
MUSSOLINI'S INTELLECTUALS

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MUSSOLINI'S INTELLECTUALS

FASCIST SOCIAL AND
POLITICAL THOUGHT

A. James Gregor

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The work embodied in this book is dedicated
to all those who, willingly and unwillingly,
accompanied me on my journey.

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THIS BOOK appears after almost four decades of study, conferences, discussion, and publication. Over those years, students of “fascism,”¹ as a subject of inquiry, have seen its “essence” change, in the judgments of scholars, from a movement of the “extreme right” into one that was neither of the “right” nor the “left.”² We are now told that “Fascist ideology represented a synthesis of organic nationalism with the antimaterialist revision of Marxism.”³

From a political revolution entirely without any pretense of a rational belief system, we are now told, by those best informed, that “fascism’s ability to appeal to important intellectuals . . . underlines that it cannot be dismissed as . . . irrational. . . . [In] truth, fascism was an ideology just like the others.”⁴ Moreover, it has been acknowledged that “Fascism was possible only if based on genuine belief.”⁵

In effect, the study of Italian Fascism has delivered itself of significantly altered assessments over the past decades. Where, at one time, Fascism was simply dismissed as a phenomenon understood to be without intellectual substance, a right-wing excrescence that invoked violence and war, it is now more and more regularly understood to be a movement, and a regime, predicated on a reasonably well articulated belief system that engaged the rational commitment of many.

For all that, there remains a residue of opinion that continues to deny Fascism the same reasoned beliefs that everyone readily grants to the political movements and regimes of Joseph Stalin or Mao Zedong. We are still told, for example, that unlike Stalinism and Maoism, “Fascism had few true believers who could also write articles and books.”⁶ Strange.

One of the principal purposes of the present work is to attempt to challenge such notions. Fascist intellectuals wrote and published as many arti-

¹ Generally the lowercase “fascism” refers to a class of movements or regimes. The term “Fascism,” capitalized, refers to Mussolini’s political movement and regime.

² “Fascism did not belong to the extreme Left, yet defining it as part of the extreme Right is not very illuminating either. In many respects, fascism was not conservative at all in inspiration.” Walter Laqueur, *Fascism: Past, Present, Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 13.

³ Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 6.

⁴ Roger Eatwell, *Fascism: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. xix–xx, 4.

⁵ Laqueur, *Fascism*, p. 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

cles and books as apologists for any comparable system. Their quality varied with each author, just as was, and is, the case with comparable systems. It would be hard to convincingly argue that the intellectual yield of authors in the former Soviet Union or Maoist China was superior in any way to that produced by Fascist intellectuals. The expository account, before the reader, is evidence in support of that contention.

In that context, there is a discussion made available in the present exposition that has struck several prepublication readers as anomalous. Considerable space in the text is devoted to the eccentric and “suprarational” vagaries of Julius Evola. The reason is that there are some specialists who seem to think that Evola was a “major” Fascist intellectual, and that he provided the rationale for “Ur-fascism”—the belief system that animated Fascism and all the forms of “neofascism” with which scholarship now occupies itself.⁷ The discussion provided below, devoted to the thought of Evola, is intended to serve as its counterargument. I consider the space devoted to the exercise well spent. Conceiving Evola’s thought as “fascist” has led many scholars astray in their efforts to understand what they imagine to be contemporary “neofascism.”⁸ Moreover, Evola’s notions do document the impact of National Socialist thought on the coherence and fundamental rationality of Fascist doctrine.

This book is essentially the conclusion of an argument I first advanced a long time ago.⁹ Long resisted by my peers, the central claim—that Fascism was, in fact, animated by a credible and coherent belief system—has now been generally accepted by those best informed. Acknowledging that, I believe that the retrospective study of Italian Fascism—and the inquiry into what passes, in our immediate present, as “neofascism”—can only prosper.

Alongside all the volumes devoted to the lucubrations of Soviet, Chinese, East German, North Korean, and Albanian intellectuals in support of their respective Marxist-Leninist dictatorships, there is space for this one. It argues that Fascist intellectuals, in support of their dictatorship, produced works no less competent. Even if this proves true, however, I should make it clear at the outset that I do not view either Marxism or Fascism as particularly plausible, and I certainly do not recommend that we embrace either. I simply recommend that we understand them.

⁷ See Umberto Eco, “Pointing a Finger at the Fascists,” *Guardian*, 19 August 1995, p. 27.

⁸ See the discussion of neofascism in Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*; and Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁹ A. James Gregor, *The Ideology of Fascism: The Rationale of Totalitarianism* (New York: Free Press, 1969).

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THE DEBT AN author owes to those who have directly or indirectly assisted in the production of almost any work is incalculable. In the case of the present volume, the debt is particularly great.

This book is the product of a lifetime's preoccupation, study, and reflection. In the course of the journey, I enjoyed the counsel, the insights, and the experience of those who have experienced more, lived more, and studied the subject more intensely than I. Many years ago, Giuseppe Prezzolini spent several afternoons with me. He spoke of times long past—and led me to some small comprehension of what Italy was like at the beginning of the twentieth century for those who actually lived it. There was Ugo Spirito and his lovely wife, who spent more time with me than I had any reason to expect. We spoke of corporativism and economic programming. In the time he allowed me, Ing. Giovanni Volpe and I spoke of his father, Gioacchino Volpe, a prominent figure in Fascist intellectual circles. And there was Julius Evola, surrounded by his acolytes, who allowed me an interview although convinced that I was an agent of some foreign intelligence service—and Giovanni Perona, “Gamma,” who served in the armed forces of the final days. Lastly, there was Rachele and Vittorio Mussolini, who spoke to me of long ago things painfully remembered.

All these persons allowed me to share some of their remembrances of time past. All of them now gone, I would like to here record my indebtedness to them for their kindnesses and their patience—to allow a stranger to rummage through their lives.

To accomplished academics like Zeev Sternhell, Stanley Payne, Ludovico Incisa di Camerana, and Domenico Settembrini, I owe more than I can say—certainly more than I can ever repay. To the University of California, Berkeley, I am grateful for having provided me with a stimulating intellectual home for more than three decades—and for allowing me contact with some of the finest students in the world. To my wife, Maria Hsia Chang, I owe all manner of good things, not the least of which is the brood of “Little Ones” that have pleased my life.

I am especially grateful to Ian Malcolm of Princeton University Press for his patience and absolute professionalism. Other than all that, I am grateful beyond measure to all the institutions in which, and all the professors with whom, I learned my trade. This book is but a small token of appreciation for all I owe.

*A. James Gregor
Berkeley
Winter 2004*

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MUSSOLINI'S INTELLECTUALS

Some Issues in the Intellectual History of Fascism

FOR ABOUT three-quarters of a century, almost all academic discussion concerning Mussolini's Fascism¹ has tended to imagine the movement it animated, and the regime it informed, as entirely lacking a reasoned rationale. It early became commonplace to attribute to Fascism a unique irrationality, accompanied by a ready recourse to violence. Fascism, it has been argued, was full of emotion, but entirely empty of cognitive content. Fascists were, and are, understood to have renounced all rational discourse, in order to "glorify the non-rational." Their ideology, movement, revolution, and behavior were made distinctive by the appeal to two, and only two, "absolutes": "violence and war."²

Before the advent of the Second World War, some analysts had gone so far as to insist that "fascism" was the product of "orgasm anxiety," a sexual dysfunction that found release only in "mystic intoxication," homicidal hostility, and the complete suppression of rational thought.³ Marxists and fellow travelers argued that since Fascism was "the violent attempt of decaying capitalism to defeat the proletarian revolution and forcibly arrest the growing contradictions of its whole development," it could not support itself with a sustained rationale. Its conceptions were "empty and hollow," finding expression in "deceitful terminology" consciously designed to conceal the "realities of class-rule and class-exploitation."⁴

For many, "Fascism [was] essentially a political weapon adopted by the ruling class . . . that takes root in the minds of millions . . . [appealing] to certain uncritical and infantile impulses which, in a people debarred from a rational, healthy existence . . . tend to dominate their mental lives." Fascism, in general, constituted a "flight from reason," advancing "the

¹ When the term "fascism" is employed in lowercase, it refers to a presumptive, inclusive, generic fascism. When the term is capitalized, it refers to the movement, revolution, and regime associated with Benito Mussolini.

² Mark Neocleous, *Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. x, 13, 14, 17.

³ Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933; reprint, New York: Orgone Institute, 1946), pp. 110–11.

⁴ R. Palme Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* (1934; reprint, San Francisco: Proletarian Publishers, 1974), pp. 198–99.

claims of mysticism and intuition in opposition . . . to reason . . . and glorifying the irrational.”⁵

While there were some serious treatments of Fascist thought that made their appearance between the two world wars,⁶ all objectivity dissolved in the alembic of the Second. By the time of the Second World War, Fascism had simply merged into Hitler’s National Socialism—and discussants spoke of “nazi-fascism” as though the two were indissolubly one.⁷

Generic fascism was the enemy of “Western ideals,” of the “Enlightenment tradition,” as well as of the sociopolitical and philosophical aspirations of the French Revolution. It was the unregenerate agent of evil, driven by an irrational mysticism, and committed to mayhem and gross inhumanity. By the end of the 1990s, there were those who could insist that “fascism shuffles together every myth and lie that the rotten history of capitalism has ever produced like a pack of greasy cards and then deals them out.” As with Angelo Tasca, such a notion is advanced in support of a contention that the only use Fascism, like Mussolini, had “of ideas was to dispense with ideas.”⁸

By the end of the twentieth century, there was a conviction that a generic fascism existed that included a curious collection of radically diverse political phenomena that ranged from General Augusto Pinochet’s coup in Chile, the French Front National, Jorg Haider’s Austrian Freedom Party, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s Russian Liberal Democratic Party, Italy’s Alleanza nazionale, to the terroristic lunacy of Timothy McVeigh and Muslim fundamentalists.⁹ “Fascism” had become, largely, a meaningless term of abuse.

What remained constant over seven decades was the incorrigible conviction that “paradigmatic Fascism,” the Fascism of Mussolini, was “based on myths, intuition, instinct . . . and the irrational, rather than on a closely argued system based on a detailed analysis of historical, political and economic trends.”¹⁰ Given such a characterization, Italian Fascism has been considered the anti-intellectual source for all the “right wing” political movements of the past century. In fact, some commentators have held that all contemporary right-wing movements find their origin in a single “Ur-fascism”—an identifiable *fons et origo malorum*. While Fas-

⁵ R. Osborn, *The Psychology of Reaction* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938), pp. 5, 238, 239.

⁶ The best of these included that of Herbert W. Schneider, *Making the Fascist State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1928).

⁷ See, for example, Eduardo Haro Tecglen, *Fascismo: Genesis y desarrollo* (Madrid: CVS Ediciones, 1975).

⁸ Dave Renton, *Fascism: Theory and Practice* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), pp. 27–28.

⁹ See *ibid.*, chap. 1; and Walter Laqueur, *Fascism: Past, Present, Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pts. 2 and 3.

¹⁰ Laqueur, *Fascism*, p. 96.

cism, in and of itself, apparently possessed no identifiable ideological substance—being little more than a collage of contradictory ideas—it has been argued that whatever ideas *are* to be found, they are shared by every right-wing political impulse. Given that Fascism had no content, it seems that what is shared is the tendency to irrationality and violence. It is not clear how helpful such a classificatory strategy might be in any effort to undertake a responsible history of ideas.

Generic fascism, it would seem, shares a common, if irrational, substance with the entire political right wing. That substance, devoid of meaning, finds its origin in the nonthought of Mussolini's apologists. It is argued that the nonideology of fascism is linearly related to all the "extremist" thought of contemporary Europe and North America. We are told that if we would discuss contemporary extremist thought, we must "denotatively define" the range of our inquiry—and definition be made in terms of its "ideology"—and, finally, that "the extreme right's ideology is provided by fascism."¹¹

Fascist studies, it would seem, as an intellectual, historic, and social science discipline, has collapsed into a clinical study of an omnibus, psychopathic "right-wing extremism." "By extreme right" is meant "that political/ideological space where fascism is the key reference"—with fascism being little more than a "pathological form of social and political energy."¹² As a consequence, the study of Italian Fascism is treated as the antechamber to the scrutiny of contemporary right-wing political psychopathology—to include any and all groups, movements or regimes that have been identified by anyone as "fascist," any time during the twentieth, and now the twenty-first, centuries—as well as any that might somehow be associated with one or another form of irrationalism and criminal violence. Under such circumstances, fascism studies, as a discipline, expanded into a circle of inquiries that now includes soccer thugs, skinhead fanatics, graveyard vandals, anti-Semites, racists, and terrorists of all and whatever sort.¹³ Some have suggested that "in the West," one might profitably study Ronald Reagan Republicans as well.¹⁴

¹¹ Piero Ignazi, "The Extreme Right in Europe: A Survey," in Peter H. Merkl and Leonard Weinberg, eds., *The Revival of Right-Wing Extremism in the Nineties* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), p. 48.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 49; Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. xii.

¹³ Renton, *Fascism: Theory and Practice*, pp. 8–9. See the intricate and fascinating treatment of all these "fascist" individuals and groups by Kevin Coogan, *Dreamer of the Day: Francis Parker Yockey and the Postwar Fascist International* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1997).

¹⁴ See the discussion in Leonard Weinberg, "Conclusions," in Merkl and Weinberg, eds., *The Revival of Right-Wing Extremism in the Nineties*, pp. 278–79.

The “extreme right” is essentially and irremediably irrational and criminal—because Fascism was uniquely irrational and criminal.¹⁵ The connection advanced is an *empirical* one. To be convincing, it would have to be shown that Fascists in general, and Fascist intellectuals in particular, were possessed of nothing that might pass as right reason or moral purpose—and that somehow the contemporary “right-wing extremists” share that unfortunate disability.

Given the prevailing clutch of opinions, one might easily anticipate the outcome. With the absence of any discriminating list of traits—other than irrationality and bestiality—one might well have predicted that it would be impossible for research to distinguish fascists from simple lunatics and ordinary footpads. Today, in common usage, the word “fascist” does little more than “conjure up visions of nihilistic violence, war and *Götterdämmerung*,” together with a “world of . . . uniforms and discipline, of bondage and sadomasochism.”¹⁶

The term hardly has any cognitive reference at all. By and large, the term “fascism” has only pejorative uses. It is employed to disparage and defame.

None of that should puzzle laypersons. It is a heritage of usage made commonplace during the Second World War. In the course of that war, the term “fascist” was employed to refer indiscriminately to both Mussolini’s Fascism and Hitler’s National Socialism—irrespective of the fact that serious National Socialist theoreticians rarely, if ever, referred to their belief system, their movement, or their regime as “fascist.” Similarly, Fascist intellectuals never identified their ideology or their political system as “National Socialist.” The notion of a generic fascism that encompassed Italian Fascism, German National Socialism, Spanish Falangism, Portugese National Syndicalism, the Hungarian Arrow Cross, and the Romanian Legion of the Archangel Michael, among an indeterminate number of others, was largely an artifact of the war. Rarely, if ever, was a serious comparative study undertaken that might provide the grounds for identification. As a result, membership of all or any of those political movements in the class of “fascisms” has been a matter of contention ever since.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Roger Eatwell, *Fascism: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. xix.

¹⁷ Renzo De Felice, perhaps the most knowledgeable scholar in the field of fascism studies, had rejected the notion of a class of regimes that might be identified as “fascist.” See Renzo De Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 10–11, 180; and *Fascism: An Informal Introduction to Its Theory and Practice* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1976), pp. 92–96. Zeev Sternhell has argued that “Fascism can in no way be identified with Nazism.” Sternhell, with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 4.

In our own time, any individual or group of individuals that might in some sense, or some measure, be identified as “extremely irrational,”¹⁸ “antidemocratic,” “racist,” or “nationalist,” is identified as “neofascist,” “parafascist,” “quasi-fascist,” or “cryptofascist.” “Fascism” has devolved into a conceptual term whose grasp far exceeds its reach—almost entirely devoid of any ability to offer empirical distinctions that might serve any cognitive purpose. Entirely devoid of meaning, the term is used arbitrarily, generally with little empirical reference to any historical, social, or political reality.

Because the notion that Fascism might have had ideological convictions, or a rational program for its revolution and the regime it fostered and sustained, is dismissed, explanations for its rise and success are sought in individual and collective psychopathology or “historic circumstances.”¹⁹ A variety of these efforts have been made. None have been notably successful. One of the more common has been to associate fascism with “an ideology generated by modern industrial capitalism.”²⁰

It is not at all clear what that can be taken to mean. Fascism would appear to have an ideology—however internally contradictory and meaningless. It is confidently asserted that fascist ideology, however meaningless, is apparently the specific product of “modern industrial capitalism.”

The putative causal association is difficult to interpret. It could not possibly mean that Italian Fascism arose in an environment of *modern* industrial capitalism. Informed Marxists have long since recognized that Fascism arose and prevailed on the Italian peninsula in what was, without question, a transitional and only marginalized industrial environment. There was very little that was modern about the Italian economy at the time of the First World War. In 1924, Antonio Gramsci—usually identified as among the more astute of analysts—spoke of the political successes of Fascism as following, in part, from the fact that “capitalism [in Italy] was only weakly developed.”²¹

Perhaps the reference to “modern capitalism” can be taken to mean *any* capitalism at all. Since capitalism is a modern product, the insistence that fascist ideology is the product of modern capitalism may simply mean that the ideology of fascism appears only in a capitalist environment. If that is

¹⁸ Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, p. 18.

¹⁹ See the discussion in A. James Gregor, *Interpretations of Fascism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1997).

²⁰ Neocleous, *Fascism*, p. xi.

²¹ Antonio Gramsci, “Fascismo e forze borghesi tradizionali,” in *Sul fascismo* (Rome: Riuniti, 1973), p. 217.

what is intended, it is not very helpful. Some forms of “fascism” (however conceived) have evidently appeared in noncapitalist environments.²²

More than that, for some commentators, any ideology, doctrine, or intellectual rationale for fascism would have to be, on its face, irrational and contradictory. For Marxist intellectuals, any individual or movement that failed to anticipate the imminent collapse of capitalism and the advent of the proletarian revolution was deemed irrational, incapable of the most elementary rationality. For a Marxist like Gramsci, any ideology other than Marxism could only be contradictory and irrational. Italian Fascism, as a non-Marxism, simply could not have a coherent ideology. Any intellectuals who sought to provide its vindication could only be bereft of reason and morality.

Whether the product of senescent, established, or emergent capitalism, Fascism was apparently not capable of formulating a consistent belief system—because, for Gramsci (as was the case for all Marxists), Fascism itself was a “contradictory” movement representing a middle-class attempt to avoid “proletarianization” in a capitalist environment. Marx had always contended that industrial capitalism would inevitably generate concentrations of enterprise at the cost of small and medium industry. As a predictable consequence, more and more members of the “middle class” would be jettisoned into the proletariat.

According to Gramsci, however weakly developed capitalism may have been in post-World War One Italy, Mussolini was nonetheless “fatally driven to assist in [its] historic development.”²³ In Gramsci’s judgment, it seemed transparent that Fascism could not represent the efforts of the middle class to resist proletarianization and at the same time assist capitalism in its historic development. Fascism could not do both without “contradiction.”

Why such a course should inescapably prove “contradictory” is explicable only if one assumes that the development of capitalism must necessarily “proletarianize” the middle classes. One could not pursue a course of industrialization without sacrificing the middle classes. Marx, after all, had insisted that industrialization would inevitably reduce the class inventory of modern society to but two: the proletariat and *grand capital*. As capitalist plant became increasingly large, complex, and costly, the larger, more complex, and costly would swallow the smaller, simpler, and less capital intensive. Fewer and fewer middle-class capitalists would survive

²² See the discussions in Alexander Yanov, *The Russian New Right: Right-Wing Ideologies in the Contemporary USSR* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, 1978); and A. James Gregor, *Phoenix: Fascism in Our Time* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1999), chap. 7.

²³ Gramsci, “Tra realtà e arbitrio,” in *Socialismo e fascismo: L’ordine nuovo, 1921–1922* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967), p. 302.

the winnowing. Over time and with greater and greater frequency, members of the lesser bourgeoisie would become proletarians. According to Marx, the *petite bourgeoisie* was a class destined for extinction in a social environment analogous to the biological struggle for survival—in which the “weaker” were destined for extinction as the “fittest” survive.

According to the thesis, Fascism was driven to support capitalist industrial development—even though that development would destroy the middle classes, the very recruitment base of the movement. Given those convictions, Marxists could only imagine that Fascist normative and doctrinal appeals would have to be “contradictory”—devoid of real significance. That conviction could only be predicated on the “scientific” truth that as industrial capitalism advances, the *petite bourgeoisie* would necessarily suffer gradual extinction. And yet, *petite bourgeois* elements persist in all, including the most advanced, capitalist societies. Those elements may assume different functions, and take on different properties, but they survive and prosper, no matter what the stage of industrialization. The notion that one could not consistently represent the middle classes and at the same time advocate rapid industrial development seems to be empirically disconfirmed.

It would seem that, in an informal discipline like intellectual history, rather than accepting the postulate that a given “theory of history” is true, thereby rendering it “necessary” that Fascist ideology *must* be contradictory and empty of substance, one might first apply oneself to a detailed inspection of that ideology, to judge it on its own merit. The alternative would appear to be nothing other than a dedicated search for self-serving “contradictions.” As will be suggested, it is not at all self-evident that Mussolini’s pursuit of industrialization inescapably involved contradictions—or that such contradictions surfaced in Fascist doctrine.²⁴

All that notwithstanding, some contemporary analysts insist that Mussolini’s Fascism, like all fascism, was and is a product of industrial capitalism, whether emergent, mature, or senescent. As such, according to such appraisals, it will always be irrational and contradictory because it casts itself athwart the tide of history—the imminent and inevitable anticapitalist proletarian revolution.²⁵ Again, in order to defend such notions, one would have to defend all its associated, but interred, premises. One would have to assume that history had one and only one course—culminating in the “ineluctable” revolution of the proletariat. There is little objective evidence to support any of that.

These are the kinds of curiosities to be found in considerable abundance throughout the literature devoted to the study of the intellectual substance

²⁴ See the discussion in Gramsci, “Il fascismo e la sua politica,” in *Sul fascismo*, p. 304.

²⁵ See the discussion in Neocleous, *Fascism*.

of Mussolini's Fascism. The result has been an inability of historians and political scientists to deal, in some significant measure, with the intellectual history not only of Fascism, but with the history of the twentieth century as well—and whatever influence that history might have on the political life of the twenty-first.

The identification of fascism with the exclusive interests of capitalism, the petite bourgeoisie, together with a rage against Enlightenment values and the political fancies of the French Revolution—to see Fascism the paladin of the world's machine and market economy, to make of Fascism the foundation of modern evil—seems to satisfy a deep and abiding psychological hunger among many in our postmodern circumstances, but assists us very little in the effort to understand either the twentieth century or our own troubled times. There is the evident necessity, among some analysts, to identify fascism, however understood, not with any syndrome of ideas, but with late capitalism, ultranationalism, racism, antifeminism, and every antidemocratic impulse—simple violence, bourgeois perversity, and irremediable irrationality. As a consequence, many commentators choose to see “fascism” as a right-wing excrescence, exclusively as a “recurrent feature of capitalism”—a “form of counterrevolution acting in the interests of capital.” Burdened with all these moral and intellectual disabilities, Fascism could only be inspired by an evil and “very contradictory ideology” in the service of what has been frequently identified as a capitalistic “open dictatorship of high finance.”²⁶

Of course, it was not always so. Prior to the Second World War, while non-Marxists, in general, deplored Fascism,²⁷ there were American intellectuals who were not prepared to identify Fascism with either capitalism or incarnate evil. There were even those prepared to acknowledge that Mussolini's movement and regime was, in fact, possessed of a reasonably well articulated and coherent belief system.²⁸

All of that dramatically changed with the coming of the Second World War. It served the purposes of that conflict to dismiss Fascist ideology as not only evil, but as internally inconsistent and fundamentally irrational

²⁶ Renton, *Fascism: Theory and Practice*, pp. 3, 16–17, 25. To all that, Renzo De Felice, perhaps the best informed historian of Fascism, states simply, “It is unthinkable that Italy's great economic forces wanted to bring fascism to power.” De Felice, *Fascism: An Informal Introduction to Its Theory and Practice*, p. 63.

²⁷ See the account in John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), chap. 17.

²⁸ For example, Schneider, *Making the Fascist State*; Paul Einzig, *The Economic Foundations of Fascism* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1933); and William G. Welk, *Fascist Economic Policy: An Analysis of Italy's Economic Experiment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938). Welk speaks of Fascist ideology as a “curious mixture of Nationalism and Socialist doctrine” (p. 11)—and of the “philosophy upon which the new Fascist state was to be based” as “set forth in detail” (p. 20)—but he nowhere speaks of its “irrationality.”

as well. Left-wing notions, already abundant in the intellectual atmosphere, were quickly pressed into service—to become fixtures for years thereafter.

Only decades after the passions of the most destructive war in human history had abated did some academics, once more, find “a coherent body of thought” among Fascist thinkers.²⁹ Thus, in 1994, Zeev Sternhell affirmed that “the intellectual content of fascism had the same importance in the growth and development of the movement as it had in liberalism or later in Marxism.”³⁰ In effect, some scholars were prepared to grant that the intellectual folk wisdom that held that Fascism was innocent of doctrinal coherence was less than simply unconvincing—it was in error.

Some have sought to provide a justification for the conviction that fascism was irrational, and devoid of ideological sophistication, by pointing out that there were “radical differences” between Fascism’s revolutionary tenets “and the realities to which it [gave] rise.”³¹ The argument is not at all persuasive, for if the marked discrepancies between antecedent ideological affirmations and the realities that emerge after successful revolution were enough to identify a political creed as “irrational,” one of the first to so qualify would be the Marxism of revolutionary Bolshevism.

V. I. Lenin anticipated the “withering away” of the state to be among the first consequences of successful revolution. That would entail the advent of anarchistic government, peace, “workers’ emancipation,” and “voluntary centralism.”³² The fact is that everything of the subsequent reality of the Soviet Union belied all that. Almost everything about post-revolutionary Russia stood in stark and emphatic contrast to the specific theoretical anticipations that had carried the Bolsheviks to the October Revolution. The differences, in fact, were more emphatic than anything to be found in the comparison of Fascist thought and Fascist practice. If the discrepancies between doctrinal formulations and the reality that emerges out of revolution were a measure of “irrationality” or the potential for violence, then Lenin’s Bolshevism was perhaps the most irrational and violence-prone doctrine of the twentieth century.

Actually, the conviction that Mussolini’s Fascism had no ideology to speak of—or that whatever tenets it entertained were irrational and contradictory—is the product of a complex series of conjectures that arose out of the political circumstances of the first quarter of the twentieth cen-

The thought of Fascist intellectuals is presented with accuracy and academic detachment in chap. 2.

²⁹ Eatwell, *Fascism*, p. xix.

³⁰ Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, p. 4.

³¹ See Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, p. 18.

³² V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution in Selected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Press, 1950–51), vol. 2, p. 251.

ture. Through the nineteenth century, Marxism had assumed the mantle of revolutionary responsibility—the presumptive solitary hope of proletarian emancipation. Within the first two decades of the twentieth century, Marxism, as Marxism-Leninism, inspired the revolution that overwhelmed czarist Russia in 1917. Out of that successful revolution, the Third International—the Leninist international—was born.

About the same time, Benito Mussolini was beginning to bring together those elements that were to constitute the first Fascism. In the years that followed, Mussolini's *Fasci di combattimento* defeated the antinational revolutionary socialists, to dismantle their entire organizational and communications infrastructure. Among the socialists of the peninsula, it was uncertain what had transpired. Antonio Gramsci himself was clearly confused.

Gramsci recognized that initially Fascism had opposed socialism not necessarily because Fascism was antisocialist, but because official socialism had opposed Italy's entry into the First World War. That opposition arose, in Mussolini's judgment, out of socialism's unreflecting antinationalism.³³ Gramsci argued that only when its antisocialism attracted "capitalist" support did Fascism become the "White guard" of the "bourgeoisie"—the military arm of the bourgeois government of Giovanni Giolitti. Gramsci went on to argue that since Fascists possessed no "historic role" of their own, they could do no more than serve as janissaries of the government of Giolitti.³⁴

Later, after it became evident that Fascism was not simply an adjunct to Italy's bourgeois government, Gramsci was to go on to argue that Fascism was a special product of Italian industrial capitalism's "inability to dominate the nation's forces of production within the confines of a free market." Fascism was pressed into service to create a "strong state" that could be used not only against the emerging proletariat of the peninsula, but against any organized resistance to capitalist hegemony.³⁵ Fascism was no longer seen as ancillary to the process, but its critical center. That implied that all classes and fragments of classes, other than the industrial capitalists, who sought the creation of a repressive state, might be united against Fascism.

But that was not clear. A little later, by early 1921, Gramsci no longer identified Fascism with industrial capitalism but as "the final representative of the urban petty bourgeoisie." Gramsci had already convinced himself that Fascism was doomed, by history, to discharge reactionary purpose—what remained uncertain was the identity of the class in whose

³³ See Gramsci, "I due fascismi," in *Sul fascismo*, p. 133.

³⁴ "La forza dello Stato," in *Sul fascismo*, pp. 92–95.

³⁵ "Cos'è la reazione?" in *Sul fascismo*, pp. 89–91.

service that purpose was discharged.³⁶ It was uncertain whom Fascism was understood to serve. Sometimes it was simply a generic “capitalism.” At other times, it was one of capitalism’s component classes or subclasses. Since that issue remained unresolved, Fascism’s pronouncements and its behaviors must necessarily have appeared both contradictory and irrational to Gramsci and the intellectuals of the Italian left.

Given his Marxist convictions, Gramsci was certain that the First World War had irretrievably impaired the survival capacity of industrial capitalism. Capitalism had entered its “final crisis.” Any effort at revival was doomed to failure. Any political movement that sought the rehabilitation of capitalism, in any form, was hopelessly reactionary—seeking to restore what history had deemed irretrievably lost. Worldwide proletarian revolution was on history’s immediate agenda. Whether composed of Nationalists, National Syndicalists, or Fascists, any movement opposed to the unalterable course of history could only proffer contradictory, irrational, and abstract doctrines.

As a Marxist, Gramsci *knew* history’s future course. He held that *any* political movement not committed to that course was, of necessity, not only irrational and counterrevolutionary, but reactionary as well. Such movements must, *necessarily*, represent nonproletarian agrarian and industrial elements condemned by history to its “ashbin”—to reaction, counterrevolution, and confusion.³⁷

Given that set of convictions, one did not have to consider the intrinsic merits of the non-Marxist ideological formulations found in Fascist thought. The very best of non-Marxist doctrinal statements could be nothing other than “ideological abstractions.”³⁸ Since capitalism had finally lapsed into that last “general crisis” foretold by Marx in the mid-nineteenth century,³⁹ the future was clear. All twentieth-century political movements not committed to proletarian revolution must necessarily be contradictory as well as irrational—and because counterrevolutionary, violent.

By the time of Fascism’s accession to power on the peninsula, Marxists of all kinds, and their fellow travelers, were desperately searching for the key to the understanding of the complex events that had overtaken them. “Ahistoric” and “counterrevolutionary” elements had somehow succeeded in overwhelming Marxism and political progressivism that had been commissioned, by history, to transform the world. It was at that

³⁶ “Il popolo delle scimmie,” in *Sul fascismo*, pp. 96–99.

³⁷ See “Il sindacalismo integrale,” and “La fase attuale della lotta,” in *Sul fascismo*, pp. 50–52, 77.

³⁸ “Il sindacalismo integrale,” in *Sul fascismo*, p. 54.

³⁹ “Italia e Spagna,” in *Sul fascismo*, p. 105.

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