The sacred synthesis: the ideological cohesion of Fascist cultural policy

ROGER GRIFFIN

Summary
This article challenges commonly held preconceptions about the absence of a cohesive cultural policy by arguing that, while many rival aesthetic creeds were accommodated under Mussolini’s regime, they can all be seen as permutations of a common vision of the central role to be played by a culture in the regeneration of the national community and the creation of a new Italy. It points to a profound relationship between Fascism’s cultural policy and its core mobilizing myth of paligenetic ultra-nationalism, which similarly spawned a wide variety of surface ideologies similarly doomed to failure by the irreducibly pluralistic nature of modern society.

The elusiveness of Fascist ideology
This article sets out to identify the ideological matrix underlying Fascist cultural policy. By doing so, it risks creating an alienation effect of a far from Brechtian nature, for there has been a marked tendency for academics to treat the proliferation of conflicting styles of art under the Fascist regime and the general failure of its efforts to create a Fascist culture as symptoms of ideological confusion and vacuousness. Synoptic histories of Mussolini’s Italy thus tend to give the whole subject short shrift, at most offering a brief account of the events which led to Giovanni Gentile’s publication of the Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals and Benedetto Croce’s defiant response to it, followed by an impressionistic survey of the kaleidoscopic array of aesthetics vying for a place in the sun which were so complacently accommodated by the regime. As for specialist literature, numerous individual cultural initiatives undertaken by the ‘new Italy’ have received in-depth analysis over the years, yet in all the pages written it is difficult to find sustained attempts to relate the bewildering variety of phenomena which resulted to a cohesive ideology. A well illustrated scholarly monograph surveying the various spheres of Fascist culture as different manifestations

Roger Griffin, Department of History, Oxford Brookes University, Telephone: +44 (0)1865 483581, Fax: +44 (0)1865 484082. E-mail: rdgriffin@b

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of a unifying world-view is conspicuous by its absence,\(^2\) even though such works exist on art in the Third Reich.

The general impression thus formed is that, in the cultural sphere at least, the ethos which prevailed was of laissez-faire, not to say anarchy. The fact that such an assumption goes unchallenged is in large part attributable to the fact that it fits in well with the common sense view of Fascism as being an ideological hotchpotch, a rag-bag of contradictory influences and ideas. This in turn seems to mirror the received view of the personality of its leader, Benito Mussolini who, as Denis Mack Smith documented with such undisguised glee in his biography (1981), apparently exhibited a capacity to chop and change between contradictory positions which bordered on the pathological.\(^3\) The inference is that, lacking any genuine ideology, his regime operated on an \textit{ad hoc} basis as far as formulating policies were concerned, and hence in the cultural or any other sphere had no scruples about welcoming into its fold any artists and intellectuals prepared to contribute their energies to the Fascist cause, irrespective of the precise political philosophy or values they stood for, thus giving rise to an extraordinary heterogeneity of positions.

Following the logic of this approach, it would be natural to argue that any hint of ideological cohesion in the arts was further undermined by the continued activity of artists and intellectuals who, even if they were not convinced Fascists themselves, were willing to pay lip-service to the shibboleths of the new Italy so as to be allowed to pursue their careers undisturbed by a regime keen to harness any creativity as long as it could be presented as an expression of Italian genius. The 'Third Rome' thus never threatened to resemble the Third Reich by becoming a land of book-burnings, degenerate art exhibitions and strictly regimented cultural production. The validity of this stance seems borne out by the fact that an internal report on cultural life after nine years of Fascist rule conceded that, in marked contrast to Nazi Germany, 'everyone does what he wants, how he wants'.\(^4\)

**The underlying unity of Fascist ideology**

While acknowledging the acute lack of consensus about what should constitute the official aesthetic of Fascism, this article aims to challenge the assumption that the blatant failure to produce a coordinated or effective Fascist culture is attributable to the lack of a unitary and unifying ideology. It will argue instead that Fascism did indeed possess a cohesive ideological core, but one which in the cultural sphere encouraged not totalitarian uniformity, but the paradoxical situation of 'totalitarian pluralism'.

To suggest that Fascism possessed an ideology at all, of course, remains highly contentious. By axiomatically assuming that Fascism is a reactionary force mobilized in the defence of capitalism against revolutionary socialism, even the most sophisticated Marxists can see in its cultural activities only the mystification of a state system of class exploitation and imperialistic violence, Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony' being just one of the more famous
and sophisticated examples. Meanwhile many ‘liberals’, heirs of the Enlightenment blind-spot which confuses the anti-rational with the irrational and the mythic with the primitive or downright pathological, implicitly deny the existence of a Fascist ideology by ignoring the subject altogether in histories of the regime. Sometimes they at least make their position explicit, as when Mack Smith tells his interviewer in a teaching video, ‘ideology meant very little to Mussolini … forget about Fascist ideology’, or John Whittam claims that the very ‘concept of Italian Fascism’ was ‘illusory’, making the quest to identify a generic, European ‘fascism’ analogous to ‘searching for a black cat in a dark and possibly empty room’.

The premise which informs what follows is that the underlying cohesion of Fascist ideology is not to be sought at the surface level of statements made in specific manifestos, programmes, policies or declarations of values. At this level, confusion and contradiction certainly prevail, not only synchronically in the sense that sharply conflicting Fascisms coexist at every stage in the evolution of both movement and regime, but also diachronically: the official programme underwent major transformations over time, and many prominent Fascists repeatedly shed their ideological skins, none more so than Mussolini himself. Yet the countless ‘Fascisms’ can be empirically shown to share a common ideological core, without which their protagonists would never have been able to feel that they belonged to the same movement. In other words, while the species of Fascism may vary wildly, they all derive from an identical genus of political thought inferable from the particular pronouncements of its protagonists. This genus can be extrapolated by the researcher through a cognitive process which Max Weber termed ‘idealizing abstraction’. Applying this process to a wide sample of different currents of Fascist ideology, this common core consists of two components which fuse into a single compound: first, the myth of palingenesis (rebirth, renewal), and, second, an organic, illiberal conception of the nation which celebrates the collective energies of the ‘people’ (ultra-nationalism).

These two components crystallize in the image of the rejuvenated nation rising phoenix-like from the ashes of the decadent order which has suffocated the true life of the people, an image which supplies Fascism’s mobilizing myth. In concrete terms, this means that even a relatively unsophisticated analysis of any Fascist text of substance will reveal a recurrent set of images and themes relating either to the condemnation of the decadent, liberal nation of decline, weakness, crisis, anarchy, or to the celebration of the reborn, post-liberal nation of regeneration, strength, stability, order which Fascism aspires to be creating—and very often to the gulf which divides the ‘old’ Italy from the ‘new’. Ideall-typically, therefore, each contrasting permutation of Fascism manifests an identical mythic core of ‘palingenetic populist ultra-nationalism’. This core also constitutes a prime candidate for being accepted heuristically as the definitional lowest common denominator shared by all varieties of generic fascism.

The ‘fascist minimum’ thus turns out to be a ‘virtual’ cat more akin to Schrödinger’s than to the living, breathing household moggy that Whittam
referred to, which may explain why empirical historians allergic to anything as abstrusely theoretical as Weberian epistemology are prone to dismiss the whole debate out of hand. They are of course right to feel that an ideal-typical construct is a figment of the imagination—Max Weber himself stressed that generic concepts in the social sciences are ‘utopias’. It is their blindness to the heuristic value of such utopias, whose construction involves a flight of imagination informed and delimited by empirical data, which perhaps points to a certain methodological ingenuity.

An illustration of how this approach modifies conventional approaches to the issue of Fascist ideology is provided by an article which Mussolini wrote for his newspaper Il Popolo d’Italia on 15 December 1917. Entitled ‘Trenchocracy’, it portrays the soldiers returning from the trenches as forming the basis of a new ruling élite who will sweep aside the old Italy of Giolittian liberalism to usher in a new era in the life of the nation. The future Duce makes the following comment on what might form the ideological basis of the new Italy:

The words republic, democracy, radicalism, liberalism, the word ‘socialism’ itself, have no sense any longer: they will have one tomorrow, but it will be the one given them by the millions of ‘those who returned’. And it could be something quite different. It could, for example, be an anti-Marxist and national socialism. The millions of workers who return to the furrow in their fields, after being in the furrows of the trenches, will realize the synthesis of the antithesis: class and nation (emphasis mine).

For Marxists, such a passage would provide eloquent testimony to the ultimate aim of the future leader of Fascism in the year of the Russian Revolution to hi-jack genuine socialism by creating a counter-revolutionary force based on a militaristic brand of chauvinism which will perpetuate capitalism and the bourgeois exploitation of the masses, mystifying them beneath the verbal mantle of pseudo-revolution and pseudo-socialism. By the same token, ‘liberal’ historians convinced of Mussolini’s cavalier attitude to political doctrine and policy might read this text as evidence of his legendary cynicism and opportunism: despairing of socialism as his vehicle to power on the eve of the First World War, he then embraced interventionism. He now shows his determination to manipulate the wave of patriotism unleashed in the wake of the Italian army’s defeat at Caporetto by trying to monopolize the veteran movement while the war is still on, unashamedly shuffling his marked pack of conventional political concepts in the process and thereby showing his disdain for ideological nicety or consistency.

The ideal type of ‘palingenetic ultra-nationalism’ prompts a different reading. It suggests that, once the object of his early revolutionary fervour shifted from the utopia of the classless society to the utopia of a reborn Italy nation (which it demonstrably did as early as 1909), Mussolini’s dramatic conversion to interventionism was but a logical step. He was thus predisposed to see in war veterans the agents of national rejuvenation and renewal that he was so desperately looking for, as is demonstrated by his formation of a highly politicized veteran league, the Fascio di Combattimento, in March 1919. What
the passage expresses, therefore is Mussolini's commitment to a core myth of palingenetic ultra-nationalism, and simultaneously his utter indifference to the precise vehicle for its rationalization in detail and realization in practice which the volatile situation in Italy might supply, whether from leftists or rightists, anarchists or statist, proponents or critics of established religion, republicanism, capitalism, modern technology, rural life or any specific aspect of existing Italian society, as long as the basic thrust of their dissatisfaction with the status quo was towards national regeneration in a post-Giolittian 'new order'. Indeed, the impossibility of specifying in advance the theoretical contents and political constituency of his cause points to its nature as a genuinely revolutionary force born of seismic social and historical forces rather than in the head of an armchair radical.

This position, a paradoxical blend of the most unrealistic utopianism and extreme pragmatism, explains the future Duce's willingness for his Fascist movement to be a broad church of all the forces either bent on creating a new, non-liberal and non-Bolshevik Italy or prepared to collude with them for their own non-revolutionary ends. His notorious U-turns and ideological inconsistencies thus point not to fickleness, but to the practical problems he had to surmount in trying to aggregate a significant following of 'faithful' around a core myth which was sufficiently nebulous and multivalent to admit any number of nuanced permutations at the level of surface rationalization.¹³

The implications of palingenetic ultra-nationalism for Fascist culture

This ideal-typical characterization of Fascism has significant implications for its cultural policies. It suggests that Mussolini's movement and regime are to be considered a deliberate and serious project to sweep away for good the liberal ideal of a civic society made up of autonomous individuals loosely ('contractually') associated by the dictates of enlightened self-interest. In particular, it meant forcing a radical break with the grotesque travesty of the liberal ideal embodied in Giolittian Italy whose inefficiency, corruption and unrepresentativeness made a nonsense of any talk of liberty, equality, or fraternity. What was to replace it was a national community integrated organically through the binding effects of charismatic forces and a strong, authoritarian state which would enable Italians to feel for the first time a sense of pride in belonging to a nation whose creative genius was expressed in every sphere of activity.

Such an aspiration not only expressed itself in the features most associated with Fascism, such as the personality cult of Mussolini, mass rallies and militarism, but in a sustained attempt to bring about what Walter Benjamin called the pervasive 'aestheticization of politics', whose function it was to restore the numinous, 'auratic' dimension of objects and events which had been eroded by the rise of secularization, materialism, rationalism, and individualism.¹⁴ A national holiday commemorating a significant moment in the (heavily mythicized) history of the movement,¹⁵ the organization of an exhibition
celebrating the Fascist Revolution or Italy’s Roman legacy, the opening of a new Casa del Fascio in the town square, the revival or invention of a regional festival were thus all symptomatic of the bid to encourage as many Italians as possible to experience politics under Fascism as something poetic, contemporary affairs as something stirring and everyday life as a continuous source of collective enthusiasm and transcendent meaning. In fact, the bussing of schoolchildren to catch a sight of the Duce when his cavalcade stopped at a local railway station, the mass rally to celebrate a victory of the armed forces in Abyssinia, the proliferation of uniforms, the regimentation of leisure, the spread of a military discourse (e.g. the ‘Battle for Grain’), the preparations for war itself, all were in fact rooted in the same ‘ritual’, ‘aesthetic’, ‘sacral’ conception of politics.

For Walter Benjamin the attempts by the state to ‘auraticize’ daily life under Fascism was reducible to little more than a cynical conjuring trick designed to remystify the capitalist system. Using the subterfuge of charismatic authoritarianism instead of liberal democracy, the Fascists aimed to exercise power in such a way that the toiling masses exploited by it experienced the illusion of participation while continuing to be systematically alienated from direct control over the means of production and the exercise of political sovereignty. What the perspective suggested by our ideal type proposes instead is that we see the Fascist regime’s efforts to mass-produce the aural in modern Italy as stemming from a genuine bid to involve ‘ordinary’ Italians in the collective sense that they were living in a qualitatively new period of the nation’s history, one infused by a spirit of epic destiny comparable to that which inspired all ‘great’ civilizations in history. Since each healthy civilization in the past was the outward expression of the unique creative genius of the race, the task of Fascism was to reawaken that genius in the Italian race, dormant after so many centuries of disunity and misrule, and usher in a new period of glory and greatness comparable to its earlier flowerings in the Roman empire and the Renaissance. The result would be a new type of human being, the homo fascistus, who voluntarily lived not for himself as liberalism intended, or for the whole of humanity as communism intended, but for the greater good and higher destiny of the nation. Such ‘palingenetic’ aspirations were no mere rhetorical devices, let alone calculated propaganda, but manifestations of Fascism’s core myth, which to Fascists themselves was a living reality.

The precondition of the national rebirth was thus a revolution in culture. Instead of reflecting, celebrating even, the fragmentation of world-views into a myriad personal outlooks, private ways of seeing and idiosyncratic experiences or values, culture would, so Fascist idealists trusted, once more come to embody the total vision and ethos of a whole people. Instead of forming a separate sphere of social life divorced from politics, economics and science, and bracketed by association with art, religion and leisure, it would again be inseparable from them all, nourishing and harmonizing them. Contemporary life itself would become a living Gesamtkunstwerk, a total work of art, with the Italian people as both its performers and spectators.
It is the contention of this article that convinced Fascists who attached importance to cultural matters shared an understanding (largely intuitive, but sometimes explicit) of the need for a comprehensive cultural revolution which would act as both the corollary and the well-spring of (though not a precondition for) the ‘total’ political, economic, and social revolution that they believed had been inaugurated under Mussolini’s leadership. In this respect, Fascism was characterized by a consensual core cultural myth, one which corresponded precisely with its core political myth, that of the regeneration of the national community in a post-liberal new order.

In the most general terms, the shared myth of cultural renewal as the underpinning and expression of national rebirth meant that Fascism’s cultural pundits also shared a vision of what was to replace the ‘decadent’ contemporary culture of Giolittian Italy. Expressed in a cosmological discourse (which was rarely used by Fascists themselves), it was to be a culture which would generate a collective sense of sacred time, one which would protect each Italian from the invasion of secular, anomic, chronological time. Just as culture allowed members of ‘primitive’ communities to commute effortlessly between ritual, festive and ‘dead’, secular time, so Fascist culture would enable Italians to experience the nation’s History as a constantly unfolding higher reality. By participating in it they would partake in an epic destiny which would give meaning to otherwise meaningless lives. The linguistic register which such a concept of culture instinctively summoned up was that of religion: Fascist culture would allow life to be lived ‘religiously’.

Testimonies to the Fascist core myth of cultural renewal

With this ideal-typical characterization of Fascism’s core cultural programme in mind, it should now possible to read samples of the highly speculative discourse employed by its spokesmen on cultural matters neither as devious re-mystifications of capitalism, nor as mindless exercises in rhetoric or propaganda. Instead, this article invites a reading of them as statements of beliefs which, no matter how utopian and nebulous, were not only deeply held but rooted in the cohesive core myth of national palingenesis which permeated the whole of Fascist thought. Within the constraints imposed by an academic article a few specimens will have to stand for hundreds.

An example of the central role played by the idea of destruction as the prelude to rebirth in Fascism’s core cultural myth is provided by one of the regime’s most prolific and influential spokesmen on cultural issues, the idealist philosopher Giovanni Gentile. In his inaugural speech to the National Institute of Fascist Culture made in December 1925 he stated:

Fascism seems to have littered the field of culture with ruins. And yet in reality its work has only been one of construction. Nothing of what the past has bequeathed us has been jettisoned as long as it appealed to the spirit and meant something to us, and hence formed a stone that could be used in the edifice which the new Italy has undertaken to
construct: it is just that the site has been cleared of materials which were cluttering it up, and thus impeded the construction work. And the construction, so ardently awaited and longed for, has begun.

In his speech, Gentile went on to speak at length about the new ethos, the spiritual unity which is the precondition for a new, unified culture:

We scholars who have placed our faith in Fascism can turn to those who still stand apart and refuse to let themselves be blinded by passion and say to them: 'see for yourselves: this is a new Italian culture, created by Fascism'.

I say a new culture, because culture is not content, but form: is not the quantity of knowledge which has been accumulated or disseminated, but spiritual power; it is not matter, but style. Today in Italy there is, as we have seen, a spiritual force at work: a vitality which spontaneously tends to pervade and inform every sphere of life.

In a discourse which is typical not only of Gentile, but of the attempted 'sacralization of politics' characteristic of Fascism (and generic fascism) as a whole, Gentile proceeds to refer to the new ethos in terms of 'religion':

What has come over us to endow us with this sensibility, the sign that new spiritual needs and new directions are being taken by life and thought? ... It is a religious sentiment, ... one which takes life seriously: really seriously ... and no longer distinguishes doing from talking, deed from thought, literature from life, reality from programmes, life and death from the triumph of ideals which we have faithfully served: this is the new spiritual value which Fascism has planted in the Italian soul: it is to these heights that we are now trying raise national culture.

A closely related concept of culture was presented by Forges Davanzati, not an idealist philosopher, but a leading representative of the Italian National Association when it merged with Fascism in 1923. The central theme of a talk given to the Giacomo Venezian Cultural Circle in 1926 was the intimate relationship between culture and politics. In an allusion to the signatories of Croce's Manifesto of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals, he agreed with those who contended that culture is 'everything that has a vital sense of creation', but asks:

is it possible to say that art is something abstract that can really be separated from what is good politics? ... Is it possible to admit that art, that speculation, do not carry with them the best seeds of a race, and are not the expression of a people? When within the word culture we want to include as well that fresh zone of creation where the seed of a people blossoms, we no longer see in the fruits thus produced that aridity, that sterility, that abstraction which men of culture believe they need to defend against what are made out to be the dangers of politics. And when, leaving aside so much in the production of art which is transitory and contingent, we come to the great creative figures, at this point we link up with that great, ideal lineage in which all the heroes of the spirit are related, whether they are great captains and the founders of empires, or great artists and creators of works of the mind.

Even Giuseppe Bottai, a technocratic modernizer, and hence a completely different political animal from both Forges Davanzati and Giovanni Gentile in so many respects, hinted at precisely the same intimate relationship between
culture and (at least for the liberal mentality) unrelated spheres of society in a speech he made in November 1928 at Pisa University to inaugurate a course in corporative legislation:

Only a unified way of thinking, only an ordered culture can establish the relationships and connections necessary to endow the politics of a ruling class with a truly national dimension. A great politics is basically no more than a method to think, study, predispose, and order the relationships between ponderable and imponderable values which operate in the life of a people; an energy which, reconnecting the particular with the universal, determines the fundamental qualities of a historical process and creates, in a unified and unifying movement, a political style and the character of an epoch.

Operating on this premise, it is not surprising to find Bottai presenting the new state as founded on a Fascism which is primarily a political force, rather than a cultural one:

It is in these terms that, as I see it, the problem of culture in the present phase of Fascism is to be framed. Fascism-as-culture, in which, as we saw, Fascism-as-action is not denied but integrated, is the foundation of Fascism-as-State. In our type of State, which is not an arid bureaucratic construction (whether we are talking about the old bureaucracy or the one now emerging within the framework of syndicalism), professional skills based on the mentality of the accountant is not enough. Our State engages the spirit and conscience of our citizens; it is with their spirit and conscience that they must operate in order to serve it.

This conception allows him to see even a course in corporatist legislation in terms of political and cultural renewal:

It is in this precise point that, according to me, the role of the university under Fascism lies: in laying the basis for a living culture, one which creates a class of men able to provide leadership in politics, science, and art.27

The third example is taken from Balbino Giuliano’s chapter ‘Il fascismo e l’avvenire della coltura [sic]’ in a work entitled portentously Fascist Civilization, published in 1928. A former Nationalist, Giuliano went on to become minister of national education, a position which he used to impose on university professors an oath of loyalty to the regime. Though temperamentally very different from Bottai, a major theme of his argument is the symbiosis between politics and culture which Fascism has brought about:

The first development within the new culture is simply this: that today for the first time the Italian people has understood the need for a really national politics, one which is really realistic and really idealistic simultaneously, transcending egoistic interests of class and region.

He goes on to present Fascism as bringing about a cultural transformation which could bring new life to every aspect of Italian society:

When we affirm the divinity of our beautiful Italian nation we fully understand that we are announcing a religious idea in the true sense of the word, capable of creating a whole new development in culture, practical and theoretical, via which we can arrive at new
conceptions of God, cosmic reality, and human destiny, at a new way of ordering our interior life and external social life.

Giuliano believes that an art which achieves this cosmological function will create a symbiosis between the Italian people and the Italian state:

Time will tell whether Italy can succeed, as we said earlier, in resolving the problem which the Nineteenth century never resolved, in other words whether the new Fascist culture, which has justified in the name of the spirit both the legitimacy of the State and the life of its subjects, is able to bring forth from its depths the new syntheses of life similar to those descending from above which gradually dissolved during the Renaissance, and by virtue of these syntheses endow the State with total sanctity through the total sanctification of life.28

It is in this sense that Giuliano talks of Fascism having brought about a ‘sacred synthesis’ between the Italian nation and its institutional form, born of the national uprising which it carried out against the State.29

How far this core myth of culture penetrated Fascist thought can be inferred from an article published seven years later by M. Scaligero, an obscure figure who later made a minor contribution to Italy’s anti-Semitic campaign. Writing for a special page which the Fascist daily Il Regime Fascista once a fortnight gave over to followers of Julius Evola’s highly unorthodox ‘Traditionalist’ theory of Fascism, he makes the following observation concerning the ‘Fascist function of art’:

A true art, one which rises above the contingent and does not tolerate limitations of a spatial or temporal character, but is able working within time and space to find ways of connecting up with the enduringly and authentically spiritual, is above all the fruit of a superior civilization. Great art has always been underpinned by the reality of a culture, a tradition, an empire: it has never been the emanation of a decadent civilization or a period of degeneration: it has always wanted to express the state of spiritual plenitude, the happiness and warmth of a life which transcends life itself, and hence has always been a sort of rich symbology epitomizing an epic moment or time in the solar period of a race or its emergence, which at first is woven as a myth, as cosmic-religious representation, and finally culminates with motifs of regality, of mature power, of supreme authority over things and forms, only to give way to involution, rhetoric, and decadence thereafter.30

And what of Mussolini himself, so often presented as an ideological *bricoleur*, scavenging in the waste-paper bins of ‘real’ thinkers to cobble together the semblance of a ‘world-view’? As I suggested earlier, there is ample documentary evidence (if considered in the light of the myth of palingetic ultra-nationalism) that he had more insight into the core ideology of his own movement than is generally realized. This can be gleaned, for example, from two speeches which he made in Perugia on his visit there in October 1926. In them, Mussolini alludes to the basic components of Fascism’s core cultural myth so casually that it suggests the umpteeth restatement of deep-seated convictions rather than rhetorical bluster. In the first, with which he regaled the crowd gathered in Perugia’s town square to hear him, he makes a throw-away remark emphasizing
the gulf which divided Fascism from traditional political movements: 'Perhaps we are the bearers of a new political system; but we are also the bearers of a new type of civilization.' The next day he visited the town's Academy of Fine Arts. In his brief reply to the address by its president Professor Francesco Guardabassi in which he had waxed lyrical about the importance of art, the Duce stated:

Without art there is no civilization. I believe that art marks the dawn of every civilization. When Italy was still divided its unity was expressed in the renaissance of its art. Italy existed in the world by virtue of this single glory: the Renaissance. Today Italy is a people with great possibilities ahead of it and the condition has been realized which all its great men looked forward to, from Machiavelli to Mazzini. Today there is more: we are about to be united morally. Now on a ground thus prepared a great art can arise which can be traditionalist and at the same time modern. We must create, otherwise we shall be no more than the exploiters of an old patrimony: we must create the new art of our times: a Fascist art.31

In such pronouncements Mussolini is consistent with the various commentators cited above specifically in identifying Fascism's mission with the three interconnected ideas: the moral and spiritual unification of the people, the appearance of a new form of art, and the creation of a new civilization (essentially Italian, but with the mission of inspiring renewal in Western civilization as a whole).

The irreducible pluralism of Fascist culture

Fascism thus possessed a cohesive core myth of imminent cultural renewal. It was to have three interrelated aspects. First, it would mediate the subjective, 'moral' adherence of the people to the institutions and processes of government which was the premise of the 'ethical', 'totalitarian' state in the positive (Gentilean) sense of the word. Second, it would express the organic unity of the Italian people and its regeneration as a national community, thus completing the Risorgimento project of unification so disastrously botched by liberalism. Third, it would betoken the renewed flowering of the Italian creative genius which had produced the Roman Empire and the Renaissance, turning Italy into the heartland of a new type of civilization which would act as a lodestar to other modern nations of the world which found themselves so mired in crisis.32 The Fascist political revolution would thus act as the precondition for, and find fulfilment in, an all-encompassing cultural revolution: artistic excellence would complement the outstanding achievements in the economic, technological, social and military spheres. Italy would be 'great' once again.

It was a myth which despite its boundless nebulousness at least acquired a certain degree of concreteness in what it precluded. Just as Fascism's core political myth of national rebirth allowed a high degree of consensus to exist between Fascists about what political systems their movement rejected in order to achieve its revolutionary ends (notably those of liberalism and international socialism), so its core myth of cultural renewal assured a high level of agreement.
on what forms of cultural life the new Italy had to purge itself of, namely everything which bore the hallmark of their liberal origins. As far as high-brow culture was concerned, this meant ivory-tower elitism, self-indulgent subjectivism, Bohemianism, hermeticism, the tendency to over-specialization, sterile erudition and anything which smacked of an anti-heroic, cynical, pessimistic or gratuitously aestheticizing attitude to life cut off from the vitality of ‘the people’. Existing popular culture was condemned for its crass materialism, commercialism, hedonism, vulgarity, triviality, sensationalism or banality, all symptoms of a decadence as evident in the slushy romanticism of escapist love-stories as in the mindless violence of pulp fiction. For the Fascist the contemporary art (as opposed to modernist art) which had thrived before the March on Rome was thus as much associated with fragmentation, class division and a lack of unifying ideals as were the other spheres of life in the ‘old’ Italy.23

There were also few ardent Fascists who would dispute the need for the new state to create institutions and sponsor initiatives to associate more and more of the nation’s existing cultural life with the triumph of Fascism, to stimulate a revival of creativity in every sphere of cultural production and to ensure that the maximum number of Italians were exposed to, and felt integrated within, the Fascist experience of life.24 What could not be resolved so easily were two major issues. First, how prescriptive, proactive or interventionist should the new Fascist state be in cultural affairs when it came to banning ‘un-Fascist’ art and actually promoting Fascist aesthetics in a prescriptive spirit? Second, what precisely should constitute Fascist aesthetics? It was the lack of consensus concerning these two fundamental questions, not the lack of a core theory of culture, which lies at the root of the Fascist Tower of Babel in aesthetic matters.

This can be illustrated by considering a series of articles published in Giuseppe Bottai’s Critica Fascista in 1926–7.25 They were written by a motley assortment of artists and cultural commentators in response to the cryptic allusions to the task of creating a ‘Fascist art’ made by Mussolini in Perugia in the October 1926 speech cited earlier. The contributors included Ardengo Soffici, who started out writing for Papini’s La Voce, went through a Futurist phase, and ended up an advocate of the classicizing modernism of Novecento; Curzio Malaparte, who passed through a Novecento phase only to embrace the ultra-ruralist strapaese ideals; Mario Puccini, a novelist influenced by the late nineteenth-century naturalist Verga; and Filippo Marinetti, founder of the Futurist movement, not to mention a number of Fascist ministers and high-ranking civil servants.

The articles are in conformity with Fascism’s core cultural myth about what the ultimate function of art should be in the new Italy. Thus Soffici reminds the reader that as early as September 1922 he had argued in the pages of Gerarchia that Fascism was not a party, but a ‘movement aimed at total regeneration’, and that it ‘tends necessarily towards a vision of the whole where political facts spontaneously merge with spiritual facts, philosophy mixes with action, reality with imagination, and thus poetry with politics’.26 In admittedly far more grandiose terms, this is precisely the point which Bontempelli makes when he
defends the idea of a ‘Fascist art’. He starts by conceding that the phrase would be a nonsense if "’Fascism’ were only the name of a party or a political preference’.

But by ‘Fascism’ we mean a whole orientation of life, public and private: a total and perfected order that is at once practical theoretical, intellectual and moral, application and spirit. We all agree on this (and those who do not, simply do not count). And so it is evident that one can legitimately speak of ‘Fascist art’ just as one can properly speak of ‘classical art’ or ‘romantic art’… Fascism, a specifically Mediterranean phenomenon, is the precise historical event which inaugurates the latest era: the Third Epoch of Human Civilization… Art is the sensitive instrument that must at once mark off and foster, express and bring to maturation, the fecundity of the third epoch of civilization: the Fascist Era (emphasis mine).37

Similar allusions to the core Fascist myth of cultural renewal, and to the ‘total’ function of art as expressing the ethos of the entire Italian people now that it is being regenerated, can be found in all the Critica Fascita contributions. Puccini, for example, assures us that ‘it may well be that a Fascist art will be born, since the spirit of the race is by now essentially Fascist’. He goes on to observe that a Fascist art is one which ‘improves the race and at the same time expresses it’.38 In the next issue Marinetti, in a typically bombastic contribution, associates Fascist art with ‘the creative genius of the race’, ‘colonial expansion’, ‘innovative Italian pride’ and everything that is quintessentially Italian, and hence ‘virile, bellicose, joyous, optimistic, dynamic, synthetic, simultaneous, and colourful’.39 There are also scattered though the contributions pointed attacks on the enemies of Fascist culture: scepticism, pessimism, foreign spiritual values, trash fiction, immoral plays, primitivism, atheism, the vacuously decorative, fragmentary, psychoanalytic and so on.

The problems start when the reader looks for consensus on what Fascist culture should be and how the state should act to promote it. For, as is only to be expected, each contributor defends the merits of his own particular aesthetic as embodying the true spirit of Fascism. Nor is there any agreement on how best the state can act to promote Fascist art. Marinetti, the arch-enemy of libraries, museums and academies, characteristically implies that nothing need be done by the state since both the theory and practice of Fascist art are already a reality, since they came into existence avant la lettre with the Futurist crusade against ‘pastism’. Malaparte, too, pours scorn on the idea of an art ‘which is proposed, defended, advanced by push and shove, imposed upon us in a shower of pamphlets’ and produced by ‘the oh-so-highly disciplined sheep who would accept a fist in the eye as art, as long as it were handed down to them via the proper hierarchical channels’. But, after lashing out in typical strapaesano fashion at the corrupting influence of foreign art, he calls for a truly Italian art ‘that has roots in our true, classical and most Italian tradition’. The first step towards this would be to ‘clear the field of all that which claims the right to call itself “Fascist art”, suggesting a draconian policy of censorship and establishing
norms of cultural “health” whose logical conclusion would have been the Italian equivalent of the Nazis’ purge of “un-German art”.40

Bottai, in his role as editor of Critica Fascista and arbiter of the debate, comes to an even more interventionist, dirigiste conclusion. He proposed that ‘the development and perfection of artistic culture’ be entrusted to the newly created Italian Academy. This he envisaged as proceeding in a spirit which was ‘anti-academic’—i.e. ‘anti-parasitic and anti-static, dynamic, working, creative’.41 Eventually it would be the Academy which would ‘set the tone and indicate the paths to be taken by Italian culture (a phrase to be understood in its broadest sense as nearly synonymous with civilization itself)’.42

As for the type of aesthetic to which the Academy might grant official recognition as the regime’s orthodoxy, Bottai clearly felt it unpoltic to express his own growing predilection for the type of internationalist modernism which he was later to encourage when he instituted the Bergamo Prize in 1940. Hected by so many fundamentally incompatible claims to embody the ‘true’ spirit of Fascism, Bottai prefers to sit on the fence. Instead of passing judgement, he takes refuge in wishful thinking. Fascist art, he predicts, ‘is ready to burst forth from the deepest roots of the consciousness of the new Italian, the Fascist Italian’, but he concedes that ‘it is easier for us to say what Fascist art should not be, rather than what it should be’.43

We cannot give decalogues, formulae, maxims, or recipes which would contain the exact doses of the various ingredients that make up Fascist painting, sculpture, music, or literature. The creation of Fascist art now requires only artists: artists who possess creative genius.44

In retrospect, Bottai’s observation that ‘at the moment the only great artist of the regime is its founder, Mussolini’45 did not bode well for the future of Fascist culture.

The failure of the Fascist bid for cultural renewal

In her analysis of the fate of yet another bid to stimulate the creation of a genuine Fascist culture, the launching of the arts periodical Corrente di Vita Giovane, Ruth Ben-Ghiat shows that a decade after the great debate in the pages of Critica Fascista the fundamental paradox of Fascist culture was as far from being resolved as ever. Its founders still aspired to bridge high art with popular culture in order to awaken the spiritually inert of the new Italy and so help generate the ‘new Fascist man’. This time the medium was to be Realism, not naturalistic realism, but one infused with idealism and heroism. The article traces how this initiative too came to naught, breeding a disillusionment amongst its most ardent protagonists which eventually turned some into the proponents of the Neorealism of the war and post-war years, much of which still bore the traces of the palingenetetic aspirations of the heady days of the early 1930s, but now in communist rather than Fascist key.
Ben-Ghiat rightly observes that ‘the redefinition of Realism by the writers of *Corrente* can be taken as a symbol of the failure of the regime’s cultural policy’. It was a failure on two distinct levels. First, as we have seen, the core myth of a total culture to reflect the totality of the Fascist revolution admitted any number of specific aesthetics, all of which could be claimed by their advocates to embody the ‘true’ spirit of Fascism. In this sense, there is a profound parallel with the political sphere. The vision of national palingenesis of the total regeneration of Italy, similarly admitted many conflicting interpretations: syndicalist, Dannunzian, Futurist, *squadrista*, Nationalist, Gentilean, ruralist, technocratic, Romanizing, Europeanizing or racist, to name only the most important.

Furthermore, Mussolini’s instinct, conditioned by the deep-seated traditions of Italian politics and reinforced by the absence of any one powerful Fascist faction to support him, was not to impose any one version of Fascism, but to operate as a *super-trasformista*, coopting different Fascisms into a loose coalition. This was as true in the area of culture as in any other sphere. The widespread impression noted at the outset of this article, that he was happy to accommodate any activist or ideologue willing to put their backs into pushing the Fascist juggernaut, is thus true. But the reason is not the absence of a core ideology, but rather the fact that the skeleton of an ideology of national renewal could be fleshed out in so many conflicting ways, and his temperament led him to cultivate the proliferation of rival Fascisms rather than using his authority to dictate a single orthodoxy.

Second, even if some Darwinistic law had enabled one particular aesthetic or vision of palingenesis to win out over all others, Fascist cultural policy would still have failed disastrously. The idea that it is still possible in the twentieth century to recreate the type of total culture which seemingly existed under the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt, the Emperors of dynastic China, or the Mayas of pre-Hispanic America once the forces of secularization, internationalization and individualism have wrought their havoc is irremediably utopian.

The Humpty Dumpty of a fully homogeneous society, even if such a thing ever existed, cannot be put back together, no matter how many of Caesar’s horses and Caesar’s men are sent to the scene of his great fall. Even the attempts by today’s fundamentalist theocracies to keep back the tide of ideological relativism, pluralism and fragmentation in societies exposed far less than early twentieth-century Italy to the faith-corroding onslaught of Westernization has a Canute-like quality. Mussolini’s goal of turning his regime into a ‘totalitarian’ state as a role model for other nations was doomed from the start to remain a chimera. Equally flawed was the syllogism which implicitly informed so much Fascist cultural speculation: ‘A great civilization produces great art. Fascist Italy is creating a great civilisation. Therefore it will produce great art’ (though it would take a sophisticated exercise in cultural anthropology and art theory to explain why it was flawed). The upshot is that Fascism remained a chronically disunited, divided, heterogeneous society till the bitter end. Unsurprisingly, not only did no great art spontaneously arise under Mussolini’s aegis, but
specifically non-Fascist culture continued to be produced, not just when the
jerry-built Fascist edifice collapsed in ruins, but all the time that attempts were
being made to erect it. The doomed project of mounting a huge Universal
Exhibition of Rome in 1942, which came to be known as E'42, or, even more
tellingly, E quaranta-mai ('E 40-never') came to epitomize not the cultural
greatness of the new imperial Italy, but the insoluble aesthetic contradictions and
monumental hubris of the regime's whole concept of a reborn civilization.  
Fascism was not anti-modern. It envisaged an alternative modernity as the
solution to the perceived crisis of civilization, but one which denied one of
the fundamental features of modernization: the pluralization, bastardization and
cross-fertilization of culture as they intermingle so unpredictably and inexorably.
Despite its totalitarian aspirations, then, what emerged under Mussolini was not
uniformity but, as we pointed out at the beginning, the paradoxical situation of
'totalitarian pluralism'. However, as has hopefully been shown, this was not
because of the lack of a cohesive cultural ideology, but because of the intrinsic
multivariance and ambiguity of that core ideology when it came to translating it
into concrete terms.

For the regime's intransigent 'believers', though, what was even more
intolerable than the absence of cultural homogeneity was the fact that instead of
the boundless enthusiasm and dynamism which was meant to characterize the
inner life of the homo fascistas, Fascism had created an all-pervasive apathy and
inertia. The generation of Italians whose individual human potential was to have
found complete expression and fulfilment as citizens of the Third Rome was
still-born: Fascist Italy was a nation of indifferenti and conformisti.

Even Bottai, who throughout his many years of unceasing service to the
regime had poured so much idealism and energy into creating a Fascist culture
and who officially maintained his optimism about the imminent regeneration of
the nation until the very end, was forced to admit in the privacy of his journal
the gap between the ideal and the reality:

I look around me, and it seems to me that the little bit of social life which the
Mussolinian regime has allowed to survive is kept going by the same provisional, fragile
equilibrium which regulates the inner life of each of us. There is no individuality left any
more to express itself in this inarticulate community which is so close-knit it has reached
a point of stasis. There is neither personality, nor seriousness. It is erroneous to believe
that the rule of a single person, protracted beyond the limits permissible for a dictator-
ship, destroys individual values so as to foster collective ones. It destroys both ... The
dictatorship has devoured itself.

Notes

1. E.g. both Philip Morgan, Italian Fascism 1919–1945, Macmillan, London, 1995 and John Whittam,
Fascist Italy, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1995 ignore cultural issues entirely, while even
scholarly studies such as E.R. Tannenbaum, The Fascist Society and Culture 1922–45, Basic Books, New
York, 1972 and A. Lyttleton, The Seizure of Power, Fascism in Italy 1919–1929, Weidenfeld and
Nicholson, London, 1987, chapter 14 make no attempt to identify a basic theory underlying Fascist cultural
phenomena. Nor is the reader given much sense of the existence of such a theory from multi-author
treatments of the subject, such as R. J. Golsan (ed.), Fascism, Aesthetics, Culture, University Press of New
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The refreshing exception to this generalization is the essay published in the latter collection by Ruth Ben-Ghiat called ‘Italian Fascism and the Aesthetics of the “Third Way”’ (*ibid.*, pp. 293–316), which emphasizes the fascist bid to create a new type of total culture. In addition I must draw attention to M. Affron and M. Aniliff (eds), *Fascist Visions. Art and Ideology in France and Italy* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997), which went to press only after I had finished the present article. Underlying this important collection of essays is a concept of the vision of culture adopted by generic fascism which corroborates and illustrates the one expounded in this article to a remarkable degree: the essay by Maria Stone, ‘The State as Patron Making Official Culture in Fascist Italy’ introduces the concept of ‘hegemonic pluralism’ which is profoundly congruent with the present article. (Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi’s *Fascist Spectacle. The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997, and Mabel Berezin’s *Making the Fascist Self*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1997, similarly unavailable at the time of writing, both indirectly provide lavish documentation of the centrality of palaeontological myth to the concrete measures taken by Fascism to create a new type of culture. However, neither make it central to the conceptual framework of their investigation.)

2. The catalogue to the *Anni Trenta* exhibition held in Milan in 1982 (ed. A. Pansera, Nuove Edizioni Gabriele Mazzotta, Milan) is one of the most comprehensive collection of essays and images so far to have appeared, but again there is no attempt to identify a cohesive Fascist cultural theory.


11. Quoted in Griffin, *Fascism*, p. 29.


13. For a more detailed account of the implications of this ideal type for an understanding of Fascism and generic fascism, see Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, chapters 2, 3; Griffin, *Fascism*, General Introduction.


21. By contrast it is central to the ‘Gramscian’ diagnosis of contemporary history put forward by the *Nowelle Droite* strand of neo-fascist ideology that ‘cultural hegemony’ has to be gained before the political and social transformations they long for can take place. See Griffin, *Fascism*, pp. 346-51.


24. See Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*.


29. Ibid. p. 191.


31. E. and D. Susnai (eds), *Omnia Opera di Benito Mussolini*, La Fenice, Florence, 1951-81, 8, pp. 228-30. It is also worth reading Mussolini’s introduction to Pomba, *Civiltà Fascista*.


33. For an excellent case-study in the fierce critique of pre- and non-Fascist culture offered by a group of Fascist ideolists who looked to art (this time in ‘realist’ key) to unite the people to the regime and create the ‘new man’, see R. Ben-Ghiat, ‘The Politics of Realism: *Corrente di Vita Giovane* and the Youth Culture of the 1930s’, *Stanford Italian Review*, 8, 1-2, 1990, ‘Fascism and Culture’, pp. 139-64.

34. The principal institutions created by Fascism to regulate cultural production included the Istituto Nazionale Fascista di Cultura (1925) (renamed Istituto Nazionale di Cultura Fascista); L’Unione Cinematografica Educativa or LUCE (1925); Ente Italiano Audizione Radiofoniche (1928); Accademia d’Italia (1929); the Scuola di Mista Fascista Sandro Mussolini (1930); Gruppi Universitari Fascisti (independent from 1926); Enciclopedia Italiana (1925); Corporazione dello Spettacolo (1930); Corporazione degli Intellettuali (originally the National Syndicate of Intellectual Work, then the Confederazione di Professionisti e degli Artisti; Comitato Nazionale per le Arti Popolari (1932); Ministero di Cultura Popolare (1937), which grew out Mussolini’s Press Office; Opera Nazionale Baillia (1926) (merged into Giovannì Italiana del Littorio in 1937). A major role in generating and coordinating popular art was played by the Opera Nazionale Dolovaloro (1925).

35. For a full English translation of some of the most important of these articles, see J. Schnapp and B. Spackman, ‘Selections from the Great Debate on Fascism and Culture: *Critica Fascista*, *Stanford Italian Review*, 8, 1-2, 1990, ‘Fascism and Culture’, pp. 235-72.

36. Ibid. p. 239.


38. Ibid. p. 258.


40. Ibid. p. 255.

41. Ibid. p. 269.

42. Ibid. p. 272.

43. Ibid. p. 266.

44. Ibid. p. 267.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid. p. 163.

47. On this aspect, this crucial role of Mussolini’s role as leader of Fascism, see D. D. Roberts, *The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1979, chapter 8, ‘The varieties of Italian Fascism’.

48. Contrast the way that in Nazi Germany, Expressionism eventually was judged to be ‘un-German’ despite

49. For a recent study of totalitarianism which rightly underlines the hopelessness of the bid to create any more than the façade of total conformity and consensus within the population of a modern state, see Simon Tormey, Making Sense of Tyranny, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1995.


51. The allusion is to Moravia’s novel Gli indifferenti and Bertolucci’s film Il conformista, both of which can be read as allegories of the vacuousness at the core of Fascist society.