Everyday Fascism in the 1930s: Centre and Periphery in the Decline of Mussolini's Dictatorship

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Abstract

From the first Italian Fascism proclaimed its aim of nationalising, centralising and moralising Italian politics. During the regime the cult of the ethical state was the most obvious and continuing expression of this ambition. This article argues that the decline of Fascism, already very evident by the end of the 1930s, was closely linked to the regime's failure to realise these objectives and that this failure was in large part a consequence of the difficulties experienced by Fascism in changing the relationship between the provinces and the centre in terms of the way in which power was perceived and employed in the provinces. It is argued that these difficulties were implicit in the way in which Fascism had been understood by its provincial supporters from the very beginnings of the movement.

Almost all studies of nineteenth-century Italy draw attention to the particular relationship between central government and local administration which developed after unification.[1] Although convinced of the need for administrative centralisation, the first governments after 1861 also believed that local autonomies had to be respected in order that the message of a victorious liberalism could spread down to the grass-roots of the towns and villages of a country largely new to liberal practices. Cavour's centralising thrust was blunted, therefore, by the desire of the politicians who followed him to tread carefully where local elites were concerned. The resulting tensions between the centre and the periphery produced a relationship between central and local government which was to characterise Italy for decades: thus, although local government was formally dependent on the centre, the latter was sufficiently weak to have to rely on the collaboration of local government and local notables in order to realise its objectives. Deals had to be struck and this required

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1 See G. Carocci, *Destra e Sinistra nella storia d'Italia* (Laterza: Rome-Bari, 2002), ch. 1; also R. Romanelli, ed., *Storia dello stato italiano dall'Unità ad oggi* (Donzelli: Rome, 1995), in particular the chapters by Romanelli and Melis.

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continuous mediation. A key figure in this mediation was the prefect; but much also turned around the *deputato* (parliamentary deputy). Many local representatives went to Rome and voted for government in exchange for favours – finances, public works, permits, recommendations – which reinforced their position (and thus the position of the government) among their own constituents. It was a system which risked baulking the national initiatives of central government, constantly held to ransom by local interests; just as significantly, it was an exchange in which the politician often saw his role in national politics as being essentially that of furthering the interests of his own backyard. Public and private thus became intertwined as it became increasingly difficult to distinguish the one from the other in a world made up of lobbies, interest groups, patrons and clients. After the turn of the century, many saw in Giovanni Giolitti the ultimate exponent of the politics of barter; by 1914 revulsion against the politics of liberal Italy became common on both the left and the right as critics attacked a system which seemed without either efficiency or ideals.[2]

The Fascist approach to centralisation

One of the principal objectives of the Fascist 'revolution' was the destruction of this system. Liberal Italy was vilified as corrupt, parochial, inadequate to the great national task, decadent and self-serving. The anti-political attitude which so much characterised early Fascist ideology drew its inspiration from this unforgiving analysis; if liberal Italy had represented politics as such, then Fascism was having none of it. Taking up themes which had been developing in certain nationalist circles before the First World War, Fascists argued that political parties and associations, even where they were not openly subversive as were the socialists, were divisive and constituted a fragmentation of the national spirit.[3] According to this analysis, national unity of intent was consistently sacrificed on the altar of a selfish and divisive local factionalism which did nothing but debase political practice. It followed from this that the parliamentary system was in reality nothing other than a formal representation of local interests and should be destroyed, and that national interest would best be served by a single, centralised, hierarchically organised political grouping which subsumed and reconciled in itself all previously conflicting interests.

This, at least, was the theory. In reality, of course, Fascism was itself very much a movement which developed from a provincial base and which represented different regional and local interests. Prior to the 1922 March on Rome, Fascism was slow to understand its national potential, and the provincial dimension remained one of its defining characteristics. Almost everywhere Fascism developed, it did so as a response to a particular local situation and assumed certain features as a consequence

2 For a summary of the problems posed for Giolitti by local interest groups see P. Corner, 'State and Society 1901–1922', in A. Lyttelton, ed., *Liberal and Fascist Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 17–29.

3 Interesting comments on the way in which, before the First World War, the national discourse and the associations of civil society seemed to be pulling in very different directions can be found in A. Lyttelton, 'Liberalism and Civil Society in Italy: From Hegemony to Mediation', in N. Bermeo and P. Nord, eds., *Civil Society before Democracy* (Oxford and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 61–81.

of that situation. The virulent anti-socialism typical of the Po valley was not the only determining factor. In certain provinces of Tuscany and Umbria, Catholic sentiment, focused around the Partito Popolare, was the issue; in the South and in Sardegna, the role of the organisations of demobbed soldiers served to give a special orientation to the *fasci*; in Turin, Fascism had to deal not only with a strong working-class tradition, but also with a Piedmontese aristocracy and bourgeoisie with very clearly defined traditions. Agrarian and urban Fascism often sprang from very different stimuli, as did moderate and radical Fascism. As a result, from the first, Fascism, which preferred to define itself by what it was against rather than by what it was for, was different things to different people. Precisely because of its origins linked to individual provincial situations, Fascism tended to be at least partially defined for its supporters by its role in that situation. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the features of Fascism in its early years was that of dissidence and internal struggle. Discussions about the role to be played by the movement developed almost from the start. Sometimes the discussions were resolved by expulsions, but frequently they were of such intensity that they ended with physical clashes, on occasions giving rise to death or injury.

The need to establish discipline, to stamp out dissidence and to control factionalism within a highly variegated movement was one of the first imperatives of Mussolini on gaining power. The story of how this was attempted is already well known.[4] In part it was a question of reining in the lawlessness of the squads, of taming the independence of provincial bosses (called the *ras*) who had created their own fiefs by force of arms and saw no reason to renounce their independence, of settling internecine disputes between rival groups of provincial Fascists. But the realisation of centralisation and normalisation was far from straightforward. Many squads remained recalcitrant to the discipline of the newly formed Fascist militia (the MVSN) and certain of the provincial *ras* were too powerful to touch without jeopardising Fascist control of their provinces and sparking off serious internal friction in the movement. At an ideological level, the clash between revisionists and intransigents produced commissions of inquiry, expulsions and even the organised beatings of prominent representatives of the movement. The crisis surrounding the killing in 1924 of Giacomo Matteotti further complicated the issues, with Mussolini forced back to reliance on many of those elements within Fascism that he had been trying to check. If, with the speech of 3 January 1925, he managed to outmanoeuvre the party hardliners and entrust the role of repression of opposition to the institutions of the state, it was at the cost of having to appoint Roberto Farinacci, one of the princes of provincial Fascism and, above all, the principal advocate of the primacy of the party, to the position of party secretary.

Both Farinacci's period as party secretary (1925–6) and that of Augusto Turati (1926–30) were to be of critical importance in the struggle against the 'old politics' of factionalism and political division and in the efforts to form a disciplined and centralised structure for the regime. At one level, this campaign concerned the relationship between local federations and the national party; at another, it concerned

4 A. Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power. Fascism in Italy 1919–29* (London: Weidenfeld, 1973), chs. 6–11.

the relationship between the party and the state. Farinacci, an intransigent advocate of the 'Fascistisation' of the state, fully supported the idea of a monolithic and well-disciplined hierarchical party, and worked towards that end, but, as a *ras* himself, he was not prepared to see the emasculation of the provincial structures. On the contrary, the attacks he levelled against local notables, industrialists, freemasons and intellectuals were meant to purge the provincial federations of their moderate and demo-liberal fellow travellers.[5]

While the restoration of discipline within the party was undoubtedly welcome to Mussolini, Farinacci's emphases, which favoured the violent wing of the *squadristi*, the members of the original action squads (where Farinacci's own power base lay), could not be tolerated indefinitely without provoking serious tensions within the movement. It was no accident that his successor was a relatively second-order Fascist, with less of a marked position to defend. Turati, in fact, pursued the aim of achieving a disciplined party, but his keyword – the 'depersonalisation' of local situations – indicated the degree to which he saw his task as being that of controlling the personal ambitions of local Fascist bosses in order to arrive finally at an administrative stabilisation of the movement. To this end he inaugurated a wide-scale purge of fractious elements, closing down provincial newspapers linked to prominent Fascist leaders and attacking local autonomies. In the course of four years he expelled around 100,000 militant Fascists, many of them fairly senior in the party, and employed Rome-based political commissars to resolve situations of provincial conflict. Further, in a massive changing of the guard he imposed the principle of appointment to office from above, banning any kind of local electoral process. His objective – the realisation of a highly organised, standardised party, essentially docile and complementary to the workings of the state machine – required the definitive end of provincial factionalism. In fact, analysis of those expelled under his secretariat suggests that his criterion of operation was much less that of adherence to any political line – pro-moderate or anti-intransigent – than that of the construction of an efficient and well-controlled provincial party organisation.

The years between 1925 and 1930 can rightly be seen as the years in which the Fascist regime defined itself; as such they were very much the decisive years. The curbing of many of the pretensions of the party was undoubtedly a central part of this definition. Appointment to office from above, rather than through election, was only one aspect of a process which, at the administrative level, placed the provincial federations on a distinctly subordinate position in respect of the central party machine. The 1927 government circular which stated that the prefect was the senior administrative figure in the province clearly undermined the authority of the *federale* (the provincial party leader) – representative of the revolution but still apparently obliged to bow to the wishes of one of the figures of traditional state authority. The invention of the figure of the Fascist *podestà* (mayor), usually a person of some local prestige although appointed from the centre in consultation with the

5 On Turati as PNF secretary see S. Lupo, *Il Fascismo. La politica di un regime totalitario* (Rome: Donzelli, 2000), chs. III–IV; also P. Morgan, 'Augusto Turati', in F. Cordova, ed., *Uomini e volte del fascismo* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1980), 475–519.

prefect, also served to weaken the authority of the *federale*.[6] All were measures which were intended to put the PNF (Partito Nazionale Fascista) firmly in its place. When Turati was removed as party secretary in 1930, it appeared that this intention had been realised in large part, that, at least superficially, the party had finally become an efficient and disciplined machine, possibly less dynamic than it had been but at least no longer permanently rocking the political boat and creating problems for Mussolini and the state authorities.

Factionalism and 'cannibalism'

So much for intentions. Here it will be argued that the tensions between local and national politics, which Fascism attempted to resolve in the second half of the 1920s in favour of national politics, were never fully overcome and that this had a profound impact both on the workings of Fascism during the 1930s and on the ways in which people looked at Fascism. The pages that follow deal mainly with the second half of the 1930s.[7] They thus address the question of a Fascism already established in power for more than a decade, apparently at its height with the proclamation of Empire, yet, as most scholars recognise, in many ways obstinately lethargic and immobile, requiring the 'totalitarian' impulse in the attempt to restore some kind of dynamism. Perhaps more than does the work of certain other scholars, these pages postulate a rapid Fascist decline towards the end of the 1930s – not terminal in the sense of the imminent loss of power but rather in the sense of the failure of the Fascist project.[8] Here we examine the years before Mussolini's June 1940 decision to go to war in alliance with the Nazis and argue that the crisis of Fascism that the war made so evident was already well under way before the outbreak of hostilities, and that this crisis was intimately linked to the relationship between local and national politics and the way in which Fascists used power at a local level. It is suggested that, despite all the grand nationalising rhetoric of Fascism, despite the depersonalisation of politics and the subordination of the party to the state, a large part of politics remained dominated by local issues and by considerations of local power. As we shall see, this was as true for the north as it was for the south, despite the very different ways in which Fascism had established itself in these areas. As a result the Fascist revolution, which had aimed at the reversal of the relationship between centre and periphery characteristic of the liberal era, ended up reproducing many of the same characteristics of that relationship, often in an even more accentuated form, with disastrous short- and long-term consequences for Italy.

This is not, of course, to suggest that nothing changed in the relationship between Rome and the provinces under Fascism – far from it. Fascism did undoubtedly realise a massive programme of centralisation of many political and economic decisions.

6 On the figure of the *podestà* see P. Morgan, 'I primi podestà Fascisti 1926–32', *Storia contemporanea*, 3 (1978), 407–23.

7 On the issue of the local/national conflict in the late 1920s and early 1930s, see the very comprehensive study of Lupo, *Il Fascismo*.

8 See, in particular, for viewpoints differing from the above, which tend to place the crisis after the entry in the war, R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*. II. *Lo stato totalitario 1936–1940* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), and E. Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo* (Florence: Nuova Italia, 1995).

Particularly in the 1930s the vast bureaucratisation involved in the creation of a large number of *enti* (government agencies), many of them associated with the extension of Fascist welfare, meant that, since the state was ever more present at the local level, local interests were also greatly restricted in their room for manoeuvre. There was an authentic process of nationalisation of politics which concerned almost every aspect of provincial life and did represent a real penetration of both state and party influence on local politics and administration.[9] At the same time, however, decisions taken at the centre were implemented on the ground by provincial party officials, local state administrators (such as the prefect), and economic and union organisations. It was at this point that the centralised mechanisms of state Fascism were exposed to obstruction, deviation or just plain abuse. As local interests and private lobbies sought to influence the manner in which government directives were put into operation in practice, the way was opened for local contrasts and rivalries to come to the fore again.

Here it is suggested that the problem of factionalism, so evident in the 1920s, was never really solved in the 1930s. On the contrary the capacity of Fascism to self-destruct through internal squabbles – what the Fascists themselves referred to as 'cannibalism'[10] or *beghismo* (broadly, 'troubles' in the sense of factionalism) – remained constant, even if it showed itself in slightly different forms. This had a critical impact on the way in which Fascism functioned; just as importantly it had a very strong impact on public opinion, determining the way in which people related to the Fascist movement and the degree to which they were prepared to support Fascist initiatives.

The potential for 'cannibalism' within the Fascist movement was never more evident than at the change of party secretaries. While Turati had worked, at least in part, to isolate Farinacci and to reduce the influence of the intransigent wing of Fascism, his removal in 1930 opened the way for vendettas, resulting in the expulsion or suspension of many thousands of those who had shown themselves too faithful to the Brescian secretary and in the readmission of many of those expelled by him. Thus a change of guard at the centre tended also to produce a sometimes rather violent change of guard at the provincial level, where old scores could be settled – at least for the moment. This qualification is pertinent because, as time progressed, people learned that their fortunes depended on those who were in favour in Rome at that moment and that this favour was highly susceptible to change. Those expelled or pushed out of local office knew, therefore, that their turn might come round again and that the contest was never really definitively resolved. As a consequence, a characteristic of the 1930s, as we shall see, is a constantly recurring battle between the 'ins' and the 'outs', each declaring themselves to represent the true Fascism.

9 Interesting comments on this phenomenon are to be found in P. P. D'Attorre, 'Aspetti economici e territoriali del rapporto centro/periferia', *Italia contemporanea*, 184 (1991), 406–19. Useful observations on the question of the study of local Fascisms by N. Gallerano and M. Palla are to be found in the same issue.

10 'The restlessness we see today . . . looks like a warning of an election, with accompanying attempts at committing cannibalism in the family'; Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF), Situazione Politica e Economica delle Province (SPEP), b. 14, Pisa, document rubber stamped '22 ottobre 1933'. English translations of the documents are mine throughout.

The period examined here, covered almost entirely by the secretariat of Achille Starace (1931–9), is often considered to have been a period of relative stability for Fascism. In a sense, this is undoubtedly true. Starace worked to produce an ordered and efficient party machine which could regiment, instruct and assist Italians across the peninsula. The reports which all *federali* had to submit to the party secretary every two months indicate that there was very detailed attention paid to all aspects of the provincial organisation's activities. Indeed, 'activity' seemed to be the important word, with *federali* listing every initiative, however small. Thus Starace was informed that, in Piacenza in May–June 1935, the activities of the Dopolavoro Provinciale (the Fascist leisure organisation) alone had been:

Number 1 game of *tamburello*
" 27 games of bowls
" 4 tug-of-war contests
" 2 canoeing competitions with 17 crews
" 2 games of football
" 1 athletics meeting
" 12 target shooting competitions
" 7 competitions plate shooting
" 19 excursions with 1,088 participants
" 21 tourist events with 2,851 participants
" 3 tourist motorcycling events with 66 participants
" 22 tourist cycling events with 2,962 enrolled
" 7 walking events with 125 participants[11]

The obsession with precise numbers was extended to the operations of public assistance; provincial secretaries would report on the number of portions of flour that had been handed out and the precise quantity of pasta, the number of bundles of firewood, and the total number of meals served daily to the deserving poor. Equally, the numbers of sewing classes held by the Fasci Femminili would be documented, as would the activities of the Fasci Giovanili (FGC), usually very similar to those of the *dopolavoro*. This was hardly the stuff of which heroes were made, but clearly the party *was* everywhere, as some at the time lamented; and, even given the natural tendency of *federali* to exaggerate their own efficiency, the party was justifying its existence by a very extensive organisation of activities, intended to involve large numbers of the population.

This image of a perfectly functioning mass organisation is hardly confirmed by other documents, however; indeed, the regular reports of the provincial *federali* are perhaps those which – understandably given their source – most provide the picture of a Fascism which really worked, largely because that picture is defined almost entirely by numbers. Elsewhere weaknesses begin to show through. One

11 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 14, Piacenza, 'Relazione Attività Bimestre Maggio-Giugno XIII'. Years in Roman numerals are those of the Fascist calendar, in which year I began on the day of the March on Rome, 28 October 1922.

problem, which came to the fore in the late 1920s and which became ever more evident as the next decade progressed, was the lack of competent Fascists able to undertake the task of provincial leadership. Although young men from the Gruppi Universitari Fascisti (GUF) were drafted into service in the party organisations during the course of the 1930s and there was to some degree the formation of a new group of young professional politicians, the quality of these people does not seem to have been high.[12] Both the anonymous *fiduciari* (police informers) and the prefects persistently recounted that good men were in short supply and that those who were in command were not up to the job. In Padua in 1931 it was reported that there were problems because of the 'difficulty of finding people who are able and ready to accept responsibility', while in the same province in 1932 it was stated that the *federale* Boldrin was hampered in his work by the fact 'of not having a sufficient number of able people available to whom he can entrust jobs involving direction. That depends . . . on the absenteeism of local people.'[13] A signed letter to Starace from Parma in 1934 was lapidary: 'we're in the doldrums because there are no new men'.[14] In 1935 it was the *federale* of Reggio Emilia himself who complained that 'The reorganisation (of the FGC) . . . is considerably hampered by the many restrictions in force which limit the choice of officers and by the impossibility in many places of finding people with the necessary qualities.'[15] Further south, in 1931 we find the *federale* of Reggio Calabria, Avv. Pasquale Faraone, termed 'a real nobody',[16] while, in the following year, the commander of the *carabinieri* (Divisione Reggio Calabria) reported that the *podestà* of Stignano (about whom more later) was 'unworthy of being in charge of public administration'.[17]

Neither prefects nor *fiduciari* were always without axes to grind, but the repeated accusations of incompetence or worse do appear to reveal a situation in which the

12 See, e.g., ACS, PNF, SPEP, b.18, Rieti, 'La situazione politica di Rieti', undated but 1940, where the *federale*, Giovanni Torda, 'coming from the GUF', is described as being without 'personal prestige [and] without any clear characteristic which would distinguish him from ordinary young people either for education or for ability'. A study of the effective contribution of a second generation of Fascist leaders fully confirms these conclusions: M. Palla, '"Fascisti di professione": il caso toscano', in *Cultura e società negli anni del fascismo* (Milan: Cordani, 1987), 31–49. L. La Rovere, *Storia dei GUF* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003), presents a more positive view of Fascist youth and argues that a new ruling group never really had time to assert itself.

13 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b.11, Padova, 'Estratto della relazione del mese di maggio 1931'; 'Estratto della relazione del mese di febbraio 1932'.

14 The situation never improved in Padua. In 1941 a PNF inspector wrote, 'Given the stagnant situation which has lasted long years already, few new men have emerged, despite the passage of many *federali*'; ACS, ibid., 'Ispezione alla federazione dei fasci di Padova, 29 e 30 marzo 1941'.

15 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b.18, Reggio Emilia, 'Relazione sull'attività svolta nel bimestre gennaio-febbraio XIII, 4 marzo XIII'.

16 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b.17, Reggio Calabria, 'Pro-memoria Situazione Politica della Provincia di Reggio Calabria', undated but 1931. Space prevents a full survey of the characteristics of the evolution of Fascism in the South; but see, for Calabria, V. Cappelli, *Il fascismo in periferia. Il caso della Calabria* (Rome: Riuniti, 1992), and, more generally, L. Ponziani, *Il fascismo dei prefetti. Amministrazione e politica dell'Italia meridionale* (Catanzaro-Rome: Donzelli, 1995), who examines the changes in social composition of Fascist administrations in the south during the 1920s.

17 ACS, ibid., Capitano Landolfi to *Federale* of Reggio Calabria, 8 March 1932.

creation of a political class able to replace that of liberal Italy (and able to replace some of the ageing *ras*) was proving extremely difficult. The 'new Fascist man' always remained very firmly on the horizon. The prefect of Piacenza, Montani, described the position clearly in 1937 (again attempting to explain why things were going so badly in the province):

> The solution to the problem of the rejuvenation of office holders . . . depends on the preparation of cadres, which is in large measure beyond the competence and the possibilities of the Prefecture, being principally the job of other organisations. This area is dominated by the most depressing squalor. In the course of the last fifteen years there has been no evidence at all of the emergence of people able to take on jobs of a certain importance. All the people used in the public administration belong to the category of those brought in from outside, not of those formed by Fascism.[18]

This was hardly a favourable comment on the work of the youth organisations in the province, but the same judgement was made in a further, unsigned document which found its way to Starace's desk, almost at the same time: 'The rejuvenation of office holders is impossible, not to say difficult, because of the absolute lack of preparation of the cadres. In this area the Party has been totally absent . . . we need action by leaders who have much more authority than those to whom extremely important sectors of provincial politics are entrusted.'[19] Nothing much happened, it seems; in 1939 the new *federale* of Piacenza was excused his bad performance on the grounds of his 'youthful age and inexperience'.[20] At much the same time it was reported in Modena that the formation of new leaders was proving impossible: 'the mass of the young people in Modena live without any contact with the Party; they are full of scepticism and couldn't care less. The generations which should have provided young leaders have distanced themselves and it's only and especially those young people who want to try to find a job who are interested in the party.'[21] Evidently even this kind of interest was not enough to guarantee competent new leaders.

The problem of renewal of the political class was more complex than suggested by the quotations above, however. New men were needed to satisfy a normal requirement of replacement, even if the Fascist generation of the early 1920s was still fairly young. But new men were also required because of the difficulties which had arisen in many provinces among that first generation of Fascism. The factionalism of provincial Fascism – that *beghismo* which was so much deplored by successive party secretaries – made it increasingly difficult to use the older men. Many of these were too compromised by long-lasting squabbles, by expulsions, readmissions, suspensions and warnings, to be usable as local leaders without provoking renewed squabbles among local Fascist groupings. Thus many able men were excluded from office because of the possible political implications of their appointment; the 'ins' and the 'outs' came almost to cancel each other out through a process of constant conflict.

18 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 14, Piacenza, Montani to Minister of Interior, 1 May 1937.
19 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 14, Piacenza, 3 June 1937.
20 ACS, ibid., relazione fiduciario, 22 Nov. 1939.
21 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 8, Modena, Pro-memoria, undated, but either 1939 or 1940.

This was the real meaning of 'cannibalism'; Fascist provincial organisations sometimes virtually destroyed themselves through perpetual internal squabbles.

An excellent example is provided by the province of Piacenza, where questions surrounding the 'historic' local leader, *squadrista* and client of Farinacci, Count Bernardo Barbiellini-Amidei, produced a decade of suspensions, expulsions, constant infighting between Fascist groups and, ultimately, paralysis. In 1937, the prefect, complaining that there were few competent Fascists available, observed that

> This painful phenomenon . . . has its origins here in the disagreements which have often come to look like real tragedy, as a result of which a great many well-prepared citizens have remained and remain distant from public life for fear of being involved in the struggles between factions. From the time of the well-known disturbances there has followed – and this has lasted for several years – a period of not wanting to know . . . [22]

Similarly in Modena the crisis provoked in the late 1930s by the lack of qualified people in the Federation was attributed to the effects of internal conflicts.

> This crisis, which had already . . . begun several years ago, has become much worse after the appointment of *Camerata* Feltri as *Federale*. His appointment, proposed by the people at the top of the party hierarchy at that time, provoked the exclusion of those elements who for years had decided everything in the province and in the city . . . This action [the appointment of Feltri] was well received because Modena Fascism had suffered under these leaders, whose sectarian and overly ambitious activity was not in accordance with the times.
>
> But after what we might call this purge, so much desired by many, there followed a selfish, exaggerated and persecutory activity which resulted in the exclusion of all those people, of all ages, who could have given some unselfish contribution of intelligent participation, so that Fascism became and has become simply the figure of the Segretario Federale, given that those kicked out have been hit very hard.[23]

The problem facing the central secretariat was not easily solved. In seeking to avoid, through fairly frequent rotations, the creation of situations where the *federale* became too wrapped up in local politics, the party secretary could look to make appointments among the few available promising local young men, but was likely to find that these, like the older professional figures of the province, were aligned – or became rapidly aligned – with one or other of the factions competing for control. Similarly a new administrator imported from outside found that he could only function as *federale* with the collaboration of the local Fascists. This inevitably implied a choice of collaborators, which would be interpreted as a choice of faction. And once identified as a representative of one or other faction he became the target of all kinds of hostile actions on the part of those who felt themselves excluded, impeding any effective pursuit of what were considered to be the appropriate policies.

Often the old *squadristi* represented a problem in this context. Frequently politically naive and unsophisticated, the men who considered that they had made the Fascist revolution found it difficult to accept that they were not always the people best suited to run local politics in later years. Finding themselves often pushed to one side by new

22 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 14, Piacenza, 3 June 1937.
23 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 8, Modena, Pro-memoria, undated, but either 1939 or 1940.

men with dubious (in their eyes) Fascist credentials, the *squadristi* represented a thorn in the side of many *federali*, perpetually claiming the privileges of primogeniture and denouncing the legitimacy of those who had stolen their birthright.

Sometimes the prefect would add to the difficulties of the *federale.* The above considerations about the inevitability of working with one group or another applied – inevitably – to an incoming prefect as well. But the problem was not only that of the formation of alliances. Although the circular of 1927 stated explicitly that the prefect was the highest representative of the state at provincial level, many *federali* were loath to accept a subordinate position, arguing that the Fascist revolution required that a Fascist party official be paramount. Conversely the prefect would attempt to defend his position, seeking either to ensure the appointment of a weak and compliant *federale* or attempting to assert the right of the prefect to determine the important decisions of the province. This contrast produced situations of tension in many places during the 1930s, with both *federale* and prefect complaining of the undue interference of the other in what were regarded as specific competences. Thus a confidential memo of 16 October 1930 informed the party secretary that 'The prefect of the Province [of Modena] Ernesto Perez thinks that the activity of the Segretario Federale is excessive and that it invades his area of responsibility. For the present, nothing to worry about, but it is probable that, very shortly, it will be necessary to intervene.'[24] While this was formally a contest between the authority of the state and that of the party, tensions could become particularly high when the prefect was himself not a career administrator but an appointee from the Fascist movement. Presumably feeling himself to be in some way doubly legitimated, a Fascist prefect could be exceptionally intolerant of an interfering *federale*. Very often this intolerance would be expressed in the usual way – by allying with the local enemies of the *federale*, thus rekindling old divisions, and by blocking any administrative initiatives deriving from the local party.[25]

Tensions were high in Piacenza between 1935 and 1938. In early 1938 the *federale*, Biaggioni, was reduced to writing long letters of complaint to Rome about the attitude of the prefect. He admitted that provincial administration was deficient, but argued that it was not his fault, which lay with the prefect, who was openly hostile.

> On various occasions he has allowed himself to make the following remarks to me:
> 'In Piacenza there is no political sense at all'– 'In Piacenza we've hit rock bottom' . . . 'The Federation doesn't know how to make good use of the intellectual element (referring to the members of the local Union Club which the prefect frequents, well-known for their antifascism)' – 'The people who command are the Prefects. The *Federali* have to do what the Prefects tell them' – 'The Prefect will not protect the Federale any longer' – 'You, *Federale*, are a person of modest education and capabilities' – And referring in general to the preparation and capabilities of the *Federali* of the country: '. . . of the 97 *segretari federali* in all Italy only around twenty are up to the job of educating the young people.'

24 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 8, Modena, Nota Riservata, 16 Oct. 1930.

25 On the role of the prefects, see P. Morgan, 'The prefects and party-state relations in Fascist Italy', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 3 (1998), 241–72.

Observing that 'a real dualism between Party and local Administrations in the province has been created', the *federale* could not hide the fact that the 'The prefect complains that the Federation doesn't do anything'.[26] In doing so he appears to have admitted more than he should, or simply to have confirmed the accusations made against him which were no doubt going to Starace from the prefect. In any event, Biaggioni was removed, Starace not failing to comment, however: 'I am still waiting for precise explanations, on the part of Prefect Montani, about the epithet "bastards" which he has felt obliged and able to apply to the leaders in the province.'[27] The prefect, Montani, remained in Piacenza until 1942, but reports subsequent to this incident speak of a province in which all enthusiasm had disappeared and where unexpressed hostilities impeded any political activity.

A situation of this type also developed in Reggio Emilia at the end of 1940. An inspector, sent from Rome to try to understand what lay behind the disagreements, interviewed both *federale* and prefect and concluded that there existed

> a tension which is really damaging to the interests of the province and which paralyses the entire activity of the Party, making the work of the *federale* pointless. This [the Party] is, in any case, authoritarian, exclusionary and closed to any suggestion or advice, even from collaborators, and ends up not only being without any good results, but stimulating absolutely negative ones.[28]

It was unsurprising that in such circumstances the so-called second generation of Fascism had difficulty in asserting itself. Most provincial Fascist federations carried within them such a reservoir of bitter disputes and unresolved hostilities generated during the early years that the pitch was totally queered for anyone attempting to establish a new mandate of authority. Often it proved as impossible to work with the 'old' men as it was to work against them. The resulting paralysis produced the Fascism for which Starace was often criticised (even by other prominent Fascists) – a Fascism which went through the day-to-day motions required by an organised and regimented society but with little conviction or enthusiasm.

Fascist faith and Fascist fortunes

Conviction – or as the Fascists put it, 'faith' – was a word much bandied about in the power struggles of the kind described above. The writer of a report and his friends were always the bearers of the true *fede fascista*, their enemies usually said to be totally unable to understand even the meaning of the term, or else they were accused of having betrayed the concept. *Fede* became a kind of coded message, encapsulating the possession, or the lack, of all those qualities which, it was assumed, went towards the making of the good Fascist. What those qualities were was usually not made explicit, presumably because their identification could have made it easier to contest their presence or absence. But beyond the references to *fede fascista* there is little or nothing in the party documents for the 1930s and early 1940s which could be related

26 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 14, 8 Jan. 1938, 'Relazione generale del Fascismo Provinciale'.
27 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 14, Piacenza, Starace to Buffarini Guidi, 16 Jan. 1938.
28 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 18, Reggio Emilia, Relazione 12 Dec. 1940, signed Mancini.

to Fascist ideology. What strikes the reader is the degree to which any discussion of policy is absent; provincial politics is conducted entirely at the level of personalities and reputations, of local intrigues and vendettas. In a way this is hardly surprising, given that all major decisions were taken in Rome and simply handed down to the *federali* and the prefects for execution; the meaning of the defeat of liberal democracy and the establishment of a hierarchically organised dictatorship had been just that. Provincial Fascists were not there to discuss, they were there to obey. Yet, given that this was certainly the case, it raises the question as to why tensions among Fascists in and out of the local federations were frequently so high. If there was really so little to decide, what were the local struggles all about?

Here the documents are very much more illuminating. A constituent part of *beghismo* was the production by one faction of dossiers of accusations of wrongdoing on the part of the opposing group. Since politics – in the sense of alternative policies – was not in discussion, the accusations invariably concerned the administrative capacities and/or moral qualities of the person or group in question, either related to their role in local government or to their personal behaviour. Given the type of material, the truth of the accusations is often in doubt (although at times confirmed by party inspectors and other third parties) but the overall sense is clear. Very predictably, the local struggles were about the control of power at the provincial level, with all that that implied. This reminds us that Fascism had always been an uneasy alliance between interest and ideology and that many Fascists had seen the movement, almost from the start, as a vehicle for social (and economic) promotion. Even the first *squadristi* – those who were strongly motivated by patriotic sentiment – were not slow to recognise that their victories could be used to achieve a good position. On the one hand this ambition could be justified as the necessary guarantee of the continuation of the Fascist revolution; on the other it could be seen as the just reward for personal risk and dedication.

This was not just a question of status in provincial society, although that was undoubtedly involved; a great deal more was in play. As the representatives of central government, *federale* and prefect between them controlled or presided over not only the party machine but also most of the key economic institutions of the province. If they did not control them directly, they had great influence, either because of their presence on governing boards, or through the possibility of influencing the appointment of leading figures. It was the right to exercise this kind of power without interference which prefect, *federale* and rival Fascist factions contested between themselves. In this context, it must be remembered that, as the state expanded its functions under Fascism with the enormous growth in the number of *enti* and associations, the role of those who were in effect the administrative link between central government and the province became more rather than less important, representing an obligatory point of passage both towards and away from Rome. *Federale* and prefect exerted enormous power over appointments, over the allocation of financial flows from the centre towards local government such as those made for public works, over the ways in which local financial and commercial interests were represented at the centre, and so on. Under Fascist centralisation Rome might decide

policy, but how those decisions were put into practice in the province often depended on choices made by the local representatives of central government, and – in most issues – these enjoyed sufficient discretionary power to make their own preferences assume a great importance.

For the all the rhetoric about 'Fascist faith', therefore, the real battle in the provinces was about far more material matters. This was true of the struggles between rival Fascist factions, between the 'ins' and the 'outs', each eager to enjoy the domination of the local political and economic scene, and was often true of the contests between prefect and *federale* (although here a certain amount of *amour-propre* also seems to have come into play – as we have seen, many prefects affected to despise the unsophisticated *federali*). The tactic employed by rivals was invariably that of trying to demonstrate first administrative incompetence and then, if possible, moral turpitude. Attacks levelled at *gerarchi* (Fascist Party leaders) and *podestà* often started by stressing that they had not known how to select the right collaborators. Segretario Federale Bofondi of Reggio Emilia was accused of having surrounded himself with freemasons, profiteers, 'incapable people'[29] and 'unworthy elements'.[30] But it was rare for the accusations to stop there. Sometimes the *federale* would be accused of arrogance in the exercise of his functions – an accusation which usually came from people who believed they had as much claim to command in the name of Fascism; 'with arrogance we are threatened with prison, suspension [from the party], disciplinary actions, and as a consequence it is necessary to keep quiet in order not to lose our modest jobs . . . we are forced to have resort to the cowardly but necessarily anonymous letter so as not to have to put up with sabotage by our leaders, the loss of our jobs and other infamous actions'.[31] Most often letters of denunciation contained complaints about abuse of office in terms of lifestyle – use of expensive cars bought with public funds, money wasted on banquets and private dinners, holidays and – inevitably – dark hints, or worse, about womanising. Invited to look into accusations concerning the habits of the *podestà* of Stignano in 1931, the *carabinieri* of Reggio Calabria reported that he was widely known to have seduced at least eight young women (who were named), some married, others from the same family, in the course of the previous ten years, buying off husbands and arranging marriages when the women became pregnant. He was apparently so much feared that no one dared to stand up to him.[32] An anonymous correspondent from Padua explained to Starace in 1935 how to get a job from the *federale*: 'Your son wants a job? He needs to have a pretty mother or a sister.'[33] A signed letter to the Duce from Perugia in 1938 complained that the prefect and the president of the province passed their time together eating in smart restaurants, hunting and driving around in the company of

29 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 18, Reggio Emilia, 'Sulla situazione generale in Reggio Emilia', 29 Dec. 1933.
30 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 18, Reggio Emilia, 'Reggio Emilia', 2 March 1934.
31 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 14, Pisa, anonymous letter to Muti, 22 Nov. 1940.
32 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 17, Reggio Calabria, Capitano Landolfi to *Federale* of Reggio Calabria, 8 March 1932.
33 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 11, Padova, letter to Starace 15 Nov. 1935.

'vulgar' women.[34] The *federale* of Piacenza came in for a similar attack in 1937 in the report of a police *fiduciario*:

> . . . it turns out that the Segretario Federale dedicates all his activity to the sport of *tamburello* and to trips to the Adriatic beaches . . . in order to pass long days in attractive female company.
>
> It is extremely well-known in the whole town and province that one of his most strenuous activities consists in visiting the wife of the *Fiduciario* of the local Fascist group 'Filippo Corridoni', geom. Ercole Manfredi, without taking into account that the use of the Offices of the federation for romantic encounters is not a mystery for anyone – the public watches the privilege of precedence, and the interminable interviews, given to persons of the female sex known for their easy ways.[35]

But the most common accusation was that of *affarismo*, of using public office in order to further private financial interest. From Naples in 1934 came a signed letter complaining about the fact that the public officials had all set themselves up very well: 'all the citizens have noticed that there is not one of them who – thanks to the position held – has not procured a life of ease and comfort'.[36] A letter to Giovanni Marinelli, a PNF central organiser, undated, but clearly from 1936 or 1937, declared that 'The Federation of Perugia is a den of thieves', and went on to detail, with chapter and verse, the prison records, for theft and criminal deception, of certain of the local leaders. It was alleged that, in Reggio Calabria, 'the Bosses go round by car, they couldn't give a damn about anything and the only thing they know how to do is to extort money with threats'; the Federation itself was generally known as 'the Federation of the blood-suckers'.[37] Another letter of 1940, signed by four Fascists, went further: 'Here, once upon a time, the underworld was controlled by Michele Campolo; now it's worse because there is an organisation of no-goods favoured and protected by the law. The Police station and the prefecture are two sewers, the *carabinieri* even worse: they only help those who pay them . . .'[38] Forced to defend himself from such allegations, the *federale* wrote that, on taking up office, he had had arrested 'three employees of the Federation involved in barefaced robbery' and that he had found a situation in which 'nepotism [and] the most barefaced favouritism' was the order of the day.[39]

Letters to the party headquarters are filled with suggestions that local officials had a very original interpretation of the meaning of 'Fascist sacrifice' and that they were filling their pockets and distributing contracts for public works and Fascist-sponsored building projects to friends and family. A group of 'elderly Fascists' in Naples – clearly belonging to the 'outs' – wrote to the new PNF secretary Ettore Muti in late 1939, complaining that the party had consigned the city to '*federali* who love luxury too much and who have a well-padded wallet where their heart should be, to councillors

34 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 13, Perugia, protocol dated 27 July 1938.
35 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 14, Piacenza, 13 Sept. 1937.
36 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 9, Napoli, Volanti to Starace, 21 July 1934.
37 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 17, Reggio Calabria, letter signed 'Alcuni Malcapitati' to Starace, 23 March 1938.
38 ACS, ibid., letter signed by four Fascists, 21 April 1940.
39 ACS, ibid., Cassini to Mussolini, 24 May 1940

who only think about themselves and look to enrich themselves and their relations'.[40] A year later an anonymous writer from Pomigliano d'Arco (Naples) accused the *Segretario federale* of selling jobs to desperate unemployed workers, 'L[ire]500 for a manual worker, L 1500 for a building worker, price to be arranged for apprentice mechanics, etc., (besides gifts and other things)'.[41] The *Federale* of Modena, Feltri, was replaced in 1940 after a series of scandals involving mixing marble dust in the flour (his cousin was the principal mill owner of the province), selling 'red' petrol reserved for agricultural uses illegally to others (he was the manager of the local AGIP agency), and giving contracts for building work to his brother-in-law.[42] An anonymous letter from Pescara accused the *federale* of building up a considerable fortune by allocation of contracts to a frontman; 'in reality the contracts are all going to him'. Even the 1940 national campaign to draw up an inventory of copper brought cynical (and ungrammatical) reactions: 'They say that the identification of the copper will soon be followed by its confiscation. In this way, with one pretext or another, [the same thing will happen] as happened with our wedding rings, required for the Fatherland, but a lot of that precious metal changed destination, thanks to the efforts of many important Fascists on whom it is impossible to effect a real and proper control.'[43]

Although the truth of many of these allegations can be doubted – the denouncer's motives were obviously suspect and much was no doubt typical small-town back-biting – in many cases official inspections and enquiries revealed the extent to which the provincial Fascist organisations were being utilised for personal advantage. Feltri, the *federale* of Modena, was dismissed after enquiries about the irregularities listed above, suggesting that they were confirmed. Greater detail is provided by the inspection of the Pisa Federation in 1941, which revealed that large sums of money were unaccounted for in the registers and had simply disappeared, that the party was extorting contributions from local industrialists with threats, that 'grants' were made to individuals with no obvious justification, that party officials were paying themselves unwarranted 'subsidies', that cars were used without any documentation of their missions, that the Gruppo Universitario Fascista (which had a separate account) was regularly paying out large amounts to individuals for no obvious reason and was spending money on trips, hotels and meals to an unjustified level.[44]

The similarity of the allegations made against Fascist bosses in so many provinces must lead to the conclusion that there was a great deal of truth in them. The sources are not entirely reliable; anonymous letters are obviously suspect and there is sometimes reason to doubt the accuracy of the reports of the informers – they had

40 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 9, Napoli, 13 Dec. 1939.

41 ACS, ibid., 18 July 1940.

42 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 8, Modena, report from informer 16 Jan. 1940, and report of inspectors, undated but January 1940.

43 Compare with accusations levelled at one of the leading members of the federation of Modena concerning the collection of gold wedding rings – a person said to live in 'terror that you get to know how much he gained personally from the collection of gold carried out by his group'; ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 8, Modena, Guido C. to unnamed Camerata, 27 March 1938.

44 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 14, Pisa, 'Ispezione amministrativa', 5 May 1941.

to write something to justify their existence (and, in some but not all cases, their payment) and it was presumably better to write what was interesting, from the point of view of the authorities, than what was boring.[45] That said, the fact that the drift of such a mass of letters and reports is in the same direction lends credence to them, and what they say is often, in effect, substantiated by the more official reports provided by the *federali* themselves, the prefects and the police. The allegations suggest that, like many of the *ras* who rose to national prominence – even the *soi-disant* pure and intransigent Farinacci, for instance[46] – Fascist officials at a local level regularly used their positions for personal advantage. This would explain the bitter nature of local struggles, directly linked to questions of personal fortune. It would also explain why people, when they fell from favour, so frequently lamented that they were also ruined financially. But a further important point is to be gleaned from the anonymous letters and the reports of the *fiduciari*. These show that the belief that the provincial Fascist authorities were corrupt and self-serving was generalised at popular level. Certainly, the fact that, in the absence of political differences, the repeated struggles between local figures were fought almost entirely on the basis of attempts to destroy the reputation of the rival meant that the Fascist dirty linen was continuously being aired in public. The intimate language of local Fascism was the language of calumny – and clearly a lot of the mud stuck.

Popular reactions to Fascist administration

This could not but affect popular attitudes to the Fascist movement. What seems to have been a fairly generalised perception that Fascist officials in the provinces were principally interested in furthering their own interests and those of their immediate circle was bound to produce cynicism and hostility on the part of those who remained outside the privileged circle. It was a cynicism compounded by the fact that the continual rotations of officials necessitated by the attempts of the party to resolve provincial squabbling and to stem corruption served in any case to undermine the authority of the party. Leaders came and leaders went – Naples had fifteen *federali* in less than ten years – but the squabbles, the denunciations and the suspicions remained constant. For some – for the workers of Reggio Emilia or Padua, for example – the condition of the party was no surprise; even though many of them put on the black shirt and took the Fascist card because they needed work, they retained their former political allegiances.[47] But for many others – those perhaps who had initially suspended judgment on Fascism or even supported it – the disappointment was evident. For much of the 1930s, in fact, many reports from the provinces underline the lack of popular support for the regime. Sometimes this was related more to factionalism than

45 On the methodological problems related to the use of the reports of the *fiduciari*, see S. Colarizi, *L'opinione degli italiani sotto il regime 1929–1943* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1991), 14–26. The study contains a larger sample of the kind of documents used here.

46 See Lupo, *Il fascismo*, 300–2, for Farinacci's rise to riches.

47 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 18, Reggio Emilia, 'Reggio Emilia', 18 Oct. 1939; 'there are a great many workers who, although they wear the black shirt in order to get work, as they themselves say, still think and feel like socialists'.

it was to corruption. A detailed account of the situation in Reggio Calabria in 1931 explained that continued instability and perpetual feuding had provoked a disastrous flight from the movement.

> In many communes . . . we note the phenomenon that, for a certain period of time, almost all the citizens held the membership card of the PNF, to the extent that the organization was transformed very rapidly into a battleground between the factions which controlled the area. The consequences [were] easy to imagine. Total decadence in the organization, lack of seriousness in the disciplinary measures, deficiencies in the cadres, given that all the honest people who might have been able to make a notable contribution had fled.[48]

As a consequence 'The *fasci* have been abandoned, closed now for months . . . ' and 'The masses have lost confidence, are disillusioned, offended, blocked . . . '[49] In Padua in February 1931 it was reported that, after rival factions had actually come to blows ('The wounded and bruised have been taken to the hospital to avoid giving publicity to the events'), 'The workers remain on the edge of things, disgusted, and the subversives take advantage of the situation to make their case.'[50] A letter from a *squadrista* from Reggio Emilia at the end of 1933 spoke of a 'deaf' Fascism, and stated that 'the inhabitants complain above all that from 1922 until today the divisions, the different groups within the Party itself, have produced and are producing a state of affairs which goes against the interests and the most reasonable wishes of the citizens themselves'.[51]

In other cases the emphasis is put on the link between corruption, *affarismo* and hostile popular opinion. After recounting the scandal surrounding the *federale* of Piacenza, the police informer concluded, 'The deepest squalor and the most crass indifference are nowadays . . . the most striking aspects of the situation in Piacenza, which makes you think seriously of something dead'.[52] One of the first Fascists of Vicenza wrote, at the end of 1938, that 'I have to tell you that the Party is gradually becoming a dead weight . . . The things that are especially criticized and provoke bad feeling are the nepotism and the system of *raccomandazioni*.'[53] The same situation existed in Modena where the Prefect told the Party Secretary that the accusations levelled at *Federale* Feltri were ruining the local party; 'They have generated a total loss of confidence. Bread with flour containing marble dust, oil, petrol, *gerarchi*, Fascism, all one big minestrone of people and facts, presented on every kitchen table, damaging to certain people but above all damaging to the Party.'[54] In Naples, in 1938, the same 'elderly Fascists' quoted above, wrote, 'Everywhere, in homes in suburbs and even in the convents they swear at and curse our Duce and if it goes on like this the people will rebel . . . it's not right that the people suffer because of a *federale* who

48 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 17, Reggio Calabria, 'Pro-memoria Situazione Politica della Provincia di Reggio Calabria', undated but 1931.
49 ACS, ibid.
50 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 11, Padova, 8 Feb. 1931.
51 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 18, Reggio Emilia, 'Sulla situazione generale di Reggio Emilia', 29 Dec. 1933.
52 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 14, Piacenza, 13 Sept. 1937.
53 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 11, Padova, 'Vicenza: Spirito Pubblico', 21 Dec. 1938.
54 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 8, Modena, Prefect Passerini to Starace, 24 July 1938.

doesn't know how to be a *federale* . . . it's not right that because of the authorities who don't know their duty, because of these newly enriched parasites, the people's hearts are filled with hatred'.[55] At Pomigliano d'Arco in 1940 there were riots among the workers, which some attributed to the bad working of the labour exchange. The anonymous report on the events related the problems instead to the way in which the *federale* was selling jobs to the unemployed: 'the principal reason for the worker discontent is to be sought in the systematic *affarismo* of the local Fascist bosses'.[56]

People were afraid to react against this kind of injustice and exploitation. 'People keep quiet because they are frightened'; they were all too aware that there were spies everywhere.[57] And violence had never ceased to be a constituent part of Fascism. Even before *squadrismo* was given its official second wind in the late 1930s, *federali* made no secret of the fact that they used violent methods against opponents; indeed, some were clearly proud of the fact. Bofondi of Reggio Emilia wrote to Starace in 1934, stating that a presumed 'subversive' had died after throwing himself out of a third floor window in order to avoid arrest (the usual story); other suspects, on whose account it was not possible to prove anything, would be 'dealt with *in our usual fashion*' within the four walls of the Fascist headquarters.[58] A handwritten letter from a Fascist in Padua to Starace in late 1935 recounted that 'someone was beaten up because he asked for a foreign newspaper'.[59] In the same town in 1937, during a ceremonial march of the soldiers returning from Africa, 'two old men were beaten up because, without realising it, they did not take their hats off as the column passed by'. The same account finished with the statement, not linked to anything in particular, 'At midnight, two foreigners were beaten up.'[60]

But, if it is clear that the open violence of Fascism did not finish with the March on Rome but continued throughout the twenty years of the regime, people probably feared less the *manganello* (cudgel) than other reprisals. Again from Padua, a document of April 1938 revealed that 'all employers are obliged to denounce [to the authorities] those employees who refuse to join the Party'.[61] In both Naples and Reggio Calabria reports indicated that people could not speak out because they feared for their jobs; the withdrawal of the union card or the *libretto del lavoro* (work permit) could have disastrous consequences for the family. Other kinds of reprisal were possible. When, in 1937, the *federale* of Padua visited a poor area of the city to watch the distribution of food by the Fascist authorities, he was unwise enough to ask an elderly woman what she thought of the quantity and the quality of the produce distributed. 'She had

55 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 9, Napoli, 'Fascisti anziani' to Muti, 13 Dec. 1939.
56 ACS, ibid., 18 July 1940.
57 ACS, Ministero dell'Interno (Min.Int.), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (DGPS), Polizia Politica, Materia (1927–44), pacco 220, Firenze, 17 March 1939: 'the general impression of being spied on everywhere and the mania, or rather the obsession, of believing that everywhere there are attentive ears listening'.
58 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 18, Reggio Emilia, 13 Sept. 1934, underlining in original text.
59 ACS, PNF. SPEP, b Nov. 19 Padova, Baseggio to Starace, 21 Oct. 1935.
60 ACS, ibid., 18 May 1937.
61 ACS, ibid., informer's report to Starace, 23 April 1938.

the courage to tell the truth about both the quantity and the quality, both deficient.' The next day the woman had her *libretto di assistenza* (welfare book) withdrawn.[62]

All in all, the impression that emerges from a study of the local federations in the 1930s and early 1940s is anything but that of a perfectly oiled machine, efficiently carrying out at a local level the orders of central government, creating and cultivating consensus and directing the new generation towards the future Fascist paradise of the New Italy. Overall, the workings of many of the provincial federations would appear to have been very irregular and at times totally chaotic. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the impression that, by the end of the 1930s, the wheels were falling off Fascism. This was not, on the whole, a question of a recrudescence of anti-fascism; it was much more a question of simple public apathy. The public image of the local *gerarchi* was such that people found little to stimulate them and much to repel them. In the absence of any prospect of change, a widespread reaction seems to have been simply to turn off.[63] For a regime which proposed to mould people into the form of the New Fascist Man through participation, this was a disaster.

As a consequence of apathy the provincial federations lost contact with the people they controlled. This tendency had been evident in some areas from the beginning of the 1930s. At that point it occurred in provinces where there were particularly marked contrasts between the *gerarchi* and where Fascist energies were put almost entirely into conducting internal intrigues. Thus in Padua, which went through a serious crisis in early 1931, a special commissioner noted among the population 'General apathy about public affairs . . . Little enthusiasm in their 'faith' . . . Total disorganisation'.[64] Intervention from Rome and a prompt rotation of officials would often restore the situation, at least for the time it took for factions to reorganise and re-emerge. This did occur in Padua, but by 1934 it was again reported that 'The organisations live a meagre existence and carry on without any enthusiasm, the best people who don't have interests to look after distance themselves and Fascism is reduced to something purely external.'[65] In Naples, in March 1934, very few people turned out to listen to a broadcast speech of the Duce and a *fiduciario* spoke of the 'worrying phenomenon of apathy and absenteeism among the population', noting in the city 'a spiritual climate of Muslim fatalism, cold, reserved and hostile'.[66] In the later 1930s, the reports of public disillusion rose. Economic hardship and high levels of unemployment in many places increased the expectations placed in local officials and made the corruption, inefficiency and factionalism of the provincial federations all the more intolerable. Even at the time of the Ethiopian war, popular attention seemed to be directed

62 ACS, ibid., 17 Feb. 1937.

63 De Felice notes this process. 'Beneath the appearance of an extreme politicisation of the masses, an ever more marked and real depoliticisation of society . . . led to an ever more accentuated separation from, and an ever increasing disdain of, the PNF and . . . to a general disgust for politics as such . . .' R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce.* II, 221.

64 ACS, PNF. SPEP, b Nov. 19 Padova, 'PNF Padova. Rapporto sulla situazione Fascista in Padova', 27 March 1931.

65 ACS, ibid., 11 March 1934.

66 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 9, Napoli, 20 March 1934.

more towards local questions, in particular unemployment and high prices, than to those of empire; the most common reference to the conflict relates to the problems of choosing those who were to go to work in Africa from among the mass of unemployed.[67] The popular enthusiasm for the Italian victory seems to have dissipated very rapidly as the contrast between the promised rewards of victory and the realities of its costs became evident. From Naples in September 1936 it was reported that 'people talk a lot about hunger, unemployment, the unjust distribution of assistance. The population . . . attack the institutions and the leaders openly.'[68] A report from Modena for the same month complained that 'the population of the province of Modena, and particularly that of the town, showed up in very limited numbers in the public squares to listen to broadcast of the speech of the Duce from Avellino.'[69] The same lack of enthusiasm was reported from Padua in 1937: 'On the occasion of the speech of the Duce from Tripoli, the loudspeakers installed in the two fruit and vegetable markets . . . spoke to the wind as usual.'[70] Again from Padua a local notable and ex-*squadrista* Baseggio wrote to Starace to tell him that 'The masses are exasperated because of misery . . . and everyone blames the present situation in the province on the local *gerarchi*.'[71] Soldiers who returned from Africa to face further unemployment constituted a common difficulty of the later years of the 1930s and even in the early 1940s, the disregarded soldiers in Naples arguing that the priorities should be 'First redeem the Neapolitans, then the blacks.'[72] The demobilised from Spain only added to the problem.

By the end of the 1930s and before Italy joined the war the reports of disaffection become ever more common. People were aware that war was looming and the prospect of fighting alongside the Nazis was universally unpopular. Indeed, many foresaw that a German victory could only be disastrous for Italy in the long run (something Mussolini would apparently fully appreciate only in September 1943).[73] In addition unemployment remained high and the complaints about shortages and rising prices increased continually. A generalised atmosphere of depression seems to have prevailed. Thus a *fiduciario* in Padua wrote in 1937 about the arrival home of a group of soldiers from Africa, 'The company marched through the city amid general indifference', while a month later he reported that 'The demonstration to commemorate 23 March [1919] took place amidst general indifference, without

67 Even here there were accusations of corruption. The *federale* of Pescara was accused in an anonymous letter of asking for payment from the unemployed workers who were selected; 'During the Ethiopian war he sent those who paid him to Africa.'

68 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 9, Napoli, 1 Sept. 1936.

69 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 8, Modena, 15 Sept. 1936.

70 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 11, Padova, 20 March 1937.

71 ACS, ibid., Baseggio to Starace, 2 June 1938, in which he advises the PNF leader against the organisation of a visit of Mussolini to Padua: 'it would mean making HIM make a bad impression'.

72 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 9, Napoli, letter from 'a large number of soldiers returned from Africa', August 1941.

73 'An industrialist said to me this morning that he did not think it possible that Mussolini could agree with Hitler to fight a war of extermination, which would destroy everything that has been done in these 17 years of Fascism . . . the public is puzzled, disappointed, filled with anxiety', ACS, PNF, SPEP, b.18, Reggio Emilia, 'Reggio Emilia', 18 Oct. 1939.

enthusiasm. The procession seemed like a funeral.'[74] A note from Vicenza in 1938 spoke of a Fascism which had exhausted its energies: 'The general impression is that the people are tired, that they are afraid of wars and economic collapse . . . the Fascists are tired of the formalities of uniforms, of the perpetual parades, which they look on as an imposition.'[75] From Padua on 21 April 1938 came the news that 'The demonstrations in Padua took place as usual amidst general indifference.'[76] In Piacenza it was observed that, in late 1939, 'the critical spirit against the regime is more alive than ever' and that 'in recent times the PNF badge has disappeared from the buttonhole of many members',[77] while by November 1939 'in the ranks of the old blackshirts or of the squads there is little enthusiasm. People criticise and discussions develop which are certainly not good for the prestige of the Party.'[78] A Fascist inspector sent to examine the situation in Modena in early 1940 found that 'The dominant impression of the Fascist situation in Modena is that of a diffuse sense of unease and of coldness, and, in certain areas, of real hostility and lack of confidence in the present leaders.'[79] A further report spoke of 'the complete absenteeism of the population'.[80] Similarly, in April 1940 an informant in Trento deplored the fact that the various local commemorations of the foundation of Fascism had been marked by 'complete absenteeism' and 'absolute indifference' of both Fascists and the population at large. In Reggio Calabria in 1940 a Fascist inspector reported that 'The mass of the inhabitants [are] a long way away from the Party.'[81] The view from Rome provided by one informer in January 1940 summed it all up: 'Unfortunately in the periphery . . . the misdeeds of this or that Fascist boss have an enormous influence on the moral unease which weighs on the Fascist masses.'[82]

It is interesting to note that this disaffection even involved the young – that group supposedly most convinced by Fascist indoctrination. An informer complained that the student demonstrations organised in Vicenza, Venezia and Padua in late 1938 against the French 'were characterised more by the usual stupid student spirit (in the best of the hypotheses) than by the recognition of our cause against France'.[83] In late 1940 it was reported from Reggio Emilia that 'the G[ioventù] I[taliana del] L[ittorio] . . . has hit rock-bottom',[84] while a *Pro-memoria* of the same period related that

> In the province of Modena and especially in the city there is a worrying situation with regard to the Party. [There is] a total division between everything that is the life of the Party and the life of the city and the province. The *gerarchi* work without producing results, and can find no – or almost

74 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 11, Padova, 17 Feb. 1937 and 25 March 1937.
75 ACS, ibid., 'Vicenza: Spirito Pubblico', 21 Dec. 1938.
76 ACS, ibid., 23 April 1938.
77 ACS, PNF, SPEP, Piacenza, 18.10.XVII.
78 ACS, ibid.
79 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 8, Modena, report of inspectors, undated but January 1940.
80 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 8, Modena, 'Situazione politica della provincia di Modena', 16 Jan. 1940.
81 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 17 Reggio Calabria, 27 May 1940.
82 ACS, Min. Int., DGPS, Polizia Politica, Materia (1927–44), p. 219, 12 Jan. 1940.
83 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 11, Padova, 21 Dec. 1938.
84 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 18, Reggio Emilia, Relazione 12 Dec. 1940, signed Mancini.

no – support among the masses. Even the mass of young people from Modena live at a distance from the Party. They are full of scepticism and couldn't care less.[85]

At Schio, in 1940, almost no one turned up to celebrate the anniversary of 23 March 1919. The youth groups, who were 'forced to participate', disrupted the whole proceedings, 'continually disturbing the speaker with their laughter, smoking and showing off in ways that were clear indicators of their total spiritual absence'.[86] The *federale* of Reggio Calabria wrote of the 'the complete disorientation of the student masses'.[87] If anything, matters in Piacenza seem to have been even worse. A report on 'Pre-military instruction' of 1 May 1940 informed Rome that

> The instruction takes place amid complete political and moral disorientation on the part of both the Comando Federale and that of the pre-military recruits . . . the lack of discipline of the recruits is shown by the fact that they turn up every Saturday simply because they are threatened with disciplinary measures or because of the belief that if they do not they would be denounced to the Military Authorities for habitual and unjustified absence.
>
> The young people show themselves to be without enthusiasm and unprepared for the duties and the obligations which the pre-military course imposes, unaware even of the moral reasons which are at the base of the organization of the military preparation of the Gioventù del Littorio.[88]

Flight from the enchanter?

What was the position of Mussolini regarding all this? Was his hold on Italy being undermined? It is often said that, even if the PNF generally enjoyed a bad reputation among the population, the cult of Mussolini remained intact and carried Fascism, warts and all, along with it. In other words, that link between charismatic leader and the masses, decisive for totalitarian dictatorships, was not destroyed by day-to-day discontent. To some degree this would seem to be true. The oft-repeated phrase 'If the Duce only knew' is rightly taken to indicate a popular mental distinction between the good leader and his overbearing and self-interested followers, and does, by itself, represent a condemnation of what everyday Fascism represented for many people. At the same time, certain reservations need to be made. The cult of the Duce was itself very obviously a political construct and it paid to go along with it; criticisms of the Fascist leader were always severely punished. Moreover it should be noted that it was a cult which did not save Fascism as such in the eyes of the people; there does not seem to have been the formation of any kind of mental 'dual reality' by which people

85 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 8, Modena, Pro-memoria, undated, but either 1939 or 1940.

86 ACS, Min. Int., DGPS, Polizia Politica, Materia (1927–44), p.219, 1 May 1940.

87 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 17, Reggio Calabria, Quarantotto to Muti, 27 May XVIII.

88 ACS, PNF, SPEP, b. 14, Piacenza, 1 May 1940. See also Gentile, *La via italiana*, ch. 7, where, in the discussion of the role of Adelchi Serena (party secretary 1940–1), the degree to which the PNF had lost contact with the people, particularly with the young, is made obvious: 'Serena was concerned especially with the university students in order to combat the tendency, which appeared ever more widespread among the majority of the young, to ignore the life of the party and to abandon its activities' (248).

continued to support the ideals of Fascism, together with Mussolini, while hating the daily reality.[89] The cult of Mussolini was something apart, and people occasionally spoke of the possibility of the continuation of a *Mussolinismo* even after the fall of Fascism. Even so, there is some evidence that the myth of Mussolini was beginning to wane in the late 1930s. As we have already seen, in some cities people did not exactly flock to hear the Duce's speeches when broadcast in the piazza. He 'spoke to the wind, *as usual*'. There was little point in listening. Many began increasingly to doubt the truth of the official news sources; even the police informers were forced to say that the people were not stupid and that the triumphalistic rhetoric they were fed was totally counterproductive. Above all else, economic hardship convinced Italians that Fascism had got it all wrong; it was common for people to observe that, after nearly twenty years, the regime had led Italy to ruin. These were comments which clearly included Mussolini among the guilty men.

After 1936, when the Fascist leader withdrew to some extent from the running of internal affairs, he was slightly lost to view among the population.[90] In the mid-1930s and among many segments of the population, Mussolini had been widely admired for his apparent successes on the international scene, but, particularly in the gathering gloom of 1938–9, people began to express perplexity, to say the least, about Italian foreign policy, foreign wars and the alliance with Nazi Germany. While a few reports speak of people welcoming the prospect of war because they hoped it would provoke the fall of Fascism, most speak of popular foreboding. One common reaction was that implicit in totalitarian dictatorship – people delegated to the leader, assuming that Mussolini knew what he was doing and would produce some miracle at the last minute. In a sense this was an obligatory reaction for those seeking reassurance; for those who needed to live with hope there was, after all, no alternative but to suspend disbelief and to trust in the Duce – he was very much the leader of last resort. But doubts increased about the Duce's infallible 'intuition', and, especially during his long silence in late spring and early summer 1939, rumours began to circulate widely that the Duce had stepped down because of serious illness, that he had been wounded in an assassination attempt, that he was making mistakes because deliberately isolated from reality by untrustworthy advisors, and even (with prophetic vision) that he had been removed from power by the king and replaced by Badoglio or by a military triumvirate. The existence of such rumours is itself indicative of a certain state of mind among the population, but what is particularly surprising is the degree to which these reports seem to have provoked relatively little surprise or alarm among the population, almost as if the destitution of a clearly incapacitated Mussolini and the end of Fascism were already a foregone conclusion. Here the situation of disaffection, stagnation and paralysis in the provinces, combined with a generalised fear for the future, would seem to have at least partially undermined

89 See the development of the concept in S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilisation* (Davis: University of California Press, 1995). The 'dual reality' referred to is that in which people continue to believe in the ideal of communism while hating the reality of the Soviet Union.

90 De Felice, *Mussolini il duce,* II, ch. 3.

even the myth of the infallibility, and virtual immortality, of the Fascist leader himself.

The triumph of the periphery

To draw firm conclusions about the condition of Fascism in the late 1930s from party and police documentation is not easy, not only because of the nature of the material itself, but also because not all of it points in the same direction. Recent studies have emphasised the degree to which the PNF slowly extended its influence over economic and union organisations in the course of the 1930s, realising a kind of 'creeping' capillary totalitarianism at the level of decision making.[91] And, as we have seen, the reports of the *federali* show that there was an almost frenetic level of activity in the various provincial organisations; clearly a lot of people were working to keep the various facets of the Fascist movement going and a lot of people were participating in these activities. That these were usually not particularly 'political' is certainly significant from the point of view of the ideological penetration of the masses, but it is nonetheless necessary to recognise that under the banner of a national movement common activities, however banal, were an important novelty for most people, just because they took place at all. The totalitarian aspirations of Fascism – in good part realised if we consider the question of social control – did produce a kind of collectivisation of activity which, at least at a formal level, represented an important affirmation of Fascist objectives.

At the same time much of the documentation points to a progressive decay of the movement under the impact of provincial leaders who, for one reason or another, were not up to the job or who brought the movement into bad repute. Partly as a result of this kind of leadership (but partly because of economic hardship, which made visible or suspected corruption more unbearable), the party lost any attraction it had ever had. 'Indifference', 'apathy', 'deafness' and 'absence' are words which occur repeatedly in the papers on the second half of the 1930s in relation to popular attitudes to the party. It is important to stress that these attitudes were not those of militant anti-fascism and did not immediately threaten the survival of the regime; rather they were those of withdrawal, resignation, passivity and de-politicisation. There were no obviously viable alternatives to Fascism available. Understandably, it was difficult to go beyond passive reaction in a regime which controlled so many of the paths which gave access to a job and a normal life. Indifference and apathy would not cost you your job; more vocal opposition almost certainly would – and might cost you much more. Thus, while the young might sometimes join in the activities of the Opera Nazionale Balilla, the FGC and the GIL with some enthusiasm because of the nature of the activities themselves (sport, competitions, etc.), the sentiments of many others who participated in the, often effectively obligatory, activities must remain a matter of doubt. Activity there certainly was, but it seems legitimate to think that it was

91 See, for example, P. Morgan, "The Party is Everywhere": The Italian Fascist Party in Economic Life, 1926–40', *English Historical Review*, CXIV, 455 (1999), 85–111.

a quasi-obligatory activity on the part of a population which, in many places, was progressively distancing itself from the regime. As one informer put it at the end of the 1930s, 'people join [the party] because it's better to be in the party, that's all there is to be said!'.[92]

Two parallel processes would appear to be going on, therefore. On the one hand, the formal structures of Fascism were being extended and reinforced in order to increase the possibilities of Fascist control of society; on the other, the actual impact of Fascism on society – the way in which Fascism was experienced on a day-to-day basis – was pushing people away from any commitment to the regime. In this second respect, it was the experience of Fascism in the provinces which most served to damage the regime. This points to an important conclusion. For all its nationalising, modernising and centralising efforts, for all its idolatry of the state, the Fascist regime never really outgrew its origins, which were dominated in the first instance by local and provincial considerations. Despite all efforts, the reality of what Fascist control meant in the provinces ensured that local and personal issues could never be prevented from coming to the fore.[93] In a way this had always been the probable destiny of Fascism. The rebellion against liberal Italy, against socialism and against the politics of division had mouthed patriotic slogans and appropriated the national flag and the national discourse, but politically that rebellion had always been profoundly centrifugal. As was inevitable, after the Fascist victory most Fascists saw their future in the province in which they had conducted their battles and expected to see rewards for their efforts in terms of their life within the province. At a provincial level, the clear message of the Fascist triumph was that local Fascists would assume local control; the old politics had been defeated, now the new men would take over. This was the local perception. Emphasis on the centrality of the state was unable to change this situation, in large part because local people *were* inevitably required to run the provincial movements. Certainly many old and difficult *squadristi* were set aside or were given jobs which took them away from their own areas; others were suspended or expelled. Certainly the 1930s saw the rise of a new group of 'professional' Fascist administrators who were moved from province to province in an attempt to reduce the importance of local interests. But the old idea of local politics – that power in Rome was to be used primarily to exercise control at the local level, with all that that implied – never really died. Fascism was simply unable to defeat a political practice which had been formed in the decades before the inception of the movement.

92 ACS, PNF, SPEP, Modena, Pro-memoria, undated, but either 1939 or 1940. The spontaneity of much of this mass activity is, of course, another question. Much evidence exists to show that people were forced to go to mass rallies on pain of losing their jobs or were subject to heavy fines if they were absent. See, e.g., ACS, Min.Int., DGPS, Polizia Politica, Materia (1927–44), p. 220, Turin 29 May 1939, 'and was it really necessary to use the threat of sacking to force the workers to go to the demonstration?'.

93 Rome was anything but exempt from personal squabbles, corruption and *affarismo*, of course, providing the example for the provinces. As one anonymous reporter put it, commenting on the disastrous situation in the provincial federations, 'il pesce puzza dalla testa [a fish begins smelling from its head]'. ACS, Min. Int., DGPS, Polizia Politica, Materia (1927–44), p. 219, 1 May 1940.

Put another way, Fascism was always working against a long-established political grain.[94]

Rather paradoxically, but also very predictably, therefore, the political vices for which liberal Italy had been so roundly condemned by the Fascists – parochialism, clientelism, corruption, factional divisiveness – were reproduced under Fascism. It was this reproduction of the old methods of local politics, usually around private interest rather than political position, which ultimately produced instability, paralysis and popular disaffection. There is ample evidence to suggest that, in many provinces, Fascist *gerarchi* abused their positions for the realisation of private ends and were generally perceived as behaving in this way. It is hardly surprising that people reacted against this, either because they thought *they* should be the people to use power in that way, or because they had to submit to the consequences of that abuse. In the first case the reaction produced perpetual squabbling between Fascists, which brought about a degeneration in the federations, administrative paralysis and a progressive loss of reputation; in the second it produced passivity, apathy and an accelerating attempt by people to escape from the tentacles of the movement. Essentially, under Fascism, in the struggle between centre and periphery, the periphery won – with disastrous consequences for the regime. At the provincial level, the new men perpetuated and accentuated some of the worst aspects of the old politics, particularly the use of public power for private ends, thus contributing to the consolidation of a political practice which would not end with Fascism.

This conclusion prompts in turn two, more general, considerations. The first relates to the increasing tendency in recent years to try to study Fascism 'on its own terms', something which has prompted a much closer attention to Fascist ideology and to the 'political religion' which Fascism undoubtedly represented to its more faithful followers. It is an approach which is illuminating and obviously justified; why people embraced Fascism and what they believed they were achieving are fundamental questions if we are to understand the Fascist phenomenon, just as they are fundamental if we are to understand the full failure of the regime. At the same time, too great a concentration on the sphere of ideology and beliefs carries with it the risk of a loss of perspective, of confusing the project with the reality. Why people followed Fascism is one issue; how Fascism used its power is another, different, even if obviously related, issue. Here it is argued that, in the twenty-year evolution of Fascism, what happened on the ground strongly influenced people's capacity to believe. This brings us back to a point made earlier. For a great many people who adhered to the movement at its beginning, Fascism had been a heady cocktail of interest and ideology. The impression given by the documents cited above is that, as the years passed, the element of interest came to dominate. Ordinary people reacted against this and did not distinguish in their reaction between an abstract ideal of

94 See the judgment of J. Davis (summing up recent historiographical trends in relation to liberal Italy), 'the central thrust of Fascism – strengthening the power of the central state, elimination of the "private" sphere, the nationalisation of culture and ideology – ran directly counter to the fundamental traits in Italy's social and political development that had been evident in the nineteenth century'. J. A. Davis, 'Remapping Italy's Path to the Twentieth Century', *Journal of Modern History*, 66 (1994), 319.

Fascism and the day-to-day reality. They did not make the distinction, it must be assumed, largely because the hold of Fascist ideology – of the 'political religion' – was in itself insufficiently strong to have the better of the everyday considerations of corruption, nepotism and other forms of arbitrary use of power.

Such a conclusion does have important implications for our assessment of the relative strengths of interest and ideology in the Fascist mentality; it suggests that it is important to look at actions and not only at words. To get the full picture, we need to insert the squalid realities of provincial Fascism into any appraisal of what motivated Fascists, to look at what so many Fascists *did* when in power and not just at what they said. This is not to say that Fascism was all a corrupt and self-interested exploitation of power; for many, anthropological revolution and national apotheosis may indeed have been the ultimate goals. It is simply to say that a close look at the provincial situations in the 1930s reveals very clearly that many important exponents of provincial Fascism thought that the realisation of those goals was perfectly compatible with the pursuit of private, personal and, above all, very material interests, and that this had profoundly deleterious consequences for popular attitudes towards the regime – attitudes formed around a painful awareness that, in its actual workings, provincial politics often displayed very little which could be termed 'religious'.

A second and final consideration relates to the question of the place of Fascism in the broader context of Italian history after 1861. One of the difficulties facing the historian of Fascism is the risk of seeing the years before Fascism from a teleological viewpoint, by which almost everything which happens before 1919 is seen as somehow 'leading' to Fascism. This difficulty arises partly because the question is seen in terms of two protagonists – liberalism and Fascism. Yet the fact that the Fascist movement reproduced and accentuated many of the problems it had identified in the government of liberal Italy suggests that it may be more fruitful to see matters not as a simple contrast between liberal and Fascist Italy but rather in terms of the more deep-seated problems which faced the nation – the relationship between centre and periphery, between civil society and government, between the public and private spheres, between national ambition and realisation. These were problems which in large part provoked Fascism; they were also the problems which would in the end overwhelm Fascism. By this reading Fascism is seen in a broader context; it becomes a response to more fundamental tensions present in Italian society, which in no way began with Fascism and would in no way end with Fascism. To understand both the successes and the failures of Fascism, therefore, it may be necessary to look beyond the immediate circumstances, declarations, 'realisations' and illusions of the regime itself and to address the broader, long-term questions relating to the evolution of Italian society and the Italian nation, where continuity clearly does exist and where teleology is not an issue.