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Fascism, Anti-Liberalism and Liberalism in Italy

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Abstract

Anti-liberalism is often highlighted as central to interpretations of fascism. This article discusses the existence of a liberal-fascist current in Italian Fascism. Very active during the first years of the Fascist government, this current was expressed in the pages of the journals *La Nuova Politica Liberale*, which brought together disciples of the philosopher Giovanni Gentile, and *Critica Fascista*, an organ of the revisionists led by Giuseppe Bottai. Anti-individualist, anti-naturalist and anti-democratic, this current asserted that the rights of the nation preceded individual rights, that freedom would not exist in a supposed state of nature and would be the creation of a political society. It rejected the opposition between freedom and authority, stating that only a strong and orderly state would allow freedom to occur. Although the existence of a liberal-fascist current does not impugn the predominantly anti-liberal character of Italian Fascism, bringing it to light contributes to a more complex assessment of Italian Fascism, underlining the existence of different intellectual currents, ideological clashes, and political antagonism within the movement.

Keywords

Italy – Fascism – liberalism – idealist philosophy – *La Nuova Politica Liberale* – *Critica Fascista* – Benito Mussolini

In his historical synthesis of fascist culture, Norberto Bobbio was categorical: 'it never really existed'.¹ He was not the only one to insist on this thesis. In the intellectual history of fascism, it became commonplace to state that it was 'indigent in terms of doctrine',² and that its ideology was 'often confused, composed, approximate and addicted to negligence'.³ This perception has led many researchers to define fascist ideology not by what it sought to achieve, but rather focusing on a set of negations, listing ideas and ideological movements that fascism opposed. The set of denials, however, varies according to the orientation of historians. Ernst Nolte, for example, defined interwar European fascisms as 'radical nationalist movements with revolutionary aims that were one and the same time anti-Marxian, antiliberal, and anticonservative (in the conventional political sense)'.⁴ For Eugen Weber, 'its ideas are chiefly negative: anti-liberalism, anti-individualism and anti-democracy',⁵ while Juan L. Linz wrote that 'fascism is an anti-movement; *it defines itself* by the things against which it stands . . . The basic anti-dimensions of fascism can be summarized as follows: it is anti-Marxist, anti-communist, anti-proletarian, but also antiliberal, anti-parliamentarian, and in a very special sense, anti-conservative, and anti-bourgeois'.⁶

The persistent definition of fascism as an anti-liberalist ideology continues to resonate within contemporary scholarship. For instance, Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri regard fascism as a revolutionary ideology that is 'antiliberal, anti-materialist, and anti-Marxist'.⁷ Emilio Gentile, on the other hand, characterizes fascist ideology as 'pragmatic' and 'anti-ideological', offering an expanded list of negative attributes: 'anti-materialist, anti-individualist, anti-liberal, antidemo-

1 Norberto Bobbio, 'La cultura e il fascismo,' in *Fascismo e società italiana*, ed. Guido Quazza (Turin: Einaudi, 1973), 229. For a critique of Bobbio's thesis, see Alessandra Tarquini, *Storia della cultura fascista* (Milan: Il Mulino, 2011), 14 ss.

2 Angelo D'Orsi, *L'Italia delle idee: Il pensiero politico in un secolo e mezzo di storia* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2011), 64.

3 Eugenio Garin, 'La filosofia italiana di fronte al fascismo,' in *Tendenze della filosofia italiana nell'età del fascismo*, ed. Ornella Pompeo Faracovi (Livorno: Belforte, 1985), 18.

4 Ernst Nolte, 'What Fascism Is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept: Comment,' *The American Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (1979): 329. In a similar vein, see also Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), Ch. 1.

5 Eugen Joseph Weber, *Varieties of Fascism: Doctrines of Revolution in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand, 1964), 77.

6 Juan J. Linz, 'Some Notes toward a Comparative Study of Fascism in Sociological Historical Perspective,' in *Fascism: A Reader's Guide: Analyses, Interpretations, Bibliography*, ed. Walter Laquer (Aldershot: Wildwood, 1988), 15–16. Author's emphasis.

7 Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder, and Maia Ashéri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 232.

cratic, anti-Marxist, and tendentially populist and anti-capitalist'.⁸ These definitions can suggest that there is no 'positive' ideology in fascism. Although the set of denials varied according to the authors, anti-liberalism seems to be a common denominator in all definitions of this type. Contrastingly, Roger Griffin has rejected a negative common denominator, and states the generic fascist minimum was a mythic core of 'palingenetic-ultranationalism',⁹ adding its ideology was a coherent 'form of revolutionary ultranationalism'.¹⁰ For Griffin, ultranationalism is conceived as a form of nationalism fundamentally opposed to liberal principles and institutions, rejecting 'anything compatible with liberal institutions'.¹¹ This viewpoint implies that the core of fascism is inherently anti-liberal, not merely as a political stance but as an ideological foundation.

It is not difficult to find strong empirical evidence to support the idea that fascism is ideologically anti-liberal. Take, for example, the booklet, *La dottrina del fascismo*, published in 1932. Signed by Mussolini and published by the Biblioteca della Enciclopedia Italiana, this small book reproduced the entry entitled 'Fascism' and a historical note written by Gioacchino Volpe, which were part of volume XIV of the *Enciclopedia italiana*, edited by Giovanni Gentile.¹² In his entry, Mussolini explained: 'In the face of liberal doctrines, fascism is in an attitude of absolute opposition, both in the field of politics and in the field of economy'.¹³

A thorough examination of this booklet allows for a reevaluation of the intricate interplay between fascism and liberalism, elucidating the multifaceted array of perspectives within the movement regarding the organization of Fascist government and the substance of its ideological tenets. Although the text was signed only by Mussolini, only the second part of the entry, with the sub-

8 Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001), 32.

9 Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista*, 38.

10 Roger Griffin, *Fascism: An Introduction to Comparative Fascist Studies* (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018), 128.

11 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991), 37.

12 This was not the only attempt to systematize a doctrine of fascism. Others took place, such as that by Gentile himself, *Origini e dottrina del fascismo* (Rome: Libreria del Littorio, 1929), by Alfredo Rocco, *La dottrina del fascismo e il suo posto nella storia del pensiero politico* (Milan: Periodica Lombarda, 1925) and, later, by Antonio Canepa, *Sistema di dottrina del fascismo* (Rome: Formiggini, 1937) and Pietro Landini, *La dottrina del fascismo, ad uso dei corsi di preparazione politica* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1936). Bobbio, once again, expressed a negative judgment regarding this doctrine, stating that fascism 'did not have an original thought'. Bobbio, 'La cultura e il fascismo,' 232. In the opposite sense, see Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista*.

13 Benito Mussolini, *La dottrina del fascismo: Con una storia del movimento fascista da Gioacchino Volpe* (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1932).

title 'Dottrina politica e sociale' [Political and social doctrine], was by il Duce, while the first, entitled 'Idee fondamentali' [Fundamental ideas], was by Gentile. Renzo De Felice maintained that there is no incongruity between the two parts, but a closer comparison reveals significant differences in nuance.¹⁴ In the first part of the text, written by Gentile, the fascist conception was defined as 'anti-individualist' and contrary to 'classical liberalism'.¹⁵ The difference was subtle, yet important. The idealist philosopher was not opposed *tout court* to liberalism, but disagreed with a liberalism that had its roots in the eighteenth century and affirmed the individual against the state. Mussolini, in turn, highlighted the anti-liberal character of all important historical experiences of the twentieth century, including fascism, and diminished the historical relevance of liberalism, which had only flourished for a brief fifteen years in the nineteenth century and did not have great importance in the Italian *Risorgimento*.¹⁶

The 1939 edition of the pamphlet, published with comments by Ersilio Costa, increasingly emphasized the anti-liberal character of Mussolini's text, adding subtitles and comments that reinforced this interpretation. Costa's notes revealed a peculiar vision concerning 'socialism, communism, democracy', where fascism 'overcomes and denies', but nevertheless could maintain 'some particular positive attitudes' to these doctrines. Although idiosyncratic, Costa's view was not in contradiction with Mussolini's text, nor with the fact that he considered fascism as a form of democracy, one that was 'organized, centralized, authoritative'.¹⁷ However, liberalism was radically rejected by Costa: 'no justification, no contact, however minimal, can be established . . . in relation to liberalism'.¹⁸

The subtle differences present in the texts written by Gentile and Mussolini reveal diverse ideological orientations within the Italian Fascist movement, which have often been erased within historiography. These differences were more acute in the first years of Fascism, when the political regime had not yet been consolidated. Even if the predominant tendency was strongly anti-liberal, it is important to reconcile the existence of an intellectual current that advocated a new liberalism. Very active during the 1920s, it tended to

14 Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce, 1929–1940* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 36–37.

15 Mussolini, *La dottrina del fascismo*, 4. The comparison of this text with Gentile's previous workbook (1929) on the doctrine of fascism allows us to highlight these differences even more. See Gentile, *Origini e dottrina del fascismo*.

16 Mussolini, *La dottrina del fascismo*, 15–17.

17 *Ibid.*, 32.

18 Benito Mussolini, *La dottrina del fascismo: Comento da Ersilio Costa* (Milan [etc.]: Società Dante Alighieri, 1939), 35.

bring together intellectuals of different orientations, encountering important channels of expression in the journals *La Nuova Politica Liberale* and *Critica Fascista*.¹⁹

This intellectual discourse is termed herein as 'liberal-fascism', an ideologic movement that advocated the incorporation of parliamentary institutions and the rule of law as foundational pillars within the emergent Fascist regime under the leadership of Mussolini. Moreover, liberal-fascism harmonized the notion of freedom, whether pertaining to individuals or societal groups, with the realization of authority, asserting that freedom did not precede laws, but was created for them and that the rights of the nation have a primacy over the rights of individuals. Proponents of this perspective, some of whom joined the movement just after the March on Rome, saw in Fascism a political force capable of restoring order and giving life to the ethical state, the promoter and guardian of liberty. These ideas were manifested more intensely in the first years of Fascism before it took the form of a new political regime. Therefore, this study is limited to assessing the period from the March on Rome in October 1922 to the kidnapping and assassination of the deputy Giacomo Matteotti in June 1924.

Liberal State and Fascist State

The historiography that highlights the anti-liberal character of Italian Fascism tends to refer to historical sources after 1925, when the Fascist regime assumed a more defined form and Mussolinian hegemony was stabilized within the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* [PNF; National Fascist Party], after years of crisis and intense internal struggle. Yet when research shifts to previous years, it is possible to find oscillations and ambiguities even in Mussolini's political discourse. Certainly, anti-liberalism was an important component of his thinking, a trait consolidated during the Great War and becoming increasingly more radical thereafter. The first targets of this discourse were liberal politicians and their ideas, which were rejected as historical wreckage along with socialism, republicanism, electoralism, and reformism.²⁰

19 On Fascist journals, see Luisa Mangoni, *L'interventismo della cultura: Intellettuali e riviste del fascismo* (Bari: Laterza, 1974), and Albertina Vittoria, *Le riviste del duce: Politica e cultura del regime* (Milan: Guanda, 1983).

20 See, for example, his article in *Il Popolo d'Italia*, August 11, 1918, in *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, ed. Eduardo and Duilio Susmel, vol. 11 (13 aprile 1918–12 novembre 1918) (Florence: La Fenice, 1953), 272.

As Italian Fascism consolidated and began to glimpse the possibility of gaining power, this anti-liberalism became the basis of a new doctrine of the state. The old liberal ideas and politicians remained under the Fascists' sights, but a new object of criticism appeared: the liberal state, which would give way to a new political form under Fascism. The theme was first announced in an article published on 30 April 1922 in *Il Popolo d'Italia*. Here, Mussolini stated: 'The new state that is in germ and potential in our Party will—little by little or violently—replace the liberal state'.²¹ This formula recurred in the Fascist press before the March on Rome. The institutions of representative democracy were subjected to ruthless criticism and the idea that a new state form should replace the old one arose frequently. In July of 1922, Mussolini insisted once more: 'fascism, which sits on the right and is reactionary in relation to socialism, is, on the contrary, revolutionary in relation to the liberal state and liberalism insofar as it wants to reduce the state to its necessary functions, wants to revive hierarchies and, at the same time, it rejects the liberal mode of government'.²²

A month later, he returned to the subject, affirming the 'antithesis between our state and the liberal one',²³ and a few days later he defined Fascism as 'the beginning of a long era in Italian history, the end of the cowardly Italian liberal state and its parasitic antagonist, socialism'.²⁴ In these articles and speeches little was said about the institutions that would characterize this new political form. But Mussolini did not have to hastily improvise his critique of the liberal state and the doctrine of a new state form. Criticism and doctrine had already been distilled by nationalist intellectuals in the preceding decade. Gathered in the newspaper, *L'Idea Nazionale*, founded by Enrico Corradini in 1911, and in the journal, *Politica*, created by Francesco Coppola and Alfredo Rocco in 1919, these intellectuals had consistently formulated an organic conception of the state and society that opposed individualist conceptions that were common to liberalism, socialism, and democracy.

In the 'order of business' of the Nationalist Congress in Rome, held in March 1919, the jurist Alfredo Rocco, future Minister of Justice in the Mussolini government, stated that the development of the nation was the purpose of political action, which was not conceived as a sum of individuals but as the historical result of the succession of several generations. The predominance of national

21 Eduardo and Duilio Susmel, eds., *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 18 (14 gennaio 1922–30 ottobre 1922) (Florence: La Fenice, 1956), 173.

22 *Ibid.*, 323.

23 *Ibid.*, 339.

24 *Ibid.*, 344.

interests over the interests of individuals or groups of individuals would imply 'the absolute supremacy of the state, which is precisely the organized and functioning nation, the rigid assertion of its authority over individuals and classes'.²⁵ This identity between nation and state, characteristic of nationalist political discourse, would become the main plank of the nascent Fascist doctrine of the state. It is no coincidence that Rocco came to be the architect of the legal constitution of the new Fascist regime.²⁶

As can be seen, there is solid evidence that corroborates Danilo Breschi's thesis, according to which 'it is certainly not possible to find any trace of liberalism' in Mussolini's thought.²⁷ Despite this, it is important to point out that the leader of Italy's Fascists maintained an ambiguous discourse regarding liberalism and its institutions, at least for a few months at the end of 1922. As the crisis of Luigi Facta's government became increasingly acute and the Fascists were gaining strength, Mussolini maneuvered for the formation of a new government. Between the end of July and the beginning of August of that year, he was involved, alongside the poet Gabrielle D'Annunzio, in the formation of a government of national pacification with the liberal politician Francesco Saverio Nitti.²⁸

If Mussolini's direct participation in the negotiations indicated a parliamentary path, the participation of the liberals, who increasingly saw it as impossible to govern with the opposition of the Fascists, was no less important. There were many liberals who considered the mission of Fascism accomplished with the defeat of the socialists and called on Mussolini's supporters to lay down their arms, admit their civil responsibility and contribute to the restoration of order, assuming the role of government. In August, for example, Luigi Albertini gave his important speech in the Senate.²⁹ Liberal and owner of the newspaper *Cor-*

25 Alfredo Rocco, *Scritti e discorsi politici: La lotta contro la reazione antinazionale (1919-1924)*, vol. 2 (Milan: A. Giuffrè, 1938), 489.

26 On Rocco's political ideas and his contribution to a doctrine of fascism, see Rocco D'Alfonso, 'Oltre lo stato liberale: Il progetto di Alfredo Rocco,' *Il Politico* 64, no. 3 (1999): 341-368; Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista*, 584 ss; A. James Gregor, *Mussolini's Intellectuals: Fascist Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Giulia Simone, *Il guardasigilli del regime: L'itinerario politico e culturale di Alfredo Rocco* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2012); and the essays collected in Emilio Gentile, Fulco Lanchester, and Alessandra Tarquini, eds., *Alfredo Rocco: Dalla crisi del parlamentarismo alla costruzione dello Stato nuovo* (Rome: Carocci, 2010).

27 Danilo Breschi, 'Fascism, Liberalism and Revolution,' *European Journal of Political Theory* 11, no. 4 (2012): 410-425.

28 Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista*, vol. 1 (Turin: Einaudi, 1966), 282ss.

29 On Albertini, see the biography by Ottavio Bariè, *Luigi Albertini* (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1972).

riere della Sera, Albertini considered that ‘The time has come for one party to put an end to threats and violence, which can make it doubt that through this path it is possible or desirable to achieve the restoration of state authority, and for the other party to recognize that the best way to remove every pretext for violence is to call on the fascists to prove their ability to direct public affairs, to keep the promises with which they have attracted so many proselytes to their ranks’.³⁰

Even a liberal-democratic and astute political analyst like Giovanni Amendola, in a speech on 1 October 1922, a few days before the March on Rome, thanked Fascism for having spared Italy from the ‘mortal experience of Leninism’ and for having promoted ‘a solid and radical restoration of national consciousness’, considering the Fascist reaction ‘a fact of indisputable value’.³¹ He called on Fascism to appear in his beloved *Mezzogiorno* [Southern Italy], but ‘armed with constructive ideas, if it has them, and civil methods’.³² A few days later, Amendola himself returned, in the pages of the liberal newspaper *Il Mondo*, to ‘appeal to the political astuteness and sense of responsibility of the leaders of the’ Fascist movement to make them realize the dangers arising from the ‘spread and perpetuation of violence’.³³

The agreement involving D’Annunzio and Nitti did not prosper, but Mussolini’s parliamentary maneuvers continued intensely. This frenetic political movement had consequences for Mussolinian discourse. On the eve of the March on Rome, he seemed to assume more moderate and conciliatory tones, provoking protests from the intransigent wings of the Fascist movement, which were pressing for a coup d’état.³⁴ In an interview given on 20 October 1922 to the Italian correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*, Mussolini was categorical: ‘Our policy will be entirely liberal. We will be very happy to accept the collaboration of everyone and also of our opponents’. He saw fit, however, to specify his ‘liberalism’: ‘I want the Italian people to understand that our conception of freedom implies a severe national discipline. Fascist government will usher in

30 Luigi Albertini, ‘Il sen. Albertini e la soluzione liberali,’ *Corriere della Sera*, August 14, 1922, 1.

31 Giovanni Amendola, ‘Il Mezzogiorno e la crisi politica italiana,’ in *In difesa dell’Italia liberale: Scritti e discorsi politici (1910–1925)*, ed. Antonio Carioti (Florence: Liberal Libri, 2001), 97–99.

32 Amendola, ‘Il Mezzogiorno e la crisi politica italiana,’ 100.

33 Giovanni Amendola, ‘Il limite insuperabile,’ in *In difesa dell’Italia liberale: Scritti e discorsi politici (1910–1925)*, ed. Antonio Carioti (Florence: Liberal Libri, 2001), 106.

34 On internal conflicts within Fascism on the eve of the March on Rome, see De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista*, vol. 1, Ch. 4, and Enzo Santarelli, *Storia del fascismo* (Milan: Res Gestae, 2018), Ch. 4.

a new era of freedom, provided, however, that all parties understand that this freedom must be devoted entirely to the welfare of the fatherland'.³⁵

Two days later, in a famous speech given in Napoli, he took up the question again in similar terms, imagining a future Fascist government: 'it is a matter of introducing into the liberal state, which has fulfilled its grandiose tasks, which we have not forgotten, the full force of the new Italian generations that came out of war and victory'.³⁶ It was no longer a question, as announced in the articles of the preceding months, of replacing the liberal state with a new Fascist political form, but of making Fascism take over the leadership of the existing liberal state. This flirtation with liberalism seems, however, to have been short-lived in Mussolini's political discourse. Once the government was formed, frequent clashes in the Chamber of Deputies led the Fascists to manifest their opposition to liberals and liberalism in an increasingly open manner.

The March 1923 article published by Mussolini in the Fascist monthly *Gerarchia* [Hierarchy], with the suggestive title of 'Forza e consenso' [Force and consensus], illustrates these clashes. For the head of the Fascists, liberalism could not be considered, contrary to what its defenders claimed, the ideal political formula. Each formula should be considered historically. Liberalism would seem to have been suitable for the nineteenth century, when capitalism and the nation asserted themselves, but the demands of the twentieth century were different and made the limits of liberalism evident, provoking its defeat: 'In Russia and Italy it was demonstrated that it is possible to govern outside, above and against all liberal ideology. Communism and fascism are outside of liberalism'.³⁷ The *Gerarchia* article resumed a formula already present in his interview for the *Manchester Guardian*. According to Mussolini: 'freedom is not an end; it's a medium. As a means, it must be controlled and dominated'.³⁸ Only force could exercise this control.

According to Mussolini, no government could maintain itself exclusively through the consensus of the people. Government procedures often run counter to interests; it would not always be possible to please everyone. Without force, thwarted interests could jeopardize the stability of the state: 'Deprive any government of its strength—and we mean physical strength, armed strength—and leave it with only its immortal principles, and that government will be at the mercy of the first group organized and determined to overthrow

35 Susmel, *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 18, 451.

36 *Ibid.*, 456.

37 Eduardo and Duilio Susmel, eds., *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 19 (31 ottobre 1922–22 agosto 1923) (Florence: La Fenice, 1956), 195.

38 *Ibid.*

it'.³⁹ No universal principle, no political institution was safe from Fascism. Mussolini questioned universal suffrage and the permanent functioning of the Chamber of Deputies, considering that without the limits imposed by force, such institutions could lead the state to crisis.

Despite the oscillations of Mussolinian discourse, the defense of discipline and order remained a constant, alongside the submission of individual freedom to the collective interest, embodied in the realization of the nation's potential. Force and violence were justified as the necessary means for achieving these goals. Such means could be illegal, when the (liberal) state, dominated by the demagogic plutocracy, refused to pursue these objectives. In that sense, Fascism would be an anti-state force. But once it came to power, Fascism would be blended with the state itself and illegality would lose all *raison d'être*. Force and violence would assume a state character and be regulated by law.⁴⁰

Revisionism and Normalization of Fascism

The ascension of Fascism to power engendered a consolidation of Mussolini's political rhetoric, which increasingly adopted an anti-liberal stance. However, within the domain of economic policies, anti-interventionism continued to exert significant influence, at least for a few more years. But the controversy persisted within fascism and there were many who called for a normalization of the movement within a renewed liberal political order. Within the biweekly *Critica Fascista*, established by Giuseppe Bottai in 1923, intellectuals advocating for such inclinations could be discerned, expressing their alignment with liberal principles through various means.⁴¹ The journal gave voice to those whose

39 Ibid., 196.

40 The idea of fascism as anti-state appeared in the Fascist press before the March on Rome. See, for instance, Benito Mussolini, 'Stato, anti-Stato e fascismo,' *Gerarchia* 1, no. 6 (July 25, 1922), 295–300.

41 On *Critica Fascista*, see Francesco Malgeri, *Giuseppe Bottai e 'Critica fascista'* (Florence: Landi, 1980). The bibliography on Giuseppe Bottai is now extensive. In the 1970s, following the publication of the biography of Mussolini written by Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista*, 2 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1966–1968), and *Mussolini il duce*, 2 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1974–1980), the critical and dissident character of Bottai's fascism was highlighted. See, for example, Giordano Bruno Guerri, *Giuseppe Bottai, fascista* (Milan: Mondadori, 1996). Against this reading, a different opinion arose, which underlined the orthodox or even totalitarian profile of his enterprise. See, for example, Vito Zagarrò, 'Bottai: Un fascista critico?' *Studi Storici* 17, no. 4 (1976): 267–271; Angelo D'Orsi, 'Il fascismo di Bottai,' *Il Pensiero Politico* 12, no. 1 (1979): 87–101; and, more recently, Monica Galfrè, *Giuseppe Bottai: Un intellettuale fascista* (Florence: Giunti, 2000); Alessandra Tarquini, *Storia della cultura*

program was the reform and updating of fascism in the PNF. The intellectuals gathered around the periodical had a common perception of the limits of the movement, that is, the understanding that after coming to power, *squadrist* had become an obstacle to the construction of a new legal order and the belief that Fascism, becoming the state, needed to form a new ruling elite.

Already in the first issue of *Critica Fascista*, Sergio Panunzio asked himself: 'What is liberalism?' Panunzio proposed to discuss the idea, the category of liberalism, and not the Liberal Party: 'What is the idea, the liberal category? It is evident: it is the idea of law, that is, the idea of the relationship and proportion *hominis ad hominis*.'⁴² According to the author, law and freedom were the same thing: 'if freedom means relationship, proportion, order, discipline, hierarchy, guaranteed, protected in the last instance by force, the liberal idea and the legal idea, the liberal society and the legal society, they are the same thing.'⁴³ It was this affirmative concept of freedom that allowed Panunzio to establish a positive relationship between Fascism and liberalism.

When society was legally governed, that is, by means of the law, there would be, according to Panunzio, a legal society, a civil society, typical of the West. But when the direction was of a political kind, that is, when the direction was arbitrary and contingent, society would be Oriental and Asiatic. This distinction allowed the jurist to present Soviet Russia as a political, Asian type of society, that was, 'anti-liberal, or even aliberal'.⁴⁴ Fascism, in turn, would already be a Western-type state: 'The path on which Fascism walks is not the path of Asia, but the path of law and liberalism.'⁴⁵ Panunzio saw Fascism as the realization of the rule of law.⁴⁶ His liberalism was not based, however, on an individualist

fascista (Milan: Il Mulino, 2011), Ch. 3. An expression of these shifting interpretations was the change in the title of Guerri's book, which in the first edition was called *Giuseppe Bottai: Un fascista critico* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976), and in the second, revised, 1996 edition simply *Giuseppe Bottai: Fascista*.

42 Sergio Panunzio, 'Che cos'è il liberalismo?' *Critica Fascista* 1, no. 1 (June 15, 1923), 8.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Panunzio designed certain conceptual pairs—civil society/political society, West/East—which will later be found again in Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. Differences do exist, however, and they are important. These conceptual pairs do not express antagonistic realities in Gramscian thought. They have a topological character and serve to highlight different realities that maintain a unity-distinction relationship between them. For Panunzio, such concepts expressed antagonistic oppositions. See Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1977).

46 Panunzio, 'Che cos'è il liberalismo?' 9. Ideas previously presented in a 1921 book by Panunzio are resumed in this article. See Sergio Panunzio, *Lo Stato di diritto* (Ferrara: Taddei, 1921). The jurist's insistent defense of the rule of law generated criticism from the so-called

conception. It was based on 'order, discipline, hierarchy, freedom' and would be 'of groups, not of individual atoms and wandering grains of sand'.⁴⁷ His conclusion was strong: 'Liberty, therefore; eternal, invulnerable freedom with a strong, very strong state, based on order, discipline, hierarchy. This is fascism and this is liberalism'.⁴⁸

The first issues of *Critica Fascista* anticipated, on a theoretical and conceptual level, the sharp revisionist campaign that took place a few months later. The trigger for the campaign was the article by Augusto De Marsanich, published in *Critica Fascista* on 1 August 1923.⁴⁹ In it, the author violently contested the assumption held by many Fascists that their party could encompass the entire society and the Italian state, becoming a single governing force. It was against the intransigent currents that De Marsanich protested, those 'who believe that the Fascist Party must remain armed against everything that is not our creation and against all those who did not enter our ranks'.⁵⁰

De Marsanich considered it necessary for Fascism to exercise its central role in Italian life, becoming 'the fulcrum and dominator of a political collaboration that takes back and uses all that is alive, political and economic forces, in Italian society'.⁵¹ Many Fascists, he claimed, identified in parliament the sum of all enemies and in that struggle they had defined themselves as 'anti-democratic'. However, he thought it necessary to distinguish democracy as an ethical principle, which should be rejected, from democracy as a method: 'if by democracy one understands the conception of the people as a spiritual and economic synthesis of individuals, categories and classes of the nation, and the right of this people to participate in the government of public affairs, either through their representative institutions, we are also democrats'.⁵² Fascism's commitment to the democratic principle would be proven with the preservation of 'universal suffrage, implicitly recognizing the need for parliament'.⁵³ De Marsanich concluded his article by calling for a reconciliation of the Fascists with the

Destra fascista [Fascist Right]. See, for example, Volt [Vincenzo Fani Ciotti], 'Lo Stato di diritto,' *Gerarchia* 3, no. 6 (June 1924), 372–378; Volt [Vincenzo Fani Ciotti], 'Filosofia dell'autorità,' *Gerarchia* 3, no. 7 (July 1924), 416–421.

47 Panunzio, 'Che cos'è il liberalismo?' 9.

48 Ibid.

49 Augusto De Marsanich (1893–1973) was a journalist, trade unionist and early Fascist. Elected deputy for the PNF in 1924, he was re-elected in 1934. He held the position of under-secretary of the Kingdom from 1935 to 1943.

50 Augusto De Marsanich, 'Revisione,' *Critica Fascista* 1, no. 4 (August 1, 1923), 31.

51 Ibid., 32.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 33.

parliament and of the parliament with the nation. This would imply a demobilization of Fascism, a deposition of arms, and a policy more open to other political forces.⁵⁴

The debate became more intense with the publication of an article by Massimo Rocca on 15 September 1923, in *Critica Fascista*. The article expressed the tensions inherent in the transition from Fascism to the condition of government and the difficulty for the central administration to impose its authority over the provinces in which the local Fascist leaders exercised their power.⁵⁵ According to Rocca, neither Fascism nor its revolution could be reduced to violence. Violence and dictatorship would be justified only to the extent that they were indispensable instruments for greater purposes. According to Rocca:

Mussolini morally conquered Italy, to the point of continuing, consolidating and concluding the Fascist Revolution with his consent—in the historical and creative sense of the term. We humbly and cordially demand of the party to reconcile itself with Mussolini's Italy and, in order to reconcile itself, to stop the parody of revolution and verbal discipline, eternalized in the vain memory of victorious violence, today that its need has disappeared.⁵⁶

When he published his *Critica Fascista* article, De Masarnich did not occupy any position in the leadership of the PNF. Contrastingly, Rocca was a prominent member of the party leadership, which made his criticism even stronger. Emilio Settimelli and Mario Carli, editors of the newspaper *L'Impero*, were among the first to side with Rocca. In an article published on 20 September 1923, they went further and identified Fascism with Italy. As Catholics, monarchists and Fascists, the authors of the article were satisfied with the re-establishment by the new government of the 'fundamental values of life' (God—King—Homeland—Family) and of 'perfect obedience to the law under the aegis of the

54 Ibid.

55 In the months preceding Rocca's article, a strong campaign took place in defense of discipline in the PNF and against the abuse of power by local chiefs. The uses of the idea of discipline among fascists varied. In Mussolini's political discourse, it is possible to identify, in 1923, a repeated affirmation of 'discipline, concord, work', aimed at subordinating the nation and mobilizing it under fascist command. See, for instance, Susmel, *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 18, 272. The intransigents, on the other hand, demanded the framing of the dissidents, while the revisionists, like Giuseppe Bottai, called for a discipline in which consensus prevailed: Giuseppe Bottai, 'Disciplina,' *Critica Fascista* 1, no. 3 (July 15, 1923), 45–47.

56 Massimo Rocca, 'Fascismo e paese,' *Critica Fascista* 1, no. 7 (September 15, 1923), 131.

reconstructed state authority'. Settimelli and Carli considered that after winning the government 'the party was a phase overcome and that it should have given way to an aristocracy of command, to a new ruling class, without an affiliation card, but selected and proven'.⁵⁷ In this context, the parties—all of them, including the PNF—'are useless pleonasm, when they are not a tangible damage to the nation'.⁵⁸ Although they did not consider the dissolution of the PNF should be immediate, it was clear that they viewed the party as a transitory and anachronistic political form.

Rocca responded in an article published in the same newspaper on 22 September. He argued that he did not defend the immediate dissolution of the PNF, which would only be possible and desirable after the achievements of the Fascist revolution were consolidated by intense propaganda and the 'purely, unbalanced parliamentary political society' gave way to new political forms founded on the 'unions of each productive group, on competence groups, on eventual new formations of the economy'.⁵⁹ Unlike other contributors to *Critica Fascista*, Rocca did not attribute a central role to corporations in the new state and highlighted the role of the 'Competence Groups', the technical bodies foreseen in the 1921 *Statuto-regolamento* generale [General statutes and regulations] of the PNF, aimed at forming a new technocratic-style ruling class.⁶⁰

Mussolini seems to have taken advantage of the revisionist campaign to launch an attack against the intransigents, led by Roberto Farinacci, who was publicly warned in an unsigned article in the 20 September edition of the newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*.⁶¹ While the controversy with Farinacci was ris-

57 Emilio Settimelli and Mario Carli, 'La ultima svolta del fascismo,' *L'Impero*, September 20, 1923, 1.

58 Ibid.

59 Massimo Rocca, 'Partito e governo fascista,' *L'Impero*, September 22, 1923, 1.

60 'The purpose of the Competence Groups is to assemble fascist intelligences and skills according to specialized aptitudes and values, in order to enable the study of any political-economic-social problem that is of interest to the nation, region, province or municipality'. PNF, 'Statuto-regolamento generale del PNF (dicembre 1921),' in Alberto Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), 325. Rocca was national secretary of the Competence Groups between April and September 1923. On the Competence Groups and Rocca, see Alberto Aquarone, 'Aspirazioni tecnocratiche del primo fascismo,' *Nord Sud* 11, no. 52 (1964): 109–128, and Roland Sarti, 'Fascist Modernization in Italy: Traditional or Revolutionary,' *The American Historical Review* 75, no. 4 (1970): 1039.

61 According to *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 'it is not necessary to be deeply political to realize that there are still many people in Italy who are unemployed because they don't know who to attack with the stick or who no longer know who to criticize; angry people who feel wronged in their official positions. The government is always wrong if it doesn't heed the advice of its councils and the on. Farinacci seems for some time to want to take on the fight to lead

ing in tone, on 23 September the unofficial *Corriere Italiano*, published in Rome, dedicated a front-page column defending Rocca from the attacks that had been brought against him by Gino Baroncini, political leader in Bologna. In the Roman newspaper, Baroncini was called the 'little Rigoletto of Emilian Fascism' and accused of having belatedly joined interventionism and Fascism.⁶² On the same page, *Corriere* published an interview with Rocca himself, in which he stated: 'Revolution is . . . the formation of new human or spiritual values, the emergence of a new national consciousness, the change of a political custom, the emergence of a new ruling class, more dignified and capable, the creation and integration of new forms of social synthesis or public direction. But the revolution, in this sense, can be carried out very well within the framework of a perfect legality that legalizes, step by step, evolution itself'.⁶³

On 1 October, a letter from Mussolini to Michele Bianchi ordered the suspension of 'all written or verbal polemics'.⁶⁴ On the same day as Mussolini's letter, a new issue of *Critica Fascista* appeared, with articles by Bottai and Rocca. The first celebrated the beginning of an 'examination of conscience' on the part of Fascism and affirmed that the main objective of the revisionists was: 'to return

this last punitive expedition, not being satisfied if he doesn't attack a man a day and if he doesn't throw a defined situation into the air'. Monito, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, September 20, 1923, 3. The main Fascist dailies ignored Farinacci's response, originally published in the local daily *Cremona Nuova*, but it was reproduced three days later by *L'Impero*: 'Farinacci Risponde a "Il Popolo d'Italia"; *L'Impero*, September 23, 1923, 4, and by *Il Giornale d'Italia*: 'L'on: Farinacci risponde al monito de "Popolo d'Italia"; *Il Giornale d'Italia*, September 23, 1923, 6. On that same day, *Il Popolo d'Italia* published its own reply, without, however, disclosing Farinacci's reply: 'When a party is in power it cannot be intransigent, exclusivist, sectarian *a priori*: it would end up sterile and perish'. 'Il Purismo e il resto', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, September 23, 1923, 3.

62 'Rassismo e fascismo,' *Corriere Italiano*, September 23, 1923, 1. The title of the article refers to military chiefs in Ethiopia, denominated *ras*. The term was used by revisionists in a pejorative way—and with a strong colonialist color—to designate the local Fascist chiefs, who acted arbitrarily. See, for example, Massimo Rocca: 'In fact, since 1923 the squads were formed again on all sides in Upper Italy at the service of local chiefs who compared themselves to Abyssinian "ras", inasmuch as they arrogated to themselves arbitrary power, imposing themselves on mayors, the judiciary, industrialists and agrarians to extort'. Massimo Rocca, *Come il fascismo divenne una dittatura: Storia interna del fascismo dal 1914 al 1925: seguita da la fine e il socialismo di Mussolini* (Milan: Edizioni Librerie Italiane, 1952), 149.

63 Massimo Rocca, 'Una intervista con Massimo Rocca,' *Corriere Italiano*, September 23, 1923, 1.

64 Eduardo and Duilio Susmel, eds., *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 20 (23 agosto 1923–3 giugno 1924) (Florence: Le Fenice, 1956), 334.

to normality, to relieve the Party of all those heavy harnesses of war that oppress it, suffocate it and kill it'.⁶⁵ The article listed the main problems of the party, all related to discipline, the arbitrariness of local leaders and the lack of definition of attributions of instances and party-government relations.⁶⁶ He concluded by proposing a set of reforms that would prevent the emergence of new local leaders, enabling the Fascist army to live as a party.⁶⁷

Bottai's revisionist enterprise seemed, in 1923, to be all about reforming the PNF. Little attention was paid, however, to the transformation of the state. Rocca, in turn, expressed a deeper revisionism, in which the relationship between the party and the government was an aspect of a larger problem: the relationship between Fascism and the nation. His article, in the same issue of *Critica Fascista*, expressed this way of seeing the problem. Rocca resorted to a historical analogy with the French Revolution and a period of 'revolutionary fatigue' that resulted in the formation of a dictatorship to impose law and order on a movement that did not want to end and therefore subverted the order itself born of the revolution. It was Thermidor, which 'dominates when the old order no longer exists, terrorist disorder is no longer necessary, not even to save the leaders from terror, and the new order has not yet been created'.⁶⁸ But Thermidor was not able to reorder France. Therefore, Napoleon resolved it in the Eighteenth Brumaire, which was necessary for the revolution to continue militarily and socially in a new and reestablished legality.⁶⁹ The target continued to be the arbitrary power of local political bosses. For Rocca, only with their end 'the reconstruction of Italy under a single constitutional monarch, served by a single dictator, in the name of Italy' would be possible, a formula that translated the Albertine Statute into the language of Fascism.⁷⁰

Rocca withdrew to the sidelines for a few months. But he returned to the charge in January 1924, in an article with the suggestive title 'Tornare alla normalità' [Get back to normal], published in *Il Nuovo Paese*, a newspaper published by Carlo Bazzi.⁷¹ In the debate of the previous year, the newspaper expressed support for Rocca, aligning itself with the revisionists and firmly criticizing the intransigents. Now, in a much more difficult context after Mussolini had ended the discussion, Bazzi opened the pages of the newspaper to his

65 Giuseppe Bottai, 'Esame di coscienza,' *Critica Fascista* 1, no. 8 (October 1, 1923), 151.

66 *Ibid.*, 150–151.

67 *Ibid.*, 151.

68 Massimo Rocca, 'Diciotto brumaio,' *Critica Fascista* 1, no. 8 (October 1, 1923), 152.

69 *Ibid.*, 153.

70 *Ibid.*

71 Massimo Rocca, 'Tornare alla normalità,' *Il Nuovo Paese*, January 17, 1924, 2.

friend.⁷² The publication of the article in a daily newspaper guaranteed Rocca greater dissemination of his ideas. But it is possible that the revisionist had no other options, since Bottai, as he would several times afterwards, seemed to have taken a more cautious and disciplined attitude, avoiding challenging Mussolini.

In this new article, Rocca once again admitted the importance of dictatorship, but now added that it would only be useful and fruitful if it did not lose 'awareness of its temporary nature and exceptionality, in tragic hours of general danger or during crises of disorientation of the peoples'.⁷³ However, the central theme was constitutional reform. Rocca commented on the current debate on reform and rejected any attempt to suppress Parliament in fact or in law. According to the author, if the powers of the Chamber and the Senate were reduced by establishing by law 'five-year dictatorships . . . the country would first be guaranteed a little more or less South American revolution every five years, due to the enormous power conferred on any party winner, and after a certain time, even in times of fascism, it would no longer be known precisely who the dictatorship serves'.⁷⁴

The idea of constitutional reform was present among many Fascists before the March on Rome,⁷⁵ but from October 1923 the discussion around the theme seems to have gained new impetus with the publication of two articles favorable to the termination of Parliament in the journal *Gerarchia*.⁷⁶ It was no coincidence that Giovanni Preziosi published a posthumous article by Vilfredo Pareto in the magazine *La Vita Italiana* in 1923, entitled 'Pochi punti per un futuro ordinamento costituzionale' [Points for a future constitutional order], in which he defended the rapid implementation of a constitutional reform that

72 De Felice casts suspicion on Bazzi's commitment to revisionism, arguing that it had little political coherence. De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista*, vol. 1, 450.

73 Rocca, 'Tornare alla normalità.'

74 Ibid.

75 See, for instance, the article published in October 1922 in the journal *Gerarchia*: 'The current parliamentary democratic regime is no longer adequate, it is not adapted, in any sense, to the needs of the time; it is necessary to change it. The direct and immediate objective of fascist political action must be this mutation, that is, the radical reordering of the state'. Mario Govi, 'Il riordinamento dello Stato e il fascismo,' *Gerarchia* 1, no. 10 (October 25, 1922), 579. See also the answer in *Il Popolo d'Italia* in February of the following year: Volt, [Vincenzo Fani Ciotti], 'La riforma costituzionale: Epistemarchia?' *Il Popolo d'Italia*, February 25, 1923, 1.

76 Gherardo Casini, 'La crisi dei sistemi rappresentativi e la loro trasformazione,' *Gerarchia*, 2, no. 10 (October 1923), 1287–1289; and Arrigo Solmi, 'La crisi dei sistemi rappresentativi e la loro trasformazione,' *Gerarchia* 2, no. 10 (October 1923), 1287–1289.

would maintain the form of the present institutions, preserving the parliament, but redefining its functioning to make it more effective.⁷⁷

In his article, Rocca advocated a new political normality, based on the holding of periodic elections that would allow each political current to have 'a representation legally adequate to its strength of numbers and sympathies'. It was, in short, about preserving the Albertine Statute, purifying it of the parliamentary excesses of previous decades: 'It is necessary to resume the fundamental statutory criterion that places the Crown and Parliament face to face, so that the people are understood and protected against eventual arbitrations of one and of the other'. All this would be a 'strict constitutional right'. Fascism should prevent the 'past parliamentary and degenerate customs' from being revived, but it should do so 'precisely in defense of the Constitution'.⁷⁸

This time the reception of the article was not positive. In the pages of *L'Impero*, Emilio Settimelli opposed the normalization of Fascism and the parliamentarism advocated by Rocca, accusing him of appearing 'more like an "energetic liberal" than a true fascist'.⁷⁹ The harsh criticism levelled against the revisionist revealed that the support given by Mario Carli and Emilio Settimelli in September of the previous year was only circumstantial and did not imply an adherence to the revisionist theses promoted by the journal *Critica Fascista*. Heirs of the Futurist Movement, the editors of *L'Impero* highlighted the religious character of Fascism, framing their political discourse with appeals to a secular faith and showing more concern with deepening the imperialist character of the government than with reforming fascism. Anti-liberal and anti-parliamentary, Carli and Settimelli decided to distance themselves from the uncomfortable company of their former ally.

Rocca responded to the attack by writing that Fascism was 'much more an overcomer than a renegade of liberalism', and that it had been, until that moment, 'a vigorous applicator, with renewed spirit, of the postulates of liberalism'.⁸⁰ He defended a parliament without parliamentarism, emptying the Chamber and the Senate of the technical tasks for which these institutions were not prepared and proposing the creation of technical councils, 'competent bodies for the consultation and prior examination of technical problems or the detailed improvement of laws already voted on the general and financial

77 Vilfredo Pareto, 'Pochi punti di un futuro ordinamento costituzionale,' *La Vita Italiana*, XII, no. CXXVIII–CXXIX, 165–169.

78 Rocca, 'Tornare alla normalità.'

79 Emilio Settimelli, 'Fascista o liberale energico (Risposta a Massimo Rocca),' *L'Impero*, January 19, 1924, 1.

80 Massimo Rocca, 'Fascismo e liberalismo,' *L'Impero*, January 22, 1924, 1.

lines of Parliament', bodies that would also constitute 'a real and healthy control of the bureaucracy'.⁸¹ Rocca continued to insist on technocratic political reform. The creation of the councils would be, in his view, 'the only truly revolutionary purpose of fascism', promoting the fusion of the ideas of syndicalism and nationalism.⁸²

Revisionists had different views amongst them regarding the relationship between liberalism and fascism. They were all in favor of a normalization of Fascism, but the direction of the revision they wanted was different. Some, like Bottai himself, considered that Fascism should absorb the best cadres of liberalism within a new ruling class. The program was the nationalization of Fascism, and its transition from a movement form to a state form.⁸³ But some espoused a distinctively liberal-fascist agenda. Panunzio, for instance, posited Fascism as the epitome of liberalism, representing the current form of the rule of law. Conversely, De Marsanich contended that Fascism embodied not only the ideals of liberalism but also those of democracy. Additionally, Rocca advocated for Fascism as the overcoming of liberalism, advocating for political pluralism that welcomed alternative ideological currents, but only those that were not 'anti-national' or 'anti-patriotic'. It was, however, the latter who took the criticism of squadristism further. While this opposition to the intransigents led by Roberto Farinacci favored Mussolini's position in the PNF, Rocca was tolerated. Yet in May 1924 he was definitively expelled from the party and at the beginning of 1926 he went into exile in France.

81 Ibid. In November 1923, the Grand Council of Fascism approved the transformation of the Competence Groups into National Technical Councils. *Critica Fascista*, attached great importance to the Councils and immediately created a section 'Review of the Technical Councils' in the journal. On the role of Technical Councils in the creation of a new ruling class, see the article by Carlo Costamagna in the January 1924 issue: Carlo Costamagna, 'Classe dirigente,' *Critica Fascista* 2, no. 2 (1924), 303–304.

82 Rocca, 'Fascismo e liberalismo,' 1.

83 At times, Bottai went further and considered that fascism was part of liberalism conceived not as an ideology, but as an historical process: 'in liberalism, understood as the very process of history, Fascism is inserted by the very fact of being, of governing, by the form of its organization and by the spirit that inspires its nation, a spirit of freedom which is affirmed in history, which is not individual arbitrariness but superior will, a synthesis of freedom and authority which, in order to be fulfilled, is also opposed to the libido of individuals'. Giuseppe Bottai, 'L'equivoco antifascista: Il fascismo nel suo fondamento dottrinario,' *Critica Fascista* 2, no. 7 (1924), 395–399.

Idealism and Liberalism

The main liberal-fascist current inside the PNF was led by Giovanni Gentile. Six days after Benito Mussolini took office, Carmelo Licitra wrote the 'Foreword' for a journal whose objective was to promote a *rapprochement* between liberals and Fascists.⁸⁴ The first issue of the journal appeared in January of the following year, with the title *La Nuova Politica Liberale*. Among the journal's authors, disciples, collaborators, and friends of Gentile predominated, such as Giuseppe Maggiore, Ugo Spirito, Arnaldo Volpicelli, Giuseppe Saitta, Armando Carlini, Giuseppe Lombardo Radice and Licitra himself, the secretary-editor. The presence of intellectuals linked to other philosophical trends was occasional, but still important, since it indicated the existence of certain political-intellectual confluences, as can be seen in the articles published in *La Nuova Politica Liberale* by the nationalist historian Gioacchino Volpe and by the writer Giuseppe Prezzolini.

In spite of these occasional voices, the overarching thematic coherence within the journal was predominantly sustained by the Gentilian neo-idealist agenda, as initially delineated in Licitra's 'Foreword'. This ideological framework established a dichotomy between democracy, construed as a paradigm characterized by individualism and naturalism, and a distinct variant of liberalism stemming from the philosophical lineage of Italian idealism.⁸⁵ Licitra's discourse encapsulated a narrative of primordial origins, attributing the genesis of this anti-democratic liberalism to the era of the Risorgimento and the intellectual contributions of figures such as Vincenzo Gioberti. These nineteenth century thinkers advocated for moral principles and political structures antithetical to individualistic and naturalistic paradigms. Nevertheless, the viability of this socio-political philosophy appeared to falter in 1876 with the defeat of the *Destra storica* [Historical Right], leading to the ascent of a demagogic democracy within the state apparatus.⁸⁶ Fascism, in this context, was posited as an agent of restoration and actualization of the traditions espoused by the

84 Carmelo Licitra, 'Proemio,' *La Nuova Politica Liberale* 1, no. 1 (1923), 1–8.

85 The keystone of this political-conceptual program lay in that conception of the ethical state already announced by Gentile in his *Fondamenti della filosofia del diritto*, which would oppose the naturalist conceptions of the state and the rights of individuals. Giovanni Gentile, *Fondamenti della filosofia del diritto*, 3rd ed. (Florence: Sansoni, 1937 [1916]), 103 ss.

86 Licitra, 'Proemio,' 6. In Italian political history, 1876 is the year of the so-called 'parliamentary revolution,' the defeat of the *Destra storica* and the rise of the *Sinistra* [Historical Left], led by Agostino Depretis. Consult Fulvio Cammarano, *Storia dell'Italia liberale* (Rome: Laterza, 2011), 54–60.

Destra storica. Although the 'Foreword' did not make explicit reference to Mussolini, it announced 'the time to return to the genius work of our first liberalism'.⁸⁷ It would be up to Gentilian idealism to promote the unification of conceived 'philosophy and political life' and to give awareness to the construction of a 'human world as a world of values'.⁸⁸

In the *Giornale Critico della Filosofia Italiana*, directed by Gentile, the historian Adolfo Omodeo announced the launch of the new journal and wrote that Benedetto Croce would also be among its promoters.⁸⁹ Omodeo also accurately summarized the magazine's program before it came to light: 'recovering the liberal tradition of our Risorgimento, lost in the democratic evolution of the last fifty years, and giving full development to its idealist assumptions, effectively inserting itself in the present political problem in Italy. In short, not a lazy affirmation of all freedoms, which would lead to the suicide of freedom, but freedom as a perennial method of politics'.⁹⁰

Licitra's 'Foreword' also served as an introduction to Giovanni Gentile's article, published in the following pages. In this text, Gentile, who since 31 October 1922 held the post of Minister of Public Instruction, prepared the ground for announcing his affiliation to the PNF.⁹¹ According to Gentile, there was a materialist and individualist liberalism, born in the eighteenth century in England, which became the creed of revolutions in the following century. For this liberalism, 'the state presupposes freedom' and respecting it would imply promoting 'a tendency towards a limiting political form equivalent to the negation of the state itself'.⁹² Socialism would make the same mistake as this Jacobin and anti-

87 Ibid., 4.

88 Ibid.

89 Despite the advertisement, Croce only published a note in the journal, commenting on the school reform promoted by Giovanni Gentile, then Minister of Public Instruction.

90 Adolfo Omodeo, 'Notte e notizie: La Nuova Politica Liberale,' *Giornale Critico della Filosofia Italiana* 3, no. 4 (1922), 419.

91 On May 31, 1923, Gentile was visited by Michele Bianchi, general secretary of the PNF, and by Giovanni Vaselli, federal secretary of Rome, who offered him 'honorary' membership in the party. Gentile accepted and sent a letter to Mussolini the same day announcing his affiliation. In it he explained his reasons: 'Liberal by deep and solid conviction, in these months in which I have the honor of collaborating in His work of government and of closely watching the development of the principles that inform His policy, I have persuaded myself that liberalism, as I understand it and as it was understood by the men of the glorious Right who guided Italy in the Risorgimento, the liberalism of freedom in the law and, therefore, in the strong state and in the state conceived as an ethical reality, is not represented today in Italy by liberals, who are more or less openly against you, but precisely for you'. Giovanni Gentile, 'Adesione al Partito Fascista, (31 maggio 1923),' in *Scritti pedagogici: La riforma della scuola in Italia*, vol. 3 (Milan and Rome: Treves, 1932), 127–128.

92 Giovanni Gentile, 'Il mio liberalismo,' *La Nuova Politica Liberale* 1, no. 1 (1923), 9.

historical liberalism, insofar as it presupposed the individual and denied the state.⁹³ Yet, according to Gentile, there was another liberalism, born in the nineteenth century from the critique of materialism, which would reaffirm spiritual values. This would be the only one capable of promoting 'a truly liberal conception of life'.⁹⁴ Opposing the anti-state tendencies of Anglo-Saxon liberalism, the minister-philosopher asserted that liberalism without a state would be liberalism without freedom.

This distinction between two forms of liberalism was characteristic of the Gentilians. In the same issue of the journal, Giuseppe Maggiore explained the difference between these two forms. According to him, the Risorgimento had a Catholic, aristocratic and idealistic spirit that expressed itself as an ethical mission.⁹⁵ But the fall of the *Destra storica* had shaken this spirit and made the state lose its ethical mission.⁹⁶ The power-state, an organ of sovereignty, was thus replaced by the administrator-state, merchant and entrepreneur, arbiter and conciliator of conflicts: 'Such a conception that democratic liberalism had of the state led to that process of dissolution of authority typical of communism'.⁹⁷ The liberalism born of the Risorgimento, however, would be another, according to Maggiore. Only this should be resumed. This new liberalism: 'is not the exclusive privilege of a party, a sect, a faction; it is not a government secret, or a Machiavellian cunning of the cabinet, but true politics, because it is the only one in keeping with history, with that history which is the very process of freedom. In this sense, liberalism must be considered as a synonym of political historicism'.⁹⁸

The liberalism of the contributors to *La Nuova Politica Liberale* was anti-naturalist, anti-materialist, anti-individualist and, evidently, anti-democratic. It found its reason in history and its fulfilment in the state. Contrary to what the jusnaturalists believed, the state for the Gentilians would not presuppose a natural freedom before which all power external to the individual should stop. Freedom would have its place in history and not outside it. It should be created by law and developed in the state. This liberalism was not the one that

93 Ibid., 10.

94 Ibid., 9. For the distinction between the different forms of liberalism, see also Gentile's criticism of the opposition that Enrico Corradini promoted against liberalism *sans phrase*, in the 1918 essay 'L'Ideale politico di un nazionalista'. Giovanni Gentile, *Guerra e fede: Frammenti politici* (Naples: Ricciardi, 1919), 53–59.

95 Giuseppe Maggiore, 'Liberalismo morto e liberalismo vivo,' *La Nuova Politica Liberale* 1, no. 1 (1923), 21.

96 Ibid., 22.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid., 23.

denied the state, it was the one that 'strictly affirms the state as an ethical reality, which must itself be realized and is realized by realizing freedom'.⁹⁹ Gentile concluded this small manifesto-article by explaining the characteristics of his liberalism:

I am firmly convinced of the supreme need for a strong state, as a citizen's duty and right, and of an iron discipline, which is a rigid school of political will and character. That is why I am firmly convinced of the need to awaken and develop in politics an energetic sense of religiosity and morality, and to promote, on the other hand, a sense of measure and political determination, that is, of social and historical concreteness in the religious-ethical development of an individual. This is the juice of my liberalism.¹⁰⁰

In his manifesto-article, Gentile did not mention Fascism, but the fundamentals of its accession were present. In the first issue of the journal, Licitra published an article in which the meaning of the operation became explicit. Announcing for the first time an idea that would become current in post-war anti-fascist historiography, the secretary-editor of *La Nuova Politica Liberale* stated that Gentile was the 'philosopher of fascism'.¹⁰¹ According to Licitra, the 'relationship between idealism and fascism is established to the extent that both represent the struggle against a world that is now nothing more than a dead weight, an inert matter, capable of suffocating and disintegrating our spirit if not controlled, confronted once and for all with courage and decision'.¹⁰² In this fight against the old world, idealism expressed itself in the

99 Gentile, 'Il mio liberalismo,' 9.

100 Ibid., 11.

101 Carmelo Licitra, 'Mussolini e noi,' *La Nuova Politica Liberale* 1, no. 1 (1923), 12. The claim that Gentile was the 'philosopher of fascism' can be seen, for instance, in Sergio Romano, 'Giovanni Gentile, philosophe du fascisme,' *Vingtème siècle: Revue d'histoire* 21 (1989), 71–82; and James Gregor, *Giovanni Gentile: Philosopher of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 2017). Garin has argued, albeit somewhat exaggeratedly, against the identity of Fascism with Italian idealism. The claim that Gentile was the philosopher of fascism is greatly exaggerated and confuses the position that Gentile and the Actualists wanted to occupy in Fascist culture with the actual place they had. Gentile was undoubtedly a philosopher and Fascist, and although he was the most prominent, he was certainly not the only one, coexisting with important Antigentilian currents. Eugenio Garin, 'La filosofia italiana di fronte al fascismo,' 17–40. On Gentilism and Antigentilism in fascist culture, see Alessandra Tarquini, *Il Gentile dei fascisti: Gentiliani e antigentiliani nel regime fascista* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009).

102 Licitra, 'Mussolini e noi,' 12.

intellectual production that in the last twenty years had confronted positivism, while Fascism would express itself in 'Mussolini's powerful personality'.¹⁰³

Licitra did not consider that the relationship between Fascism and idealism was one of coexistence or exteriority. Expressing the unity between philosophy and political life announced by Gentile, the journal's secretary-editor considered that Mussolinism would not be one doctrine alongside another. Il Duce would express 'a faith, an action that is organized and lives within a concept, a concept that is, then, our own doctrine'.¹⁰⁴ In that unity between philosophy and political life, it was up to idealism to give Fascism a philosophical conscience. Licitra believed that the undertaking of idealism was a pedagogy that could give Mussolini's action the 'necessary universality for it to have true historical value'.¹⁰⁵ This pedagogical action was, in his view, 'a properly liberal attitude'.¹⁰⁶

The way was thus open for the adherence of the Gentilian idealists to Fascism. There was common ground for this endeavor. In the incipient Fascist ideology of the time, traces of Italian idealist culture at the beginning of the twentieth century were easily identifiable, in particular anti-positivism and anti-materialism. A few days before the March on Rome, Camillo Pellizzi published an article in the journal *Gerarchia* that in many ways anticipated Licitra's argument. According to Pellizzi, the rejection of materialism in the field of philosophy promoted by Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, had found its political counterpart in Fascism: 'Fascism is the practical negation of historical materialism, but also the negation of democratic individualism, of Enlightenment rationalism'.¹⁰⁷ The 'germs' of Italian idealism would be 'present and active in the fascist movement' and it would be up to this idealism, mainly Gentilian, to elaborate 'the conscience of what we are doing'.¹⁰⁸

The common ground was not merely philosophical. Although the Great War did not promote a relevant political turn in Giovanni Gentile's thought, it allowed his reflection to take on a strongly practical-political aspect, extending to current issues, and assuming an urgent character. The essays gathered in *Guerra e fede*, written between October 1914 and January 1919, made public the philosopher's interventionist tendency and his renewed, increasingly radical, nationalist commitment.¹⁰⁹ This new political-intellectual activism was

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid., 13.

105 Ibid., 15.

106 Ibid.

107 Camillo Pellizzi, 'Idealismo e fascismo,' *Gerarchia* 1, no. 10 (October 25, 1922), 571.

108 Ibid., 574.

109 Gentile, *Guerra e fede*.

not lacking in the anti-socialist and anti-democratic discourse that would gain intensity over time.¹¹⁰ In this, Gentilian liberalism coincided with Fascism, although it still did not fully identify with it, which would only occur after the March on Rome.¹¹¹

Conclusion

Often, the search for a minimum definition of generic fascism has resulted in listing the fundamental characteristics that define the ideology. As noted earlier in this article, many have included anti-liberalism in this enumeration and this anti-liberal character has been highlighted in recent monographic studies.¹¹² However, defining fascism as anti-liberal presupposes a conception that, while not always made explicit, is conditioned by the Anglo-Saxon tradition, in which freedom and authority are opposed, and liberalism is understood as synonymous with democracy. This article demonstrates the existence of liberal-fascist currents within the PNF during the first half of the 1920s. Such evidence suggests that instead of defining fascism as an ideology antagonistic to liberalism, it may be more precise to consider it anti-democratic.

Selective affinities between liberalism and Italian Fascism have been highlighted in contemporary research. For example, Ishay Landa argues that ‘economic liberalism . . . was much closer to the core of the fascist experiment than anti-economic-liberalism’.¹¹³ Clara Mattei moved in the same direction with an extensive investigation into the austerity economic policy in Mussolini’s government and the influence liberal economists like Alberto de’ Stefani, Maffeo Pantaleoni, Umberto Ricci, and Luigi Einaudi had on Fascism.¹¹⁴ This article

110 See, for example, the essays gathered in Giovanni Gentile, *Dopo la vittoria: Nuovi frammenti politici* (Rome: Laterza, 1920).

111 Despite this common philosophical-political ground, Gentile showed no interest in Mussolini and fascism before being appointed Minister of Public Instruction by Camillo Pellazzi and Ernesto Codignola. See Alessandra Tarquini, ‘The Anti-Gentilians during the Fascist Regime,’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 4 (2005): 637–638.

112 John E. Richardson, *British Fascism: A Discourse-Historical Analysis* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2017); Constantin Iordachi, *The Fascist Faith of the Legion ‘Archangel Michael’ in Romania, 1927–1941: Martyrdom and National Purification* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023); Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

113 Ishay Landa, *The Apprentice’s Sorcerer: Liberal Tradition and Fascism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 19.

114 Clara E. Mattei, *The Capital Order: How Economists Invented Austerity and Paved the Way to Fascism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022).

is not interested in economic liberalism but in political liberalism; not in the ideas of free-market and private property, but in those of individual freedom and the rule of law.

In the 1920s, Italian liberal-fascism was rooted in the Hegelian philosophy of Law and State and opposed the Anglo-Saxon liberal tradition. It rejected the idea of freedom as the absence of impediments, considering it abstract or purely negative. True freedom, understood as self-consciousness, as the realization of the moral ideal, would not have a place in an abstract state of nature; it could only occur as an attribute of the people or the nation as a whole, therefore it could only occur in a political community. For the liberal-fascists, without the state and the strong authority emanating from it, there would be no freedom.

These liberal intellectual trends were always in the minority groups and, as seen, found strong opposition in the PNF, mainly from radical factions, heirs of squadristo. In these conflicts, Mussolini's position tended towards pragmatism, favoring one side or the other to strengthen his position. Although they influenced the formulation of cultural policy, liberal-fascists like Giovanni Gentile and Sergio Panunzio were often outside the party's leadership and occupied peripheral spaces within the state machine, predominantly in the cultural apparatus, universities and education policies.

In the study of intellectual history, recognizing the presence of a liberal-fascist intellectual current, such as in Italy, does not imply that liberalism and fascism are synonymous, that fascism is the logical outcome of liberalism, or even that fascism embodies liberal principles. The distinction between liberalism and fascism is crucial for understanding the unique characteristics of a stream that perceived fascism as the embodiment of freedom and the rule of law. Conversely, liberal-fascists were staunch opponents of democracy, understood as the expression of a popular general will.

In addition to improving the understanding of ideological divergences within the wider interwar fascist movement, or even its national particularities, the examination of liberal-fascist ideology in Italy provides an analytical framework for scrutinizing recent neo-fascist and post-fascist political-ideological trends. After the defeat in the Second World War, movements and political leaders claiming the legacy of old fascist organizations and preserving an ultranationalist program had to adapt to new times and simultaneously affirm their commitment to liberal parliamentary institutions.¹¹⁵

115 See for example Matteo Albanese, *Neofascism in Europe (1945–1989): A Long Cultural Journey* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), Ch. 5.

The post-1945 evolution of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI) and its successors, such as *Alleanza Nazionale* and *Fratelli d'Italia*, represents a distinctive case.¹¹⁶ When reconciling the principles of freedom and the rule of law with ultra-nationalism and the advocacy for a robust authoritarian state, these movements utilized an existing ideological framework. This framework, developed by liberal-fascism in the 1920s amid intense intra-party conflicts, was repeatedly employed by neo-fascist and post-fascist leaders. Through this, they established a historical and ideological continuity with interwar Italian Fascism, systematically eliminating its most problematic elements while normalizing and institutionalizing the movement.

However, the way Italian neo-fascists and post-fascists appropriated this liberal-fascist imagination was uneven. While some figures like Massimo Rocca and Sergio Panunzio were condemned to ostracism, others, like Giuseppe Bottai and especially Giovanni Gentile, gained prominence in the contemporary Italian far-right imagination. Piero Ignazi had already identified the presence of the philosopher's name as the most admired figure by National Alliance supporters.¹¹⁷ In the Theses of Trieste of 2018, an important document that defines the identity of *Fratelli d'Italia*, a quote from Gentile helped define the nation as 'soil, common life, community of habits and customs, language, and tradition'.¹¹⁸

Coinciding with the electoral growth of these parties and their participation in national governments, there has been renewed editorial interest in the work of the neo-idealist philosopher.¹¹⁹ This diffusion was accompanied by increasing ideologization of his ideas, especially in politically engaged publications that highlighted Gentile as a theorist of the ethical and sovereign State. Public tributes to Gentile have become increasingly recurrent and have assumed an official character with the issuance of a commemorative stamp by the Posta

116 See Davide Conti, *L'anima nera della Repubblica: Storia del MSI* (Rome: Laterza, 2013); Piero Ignazi, *Il polo escluso: La fiamma che non si spegne. Da Almirante a Meloni* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2023); Roger Griffin, 'The "Post-Fascism" of the Alleanza Nazionale: A Case Study in Ideological Morphology,' *Journal of Political Ideologies* 1, no. 2, (1996): 123–145. About the political uses of the past by Movimento Sociale Italiano, see Gregorio Sorgonà, 'The Nostalgic and Political Use of the Past: Fascism in the Italian Social Movement,' *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 29, no. 3 (2024): 285–302.

117 See Piero Ignazi, 'From Neo-Fascists to Post-Fascists? The Transformation of the MSI into the NA,' *West European Politics* 19, no. 4 (2007): table 3.

118 *Fratelli d'Italia*, 'Le tesi di Trieste per il movimento dei patrioti,' *giorgiameloni.it*, January 3, 2018, <https://www.giorgiameloni.it/tesitrieste/>.

119 See Gabriele Turi, 'La sfortuna di Gentile,' *Passato e Presente: Rivista di Storia Contemporanea* 36, no. 104 (2018).

Italiana in April 2024.¹²⁰ A few days later, a photographic exhibition dedicated to Giovanni Gentile opened with the support of the Ministry of Culture at the Istituto Centrale per la Grafica, in Rome. On that occasion, the Fratelli d'Italia senator, Andrea De Priamo, issued a note saluting the exhibition dedicated to 'one of the greatest intellectuals of the 20th century'.¹²¹ The tributes coincided with the eightieth anniversary of his execution by a partisan group and were accompanied by a political speech questioning the resistance's commitment to freedom and democracy.

The revaluation of Gentile has occurred even among openly neo-fascist sectors, such as CasaPound, which highlighted his patriotism, his contribution to culture, and also his commitment to Mussolini. Valerio Benedetti, ideologue of this organization, had already announced the need to 'recover' the philosopher's work and his role in Italian culture and fascist thought.¹²² A day before the inauguration of the photographic exhibition, *Il Primato Nazionale*, CasaPound's newspaper, proclaimed: 'Giovanni is still with us, he is our inspiration and our guide, and he always will be'.¹²³

The evolution of liberal-fascism in the 1920s offers valuable insights for envisioning the future trajectories of neo-fascist and post-fascist movements, beyond Italy as well. The efforts to reconcile liberty with authority and the rule of law with a strong state, as advocated by intellectuals such as Gentile, Bottai, Rocca, Panunzio, and others, were pursued at the expense of democracy and pluralism. The defeat these proponents experienced in the early years of fascism underscored the impracticability of domesticating or normalizing fascism. By the onset of the war, beginning with the invasion of Ethiopia, former liberal-fascists revealed their core priorities by unreservedly supporting the imperialist endeavor. This historical episode demonstrates that while ultranationalism can be ideologically aligned with certain forms of political and economic liberalism, it remains fundamentally incompatible with democracy. This enduring lesson is crucial for understanding the dynamics of the contemporary far right.

120 Postenews, redazione, 'Francobollo per 80 anni dalla scomparsa di Giovanni Gentile,' *TC Poste*, April 10, 2024, <https://tgposte.poste.it/2024/04/10/giovanni-gentile-francobollo/>.

121 'Mostra Gentile: Doveroso omaggio a grande intellettuale,' *fratelli-italia.it*, April 16, 2024, <https://www.fratelli-italia.it/mostra-gentile-doveroso-omaggio-a-grande-intellettuale/>.

122 Valerio Benedetti, *Riprendersi Giovanni Gentile* (Milan: Aga, 2014). On the appropriation of Gentile by the neo-fascist and post-fascist right, see Rodolfo Sideri, *Con Mussolini e oltre: Giovanni Gentile da Marx alla destra postfascista* (Rome: Edizioni Settimo Sigillo, 2020).

123 Fergola, Stelio, 'Giovanni Gentile è eterno: Chi lo uccise si illuse del contrario,' *Il Primato Nazionale*, April 15, 2024, <https://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/approfondimenti/giovanni-gentile-e-eterno-chi-lo-uccise-si-illuse-del-contrario-277952/>.