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Worldwide Fascism. Italian Historians in an International Debate

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Worldwide Fascism Italian Historians in an International Debate

Abstract

The essay examines whether and how far Italian historiography has contributed to the view of fascism as a global phenomenon, and reflects on its relationship with various other approaches. In particular, it highlights the differences among Italian, German, French and Anglophone historians studying fascism. On this basis, the author argues that Italian scholars divide between those who prefer to dialogue with German or French historiography and those who propend for the English-speaking school.

Keywords: *Fascism, Italian Historiography, Consensus, Violence.*

1. Introduction

The historical coverage of fascism and its various forms was already «enormous» – to quote Stanley Payne – by the mid-1990s¹ and has gone on growing. Even studies on Italian fascism, published in Italy, amount to a daunting number of titles and continue to mount up, given the mark fascism left on national history and the historical memory of the Republic². The last few years have seen studies on globalization and critiques of the historical approach focusing on national histories; these have cast strikingly new light on the historiographical problems and include a crop of transnational studies. In the present monographic issue, we therefore need to ask how far Italian historians have contributed to this view of fascism as a global phenomenon. In other words, we need to check to what extent contributions made in recent decades have em-

¹ S. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. XIII.

² As a simple example, I searched certain key words in titles (*fascismo, fascista, fascisti*, Mussolini among works in Italian) using a number of bibliographic search engines (sbn, worldcat) divided by year of publication. Though the data need handling with caution as absolute values, they concur in showing persisting interest in the topic since the surge in the 1970s, with a peak of over 3000 titles in the period 2010-19. A more circumscribed survey – though more homogeneous in that it omitted re-editions, reprints and non-historiographical material – based on the national historical bibliography databank, came up with 963 works (monographs and essays) published in the decade 2000-2009 and 510 appearing in the period 2000-2009.

braced this viewpoint and yielded results of value when it comes to analysing fascism as a worldwide phenomenon. In the 1980s and 1990s it was often pointed out that the collapse of radically opposing ideologies – and the restructuring of the political system in the Nineties – prompted a different mode of interpreting fascism. Publication of Claudio Pavone’s book on the resistance was obviously important here: it marked a break, especially on the topic of antifascism, though it also bore to some extent on people’s thoughts on fascism itself³, giving rise to new studies in a comparative vein⁴. At the same time the very crisis in the Republic’s political parties brought controversy as to the memory of fascism. In many respects this last still drags on⁵, though it seems of late to have preoccupied the public discourse on history especially. Attention to such interaction between the sphere of public discourse and the writing of history often occupies the centre of any reconstruction of the historical treatment of fascism. Without wishing to underestimate this aspect, I think that this way of tracing the historiography of fascism captures a somewhat partial, if important, side to the real picture, skating over the institutionalization of contemporary history as a discipline that occurred over the last twenty years of the last century. For that institutionalization helped research to keep a distance from the public debate about history and to create a scientific and more commonly adoptable basis for research on the contemporary era⁶. Research of such kind has in fact pressed beyond many of the heated disputes of the Seventies and Eighties⁷. This is now an acknowledged fact, just as there is universal recognition for Renzo De Felice’s labour of unearthing documentation, a fact accepted even by those who do not share his interpretations⁸.

Besides such all-Italian dynamics, we must remember that the analysis of fascism has also changed at a wider level. In his retrospective reconstruction of the debate over fascism Sven Reichardt distinguishes three phases in the historical coverage⁹. The first was in

³ C. Pavone, *Una guerra civile: saggio storico sulla moralità nella resistenza*, Torino, Einaudi, 1991.

⁴ See for example: L. Baldissara (ed.), *Atlante storico della Resistenza italiana*, Milano, Mondadori, 2000; E. Collotti, R. Sandri, F. Sessi (eds.), *Dizionario della resistenza italiana*, 2 voll., Torino, Einaudi, 2001; *Resistenza / Resistenze in Europa*, edited by Giulia Guazzaloca, «Ricerche di Storia Politica», 5 (2002); S. Peli, *La Resistenza in Italia: storia e critica*, Torino, Einaudi, 2004.

⁵ See the reconstruction by M. Bresciani, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and the Idea of Nation: Italian Historiography and Public Debate since the 1980s*, «Contemporary European History», 30 (2021), pp. 111-123.

⁶ For some thoughts on this general point, see S. Cavazza, *Die Neueste Geschichte in Italien. Überlegungen zu einem etablierten Fach*, «Annali dell’Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico in Trento», 36-37 (2011), pp. 83-111.

⁷ On the various sides to the 1970s-1980s debates: T. Baris, A. Gagliardi, *Le controversie sul fascismo degli anni Settanta e Ottanta*, «Studi storici», 55 (2014), pp. 317-333; G. Sabbatucci, *Una rivoluzione storiografica: De Felice e le origini del Fascismo*, in F. Perfetti (ed.), *Renzo de Felice la storia come ricerca*, Firenze, Polistampa, 2017, pp. 119-132.

⁸ G. Albanese, *The Italians and Fascism*, «Contemporary European History», 24 (2015), p. 318. Aramini likewise acknowledges that the controversy has now been resolved, though he is convinced that De Felice’s work is still not fully understood by some Italian historians; see D. Aramini, *Renzo De Felice e la recente storiografia italiana*, «Studi Storici», 55 (2014), pp. 335-348.

⁹ S. Reichardt, *Neue Wege der vergleichenden Faschismusforschung*, «Mittelweg» 36 (2007), pp. 9-25.

the 1920s and 1940s when, be it noted, it was the work of exiles and antifascists¹⁰, as well as foreigners such as Herbert Schneider and Louis Franck¹¹. Reichardt dates the second phase to the Sixties and Seventies, coinciding with the opening of archives and the first theoretical analyses of fascism. The third phase starts with the 1990s when studies on fascism sought a comparative, ideal type-based definition of fascism as a concept according to various models; the focus of their analysis was on the processes underlying the various instances of fascism¹². Above all in Anglophone historiography – as Roger Griffin points out – a new consensus emerged as to the definition of fascism; this led to its being seen as a political ideology occurring in the politics of various different epochs without (all) the features of fascism between the two world wars¹³.

Again, it should be remembered that in recent decades international works of history on fascism have gone in for the functionalist, rather than intentionalist, approach. This distinction, in relation to national socialism, was made by Timothy Mason. In 1981 Mason argued that intentionalists were «those historians who regard the dictatorial will as being of the essence of nationalsocialist rule»¹⁴, while functionalists «underlined the role played by the machinery of government and its effect upon decision-making in the Third Reich»¹⁵.

Since the present paper, assuming Reichardt's subdivisions, sets out to decide whether, and how far, Italian historiography continues to add to our understanding of fascism as a global phenomenon, one is also driven to ponder its relationship with those other historiographic approaches: for example, may the focus on the global and transnational, or the emphasis on the international side to fascism as a political category, have either reduced or bolstered the contribution of Italian historians to the global picture? I must make it clear, however, that this paper does not lay claim to any exhaustive description of the historiography on fascism, but seeks to point out certain cruxes relevant to the theme underlying this monographic issue, namely whether the studies added more or less to the vision of fascism as a worldwide phenomenon.

2. The Local Dimension

The first batch of studies concerning us here are those on so-called provincial fascism. These belong directly to Reichardt's second phase which they carry a considerable step forward. And that, in fact, was the moment when the debate blew up over Renzo de Felice's theories. In that 1971 setting, as part of a pioneering volume devoted to the history of Tuscany under

¹⁰ For example: G. Salvemini, *The Fascist Dictatorship in Italy*, vol. 1, *Origins and practice*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1928; S. Trentin, *Aux sources du fascisme*, Paris, Rivière, 1932.

¹¹ H. W. Schneider, *Making the Fascist State*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1928; and L.R. Franck, *Les étapes de l'économie fasciste italienne. Du corporatisme à l'économie de guerre*, Paris, Librairie sociale et économique, 1939.

¹² S. Reichardt, *Neue Wege der vergleichenden Faschismusforschung*, «Mittelweg», 36 (2007), pp. 9-25.

¹³ R. Griffin, *Studying Fascism in a Postfascist Age. From New Consensus to New Wave?*, «Fascism», 1 (2012), pp. 1-17.

¹⁴ T. Mason, *Intention and Explanation: A Current Controversy about the Interpretation of National Socialism*, in G. Hirschfeld, L. Kettenacker (eds.), *Der Führerstaat: Mythos und Realität*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1981, p. 27.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

fascism promoted by the local Resistance History Institute, Ernesto Ragionieri argued the need for fascism to be studied at a local level¹⁶. The same decade saw two other works of note: one by an English scholar settled in Italy, Paul Corner¹⁷, the English edition of whose study on Ferrara made a considerable splash¹⁸; the other by Marco Palla¹⁹ whose study on Florence was likewise acclaimed in Italy and abroad²⁰.

From the 1990s on, this avenue of study gained strength²¹, with some interesting articles adding to the analysis on fascism triggered by documentation amassed in Central State archive (Archivio Centrale dello Stato), and shedding light on areas like so-called «fascismo di frontiera» (frontier fascism)²². Such studies started out from a local standpoint, of course, and risked losing sight of the wood for the trees²³. Yet in some cases they provided a detailed picture of fascist dynamics between centre and periphery, revealing the mechanisms of power, consensus-building and regime legitimization²⁴. They showed how the rise of the dictatorship did not smother dialogue between centre and periphery, which might take various forms: from an anonymous protest to an attempt to win over party officials and/or Mussolini himself to take sides in locally-generated disputes. In other words, the centre-periphery dialogue got absorbed into tensions dividing local branches of the party, so-called «*beghismo*» (political infighting)²⁵. Such research delved into the composition of elites and the changing/unchanging mechanisms by which these were reproduced. Historians long stuck to the idea that fascism simply reinstated or bolstered traditional local elites; this was borne out in some places, especially Tuscany. Present-day studies have shown a more complicated picture, however, offering food for thought that includes continuity down to the Republican period. The research does tend to show that party secretaries and

¹⁶ E. Ragionieri, *Il Partito fascista: appunti per una ricerca*, in *La Toscana nel regime fascista, 1922-1939*, Firenze, Olschki, 1971, pp. 59-85.

¹⁷ P. Corner, *Il fascismo a Ferrara 1915-1925*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1974.

¹⁸ Cf. F. Delzell, *Fascism in Ferrara, 1915-1925* by Paul Corner, «The American Historical Review», 81 (1976), pp. 893-894; R.A.H. Robinson, *Fascism in Ferrara 1915-1925* by Paul Corner, «History», 61 (1976), pp. 470-471; H. Hearder, *Fascism in Ferrara 1915-1925* by Paul Corner, «The English Historical Review», 91 (1976), pp. 681-682.

¹⁹ M. Palla, *Firenze nel regime fascista*, Firenze, Olschki, 1978.

²⁰ A. Lyttelton, *Firenze nel regime fascista (1929-1934)* by Marco Palla, «The Journal of Modern History», 52 (1980), pp. 712-714.

²¹ P. Varvaro, *Una città fascista: potere e società a Napoli*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1990; G. Galli, *Arezzo e la sua provincia nel regime fascista (1926-1943)*, Firenze, Centro editoriale toscano, 1992; L. Di Nucci, *Fascismo e spazio urbano. Le città storiche dell'Umbria*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1992.

²² For an overview see the special issue *Faschismus an den Grenzen / Il fascismo di confine*, edited by G. Mezzalana, H. Obermair, «Storia e Regione/Geschichte und Region», 20 (2011), 1.

²³ P. Corner, V. Galimi, *Introduzione*, in P. Corner, V. Galimi (eds.), *Il fascismo in provincia articolazioni e gestione del potere tra centro e periferia*, Roma, Viella, 2014, p. 7

²⁴ *Fascismi locali*, special issue edited by R. Camurri, S. Cavazza, M. Palla, «Ricerche di Storia Politica», 13 (2010).

²⁵ On conflict in the periphery: S. Lupo, *Il fascismo: la politica in un regime totalitario*, Roma, Donzelli, 2000, p. 267 ff; P. Corner, *Everyday Fascism in the 1930s: Centre and Periphery in the Decline of Mussolini's Dictatorship*, «Contemporary European History», 15 (2006), pp. 195-222. On the changing historical coverage of centre-periphery relations, see T. Baris, *Tra centro e periferia. Stato e partito negli anni del fascismo*, «Studi Storici», 55 (2014), pp. 27-40 and S. Cavazza *Faschismus vor Ort. Die faschistische Partei auf lokaler Ebene*, in S. Cavazza, T. Großbölting, C. Jansen (eds.), *Massenparteien im 20. Jahrhundert Christ- und Sozialdemokraten, Kommunisten und Faschisten in Deutschland und Italien*, Stuttgart, Steiner Verlag, 2018, pp. 141-156.

local leaders of the fascist national party (PNF) came from outside the traditional elites. Yet the latter, where they embraced fascism, seem to have kept a prominent position in municipal administration or economic power. Studies on local fascism have revealed that where local elites went over to fascism at once, or where fascism did *not* take root, those elites retained a lasting role of importance both outside and inside the party. In areas where fascism grew without involving the elites the new intake to posts of authority was higher and the gap with the traditional elites more pronounced. Baris' hypothesis based on a study of Frosinone seems to be generally applicable: namely, that the political posts in the party tended to go largely to new men, while the *podestà* and centres of economic power stayed in the hands of the traditional elite²⁶ – an occurrence that we find elsewhere²⁷.

However, considerable though the contribution of such literature was to our understanding of fascist power dynamics, it left less of a mark abroad. The few exceptions regard the earliest studies above all²⁸, either in research explicitly devoted to fascism on the periphery²⁹, or in specific journals³⁰. This I find understandable for the reason that this mound of scholarship – undeniably patchy in value, but useful to the extension of knowledge – tended not to lead to any general interpretive model of centre-periphery relations. One exception was Salvatore Lupo whose general history of fascism tried to incorporate centre-periphery dynamics in its interpretation of the fascist Ventennio³¹, as well as concepts like polycracy that stemmed from the German setting³². So it was the general failure to provide an overall interpretive framework that prevented local studies from smoothly fitting into the so-called third wave.

3. Violence and Transition

A different reception awaited studies on violence as practised by fascism. Though not a novel theme, it was stimulated by an emerging international interest in the topic. It will be recalled that research on violence and genocide gradually became current in the literature of history, no doubt prompted by dramas like the war in Yugoslavia or the genocide in

²⁶ T. Baris, *Il fascismo in provincia: politica e società a Frosinone, 1919-1940*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2007.

²⁷ A. Baù, *All'ombra del Fascio: lo Stato e il Partito nazionale fascista padovano (1922-1938)*, Sommacampagna, Cierre, 2010.

²⁸ F. Archambault, *Monica Busti, Il governo della città durante il ventennio fascista. Arezzo, Perugia e Siena tra progetto e amministrazione*, «Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales», 69 (2014), pp. 570-572. Confirming the interest in this kind of study, the review cites the pioneering work by Di Nucci, *Fascismo e spazio urbano*, cit. (*ibidem*, p. 570).

²⁹ For example F. Vollmer, *Die politische Kultur des Faschismus. Stätten totalitärer Diktatur*, Köln, Böhlau Verlag, 2007, who compares Arezzo and Terni, using the literature on local fascism.

³⁰ S. Cavazza, *Faschismus vor Ort*, cit.

³¹ G. Vidal, *Lupo Salvatore, Le Fascisme italien. La politique dans un régime totalitaire*, «Vingtième Siècle», 82 (2004), pp. 188-189. Another exception is Paul Corner's study on public opinion and fascist party: P. Corner, *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini's Italy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

³² S. Lupo, *Il fascismo: la politica in un regime totalitario*, Roma, Donzelli, 2000.

Ruanda³³. This had repercussions for Italian historians as well³⁴. Thus Giulia Albanese's work on the March to Rome and the role of violence as fascism seized power found a favourable reception, chiming as it did with historians' rediscovery of the violent era that ensued on the First World War, following the lead of Robert Gerwarth³⁵. The English edition of Albanese's book was singled out for praise by Gerwarth for recognizing how the March lent weight to the fascist bid for power, lifting it out of marginal news status³⁶. It is worth noting that Gerwarth based his judgement on far from recent literature like Malaparte and Seton-Watson³⁷, overlooking the fact that various authors like Alatri³⁸ and Lyttelton³⁹ had focused on the role of violence. But they too were no longer recent, and Gerwarth was right to acknowledge the merit of Albanese's broad-ranging study in recalling historians' attention to the central issue of fascist violence – in the wake of Sven Reichardt's work which he rightly mentioned in his review. The topic of violence thus seems more open to dialogue with English-speaking historians, as witness the work of Matteo Millan whose theme was the continuing role of violence even after the seizure of power⁴⁰. Both are instances of an approach that accords with history-writing in other countries. Evidence of this comes from Corner's comment on Millan: despite reservations on the role attributed to squadrist (organized thuggery) in the regime once ensconced, Corner acknowledges Millan's merit in reviving attention to violence after historians had tended to neglect the issue⁴¹. The topic surfaced again in the crop of studies reconstructing massacres and violence against civilians during the Second World War. Prominent among these was Paolo Pezzino's essay on Sant'Anna di Stazzema. This and his Atlas of Nazi and fascist massacres in Italy make Pezzino a leading researcher on this front⁴², leading to international acclaim which he shares with Luca Baldissara and various scholars connected

³³ From the enormous literature on this topic, I would simply cite the historical opinions of M. Mazower, *Violence and the State in the Twentieth Century*, «American Historical Review», 107 (2002), pp. 1158-1178.

³⁴ The key reference here is to the works of Marcello Flores: M. Flores, *Tutta la violenza di un secolo*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2005; Id., *Il genocidio degli armeni*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2006 and more recently Id., *Il genocidio*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2021.

³⁵ See for example D. Bloxham, R. Gerwarth (eds.), *Political violence in Twentieth-century Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

³⁶ R. Gerwarth, *Giulia Albanese, The March on Rome: Violence and the Rise of Italian Fascism*, «The English Historical Review», 135 (2020), pp. 1364-1366.

³⁷ «In the existing literature on the rise of Italian fascism, it has been belittled as a 'comedy' (Curzio Malaparte) or 'a victory march of no political significance' (Christopher Seton-Watson)» (Gerwarth, *The March on Rome*, cit., p. 1364).

³⁸ P. Alatri, *Le origini del fascismo*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1956.

³⁹ A. Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919-1929*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973, appearing the year later in Italy: *La conquista del potere: il fascismo dal 1919 al 1929*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1974.

⁴⁰ M. Millan, *The Institutionalization of Squadristo: Disciplining Paramilitary Violence in the Italian Fascist Dictatorship*, «Contemporary European History», 22 (2013), pp. 551-573; and Id., *Squadristo e squadristi nella dittatura fascista*, Roma, Viella, 2014.

⁴¹ P. Corner, *Response to Matteo Millan: «Squadristo» and Fascist Violence in the Long Term*, «Contemporary European History», 22 (2013), pp. 575-578.

⁴² P. Pezzino, *Anatomia di un massacro: controversia sopra una strage tedesca*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2007; P. Pezzino, *Sant'Anna di Stazzema: storia di una strage*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2013; G. Fulveti, P. Pezzino (eds.), *Zone di guerra, geografie di sangue: l'Atlante delle stragi naziste e fasciste in Italia (1943-1945)*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2016.

with the Istituto Nazionale Parri⁴³. One should note *en passant* that publication of the Atlas and the creation of a databank by the Istituto Nazionale Parri, in collaboration with the National Partisans Association, was made possible, like other wartime history studies, by funding from the Deutsch-italienischen Zukunftsfonds /Italo-german Fund for the Future⁴⁴. In recent decades the period 1943-45 has come in for close study, often in collaboration with German historians. One should note in the context the studies on Italian military internment⁴⁵, and deportation to supply forced labour⁴⁶, following in the wake of pioneers like Brunello Mantelli⁴⁷, as well as works on Italian prisoners-of-war in various geographical settings⁴⁸. Such works hold undeniable global importance, though some of them have figured for the most part in Italo-German historical exchanges. Relations with Germany and the behaviour of Italians in war are another major field of enquiry⁴⁹. Various authors (Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, Simone Leis Sullam) have whole-heartedly pursued the topic of anti-Semitic persecution, which is another area interesting non-Italian historians⁵⁰. The themes of the transition to a Republic and the legacy of fascism have likewise been explored by Italian historians and in some respects tie up with trends in international historiography. This avenue of study is linked above all to German historiography, above all the studies by Filippo Focardi, conducted in profitable dialogue with German historians⁵¹, and accompanied by a growing attention to the memoirs of victims⁵². It should go on record that Italo-German dialogue on the issue of fascism has been fostered by German (German Historical Institut in Rom) and Italo-German institutions (Centro Italo-tedesco per il dialogo Europeo- Villa Vigoni), (Istituto Storico-germanico Fondazione Kessler), as well as by Associations like Siscalt (Society for the study of countries in the German-speaking area), cooperation with which has stimulated

⁴³ J. Foot, *Via Rasella, 1944: Memory, Truth, and History...*, «The Historical Journal», 43 (2000), pp. 1173-1181.

⁴⁴ The databank website is: www.straginzifasciste.it. The Fund for the Future is a joint enterprise, funded by the German government, with a view to promoting the history and memory of imprisoned Italian soldiers and in general the experience of war: <https://italien.diplo.de/it-de/themen/kultur/04-Kultur/-/1601644>.

⁴⁵ N. Labanca (ed.), *Fra sterminio e sfruttamento: militari internati e prigionieri di guerra nella Germania nazista, 1939-1945*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 1992; G. Procacci, L. Bertucelli (eds.), *Deportazione e internamento militare in Germania: la provincia di Modena*, Milano, Unicopli, 2001; B. Maida, B. Mantelli (eds.), *Otto lezioni sulla deportazione: dall'Italia ai lager*, Milano, Aned, 2007.

⁴⁶ B. Mantelli (ed.), *Tante braccia per il Reich!: il reclutamento di manodopera nell'Italia occupata 1943-1945 per l'economia di guerra della Germania nazionalsocialista*, 2 vols., Milano, Mursia, 2019.

⁴⁷ B. Mantelli, *I lavoratori italiani in Germania: 1938-43*, Torino, Loescher, 1989.

⁴⁸ M. T. Giusti, *Gli internati militari italiani: dai Balcani, in Germania e nell'URSS, 1943-1945: cura e traduzione di documenti inediti bielorusi*, Roma, Istituto di studi politici S. Pio V, 2019. Ead., *I prigionieri italiani in Russia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019.

⁴⁹ A. Osti Guerrazzi, *Esercito italiano in Slovenia: 1941-1943: strategie di repressione antipartigiana*, Roma, Viella, 2011; M. Baumeister, A. Osti Guerrazzi, C. Procaccia, *6 ottobre 1943: la deportazione degli ebrei romani tra storia e memoria*, Roma, Viella, 2016; Id., *Gli specialisti dell'odio: delazioni, arresti, deportazioni di ebrei italiani*, Firenze, Giuntina, 2020.

⁵⁰ S. Levis Sullam, *I carnefici italiani: scene dal genocidio degli ebrei, 1943-1945*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2015.

⁵¹ F. Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano: la rimozione delle colpe della Seconda guerra mondiale*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2013; Id., *Nel cantiere della memoria: fascismo, Resistenza, shoah, foibe*, Roma, Viella, 2020.

⁵² F. Focardi (ed.), *Le vittime italiane del nazionalsocialismo: le memorie dei sopravvissuti tra testimonianza e ricerca storica*, Roma, Viella, 2021.

comparative research, in particular into Italo-German fascism⁵³. It is hardly surprising, as a result, if the question of transnational relations among different fascisms – a prominent theme outside Italy – has been construed by Italian historians largely in connection with Germany. Fewer studies have enlarged the horizon except as concerns the regime's propaganda and foreign policy⁵⁴, though Giulia Albanese stands out again for her research on Mediterranean dictatorships⁵⁵, and Matteo Albanese for his on transnational fascism⁵⁶.

4. Symbols and Politics

The brand of Italian historical coverage of fascism that makes the greatest impact at home and abroad is the analysis of the symbolic and cultural dimension. In this field the studies by George Mosse on nationalization of the masses must be seen as pioneering and transversally influential⁵⁷. No less significant has been the emergence of studies on the *Invention of Tradition*, coming on top of the linguistic turn which has actually made a limited impact in Italy, and certainly nothing to compare with that of the two aspects we have mentioned⁵⁸. Although the main studies on anthropological aspects of culture and ritual have often started outside Italy⁵⁹, some significant work has been done in Italy, at times embracing a long period⁶⁰. The study of rites has indeed influenced the debate as a whole. Emilio Gentile's reconstruction of fascist ritual and symbols remains a paradigm work on the symbolic mobilization of the masses. I refer primarily to the Cult of the Littorial, and also to his investigation of fascism as a political religion, studies that have earned him international renown⁶¹. The interpretation of fascism as a political religion owes something to Vogel's view of politics. Fascism would thus become an

⁵³ Lastly see: A. Di Michele, F. Focardi (eds.), *Rethinking Fascism: The Italian and German Dictatorships*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 2022.

⁵⁴ The need for greater attention to the international dimension of fascism was pointed out, for example, by P. Bernhard, *Renarrating Italian Fascism: New Directions in the Historiography of a European Dictatorship*, «Contemporary European History», 23 (2014), pp. 151-163.

⁵⁵ G. Albanese, *Dittature mediterranee: sovversioni fasciste e colpi di Stato in Italia, Spagna e Portogallo*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2016.

⁵⁶ M. Albanese, P. Del Hierro, *Transnational Fascism in the Twentieth Century: Spain, Italy and the Global Neofascist Network*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

⁵⁷ On the Italian role cf. D. Aramini, *George L. Mosse e gli storici italiani: il problema della «nazionalizzazione delle masse»*, «Mondo contemporaneo», 3 (2007), pp. 129-159. On Mosse's merits for his cultural study of politics on a more general scale, see P. Burke, *Cultural History, Ritual and Performance: George L. Mosse in Context*, «Journal of Contemporary History», 56 (2021), pp. 864-877.

⁵⁸ Adoption of the same research topics should not blind one to the different degrees to which historical analysis is used in the different approaches, as rightly mentioned by R. Griffin, *The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies*, «Journal of Contemporary History», 37 (2002), p. 33, note 33.

⁵⁹ S. Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997.

⁶⁰ S. Luzzato, *Il corpo del duce: un cadavere tra immaginazione, storia e memoria*, Torino, Einaudi, 1998; M. Ridolfi, *Le feste nazionali*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2003; Id., *La politica dei colori: emozioni e passioni nella storia d'Italia dal Risorgimento al ventennio fascista*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2014; S. Cavazza, *Piccole patrie. Feste popolari tra regione e nazione durante il fascismo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2003.

⁶¹ E. Gentile, *Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista*, Roma-Bari Laterza, 1998.

alternative faith, religion sanctifying politics⁶². This connection with the Vogel approach gave Gentile's theory widespread resonance within the third wave of fascist studies. His attention to the religious dimension links him to schools of thought based on the anthropological primacy of culture, and likewise to Griffin's view of fascism as nationalist regeneration. Though Gentile takes a critical stance towards the generic fascism line⁶³, his interpretation has bulked large in Anglophone historiography precisely because of its powerful conceptualization tending to a more general theoretical model.

Other scholars have also pursued a theoretical line, though without arriving at any general form of theoretical framework. In this connection we should note Paolo Pombeni's tracing of the relationship between populism and fascism⁶⁴, as well as his and other scholars' analyses of leadership which, though often forming part of a broader time-frame, have contributed to an overall vision of the fascism issue⁶⁵. Since research on fascism had become «ideology-centred», as Antonio Costa Pinto remarked in 2010, shifting the accent towards the political and cultural⁶⁶, we should mention the studies that have explored the ideological and cultural dimension. The work that stands out here is Pier Giorgio Zunino's. By a detailed analysis of the various cultural components, Zunino helped put an end to the historiographical diatribes of the 1970s⁶⁷. Within this line of studies, we should not forget Monica Cioli's exploration of the cultural side, again closely linked to German history-writing⁶⁸. And another noteworthy contribution is Renato Moro's recent volume on the relations between regime and Catholicism which he traces to that between Catholics and nationhood in Italy⁶⁹.

⁶² E. Gentile, *Fascism as Political Religion*, «Journal of Contemporary History», 25 (1990), pp. 229-251.

⁶³ Id., *Il fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2005, pp. 59-61.

⁶⁴ P. Pombeni, *Das Problem des Populismus im Rahmen der europäischen Geschichte, «Totalitarismus und Demokratie»*, 8 (2011) 2, pp. 221-236; S. Cavazza, *War der Faschismus populistisch? Überlegungen zur Rolle des Populismus in der faschistischen Diktatur in Italien (1922-1943)*, «Totalitarismus und Demokratie», 9 (2012), 2, pp. 235-256; P. Armellini, *Populismo e fascismo: un confronto tra categorie politiche affini e diverse*, in R. Chiarelli (ed.), *Il populismo tra storia, politica e diritto Populismo tra storia, politica e diritto*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2015, pp. 161-176; A. Mastropaolo, *Tra fascismo e populismo*, «Italia Contemporanea», 294 (2020), pp. 152-162.

⁶⁵ P. Pombeni, *Charismatic Leadership between Ideal Type and Ideology*, «Journal of Political Ideologies», 13 (2008), pp. 37-54; S. Cavazza, *Il ruolo del capo nel fascismo italiano in chiave comparata*, in F. Triola (ed.), *Destini incrociati? Italia e Germania tra Otto e Novecento*, Berlin, Freie Universität, 2020, pp. 22-42.

⁶⁶ A. Costa Pinto, *Introduction: Fascism and the Other «-isms»*, in A. Costa Pinto (ed.), *Rethinking the Nature of Fascism: Comparative Perspectives*, Basingstocke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, p. 1.

⁶⁷ P.G. Zunino, *L'ideologia del fascismo. Miti, credenze e valori nella stabilizzazione del regime*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1985. On his contribution to resolving the conflict: M. Canali: *Il revisionismo storico e il fascismo*, «Cercles. Revista d'història cultural», 14 (2011), p. 101.

⁶⁸ M. Cioli, *Il fascismo e la sua arte: dottrina e istituzioni tra futurismo e Novecento*, Firenze, Olschki, 2011; Ead., *Anche noi macchine! Avanguardie artistiche e politica europea (1900-1930)*, Roma, Carocci, 2018; and Ead., M. Ricciardi, P. Schiera (eds.), *Traces of modernism: Art and Politics from the First World War to Totalitarianism*, Frankfurt a. M., Campus, 2019.

⁶⁹ R. Moro, *Il mito dell'Italia cattolica. Nazione, religione e cattolicesimo negli anni del fascismo*, Roma, Studium, 2020.

5. Party, State, Consensus

Reverting to the topic of centre-periphery relations, an important role was played by the regime's welfare policies which have been studied in the last few decades. Various essays have explored the regime's organizations providing services in the pensions field⁷⁰, support for maternity and infancy⁷¹ and its social policies in general. Works extending our knowledge of fascism, they seem nonetheless to have had limited impact outside the country and to have circulated their ideas via direct contact with other countries' historiography⁷². If one sifts the general histories of fascism, only Patrizia Dogliani tried to build a social perspective into the overall reconstruction of the period, and this found favour abroad⁷³. Analysis of the institution system, which in many respects builds on the studies by Aquarone, has continued to play its part in fascist studies. Despite Aquarone's undoubted success, this line has made less impact outside Italy – except in specialist sub-sectors – and this is particularly so in English-speaking historiography. Likewise, the impact of studies on administration: partly owing to the peculiar intricacy of the associated legal analysis, but also because the past interest in this aspect has dwindled. If one searches for the impact of Guido Melis' *Imperfect Machine* – a detailed reconstruction of how the bureaucratic mechanisms conditioned the regime – the various databases show a number of quotations and reviews but nearly all come from Italian sources⁷⁴. Melis' study actually rests on an impressive documentary basis conducted with historical and legal finesse and leading to an eminently functionalist conclusion: namely, that bureaucracy conditioned regime policy and even Mussolini's decisions⁷⁵. In such case these conclusions may be of great interest abroad within certain areas of study – as with the history of administration – but less so for the general debate on fascism. In the same bracket go Loreto Di Nucci's studies on the fascist party which – like Gentile's⁷⁶ and Pombeni's⁷⁷ – have thrown light

⁷⁰ C. Giorgi, *La previdenza del regime. Storia dell'INPS durante il fascismo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2004.

⁷¹ M. Minesso, *Stato e infanzia nell'Italia contemporanea: origini, sviluppo e fine dell'Onmi, 1925-1975*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2007.

⁷² C. Giorgi, *The Allure of the Welfare State*, in G. Albanese, R. Pergher (eds.), *In the Society of Fascists*, cit., pp. 131-148; Ead., *Das faschistische System der sozialen Vorsorge im Spannungsverhältnis zwischen autoritären Maßnahmen und sozialer Integration*, «Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken», 97 (2017); Ead., *Die Sozialpolitik der faschistischen Partei*, in S. Cavazza, T. Großbölting, C. Jansen (eds.), *Massenparteien*, cit., pp. 157-172.

⁷³ P. Dogliani, *Il fascismo degli italiani. Una storia sociale*, Torino, Utet, 2008 which also had a French edition: P. Dogliani, *Le fascisme des Italiens: une histoire sociale*, Grenoble, UGA Éditions, 2020.

⁷⁴ Two search engines were used, implemented by ebsco: almastart at Bologna University and Stabikat+ at the state library of Berlin, engines working within the entire digital and hard-copy collections of either institution. Despite the limitations of any such research, the results are significant enough to assess the impact.

⁷⁵ G. Melis, *La macchina imperfetta. Immagine e realtà dello Stato fascista*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2018.

⁷⁶ E. Gentile, *Storia del Partito fascista: 1919-1922: movimento e milizia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1989; Id., *Le rôle du parti dans le laboratoire totalitaire italien*, «Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations», 43 (1988), pp. XX-XX; Id., *La via italiana al totalitarismo. Il Partito e lo Stato nel regime fascista*, Roma, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1995.

⁷⁷ P. Pombeni, *Demagogia e tirannide: uno studio sulla forma-partito del fascismo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1984; Id., *A study of the party form of Fascism. Demagoguery and Tyranny in the Evolution of*

on internal party discussion and how it worked⁷⁸. Unfortunately, the state of the documentation does not allow sophisticated prosopographic analysis to be conducted on the composition of the fascist party, unlike what is possible with the NSDAP where conservation of large quantities of individual party cards enabled Michel Kater to pursue his studies⁷⁹, and more recently Jürgen Falter⁸⁰. No less important were Mauro Forno's studies on communication⁸¹.

We should add, in conclusion, a few remarks on relations between regime and population and especially how scholars have depicted the Italians' attitude towards the regime. Debate as to consent/dissent has long raged among historians, but we may say that developments in research have largely resolved the dichotomy. On the one hand, Paul Corner has shown how superficial part of the population's relation was with the regime⁸². On the other hand, it has been pointed out that the relationship between dictatorships and citizens calls for subtler and more complex tools⁸³. Here, analysis of postwar eastern European regimes, especially the GDR, has suggested that a wide range of attitudes may keep a regime in place, without reducing them to mere consent or dissent⁸⁴.

6. Conclusions

Let us conclude by trying to sum up how far Italian historiography has contributed to the view of fascism as a worldwide phenomenon. But first, a more general premise. Italian historical scholarship has come in for criticism, at times rightly but sometimes ungenerously, it must be said. What is often forgotten is the damping effect of university research cuts in funding since 2008 which have still not been made good. Add to this the shift in the promotion of research towards external financing and technology transfer. This is not the place to go into the topic; but together, these factors have certainly cramped history research, and it is hard to quantify the specific effect on research into fascism. The present article has nonetheless found some food for thought in examining National Research Projects and PhD Programmes – financed in Italy by individual university grants. Such PhD Programmes played a big part in the new turn in

the Modern State, «Annals of the Archive of F. Valls I Taberner's Library», 5 (1989), pp. 25-44; for praise of this approach, see T. Mason, *Whatever happened to fascism?*, «Radical History Review», 49 (1991), p. 95.

⁷⁸ L. Di Nucci, *Lo Stato-partito del fascismo. Genesi, evoluzione e crisi. 1919-1943*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009.

⁷⁹ M. H. Kater, *Quantifizierung und NS-Geschichte. Methodologische Überlegungen über Grenzen und Möglichkeiten einer EDV-Analyse der NSDAP-Sozialstruktur von 1925 bis 1945*, «Geschichte und Gesellschaft», 3 (1977), pp. 453-484; Id., *The Nazi Party: A Social Profile of Members and Leaders, 1919-1945*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1983.

⁸⁰ J. Falter, *Hitlers Parteigenossen: Die Mitglieder der NSDAP 1919-1945*, München, Campus, 2020.

⁸¹ M. Forno, *La stampa del Ventennio: strutture e trasformazioni nello Stato totalitario*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2005.

⁸² P. Corner, *Italian Fascism: Whatever Happened to Dictatorship?*, «The Journal of Modern History», 74 (2002), pp. 325-351; Id., *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini's Italy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

⁸³ P. Bernhard, *Renarrating Italian Fascism*, cit., pp. 161-162.

⁸⁴ P. Corner, *The Fascist Party*, cit., p. 179 e pp. 283 ff; S. Cavazza, *Miti e consenso durante il fascismo*, in A. Varni (ed.), *Storia di Bologna*, vol. IV, t. 2, Bologna, Bononia University Press, 2013, pp. 480-482.

history writing; indeed, many of the studies cited here were based on such PhD research. On the first point, during the period 1996-2009 when competitions were held annually, out of a total of 931 projects funded in area 11 (history, anthropology, philosophy, pedagogy and psychology) 83 were to do with contemporary history and five of them (6%) specifically concerned fascism, while 11 (13%) covered a longer time-span and (wholly or partially) included the interwar period⁸⁵. Over the ensuing decade (2010-2019) only 4 funding competitions were held, resulting in only 9 projects funded in contemporary history, none of which specifically concerned fascism⁸⁶. The drop was due not so much to a reduction of resources which actually saw an inversion of trend with the 2017 competition, as to a lumping together by macro-areas according to European Research Council classification, and to more funds being assigned to individual projects, thereby reducing the overall number of funded projects as compared with the past.

As concerns doctorates, it should first be noted that, following official changes to the system of PhD Programme creation, to do especially with the financial requisites demanded, it became very difficult to launch disciplinary PhD programmes, thus curtailing the number of PhD researchers in contemporary history. In searching for the role of fascism in studies by young researchers, I found difficulty due to changes in the system for depositing theses: these used once to be centralised at national central libraries, but then were placed in individual university repositories. However, one can make use of a partial census conducted by the Society for the Study of Contemporary History which covered part of the 1990s down to the beginning of the second decade of the new century: in these 142 contemporary history theses figured, 15 of them (10.5%) being devoted to fascism⁸⁷. Turning to the 201 thesis projects selected at the *Storie in corso* (*ongoing histories*) meeting of the Society for the Study of Contemporary History (Sissco) which began in 2006, one finds 18 theses specifically devoted to fascism (8.95%)⁸⁸. Various limited surveys on repositories at certain universities suggest that the younger generation of scholars are tending to favour other research topics and not so much fascism⁸⁹.

Of course, receiving funding does not in itself guarantee innovative research, but clearly when resources dwindle people tend to tread the well-worn paths hoping to improve their selection chances. For that very reason it needs to be stressed that, despite real cuts in resources, Italian research has gone on producing interesting results and holding its own with

⁸⁵ To this number one should add the history projects presented within the social sciences: 48 out of 439 projects receiving funding, 2 of which (4.2%) related to the fascist period and 2 to a longer time-span.

⁸⁶ The data used came from the website of the Ministry for the University and Research (Miur) (<https://prin.miur.it/index.php>). In the decade 2000-2009 on average 6.6 history projects were funded per competition; from 2010 to 2019 the number was 2.2 projects.

⁸⁷ The census contains gaps at the beginning of the 1990s /www.sissco.it/tesi-dottorato/? (last access 26 May 2021).

⁸⁸ Another 10 theses (4.91%) were on more general topics partly involving the fascist era. Source: www.sissco.it/categorie/attivita/convegni-e-incontri-della-sissco/ (last access 24 April 2021)

⁸⁹ The search entailed the presence of the word *fascismo* (or *fascista* or *fascisti* in the title and keywords, and was confined to area 11. University of Bologna: 3 theses on fascism out of 66 registered (4.54%); Padua 3 theses out of 38; Pisa 7 theses out of 66 (10.6%) (though this includes 3 theses for doctorates in the history of international relations which belong to a different discipline); Naples 5 theses out of 63 (7.93%).

historians in other countries. Here, however, we note a persisting happy dialogue with German historiography but a different pattern when the Anglophone historiography is involved. The two paths at times interweave but at others go their separate ways. In recent years the Italian contribution to the history of fascism as a global phenomenon has generally come from a few groups of scholars above all – albeit not always meeting with due international recognition – and has represented a lower percentage of the overall number of studies. We thus need to seek the causes of this, which cannot just be set down to a drop in funding. The already mentioned preponderance of the functionalist approach – marked as it is by considerable hybridization of interpretation – can hardly be taken as a sufficient explanation, since in that field Italian historians have shone in their empirical analysis of individual aspects of fascist era politics and society. If anything, I feel that the emergence of new interpretations of fascism in the Nineties – the third wave of studies according to Reichardt or the second according to Griffin – tending to conceptualize fascism in various forms and analysing it as a political ideology, proved harder for Italian historians to relate to, except for a few scholars such as historians influenced by Weber and Koselleck, who seem anyway to have preferred to dialogue with German historiography. And conversely, international scholars seem to have been less impressed by the Italian approach based on field research and going into local power dynamics, such as the studies of regime bureaucracy: probably because these lacked a more general conceptualization of their results.

A reluctance to talk in terms of generic fascism or a «fascist minimum» has tended to deter historians (with certain major exceptions) for two reasons that have not figured so far since the aim of this essay was different. Firstly, one senses a persisting kind of undertow towards the idea that Italian fascism was unique, and that it can be confined to the experience between the two world wars. This renders dialogue difficult: for the whole idea of generic fascism or a «fascist minimum» is that they can fit other time-frames, though clearly not in identical form. However, that does not seem sufficient justification for the distance with third-wave Anglophone historians. Emilio Gentile, who criticised that position, nonetheless remains the most credited Italian scholar in this new season of Anglophone studies. Gentile's interpretive model of fascism as a political religion is based on solid empirical analysis but enriched by a general interpretive framework, thus bridging to schools of thought based on the primacy of culture or regenerative ideology. But the general run of studies based on field research and eschewing theory seem less able to dialogue with third-wave themes. Some avenues of study have inevitably been played down for this reason, while others have lent themselves better to a view of fascism as a worldwide phenomenon, and hence can work more closely with other historical approaches – dividing into those that favour the German (or French) school and those geared to Anglophone historiography.

Time alone will show whether the trend is definitive, or a passing phase destined to be followed by returning interest in these issues among younger scholars, or by a change of focus in English-speaking studies.

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