctance to ally itself with fascism before Mussolini came to the government, and its efforts to maintain its independence of the regime after Mussolini consolidated his position. Dino Olivetti, the Secretary-General of *Confindustria*, remained an anti-fascist opponent of the regime until his death in 1925.¹⁸ Other industrialists, however, were not so stubborn. Sarti notes that the fascists became more attractive to big business after the occupation of the factories in 1920, and Mussolini's subsequent reorientation. He affirms, however, that big business had more confidence in the malleable and opportunistic Mussolini than in his ideological fascist revolutionary followers. Sarti finds no evidence that the industrialists encouraged Mussolini to make his March on Rome, "but once he had made it, they were prepared to consider him as just another candidate for the job of prime minister, a candidate who could obtain their backing in return for specific promises of a contingent nature."¹⁹ They could not foresee that the government to be formed by the leader of a small party in a shaky coalition would last much longer than its unstable and short-term predecessors.

¹⁸ Mario Abrate, *La lotta sindacale nell'industrializzazione in Italia, 1906-1926*. (Milan: Franco Angeli Editore, 1968).

¹⁹ Sarti, *loc. cit.*, p. 416.