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A. James Gregor: Mussolini's Intellectuals

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Some Issues in the Intellectual History of Fascism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁰ Laqueur, *Fascism*, p. 96.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁰ Neocleous, *Fascism*, p. xi.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁵ See the discussion in Neocleous, *Fascism*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁹ Eatwell, *Fascism*, p. xix.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

juncture that Clara Zetkin affirmed that Mussolini's success was not the simple consequence of military victory; it was "an ideological and political victory over the working class movement"⁴⁰

That did not mean, in the least, that Fascism employed an ideology that enjoyed superiority over that of Marxism. What it meant was that Marxists had not employed inherited "theory" to best advantage. Prior to its victory, Marxists had not understood the "essence" of Fascism. Once understood, there was an aggressive effort among members of the Third International to formulate a convincing account of Italian Fascism to better counteract its toxin. Unfortunately, there was never to be any consistency among the Marxist assessments. Marxist theoreticians settled on only one consistency: Fascism was deemed counterrevolutionary, opposed to the course of history. So disposed, Fascism had to be, necessarily, irrational—and, as irrational, contradictory.

Other than that, Marxists were to characterize Fascism in any number of overlapping, and sometimes mutually exclusive, fashion. At first it was seen as a rural, agrarian reaction, in the service of those possessed of extensive landholdings. Then it was understood to be enlisted in the service of the urban middle classes. Then it was envisaged the creature of industrialists. Then it was conceived the instrument of finance capitalists. Some even attempted to portray Fascism as the tool of all such interests in all their complexity.⁴¹

By the mid-1930s, most of the proffered Marxist interpretations of Fascism had become standardized under the weight of Stalinist orthodoxy.⁴² Fascism was the creature and the tool of "finance capitalism," struggling to survive during the end-days of the final crisis of capitalism.⁴³ As capitalism sank into its inevitable and irreversible decline, Fascism was compelled to ratchet down the nation's productive processes in the effort to sustain monopoly price levels. Finance capitalists, the owners of the means of production, demanded that Fascism limit production, curtail technological innovation and systematically destroy inventory. What was attempted was an artificially reduced, stabilized but profitable rate of con-

⁴⁰ Clara Zetkin, "Der Kampf gegen den Faschismus," in Ernst Nolte, ed., *Theorien ueber den Faschismus* (Berlin: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1967), p. 99.

⁴¹ See the discussion in Gregor, *Interpretations of Fascism*, chap. 5; and *The Faces of Janus: Marxism and Fascism in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), chap. 2.

⁴² See the comments in the "Introduction" to David Beetham, ed., *Marxists in Face of Fascism: Writings by Marxists on Fascism from the Inter-war Years* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), particularly p. 1.

⁴³ Georgi Dimitroff, "The United Front against War and Fascism," *Report to the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, 1935* (New York: Gamma Publishing Co., n.d.), p. 7, passim.

sumption. Completely cartelized or monopolized production was distributed in fixed quantities calculated to maximize profit.⁴⁴

The maximization of profit would be pursued at the cost of technological proficiency and productivity. That would necessarily impair the efficiency and survival potential of Fascist military capabilities. Fascism was seen as an institutional irrationality, driving Italy into international conflict through irredentist demands while, at the same time, reducing the technological and industrial output of Italy's economic system to preindustrial levels—thus crippling any military potentialities the nation might have developed. Under Fascism, Italy would be reduced to a “lower technical and economic level” as a consequence of the constraints imposed by productive relations—property and distributive modalities—that had become obsolete.⁴⁵ Torn by the contradictions dictated by the “laws of history,” Fascism could only compel the economy of the Italian peninsula to spiral down into economic senescence. Whatever the consequences, Mussolini had no alternative but to drive the nation into catastrophic wartime destruction. Fascism was animated exclusively by political, economic, and military irrationality and an irrepressible impulse to collective violence. All of these notions easily fed into the passions of the Second World War.

For all that, there was to be no closure for those who sought a credible interpretation of Fascism, and its ideological expressions, in whatever form. During the quarter century that followed the Second World War, both Soviet and Chinese Communist Marxists began to reinterpret their understanding of Mussolini's Fascism, international capitalism, and the history of the twentieth century. Very soon the notion that Fascism was the inevitable product of capitalism in its final crisis was abandoned—and the conviction that capitalism would inevitably collapse because of its “internal contradictions” was similarly foresworn.

The economic growth rate in the post-World War Two West clearly discredited the belief that capitalism had been, or was, suffering its terminal crisis. Industrial capitalism had clearly entered an ascending trajectory of growth. It followed that the Fascism of the interwar years could hardly have been the product of a moribund capitalism.

By the mid-1960s, Soviet Marxists argued that Fascism was only one political form that contemporary capitalism might assume. More than that, they granted that Fascism was neither a creature nor a tool of finance capital. Nor was it a function of the ownership of property. Fascism, we were told, exercised power over Italy independent of whoever owned the

⁴⁴ R. Palme Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1934), pp. 225–26.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 103, 206–8.

means of production.⁴⁶ More than that, rather than supervising the productive and technological retrogression of Italian industry, Fascism administered its growth. By the beginning of the 1970s, we were told that rather than undermining productive output, “fascism really represented a development of capitalist forces of production. . . . It represented industrial development, technological innovation and an increase in the productivity of labor.” We were informed that after the First World War, Fascist Italy’s “industrial recovery . . . was the strongest in capitalist Europe” and after the Great Depression, its recovery “was quite spectacular.”⁴⁷

At about the same time, other Marxists informed us that after the First World War, Fascism emerged as “the *only* political form adequate to the new phase of capitalist development.” Fascism was “an objectively progressive, anti-capitalist, and . . . antiproletarian movement . . . that fulfilled an historical function. . . .” It was argued that Italian Fascism provided the conditions for a period of extensive growth on the peninsula that had only begun at the turn of the twentieth century. It was held that in the retrograde conditions of the economically underdeveloped peninsula, the notion of a socialist revolution was entirely counterproductive. Associated as it was with “trade union demands,” the account continued, socialism “hindered capitalist accumulation, prevented the modernization of the economic structure of the country, and completely ruined the petty bourgeois strata without offering them any opportunity. . . . Italian Fascism remained the only progressive solution.”⁴⁸

The most familiar claims had characterized Fascist thought as contradictory and incoherent—as a simple pastiche of themes, without any intrinsic meaning. Given the transformations that had proceeded over time, all of that was critically reviewed. Non-Marxists began to speak of Fascist thought as “fascinating,” as having elaborated myths “far more powerful and psychologically astute than that provided either by its liberal or socialist rivals.”⁴⁹ At about the same time, others affirmed that Fascism’s political ideology, “taken as a whole, represented a coherent, logical and well-structured totality.”⁵⁰ In 1997, others spoke of a “coherent body of thought” that lay behind the reigning stereotype of Fascist doctrinal irra-

⁴⁶ See the discussion and the source citations in Gregor, *The Faces of Janus*, chap. 3.

⁴⁷ Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship* (London: NLB, 1974), pp. 98–99.

⁴⁸ Mihaly Vajda, “The Rise of Fascism in Italy and Germany,” *Telos* no. 12 (Summer 1972), pp. 6, 9–10, 11, 12; see also Vajda, *Fascisme et mouvement de masse* (Paris: Le sycomore, 1979), pp. 73–78, 121–24.

⁴⁹ See J. T. Schnapp, “18BL: Fascist Mass Spectacle,” *Representations*, no. 43 (1993), pp. 90, 92–93.

⁵⁰ Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, p. 8.

tionality.⁵¹ Still others spoke vaguely of fascism's ideology as "relatively original, coherent and homogeneous."⁵² There was a tendency among more serious scholars to reevaluate the omnibus judgments about Fascist doctrine that had influenced "committed" scholars.

The "revisionism" that resulted was not uniformly welcomed. With the changes that were becoming more and more apparent in the field of fascism studies during the 1990s, some warned that they presaged a cynical and manipulative attack against decency and democracy.⁵³ Some scholars attempted to reconstruct a framework that might still capture the full malevolence that had been attributed to Fascism by making Fascism the direct ancestor of an inclusive ideological "right." That the right was irremediably evil remained prominent in the institutional memory of many intellectuals. By the early 1990s, as a consequence, there was a tendency among some thinkers in the advanced industrial countries to retreat to the antifascist formulations of the interwar years. There could be nothing "progressive" about fascism. It was not to be seen as discharging any "historic function." More than all that, its ideology was to be understood once again as devoid of reason, as fundamentally irrational, and as remorselessly homicidal.

In those years, a wave of new publications appeared, particularly in the anglophone countries, that sought to deliver a convincing interpretation of fascism that might still accommodate the notions so prevalent during the times of committed scholarship. There seemed to have been a genuine revulsion among some scholars to the thought that Mussolini's Fascism might be considered as having been "underpinned by a genuine intellectual base."⁵⁴

It is in that parlous state that the study of Mussolini's Fascism and the assessment of contemporary "extremism" finds itself. It is evident that many scholars concern themselves with the instances of senseless violence that trouble Europe and North America in the twenty-first century—terrorist attacks on innocents, murder at soccer matches, vandalism of houses of worship, attacks on immigrants, together with a host of other atrocities. To identify these criminal acts as "fascist" is neither informative nor does it advance the cause of their suppression. Beyond that, the entire notion that graveyard vandals and race-baiters are fascists does nothing to reduce the confusion that has traditionally attended the study of Italian Fascism.

⁵¹ Eatwell, *Fascism*, p. xix.

⁵² Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, p. xii.

⁵³ R.J.B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London: Arnold, 1998), pp. 231–38.

⁵⁴ See the response by Bosworth, *ibid.*, p. 23.

Among the desperate efforts made to find the irrationality and malevolence that typifies contemporary mayhem in a Fascist source, some have seized on the work of Julius Evola.⁵⁵ Elevated to the stature of “the philosopher of Fascism,” Evola has been identified as one of the principal sources of “right-wing extremism.”

The fact is that whatever the case might be with respect to Evola’s connections with contemporary extremism, there are virtually no grounds for identifying him as a spokesman for Fascist doctrine. Such an identification has become possible only because Fascism as an historic reality has receded further and further into the mists of stereotypy and political science fiction. An entire quarter century of Italian history has taken on the banal qualities of a poor morality play. Fascism no longer appears as an historical reality, but becomes a waking horror, without substance and without an intellectual history.

In fact, Italian Fascism has very little, if anything, to do with either Julius Evola or modern extremism of whatever sort. Those today identified as “neofascists,” “cryptofascists,” and “parafascists” are, most frequently, not fascists at all, but persons suffering clinical afflictions.

There are a great many reasons why one could not expect to find Fascists among the marginal persons of the postindustrial Western communities. The problems that concerned the revolutionary intellectuals of the Italian peninsula at the advent of the twentieth century are no longer issues for their successors. In order to understand something of all that, one would have to be familiar with the evolving ideology of historic Fascism.

To begin to understand the ideology of Fascism—with whatever rationality and coherence it possessed—one would have to acquire some familiarity with its emerging substance as it traversed the entire course of its historic parabola. That would require familiarizing oneself with a substantial body of primary doctrinal literature: that of Italian nationalism, idealism, and syndicalism. Only by doing something like that—something that has only rarely been done—might one begin to understand how Fascist thought enjoyed the measure of coherence and intelligibility that it has been typically denied.

More than that, one would be required to provide a catalog of central themes to be found in the earliest formulations of Mussolini’s Fascism. Such a roster of political, economic, and social intentions would afford a convenient and responsible guide to the dynamic evolution that governed Fascism’s complex rationale.

All of that is available in the best of the doctrinal literature produced by some of Italy’s most gifted intellectuals after the termination of the

⁵⁵ See, for example, the treatment of Evola in Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, pp. 47, 51, 69, 147, 152, 169, 172; Eatwell, *Fascism*, pp. 253–55, 263, 270, 313–14, 319, 321, 341.

First World War. The fact is that much of Fascism's rationale, as Zeev Sternhell has persuasively argued, had been "fully elaborated even before the movement came to power."⁵⁶ Internationally celebrated scholars such as Giovanni Gentile, a philosophic nationalist and idealist, and Roberto Michels, a revolutionary syndicalist, had both contributed to its initial articulation and were to influence its subsequent development.

Given the intellectual gifts of those who contributed to its articulation, it would be hard, for example, to find the simple advocacy of violence and war in the ideology of historic Fascism. Whatever rationale for violence one does find in the doctrinal statements of the best of Fascist thinkers is no more immoral than similar vindications found in the works of Marxists and revolutionaries in general.⁵⁷ Much the same might be said of the "irrationality" of Fascist thought. That more "contradictions" are to be found in Fascist ideology than any other is a claim that defies any kind of confirmation. Vaguenesses and ambiguities are found everywhere in the most sophisticated ideological argument. That granted, locating *formal* contradictions in those arguments becomes, for all intents and purposes, logically impossible.

Radiating outward, Fascist doctrine influenced, and was influenced by, such major intellectuals as Henri De Man. Growing out of the Marxism of Georges Sorel and the positivism of Vilfredo Pareto, Fascism, as a set of ideas, was to dominate the European world of ideas for almost three decades. In effect, to understand something important about the twentieth century is to understand something of the thought of half a dozen Italian intellectuals who produced the public rationale of Fascism between the time of its first appearance and its extinction in 1945.

However Fascism is judged by history, the movement, the revolution, and the regime itself had, at their disposal, as talented and moral a cadre of intellectuals as any found in the ranks of revolutionary Marxism or traditional liberalism. Those thinkers who fabricated the ideology of Fascism were gifted intellectuals—whose works were as interesting and as persuasive as any found in the libraries of contemporary revolution. To trace the development of their ideas is a responsibility of contemporary political theorists and intellectual historians.

⁵⁶ Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, p. 229.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Sergio Panunzio, *Diritto, forza, e violenza: Lineamenti di una teoria della violenza* (Bologna: Licinio Cappelli, 1921), where we find an account of a "theory of violence." I have provided a brief account of some of Panunzio's ideas in A. James Gregor, "Some Thoughts on State and Rebel Terror," in David C. Rapoport and Yonah Alexander, eds., *The Rationalization of Terrorism* (Frederick, Md.: Aletheia Books, 1982), pp. 56–66. In this context, one must compare Leon Trotsky's *Terrorism and Communism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961).