Myth, Style, Substance and the Totalitarian Dynamic in Fascist Italy

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Abstract

Recent studies of Italian Fascism have focused on ritual, spectacle, commemoration and myth, even as they also take seriously the totalitarian thrust of Fascism. But whereas this new culturalist orientation has usefully pointed beyond earlier reductionist approaches, it has often accented style and myth as opposed to their opposites, which might be summed up as 'substance'. Some of the aspirations fuelling Fascism, responding to perceived inadequacies in the mainstream liberal and Marxist traditions, pointed beyond myth and style as they helped to shape the Fascist self-understanding – and Fascist practice. This article seeks to show how the interplay of substance, style and myth produced a particular – and deeply flawed – totalitarian dynamic in Fascist Italy.

Italian Fascism as (post-)modern and totalitarian

Gradually emerging, over the past decade or so, have been some fresh questions about Italian Fascism that promise to illuminate the wider experience of its still troubling era. Among Italian scholars Emilio Gentile has been central, although there have also been some notable contributions from the English-speaking world. The changed political environment surrounding the end of the cold war has obviously afforded scope for rethinking, as has the cultural turn that we have come to denote with the unfortunate term 'postmodernism'. Among other things postmodernism has helped to foster a new culturalist approach that takes seriously certain dimensions of fascism – style, ritual, spectacle, myth, rhetoric – that were long viewed as merely superficial or readily reducible. Although the Italian variety has seemed especially to invite it, Roger Griffin has recently suggested that the culturalist approach is producing a new

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consensus in fascist studies overall.[1] But aspects of that approach, and the implications of postmodernism more generally, make some profoundly nervous.

Meanwhile, Stanley Payne, in his authoritative study of the whole fascist phenomenon, noted with approval that whereas fascism had long been dismissed in terms of nihilism, opportunism, class reaction and/or failed adjustment to modernity, it was increasingly viewed as 'a revolutionary new epochal phenomenon with an ideology and a distinctive set of ambitions in its own right'. Plausibly enough, Payne cited, among others, George L. Mosse as well as Griffin himself.[2] Without in any sense advocating some undemocratic alternative, Mosse had indicated the scope for an ongoing effort at 'nationalisation of the masses' in the light of the undoubted limits of the liberal democratic tradition. In developing his own theoretically astute reinterpretation of fascism, Griffin extended Mosse's insights as he featured national renewal, palingenetic myth and the effort to create a 'new man'.[3]

The Mosse–Griffin sort of culturalist approach was one reading of 'revolutionary in its own right', but did it best make sense of the evidence? Whereas Payne and Griffin referred to a distinctive fascist *ideology*, many culturalists played up style *as opposed to* ideology, and others took 'culture' seriously to suggest deeper ways of understanding fascism as reactionary or anti-modern, not genuinely revolutionary at all.

To suggest that fascism was 'revolutionary in its own right' was to invite fresh questioning about its place vis-à-vis the contemporaneous Leninist-Stalinist effort in the Soviet Union. Of course we have a long tradition of treating fascism and communism in tandem, even while still distinguishing them on the basis of familiar left–right differences. On some level, they seem to have had something significant and novel in common, even if it boiled down to mere means or methods. And the operative category, of course, has been 'totalitarianism'.

But although that term has continued in ordinary use, its abuses and inadequacies as used for decades are notorious.[4] Moreover, although totalitarianism was originally an Italian term, coined in the 1920s, and although it was central to the Italian Fascist self-understanding, the Italian case was long taken as peripheral to any consideration of totalitarianism, for reasons now familiar – most notably the extent of compromise with established elites and institutions, and the lack of secret police and terror. Hannah Arendt's treatment proved definitive.[5] But for a generation and more, researches on

1 Roger Griffin, 'The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies', *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, 1 (Jan. 2002), 21–43. See also the invited commentaries by David D. Roberts, Alexander DeGrand, Mark Antliff and Thomas Linehan that appeared in the next issue (vol. 37, 2, 259–74).

2 Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 494. Payne also cited the work of Ernst Nolte and Eugen Weber.

3 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1991), is arguably the most important work on the overall problem of fascism in any language over the past generation.

4 For an exemplary survey of the uses of the concept, see Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

5 Arendt portrayed Stalinist communism and German Nazism as archetypally totalitarian, whereas Fascist Italy was merely authoritarian and thus not part of the novel mix to be explained. Most importantly,

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Nazism and Stalinism have seemingly undermined the applicability of the older notion of totalitarianism to those regimes as well.[6] Conversely, culturalists focusing on Italy have tended to find the category applicable after all.

So despite much promising questioning that takes Italian Fascism newly seriously, even as 'totalitarian', we have new uncertainties, tensions and axes of contest at the same time. I suggest that we are coming better to understand how the Italian case illuminates the contours of the era that also produced Nazism and Stalinism. I also suggest that totalitarianism, suitably recast, is precisely the category we need to begin understanding what the three departures had in common, which is not to be confined to mere means or methods. I further suggest that the postmodern turn, understood from a certain angle, not only invites fresh questions but also indicates how we might frame them to better place the Italian Fascist experience within the wider totalitarianism of the era.

After initially endorsing Arendt on the limits to the totalitarian thrust in the Fascist regime, the late Renzo De Felice came to accent a totalitarian departure around the turn to overt imperialism by the mid-1930s. Seeking to overcome the pre-Fascist elites who seemed to have ensnared him, Mussolini was seeking not merely to divert the public or to glorify himself, but more deeply to realise the fascist vision of a new society.[7]

The conquest of Ethiopia was indeed bound up with certain new cultural accents, as well as the intensification of others. The regime sought to root out the bourgeois mentality, including, for example, the 'bourgeois' use of irony. At the same time,

Fascist Italy lacked the terror apparatus and camp system of the other two, but she also cited its apparent statism. Whereas Mussolini merely seized the state, recognised as the highest authority, a movement claims superiority to the state and even aims to destroy it. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland: World [Meridian], 1958), 256–60.

6 See J. Arch Getty, 'The Politics of Repression Revisited', in J. Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning, eds., *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 40–62, for a good introduction to this strand of revisionism in Soviet studies. Other prominent revisionists, loosely within the same camp, were Gabor Rittersporn and Robert Thurston. Although they differed crucially among themselves, all three portrayed the Soviet terror as the result not of intention and control from the top, but of an inability to control, a process *out of* control. Thurston was fairly typical in suggesting that 'totalitarianism is of some use in thinking about what the Nazi and Soviet regimes wanted, but it does not have much to do with what they got, for state intervention 'often produced disorder and other negative consequences for the regime'. See Robert W. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934–1941* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), xviii.

7 When he came to the years after Ethiopia in his monumental biography of Mussolini, De Felice's choice of subtitle was highly indicative: see Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce* 2: *Lo Stato totalitario, 1936–1940* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1981). In his earlier volumes, De Felice had concluded that Mussolini was quite serious about domestic transformation, with corporatism as its core. But he had come to recognise by the early 1930s how potent were the obstacles to any effort to fascistise society directly. Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista*, 2: *L'organizzazione dello Stato fascista, 1925–1929* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1968), 359, 363–7. Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce* 1: *Gli anni del consenso, 1929–1936* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1974): 177–81. See also Renzo De Felice, *Fascism: An Informal Introduction to Its Theory and Practice* (An Interview with Michael A. Ledeen) (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1976), 79; and Meir Michaelis, 'Anmerkungen zum italienischen Totalitarismusbegriff. Zur Kritik der Thesen Hannah Arendts und Renzo De Felices', *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 62 (1982), 291.

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there was increasing accent on ritual, on *Romanità*, on the cult of the duce.[8] War was a school of what now became the essential Fascist virtues; indeed, the Italians were learning to become hard-edged conquerors, masters. But the meaning of these themes and the criteria of totalitarianism are themselves at issue as we assess the place of this cultural turn in the overall trajectory of Italian Fascism.

That turn took place from within a wider dynamic already in progress under Achille Starace, secretary of the National Fascist Party from 1931 to 1939. The Starace era was long associated with the depoliticisation of the party in favour of choreography and an obsession with mere style. The whole syndrome seemed to suggest the triumph of a delimited 'Mussolinianism', as opposed to genuine totalitarianism. Even as he came to accent a totalitarian turn, De Felice essentially endorsed the negative verdict on the Starace era; he found the direction under Starace symptomatic of the contradictions that mark all totalitarian regimes.[9] In recent years Emilio Gentile has taken the totalitarian content of Fascism still more seriously – while offering a double challenge to De Felice. First, for Gentile, fascist totalitarianism was not simply a departure in the light of impasse; rather, the measures of the mid-thirties constituted a phase in an ongoing effort of totalitarian implementation that had already begun to accelerate.[10] But this difference reflected a much deeper difference over the meaning and criteria of totalitarianism. Gentile found significance in stylistic dimensions that, for De Felice, were symptoms of depoliticisation and impending crisis.

Although he too was indebted to Mosse, Gentile insisted precisely that the level at issue is not generic fascism, even as revolutionary in its own right, but *totalitarianism*. Warning against measuring the Italian case against some Hollywood version or abstract standard, he argued that Fascism was simply 'the Italian way to totalitarianism'; it was not qualitatively different from the Nazi and Stalinist regimes.[11] And Gentile's revisionist case gained plausibility from studies of Stalinism and Nazism that have shown how little the Hollywood image applies even to them. Although Mussolini continued to play personnel and institutions against each other, Fascist Italy never settled into authoritarian routine, mere state control – in contrast to Franco's Spain, for example.[12] For Gentile, totalitarianism in Fascist Italy as elsewhere was not a static reality, defined once and for all, but a process, a reality in continual construction.[13]

8 Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 108–9, 225–6.

9 De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, 1: 220–8. See especially 227–8. For a typically negative account of the Starace era in English, see Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini: A Biography* (New York: Random House [Vintage], 1983), 175–81.

10 Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 28, 75–9, 132–3; see also Emilio Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo: Il partito e lo Stato nel regime fascista* (Rome: La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1995), 144–8, on 'the myth of the duce'.

11 Gentile insisted that although comparison of course reveals differences, they are best understood from *within* a common totalitarian departure. At the same time, the incompleteness of the totalitarianism, so often noted in the Italian case, was true in the other two as well. See Gentile, *La via italiana*, 148–53; especially 149–50. Arguing explicitly against Arendt and De Felice, Michaelis had earlier (1982) made much the same overall point in 'Anmerkungen'.

12 Gentile, *La via italiana*, 148–9.

13 Ibid., 119, 135–6

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Although he was careful to portray that ongoing dynamic in terms of a complex three-way interaction of state, party and leader, he especially featured the ongoing role of the Fascist party, which had long been seen as marginalised with Mussolini's triumph and/or compromise with pre-fascist elites.

As Gentile saw it, Italian Fascism was totalitarian in seeking to remake its society through a new form of mass politics revolving around an 'internal symbolic universe' of liturgy, ritual, symbol, myth and commemoration, all serving 'the sacralisation of politics'.[14] Against those who found mere 'depoliticisation' in this side of fascism, he insisted that we must start by considering this politicisation '*in a fascist sense*' and participation '*in a totalitarian sense*'.[15] Although some rituals bordered on the ridiculous, the Fascists sought seriously to educate and convert on the basis of a genuine faith. From that perspective, Starace's effort to use the Fascist party to promote sacralisation through permanent mobilisation was authentically totalitarian. As channelled by Starace, the party was able to condition the experience of millions as the only vehicle for participation in the life of the state.[16]

Gentile's work on Italian Fascism was central to his still developing inquiry into the wider phenomenon of modern political religion. And it was especially as a new form of political religion, he argued, that the three interwar regimes were in fact totalitarian. On that level Fascist Italy was a full participant, even a pioneer.[17] As a political religion, totalitarianism was not a regime or form of rule but an ongoing experiment, not expected to be completed, animated by the will of the single party, using the state as its instrument. With its characteristic set of beliefs, dogmas, myths, rites and symbols, the party sought at once to create a 'new man' and to shape the mass into a single body, dedicated to realising the party's revolutionary and imperialist aims, which revolved around the creation of a new supranational civilisation.[18]

14 With these accents, Gentile was moving far from De Felice, who had observed in his famed interview of the mid-seventies (*Fascism*, 76) that in Italian fascism 'ritual existed – the salute to the Duce, the call to the fallen heroes – but it does not have a decisive role. Here we have another difference with Germany, where ritual tends to become everything.' De Felice was explicitly drawing from Mosse's work on Germany; indeed, his interlocutor, Michael Ledeen, had been a student of Mosse's. Bosworth noted that Gentile was essentially translating Mosse to the Italian case. See Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship*, 22. See also Emilio Gentile, *Storia del partito fascista, 1919–1922: Movimento e milizia* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1989), preface, vii–x, where Gentile nicely locates his own effort, noting especially what he deemed the anomalous neglect of the Fascist Party in recent research.

15 Gentile, *La via italiana*, 113–19; see especially 116. All quotations from untranslated works have been translated by the author.

16 Ibid., 134, 178–91. While recognising that the Fascist Party was of course caught up in the infighting among Fascist oligarchs, each struggling to preserve and expand their turf, Gentile stressed the overall coherence of the party's effort and its success in expanding its role during the 1930s. Thus, for example, the party secured a monopoly over the formation of youth with the creation of the Gioventù Italiano del Littorio (GIL) 1937. But he also notes, for example, the 'grotesque and risible aspects' of the cult of the duce. See Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 138.

17 Emilio Gentile, *Le religioni della politica: Fra democrazia e totalitarismi* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2001), xvii–xviii.

18 For Gentile's overall conception of totalitarianism and political religion, see ibid., 69–102, especially the definition on 70–4. See also Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 160, for some especially cogent remarks on the seriousness of the impulse.

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Not only did Gentile show the seriousness of the originating aspiration, precisely as totalitarian, but he avoided both the older reified notion of totalitarianism and any hint of the teleological fallacy. Stressing the open-ended, experimental nature of the fascist dynamic, he sought to restore the drama that surrounded this innovative departure on the part of agents who did not know how the whole thing would turn out.[19]

Although Gentile was especially prominent, other culturalists similarly focused on the Fascists' pioneering use of ritual and spectacle, taking these dimensions not as merely superficial diversion or extrinsic form, but as the core of fascism *as* totalitarian.[20] Like Gentile, moreover, they tended to posit a greater measure of success in producing a sense of belonging and participation than had generally been recognised in terms of earlier criteria.

Still, many of these culturalists invoked this stylistic or aesthetic dimension explicitly in opposition to ideological coherence or ideational content. Coherence lay on the level of style in the face of ideological confusion, as for Jeffrey Schnapp, or in the light of a contextually appropriate de-emphasis on any ideational dimension, as for Mabel Berezin.[21] Gentile, in contrast, warned that

> the theme of fascist religion is not to be summed up merely by its liturgical displays ... To take its symbols and rituals only in their aesthetic and propagandistic aspects, disregarding the system of beliefs and values, the theological politics that inspired them and that these represented, would give a partial and distorted view of the rituals themselves and would lead to a misrepresentation of their historical significance.[22]

For Gentile, then, if we stick to the symbolic universe, we miss something, apparently deeper, about both the source and the content of that educational impulse. Gentile started with a major book on fascist ideology, and he subsequently sought to account for the longer-term sources of the totalitarian aspiration in terms of both the well-known limitations of the nineteenth-century Risorgimento and the wider religious dimensions of modern politics since the French Revolution.[23]

So both Payne and Gentile insisted on ideology or some substance 'deeper' than mere liturgical display, whereas culturalists such as Schnapp and Berezin suggested that coherence and meaning lay on the level of style instead. This difference in accent points to questions about what might count as deeper substance, standing opposed to

19 Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 160, is especially clear and explicit.

20 Much like Gentile, Mabel Berezin warned that 'to ascribe the proliferation of fascist public spectacle to the fanaticism of Starace is to attenuate the extent to which it was part of the fabric of the fascist cultural project ... Starace notwithstanding, fascist spectacle sprang from a general agreement among fascist elites, including Mussolini, that the state needed to theatricalise everyday life.' See Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self*, 65.

21 Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Staging Fascism: 18 BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 5–7. Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self*, 29–30.

22 Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 159–60.

23 Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista (1918–1925)* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1975). See the conclusion to Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 153–61, for his way of placing Fascist sacralisation within the wider framework since the French revolution. Gentile's more recent *Le religioni della politica* of course extends that discussion of the supranational framework.

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style. What measure of 'stability' or coherence do we expect, and what role are we to take any such substance to have played? The slippery term 'ideology' may throw us off.[24]

Yet even culturalists who played down intellectual substance tended to posit a measure of success as totalitarian, although in a sort of postmodern sense, taking style as substance, the medium as the message. What had seemed deeper substance either was not really deeper, but just play on a flattened-out surface, or was unstable, affording no bedrock. Insofar as we pull back from positing some deeper, and thus more stable, ideology or substance, it becomes possible to conceive style as in some sense sufficient.

Whatever the import of these differences, Gentile and the American culturalists were taking fascism newly seriously, as totalitarian, on the basis of criteria that some found inappropriate. Particularly critical was the Australian scholar R. J. B. Bosworth, who worried that the culturalist approach, emerging against a postmodern backdrop, led to a trivialisation of Fascism. He associated the cultural turn with a combination of 'end of history' liberal hegemony and anything-goes relativism voiding history of its cultural significance and moral import.[25] In this complacent, postmodern mode we forget that the Fascist regime was vicious, cruel – and a failure.[26] More generally, Bosworth charged that the culturalists were prone to take the Fascists at face value, credulously reporting what they said. We must read between the lines instead.[27]

Bosworth was right to worry about certain implications of the culturalist accent on style, but he himself seemed to invite only a limited and conventional way of reading between the lines, encompassing class-based counter-revolution and the familiar 'revelation' argument attributing Fascism to enduring Italian weaknesses, many of which were then sidestepped in the aftermath. His determination to maintain this particular critical focus seems to have led him to miss the element of force in the culturalist argument. Yet the element of mushiness and incompleteness in that argument surely contributed to his sense that we had better stick to his relatively conventional orientation. In any case, his reading of the implications of

24 Although the confusion has remained more or less constant, the sense of anomaly or disconnect has long been noted. George Lichtheim observed in 1965 that with uses of the 'ideology' category, 'one encounters a terminological vagueness which appears to reflect some deeper uncertainty about the status of ideas in the genesis of historical movements'. George Lichtheim, *The Concept of Ideology and Other Essays* (New York: Random House [Vintage Books], 1967), 3. More recently, Steven E. Aschheim has offered much insight on the issue, particularly with respect to the problem of Nazism, in *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); see especially 318, 320, 329.

25 R. J. B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London: Arnold, 1998), 5, 179, 204, 225.

26 Ibid., 5.

27 Ibid., 21 and 21n., 26–7. Bosworth found Jeffrey Schnapp an extreme example of the overall culturalist tendency. Although Bosworth was surely right in finding Mosse the key source of the newly dominant culturalist reading (ibid., 24), he went too far in referring to 'the curious alliance between the De Feliceans, and especially Emilio Gentile, and American cultural and intellectual historians' (ibid., 127). Although there are points of contact, partly, indeed, though the influence of Mosse, Gentile is not to be conflated with the US culturalists, especially because, as noted above, he does not accent style *as opposed to* ideological content or substance.

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postmodernism certainly affected his sense of present historiographical possibilities and priorities.

I suggest that in our approach to Italian fascism, the postmodern turn leads us not to relativism or bland liberal triumphalism but to a deeper critical understanding that more significantly illuminates the ongoing modern political experiment. Most basically, postmodernism makes us more reflexive, more alert to our own place in the continuing history we study. Our present understanding of such categories as power, ideology, myth, irrationalism, nihilism, activism and dynamism – and, yes, even freedom, reason and responsibility – have been shaped by our historical experience of fascism and the other extremes of the period. We learn to take particular care with binary dualisms, recalling, for example, Jane Caplan's call for a riskier, but potentially more illuminating approach *even* to Nazism and Fascism, putting at issue the binary oppositions at work – rational/irrational, for example – so that we might question their positive terms.[28] As themselves in play in the continuing history, such categories are not as stable as we long assumed.

We recognise that although we are privileged in knowing outcomes, we are not so sure, as we ponder the original departures, about the meaning of the evidence; the ideals and aspirations at work may entail substance that proves category-stretching. Moreover, we recognise that we have tended to fasten on some subset of the evidence based on restrictively 'modern' criteria. Some such selection remains inevitable, of course, but we should remain open to a wider range of evidence – and possible meanings. At the same time, postmodernism entails a deeper sense of how history happens, how things come to be through history. Avoiding essentialist and teleological assumptions, we attune to a contingent interplay of aspirations and provisional outcomes that could yield a dynamic not under anyone's control.

In terms of substance, postmodernism entails a new angle on modernity itself, encompassing liberal democracy and in some measure also the socialist ideal, perhaps even including orthodox Marxism as what became the mainstream quest for a systematic alternative from within the Enlightenment tradition. As an unexpected departure, Leninism and/or Stalinism, like fascism, bears an uncertain relationship to the overall modern mainstream.

The modern perspective entailed a master narrative that enabled us to trace the troubling departures of the interwar period to backwardness or wayward divergence from putatively normal modern development. In the light of the insufficiencies of Italian national integration, Fascism seemed to stem from some combination of counter-revolution by an especially insecure, vulnerable establishment and revolt against modernity by an especially threatened petty bourgeoisie. Or, turning the tables from within the same framework, perhaps Fascism was an effort at developmental dictatorship, adopting the extraordinary means that seemed necessary to overcome relative backwardness and catch up. In a postmodern mode, in contrast, there is still a modern mainstream, found in 'the West', but the mainstream is less obviously the

28 Jane Caplan, 'Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes for Historians', *Central European History*, 22 (Sept.–Dec. 1989), 274–8.

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privileged standard, and we open to uncertainties, tensions, creases in what had long seemed the relatively smooth fabric of modern deployment. We recognise that the modern triumphalist master narrative, warranting various reductionisms, restricted questioning and thus what we were prepared to hear, and possibly learn, even as we *thought* we were reading between the lines.

If we open to the possibility of category-stretching difference in responses to modernity, we may discern substance to impulses that had earlier seemed easily dismissed through familiar reductionist categories. Reactions against the modern mainstream may have been fuelled by a sense of possibility and desirability that made the frame of mind of the agents more different – in a historically specific sense, beyond mere ahistorical psychological differentiation – than we were initially prepared to grasp.[29] In this light we see how prejudicial was the notion, long taken for granted, that 'social roots', 'social foundations' or social class were the key to understanding, when in fact the place of those dimensions was – and remains – centrally at issue.[30]

Any such responses stand by definition in more complex interaction with national contextual idiosyncrasies than the modern master narrative would lead us to assume. From this perspective, Italy was not so much backward or wayward as simply different, with idiosyncratic traditions, a unique modern experience and thus a distinctive take on wider modern problems and possibilities. Whereas Berezin featured backwardness in accounting for Fascism's putative premium on style, E. J. Hobsbawm, writing a generation earlier, characterised the Italian culture of the pre-Fascist period as 'both extremely sophisticated and relatively provincial'.[31] But thus Italians might have been positioned to offer idiosyncratic, but genuinely innovative, diagnosis and prescription in response to creases in the modern mainstream to that point. Insofar

29 For an influential recent analysis of fascism that, though brilliant in its way, ends up repairing explicitly to an abiding fascist psychological type, see Umberto Eco, 'Ur-Fascism', *New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995, 12–15. The piece also appears, in slightly modified form, in Eco's *Five Moral Pieces*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Harcourt, 2001), 65–88; see also x–xi on the circumstances surrounding its genesis.

30 In *The Italian Dictatorship*, 228–9, Bosworth notes that 'only a purblind and recalcitrant anti-Marxist will want to think about fascism, or the history of the twentieth-century, without some reference to class and its discontents'. *Some* reference, to be sure – the question is to what degree we privilege that dimension a priori, on the assumption that getting at some putative social 'base' is the key to understanding. What else are we prepared to countenance in a non-reductionist way going in? We cannot deal with the 'meta'-issues here, but it is worth recalling Bernard Yack's point that we tend to miss the import of ideas because we have come to privilege certain contexts of expression; the use of shared philosophical concepts as an explanatory context appears more abstract than common economic interests or shared use of language. But though they *seem* more concrete, these latter are no less constructions – abstractions from the context of acts of expression – than a shared set of concepts. The question, Yack stressed, is which context yields the greatest insight into the material at issue. And the answer is not to be determined a priori but only on the basis of historical research. See Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx to Nietzsche* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), xxi–xxii. This insight, I suggest, simply invites more flexibility in the face of long-standing prejudices about hard and soft, practice and theory, concreteness and abstraction.

31 E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The Great Gramsci', *New York Review of Books*, 4 April 1974, 39.

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as we approached the Fascists in 'modern' ways, warranting easy reductionism, we could easily have missed the substantive dimension of the responses at issue.

Such substance could encompass a conscious accent on the import of myth and/or style, so at issue is not simply substance *as opposed* to myth or style. At the same time, myth and style are polyvalent notions, and either or both could come into play in ways beyond those originally foreseen by the innovators. Innovative substance could feed an energising sense of moving to the modern forefront – a sense that, in turn, could become intertwined with myth-making in a less lucid sense. Any such belief in the scope for innovation was perhaps especially likely to get bound up with myth-making in Italy, where a long, idiosyncratic history had bred a dialectic of grand expectation and pessimistic self-denigration by the late nineteenth century.[32]

In one sense, the substantive side of such 'postmodern' possibility seems to point even beyond Griffin's interpretation of fascism, featuring parallel instances of national renewal around palingenetic myth. Although explicit that 'renewal' could entail some new future dispensation as opposed to mere restoration, Griffin featured a sense of *national* decadence as the immediate problem. His set of categories may not be sufficiently open to the scope for innovative substance pointing beyond the wider modern mainstream. And thus the interface between myth and substance within the overall dynamic may be more complex than Griffin's accent on renewal, even palingenesis, allows.

In any case, to encompass irreducible substance is not to displace myth and style. But we can assess the place of each, even what counts as each, only insofar as we grasp the basis of any such substance. So we must find a place for all three, recognising that their implications and the proportions among them could change over time as they intertwined and interacted in practice.

At the same time, just as we recognise the possibility of a deeper substance, we also recognise that such substance might also have been undesirable, flawed, or risky in ways we have not recognised. So even insofar as we may be more open to the fascists going in, we may also become more deeply critical of the trajectory that resulted from their departure – and learn more deeply from the novelty that thereby became part of our world.

The totalitarian aspiration in Italian Fascism

Our conventional way of conceiving ideology has prejudicially limited our approach to all three of the interwar regimes, and it is only a bit of stretch to suggest that the inadequacy has stemmed from 'modern' assumptions that we might now leave behind. That inadequacy especially affected our treatment of Italian Fascism, which

32 Raymond Grew noted the Italian tendency during the pre-Fascist period to view problems that were at least as worrisome elsewhere as distinctively and endemically Italian. But thus in the Italian case a new sense of possibility might be especially likely to become exaggerated, engendering myth. See Raymond Grew, 'The Paradoxes of Italy's Nineteenth-Century Political Culture', in Isser Woloch, ed., *Revolutions and the Meanings of Freedom in the Nineteenth Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 244.

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was long assumed to lack an ideology or consistent worldview – a major difference, it would seem, from Nazism and Soviet communism. And thus Fascism was long reduced to some combination of opportunism, activism, irrationalism and myth.

From the modern perspective, we tend to equate 'substance', or ideational content, precisely with 'ideology' taken as unified and stable; absent that, we posit incoherence or some merely instrumental role for whatever ideas we find. It is striking that Zeev Sternhell and A. James Gregor, each of whom usefully challenged the long-standing denial of fascist ideology, posited an ideology in essentially this modern sense, as unified and stable, as each sought to make his case for the import of intellectual antecedents and/or fascist ideas. Moreover, radically different though they were, their respective readings of the content reflected delimited modern premises. Gregor posited backwardness and catch-up through developmental dictatorship, whereas Sternhell posited the negative reversal of a smooth, unified, rational and humanising Enlightenment tradition.[33]

Also featuring ideology, up to a point, was MacGregor Knox, who convincingly criticised long-standing assumptions that fascist ideologies must have been expressions of particular social groups or classes. On the contrary, he insisted, those ideologies were the products of individuals – and only Hitler and Mussolini ultimately mattered; 'the dictators were the doctrine, the word made flesh'.[34] The key in Mussolini's case was the drive toward radicalisation and war, which amounted to 'Mussolini unleashed'.[35] Yet Knox denied any implication that this drive stemmed from the views of 'just one man'. Rather, Mussolini's doctrine brought to extreme culmination long-standing perceptions and aspirations of Italian elites that surely reflected Italy's latecomer status and relative weakness.[36]

Yet even as he took seriously not only Mussolini as an ideologue but also Fascism as totalitarian, Knox found a major source of Fascist weakness in 'the absence ... of anything resembling the powerful ideological mechanisms that gave Marxism-Leninism and National Socialism their fanatical élites and masses'. The Fascist vision of a new civilisation, a new Rome, recalling the Giobertian and Mazzinian myths of the Risorgimento, 'lacked the credible world-revolutionary dimensions of Mussolini's

33 Zeev Sternhell, with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994; original French ed. 1989). Central to A. James Gregor's effort have been *The Ideology of Fascism: The Rationale of Totalitarianism* (New York: The Free Press, 1969); *The Fascist Persuasion in Radical Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974); *Italian Fascism and Developmental Dictatorship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); and *Young Mussolini and the Intellectual Origins of Fascism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). For a critique of Sternhell that also briefly addresses Gregor, see David D. Roberts, 'How not to Think about Fascism and Ideology, Intellectual Antecedents and Historical Meaning', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35, 2 (April 2000), 185–211.

34 MacGregor Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 55–9; see 57 for the quoted phrase.

35 This was title of Knox's first book, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939–1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Although he has nuanced the argument considerably in recent years, its main lines have remained the same.

36 MacGregor Knox, 'Fascism: Ideology, Foreign Policy, and War', in Adrian Lyttelton, ed., *Liberal and Fascist Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 137–8.

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principal ideological rivals, Hitler and Stalin. It also, even more damagingly, lacked the pseudo-scientific links between the regime's goals and the historical process found in Marxism and National Socialism.'[37] But even as he eschewed direct appeal to the modernist master narrative, Knox fell into a 'modern' teleological essentialism that, we shall see below, precluded probing fascism's ideological substance with the openness necessary to understand either its range and force or its potential for weakness and narrowing.

If we eschew such generally modernist assumptions and approaches, we find at work in Italian Fascism not a fully elaborated ideology but a looser mix of ideas that articulated and helped to shape aspirations even as they offered no systematic blueprint. Whereas modern perspectives, from master narrative to teleological essentialism, led us to privilege certain ideas a priori, we are now more open to the whole mix, although we recognise that it included symptomatic – and potentially debilitating – ambivalence and tension.[38] Such fragmentation does not mean overall incoherence or irrationalism, or that this or that particular strand can be dismissed as mere theory, or that we must focus on style as the basis of coherence. We simply find a more complex interaction and dynamic to be understood.

Fascism included a common energising insight and aspiration sufficiently coherent to inspire enthusiasm and indicate the general direction for practice. But it proved subject to contestation along particular axes from within that common framework. The result was a certain dynamic incoherence overall, but the meaning of that incoherence cannot be understood if we conflate it with irrationalism, activism or opportunism – or if we settle for a focus on style.

The fascist quest for a third way, in response to perceived inadequacies of both liberal democracy and the Marxist alternative, stemmed from a sense of the need – and the scope – for a new mode of collective action, in the light of a new sense of how the world gets made, or could and should get made.[39] History came to seem at once more open-ended and more subject to human intervention – if the appropriate means could be forged. The key was to eschew outmoded ideological blueprints and create the instrument for that ongoing action. Those grasping what seemed this deeper human responsibility constituted a new elite whose first task was to forge the necessary collective instrument, most basically through a new education, including collective mobilisation, to marshal comparable virtues in others. More constant and direct participation was essential to the capacity to act, and to do more, collectively. To characterise that new mode of action as 'totalitarian' is not to reduce the impulse to some ahistorical will to power, some desire for total domination; rather, it suggests the

37 Ibid., 115.

38 We find significantly different accents even in Giovanni Gentile, Alfredo Rocco, and Sergio Panunzio, whom foreign contemporaries routinely took to be the key fascist intellectuals. Yet each believed that fascism was propelling Italy to the forefront by moving in an overtly totalitarian direction. Examples of such recognition from abroad are Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944* (New York: Harper & Row [Torchbooks], 1966), 75–7; and Herbert L. Matthews, *The Fruits of Fascism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943), 151–3.

39 Ruth Ben-Ghiat effectively features the centrality of *bonifica*, reclamation, remaking in her *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 4–5, 80, 209.

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limitlessness of the collective responsibility and reach that seemed to be required. At issue, then, was not simply a new mode of being but a new mode of history-making action in a world that now seemed to lack the coherence that had underpinned 'modernity'.

The need and scope for such an intensified education was bound up with the fascist embrace of generally idealist or voluntarist categories such as will, spirit, even 'life as a mission'.[40] Indeed, grandiose achievement seemed to be fuelled or enabled by something like myth. Writing in 1934, Giuseppe Bottai noted that the Fascist doctrine was widely seen abroad as a doctrine of 'myths', but he turned the tables, charging that the mainstream had come to venerate liberty and the individual precisely as idols, 'myths'.[41] The point, however, was not simply that two can play this game. The Fascists claimed a more lucid grasp of the place of myth, as central to the new historical-political sense that could itself *change* how history happens.

Still, such idealist or voluntarist categories made for a volatile and multivalent mix. Although they expressed insights central to the fascist claim to novelty, some are likely to seem merely manipulative, easily reducible or simply vacuous from modern, teleological perspectives. To probe them in a more open way suggests the scope for both substance and excess, with the lines unclear, subject to contest.

The Fascists often claimed that Italy had special purchase on some subset of these generally idealist categories in the light of idiosyncratic traditions, from Renaissance humanism to Vico to Mazzini to the recent recasting of historicism and philosophical idealism by Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile. Standing opposed to both historical materialism and biological naturalism, Italian humanistic idealism accented spirit and culture, and thus the scope for enhanced education to nurture and focus the human ethical capacity.[42]

The effort to place this set of impulses, in light of creases in the modern deployment, must start with the philosopher Giovanni Gentile, whose influence and wider symptomatic importance have long been recognised by some, and were newly accented by the Soviet specialist Abbott Gleason in 1995.[43] Among other notable roles, Gentile wrote the theoretical portion of Mussolini's well-known encyclopedia article on fascism of 1932, the closest thing to an official statement of Fascist ideology

40 For well-known examples, see Mussolini's speech in Milan to the Fascist militia on the first anniversary of March on Rome and his 'Discorso di Pesaro' (18 August 1926), now in *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, ed. Edoardo e Duilio Susmel, vol. 20 (Florence: La Fenice, 1956), 64–5; and vol. 22 (Florence: La Fenice, 1957), 197. See also Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self*, 104–5, 107.

41 Giuseppe Bottai, *Esperienza corporativa (1929–1934)* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1934), 584–94.

42 Sergio Panunzio touched all the totalitarian bases in a speech on education to the Chamber of Deputies in 1929, published as *Lo Stato educativo* (Rome: Camera dei Deputati, 1929); see especially 11, but also 4–8, 23. For a major survey of Fascist education, see Michel Ostenc, *L'éducation en Italie pendant le Fascisme* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1980).

43 Gleason found Gentile's conception of the totalitarian state 'extraordinary' and 'prophetic', while concluding that 'Gentile deserves to be called the first philosopher of totalitarianism'. See Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 19. It should be noted that the historian Emilio Gentile is not related to the philosopher and fascist Giovanni Gentile.

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produced during the regime. Yet Gentile has long been misconstrued, and insofar as we fail to be open to difference his categories are easily ridiculed today.[44]

In response to the question of how the world could and should get made, Gentile specified a new mode of collective action through what he termed explicitly a totalitarian ethical state. Although it surely seems oxymoronic on first encounter, this category entailed an innovative reconceptualisation of the relationships among power, freedom, responsibility and participation. With the eclipse of transcendence, our sense of responsibility grows, and we seek to expand our capacity to act, to shape what the world becomes. To concentrate and expand power expands our collective freedom to act. Indeed, freedom requires that the state's reach be potentially limitless, totalitarian. However, that state is never fully realised in some tangible, empirical institution but rather is constantly under construction, ceaselessly being recreated, as the ethical capacity of individuals wells up.

In that sense, the totalitarian state does not stand opposed to the freedom of differentiated individuals, as we tend to assume it must. On the contrary, it values individuation and presupposes anything but a lifeless uniformity. But all must be mobilised and educated to identify themselves, as responsible moral agents, with the public world, all the time. We are to live lives of total public commitment, total responsibility for the world. There is no place for contemplative withdrawal, or self-cultivation, or mere alienation – let alone for some challenge to the overall vision.

Although Gentile was widely influential, his overall place in fascism is hard to pin down. There were those who disputed his authority virtually from the start, but he drew criticism especially during the early 1930s as frustration grew over the pace of change in Fascist Italy.[45] Some deemed him to be too intellectual, others too 'democratic', and still others insufficiently religious. Partly at issue were questions

44 Such significant critics as George Boas and Herbert Marcuse were simply unprepared to make sense of Gentile's fascism at the time. See George Boas, 'Gentile and the Hegelian Invasion of Italy', *Journal of Philosophy* 23 (April 1, 1926), 184–8; and Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon, 1960 [1941]), 402–12. Even the question of the relationship between Gentile's philosophy and his reading of, and commitment to, fascism, is vexed indeed. A major authority, Gennaro Sasso, denies that Gentile's fascism had any connection with his antecedent philosophy or, conversely, that his philosophy can tell us anything about the wider aspirations that produced this, the first fascism. For Sasso, what led Gentile to fascism was a fanciful, tortured reading of Italian history that betrayed an *a priori* determination to construct a distinctively Italian tradition with special contemporary relevance. See Gennaro Sasso, *Le due Italie di Giovanni Gentile* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), especially 280, 286, 568–9. I have challenged Sasso's approach and sought to indicate the scope for an alternative in David D. Roberts, 'Maggi's Croce, Sasso's Gentile and the Riddles of Twentieth-Century Italian Intellectual History', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 7, 1 (Spring 2002), 116–44. For an orientation in English to the Gentile question, see Gabriele Turi, 'Giovanni Gentile: Oblivion, Remembrance, and Criticism', *Journal of Modern History*, 70, 4 (Dec. 1998), 913–33.

45 For example see G.A. Fanelli, *Contra Gentiles: Mistificazioni dell'idealismo attuale nella rivoluzione fascista* (Rome: Biblioteca del Secolo Fascista, 1933). See also Alessandra Tarquini, 'Gli antigentiliani nel fascismo degli anni venti', *Storia contemporanea* 27, 1 (Feb. 1996), 5–59; Alessandra Tarquini, 'Gli antigentiliani nel regime fascista', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40 (2005), 637–62; and the aptly entitled conclusion – 'Una difficile egemonia' (a difficult hegemony) – to Gabriele Turi's well-researched and carefully balanced biography, *Giovanni Gentile: Una biografia* (Florence: Giunti, 1995), 446–526.

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about the place, within a putatively all-encompassing fascism, of Italy's Catholic traditions vis-à-vis the purely secular spirituality that Gentile himself trumpeted.[46] In claiming that the religious substance of Catholic tradition found its realisation in the new Fascist state, Gentile was surely the purer totalitarian, so opposition on the basis of a more traditional religiosity raises questions about the consistency of the totalitarian thrust in practice.

Emilio Gentile sought to do justice to Giovanni Gentile's essential yet uncertain role in noting that 'Gentile was, at least until the 1930s, the chief theologian of the new state. Even when his cultural leadership within the regime began to decline, his mark on the Fascist vision of the state remained strong and clear'.[47] But Emilio Gentile tended to posit an ongoing, unified totalitarian dynamic, so he left it a bit unclear how Gentilian themes, with their changing but still-essential place, meshed with the abiding effort at the sacralisation of politics that he emphasised overall. Moreover, even granting substance, some of Giovanni Gentile's argument especially invited a form of myth-making that stands in problematic relationship with Emilio Gentile's way of accenting myth as part of fascism's 'internal symbolic universe'.

Fascism's institutional centrepiece, giving structure to the ethereal notion of the totalitarian ethical state, was corporatism, which the regime began embracing formally in the wake of the Matteotti crisis of 1924. Fascist corporatism derived especially from the disparate syndicalist and Nationalist traditions, each accenting the import of trade unions as specifically modern organisations that potentially, at least, could nurture a new ethical-political consciousness through economic roles. But the syndicalists accented the scope for mobilising energies from below, whereas the Nationalists saw especially the scope for discipline from above.[48] A patina of Gentilian idealism then gave deeper resonance to fascist corporatism – but introduced some further tensions at the same time. Even if the point was to unleash energies from below, was technical competence or ethical capacity the key?[49]

Whatever their background, fascist corporatists agreed that the modern class struggle reflected genuine issues that the liberal state had proven ill-equipped to handle. Yet the Marxist alternative, suggesting that class struggle was leading to

46 Turi, *Giovanni Gentile*, 469.

47 Gentile, *Sacralisation of Politics*, 58. Even as he stressed Giovanni Gentile's importance as 'chief theologian', Emilio Gentile gave little sense of the bases of Gentile's totalitarian ideal. He had, however, treated Gentile in greater detail in his *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista* of 1975; see 343–69.

48 Sternhell and I have both shown the central importance of these two strands, though we have come to different conclusions about the relationship between them and the meaning of the themes at issue. See Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*; and David D. Roberts, *The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979). I have sought to pinpoint the differences between Sternhell and myself in Roberts, 'How not to Think'.

49 See Turi, *Giovanni Gentile*, 462, for indications of the important links between the key corporatist leader Giuseppe Bottai and Gentile and his followers Ugo Spirito and Arnaldo Volpicelli. Bottai inaugurated *Archivio di studi corporativi* with an article by Gentile in 1930. The uncertain relationship between *tecnica* and *politica* was much at issue in the proto-fascist quest for a 'third way' in the aftermath of World War I. See Roberts, *Syndicalist Tradition*, 250–6; and Domenico Settembrini, *Storia dell'idea antiborghese in Italia, 1860–1989: Società del benessere-liberalismo-totalitarismo* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1991), 277–95.

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the permanent overcoming of class division, was an outmoded nineteenth-century notion. Because of its corporatist frame, the argument went, Italian Fascism was uniquely able to address modern labour relations, as specified, for example, in the much-trumpeted Labour Charter of 1927. At the same time, corporatism was intended at once to expand the reach of collective action by encompassing the economy within the political and to involve people more constantly and directly in public life through the workplace.[50] Now politicised, even 'spiritualised', through infusion with the human ethical capacity, production was the central collective task.

Although the totalitarian expansion of sovereignty obviously also encompassed population policy, linked to both welfare and 'expansion', the corporatist transformation of the state, with this 'idealist' gloss, was consistently featured as the centrepiece of fascism, and it was much discussed abroad at the time.[51] Yet it gets only cursory treatment, at best, in most of the innovative recent scholarship at issue.

Although in principle there was surely room to seek a non-Marxist way of politicising the workplace and of transcending the liberal way of handling economic conflict, the corporatist direction is easily read in reductionist terms, especially in the light of the ongoing effort by pre-fascist economic elites to exploit fascism. At the same time, we question the corporatist mode of participation and its place within a wider totalitarian mix that also included ritual and spectacle. In principle even an overtly totalitarian alternative to liberal democracy might afford the scope for enhanced political initiative and decision as the reach of the state expanded. Yet there was also the scope for subordination, leaving ordinary people with mere spectatorship, with superficial forms of ritualistic involvement. The criteria of 'participation' are themselves obviously at issue.

Liberal individualist assumptions make it difficult to distinguish among various modes of participation that may plausibly be deemed totalitarian. Yet such distinctions are essential if we are to sort out goals and grasp the direction of change in fact. No matter how well corporatism worked, no matter the quality of participation it made possible, we may well find undesirable the politicisation, the more constant and direct participation, that it was supposed to entail. But such participation would still differ importantly from 'total domination', the production of automatons or manipulation of the 'womanish masses' to give Mussolini a sexual high.

50 Bottai consistently emphasised that corporatism, organised around concrete tasks and productive roles, was making possible the active participation of the workers in the discussion and resolution of the great problems of the day, from the organisation of single branches of production to international tariff policy. See Bottai, *Esperienza corporativa*.

51 The examples are legion, yet there seems little interest in dredging them up today. For one such example, see Paul Einzig, *The Economic Foundations of Fascism* (London: Macmillan, 1933), which vehemently contrasted corporatist fascism with Nazi Germany, deemed merely barbarous and destructive. In her *Fascist Modernities*, 119, Ben-Ghiat noted that Indro Montanelli, editor of *L'Universale*, was irritated and surprised that some of the French attending the Italian-French Conference on Corporativist Studies in Rome in May 1935 viewed fascism as a nationalistic movement of the extreme right. Caught up in traditional categories, they were not prepared to grasp the innovative thrust of fascism.

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In insisting that we consider politicisation *in a fascist sense* and participation *in a totalitarian sense,* Emilio Gentile recognised the scope for experiment and difference. And his emphasis on shaping the mass of 'new men' into a single body, dedicated to realising the party's revolutionary and imperialist aims, seems to indicate precisely that the aim was not a new mode of being or experience but a new mode of *action*. However, his accents were not entirely consistent. His overall emphasis on fascism as a secular religion, wound around ritual, commemoration, symbolism and myth, suggested a new sense of belonging that itself constituted the more constant and direct participation envisioned. Put differently, from this perspective totalitarianism was to entail a new mode of experience, of being, as opposed to a new mode of collective, history-making action. But are we to understand the experience as meaningful in religious terms, or as bogus – boiling down to forms of spectatorship and ritual that afforded only the *illusion* of participation? Whether we are to understand the 'new man' primarily as a spectator, as an automaton 'available' for the ends of the leadership, or as a participant genuinely politicised in a deeper, but still totalitarian sense depends on the modes of education, on the roles afforded, on what the collectivity was actually to do and how it was to do it. His determination to take seriously the sacralisation effort itself led Gentile to gloss over distinctions – and thus the scope for changes in accent, and meaning over time, within the developing dynamic.[52]

Gentile's conception of the aspiration proved incomplete partly because of his debt to Mosse, whose accent on 'nationalisation of the masses', valuable though it remains, proves too limited to encompass the totalitarian alternatives that became possible as new critical responses to the modern mainstream emerged around the turn of the century.[53] And although the immediate Italian contextual dimension – incomplete national integration – is undeniably important, Gentile's understanding of the interface between idiosyncratic Italian factors and the wider totalitarian departure proved too conventional to get at what differentiated Italy from the modern mainstream and produced the parallels in the totalitarian departures of the era. In the same way, his use of such categories as freedom, irrationalism and myth was too

52 Compare, for example, Emilio Gentile's accent on 'the practice of its politics through myth, ritual, and symbolism' with the Giovanni Gentilian Giorgio Masi's explicit accent on ongoing history-making, which Emilio Gentile quotes in stressing the decisive contribution of the Gentilian idealist intellectuals in institutionalising fascist religion. But the Giovanni Gentilean concern with collective history-making points well beyond the mode of belonging or being that an experience of 'myth, ritual, and symbolism' would make possible. See Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 53, 57–8.

To accent a new mode of collective action as opposed to a new mode of experience or belonging is to suggest that fascism was not simply an instance of the familiar secular substitute for traditional religion. Bernard Yack usefully delineated a deeper departure in the aspirations that came to inform philosophy with the modern break, though he did not consider systematically what happened as the modern longing for a total alternative reached an impasse. I suggest that what happened then was essential in making possible the subsequent totalitarian departures. See Yack, *Longing for Total Revolution*, 14–20, 75, 282.

53 George L. Mosse, *The Nationalisation of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1999).

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conventional to encompass the novel substance and its interface with the liturgical themes he emphasised.[54]

We have seen that myth was indeed central to the Italian fascist self-understanding, as an aspect of the mode of collective action appropriate to the new historical-political sense. But the category remains especially slippery and overloaded; despite the baggage it carries, we too often invoke it imprecisely, almost without thinking. In fact myth was implicated in Italian fascism on several levels, with proportions and even meanings changing over time.

Both myth and the elites–masses distinction were essential to the fascist sense of the new scope for collective, history-making action. But in this way myth easily comes to suggest cynical manipulation, mystification – to serve power, for example, or the interests of elites, diverting the masses from their *real* interests. In fact, however, the new thinking posited a more complex interface that, through myth, bound elites and masses together. Even the new fascist elite knew itself to be caught up in the overall myth. In that sense the fascist embrace of myth not only eluded Sorel, whose primitivism precluded any such lucidity, but also pointed beyond Sternhell, who implicitly posited myth as merely manipulative.[55]

As an aspect of the new historical-political sense, myth was part of a different syndrome – perhaps equally familiar, but more complex, less obviously susceptible to reductionist readings. That syndrome encompassed commitment, audacity, will, solidarity, faith, discipline, sacrifice, mission and the capacity for heroic collective goals wound around images of collective accomplishment. Determined action in itself helps to make new achievement possible, even as, with history open-ended, outcomes are not precisely foreseeable.[56] But even insofar as it entailed something like ongoing dynamism, this mode of action is crucially different from cynically mobilising and manipulating masses by means of myths known to be myths. Moreover, in the case at hand, it had to entail concrete institutional change at the same time.[57] And insofar

54 See, for example, Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 3, 32–33, where his reference to the Fascist propensity to abolish liberty rests on a too-conventional understanding of liberty, contrasted with such contraries as authority, discipline and hierarchy. If we back up a step, thereby better grasping the instability even of so essential a category as liberty, we also better grasp the scope for novelty, for innovative 'substance', bound up in this case with positive liberty, the collective freedom to act. See also 1–18 on the Italian context.

55 See, for example, Sternhell, *Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 118. Mosse, too, fell into the widespread tendency to treat myth as a way to direct and control mass movements; see *Nationalisation of the Masses*, 12.

56 Typical was Mussolini's use of 'myth' in his well-known speech in Naples of October 24, 1922, just before the March on Rome, excerpted in Roger Griffin, ed. *Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 44. 'We have created our myth . . . the greatness of the nation'. Such a myth, Mussolini noted explicitly, need not literally anticipate reality but, bound up with hope, faith, and passion, it affords a stimulus to ongoing action. Although his usage clearly reflects his reading of Sorel, Mussolini was using the category in a 'post-Sorelian' way, reflecting his wider sense of the scope for collective action. Such a lucid embrace of myth was not consistent with Sorel's primitivism, a distinction often missed. See, for example, Philip Morgan's treatment of the same passage in his *Fascism in Europe, 1919–1945* (London: Routledge, 2003), 127.

57 See, for example, Dino Grandi's use of myth and its link to a demand for institutional change in a proto-corporatist direction in 'Le origini e la missione del fascismo' (1921), in *Il fascismo*, by Adolfo

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as it reflected Gentilian ethical state notions, even the ongoing dynamism cannot be conflated with 'irrational activism', or 'activity for its own sake'.[58]

Despite some occasional ambiguity, Emilio Gentile was not settling for Sternhell's barely veiled reductionism but was recognising that myth was an autonomous impulse with a more complex place in a wider, more innovative totalitarian mix.[59] And whereas for Sternhell myth was integral to the finished, stable 'Fascist ideology' in place by 1922 – as a blueprint that was then undercut through the regime's compromises with existing institutions – Gentile understood myth as central to the actual practice of the regime. For Gentile, the dominant myth of Fascism after 1922 was the myth of the new state as totalitarian – a notion that surely makes sense up to a point.[60] As we noted, the Fascists eschewed blueprint and accented open-ended experiment; the totalitarian ethical state could never be definitively fixed in any empirical institution. But in the light of myth's connotation of unreality or a-rationalism, and in the light of long-standing assumptions about fascist irrational activism, Gentile's repeated reference to fascist goals or even images as 'myths' breeds confusion about content. Partly because he devoted so little attention to corporatism, his accents suggested that fascism could cohere as myth and succeed on the level of sacralisation even if the new state remained a mere image and the new participation proved merely ritualistic. But the effort actually to construct a new state reflected substance, and it mattered – it mattered decisively – what resulted at the level of concrete institutions and procedures. In fact, outcomes at that level stimulated further response that fundamentally affected the overall trajectory of the regime, including the place of myth within it.[61]

Trumpeting Fascism in 1924, Camillo Pellizzi offered an especially telling example of the early Fascist embrace of myth, linked precisely to the quest for a new state. He was seeking to articulate a new vision of things that he clearly shared, including the scope for grandiose, unprecedented accomplishment as fascism forged a mode of collective action for open-ended history-making. That instrument was the new Fascist state, which could only be 'totalitarian'. When we work for history and not for ourselves, said Pellizzi, there is no end of the discipline, no limit to what we may be called upon to do.[62]

Zerboglio and Dino Grandi (Bologna: Licinio Cappelli, 1922), 53–4, 63, 69–70. See also Roberts, *Syndicalist Tradition*, 219–20.

58 Abbott Gleason noted that the methods of Gentile's activist state included the mystification and social myths that Sorel had made famous. See Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 19. If Gentile's thinking did indeed entail 'irrational activism' or 'action for its own sake', as the caricature has long had it, some such connection with the conventional notion of myth could surely be drawn.

59 See, for example, Emilio Gentile, *La via italiana*, 131–2.

60 Ibid., 134, 136, 206. See also Emilio Gentile, *Il mito dello Stato nuovo dall'antigiolittismo al fascismo* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1982).

61 See Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 3, 28–9, 82–4, 104; and Gentile, *La via italiana*, 131–2, 270, for examples of Gentile's liberal and undifferentiated use of myth.

62 Camillo Pellizzi, *Problemi e realtà del fascismo* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1924), 157–65, especially 161 and 164.

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At the same time, Pellizzi recognised a tension in the Fascist effort to reconceive the *state* as the instrument for the action required. Precisely because of their privileged sense of open-endedness, he said, the Fascists were loath to have fascism institutionalised in the state, understood as a static juridical-bureaucratic entity. As the instrument of collective history-making, however, the Fascist state was a creative dynamism without pre-set limits.[63] Echoing Giovanni Gentile, Pellizzi insisted that the new state was constantly being recreated as collective ethical response welled up in response to historically specific challenges. In our purely historical world, even laws are mere hieroglyphs in the sand.

In this sense, for Pellizzi explicitly, the fascist ethical state could only be a myth. But although difficult to describe, it was still 'a concrete principle of action in action, of action historically valid and vast'.[64] To claim that it was 'historically valid' was to insist that the direction was not just adventurist activism but was based on a new, rational and empirically grounded understanding of the human place in history. Pellizzi expressed an explicit debt to the Italian idealist tradition, contrasted with the mentalities of both Marxism and bourgeois liberalism, which he found comparable in reducing the state to the economic level, to the interests of individual monads. Heir to that idealist tradition, fascism was overcoming liberalism in constituting itself precisely as the instrument necessary for the endless, ethically grounded collective remaking of the world in history.[65]

Pellizzi's testimony suggests that the Fascists were not merely manipulating the masses on a 'rational', means–ends basis, but knew and wanted themselves to be caught up in a new mode of collective action encompassing myth. But as the regime evolved, this sense of the positive role of myth proved to invite further, and quite different, modes of myth-making – modes that the Fascists themselves were especially likely to miss precisely because they had consciously embraced myth earlier on.

So we must grasp the interaction of substance, style and myth, each uncertain or multivalent in implication. That interaction was central to a dynamic in which the meaning of each, and their proportions and modes of interaction, changed as the effort to act proceeded. And that three-way interaction makes it especially difficult to grasp the substance in the fascist response to modernity.

In sophisticated recent studies, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi and Ruth Ben-Ghiat offered innovative accounts that challenge us to deepen our inquiry into precisely that interaction. And even as they both took fascism seriously as totalitarian in aspiration and direction, each sought to pinpoint a tension or contradiction that seemed to underpin the actual dynamic. But their accents differed, and each account raises questions about the range of possibilities we are prepared to encompass.

63 Ibid., 161, 163–5.

64 Ibid., 161.

65 Ibid., 157–60. In 1941 Pellizzi was still insisting on the endlessness of the task and thus the open-endedness of the fascist revolution. Neither the state nor the educational process would ever be finished. See Pellizzi, *Il partito educatore* (Rome: *Studi di Civiltà fascista*, 1941), 7, 43–4. By this point, however, Pellizzi was using 'myth' in a less overtly positive way: the idea of full realisation was the myth.

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Charging explicitly that Emilio Gentile's sacralisation theme did not account for the underlying ambiguities and tensions, Falasca-Zamponi argued that a kind of sensory alienation made possible the totalitarian mobilisation in Fascist Italy.[66] By exciting the senses yet denying sensual pleasure, private enjoyment and the body, the regime desensitised individuals, leaving them disembodied, part of a mass, significant only in their subordination – as raw material to be moulded by the duce as artist-politician.[67] In the final analysis, then, it was the *lack* of aesthetic satisfaction, the *denial* of the senses, that made fascism totalitarian.[68] So although she, too, featured aesthetics, even style, as substance, Falasca-Zamponi differed both from Emilio Gentile and from those US culturalists who found a measure of sensual *realisation* on the aesthetic level. She was suggesting, in a deeper, more innovative way than Bosworth, that the level of aesthetic satisfaction was superficial, even bogus.

But although she sought to do justice, as even Gentile's recent work did not, to the centrality of corporatism, and although she featured the import of generally idealist categories, appropriately linking them to fascist productivism, Falasca-Zamponi was quick to account for the whole syndrome in terms of an extrinsic theoretical discussion centring on aestheticism, and bound up with a set of fashionable categories centring on the body. Indeed, her way of opposing the fascist accent on self-sacrifice, for example, to the satisfactions of consumerism reflects the pseudo postmodernism that seems to warrant new forms of presentist imposition based on precisely these newly privileged categories, thereby precluding the scope for deeper difference.[69] Linked to a denial of consumption, the productivism of fascist corporatism was central to the sensory alienation that, in her account, underpinned the regime.[70] But even as she featured snippets from Mussolini on the basis of her aestheticist framework, she did not seriously measure her understanding of corporatism or anti-materialism against the arguments of fascist corporatists and idealists in the light of tensions and openings in the mainstream tradition. On her account, the meaning could only have been denial of the consumerist/sensory/aesthetic satisfaction. The place of consumption, desire and the body are surely worth considering in the Italian case, but we cannot assess an explanation in terms of repressed consumption without also considering what else might be at work in the fascist effort, so unfamiliar on first encounter, to 'spiritualise' the economy and make production a collective ethical act.

Although she focused especially on second-generation fascists and the dynamic from the early 1930s, Ben-Ghiat's *Fascist Modernities* offered a more convincingly

66 Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 187–8.

67 See especially ibid., 88, 122–4, where Mussolinian fascism is linked to the Nietzschean 'superman', understood as an artist-creator who shapes masses.

68 Ibid., 186–7, 192. See also 129–35, 144–6, on corporatism.

69 Ibid., 129–35, 144–6. Even as she quoted both Panunzio and Carlo Costamagna on 134-45, Falasca-Zamponi gave no sense of their crucial differences, which emerged clearly in their important polemic in *Rivista internazionale di filosofia del diritto* during 1926. See Roberts, *Syndicalist Tradition*, 240–4, on this polemic, and De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, 2: 67–9, for further observations on the import of the differences between the two fascists.

70 Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, 124.

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historical treatment.[71] And she found fascism a Janus-faced response to the challenges of modernity immediately after the First World War. Although in some respects fascism pointed beyond mere reaction to or resentment of the quest for an *alternative* modernity, it won the support of most intellectuals because it seemed to address long-standing Italian and supranational *anxieties* about modernity that were escalating in the postwar world. At this level, Ben-Ghiat concluded, fascism stemmed from concerns to preserve order, comforting continuities and master narratives of privilege and domination. Thus it sought to reinforce class boundaries and gender hierarchies, to forestall further social emancipation, and to defend national traditions in the face of the homogenising tendencies of modernity.[72]

To suggest that fascism stemmed from a mixture of sometimes incompatible impulses is surely convincing, and some of them can indeed be understood in such relatively conventional terms. But insofar as we eschew the master narrative of modernisation, it may be hard to distinguish anxious defence from a quest for an alternative modernity in the fascist accents Ben-Ghiat had in mind. The criteria were themselves at issue, and thus we cannot be sure what counts as what.[73] Even impulses that might seem most obviously to suggest anxious defence – 'ruralisation', for example – might require a deeper look, based on greater openness to difference. In terms of the modern master narrative, any accent on rural, local or regional values suggests conservative defence; the alternative is bound up with self-recommending 'emancipation'. But in the light of all that 'modernisation' has wrought – overcrowded edge cities, for example, or the much-lamented homogenisation of culture and even the landscape itself – an effort to enhance the viability of rural life and to preserve some modicum of local culture did not necessarily stem from a desire to preserve privilege and forestall emancipation. Stanley Payne noted precisely that the Fascist effort to control urbanisation by keeping a percentage of the rural population in the countryside, long derided as anti-modern, paralleled directions lauded as ecologically sound by the 1980s; yet because of a kind of double standard, fascism was not taken as prescient.[74] On occasion Ben-Ghiat's own evidence seems to elude such categories as

71 Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*.

72 Ibid., 2–3, 8, 94–5, 209.

73 In his influential study of Weimar Germany, the late Detlev Peukert noted that whereas German difference was undeniable, it stemmed not from mere waywardness or some failed adjustment to modernity. Rather, the special circumstances of the Weimar Republic forced Germany in a sense beyond Britain and France, which did not face the same challenges. Yet the resulting effort at a hyper-modern welfare state in Germany produced an impasse that then invited, or demanded, a still more radical step – into totalitarianism, which seemed the only alternative in the light of that impasse, and which was thus an effort precisely beyond 'classical modernity'. But Peukert also noted how hard it was for contemporaries – and remains for us – to distinguish forward-looking from reactionary impulses in responses to the outcome of modernity to that point. See Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993), 50–1, 130–6, 243–6, 271–2.

74 Payne, *A History of Fascism,* 478. See also Bruno P. F. Wanrooij, 'Italian Society under Fascism', in Lyttelton, *Liberal and Fascist Italy*, 182–6, for a good brief treatment of the plausible rationale but problematic execution and essentially failed outcome of the 'ruralisation' strategy. Also of interest is Roberto Dainotto, '"Tramonto" and "Risorgimento": Gentile's Dialectics and the Prophecy of Nationhood', in Albert Russell Ascoli and Krystyna von Henneberg, eds., *Making and Remaking Italy:*

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anxiety and defence, suggesting that she may be too quick to repair to conventional reductionist explanations because her sense of the possibilities is not sufficiently open to innovation and difference.

At issue in part is the timeframe necessary to assess the meaning of the fascist responses in question. In focusing on the immediate postwar period, Ben-Ghiat was not backing up very far – not far enough, I suggest, to grasp the basis for the Fascist claim to lead in response to tensions in the wider modern deployment. But thus neither could she do justice to the resulting endogenous dynamic, which itself generated some of the tensions that came to mark the regime, and that she was quick to trace to the initial Fascist response.

Ben-Ghiat's account makes it clear that those criticising corporatist performance during the 1930s were serious, but how, then, are we to account for the whole corporatist direction in the light of her stress on the Fascists' tension-ridden response to modernity? Her own evidence does not suggest that corporatism was simply about preserving hierarchies or forestalling social emancipation. But she does not consider the outcomes of parliamentary democracy and Marxist socialism, so she was not opening broadly enough to encompass the sources of the corporatist impulse in the first place. In the same way, Ben-Ghiat's accent on the defence of threatened national traditions does not make sense of Giovanni Gentile's highly selective embrace and specifically modern recasting of the Italian intellectual tradition, including the marginalised Mazzini.

If, as Ben-Ghiat recognised, the concern with degeneration and demography was more generally Western, is the point that Italy, as relatively backward and especially vulnerable, was quicker to react – indeed, that Italy was quicker to react precisely *because* it was backward and vulnerable? That, of course, would be the modern reading. Or was the fascist departure a specifically Italian yet irreducible, innovative mode of action to address the wider Western concern? We cannot answer unless we understand, first, the sense of the world that seemed to show the way to that new mode of action and, second, the basis of the Italian claim to spearhead it. What galvanised the fascist departure, as a response to the modern, was less fear and defence than a new, energising sense of opportunity and responsibility to show the way beyond the modern mainstream.

Although not concerned with 'modernity', MacGregor Knox converged with Falasca-Zamponi and Ben-Ghiat in seeking to pinpoint an underlying contradiction that weakened the regime. Even as he noted the lack of ideological foundations comparable to those of Nazism and Stalinism, he found ideological keys in the cult of the duce, the myth of the new state and the ideal of living dangerously. But he then went on to note, convincingly enough, that these three themes were mutually antagonistic.[75] Still, by privileging a restricted subset of the evidence, Knox's teleological essentialism precluded any openness to fascist ideas that stemmed from

The Cultivation of National Identity around the Risorgimento (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 241–55, on Giovanni Gentile's open-ended dialectic of regional and national culture.

75 Knox, 'Fascism: Ideology, Foreign Policy, and War', 113–114.

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an innovative response to modernity. Dismissive of everything that did not fit the essentialist telos of war, he conveyed no sense of the deeper meaning of the totalitarian state idea. In the Gentilian portions of Mussolini's 'Doctrine of Fascism' he found only 'platitudes'. From his perspective, apart from its emphasis on war as the test of nationhood, that whole 'pompous' document did not reflect the real fascist ideology but merely Mussolini's intermittent quest for a veneer of intellectual respectability.[76]

Elsewhere Knox noted that 'fascist corporatism, which the regime touted as the answer to the social needs of the age, remained a sickly plant in which Mussolini himself took little interest'.[77] But if Mussolini had little interest in corporatism, and if only Mussolini's ideas mattered, it is curious that the regime devoted such energy to the corporatist experiment, which remained essential to the self-understanding of many committed Fascists. In fact, although Mussolini's role was unique and indispensable, he was caught up in a complex web that included ideas and pressures from others within the fascist mix. Moreover, Knox's suggestion, so symptomatic of his teleological tendency, that corporatism does not really matter because it remained a sickly plant, is to miss its place in an overall dynamic in which provisional outcomes yielded responses that then changed proportions. That dynamic cannot be understood either as a single abiding thrust, as Knox generally has argued, or in terms of the cluster of three mutually incompatible ideological elements mentioned above.

At the same time, the absence of 'the pseudo-scientific links', as found in Marxism and National Socialism, 'between the regime's goals and the historical process' was not necessarily, as for Knox, a source of weakness for Italian Fascism but could nourish a sense of superiority, based precisely on the recognition that those nineteenth-century ideologies were merely *pseudo*-scientific, that fascism rested on a wider modern humanism that featured not exclusion but positive construction, education and the scope for inclusion based on culture, spirit and freedom. Fascist ideologues certainly did not envy what they themselves perceived to be the bogus certainties of their post-liberal rivals, quite the contrary. It remains true, of course, that such bogus certainties could inspire the enthusiasm and continuity that eventually proved to be lacking in Italian fascism, and that is much of Knox's point. But he is too quick to leave the matter there, with ideological strength bound up with pseudo-scientific certainty. To understand the actual dynamic we must grasp what the Italians believed they had *instead of* such pseudo-scientific certainties, and how it fed a particular kind of enthusiasm – and thus the actual practice of the regime.

Conceiving the dynamic without essence or telos

So we seek to eschew essentialism, teleology and triumphalism so that we might better grasp, first, the now-marginalised sense of possibility, even responsibility, that

76 Ibid., 113; Knox, *Common Destiny*, 57–8. Renzo De Felice, in contrast, maintained that Gentile's ideas constituted 'an important and authentic component' in Mussolini's political culture. See De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, 1: 35.

77 Knox, *Common Destiny*, 58. De Felice, in contrast, found Mussolini's commitment to corporatism 'beyond doubt and amply documented'. See De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, 1: 177.

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produced Italian Fascism but also, second, the contingent interplay of aspirations and provisional outcomes that then yielded an unforeseen dynamic. We noted that even as the Fascists agreed about the third-way totalitarian direction, certain emphases differed from the start, and those differences intensified when, moving into the effort of positive reconstruction, the fascists encountered questions about differentiation, hierarchy, individuation and the scope for initiative from below.[78] Quite apart from the inevitable personal rivalries and careerism, the very effort to act added further layers of fissuring and scapegoating in the light of unanticipated difficulties and unintended outcomes.

Although implementation entailed much serious discussion of education, starting especially with Gentile's reform bill of 1923, the reform effort provoked endless controversy over the specifics – the role of religion, for example, or how traditionally humanistic, as opposed to newly technical, a fascist education should be. The Gentilians themselves linked the technical emphases of some of their opponents to the aims of big business, which needed to be headed off.[79] Others, however, found the technical direction necessary to move from empty liberal politics into concrete productivism. Each had a point, but the tension was obvious – and debilitating. During 1935–6 – precisely the period of the Ethiopian turn – Gentile was highly critical of the emphasis the new education minister, Cesare Maria De Vecchi, placed on authority and discipline at the expense of freedom of thought.[80]

Normal generational rebellion proved a particular source of weakness as younger Fascists vented their frustration with the halting outcomes of the revolution by the early 1930s. A number of them began denouncing Gentile's continuing predominance and called for a cultural revolution to curtail the influence of all those with ties to the liberal era.[81] But their charges of abstraction and metaphysics, their insistence that fascism was about action as opposed to principles, often misconstrued Gentile's thinking, which arguably remained essential to the fascist self-understanding as 'spiritual', even as 'totalitarian', in a way that was superior to the two competing post-liberal regimes. Insofar as the quest for renewal seemed to require assault on

78 Citing the scope, through corporatism, for involving the individual not as an abstract citizen but as a specialised force of production, Gentile insisted on the democratic character of the fascist state, in explicit opposition to the Nationalist view. See, for example, Giovanni Gentile, 'The Origins and Doctrine of Fascism', as excerpted in Adrian Lyttelton, ed., *Italian Fascisms from Pareto to Gentile* (New York, Harper & Row [Torchbooks], 1975), 310–12. Alfredo Rocco gave that contrasting nationalist view classic expression in 'The Political Doctrine of Fascism', in Henry S. Kariel, ed., *Sources in Twentieth-Century Political Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 91–115. See especially 104 for Rocco's way of combining explicit elitism with an accent on mass participation in a subordinate mode.

79 Turi, *Giovanni Gentile*, 390–1.

80 Ibid., 472.

81 Ben-Ghiat is especially good on this impulse among leading 'second generation' Fascists such as Gastone Silvano Spinetti, who even organised an anti-idealist conference at the University of Rome in June 1933. See Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 30, 102–3, 108–9. See also Giuseppe Calandra, *Gentile e il fascismo* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1987), 165–7. Ben-Ghiat noted that the new generation itself tended to fissure over some of the key points at issue. For example, was the depersonalisation of mass society to be fostered or resisted? See *Fascist Modernities*, 113–15.

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Gentile, the young dissidents were diluting an important part of the original fuel. Yet Gentile himself, although he remained active, even intensifying his efforts at cultural hegemony, seemed forced onto the defensive.[82]

The corporatist direction produced significant ongoing institutional change; the Chamber of Fasces and Corporations replaced the old Chamber of Deputies only in 1939, and a corporatist reform of the legal codes followed in 1942. But by the early thirties an array of committed Fascists was sharply and openly critical of the developing corporatist institutions, which tended to function in a top-down way, precluding autonomy and initiative.[83] The new system afforded little scope for substantive, deliberative discussion, so it proved limited at best as a vehicle of participation. Even the workers' representatives were not genuinely representative. Deficiencies stemmed partly from compromise with traditional business elites, but also from tensions in the original vision, most obviously from incompatibilities between the syndicalist and nationalist sources. And then the effort at implementation brought institutional ambiguities and rivalries to the fore.

Indeed, the most debilitating of the fissures within Fascism was the disagreement over its institutional basis, especially the place of the Fascist party in an ongoing revolution still putatively centred on the totalitarian corporative state. Emilio Gentile showed that the revolutionary totalitarian element was not simply emasculated by the traditional state, as had long been held, but that the trajectory stemmed from a complex *ongoing* interaction among duce, party and *fascist* state.[84] So the regime was anything but homogeneous. In Gentile's account, however, the dynamic stemming from the effort of totalitarian implementation was homogeneous in the sense that, given the logic of the fascist religious vision, the same kind of thing was happening throughout the course of the experiment.[85] That did not preclude contest; on the contrary, the open-ended, experimental nature of the resulting dynamic entailed ongoing controversy within fascism, even over what continuing revolution might mean. But in assessing that contest, Gentile was prone to associate ongoing radicalism with the party *as opposed to* the state. And that accent on the party reinforced his tendency to portray the revolutionary totalitarian thrust as relatively homogeneous, unified and stable and to gloss over the sources and implications of certain ongoing differences of emphasis.

82 Gentile helped to create, for example, the Istituto italo-germanico in Cologne, which he inaugurated together with Mayor Konrad Adenauer in October 1931, and subsequently the Istituto italiano di studi germanici in Rome. But, subject to increasing pressure from Starace and the Fascist Party, he was finally replaced as head of Istituto nazionale fascista di cultura in 1937, as this entity fell under more immediate party control. See Turi, *Giovanni Gentile*, 436–7, 442.

83 See, for example, the critique by the veteran syndicalist A. O. Olivetti, 'Le corporazioni come volontà e come rappresentazione', *La stirpe*, 9, 4 (April 1931), 145–6. See also Roberts, *Syndicalist Tradition*, 291, 293–4.

84 Gentile, *La via italiana*, 164–5, 168–70, 172–5.

85 Thus, for example, Gentile noted that self-portrayal as a religion afforded both an enduring fascist sense of identity and a significant element of continuity in fascist practice, enabling the party to preserve 'the whole complex of myths, rituals, and symbols' that had originated in the *squadristi* experience and that 'remained basically unaltered until the fall of the regime'. Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 29. See also *La via italiana*, 270.

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As Gentile emphasised, the party did not have to take over the state as long as it had a substantive role in creating the new culture that would afford the foundation for new institutions in the future. It was on that level that he found the significance, and partial success, of the ongoing party effort. But the party itself could not embody totalitarian fulfilment; it could only claim to embody the totalitarian ideal, to be realised in the totalitarian state. And it was not clear how the party's educational and mobilising activity was to serve actual state-building. Conversely, those downplaying the ongoing role of the party were not necessarily less radical or totalitarian.

Corporatists such as Giuseppe Bottai had long been dubious about party pretences and by the 1930s blamed party interference for the deficiencies of corporatism in practice. As they saw it, the party had come to represent not revolutionary vigour but careerist conformity and superficial, outward forms. In positing his influential movement–regime distinction, De Felice had assigned corporatism, as potentially revolutionary, to the movement, which had been marginalised with the triumph of the regime.[86] But Gentile's convincing challenge to De Felice's marginalisation of the movement-party did not lead him to reassess the place of corporatism, which received very little attention in his later works.[87] And thus we note, again, his tendency to make the ongoing totalitarian dynamic too homogeneous.

But turning the tables, to accent fissuring at the level of substance may seem to confirm culturalists such as Schnapp and Berezin, who suggest that totalitarian coherence lay at the level of style. Up to a point, their accents convince. In the light of the tensions emerging from the 'underlying' layer of substance, the combination of style, symbol and ritual afforded some measure of coherence within the wider dynamic. But it is precisely that wider dynamic that these culturalists tend to miss, because, having neglected ideology and ideas, they eschewed serious engagement with originating substance. Thus they could not make sense of the changing meaning of the stylistic elements they emphasised.

Although ritual, spectacle and rhetoric were important from the start, such dimensions could be more or less empty. When the construction of a specifically fascist state began in earnest, they quickly wound around that grandiose project, which, with its idealist and corporatist core, seemed to entail real venture and experiment. As this thrust blunted, the stylistic dimension became more central, even tended to take on a life of its own, as if ritual and spectacle sufficed as post-liberal participation. Politicisation tended to become mere subordination of the individual to the regime, producing a certain mode of availability, as opposed to focusing ethical capacities through the actual exercise of expanded responsibility.

Even as he insisted that we consider the new modes of participation '*in a fascist sense*', Gentile's own researches suggested that the Starace effort of the 1930s yielded

86 See De Felice, *Fascism*, 49, for a distillation of his views on the place of corporatism. He recognised the import of the originating corporatist vision, associated especially with neo-syndicalist *Carta del Carnaro* that the syndicalists Alceste De Ambris and A. O. Olivetti had drafted for Gabriele D'Annunzio's outlaw regime in the disputed city of Fiume in 1920.

87 Corporativism barely comes up even in passing in Gentile's *Sacralization of Politics*; see, for example, 126–7.

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politicisation only in a very particular 'fascist sense', one that did not maintain the potential of the originating vision. Indeed, although he fully recognised the tendency to excess in the Starace era, Gentile was taking aspects of what now passed for fascist politicisation *too* seriously. In process was not realisation but trivialisation and narrowing from within an unforeseen dynamic. Whereas there might have been a serious Giovanni Gentilian underpinning to, for example, the theme of avoiding irony as 'bourgeois', without a wider framework of Gentilian education it was merely trivialising.

Despite his important insistence that 'the theme of fascist religion is not to be summed up merely by its liturgical displays', Emilio Gentile tended to converge with the US culturalists in leaving the 'religious' experience in mere belonging, in participation in more or less empty rituals. Indeed, he seemed to shift his ground, even lapse into circularity, when he noted that 'fascism's self-portrayal as a religion was not confined to its symbolism, to ritual and mythology; it was also useful as a means by which its institutions and its totalitarian ambitions could be made real'.[88] This was to suggest that they could be made real precisely through its 'self-portrayal as a religion', but that was a very limited, and superficial realisation of the original totalitarian aspiration. Gentile himself noted that Starace's dismissal in 1939 was widely applauded; Italians had grown tired of the rituals, the militaresque formalism, the petty party presence everywhere.[89] Recognising, in 1941, that the regime had yet to form a totalitarian morality, Pellizzi insisted that its error had been precisely in relying on mere spectacle and propaganda as opposed to genuine education.[90]

The cult of the duce of the 1930s was an aspect of that process of narrowing and trivialisation. Fascism was not in the first place about Mussolini, as some were quite prepared to remind him at several points during the earlier 1920s.[91] And the duce remained part of the wider dynamic; even the myth of the duce evolved with the trajectory of regime.[92] But the reaction against parliamentary government

88 Ibid., 29.

89 Ibid., 50–1, 63–4; Gentile, *La via italiana*, 90–2, 188–91, 225, 227–8.

90 Pellizzi referred to 'dimostazioni spettacolari'. See Gentile, *La via italiana*, 273–4, for this passage, the source of which is the Pellizzi Archive. By this point Pellizzi was director of the Fascist Cultural Institute – and still trumpeting Gentilian themes. Bottai similarly suggested approvingly (though well after the fact) that Starace was finally dismissed because he was obsessed with mere style. See Giuseppe Bottai, *Vent'anni e un giorno* (Milan: Garzanti, 1949), 146.

91 This happened, of course, at those moments when the revolutionary thrust was in danger of compromise, or when the overall direction of fascism seemed uncertain. Writing on 21 December 1924, as the outcome of the Matteotti crisis was being determined, Curzio Suckert stressed that Mussolini was no more than a servant of the revolution like every other fascist. Quoted in Alberto Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1965), 45 n.

92 In *Sacralization of Politics*, 132–3, Gentile convincingly distinguished the myth that had developed around Mussolini even before the rise of fascism from the cult of the Duce that developed later. At the same time he insisted that as one measure of its richness, the political religion of fascism was not initially identified with Mussolini; the cult of the duce derived from the religion, but then served to reinforce it. Whereas this line of argument usefully highlights the ongoing process and the scope for change up to a point, it betrays Gentile's restricted sense of what the process of change could entail. The cult of the duce was central to a wider trivialisation and narrowing, not just another step in the effort to implement the new political religion. See also Luisa Passerini, *Mussolini immaginario: Storia*

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and the accent on will and spirit invited a reliance on charismatic leadership, as Roberto Michels explained with reference to the Italian case as early as 1926.[93] The actual dynamic tended to intensify that reliance, even yielding the fatuous slogan 'Mussolini is always right'. But that intensification occasioned further trivialisation and narrowing. Precisely as Michels had anticipated, the increasing reliance on Mussolini invited capriciousness as the duce grew increasingly mistrustful and isolated. Unable to delegate, he sought to juggle too many functions and made decisions impulsively, without adequate preparation.[94]

With Italian intervention in the Second World War, many began calling for an anti-bourgeois and anti-bureaucratic 'third wave' finally to realise the fascist revolution.[95] As featured by Emilio Gentile, the pivotal phase proved the brief, long-neglected, but intense term of Adelchi Serena as party secretary, from October 1940 to December 1941.[96] Although Gentile had found Starace a credible chapter in the ongoing totalitarian effort, it is striking that for Serena the first imperative was to break the Starace mould.[97]

Departure from Starace to revitalise the party was surely possible, but Serena's effort to solidify its institutional and even constitutional role brought long-standing tensions back to the fore as major fascists such as Bottai, Pellizzi and Dino Grandi, who, although *not* associated with the party, were equally dissatisfied with the present outcome, found reason to dissent. To be sure, Gentile recognised that Pellizzi and Bottai, too, believed in continuing revolution and totalitarianism; they simply had a different idea of totalitarian politics and the means to realise it.[98] But Gentile was glossing over the import of the tension, its implications for the overall totalitarian dynamic and how debilitating this difference had by now become.[99] More particularly,

di una biografia, 1915–1939 (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1991) and A. M. Imbriani, *Gli italiani e il Duce: Il mito e l'immagine di Mussolini negli ultimi anni del fascismo (1938–1943)* (Naples: Liguori, 1992) on the changing image and role of Mussolini within Fascism.

93 Roberto Michels, *First Lectures in Political Sociology* (New York: Harper & Row [Torchbooks], 1965), 119–33, especially 125–6, 131–2. These lectures were presented at the University of Rome in May 1926.

94 De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, 1: 18–25, 172–81, 227–8, 299–300. De Felice found a downward parabola beginning around 1933, as Mussolini became the prisoner of his own myth.

95 Gentile, *La via italiana*, 238, 269. See also Vito Panunzio, *Il 'secondo fascismo', 1936–1943: La reazione della nuova generazione alla crisi del movimento e del regime* (Milan: Mursia, 1988), for a retrospective account of the period by a participant. The son of Sergio Panunzio, the young Vito Panunzio had called for renewed corporatist revolution in a pamphlet entitled *Fedeltà al sindacato e alla corporazione* (Rome: L'economia italiana, 1942).

96 Seeking seriously to radicalise the regime, Serena invited proposals from major Fascist spokesmen, such as Carlo Costamagna, Alberto De Stefani and Sergio Panunzio, each critical of the outcome of fascism so far. See Gentile, *La via italiana*, ch. 7 (225–98), especially 226–7, 239, 242, 263, 276. See also 211.

97 Ibid., 246, 248–50, 256–62, 281–2.

98 Ibid., 266.

99 See especially ibid., 263–4. Although Gentile found him typically elusive, Bottai was quite coherent on how to continue the revolution, but, as before, he did not see the party's institutional role, and certainly not its prerogatives, as the key to the extent Gentile himself does. Reflecting his Giovanni Gentilian vision, Pellizzi insisted on the organic interplay of all aspects of life within the new Fascist state. The party had its specific educational function – but it did *not* uniquely embody the fascist

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he neglected the content of the countervailing accent on the state, which was still to feature corporatism, education and Gentilian idealist themes – and not mere subordination to the state, taken as superior to the party. The renewed insistence on the party could only deflect from the deeper issues facing the regime. Yet even in Serena's relatively coherent effort, much energy was devoted to the institutional prerogatives of the party – in winning recognition of party hierarchs as public officials, for example. Conversely, although pursuit of party prerogatives vis-à-vis the state, in the light of the obstacles to genuinely transforming the state, *seemed* to keep the revolution alive, those prerogatives tended to become ends in themselves as, despite the appearance of radicalisation, the revolution narrowed.

Serena came into conflict with top state officials such as justice minister Grandi, and Gentile himself stressed that the renewed party–state tensions had come to constitute a significant problem for the regime as it faced the difficult wartime challenge.[100] Mussolini finally replaced Serena in December 1941. As Gentile saw it, Serena had proved to be too independent for Mussolini's liking.[101] But although they obviously did not help, the mere obtuseness and vanity of the duce were not decisive. Rather, irony of ironies, the attempt more seriously to realise the totalitarian pretensions of fascism only exacerbated the long-standing party–state tension and thus made it harder to prosecute the fascist war. Although the ongoing effort to deepen and radicalise surely merits attention, what strikes us by this point is how futile, even self-defeating, the effort had become.

With each step along the way, unintended outcomes occasioned further steps that proved to entail narrowing and trivialisation even as the Fascists sought, and claimed, revitalisation and radicalisation. Gentile and the US culturalists tend to miss the sense in which 'success', whether at the level of party prerogatives or at the level of style and symbol, entailed such trivialisation, as opposed to realisation.[102] And whatever success was achieved at either of those levels did not arrest, but furthered, the negative dynamic in course.

Meanwhile, the Nazi regime afforded an image of greater success and suggested some practical steps that might serve revitalisation. But contact also brought home differences and led some to play up still further the import of Italian humanistic tradition and to anticipate, on that basis, Fascist Italy's civilising role in the new

revolutionary spirit, and it did *not* play its role through more or less permanent opposition to the state. See Pellizzi, *Il partito educatore*, 7–8, 32–3, 44–5. Yet Pellizzi's pamphlet drew some harsh criticism, as Emilio Gentile makes clear. Conversely, even as he stressed that De Stefani's reflections, accenting the role of the party, attracted much attention, Gentile recognised that De Stefani lacked concrete proposals to offer. Gentile, *La via italiana*, 250–1, 264–6.

100 Gentile, *La via italiana*, 226.

101 Ibid., 288–9.

102 While insisting that the proliferation of fascist public spectacle was not to be ascribed to the fanaticism of Starace, Mabel Berezin noted that it was only in the late 1930s that all the absurdities and cruelties that have contributed to the popular cultural image of fascism came to the fore. So whereas she recognised change as she accented the ongoing role of ritual, she tended to miss the meaning of the overall trajectory – and even to over-credit the degree of success. See Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self*, especially 137.

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Europe. All along, corporatism with an 'idealist' gloss had been the basis for the Fascist claim of superiority not only to the liberal mainstream but also to the roughly contemporaneous Soviet and Nazi departures.[103]

Especially as opportunities for emigration were being severely restricted during the 1920s, the Fascists were bound to rethink population policy priorities almost at once, but there was uncertainty even about what 'expansion' would mean.[104] Insofar as imperialism was bound to be considered, it was widely held that the Italian Fascist version would be different, attuned to human values, partly because Italy, in contrast to Britain and France, would be seeking not simply to exploit colonial territories but to find land and work.[105] And the notion that corporatism showed the way beyond the capitalist exploitation of labour offered further assurance that any Italian expansionism would be different.

Introducing an Italian translation of several of Carl Schmitt's major writings in 1935, the Gentilian corporatist Arnaldo Volpicelli sharply criticised Schmitt's now famous friend–foe dichotomy. Fascism, Volpicelli insisted, understood 'the political', of which the substance and ideal is the ethical itself, as the ceaseless overcoming of separation or hostility. Our need to include others in the circle of our humanity leads us toward a common spiritual life and thus a regime of peace. Although this was simply an ideal direction, not an actual end to be reached, it meant that the goal of politics is not nationalism but internationalism, the linkage of peoples in an organic humanity. Here, insisted Volpicelli, lay the categorical superiority of corporatist fascism to National Socialism.[106]

Unfamiliar though it is, Volpicelli's underlying notion – that Italian humanistic values, especially as institutionalised in corporatism, uniquely equipped fascism to address modern needs – remained an essential component of the fascist self-understanding. But under particular circumstances, even Volpicelli's conception did

103 Comparisons with the Soviet experience seemed by the early thirties to confirm the superiority of Fascism's 'spiritual' approach, although the Fascists surely imitated Soviet techniques on occasion, and even recognised a significant kinship. Most emphasised that the outcome of the Soviet communist experiment was already definitively negative, confirming the scope for a third way. Others offered a more positive spin, but only insofar as Stalinism seemed necessarily to be moving toward fascism. For a typical example of this latter, see Renzo Bertoni, *Il trionfo del fascismo nell'URSS* (Rome: Angelo Signorelli, 1934), especially 144, 148–58. Writing in 1924, Pellizzi noted that fascism, although specifically Italian, was bound to interest and involve the world. See Pellizzi, *Problemi e realtà del fascismo*, 161. See also Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 33–4, 38–9, and Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship*, 54, on the overall import of this 'epochal' competition with the other two regimes. Although typically extreme and provocative, A. James Gregor usefully addresses the fascist understanding of the Soviet trajectory in *The Faces of Janus: Marxism and Fascism in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); see especially ch. 7 (128–48).

104 See especially the developing work of Luca de Caprariis, starting with 'Fascism for Export? The Rise and Eclipse of the Fasci Italiani all'Estero', *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, 2 (April 2000), 151–83. By avoiding teleological assumptions, de Caprariis significantly deepens our understanding of the impulses at work, as well the proportions and the interplay among them.

105 For an example see Pellizzi, *Problemi e realtà del fascismo*, 164. See also De Felice, *Fascism*, 65–6.

106 Arnaldo Volpicelli, preface to Carl Schmitt, *Principii politici*, ed. Delio Cantimori (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1935), vii.

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not preclude – indeed, could even invite – a more aggressive foreign policy, which, however, could then yield accents in tension with the original self-understanding.

Even the conquest of Ethiopia was accompanied by the notion that an expansionist Italy would not merely exploit, that Ethiopia, as the site for corporatist experiment, pointed beyond individual greed and capitalist speculation.[107] Although the sense of Italian difference and leadership continued to inspire, its mythical dimension was by now inflating – and blinding fascists to reality as practice defied the ideal. At the same time, although the sense of epochal competition energised, it also fed a tendency to inflate possibilities and achievements and to gloss over deficiencies.[108]

From within this framework we must consider the official turn, in the later 1930s, to antisemitism, heretofore essentially absent in Italian fascism. Although long marginalised as stemming from German pressures or an extremist fringe, the antisemitic turn has recently come to seem more deeply symptomatic.[109] To some extent, it was simply a corollary of the anti-bourgeois campaign that accompanied the conquest of Ethiopia. The fascists began conflating Jews with the bourgeoisie as bearers of corruption.[110] But was this radicalisation or trivialisation?

Although implementation of the race laws remained contradictory, reflecting fuzziness about the 'problem' and purpose, the Italian accent was on stepped-up assimilation of Jews through intermarriage, which was diametrically opposed to Nazi policy. This difference enabled even Fascists who were less than enthusiastic about antisemitism to reaffirm the 'spiritual' basis of Italian policy and thus Fascism's superiority to Nazism, with its crude biological categories.[111]

107 For examples in the context of the Ethiopian turn, with the link to corporatism explicit, see Roberts, *Syndicalist Tradition*, 305. Note 133 provides references to Bottai and Panunzio. See also Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 123–4, 126–7, 130. She cites Elio Vittorini and Ruggero Zangrandi.

108 See Roberts, *Syndicalist Tradition*, 303–4, for the arguments of Sergio Panunzio that fascist Italy was setting the pace, that Nazism was merely reactionary. Panunzio was the author of a sort of textbook on fascism for German consumption, *Allgemeine Theorie des Fascistischen Staates* (Berlin, 1934).

109 Ben-Ghiat argues convincingly that the antisemitic turn was widely embraced by the Fascist elite; see her *Fascist Modernities*, 152. Still, this new accent occasioned further fragmentation among committed fascists, cutting across other axes. Whereas Bottai, for example, joined others such as Farinacci, with whom he was otherwise often in dispute, in actively approving the race laws, Pellizzi, clearly uncomfortable with the whole business, scrambled to deny imitation. See Meir Michaelis, 'The Current Debate over Fascist Racial Policy', in Robert S. Wistrich and Sergio DellaPergola, eds., *Fascist Antisemitism and the Italian Jews* (Jerusalem: The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, 1995), 71–3. Note also Michaelis's still indispensable book, *Mussolini and the Jews: German–Italian relations and the Jewish question in Italy, 1922–1945* (Oxford: Published for Institute of Jewish Affairs by Clarendon Press, 1978).

110 Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 149, 156–7. In *Dictating Demography: The Problem of Population in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Carl Ipsen traced the new antisemitism to the wider official demographic effort to create a race of hardy conquerors and childbearers; see 185–94. On the overall issue, see also Giorgio Israel and Pietro Nastasi, *Scienza e razza nell'Italia fascista* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998).

111 Those who most explicitly addressed the issue, like Giacomo Acerbo and even the subsequently notorious Julius Evola, explicitly criticised the materialism of Nazi doctrine – and provoked Nazi indignation in response. See Michaelis, 'The Current Debate over Fascist Racial Policy', 73–4. See also Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 153, on the import of the distinction, and point of pride, at issue. Even in 1941, Mussolini noted with satisfaction that, thanks to stepped-up intermarriage, 'Jewish'

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Ruth Ben-Ghiat has recently suggested that even with the adoption of the race laws, the aim was not to eliminate the Jews but to force changes in customs and behaviour to fulfil long-frustrated Italian and Catholic fantasies of total Jewish assimilation.[112] But, granting her premises, why did this become a priority at this point, when it had not been a fascist concern before? Even recognising the anti-pluralist logic of totalitarianism, even crediting concerns about Zionism in the light of Italian aspirations in the eastern Mediterranean, the threat from the measure of Jewish distinctiveness to the deeper realisation of fascism at this point was nil. Yet it seemed essential to do something to tighten up, and in the light of the very real obstacles, the internal fragmentation and ambiguity, the Fascists could do no better than to fasten onto this bogus issue. It was as if the putative insufficiency of Jewish assimilation explained the incapacity to act collectively as envisioned. To focus on eliminating 'Jewishness' what had begun as an effort to create an out-front, alternative modernity reflected and reinforced the trivialisation in progress.[113]

As the Italian military effort foundered during the Second World War, the accent on cultural superiority became still more central to the Fascist self-understanding. To position Italy for spiritual leadership within the new order, Bottai launched the journal *Primato* in 1941 – to reanimate fascist culture and to represent fascism abroad as modern, out front, open to fresh ideas. Among the contributors was Galvano Della Volpe, reared a Gentilian and eventually a major communist thinker. He took it for granted that mainstream Franco-British culture was collapsing; the question was what would take its place.[114] By this point, the new layer of myth was leading the Fascists into a world of fantasy.

We have noted that although myth was central to Italian fascism , it was operative in different ways on several levels. It was important to the new fascist thinking about how history might be made collectively in a more concerted way. Moreover, the sense of the scope for leadership in Italy after the war, although it could have developed only in tandem with a measure of innovative substance, was surely overblown – a myth in the familiar, less lucid sense. It was fed by intellectuals like Giovanni Gentile who, exaggerating the significance of indigenous Italian traditions, began to overstate the cultural import of the Italian war effort and to posit a special cultural mission for

characteristics would disappear in Italy within a generation, as Jews were absorbed by the 'Aryan' bloodline.

112 Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 149; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, 'The Secret Histories of Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14, 1 (2001), 262.

113 Here again, my accent on narrowing and trivialisation is to depart somewhat from Emilio Gentile, who has consistently portrayed the antisemitic measures as a logical outcome of an abiding aspiration, the anthropological revolution central to the fascist totalitarian vision. Totalitarian implementation required eliminating any separateness. See, for example, Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 101. At the same time, Gentile has suggested that Mussolini adopted the antisemitic laws partly *to enable* the Fascists to claim superiority over Nazism. See Emilio Gentile, 'Fascism in Power: The Totalitarian Experiment', in Adrian Lyttelton, ed., *Liberal and Fascist Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 167–9. While it is convincing to feature competition as opposed to mere imitation, this accent, too, needs to be understood in terms of the wider, changing dynamic that brought the need for such competition to the fore.

114 Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 183–4.

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Italy in the aftermath.[115] But the place of myth changed decisively as the quest for substantive innovation bogged down. Increasingly, the fascist revolution itself became a myth.

In the support for Serena's late effort, Emilio Gentile noted the strong faith in the myth of the party as both the locus of the revolutionary ideal and the ongoing agent of the revolution. Indeed, that myth was bound up with a sense that the two competing totalitarian regimes had proven more radical because, early on, they had solved the party–state question in favour of the party. But thus fascism might dramatically transform itself through a comparable victory of the party. Yet, at the same time, the sustaining faith was still 'directed toward the same objective of completing the totalitarian state', based on the conviction that 'the totalitarian state was the state form of the "new civilisation"'.[116]

The Fascist belief that to increase party prerogatives was to continue the revolution, even as the revolution was about completing the totalitarian state, is surely an important datum, just as Gentile emphasises. But he so overuses myth that we miss the place of that belief in changing dynamic. Myth in the literal sense became more central as the conquest of party prerogatives came itself to seem revolutionary and as the scope for translating the ideal into a genuinely totalitarian state became ever more tenuous. At the same time, in attributing the greater success elsewhere to the triumph of party over state, Fascist enthusiasts were indulging in mere wishful thinking, fastening upon a diagnosis that did not seriously address the complex impasse at hand.

Whereas it helped to cover inadequacies and to maintain enthusiasm, myth also bred posturing and rhetoric that compromised understanding of the results so far and the prospects for the future. So the tendency towards myth-making undercut whatever chance there might still have been for a more substantive outcome. And surely the place of myth in the original vision made self-criticism at this point especially unlikely. Indeed, it made the Fascists more likely to continue, as if willing and believing would indeed make it so.

As the example of Arnaldo Volpicelli suggests, aspects of the enduring but ever more mythical idealist-corporatist self-understanding were incompatible with the new style proclaimed by the later 1930s – the accent on 'believe, obey, fight', on becoming hard-edged conquerors. Such discordance was at once symptomatic and debilitating. Even Bottai, who deplored the superficiality of many of the latter accents, embraced the pathetic, ultimately tragic notion that the Jews were a problem, even *the* immediate problem, and still envisioned the scope for cultural primacy in 1941.

115 For his influential account of the cultural mission that allegedly fell to Italy as a result of the war, see Giovanni Gentile, *I problemi della scolastica e il pensiero italiano* (Florence: Sansoni, 1963), 209–18, 235–6; Giovanni Gentile, *Guerra e fede* (Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1919), 158–9, 175, 205–6, 209–12, 217–18, 222–3, 288–90; and Giovanni Gentile, *Dopo la vittoria* (Rome, 1920), 3–25, especially 24–5. See also David D. Roberts, 'Croce and Beyond: Italian Intellectuals and the First World War', *International History Review*, 3, 2 (April 1981), 201–35.

116 Gentile, *La via italiana*, 270.

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What was 'totalitarian' about Italian fascism?

Focusing on the Fascist programme in east Africa after the conquest of Ethiopia, R. J. B. Bosworth accented the irregularity of Mussolini's policy and the trivial bickering that resulted. There was no plan as to how the area should be run. Various rivalries thus came into play, and it was of course finally up to the duce himself to decide. Bosworth concluded,

> If this vignette of imperial government has meaning, Fascist Italy was not a regime possessed of a simple and reliable system of command, nor one in which its leading figures thought only of how best they might serve their ideology and nation . . . For all its pretensions to totalitarian uniformity, was the fascist system in practice riven by personal, practical, and ideological conflicts which the *Duce* was powerless to end (and which he may have fostered for utterly cynical reasons having to do with the protection of his own 'authority')?

This latter passage is central to a series of rhetorical questions, the answer to which is of course yes, *yes*, *YES!* What surprises is not that all this characterised the Fascist regime but that Bosworth takes this syndrome as somehow undermining any notion of 'totalitarianism'.[117]

To be sure, even if we take Fascist aspirations to be genuinely, even archetypally, totalitarian, the resulting regime seems anything but – from a 'modern' perspective. But we noted that postmodernism entails a changing sense of how history happens, how things come to be through history. Insofar as we conceive Italian Fascism not as some essence but as a dynamic, an event, from within which meanings and proportions changed, we can usefully understand this particular trajectory as one strand within the wider totalitarian experience of the epoch. Although the differences were crucial – only the Nazis pursued a murderous 'race hygiene', for example – there proved a common shape to the actual dynamic in the Italian, German, and Soviet cases. In all three, the effort to act collectively, in the light of a new and comparable sense of historical-political possibility, led to radicalisation as narrowing. The slovenliness that Bosworth pinpointed, the improvisation in the light of inadequate preparation, were also evident in the Nazi and Stalinist revolutions. In each, much of what transpired was unintended, out of control, so that practice was anything but 'totalitarian' in the earlier sense. The Italian case shows that the totalitarian dynamic could lead to a kind of trivialisation and impasse that contrasts with the still more tragic outcomes of Nazism and Stalinism at about the same time.

Whereas Emilio Gentile, eschewing reification and teleology, usefully focused on the ongoing, open-ended process, we must be alert to deeper change, change in the nature of the dynamic itself, as the effort to act proceeded, producing unforeseen tensions that elude even Gentile's three-way interaction of duce, party and state. Taken as characterising the whole trajectory, totalitarianism proves stranger, more layered and complex, than an ongoing attempt to implement the initial vision. Put simply, something different was happening as the process neared its end. To grasp the

117 Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship*, 106–7 (quotation from 107). For Bosworth, 'totalitarianism' is applicable only insofar as there was realisation, producing personal, practical and ideological uniformity.

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whole trajectory, we must disaggregate myth, style and substance, for it was as the meaning of those elements changed, and as the proportions and relationships among them shifted, that the nature of the dynamic changed. And whereas it is a major step to grasp, with Gentile, that controversy continued even over what ongoing revolution might mean, the possibilities were becoming ever more restricted, partly because the Fascists themselves proved ever less able to grasp what was happening to the Fascist revolution.

It only seems paradoxical to insist that the outcomes of Italian Fascism were quintessentially totalitarian even as, precisely as, they made a mockery of the regime's totalitarian pretences. As the effort to act collectively encountered frustration, the energy tilted from idealist education and corporatist participation towards spectatorship, buttressed by inflating rhetoric. Realisation at this more superficial level did not satisfy, but the further effort that resulted led to further fissuring and trivialisation, but then also to a thickening surround of myth. As a result, the regime *ended up* with a superficial focus on style, with an absurd cult of the duce, with a pathetic accent on antisemitism and with debilitating confusion and rivalry over institutional focus. These were the wages of trying to transcend the modern framework by acting collectively in a new totalitarian mode. To understand totalitarianism in this way, as stemming from innovative, irreducible aspirations that then fed a ragged, uncertain, unforeseeable process, leads not to apology, rehabilitation or mere relativism but to a more pertinent mode of critique.

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