

to enable Italy to lead, ended up bringing her more ridicule and discredit than anything else in modern times. But the whole tragic experience dissolved some of the long-standing cultural traumas that made fascism possible—though not necessary—and created a cultural framework enabling Italians to respond to modern problems in a more genuinely creative way.

12 / *Italian Fascism in European History*

If we ask what fascism was, we are asking several questions at once—questions that simply cannot be answered in the same breath. Above all, we must distinguish the purposes that made fascism possible from the realities of the regime, from what it all added up to when the end came in 1943. There was incongruity between intentions and effects, yet interpretation of the place of fascism in history must have room for both. As a regime, fascism ended up regimenting the working class, undercutting the possibility of popular participation in decision making, and enhancing the power of the traditional bureaucracy within the state. But these effects were evidence of the failure of some of the most important objectives that made fascism possible—not of their success. Some of the fundamental features of the regime were accidental, for the regime was not a “system,” but an improvisation based on capricious personal dictatorship. Committed fascists kept pushing, but it is hardly surprising that the existing elites in business and the bureaucracy also sought to make the most of fascism. They succeeded as well as they did largely because of the weaknesses and divisions among the genuinely fascist components. All the components, fascist and nonfascist alike, looked to Mussolini, for the logic of the situation made him the key to the practice of the regime. Thus it is crucial to understand Mussolini, what made him as he was, the phenomenology of his being as he was. His activism, his cynicism, his opportunism were symptomatic of certain problematic features of modern culture, and so Mussolini has his own place in modern European history.¹

Questions about how this dictatorial regime worked and what it did are essential, but additional questions must also be asked if our concern is fascism's place in history. Impulses that never found fulfill-

ment in practice made the regime possible in the first place and had some effect on its overall shape. And whatever their outcome in practice, these impulses are historically significant, because they help to reveal the frustrations and aspirations at work in the experience of Italians—and Europeans—in the twentieth century. The traumas and hopes that gave rise to the totalitarian corporatist thrust in fascism were real and operative, whether fascism ended up a totalitarian corporatist regime or not.

Even when we move beyond effects to intentions, however, no single answer will do, for the creators of Italian fascism had different, even conflicting, values and objectives. The difference between populist and elitist currents was the most fundamental. Still, both kinds of fascism emerged in Italy partly because of her relative backwardness and political immaturity. Among more or less liberal nations, Italy was an extreme case, with problems close to the surface. Thus emerged the basic right and left fascist perspectives: the masses seemed to pose a threat everywhere—but especially in Italy; the masses were left out of the liberal parliamentary system everywhere—but especially in Italy. Moreover, both of the major components in fascism aimed at modernization and nation building. In seeking to promote national solidarity and a strong state, fascists of both left and right were trying to build a cohesive modern nation out of a fragmented society. Because of objective economic difficulties, and because she was poorly integrated as a nation, Italy would have to adopt new, totalitarian methods of mass mobilization if she was to catch up. The more advanced countries of western Europe did not face the same problems.

If we could make sense of Italian fascism solely in terms of backwardness and modernization, then the phenomenon would not be central to the modern European experience, and we could best consider fascist Italy as a nationalist-socialist developmental dictatorship—much like those that have emerged in the third world in the wake of decolonization.² Despite her relative backwardness, however, Italy had experienced many of the same problems with parliamentary liberalism and industrial capitalism that afflicted more advanced countries. Through its elitist current, Italian fascism has a place in the conservative, antidemocratic tradition of Europe as a whole. In Italian fascism that tradition was evolving, as its exponents began to devise new methods in response to the rise of the masses during the first decades of the twentieth century. The populist current, however, was a response to a different set of problems and links Italian fascism to the long-term processes of European history in an altogether different way.

It is widely assumed that fascism as a mass movement, in both

Italy and Germany, was an attempt to find traditionalist or backward-looking solutions to problems of modernization and modernity. Fascism, it seems, attracted people from the lower middle class who were losing out as modernization proceeded.³ Much of German Nazism was indeed a kind of revolt against modernity, although the motives of committed Nazis often cannot be understood in terms of the standard socioeconomic categories. In addition to the familiar petty bourgeois traumas, "modernity" raises less tangible problems of individuation and identity, freedom and powerlessness, problems which afflict certain personalities or psychological types more than others. The Himmlers and Eichmanns and Hösses in Nazism were indeed "losers" in the wake of modernization, but they revolted against aspects of modern life because of personal, psychological weaknesses, not because of responses to problematic features of modernity may well take "alienated" and irrational forms if the problems are inherently insoluble—for the most troubling features of Nazism simply did not understand the relationship between the essential structures of modern life and their own existential problems. The Jews were to blame; the Jews were the agents of the troubling features of modernity; problems could be overcome by eliminating the Jews. Unable to conceive of genuine solutions, these Nazis operated in terms of a fictional view of reality, which included archaic myths and images as well as biological racism and anti-Semitism.

Although left fascism and Nazism obviously had some major enemies in common—especially liberal individualism and Marxism—their concerns were fundamentally different; left fascism was not involved with modernity in the same way as Nazism. As we already noted briefly, left fascism sought to promote modernization. Moreover, left fascism sought to respond to modern problems in a comparatively national and forward-looking way.

Italy was relatively backward as an economy and poorly integrated as a nation—far behind Germany in both respects. Despite its superficialities and petty ambitions, left fascism responded to these features of the Italian context with a program that was modernizing and nation-building in intention. The left fascists' shrill nationalism, and their unusually intense traumas about national worth, manifested the threatened "petty bourgeois" mentality in some respects, but these concerns led them to favor modernization, not to cling to tradition. They longed to be part of a more modern, productive—and respected nation, and they saw fascism as the vehicle for the desired change. Left fascism, then, was not a revolt against modernity, but an awkward,

often superficial attempt to make Italy more modern and productive on the part of people who were in many ways ill-equipped for the task. They did not have much concrete experience of the modern industrial world.

Here it is useful to return to the thesis of Luigi Salvatorelli, the first to portray fascism as an expression of petty bourgeois losers. Another early critic of fascism, Giovanni Ansaldo, raised some telling objections to Salvatorelli's thesis in 1922 and 1923, pointing out that the petty bourgeois elements which formed the core of fascism were very much taken with modern industrialism, but in a superficial and rhetorical way.⁵ These fascists emphasized change, dynamism, and the future and dreamed of the great productive Italy that fascism would create. In response to Ansaldo's critique, Salvatorelli began to back off, explaining that he had intended to link fascism to the superficial, rhetorical mentality characteristic of the Italian preindustrial bourgeoisie; the fascist cult of speed, dynamism, and modernity that Ansaldo cited was merely a new manifestation of the same propensity.⁶ Indeed, Salvatorelli went on, it was symptomatic of the relative backwardness of Italy's middle classes that here even interest in industrial modernization tended to assume an artificial and rhetorical character. But Salvatorelli was giving up most of his original argument: he was offering a useful explanation of the rhetorical forms of fascism, but if petty bourgeois fascists were not opposed to modern industrial society, if they were not clinging to traditional preindustrial values, then his original explanation of their motives in creating fascism had no value.

In contrast to Nazism, populist fascism in Italy was not notable for the diatribes against department stores and chain stores indicative of the standard petty bourgeois concerns. Sometimes the fascists indulged in rhetorical attacks on the financial plutocracy, and Salvatorelli cited them as confirmation of his thesis; but given the questionable, highly speculative role which large financial groups had played in Italy's industrial development, it was possible for Italians favoring industrial development to deplore the machinations of big finance capital. In the same vein, early fascist support of free trade has been portrayed as a manifestation of the concerns of static middle-class consumers.⁷ But since protectionism had so often interfered with healthy industrial growth in Italy, Italians could support free trade out of a desire for more viable economic development.

These two examples indicate how easy it is simply to find what we expect to find when we consider fascist statements about the economy. If we prejudge the fascists on the basis of a priori assumptions about the traumas of the petty bourgeoisie, then we can use virtually anything they said to explain their concerns away. Insofar as they objected to

any of the features of Italian industrial capitalism, they can be taken as losers unable to adjust to modernity. On the other hand, insofar as they favored large-scale industrial development in Italy and insisted on the progressive role which capitalists could play, we assume they must have swallowed the Nationalist line.⁸ And this can be explained only because of their susceptibility to irrational nationalist appeals, since surely the declining petty bourgeoisie could not have embraced modern industrial development for any other reason. In fact, of course, the performance of Italy's capitalist economy had been contradictory, and there is a good deal of ambivalence and confusion in left fascist statements about the economy. Since ambivalence about Italian capitalism was plausible on its own terms, however, the ambivalence in fascism does not necessarily manifest the incoherence of those being left out as modernization proceeds. To promote healthier industrial development in Italy, it was necessary to attack some aspects of Italian economic life and to favor others. It was necessary simultaneously to foster and to control the development of Italian capitalism. The left fascists understood economic matters only superficially, and they were not sure how to make the necessary distinctions in practice, but they wanted to distinguish between "producers" and "parasites," to get more productive elements into politics, to overcome the old unproductive patterns of Italian life, and to involve the whole society in the great task of economic modernization. To be sure, the Nazis ended up enhancing the modernization of Germany, despite their rhetoric against department stores. But this was only an unintended by-product of their quest for the means to implement their utopian, antimodern vision.⁹ The Nazis were not modernizers, not even superficial and rhetorical modernizers, the way the left fascists were.

It was partly because of Italy's relative backwardness that liberalism and capitalism seemed so problematic to critical Italians. Liberal individualism appeared to be a problem partly because Italy was especially atomized. The liberal state seemed weak, and the parliamentary system seemed an inadequate vehicle for popular participation, partly because of the political expedients which Italy's youth as a nation made necessary. Certainly Italy had never had a mature liberal system, and the creators of fascism were unwilling to allow liberalism a full-fledged trial. Partly because of cultural sensitivities that were themselves symptomatic of Italy's relative backwardness, they refused to settle for the prosaic task of catching up with others by working to improve Italy's liberal parliamentary system; they insisted instead that Italy required something new, a postliberal antidote to the problems of the modern bourgeois order. There was much empty rhetoric to such leadership pretensions, but many of Italy's problems also afflicted more advanced

countries. Left fascism, as a response to these difficulties, has a place in the supranational history of Europe, in the ongoing quest for solutions to the problems of modern liberalism and capitalism.

During the nineteenth century, a tradition developed on the left involving those who believed that the problems of liberalism and capitalism could be overcome only if the bourgeois order itself were transcended. Some grew disillusioned with the system only as its postulates found practical realization—with the advent of universal suffrage, for example. Georges Sorel was one of those who became so frustrated with democratic government in practice that he was drawn into the radical current; experience seemed to have proven by 1898 that it had been utopian to believe that elected representatives of the people would provide good and popular government.¹⁰ The results of universal suffrage and parliamentary government were so disillusioning that something altogether different seemed necessary. Leftist critics tended to agree that the bourgeois order, with its narrow individualism, undermined or failed to foster the nobler, social capacities in man. But there were many questions about the basis of the problems afflicting the advanced liberal capitalist countries of the West—and about what was required to overcome them.

By the 1890s, Marxism had established a kind of hegemony, if not an absolute supremacy, within the tradition of radical opposition to the bourgeois order in Europe. In achieving this dominant position, Marxism had apparently relegated its rivals—the doctrines of such other opponents of liberalism as Sismondi, Proudhon, and Mazzini—to the junk heap of history. These figures, Marxists claimed, were essentially spokesmen for the petty bourgeoisie, a class which had no progressive role to play. It fell to the industrial proletariat to become the universal class, capable of leading society beyond the liberal and capitalist order.

But during the 1890s, of course, serious strains became evident in the Marxist tradition. The revisionist Bernstein recognized, among other things, that the petty bourgeoisie was not disappearing, being sucked into the proletariat. In fact, a new lower middle class of technicians and white-collar workers was emerging as capitalism became more complex. Socialists, he said, must not forget this class, which could play a progressive role as long as the socialists themselves provided imaginative leadership. In Bernstein's conception, objective class basis was giving way to subjective consciousness, for socialism ultimately depended on the ethical capacity which pertains to man as such. At about the same time, Sorel showed that Marxism lacked an adequate theory of the psychological development of the proletariat

and insisted that the workers could claim to lead, and to create socialism, only if they had undergone a process of psychological maturation, acquiring a socialist consciousness. Lenin went a step further, arguing that experience had proven that the workers, left to themselves, could develop only a limited, trade union consciousness.¹¹ Socialist revolution required something more universal—a political consciousness in definable only in terms of its consciousness, not socioeconomic class. In other words, political consciousness was autonomous; it did not depend on one's place in the socioeconomic structure. And from a Leninist perspective, the essence of the revolution is to impart political values; economic changes are secondary and, in important respects, dependent upon prior changes in consciousness.

At the same time, the Marxist tradition was being attacked from the outside, as such thinkers as Durkheim, Pareto, and Léon Duguit, certainly "bourgeois" themselves, but still critical of central aspects of the bourgeois order, developed some of their ideas in intellectual confrontation with Marxism. Obviously Durkheim, for example, was no revolutionary, but he perceived problems with liberalism and capitalism that could not be overcome merely through continued evolution in the present direction, through existing institutions. Something new was required.

Marxism had a major impact in Italy during the 1890s, when it began to establish the foundations that would enable it to become an ongoing force in Italian culture and politics. But partly because of an on-backward lags, elements from her strong Mazzinian and anarchist traditions remained close to the surface in some segments of her radical tradition. The strains in Marxism afforded these "backward" forms of radicalism an opportunity to reassert themselves, in modified form, and to claim that they had something progressive to offer after all. Francesco Saverio Merlino was the pivotal figure in this development. A Neapolitan lawyer who started as an anarchist, Merlino has recently been portrayed as a petty bourgeois degeneration in Italian socialism.¹² From a Marxist perspective, this characterization is apt. But it was partly because of his links to pre-Marxist radical traditions, and partly because his perspective was "petty bourgeois," that Merlino was able to play a major role in the revision of Marxism, anticipating Bernstein and inspiring Sorel. In the person of Merlino, those whom Marx had relegated to the dustbin of history—including the Proudhons and Mazzinis on the intellectual level, the preindustrial middle classes and the mass level—were beginning to fight back, claiming to have more to say than the Marxists and workers about how to solve modern problems. It was happening in Italy because this was a country that tested

on the borderline between backwardness and modernity. Merlino's emphasis on the people, as opposed to the proletariat, was both premodern, a legacy of Italian preindustrial radicalism, and "post-modern," responding to the impasse into which the Marxist over-emphasis on the proletariat was leading the radical tradition in Europe in general. At issue, in fact, were not merely abstract intellectual satisfactions. The problems of the bourgeois order in Europe called for a response in practice, and the value of Marxism was becoming ever more questionable.

Those problems were especially close to the surface in Italy, where they helped to produce a crisis in the aftermath of World War I. And it was symptomatic of the disarray afflicting the Marxist tradition in general that the Italian Socialists and workers were not able to put forth a credible claim to leadership. Their perspective did not enable them to offer a convincing analysis of the problems causing the crisis or to propose convincing solutions. For now, at least, the proletariat did not seem to merit the great historical role which Marxism had assigned to it. In addition, Marxist categories seemed to be of limited value since in Italy, as in twentieth-century European experience in general, political and cultural problems were increasingly coming to seem autonomous—and even primary.¹³ This perception, in fact, has been bound up with the overall breakdown of classical Marxism in the twentieth century. If the focus of the revolution against the bourgeois order was to be political and cultural rather than socioeconomic, then surely a group defined in terms of its political and cultural consciousness, and not its objective place in the socioeconomic structure, could claim to spearhead it. An influential critic of Marxism, Vilfredo Pareto, found consciousness or values to be the defining attributes of both the decadent elites responsible for social problems and the revolutionary elites which could claim to solve them. Moreover, given the intractability of nationality and national differences, and given the importance of long-standing national problems, a revolutionary program had to be sensitive to the special needs of the particular nation.

The trouble with Marxism, then, was not that it was linked to the cause of labor, and not that it envisioned changing the world by making transcendent values practical and actual, to use Ernst Nolte's categories.¹⁴ The basis of the assault upon Marxist socialism in practice in Italy need have been neither of these. The problem, rather, was simply that Marxism seemed inadequate as a practical guide to overcoming the problems of the bourgeois order in Italy.

If capitalism did not appear to be heading toward collapse, and if the proletariat was capable of developing only a trade union consciousness, was there no hope of transcending the bourgeois order? Lenin

almost in spite of himself, had already indicated the direction in which the radical tradition must move by emphasizing political consciousness. Later on, Antonio Gramsci proved that the Marxist tradition could be renewed from within, as he worked out his sensitive blueprint largely in response to the inadequacies of the Socialist posture during Italy's postwar crisis. For Gramsci, the proletarian revolutionary program must respond to long-standing Italian political and cultural problems distinguishable from problems bound up with the capitalist economy. And the proletariat develops its right to rule—establishes its hegemony—through a cultural process which does not depend on the unfolding of capitalism. Gramsci's accents, like Lenin's, were on changes in consciousness, culture, and politics, not on changes in the economic sphere. Since those seeking to restore the Marxist tradition to viability have tried to overcome precisely the deficiencies which its critics had indicated, the Marxist and anti-Marxist variants in the radical tradition have moved in parallel directions in the twentieth century.

The Marxist tradition, then, was certainly not dead, but in Italy in 1920 it was possible to doubt that the Socialists and the proletariat were fit to lead. Yet the problems called for solution. And now others stepped forward, individuals with the kind of "petty bourgeois" populist perspective which Marx felt would become ever more outmoded; they indulged in a measure of revenge on Marx's followers and the class which he had expected to lead, but they also claimed that they themselves could spearhead the solution to the problems with the bourgeois order now coming to a head in Italy. The syndicalists constituted their intellectual vanguard. Though heir to certain anarchist and populist perspectives, the syndicalists still had participated in the vogue of Marxism in Italy and had made a serious effort to work within the Marxist tradition. Isolated and alienated, they had been eager for the leadership which the emerging industrial proletariat would apparently be able to offer, sooner or later. But gradually they had encountered the tensions and questions afflicting the Marxist tradition in Europe. As Marxist categories began to seem inappropriate, they set out on their own, drawing on Marx's critics and enemies, developing a new blueprint, and finally encountering a new constituency. They became part of the postwar "petty bourgeois" revolt in Italy, giving it the measure of consistency and direction that it had. In part, then, the fascist revolt was a challenge to the dominant position in the tradition of leftist opposition to the bourgeois order which Marxism had managed to achieve. In its quest for alternative solutions, and in its quest for its own roots, the left fascist current resurrected a number of Marx's apparently vanquished rivals—populist, "petty bourgeois," antibourgeois leftists from the nineteenth century like Mazzini, Proudhon, and St.

mondi. It also drew sustenance from participants in the revision of Marxism like Merlino, Sorel, and Bernstein, and even from critical "bourgeois" thinkers like Pareto, Durkheim, and Léon Duguit. The result was a new synthesis, left fascism, intended as a third way, a more appropriate response to the problems of liberalism and capitalism than communism could offer.

As spokesmen for this current, the syndicalists sought explicitly to establish its place in the tradition of the anti-Marxist Left in Europe. Again and again, Panunzio claimed that fascism was implementing what remained of the socialist tradition after the revision of Marxism, the war, and the anomalies of the Bolshevik revolution. According to Panunzio, in fact, Mussolini's speech of 14 November 1933, announcing the organization of corporations, finally brought to a close the long crisis in the socialist tradition that had begun in the 1890s.¹⁵ For Olivetti, in the same way, fascism was to carry out the social revolution that all the socialist schools had proven unable to bring to fruition.¹⁶ Lanzillo, writing in 1918, proclaimed that the war had shattered the old socialism, but as a fascist, he portrayed socialism as a tendency inherent in modern society—one which could best come to fruition within the fascist context.¹⁷ Younger fascists like Grandi, Suckert, and Bottai similarly portrayed the historical significance of fascism in terms of the inadequacies and failures of socialism.¹⁸

Panunzio praised Sorel, Bernstein, and Merlino for perceiving the excesses of Marxism and for helping to refurbish the tradition of radical opposition to the bourgeois order in Europe.¹⁹ With its exclusivist pretensions, Marxism had become rigid and dogmatic, but the radical tradition did not have to be a Marxist monopoly. Olivetti played up the anti-Marxist implications of Sorel's ideas, while Panunzio singled out his fellow Italian Merlino for special credit: "Whoever today reads Merlino's writings finds that many of the criticisms and objections of fascism against Marxist scientific socialism are to be found in our fellow Italian writer even earlier than in Bernstein and Sorel."²⁰

We have already discussed the left fascist cult of Mazzini, but the syndicalists also linked fascism to other nineteenth-century enemies of Marx. Olivetti placed fascism in the tradition of Proudhonian socialism, which he contrasted with the allegedly centralizing, authoritarian, and bureaucratic variety of "German" Marxism.²¹ Panunzio claimed that fascism embodied the legacy of Jean Sismondi de Sismondi, whom Marx and Engels had dismissed in the *Communist Manifesto* as the head of petty bourgeois socialism.²² Panunzio took special note of Sismondi's fate at the hands of Marx, but the "petty bourgeois" charge did not perturb him, for history, he claimed, had proven Sismondi right and Marx wrong. Indeed, those like Sismondi and Proudhon had been the

real revolutionaries, while Marx could only be called a conservative, since he had welcomed the full development of capitalism, with all its excesses, and since he had envisioned the ongoing primacy of the economic sphere. Panunzio cited the Soviet experience as evidence that Marxism accepts and fosters the tyranny of the economic over the political. As a critique of Marxism, this was all quite shallow and misdirected, yet it was typical and manifested the measure of superficiality in the syndicalists' overall position. Even Panunzio was not capable of a more serious and sustained critique of the great historical adversary. Marx simply did not envision the permanent subjection of the state to the economic society that Panunzio described. On the contrary, the Marxist revolution was to make possible the *Aufhebung* of the state, which means the end of the separation between state and society, the triumph of the universal-political over the particularism of the economy-society.²³

But still it was possible for a radical critic of the bourgeois order to deny the relationship between economics and politics that Marxism postulated. At issue for Panunzio was not the ultimate intention of Marxism, but the immediate relevance of the Marxist strategy. While Marx certainly did not envision the permanent subjection of mankind to the material-economic sphere, he did insist that the leap into "political" freedom could result only in a determined, dialectical way; an economic-material process would produce an economically defined class capable of a revolution which would reverse the previous relationship between economics and politics. Panunzio portrayed Sismondi as revolutionary and Marx as conservative because he denied that this dialectical process was necessary to reverse—in a revolutionary way—the relationship between politics and economics characteristic of liberalism. The essential problem was political; the process of radical change would be essentially political as well. It was possible to transcend the bourgeois order, even overcoming some of the central problems of capitalism, by attacking the legal, political, and ethical systems of society, but without abolishing private property.

In exalting such non-Marxists as Merlino, Proudhon, and Sismondi, Panunzio and his colleagues were concerned in part about the bias toward monolithic state socialism which they claimed to find in the Marxist conception. For Marx, the tendency toward concentration inherent in capitalism would indeed reach its culmination in the collectivization of the socialist order during its initial stage; the proletariat would use its new monopoly of political power "to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state."²⁴ In Marxist theory, of course, this was only to be a transitional stage—toward the communist fulfillment which Marx never sought to delineate precisely. But

Panunzio could plausibly have his doubts since, as George Lichtheim put it, Marx failed to face up to "all the implications of the problem of social control in a planned economy."²⁵ So Panunzio recommended Merlino's critique of collectivism as a useful rejoinder to Marxism.²⁶ In the work Panunzio resurrected, Merlino had found a dangerous authoritarian tendency inherent in collectivist socialism and had advocated a more pluralistic, decentralized kind of socialist economy, with room for competition, price, and supply and demand. A rigidly collectivist system, with economic decisions imposed by bureaucratic planners from above, was bound to damage both economic productivity and human freedom.

The syndicalists had accented socioeconomic pluralism from the beginning, envisioning postliberal society as a network of partly autonomous productive groupings. In fact, Italian syndicalism was obviously part of a Franco-Italian tradition, linking those like Proudhon and Durkheim, Merlino and Sorel, Duguit and Panunzio, who shared certain misgivings about both the bourgeois order and the Marxist tradition. Proudhon placed greater emphasis on pluralism, conflict, and bargaining than Marx did, and Durkheim saw society in analogous terms, accenting the role of social subgroups in the development of political authority.²⁷ Panunzio turned to Durkheim again and again throughout his career, ultimately linking the theories of the great French sociologist to fascist corporatism.²⁸ To be sure, Durkheim was a liberal republican, not a fascist, but the problems in the bourgeois order that bothered him also troubled the left fascists, and some of his proposals for solution paralleled those of fascism. For Durkheim, as for Panunzio, the combination of societal individualism, relatively anarchical capitalism, and liberal parliamentary politics lay at the root of the major problems of modern society. And Durkheim found corporatism to be the best way of overcoming this set of patterns. Through a network of occupational groupings, it would be possible to socialize individual behavior and, at the same time, to regulate the economy, limiting the egotism of the present capitalist system.²⁹ Like Proudhon, Durkheim considered the economic sphere to be too complex to be ordered by a centralized, bureaucratic system.³⁰ It would be much more effective to let the appropriate corporate groupings coordinate each sector on the basis of its particular conditions. In addition, Durkheim suggested that occupational groupings should ultimately replace geographical groupings as the basis of political life. In general, these corporations would be public entities, carrying out public functions.

Durkheim's ideas had considerable influence on his contemporary, the solidarist jurist Léon Duguit, from whom Panunzio obviously

learned a good deal.³¹ Panunzio's first book, published in 1906, had been a critique of the solidarist—or juridical socialist—school, which included such figures as Anton Menger in Austria and Giuseppe Salvioi and Enrico Cimbali in Italy, as well as Duguit in France.³² Writing in the full flush of revolutionary syndicalism, the twenty-year-old Panunzio was so preoccupied with the difference in methods which separated the syndicalists from these very bourgeois law professors that he failed to appreciate how much he could learn from them, given the conception of the basis of social problems that was already taking shape in his mind. The juridical socialists all considered it possible to overcome the excesses of liberal individualism and to foster solidarity in society by expanding the sphere of law and by breaking down the distinction between public and private law. Léon Duguit found the emergence of new forms of binding social obligation agreements arrived at through collective bargaining—for example, or ceteris spontaneously beyond the old liberalism in significant respects.³³ The increasing role of groups outside the state in imposing obligations upon individuals tended to blur the traditional distinction between public and private law. The dualism between state and individual characteristic of liberalism was breaking down as the network of groups comprising society assumed more and more power vis-à-vis both state and individual. No longer could the state as a distinguishable entity claim a monopoly of legislative capacity; no longer could individuals claim an absolute, "anarchical" right over their own property. These new forms of social law, Duguit felt, would make possible social solidarity without the authoritarian and centralizing tendencies of collectivist socialism. A kind of pluralistic socialism was possible now, as a result of political and juridical changes which did not require a revolutionary change in the organization of the means of production. At the same time, Duguit envisioned more effective forms of economic and political integration through a network of syndicates encompassing all classes.³⁴

The problems that bothered all these non-Marxist critics of liberalism, from Proudhon and Mazzini to Durkheim and Duguit, were very much involved in the crisis of liberal Italy, so Italians seeking a Marxist way of moving beyond the present system could learn from them. The syndicalist tradition synthesized these sources, thus providing young Italians seeking radical change with a program that enabled them, in turn, to offer a plausible claim to leadership. Had it implemented the corporatist revolution, left fascism would have brought to fruition a major strand in the tradition of anti-Marxist criticism of

liberalism and capitalism. Despite its ambiguities, the program was capable of a more meaningful kind of implementation than its proponents managed to achieve in the Fascist regime.

It was not merely socioeconomic dislocation, or the new irrationalism, or some sort of nihilistic activism, that gave rise to the left fascist revolt, but genuine, still open problems with liberalism and capitalism. How is it possible, for example, simultaneously to strengthen the state against particularism and to foster autonomous social energies? If revolution against capitalism is neither possible nor desirable, how can the anarchical and antisocial aspects of the capitalist system be checked? How can economic planning be combined with broadly based participation, as opposed to stifling and elitist bureaucratization? What is to be the relationship between political and economic power, between political and economic decision making? How can legitimate interest groups express their interests without corrupting the political process? Can political parties and parliamentary systems satisfactorily educate the people for—and involve them in—public life? Is the territorially based suffrage system the best foundation for popular participation? Is it possible simultaneously to foster such broad-based participation and to minimize the premium on pure politics—understood as an empty game based on petty personal ambitions—which seems to be bound up with universal suffrage and the parliamentary system? Does popular involvement necessarily produce a tendency toward mediocrity, or can it be made compatible with quality and expertise? The subsequent history of western Europe was to make clear that these are genuine dilemmas, which raise questions about central aspects of the modern liberal-capitalist order. In Germany and elsewhere, for example, parliament as an institution has gradually lost power to political parties and to bureaucratic experts, leading to concern about the quality of popular involvement in the modern parliamentary system. In postwar France, the problems of combining technocracy and participation, planning and decentralization, modernization and consensus, have been very much at issue, and sensitive critics have pondered the need for a new kind of institutional layer between the individual and the state.³⁵ Left fascism emerged in Italy partly because of such universal modern problems as these; the left fascist program sought to respond to them by combining economic planning, decentralization, and participation, and by deemphasizing pure electoral politics.

The antipolitical thrust was fundamental. Liberal politics has not been wholly edifying anywhere, but historical circumstances made some of its worst features stand out sharply in Italy. To the left fascists, the political sphere was a parasitical encrustation stifling a healthy society and impeding effective decision making. Political life seemed

inevitably divorced from the real needs of the country. With its emphasis on election and representation, in fact, liberal politics seemed to foster the petty ambitions of those directly involved and to leave ordinary people politically incompetent. The whole system meant untoward power for mere politicians. So these fascists sought to promote direct and continuous participation in public life, at the expense of election and representation. This seemed possible largely because it was necessary for the state to take on more functions, for more decisions to be made collectively, as society became more complex. Through fascist corporatism, it seemed possible to expand the state and to foster societal initiative and a more direct kind of participation at the same time. Not all of those involved in the left fascist revolt grasped the corporativist program, but disgust with the liberal political system bound them all together—from Panunzio and Bottai to the young *syndicalisti* of 1921, with their "absurd" antipolitical "anarchism."

The left fascist program was intended to respond to central problems of the mature bourgeois order in Europe, problems which seemed to be capable of immediate solution from within the present capitalist framework. Marxism, on the other hand, by placing these problems in faulty perspective, seemed to impede their solution. The fundamental deficiencies in the "bourgeois" legal system, for example, could be overcome without abolishing private property. It was possible to solve some of the central social problems even though conflicting interests among classes would remain, given the persistence of the capitalist economy. These class conflicts were significant, but not decisive. Like the other problems inherent in capitalism, they could be handled within the new political and legal framework. But that new framework could not be created through an accumulation of reforms; antiliberal revolution was required.

In a book on counterrevolution, a major American historian has proclaimed ours to be "the era of the communist revolution." And those who oppose this particular revolution are either counterrevolutionaries, conservatives, or reactionaries.³⁶ But surely the era can better be understood in terms of the failure of the communist revolution, in terms of the bankruptcy of the old Marxist blueprint for radical change, in the advanced countries of the West. In Italy, that revolution failed after World War I not because fascism as a reaction defeated it, for fascism, historians are fond of emphasizing, merely "gave the coup *de grâce* to the revolution after its failure."³⁷ And fascism emerged not only to wreak vengeance on a failed adversary, but also to replace that tradition was at an impasse. Left fascism was not a cause, but a symptom, of the disarray and breakdown of the old Marxism. To

portray twentieth-century reality in dualistic terms, with communist revolution and defense of the status quo as the only alternatives, impedes both historical understanding and the ongoing quest for more useful critical categories.

Left fascism, then, has a different place in European history than German Nazism. It was not so much personal-existential problems of identity and freedom that bothered the left fascists, but a different set of modern problems, more tangible, more sociopolitical, and, in principle, more capable of solution through concrete institutional changes. The left fascists understood what they disliked about modern life better than the Nazis did, and thus in part they were able to propose a more plausible, rational, forward-looking blueprint for change.

Through neosyndicalism, left fascism developed a nationalist, anti-parliamentary, totalitarian corporativism on its own. This current was not subservient to Nationalism; nor were fascists like Roberto Farinacci its typical representatives. Focus on those like Farinacci leads us to underestimate the coherence of the populist current, the chance it had to create a different kind of fascist regime.³⁸ Our study has shown that left fascism, taken as a whole, envisioned something far more sweeping, than a mere take-over of the old state by the Fascist party, and certainly it was not defeated when Farinacci was forced out as party Secretary in 1926.

But left fascism did fail, and its failure was no accident. Capacity for the vision necessary for genuine leadership varied considerably among those involved; the left fascists were not all Farinaccis, but the Farinaccis were there too. So despite the important measure of force it managed to achieve, left fascism as a whole suffered from serious weaknesses, which stemmed in important respects from characteristics of its "petty bourgeois" social base. Ultimately, problems on three levels undermined this current's political effectiveness. First, there were tensions, unanswered questions, and elements of superficiality even in the most coherent expressions of the left fascist program. This was true in part because those involved were trying to solve so many problems at once, but their rhetorical propensities, their shrill insistence on fascist Italy's mission, helped to prevent the left fascists from confronting their dilemmas directly. Second, the left fascist current was too heterogeneous, too divided against itself, to be successful. Some remained stuck on the level of resentment and place-seeking, and did not fully grasp the left fascist program in its coherent form. As a result, they did not lend their energies to the struggle for its implementation. Some of those who did share in the long-term left fascist vision ultimately proved willing to settle for places in the regime, for Mussolini's

superficial dynamism, for the mere trappings of change, once the obstacles to serious implementation of the program became clear. And third, the left fascists proved unable to overcome the split with the working class, and thus they failed to develop as much political force within the regime—and with Mussolini—as they might have. They were caught in a vicious circle that made it almost impossible for them to overcome the hostility or apathy of labor. Left fascists from Turati to Panunzio seriously desired to win over the workers, and perhaps the more genuinely populist policy they sought for fascism would have made this possible. But partly because they lacked working-class support, they did not have the power to force the regime to move in this direction.

The case of Paolo Orano manifests the fragility of left fascism—even in its intellectual manifestations. Orano had always been more eclectic and rhetorical than Panunzio or Olivetti, but he had contributed to the syndicalist evolution toward fascism and he continued to dream of rapid industrial modernization. During the years of the regime, however, as fascism bogged down and as Orano himself achieved the status of a major personage, his thinking lost much of its substance. He remained committed to the basic goals that had motivated his political behavior all along, but the superficial, rhetorical tendencies always present in his thinking now got the upper hand. The desire for national solidarity began to take the form of an exaggerated concern with the achievement of Italy's past, rather than a quest for serious institutional change.³⁹ Orano lamented, for example, that Italian scientific achievements were not sufficiently appreciated abroad, especially in France, where each nation could present the case for its own precedence in scientific discoveries. An international tribunal of experts would sift the evidence and apportion the glory. Orano portrayed Italy's Catholic value as a source of spontaneous popular expression and stressed its The Catholic conception of life which he deemed especially Italian. Spontaneously come to the fore in fascism. Even now, Orano was talking about the lucid productivity and solidarity in labor that he had always wanted, but in emphasizing Catholic tradition rather than corporatist institutional change, he was making less and less contribution to bringing those ideals to fruition in practice.

Nevertheless, Orano continued in the same direction, finally producing his much-discussed anti-Semitic tract, *Gli ebrei in Italia*, in 1937.⁴⁰ His anti-Semitism was comparatively mild—and was strictly cultural-historical, as opposed to biological and racist. Giovanni Preziosi and those around his review *La vita italiana* promptly criticized Orano for

being too soft on the Jews and argued for a more genuinely racist conception. While Preziosi considered Jews to be inherently antinational, Orano simply questioned the patriotism of the existing Jewish community in Italy and exhorted Italian Jews to renounce their claim to special cultural identity within the nation. From a totalitarian perspective, it is perfectly plausible—and not specifically racist—to insist on a measure of sociocultural homogeneity incompatible with any kind of special ethnic identity. But under the circumstances, with all the obstacles to revolutionary implementation confronting serious fascists, to focus on the alleged lack of national integration of the Italian Jewish community could only be diversionary and counterproductive. In a situation of difficulty, Orano lapsed into “petty bourgeois” superficialities and became a mere conservator of certain Italian traditions, turning away from the serious problems that he and his colleagues had originally claimed to be able to solve.

Only if the forms of the degeneration of left fascism are kept in mind is it possible to confront the controversial problem of continuity between the liberal and Fascist regimes in Italy. Those who stress continuity point out that fascism left the monarchy and the old power structure largely intact and conclude that fascist Italy was nothing but the previous regime without the artificial facade of liberalism.⁴¹ Certainly right fascism, though more dynamic and confident, embodied part of the tradition of conservative opposition to the compromises of Depretis and Giolitti. In fascism, the pessimistic elitism which had bound together the old political class was becoming explicit and brutal, with all pretence of liberalism, all hope for evolution in a liberal direction, dropping out altogether.

It is not as easy to assess the continuity in left fascism, which sought to overcome the basic weaknesses of liberal Italy, but ended up reproducing some of them in extreme form. The continuity for which the leftist current was responsible was largely a measure of its own inadequacy and failure. Its members helped to undermine parliament, but the corporatist alternative some of them worked to build was never very strong, so the tendencies toward bureaucratic decision making characteristic of liberal Italy only got worse. At the same time, as the thrust toward institutional change bogged down, left fascism itself tended to degenerate, with traditional Italian rhetoric and place-seeking coming to the fore and setting the tone. The most problematic area of continuity, however, is in the common lack of genuine political life in the liberal and fascist periods. In a famous passage written in November 1922, Piero Gobetti raised this troubling issue, portraying fascism as an accurate reflection of a nation “which renounces the political struggle out of laziness.”⁴² At first glance, it seems that an ongoing incapacity for

real politics produced the peculiar political patterns of both the liberal and fascist periods. The matter is not so simple, however, for left fascism was not only “subpolitical,” but also “postpolitical”; the left fascists rejected liberal politics not just because they were too immature or lazy for it, but, at least in part, because they grasped its problematic features and sought to go beyond it. From a liberal perspective, left fascism was an overreaction, but overreaction and continuity have quite different historical meanings, even if they produce conditions with some features in common. The wellsprings of the antipolitical impulse simply were different for fascists like Olivetti than they were for liberals like Depretis. Of course, the fascist regime failed to implement the corporatist alternative to liberal politics, so fascism in practice was not so much postpolitical as “nonpolitical.” And Mussolini’s nonpolitical regime had some features in common with “subpolitical” regimes of Depretis and Giolitti. But this does not mean that fascism arose in the first place as an attempt to keep things the same. Ultimately much in Italy remained the same under fascism, but only as the result of a complex process, in which reasonably serious attempts at change got buried.

Mussolini, seeking to enhance his own position, exploited both the strengths and the weaknesses of left fascism. He used its serious ideals to give his haphazard regime the appearance of purpose and historical justification. At the same time, he fostered personal rivalries, played on petty ambitions, and thus defused the left fascist current. His methods of personal dictatorship encouraged the weaknesses of his movement, not its strengths. In a sense, then, Mussolini ended up a supertransformist in the tradition of Depretis and Giolitti, bringing new elements into the system, but taking advantage of their weaknesses to fragment them and buy them off. Insofar as Mussolini’s system brought transformism up to date, expanding the political base but still leaving the monarchy and the old elites in place, Mussolini himself was the major source of continuity. To the extent that this is all fascism amounted to, Mussolini justified the hopes of those who acquiesced as he assumed power.

Still, Mussolini himself was a new man, one of the outsiders seeking political access after the war, and a man who genuinely resented the old political system. Thus he was quite a departure from Depretis and Giolitti and, despite his pessimism, quite a risk. For most of his regime, the egocentric but cynical leader was content to balance, accumulating personal power and prestige. But increasingly, Mussolini vacillated between the giddy self-confidence that the cult of the Duce reinforced and a gloomy sense of the impasse that he was caught up in. Without something extraordinary, he felt, his regime was in danger of wearing out, of running down; at the very least, it would not survive

him.⁴³ So the needs of the personal dictatorship gave the regime a momentum of its own, and, given the near impasse on the domestic scene, it is not surprising that Mussolini was led to devote his restless energies increasingly to foreign policy.

With his conquest of Ethiopia in 1935–36, and with his defiance of the League of Nations, Mussolini's personal prestige reached a peak, but the old elites, as well as many fascists of both left and right, had serious misgivings about his subsequent policy. The more coherent left fascists like Bottai, Grandi, Lanzillo, and Panunzio disliked the alliance with Nazi Germany and resisted the drift toward war, but for Farinacci and others, racism, imperialist war, and the link with Nazism seemed ways of revitalizing fascism. With the latter as his allies, Mussolini sought to maintain his momentum, turning against the old elites who seemed to have trapped him. One result was the radicalization of the final phase, including the antibourgeois campaign—and the anti-Semitism. But the major thrust was toward war—a war of conquest, but also a war of vengeance against the intractable old Italy. Ultimately a dangerous possibility inherent in fascism from the beginning came to the fore, as Mussolini, sensing himself at an impasse, sought to return fascism to its origins, to war as revolution. The noble tragedy of Italy's World War I became the tragic farce of Italy's World War II. And now the whole system quickly began to unravel, for the one thing that Mussolini's hollow regime had not done—and could not have done—was to prepare the Italian people to fight a major war on the side of Nazi Germany.