The Italians and Fascism

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In a recent review of Christopher Duggan's latest book, Emilio Gentile notes that in the 1970s an 'intimate history of fascist Italy' would have met the opposition of 'militant anti-fascist historiography' because of its proneness to acknowledge the involvement of Italians in Fascism. Still, after criticising the book, Gentile stresses that the 'question of consent' – a topic on which he himself has provided some crucial contributions – is a 'poorly posed question'.[1]

This might seem like the beginning of a new phase in the historical controversy that fuelled the public debate on history in Italy between the 1970s and the early 1990s. However, the involvement of Italians in Fascism is no longer a topic that sparks the interest of Italian public opinion – at any rate, judging from the little impact of recent studies on this subject in the press.[2] As further evidence in support of this conclusion, it is worth noting that in recent years several studies on the topic have been published, especially in English, which have not been translated into Italian and which appear to have elicited far greater interest from the press (as well as academic journals) in Great Britain and the United States.[3]

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[1] Emilio Gentile, 'Il duce, che emozione!', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 4 May 2014 (review of Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices. An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)).

[2] To the best of my knowledge, Duggan's book has only been reviewed in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, briefly in *Il Corriere della Sera* (11 Feb. 2014) and in *La Nazione di Arezzo* (24 Dec. 2013). None of the other recent English-language books that I will mention have yet been translated into Italian.

[3] To mention but a few of the reviews of this volume, which bear witness to the interest in this topic on the part of the press, see Henrik Bering, 'Dear Duce. Benito Mussolini's devoted subjects made pilgrimages to his birthplace and sent him 1500 letters a day', *Wall Street Journal*, 16 Aug.2013; Christopher Hirst, 'The banality of evil, spoken in its own voice. Fascist voices by Christopher Duggan', *The Independent*, 6 Dec.2013; Ian Thompson, 'Roman descent. Italy under Mussolini is revealed through the accounts of ordinary people', *Financial Times*, 14 Dec. 2012; Ruth Ben Ghiat, 'Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy', *Times Higher Education*, 10 Jan. 2013. The reason why Duggan's book is partly an exception may lie in the fact that it is addressed not just to historians but to the broader public as well – which is also why it received the Wolfson Prize. Still, I

Contemporary European History, **24**, 2 (2015), pp. 317–322. © Cambridge University Press 2015
doi:10.1017/S0960777315000120

Contrary to what a minority of people like to think, both among historians and the wider public, Italian historiography has long ceased to be a space polarised between militant anti-fascists and 'the others' – and one wonders just who might be included in the two categories – or indeed between De Felice and his pupils and everyone else. And this also holds true in the case of a topic such as the Italians' involvement in Fascism. Already in the 1970s the studies by Gabriele Turi, Luisa Mangoni and Mario Isnenghi – to mention but a few historians not belonging to the 'De Felice school' – showed the significant involvement of the intellectual and cultural world in Fascism.[4] In the 1980s studies such as those by Maurizio Gribaudi and Luisa Passerini painted a picture of the political allegiances and engagement of working-class Turin that was far more complex than the one handed down by the socialist and communist tradition.[5] These interpretations have become widely accepted, particularly in more recent years and among younger historians (now roughly in their forties), who are more likely to have grown up unfettered by political or even academic orthodoxies, by now corresponding to far less precisely defined portions of the Italian political spectrum.

Within this context, De Felice continues to play a significant role, not so much – as Patrick Bernhard noted in another issue of this journal – because of a sort of historiographical-political national obsession, but rather because in certain spheres and with respect to certain topics De Felice's studies have yet to be effectively or adequately surpassed by new in-depth historical research and because his interpretations are still widespread.[6] Nevertheless, among the more conscious Italian and foreign scholars, a considerable degree of osmosis is to be observed between Italian and international historiography with regard to Fascism, along with a greater interest – and not just among younger scholars of Fascism – in the development of new contents and methods for the historiography focusing on fascist, authoritarian or totalitarian regimes in interwar Europe. It is to be hoped, therefore, that research on interrelated topics such as violence and repression, or the Italians' involvement in the regime, will experience a new phase of development – which some recent studies finally seem to foreshadow. Besides, a better knowledge of the Italian fascist regime in all its phases may contribute to the study of other fascist regimes in the inter-war period, since Italian Fascism acted as a crucial model for many of these regimes – as an example and counter-example that shaped European political reflection in the years leading up to the Second World War.

believe that the number of relevant reviews of the volume also testifies to the interest elicited by the topic.

[4] Luisa Mangoni, *L'interventismo della cultura: intellettuali e riviste del fascismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1974); Mario Isnenghi, *Intellettuali militanti, intellettuali funzionari: appunti sulla cultura fascista* (Torino: Einaudi, 1979); Gabriele Turi, *Il fascismo e il consenso degli intellettuali*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1980).

[5] Luisa Passerini, *Torino operaia e fascismo. Una storia orale* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1984); Maurizio Gribaudi, *Mondo operaio e mito operaio: spazi e percorsi sociali a Torino nel primo Novecento*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1987).

[6] Patrick Bernhard, 'Renarrating Italian Fascism: New Directions in the Historiography of a European Dictatorship', *Contemporary European History*, 23 (2014), pp. 151–163.

Over time, by focusing on the policies imposed from above to foster the involvement of Italian society in Fascism, it has been possible to reveal the extent of the control exercised by the fascist state upon Italian society – not just its propaganda efforts and the establishment of organisational and associative structures but also its attempt to build a cohesive national community through a political religion, and the ambiguity of the regime's policies for women. At least a couple of generations of scholars have been debating these issues, offering different perspectives which have mainly contributed to providing a more rounded view of the importance of the totalitarian fascist project. While these studies have marked a break with respect to the way in which the debate on 'consensus' had been framed in the 1970s and 1980s, this shift of focus onto the mass politics of the regime has prevented scholars from exploring some significant ideas that had emerged from Simona Colarizi's volume *L'opinione degli italiani sotto il regime (1929–1943)*, which represents perhaps the last enquiry carried out within this crucial initial debate. By drawing upon sources from the Italian Home Office, Colarizi charted political public opinion in Italy under the regime, as seen through the eyes of the public security organs.[7] Although this remains an important work, the author herself stressed that her research only constituted an initial investigation to be extended further both on the local level and through the use of other sources.

While more is now known about the development of this apparatus, Paul Corner's recent book constitutes a – partly belated – attempt to build on Colarizi's suggestion.[8] Corner's historical contribution stands at the crossroads of a number of classical questions raised by the historiography on totalitarian regimes – as is also shown by the volume he has edited: *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes: Fascism, Nazism and Communism*. These questions had not been fully addressed by Italian historiography, and over time Corner helped systematise them.[9] Corner's aim is to examine Italians' involvement by analysing the role of the National Fascist Party. One might argue that it is somewhat simplistic to trace the success or lack of success of a historical experience by focusing on its twilight phase; that it would be more sophisticated, for instance, to define the success of this endeavour by focusing on its legacy in Italian society. Still, the vast range of investigations conducted – and sources examined – by Corner in a study extended over several years substantially contributes to our knowledge of the Fascist Party both at a central level and with regard to the relations between centre and periphery.

Recent years have witnessed a renewed interest among historians in the topic of the Italians' involvement in and integration into Fascism, with the aim not merely of analysing individual aspects of fascist mass politics but of reflecting on the relation

[7] Simona Colarzi, *L'opinione degli italiani sotto il regime (1929–1943)* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1991).

[8] Paul Corner, *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini's Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[9] Paul Corner, ed., *Popular opinion in Totalitarian regimes: Fascism, Nazism and Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

between Italian society and Fascism in all its various expressions.[10] This course of investigation has been launched rather late compared, for instance, to the latest phase in the study of these topics in relation to German National Socialism. However, it is worth stressing that the debate on 'consensus' – despite its many problematic aspects, which are too well known to merit a discussion within these few pages – was developed early on in Italy, between the late 1970s and the early 1990s.[11]

Compared to the past, some of these more recent studies mark a real change – and not just in terms of methodology. The problem now is not simply to measure the extent of the propagandistic, ideological and organisational efforts of the fascist regime, but also to evaluate the Italian's reception of this project and their involvement in it – problems difficult to solve if one wishes to evaluate not merely the number of people involved, but also the coherence and intensity of their involvement. For years historians have been searching for solutions and evidence that might help assess these issues while also taking into account the changes in men and women's attitudes (in Italy and abroad), not to mention the development of historical, political, economic and social contexts and the coexistence of contrasting drives and opinions with regard to political regimes within the same group of people, engendered for instance by different aspects of the politics of these regimes.

This implies that any attempt to measure the effectiveness of the fascist project and the Italians' involvement in it at any given time – including in the final stages – is partly a misleading operation, albeit a helpful one for explaining the reasons behind the collapse of the regime. Instead it would be more appropriate to seek to evaluate the extent of this involvement across more extended periods of time by taking into account the way in which people's attitudes changed. However, this also means acknowledging the existence of a less committed and reversible involvement in the fascist project (or any anti-fascist one) on the part of individuals or the Italian people as a whole. The importance of these distinctions and the awareness that it is impossible to analyse all the attitudes to be found among Italians – or even a statistically significant percentage of them – should not lead us to underestimate the importance of research on these topics. After all, at least since the development of microhistory, historians have learned that a single experience can enable them to disclose and understand whole worlds.

[10] Among the main studies adopting this approach, it is worth mentioning especially Victoria de Grazia's essential 1981 book *The Culture of Consent: The Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambrige: Cambridge University Press, 1981), followed by Perry Willson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: the Massaie Rurali*, (London-New York: Routledge, 2002); Luca La Rovere, *Storia dei Guf. Organizzazione, politica e miti della gioventù universitaria fascista 1919–1943* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003); Simone Duranti, *Le spirito gregario. I gruppi universitari fascisti tra politica e propaganda, 1930–40* (Roma: Donzelli, 2008); Petra Terhoeven, *Oro alla patria. Donne, guerra e propaganda nella giornata della fede fascista* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006); and finally Chiara Giorgi, *La previdenza del regime. Storia dell'Inps durante il fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004).

[11] I am here drawing upon some of the conclusions which Roberta Pergher and I have reached in 'Historians, Fascism and Italian Society: Mapping the Limito of Consent', the introduction to Giulia Albanese and Roberta Pergher, *In the Society of Fascists: Acclamation, Acquiescence and Agency in Mussolini's Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

The most recent studies suggest we should consider the significance of the local and individual dimension in order to measure the extent to which Fascism succeeded in entering the homes and private lives of the Italians – in the centre of the country and the Empire as much as in the periphery – in terms of consensus as well as repression. A perspective of this kind reveals the importance of the intertwining of consensus-making and repressive policies, which should be viewed not as standing in contrast to one another but as an integral part of the establishment and consolidation of the regime. Particularly significant, in this respect, are studies such as that by Michael Ebner, who emphasises the importance of the fascist use of violence by noting that its ill-defined and highly arbitrary nature encouraged the involvement of ordinary Italians in the policies of the regime and the use of repressive measures as a strategy of self-defence or attack against possible opponents or enemies.[12] These aspects had already been partly highlighted by studies published on the OVRA. Yet when examined from the perspective of the people sent into exile or of the strategies adopted by the individuals close to them – be they parents, friends or enemies – they may be seen to open up new perspectives concerning the function of fascist violence and its capacity to pervade Italian society.[13] On the other hand, through his analysis – in this very journal - of the exiling of former blackshirts (*squadristi*), Matteo Millan has shown how these violent strategies of Fascism were not exclusively employed in relation to enemies, or the Italian society in need of regimentation, but also in relation to loyal or devoted fascists.[14]

Also in the light of the above studies, a claim such as the following one recently made by Emilio Gentile seems quite unjustifiable: 'Whatever the attitude of the leaders of the totalitarian regimes may have been with regard to the consensus of the people they ruled, it is an unquestionable historical fact that none of them ever based their power on the consensus of ordinary people – although this was encouraged, stimulated, fabricated and organised – but exclusively on the political monopoly of the single party, on armed force, on police prevention and repression, and on the regimentation of the population, be it consenting or not.'[15] Besides, in his own research Gentile has shown how important it was for the regime to develop an ideological and propagandistic project that would ensure the Italians' involvement in fascist aims also in terms of their emotional engagement and beliefs. The above claim would instead appear to restrict all responsibilities to the upper echelons of the regime, stripping Italian society of any role in its development and consolidation. As such, it would make the fascist efforts in this direction rather pointless.

It is possible to argue that despite this resurgence of interest, further progress certainly remains to be made within the historiography on fascism when it comes to examining the relationship between Italian society and Fascism. In particular, new

[12] Michael Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[13] Mimmo Franzinelli, *I tentacoli dell'Ovra: agenti, collaboratori e vittime della polizia politica fascista* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000); Mauro Canali, *Le spie del regime* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004).
[14] Matteo Millan, 'The Institutionalization of Squadrismo: Disciplining Paramilitary Violence in the Italian Fascist Dictatorship', *Contemporary European History*, 22, 4 (2013), 551–573.
[15] Gentile, *Il duce che emozione!*

research is needed into the reason why the regime endured for as long as it did, as well as into the reasons behind the increasing detachment of society from the regime, leading to its ultimate failure. Moreover, with regard to the post-war period, a deeper analysis would help us to understand how Fascism managed to retain a certain degree of consensus – however minor – on the part of both those who had experiences of the regime and its failure and those who were too young to experience it but nonetheless cherished its memory.

What historiography – in Italy as well as abroad – needs most of all, however, is to rediscover and investigate the fully European dimension of these dictatorships, by carefully focusing on the circulation of ideas and practices. The transmission of experiences and exchanges between the various regimes in terms of culture, politics and economic doctrines, along with their considerable capacity to influence one another and to create consensus even abroad, including through conservative and far-right groups in democratic countries, are all part of a historical enquiry and research path that remains largely unexplored.