

SECTION TWO: FASCIST ITALY

6 *Fundamentals of Italian Fascism*

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1. *General Aspects.* An earlier section traced the roots of National Socialism in the evolution of ideas that took place in Germany during the last four centuries. When Benito Mussolini founded the Fascist party in 1919, the same year in which the National Socialist party was organized, he was, ideologically, in a much less fortunate position than Hitler. He was a political parvenu who had to create his own ideological pedigree.

The contrast between the histories and intellectual climates of Italy and Germany—clearly illustrated by the distinct forms which the Reformation and the unification took in the two countries—produced different bases for their enmity toward democratic procedures. Latins may conquer their natural individualism to a certain degree—under duress—but will never be able to extinguish it as the Germans do. German sympathy for metaphysical concepts and ideological myths finds less response where political ideas have not the globe-encircling tendency of Teutonic geopolitics. To a considerable degree, the Italians have remained the habitual regionalists that they have always been.

The historical sources of Italian Fascism are limited. Where they appear to be vast, they are an operatic invention. Mussolini's dream of recreating the old Roman Empire in the twentieth century was as picturesque as it was Utopian. It fired temporarily the imagination of some sections of the Italian people and aroused a belligerent spirit among youths who were too immature to recognize that the struggle for control of the Mediterranean Sea was one between Germany and Britain with Italy confined to the role of a fellow traveler of Germany. The vision of a Fascist Roman Empire with Italian hegemony over *Mare Nostrum* was hardly ever more than mere imperialistic propaganda.

The Renaissance is another important period in Italian history from whose greatness the Fascists tried to borrow. They pointed to the revolutionary character of the Renaissance which struggled to free the mind from the shackles of a rigid scholasticism. Its youthful vigor and rebellious impetus seemed seductive. Even more useful was the lack of political morality during this period, offering "inspiration" for opportunism and intrigue.

However, it was the *Risorgimento*¹ which appealed to the Fascists more than any other epoch in the history of their country. This movement toward unity and liberation from the Habsburg servitude, dating from the 1820's, achieved its aim with the unification of Italy under Victor Emmanuel I in 1870. The leaders of the *Risorgimento*, men like Mazzini, Cavour, and Garibaldi, were all liberals of various shades. The elements which effected the unification of Italy were incomparably more progressive than those which brought about a similar result in Germany a few months later.

The Fascists did their utmost to popularize the heroes of the *Risorgimento* as their patron saints. Any demand for political discipline on the part of one of the liberal thinkers was interpreted by them as a quest for authoritarianism. They turned Giuseppe Mazzini, one of the most admirable representatives of liberalism in Italy, into an advocate of their theories. But, in fact, the strongest influence of authoritarian trends came to Italy from foreign thinkers. The Germans Hegel and Nietzsche, and the Frenchmen Bergson and Sorel, furnished the intellectual bases for modern Italian absolutists.

Since Fascists have called their movement a "historical process" and have sought to find a background for it among some of Italy's foremost thinkers, we may examine both this claim and the more important contribution coming from foreign sources.

2. *From Dante to d'Annunzio.* Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the great poet and thinker of Italy, was one of the first to be named as an "apostle of those ideas which have become articles of faith of the Fascist creed and, in particular, of the concept of Empire which plays one of the leading roles in the Fascist philosophy of life."²

¹ Literally, "rising again," implying the rise from oppression to liberty.

² Mario Palmieri, *The Philosophy of Fascism*, The Dante Alighieri Society, Chicago, 1936, p. 220

Dante's *De Monarchia*, his treatise on government, was written in response to the political troubles of his time: the age-old and unproductive struggle between church and empire, the abuses and corruption which temporal interests had brought into the church, and the strife within his own Italy. Dante accepted the medieval concept of unity within the church and within the state, but favored a clear separation of the two powers. A strong empire was to him a means of achieving universal peace.

Fascist interpreters have distorted Dante's ideas by claiming that he had in mind the concentration of power in the hands of an absolute monarch with the seat of government in Rome. They have contended that his advocacy of separation between church and state pointed to a belief in the establishment of an authoritarian state which alone would be able to create the world empire. Where Dante wanted peace, the Fascists declared that war is not only necessary but also "beautiful" and "artistic."

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) deserves a high rank among the intellectual ancestors of Fascism. To be sure, Machiavelli was a patriotic Italian who was distressed by the petty squabbling among the city-states of the Peninsula. His observations and his activity in the civil and diplomatic service of his native Florence led him to take a "realistic" view of power politics. He came to the conclusion that the only way of achieving unity and order was through power, divorced from moral considerations, as he saw it practiced around him. His hopes centered for a time on the brilliant and unscrupulous figure of Caesar Borgia. Machiavelli has often been misinterpreted and misunderstood; the liberal Cavour was an apt pupil of his.

In his famous book, *The Prince*, Machiavelli identifies the state with society; in fact the state is society. The result of his "realism" was to accept the premise that the chief motivation of man is selfishness. The Prince, embodying the state, will therefore be guided by that opportunism which has been so characteristic of Mussolini's career and politics. The end of the state is power, unrelated to morals; the state operates above, or rather outside, the ordinary standards of morality; hypocrisy, deceit, the weakness of men will all be used as tools in furthering the power of the state whose end is the purely material one of industrial and commercial prosperity;

religion, too, is but another tool in the hands of the Prince.

All the methods suggested by Machiavelli for the expansion of the power of the state have been followed by Mussolini: increase of population; formation of "fortunate" alliances; maintenance of a large standing army; and a regulation of economic activity for the purpose of creating an empire. In 1924, the Duce wrote an unfinished thesis on *The Prince* in which he affirmed his belief in the absolute state and in the discretion of the state in creating its own morality.¹

The Neapolitan philosopher Gianbattista Vico (1668-1744) has been presented as another precursor of Fascism, and his book, *The New Science*, first published in 1725, as another milestone in the formation of Fascist doctrine. Vico conceived of history as a series of cycles, *corsi* and *ricorsi*, not as a continuous development. Each civilization had its own spiritual cycles emanating from a "divine ideal." He rejected materialistic and empirical approaches to truth finding and replaced them with spiritual idealism. Opposing Descartes' philosophy, which dominated the thinking of his time, he looked upon mathematical science as arbitrary, and stressed, quite against the convention, the reality of historical knowledge which, for him, was the basis of the "new science." The obtuseness of his writing and the fact that his ideas did not fit into the mold of his time are responsible for his not having been "discovered" until the nineteenth century.

In Fascist interpretation, Vico demanded that life be brought back to the vision inherent in the divine ideal, that is; the "ideal of today" rather than a hypothetical (scientific) conception of the future. The "ideal of today" is the ideal of the world of man. The true facts of this world cannot be shown or suggested by science. Authority should ordain the "ultimate criterion of the conduct of social life" ² because those who rule have a closer relationship with the "divine." There is no social contract between the ruler and the ruled. "With Vico," concludes Palmieri, "Fascism is born and individualism begins to die." ³

The most quoted Italian of the *Risorgimento* is Giuseppe Maz-

¹ Mussolini, Preludio al "Principe," *Gerarchia*, Vol. 3, 1924.

² Palmieri, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

zini (1805–1872). Despite the fact that he has been claimed by absolutists as well as liberals, Mazzini certainly was no totalitarian. All his life he strove for the development of the individual, although he did not share the belief in inherent natural rights of the liberalist school of Locke, Paine, and Jefferson. Instead, he related the concept of right to the idea of duty. He did not mean that there should be no liberty, but he felt that men should become conscious of their responsibility to the group.

Unlike the Fascists, Mazzini did not believe that the state owes nothing to its citizens while they owe everything to the state. His was a reciprocal system of well-balanced rights and duties between state and society. "We part forever from the exclusively individualist Age. . . . We believe in association . . . as the only means possessed by us to realize truth as the method of progress. . . ." ¹ Unlike most modern historians, he did not believe that the French Revolution initiated a new age; he taught that it concluded a period of developing individualism and that the era of "association," or, as we would say, cooperation, had arrived. ² "The watchword of the future is association," he said, ³ but he added that "without liberty no true society exists, because between free men and slaves there can be no association but only dominion over some of the other." ⁴ The Fascists forgot this interpretation conveniently.

Mazzini was neither a Fascist nor a collectivist. The fact that he advocated a strong centralized government does not mean that he wanted total government. Man's duties toward humanity took precedence for him over man's duty toward the state. It appears, moreover, that he tried to reconcile individualism and cooperative society with the aim of creating a working relationship between state and citizens for the mutual benefit of both. Likewise, the fact that Mazzini did not approve of the principle of *laissez faire* does not indicate sympathies for despotism on his part, and the efforts of the Fascists to claim him as their own can hardly be regarded as warranted. In fact, Mazzini's modern type of liberalism is evident in the economic sphere, for he wanted to retain the system of private

¹ Mazzini, *The Duties of Man and Other Essays*, Everyman's Library, E. P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1910, pp. 173, 176.

² *Ibid.*, p. 257.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

enterprise but insisted that the state or the community somehow control and supervise the conduct of business.

Mazzini was one of the few important nineteenth-century liberals who clearly foresaw the weakness of unrestricted individualism. In its place, he advocated group action as a safeguard for every member of the group. He was in this far ahead of his time. The only resemblance to Fascist ideological thinking appears in that part of Mazzini's philosophy which recalls Hegel's historical idealism. Mazzini saw history as a continuous process guided by a divine providence. In most respects he deviates considerably from Hegel, who was revered by those early Fascist philosophers who called themselves "Neo-Hegelians."

In Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) we come to an authentic source of Fascist ideology. Pareto was first a mathematician, who became an economist trying to apply mathematical processes to economic planning, and finally developed into a famous sociologist. During an early period of exile, Mussolini came under the influence of Pareto's lectures in Lausanne and remained thereafter his faithful admirer, although Pareto's influence on Mussolini has often been exaggerated.

Pareto advocated a society in which a ruling minority, the élite, should "convince" the people of the validity of its ideals not only by force but also by indoctrination. "One may say," he taught, ". . . that the governing class has a clearer view of its own interests because its vision is less obscured by sentiments; and that, as a result, the governing class is in a position to mislead the subject class into serving the interests of the governing class; but that those interests are not necessarily opposite to the interests of the subject class, often in fact coincide with them, so that in the end the deception may prove beneficial to the subject class."¹

All those who do not rule should, without contradiction, observe and revere the instructions and prescriptions of their governing leaders. Pareto believed that the concepts of religion and morality could be particularly useful in inducing the governed to accept this view. The government should be alert to "take advantage of sentiments," for the "statesman of the greatest service to himself and his party is

¹ Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society (Trattato di sociologia generale)*, ed. by Arthur Livingston, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1935, p. 1592. § 2250.

the man who himself has no prejudices but who knows how to profit by the prejudices of others."¹

According to Pareto, scientific approaches to life are acceptable only for the purpose of knowing, not of doing. Doing means acting spontaneously, that is, according to the dictates of sentiment. It is a matter of certain driving forces which may be called "ethical." Ethics is a nonscientific subject, as is religion. It is thus exempt from scientific criticism and analysis. In other words, the élite should use all available devices, from force to persuasion, to make it clear that ideas are not made to be analyzed critically but should be absorbed illogically, unscientifically, sentimentally. Since the mass of individuals cannot be expected to comply at all times with such a policy, their selfish interests have to be suppressed and future generations educated to nonanalytical obedience. The use of these concepts by Fascism is obvious.

The romantic roots of Fascism are perhaps best represented by Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863-1938). Poet and novelist of deservedly high repute, d'Annunzio was not a thinker, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he thought with his heart rather than with his head. The result was expressed in a desire for action and an exaltation of the value of action for its own sake. A violent interventionist at the beginning of the First World War, he played in that war, despite his age, a creditable, if somewhat theatrical, part in the Air Force.

A rabid nationalist, he achieved a brief moment of national and even international fame on the political stage through his seizure of Fiume in the autumn of 1919. In itself a minor episode, the circumstances and the atmosphere which surrounded the adventure gave it significance beyond its local aspects. What is more, during his brief "reign" of one year in Fiume, d'Annunzio organized there a virtual dictatorship, and bestowed upon the *Reggenza italiana del Carnaro* a constitution of his own design. This interesting document, issued in August, 1920, contains in embryonic form many of the features characteristic of Mussolini's Fascist Italy.²

The importance of this incident or of d'Annunzio's influence

¹ Melvin Rader, *No Compromise*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1939, p. 49. See also Pareto, *op. cit.*, p. 1570, § 2249.

² See R. Albrecht-Carrié, "Fiume. Nationalism versus Economics," *Journal of Central European Affairs*, April, 1942, pp. 49-63.

should not be exaggerated, but it served as a rallying focus for the forces and ideas which went into the making of Fascist ideology. D'Annunzio was at first highly honored in Fascist Italy, until it became apparent that the country was too small a stage for two such strong individualists as himself and Mussolini, and he was induced to accept innocuous retirement on the shores of Lake Garda. D'Annunzio is the best single illustration of the type of mentality which rallied to Fascism the Italian Nationalists and such people as Marinetti, the Futurist.

3 *Foreign Influences.* If there is any deeper meaning in Fascism, it comes from other influences than those which have so far been mentioned, influences whose teachings the Fascists borrowed and elaborated upon. Thus the philosophical basis of the Fascist doctrine is derived in great part from such sources as Kant's categorical imperative and his belief that freedom can be achieved only by self-conquest, from Fichte's moralism and statism and from Hegel's idealism and spiritual totalitarianism. All these sources are part of the mosaic which forms the Fascist pattern of thinking. The philosophy of Hegel, in particular, was transformed and despiritualized by the Neo-Hegelians whose leaders were Alfredo Rocco and Giovanni Gentile. The metaphysical aspects of the Hegelian "absolute" lost in depth what the worship of the "divine" state gained in emphasis.¹

On the whole, however, the Fascist doctrine is much more flexible than the Nazi ideology. The Fascists never scrupled to adapt the writings or statements of great intellects to suit their book. The use of Nietzsche's concept of the "superman" may be cited as an illustration.

Closer in time than the German philosophers, the Frenchman Henri Bergson (1859-1943) was also found useful by the Fascists. Bergson claimed that human thought can only progress by disregarding previously conceived and accepted theories and systems. He developed the concept of the *élan vital*, or, as we may also call it, creative evolution, a process of adaptation to reality, which is thus apprehended in its truest form.

Bergson's stress on intuition, misinterpreted into a depreciation of intelligence, was seized upon by Fascist thinkers and applied to

¹ See above, pp. 50-53.

the Fascist idea of state and society according to which the members of a society can find liberty and fulfillment only as parts of a state which has absorbed and completely determined the character of this society.

The pragmatic philosophy of the American psychologist William James (1842–1910) appeared to Fascist opportunism as another convenient peg on which to hang its ideology. The Fascists overlooked conveniently James's postulate that beliefs and opinions should be given the right to test themselves and to succeed if they can. In Fascist interpretation, this meant the superiority of Fascism to democracy and the right to use every means to achieve a Fascist victory. James did not claim that there could be only one successful belief; obviously, an individualistic democracy has room for many trends and opinions.

James also contended that the character of societies and institutions is basically changeable as they merely reflect acquired habits. History is the sum total of changes to which these habits are subjected, and it is the individuals who bring about the changes. The Fascists, of course, did not conceive of a multitude of individuals who all together make history. For them, the only individuals who make history are infallible leaders who make it to suit their purpose and will.

The teachings of Georges Sorel (1847–1922), another Frenchman, are said to have had considerable influence on Mussolini. Sorel called himself a "socialist," but he hated parliamentary socialism just as much as he despised the bourgeoisie. He had once been the friend of the French Socialist leader Jean Jaurès whom he had assisted in the trial of Captain Dreyfus, but he was unable to remain in the same camp with any man who followed a systematic political doctrine. Sorel's interest was centered on the irrational human aspects of socialism rather than on economic systems. Being deeply pessimistic, he opposed intellectualism and fought against what he called the "cultural humanism" of the bourgeoisie. He ridiculed the faith in peaceful democratic progress. Although he respected the theories of Karl Marx, he did not subscribe to Marx's foremost doctrines, for example, the theory of surplus value. He claimed that what socialism needed was not so much an economic system as an organization of the masses on an ideological basis.

In his famous book, *Reflections on Violence*, he declared against “mechanistic” socialism, that is, a socialism systematized and functioning according to rigid dogmas. Instead, he invented the “myth of the general strike” as an instrument to unite labor and to frighten the bourgeoisie into compliance with the demands of labor. What race is for Hitler, the general strike is for Sorel; it is the core of his ideology. He wrote:

The general strike is indeed what I have said: the *myth* in which socialism is wholly comprised. . . . Strikes have engendered in the proletariat the noblest, deepest and most moving sentiments that they possess; the general strike groups them all in a coordinated picture, and, by bringing them together, gives to each one of them its maximum of intensity. . . . We thus obtain that intuition of socialism which language cannot give us with perfect clearness. . . .¹

For Sorel, as for the Fascists, scruples about the use of violence are signs of the weakness of a decaying society. Marx’s words that “force is the midwife of society” were praised by Sorel and applied in his reasoning. He watched the success of the Russian Revolution with extreme interest and, though appalled by the consequences of violence during the Civil War, he admired Lenin’s realism and economic planning.²

The Fascists accepted Sorel in some respects and rejected him in others. They disregarded his sympathies for Marx and his interest in the working class. They borrowed his theory of the “myth of the general strike,” changing it into the myth of the total state as an irrational driving force. They also adopted Sorel’s doctrine of violence, which offered, in their version, a suitable excuse for the inhuman treatment of their political opponents.

But the real “philosophers of Fascism” did not arise until years after the “march on Rome.” Led by Mussolini, they formulated some of the basic concepts of the doctrine. Without going into a detailed treatment of its history, it will be necessary to sketch its development in order to understand its nature.

¹ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, authorized translation by T. E. Hulme, Peter Smith, New York, 1941, p. 137.

² He added an appendix on Lenin to the last edition of *Reflections on Violence* which appeared during his lifetime.