Fascist Aesthetics and Society: Some Considerations

George L. Mosse

Journal of Contemporary History 1996 31: 245
DOI: 10.1177/002200949603100202

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Fascist scholarship has become increasingly aware of the role which aesthetics played in the movement's appeal; and that exploring the link between aesthetics, politics and society could open up new dimensions in our understanding of fascism. This aspect of the fascist movement is no longer brushed aside as mere propaganda, an attempt to manipulate the people against their will. All the articles which follow are based upon the realization that in fascism, power had to express itself visually. Instead of emphasizing propaganda and terror, fascist scholarship has been increasingly concerned with aesthetics, and the building of a temporary consensus. The study of fascism is slowly emerging from the period when this movement was almost solely discussed from the point of view of socialist theory, anti-fascism, or parliamentary government — measured by the standard of other ideologies — to a time when we can take the measure of fascism on its own terms, investigating its self-representation, and attempt to grasp it from the inside out. Only in this way can we understand the true and awesome nature of its appeal.

The study of Italian fascism has been neglected outside Italy and perhaps England, and it is to be hoped that this special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History* will stimulate more research. Nazi aesthetics have quite often received some attention, but it was Italy which successfully pioneered the use of aesthetic sensibilities for political purposes. All of fascism shared an aesthetic, but knowing more about the Italian case will enable us better to judge the similarities and possible differences which existed within a common fascist aesthetic between nations like Italy and Germany.

The aesthetic of fascism should be put into the framework of fascism as a civic religion, as a non-traditional faith which used liturgy and symbols to make its belief come alive. Civic religion is distinguished from traditional religion by its primary concern with life on earth and the nature of the state and nation, making

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Journal of Contemporary History (SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi), Vol. 31 (1996), 245–252.

use of the 'beauty of holiness' for the purposes of a revolution in government. Fascists were urged to immerse themselves in symbols, a baroque world, while consecrated rooms and sacred venues inviting pious contemplation were sometimes part of factories, official exhibitions and museums. As we shall see, the new Italy represented itself through public buildings and city planning as well as through practical accomplishments such as the draining of the southern marshes. Fascism, it should be unnecessary to add, was no ideology in the traditional meaning of that term, but a faith which could not be explained solely in rational terms, something historians in the past forgot.

Without a broader framework, fascism is relatively easy to trivialize, especially for those who have never been attracted by any religion. I myself remember how, in the 1930s, even in the midst of our anti-fascist engagement, we could only laugh at Mussolini's posturing and gestures — the rigmarole of fascist ritual — without attempting to understand their true import or considering whether a fascist aesthetic could have played a crucial role in fascism's appeal. As historians we were not accustomed to give aesthetics much weight as against economic or social forces. We failed to see that the fascist aesthetic itself reflected the needs and hopes of contemporary society, that what we brushed aside as the so-called superstructure was in reality the means through which most people grasped the fascist message, transforming politics into a civic religion. For example, it is astounding that before Emilio Gentile's path-breaking *Il Culto del Littorio*, published in 1993, we had no comprehensive analysis of Italian fascism as a political religion with its own liturgy.

The aesthetic which stood at the centre of this civic religion was the climax of a long development. The ideal of beauty was central to this aesthetic, whether that of the human body or of the political liturgy. The longing for a set standard of beauty was deeply ingrained in the European middle classes, and the definition of the beautiful as the 'good, the true, and the holy' was an important background to the fascist cult. Appreciation of the arts played a central role in the self-definition of the middle classes and anyone who wanted to be a respected member of society had to value them properly. The most unmusical person, for example, had to profess his love of music; and how many young boys and girls had to undergo the torture of learning to play the piano? This was no mere German cultural phenomenon, but held true for

Europe in general — and what seemed at first glance to have no possible connection to politics became politically charged through the connection between art, beauty and truth which lay readily at hand to be used by modern political movements. Gabriele D'Annunzio, to whom an article in this number is devoted, was, so it seems, the first to practise such a 'politics of beauty' which was then taken up by fascism itself. Politics must not be defined in too limited a fashion; what was important in daily life, like the cult of beauty, was bound sooner or later to have its political consequences. The aesthetics of fascism with some of its most important roots not only in traditional religion but also in middle-class culture can remind us of that.

Here, a certain public standard of beauty reigned all over Europe, one which fascism was to annex as its own. The rediscovery of classical antiquity in the eighteenth century set a standard of beauty which never lost its attraction for the educated, who in Germany and Italy — but elsewhere as well — saw it as their own particular heritage. They valued classical beauty of form whether of the human body or, to a lesser extent, of official architecture, as close to the sublime. Many examples which document this standard could be given, whether through a comparison of the pseudo-classical sculptures of Arno Breker in nazi Germany with those surrounding the Forum Mussolini in Rome, or through a comparison of official German and many Italian fascist architectural styles — and this in spite of the fact that Italian fascism had no officially approved artistic style, and even annexed modernist architecture, while National Socialism enforced a rigid artistic standard. However great or small the variations in the fascist artistic style, when it came to the fascist liturgy itself they were minor.

Indeed, it was the strength of fascism in general that it realized, as other political movements and parties did not, that with the nineteenth century Europe had entered a visual age, the age of political symbols, such as the national flag or the national anthem, which, as instruments of mass politics, in the end proved more effective than any didactic speeches — in fascism, for example, the speech of the leader itself took the form of symbolic action. The populism of fascism helped the movement to arrive at this insight; the need to integrate the masses into a so-called spiritual revolution which represented itself through a largely traditional aesthetic.

Fascist aesthetics was not confined to the public sphere. Just as it took up a concept of beauty which informed middle-class tastes long before the movement itself came into being, so this aesthetic formed a bridge between the public and the private sphere. Here, the role which stereotypes played in all of fascism is of prime importance; it informed fascism's view of the ideal type, of the 'new fascist man' or the German Aryan. The creation of modern stereotypes as standardized mental pictures which encompassed the whole human being, body and soul, was something new at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The idea that the structure of the human body indicates the structure of the mind was to become commonplace. Aesthetics played a determining role in stereotyping: every man must aspire to a classical standard of beauty, and as he built and sculptured his body (and we must remember the part played by physical exercise in the aesthetics of fascism), his mind would come to encompass all the manly virtues which the fascists prized so highly.

The beautiful male body was an important symbol in all European fascist movements. However, significantly, such a body was not merely a fascist symbol, but one which had already been adopted by society at large. Here we are at the intersection between traditional, normative society, and fascist aesthetics; here the social and the aesthetic were not strictly separate one from another. The beautiful male body as the eighteenth-century Greek paradigm had it, projected both self-control in its posture and virility in the play of its muscles; it symbolized both the dynamic and the discipline which society wanted and needed. Here, order and progress, often in conflict, were reconciled through the symbolism of the male body modelled on the harmonious form of Greek sculpture. As we shall see later, this reconciliation was also symbolized by the aesthetic of fascist and nazi mass meetings.

Through stereotypes, fascism worked not only with abstract symbols but with living human symbols as well. The true fascist man must through his looks, body, and comportment, project the ideal of male beauty. Men of flesh and blood were given a symbolic dimension, a fact which added to the fascist appeal. Here was an aesthetic which was not confined to the public realm, but one which penetrated daily life. Perhaps the strength of this particular symbol, and the deep need it fulfilled, can be seen in the fact that while most of the symbols and rituals of the civic religion

of fascism vanished after the second world war, its stereotypes are still with us. Here, fascism had simply co-opted ideal types which had existed ever since modern stereotypes were created, and there is little difference in looks, manly behaviour and posture, between Mussolini's new man, the German Aryan, the clean-cut Englishman, or the all-American boy. Fascism and National Socialism built upon a tradition of human beauty and ugliness which, like fascist aesthetics in general, drew its strength from an already present consensus. Fascist aesthetic invented nothing new or even experimental, and that was its great strength, while in contrast, fascist politics did present something new, a so-called political party based upon a civic religion which encompassed all aspects of life.

However, one aspect of the aesthetics of fascism needs additional emphasis. Fascist aesthetic depended upon clear and unambiguous statements; there could be no 'formless wobble', to use Ezra Pound's characterization of parliamentary government. This meant that the ideal human type must be clearly distinguished and set off against what the nazis called the 'counter-type', the exact opposite of the normative ideal. A nazi book actually called *The Counter-Type* (1938) stated clearly what was involved in the sharp distinction between the ideal and its foil: 'Through the counter-image we obtain the greatest clarity of what our own ideals should be.' This statement, for example, explains the way Jews were pictured in the nazi press, or blacks in the Italian papers before and after the Abyssinian War. Only now are scholars paying some attention to the actual construction of stereotypes and their counter-types, though in every case the so-called beautiful or the supposedly deformed body set the standard for judging a person's character and mind. The clear distinction between friend and foe was an integral part of the fascist aesthetic and an important part of its appeal as well.

Here, once more, fascist aesthetic reflected a social reality, just as it symbolized modern societies' need for both movement and order. Modern society itself needed and apparently still needs an enemy against which to define itself; the 'outsiders', designated as such, often denigrated and vilified — those who did not seem to fit the established norm — accompanied our society throughout the last two centuries. Fascist aesthetic sharpened and refined the image of the 'outsider', while continuing to give him the traditional negative bodily features — for example, the Jew's

nose or his pathological gait — which had marked him for life for at least a century and a half. Settled and respectable society was not averse to bolstering its self-worth and feeling of superiority in this manner.

Fascist aesthetic supported existing society in another way as well, which has often been addressed, though not always in this context. The sexual division of labour was perceived as being as important as the economic division of labour for the smooth functioning of society. The ideal which fascism projected so strongly and which symbolized progress and order (or as fascists put it, virility and discipline), was an aggressive masculinity. Indeed, Mussolini pinned his hopes for the future on the new, strong and beautiful man which fascism would create. The body beautiful would symbolize a disciplined and committed mind. However, in reality this new fascist man was merely the normative type writ large. The tension between this ideal of manliness and family life was common to all of fascism: the bonding of males which was said to determine the fate of the state, and the virtues of a bourgeois family life which fascism was sworn to uphold. But these were bound to come into conflict when the demands of male camaraderie clashed with the duties of family life.

Enough has been written lately about the place of women in fascism as part of the sexual division of labour, and the only point to be made here is that women's athletics were encouraged (as by the female statues of athletes on the Forum Mussolini), and that the body beautiful played its role in this context as well — not, of course, in enhancing discipline and virility, but in order to highlight its graceful movements. Women's aesthetic differed from that of men. Women in Germany, for example, were usually shown as exercizing in the midst of nature, emphasizing an analogy with natural beauty and innocence. Yet, in Italy, Mussolini did not hinder his eldest daughter, Edda, when she became one of the first Italian women to drive a car, to bicycle in public, and to wear trousers, while in 1944, the Fascist Social Republic even created a women's auxiliary in the armed forces. Yet, in spite of these departures from accepted norms, there was no attempt to re-invent woman or to create a new woman in concert with the new fascist man. Here, by and large, the familiar conventions remained intact.

The interaction between fascist aesthetics and traditional society we have mentioned does throw some light upon the much

discussed problem whether or not a fascist revolution took place. Perhaps it would be best to speak about a fascist dynamic, a certain open-endedness, at least in Italy, which exchanged élites but co-opted a traditional social reality. It was surely one of the main attractions of fascism that it promised on the one hand a change of attitudes, a spiritual revolution, a new élan, and on the other, addressed those needs which seemed essential to the preservation of established modern society.

While fascism itself worked for the most part with an already existing aesthetic, it did strike out in new directions in the manner in which it presented itself. Fascist liturgy institutionalized the close link between aesthetics and politics which had existed earlier only in isolated examples such as D'Annunzio's régime in Fiume. Now the aesthetics of the human body and of colour and form were used in order to nationalize the masses, to shape and control the mass meetings which were an essential part of fascist politics. The aesthetic of the human body has already been mentioned, and the youth (and even those not so young) who marched and saluted were supposed to be ideal types who represented the movement and the nation. The *mis en scène* of these meetings, the setting constructed or chosen for their venue, represented a spectacle suffused with grandeur and beauty, and through their dynamic and virile movements the assembled and disciplined masses once more symbolized order and progress and served to reconcile both.

Aesthetics shaped the fascist view of man, of his surroundings and of politics. It was a cement which held fascism together. As it was both traditional in its forms and dynamic in its movement, fascist aesthetic reflected fascism itself which, as we have mentioned, meant, at one and the same time, to uphold tradition and symbolize a revolutionary dynamic which was supposed to lead to a better future.

The importance we have given to fascist aesthetic is not supposed to diminish the significance of the social and economic aspects of fascism, but rather this aesthetic must find its important place within the totality of the movement. That the aesthetic and the social cannot easily be separated has been demonstrated in this article, however briefly. Fascism, in the last resort, was based upon nationalism as a civic religion, and its aesthetic articulated this faith just as it did for the older established religions. The almost complete dominance of social history over

recent American, German and French historiography, as the single explanatory tool of modern politics and society, has tended to ignore nationalism as well as aesthetics. Moreover, the denigration of the leader of the movement in postwar historiography has only recently been rectified — not yet in Germany but in Italy, and the important Italian works on Mussolini have no real German equivalent. And yet, in the aesthetics of fascism the personal tastes of Hitler and Mussolini did matter, or, rather, the absence of a strong aesthetic taste in Mussolini who was, as we know, eclectic in his own artistic preference, and Hitler's decisive aesthetic judgment. Both, however, influenced the shape of their respective civic religions, and only those who ignore the civic religion of fascism can deny the importance of the personality of the leader to the movement or to the régime.

These remarks have attempted to articulate some important factors which seemed to inform the aesthetics of fascism, and which might be helpful in any consideration of the movement's attraction and of the consensus upon which it was built in the first years of its rule. The aesthetics of fascism used both a pseudo-classical ideal, if not consistently, and the instrumentality of that part of established religion which ever since the baroque had represented the 'beauty of holiness'. The articles which follow, beginning with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's analysis of an important aspect of the fascist religion, address both the experimental and traditional side of Italian fascism; they tell us how Italian fascism saw itself.