

The fascist myth of romanity

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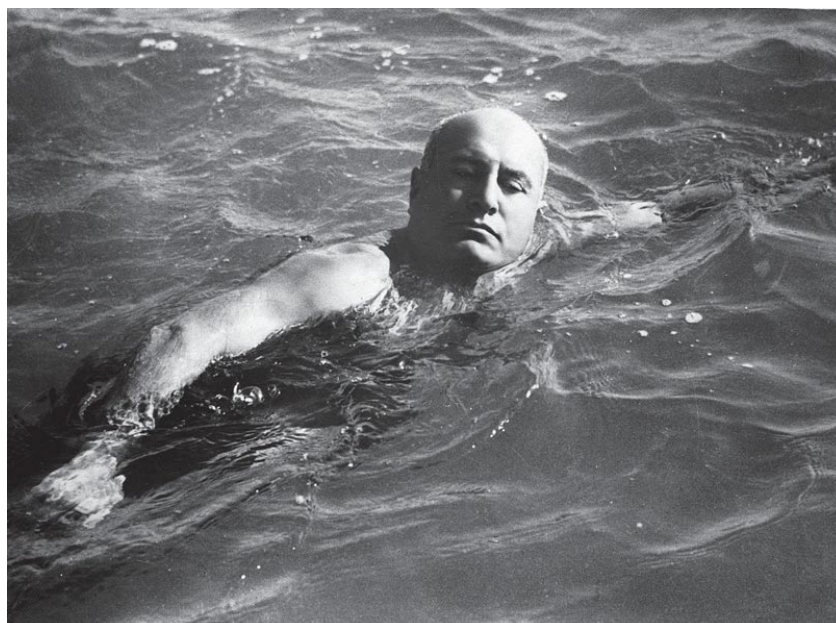


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Benito Almicare Andrea Mussolini (1883 – 1945), Prime Minister of Italy.

Discipline and power

THE MYTH of Rome was used by Mussolini, with a multiplicity of positive references, even before the fascist movement became a party.¹ It was clear from the beginning that the model of behavior that was propounded to the fascist militants should be adopted, in perspective, by the whole society. The adoption of Roman symbols and rites, such as the fascio littorio, the salute with the outstretched hand and the rhythmical march, made it possible to effectively qualify a fascist specialty, but presenting it, at the same time, as a specificity of the nation.

The fascist salute – the right arm raised with the outstretched palm -, originally used by the legionnaires of the expedition in Fiume de Gabrielle D'Annunzio, corresponded to an extensive Roman iconographic repertory, although there were multiple attestations of an identical salute in the Greek art. In the Roman society, the meanings for that gesture, which was not the sole or the most widespread salute gesture, were multiple and changed in accordance with the contexts. In sculpture and monetary representations, however, an augural meaning prevails, with no strictly political connotation.

In the fascist ritual it takes on, instead, a strong political and ideological connotation, since it indicated a martiality-impregnated adhesion to the party. It was also exalted by its greater hygiene and swiftness, which expressed the fascist dynamism so well. The assumption of this salute (which was later recaptured by the Nazi *Deutscher Grüss*) among the fascist style precepts resulted in serious consequences for the widespread image of romanity: in many movies on the Roman theme, even the recent ones, this gesture appears as an anthropological mark of some sort, displayed in a paroxysmal way, under any circumstance. The Romans are presented, therefore, as a human type that is morbidly marked by an obtuse coercion, which drives them to repeat, even in social occasions, gestures pertaining to military camps. It is obvious that the political power of a myth does not depend on the historical authenticity of the rites, values, events, gestures that bring it up to date, and it would even be possible to affirm that, under some circumstances, the effectiveness of a myth is directly proportional to its degree of adulteration of the past.

The fascist use of romanity has been extensively diffused; it resorted – for the first time in the history of the myth of Rome – to mass communication media in a global dimension; it raised enthusiasm and interest not only from the Italian public opinion, but also from abroad; it permeated the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century: for all these reasons, the fascist image of romanity became, tout court, the image of Rome.

At the dawn of fascism, the concept that was most often associated to the idea of Rome was expressed by the beautiful Latin word *disciplina*. Such virtue was represented mainly by means of the fascist march rite, designed to inculcate in the participants a sense of togetherness, solidarity and power, and in the spectators the suggestion of a comforting model, made of order and composure.

The connection between the march and the discipline remained as a constant aspect of Mussolini's political view: "We too" – he had proclaimed as early as in 1921 –

have thus abolished and tend to abolish the herd, the procession. We abolished all of this and replaced those old-fashioned forms of manifestation by our march, which imposes, on each one, an individual control, which imposes on everyone order and discipline. Because we wish to establish a solid national discipline, since we believe that, without such discipline, Italy cannot become the Mediterranean and global nation that resides in our dreams.

The virtue of discipline – the single effective healing for a country such as Italy, which Mussolini defined as "inclined towards anarchy in the tendencies and spirits" -, typical of the black shirts, should be disseminated throughout the whole Italian people, re-establishing the internal order and placing itself, at the same time, as a factor of external power. In this sense, the Roman and fascist discipline was inseparable from the mystical exaltation of the idea of nation.



Mussolini inspects the military troops in Rome, Italy.

Discipline and power were the essential values of romanity that the fascists propounded for all Italians: but discipline was the power presupposition, because, without a hard and strong discipline, any aspiration to the empire would be an illusion, as attested by the African failures of the previous governments. The adoption by the fascism of the Roman imperial model in an updated expression of colonial power repeated, at the time, the traditional tones of the liberal foreign politics. However, an absolutely new factor was the adoption of romanity as a global model, which was valid as lifestyle for a party, for the armies, for the civil society:

“To celebrate the Birth of Rome” - Mussolini proclaimed in April 21, 1922, a few months previous to the march over Rome –

means to celebrate our kind of civilization, means to exalt our history and our race, means to lean firmly on the past in order to project better onto the future. As a matter of fact, Rome and Italy are two inseparable terms [...] The Rome we honor is certainly not the Rome of the monuments and ruins, the Rome of the glorious ruins among which no civilian walks without feeling a thrilling shiver of veneration [...] The Rome we honor, but mainly the Rome we long for and prepare is another one: it is not about honorable stones, but living souls: it is not the nostalgic contemplation of the past, but of the hard preparation of the future. Rome is our starting point and reference; it is our symbol, or, if you will, our myth. We dream about the Roman Italy, that is, the wise and strong, disciplined and imperial Italy. Much of what was the immortal spirit of Rome is reborn in fascism: the lictor is Roman, our organization of combat is Roman, our pride and our courage are Roman: ‘Civis romanus sum’. (Mussolini, 1956, v.XVIII, p.160ss).

The fascio

The fundamental symbol of the new era was the fascio littorio (fascis lictoris). The assumption of this symbol occurred very early in fascism and happened – along with the multiplication of the symbolic references to romanity – even before the foundation of the party. In this first stage, the fascio evoked typically republican values; however, just after the formation of the Mussolini's government, those republican resonances were discarded: a monetary emission of 1923 showed, on one side, the figure of the king, and, on the other, the fascist ensign, celebrating the collaboration between monarchy and fascism, which had made possible the advent of the new regime. Successively, the symbol of the State consisted in the Savoias' escutcheon lifted by the two side sheaves.

In order to individualize the canonic form of the fascio, distinguishing it from any precedent that was not the one of ancient Rome, and mainly from the republican and libertarian implications that it had taken on during the French Revolution (Scuccimarra, 1999), the consultancy of the senator Giacomo Boni, an Italian archeologist of great prestige, was requested. Boni performed his duties very quickly, aided by the multiple representations of sheaves present in the Roman sculpture: thus, the kind of fascio littorio constituted by the poles and by the log in a lateral position was imposed, and designed to occupy the whole space in the nation's iconography, more still than the eagle and the Roman she-wolf, and to signalize the transformation – officially sanctioned in 1926 – of a party emblem into a state emblem. In addition to the coins, the Italians would observe the fascio on the stamps, documents, public buildings, the new works of the regime, the uniforms, books, and advertisement posters.



Panel with the motto "Mussolini is always right".

The fascio littorio expressed an austere image, permeated of gloominess and not deprived of funereal tones. We find this image's description on a page by Alberto Moravia: "The piazza was deserted, looking bigger than the usual. At first I did not see the golden sheaf on the big black flag, and I even thought it was a mourning flag". The fascist emblem perfectly indicated the values of discipline and order that the new regime intended to impose on the Italians. It was a radical inversion: the solar and carefree Italy of the mandolin players, the Italy wearing the tavern beret, "aim of every idler, bearing their heinous Baedeker", so abhorred by Mussolini, was replaced by the austere and turbid Italy of the fascio littorio, often evoked by the duce with terrifying hues: "The Fascism's poles are, more than ever, strongly strait: and the log is more sharp-edged than ever before".

Roman festivities, fascist era

One of the first formal actions of the new regime was the institution, in April 21, 1923, of the Birth of Rome festivity. This commemoration was previously celebrated in an exclusively municipal sphere; now, with an evident characterization of party, it became the "fascist day", which took on a national character and replaced the Labor Day, which used to be celebrated in May 1st.

The fascist occupation of the calendar occurred also by the indication, introduced in 1926, of the fascist era's year (as of 1922) along with the one regarding the A.D. year. The association of the two year indications occurred with the approximation of the Roman numerals to the Arabic ones, but also the Roman numeral could be used by itself. The psychological impact of this innovation was strong, since it disseminated the idea of the epochal character of the regime that, just by being a romanity-impregnated one, was presupposed to last far beyond the contemporaries' existence.

By a fortunate coincidence, within a period of a few years three bi-millenaries occurred, all of them extraordinarily important: the Virgil's one (1930), the Horatio's one (1935), and the Augustus' one (1937). The first two bi-millenaries could be wonderfully used in order to exalt, together with the Roman poets, the collaboration between the intellectuals and the power, which was intensely wished by the regime. The men of letters that Maecenas had gathered around himself and around Augustus offered a model of mobilization of the intellectual energies, which was destined to the strengthening of the consensus. The signs of updating suggested by Virgil's works covered the whole range of possibilities: as foreshadower of Christianity, he was the symbol of the agreement between the fascism and the Catholic Church; as poet of the country life, he was the ancient soul of the fascist ruralism; as celebrator of the Roman domination, he was also the prophet of the power wish of the Mussolinian Italy; as poet of the pacification after the disaster of the civil wars, he was, ultimately, the mirror of the Italy pacified by fascism (Canfora, 1985, p.469-72).

It was not so easy to discover in Horatio's works themes that were susceptible to such an immediate and persuasive updating: anyway, the civil poet

Horatio was privileged, not without exaggerations and funambulisms that were, as always, valued by a portion of the academic world (Cagnetta, 1998). The Augustus' bi-millenary occurred following the conquest of Ethiopia, when the fascist Italy had taken on a proud imperial frown. At that time, among so many other celebrations, the "Exhibition of Augustus' Romanity", an extraordinary display of the ancient Rome and the fascist cult of romanity, was organized in Rome: the visitors were introduced to the usances, customs, techniques, and culture of the Roman world, along the ancient values that the fascist Italy had transformed in contemporaneous ones. Its echo in Italy and abroad was huge (Scriba, 1995).

Contemporaneously, the "Exhibition of the fascist revolution" was re-opened; it was inaugurated in 1932 in order to celebrate the regime's tenth anniversary, and which until 1934 had recorded some four million visitors, both Italians and foreigners (Salvatori, 2003, p.439-59).² In those years, the capital became the object of a grandiose pilgrimage, which, due to its dimensions, could be compared to very few ones in the capital's history. In former days, one went to Rome to see the Pope, the Saint Peter's cathedral and other sacred spots; now, one goes to Rome also (and, maybe, mainly) to see the duce, to admire the restored monuments, to stand in awe in face of the new Roman sceneries opened by the regime. Attracted by the fascism's triumph and the mirage of the ancient Rome, millions of Italians saw the capital for the first time (Gentile, 1993, p.148ss).

Roman sceneries

While the damage inflicted by the fascist rhetoric to the diffused image of the ancient Rome would, although very slowly, be re-absorbed by other images in the future, the damage caused to its material testimonies is irreversible (cf. Giardina, 2002, p.86-90).

We know that, for Mussolini, to formulate a policy of general guidelines for the capital's rebirth would not be enough: he guided and discussed the projects, often used his unappealable power of decision-making, claimed the credit for having devised and wished the city's new image. The principle that inspired the regulator plan of 1931, of which he declared himself as spiritual father, is perfectly synthesized in the words addressed by Mussolini himself (1957, v.XXII, p.48) to the governor of Rome:

You shall continue to free the great oak's trunk from everything that is still screening it from light. You shall clear a space around Augustus' mausoleum, Marcello's theater, the Capitol, the Pantheon. Everything that grew around them along the decadence centuries should disappear [...] The millenary monuments of our history should be made gigantic within the required solitude.³

This operation had been extremely important in the outline of a false physical and social image of the ancient Rome, destined to be perpetuated

way beyond fascism, as recognized by all those that watched the external scenographies of the movies with a Roman theme after World War II: a cold and presumptuous city, which expresses, even in its monuments, an intimidating inclination. The case of the route that would be later called Via dell'Impero (Route of the Empire) is a good example. Opened on the space that had been emptied due to the demolition of a whole and modern quarter, with its foundations built on the ruins of the ancient imperial forums, that road made way for a magniloquent perspective on the Coliseum, creating, at the same time, an ideal specular association between the Piazza Venezia (Venice Square), the spot where the audience that the duce addressed from the famous balcony used to be, and the most grandiose of the Roman monuments, while the gigantic statue of Victor Emmanuel, on the Altare della Patria (Altar of the Fatherland), experienced a definitive marginalization. Moreover, that road became the triumphal trajectory of the regime, along which the forces of the new combative Italy paraded in face of the Roman crowds, and, thanks to its use as propaganda in the newsreels, in face of the whole nation. Also in this case, the misconception that characterized the relation between fascism and romanity was repeated: in the presupposition that fascism had rediscovered the Roman world, the collective imagination saw the ancient Rome through the filter of the present, while the truth was just the opposite: the current images invented the ancient ones.



Photo: Agence France Presse

The duce addresses the crowds at the Milan Cathedral square, in Italy.

Fascism did not restrict itself to restore and liberate the ancient monuments: it has also created a modern architecture of Roman inspiration, often decorated with Italian or Latin inscriptions, which, most of the time, quoted acclamations and declamations taken from the duce's speeches and writings.

The rural and combative Italy

A great prominence was also given to the agrarian tradition of the ancient Italy, which was perpetuated in the agrarian inclination of the contemporaneous Italy. This theme can be regarded as a crucial knot of multiple aspects of the fascist politics, some of them present along the whole 20-year period of fascism, others typical mainly of the thirties. As a matter of fact, it often appears in association with the campaign for the demographic development (the peasant families were more prolific than the others), with the autarchy that was proclaimed in response to the sanctions decreed by the Nations Association after the aggression to Ethiopia, with the specificity of the Italian establishments in the colonies (cultivators' establishments, it was repeated, in opposition to the mercantile character of the "plutocratic" empires), with the anti-bourgeois controversy, with the racial laws (see ahead), with the relation between the work in the fields and the warrior's worth: according to the fascist message, for each of those aspects it was possible to find a clear mirror in the history of the ancient Rome.



Photo: Agence France Presse

Benito Mussolini, surrounded by peasants, participates in the wheat harvest in Littoria, Italy.

A first significant stage of this policy was the so-called "battle of the wheat", started by 1925 by Mussolini, with a redundant warlike terminology. The campaign aimed at increasing the cereal's production, decreasing the entity of the imports: the objective was fully achieved, although at the cost of serious unbalances and a delay in the agriculture modernization.

Another great moment of exaltation of the ruralism as a character of the Roman and Italian ancestry began in 1928, with the policy of "integral bonus",

which, continuing and re-launching initiatives that had been started after the formation of the Unitarian State, aimed at the regeneration of all of the main swampy areas in the peninsula. In the regime's propaganda, the bonus was not presented only as a concrete technical and social challenge. It took on the character of a global metaphor in the construction of the new man, born from the hardness of the ancient man: like the Roman settlers, the settlers of the fascist era would have conquered the wild spaces, civilizing nature and raising prolific families that would produce soldiers ready to serve their Fatherland. The metaphor of the plow and the sword perfectly illustrated this program: "it is the plow that traces the groove, but it is the sword that defends it. And the ploughshare and the blade are both made of hardened steel, just like the faith within our hearts" (Mussolini, 1953, v.XXVI (18.12.1934), p.402). The war against the swamps was conceived as the moral training for other and much bloodier wars: in this sense, the integral bonus may be seen as the premise for the wars against Ethiopia and Spain.

The fascist ruralism got a great international echo, since its main initiatives coincided with the crisis that, in 1929, unsettled the Western economies, touching Italy to a lesser extent. The Virgil bi-millenary, in 1930, provided, in addition to it all, the occasion for the fascist propaganda to build a suggestive crossing between humanism and economics, between ancient and modern: the success of such propaganda was remarkable abroad as well.

Romanity and the new man

During the solemn ceremony in which, in April 21, 1924, the duce was granted the Roman citizenship, he stated that the continuity of Rome was a phenomenon impenetrable for the historical investigation: the scholars' cold reasoning could not surmount the legend, since the reason for the eternity of Rome was a mystery (Mussolini, 1956, v.XX, p.234). The very multiplicity of the archaeological findings could be regarded as a manifestation of this mystery:

Not a single day goes by without another document attesting the greatness of Rome returning to the sunlight. The earth seems eager to restitute the vestiges of what was once the greatest empire of history. Why should we deny the existence of some mysterious character in the fact that those findings, across the whole Europe, coincide with the fascist time, which has retrieved the symbols of Rome and ascribes to the Italian people the virtues that made of Rome so dominant and powerful? (Mussolini, 1953, v.XXVI (13.9.1933), p.51)

The fascist sense of romanity could do without books, since it was mainly action and intuition. It was the concept that Rome should act on the Italian people's conscience in a nearly instinctive fashion, and by virtue of a millenary transmission that many times, in the past, seemed to have been lost, but had always been reborn due to a subterranean and indestructible vitality. It was an unknown and mystical power that, linking the past to the present, ensured the

triumph of Rome once again. The expression “mystery of Rome” indicated the nature of a phenomenon that was extraordinary not only for its originary strength, but mainly for its rebirths and its duration – which were no longer expressions of the will of single individuals and political alchemies, but expressions of an almost subliminal vitality. The beginning of the racial politics may have added a biological aspect to this theme.

The insistence, which went on for years, on the distinction between erudition and intuition reveals a critical point in the fascist ideology of romanity: it consisted in the fear that a so strong and diffused Roman inspiration was construed as a form of misonceism and the sign of an inability of projecting the future. That is why formulas such as “return to romanity”, “restoration of romanity”, and such, which suggested a passive behavior and concealed the creative dimension of the fascist cult of Rome, should be absolutely avoided.

The rescue of the Italians and their future glory did not depend only on the rebirth of virtues that were typical of the Romans. Fascism wanted to perform an anthropological revolution. The new man: this product of the fascist education was partly a man from the past, since it kept within itself the spirit of romanity; but it was, chiefly, an original creature, that could have made possible the long duration, or rather the eternity, of the fascist era. In this sense, as recently pointed out by Emilio Gentile (1999, p.155), we cannot say that the fascist myth of romanity expressed a fundamentally anti-modern ideology.

The return of the empire

Which Rome? In the fascist time, the difficulty in conciliating the republican Rome and the imperial Rome in a single and harmonious myth was revealed in an acute form. The republic, in the stage that preceded the civil wars, offered the fascists the model of a people that was focused on the State life, the former reality of the State construed as “totalitarian”. In the imperial time this lifestyle would disappear, and with its disappearance decadence would begin (Ludwig, 2000 (1932), p.138). However, the empire offered, at the same time, at least along the two first centuries, the model of a stable global domination, of a Romanity that had been made universal and of a society that, after the traumas of the civil wars, had recovered order and discipline. Thus, the Rome updated by Mussolini eventually merges the favorite aspects of one image and of the other, recomposing in synchrony some characters of the Roman history, chronologically out of phase: the moral strictness of the republican citizen and the prince’s power, the austere synthesis of the nation and the charm of the imperial system in its mature stage. But it is evident that, after the conquest of Ethiopia, the dominant model could only be the imperial one.

In May 9th, 1936, the duce could finally announce, from his usual balcony, “after fifteen centuries, the reappearance of the empire over the fatal hills of Rome”:

Every knot has been cut by our shiny sword and the African victory lingers on in the Fatherland's history, entire and pure, as the killed and surviving legionnaires dreamt of and wished. Italy finally possesses its empire. A fascist empire, since it brings the indestructible signs of the Roman Littorio's will and power... An empire of peace, because Italy wants peace for itself and for everybody else, and decides for the war only when forced by the commanding, incoercible needs of life. An empire of civilization and humaneness for all populations of Ethiopia. This is present in the tradition of Rome, which, after having conquered, assimilates the peoples to its destiny. (Mussolini, 1959, v.XXVII, p.268ss)

The conquest of Ethiopia represented, in Italy, the moment of the greatest consensus for the regime, and, equally, the moment of the greatest success of the romanity myth. The enterprises of the new Italian legionnaires seemed, sure enough, to endorse the validity of the promise, based on the relation between discipline and power, which the fascists had made to the Italians from the beginning: the dictatorship now appeared concretely justified by history, and the concept of nation definitely took on a Roman-imperial character.

The fascist imperialism, as heir and emulator of the Roman imperialism, intended to stand out among the others. The Italians, they said, possessed the same exuberant fecundity as the ancient Romans: for several decades after the Unity, they were forced to emigrate and to be exploited by the wealthier nations, the same ones that denied Italy the right to the colonial expansion. The empire's rebirth put an end to this injustice and, at last, found an outlet to its exuberant population: for the Italians, the colonies were not, like for the other peoples, lands to be exploited and ravaged, but zones of establishment, to be valorized with the work in the fields. Ascribing the nature of a demographic expansionism of agrarian base to the Roman imperialism, they were valorizing, at the same time, the ancient commonplace of the relation between agriculture and civilization: "Rome returns not only with the material entity of the empire, but with the wisdom of its civilization. For where Italy combats, at this same place it sows and ploughs; where it conquers, at this same place it dwells and proliferates." (Bottai, 1939, p.12). The fascist ruralism, exalted during the campaign of the wheat and the integral bonus, now provided an ideological lymph also to the conquest.

Mussolini has taken on Augustus' features. With the celebrations of Augustus' second millennium in 1937, which culminated in the "Exhibition of Augustus' romanity", the exaltation of Augustus / Mussolini became paroxysmic. The historians competed to find analogies between the duce's politics and the first Roman emperor's politics: both pacified Italy, putting an end to a serious social and political crisis, expurgated the Senate, re-dimensioned the popular assemblies, promoted the demographic growth, defended morality and family, re-launched the agriculture, transformed the party militia in national militia, valued the ancestors' religion. Moreover, since the second millennium coincided with the involvement of the fascist legionnaires in the Spanish civil war, it was also pointed

out that Augustus had conducted martial operations in Cantabria and Asturias (Cagnetta, 1976, p.139-81; 1977, p.185-207).

The strongest analogy, however, was associated to the work of those two characters as restorers and revolutionaries. The comparison consented in finding again, after so many centuries, a political style that appeared as a character that was peculiar to the quality of being an Italian. In the actions of Augustus and Mussolini, one could find the creative genius of the politician that transforms everything, although seemingly not touching anything. The formal respect from the institutions and a substantial renewal have achieved, in both historical situations, to overcome, without resorting to terror, an extremely serious crisis (Bottai, 1937, p.37-54). Discourses such as these could not, however, have a broad circulation among the masses: on the level of the diffused sensitivity, what seduced and remained imprinted was the image of a disciplined and powerful Italy like the ancient Rome at the summit of its splendor, while the duce took on an imperial charisma and the temporal dimension of fascism tended to eternity.

Rome, fascism and race

Interpreting the feelings that were more deeply diffused among the Italians, fascism had excluded racism from its own ideology; and the word race, in the Mussolinian usage, had the simple meaning of “the Italian people in its physical expression”. In several occasions, the duce had openly manifested his total refusal of the biological racism: in a speech of 1934, for instance, mentioning the Nazi racism, he had said that he “looked with an enormous pity to some doctrines beyond the Alps”. The rigid set of norms that aimed at preventing promiscuity between Italians and natives at the colonies (“yes for humaneness, no for promiscuity”, Mussolini proclaimed back in 1936) culminated, in 1938, in the promulgation of the anti-Semitic laws and the divulgation of the so-called Manifest of the racist scientists. The reasons for such a change were numerous: to align, even in this aspect, the Italian politics to that of its Nazi ally; to take revenge for the limited participation and increasing hostility or the mistrust with which some Italian and foreign Hebraic environments had embraced the most recent politics of the regime; to prevent promiscuity between Italians and native women in the colonial territories, a promiscuity which had jeopardized the conquerors’ dignity and given rise to rebellions; to re-launch the demographic growth and the physical strengthening of the new generations; to inculcate in the Italians the sense of lineage dignity and eliminate their inferiority complex; to inflict another harsh blow to the bourgeois sentimentalism and pacifism; to revitalize the worn-out fascism and galvanize the youngsters that were disappointed by its revolution.

Also with regard to the racial politics, the ancient Romans were indicated as models: “they were extremely racist”, Mussolini stated. Such a judgment marked a radical change concerning appreciations that were previously expressed by Mussolini himself. In a speech made in 1924 at the Roman Forum, for example, the duce had even exalted the ancient Rome’s trend to integrate the foreigners:

The mankind's destiny was decided here, and Rome pursued its dream according to a direction of force that was never separated from directions of extreme wisdom. What Rome wished was to weaken the peoples that were opposed to it; it was just stern in its conduct of war. ... But later, when those peoples recognized its superiority, Rome embraced them into its bosom; made of them citizens of its city; endowed them with its laws, the justice, which is still the same nowadays, gentlemen! Rome made them participate in its civilization and respected their usages and their religion. In the Pantheon there is an altar for every god, even for the unknown god! (Mussolini, 1956, v.XX (4.6.1924), p.305)

Now Rome became, on the contrary, a synonym of discrimination. If, in the colonial scope, the race politics was applied to the indigenous population, in Italy such politics was applied almost exclusively to the Jews. And if Italians were the modern Romans, Jews were the modern Carthaginians. The Jew appeared more and more like the very antithesis of the Roman: the Roman expressed stability, the connection to the land, the sense of State, the primacy of rurality; the Jew expressed the nomad, individualist, restless character, the primacy of the city (Mariani, 1970, p.231).

This theme expanded more and more until becoming a metaphor that qualified the antithesis between the Roman-fascist universalism and its enemies. At the eve of and during World War II, the fascist propaganda projected the contemporaneous replica of Carthage onto the "plutocratic" great powers, and, particularly, onto Great Britain, and the imminent conflict was defined by Mussolini as "the fourth Punic war". During the very twentieth century, an extremely ancient commonplace, originally formulated by the Greeks and retrieved by the Romans, was unearthed in order to grant an extra pathos to the nationalist propaganda. The ancient peoples represented the Phoenicians, and, in consequence, the Carthaginians, as an avid and treacherous people; such nature might have been determined by their fondness of commerce, an activity which was inevitably based on deceit and lies: the "Punic perfidy", that is, the unfairness of that people, their indomitable distance from the *fides* - a civil principle and, at the same time, a religious one, which should regulate the relations between individuals, between communities, between peoples – remained as a fixed point of the ancient ethnographic representations. Now, that commonplace was adjusted to the nations that were enemies of fascism, which had subordinated ethics to the traffics and applied to the relations between States the same lack of scruples that they expressed by pursuing their own material interests.

In face of the mercantile and plutocratic great powers, fascism valued the agricultural nature of Italy (heir of the Roman nature), which, without renouncing to the industrial modernization, placed the work in the fields among the highest social values. The presence of such values had promoted, in the fascist Italy, the identification between the people and the State, while the so-called democracies, dominated by the business, aimed exclusively at benefiting the wealthiest individuals.

The theater of romanity

In a portion of the post-war historiography and in the opinion diffused within Italy and abroad, the disastrous result of the Italian participation in World War II was shown, in reductive terms, in the judgment regarding the effectiveness of the cult of the ancient Rome, its ability of functioning as a valid political myth and molding the collective identity, its role in the fascist ideology and in the consensus: the martial failure would demonstrate, in the long run, the uselessness of the myth. If the Italian soldiers had won the war, or, even losing it, had fought and resisted like the Germans, today we could say that having taken on the Romans' breastplates conferred them pride, motivation and courage, that is, three out of the decisive requisites for the victory or for a honorable defeat. Since its origins, when fascism was a movement and not yet a party, its Roman inspiration was founded upon two strictly associated values: discipline and power (§ 1).

Along the whole history of fascism, these values remained as the foundations of the romanity myth. It cannot be denied that, at the eve of entering in the war, the Italians became a disciplined people (regardless of the ways by which such discipline was obtained). Differently of what occurred with the Germans, however, the Italians realized almost immediately to be deprived of power, and their humiliation was inevitably magnified by the romanity lens: the insult that the enemies started soon to repeat – that Mussolini was a “Cesar made of plaster”, and, consequently, the Italians were “Romans made of plaster”



Photo: Agence France Presse

“Mussolini, the great comic leader, and the Italians as passionate spectators / actors...”

– found an autonomous space in the conscience of the Italians themselves. We can, therefore, affirm that the romanity myth lasted until the moment in which the presupposition of power on which it was founded – internationally recognized and confirmed by the conquest of Ethiopia and by the victory in the Spanish civil war – made itself evident as a lack of power. But it had been the supposed power, not the effective power, that animated the myth; and, therefore, the failure cannot be regarded as an element useful for the evaluation of the myth itself.

It was, anyway, inevitable that, after the war, the cult of romanity was regarded as a picturesque and pathetic aspect of the regime. The march and the salute with the outstretched hand, the imperial eagles, the fascio, the empire and everything that the regime had intended to revive appeared, universally, as the secondary and marginal manifestation of an insanity that had become a collective disaster. When some notability was given to the fascist romanity, that occurred within the sphere of interpretations, whose ambiguity was recently confirmed by S. Luzzatto. It helped to explain everything, or almost everything, attributing an absolute centrality to the theatrical character of the Italian people, represented at its highest level by their duce: Mussolini, the great comic leader, and the Italians as passionate spectators / actors in the contemporaneous representation of romanity.

In such interpretations, a disputable aspect was not so much the use of the concept of theatricalism, as the fundamental role that was assigned to it (nearly a monocausal explanation), and the acquittal judgment that, inevitably, derived of it: a kind of collective infantilism that should be viewed, in the long run, with indulgence. The uncomfortable problem of the consensus was, intrinsically, also attenuated, or even deactivated.

The theatrical interpretation, when formulated with sensibleness and with no exhaustive pretensions – like in a recent biography of Mussolini -, does not possess any scabrous aspect:

In a country in which the lyrical art rules, and in which the representation of the sacred is enveloped by scintillating scenarios, what many Italians enjoy in the fascist liturgy is its theatrical character, and what captures them in the Duce is his talent as a tenor and actor. What makes us smile nowadays are the long sentences pronounced by a potent voice from the high balcony of the Venice Palace, the dialogues with the crowds inherited from the D'Annunzio's ritual, the formulas intended to cause shock, the remarks in undertone, the gesture of defiance, which should, however, be placed in their time and their context. (Milza, 1999, p.561)

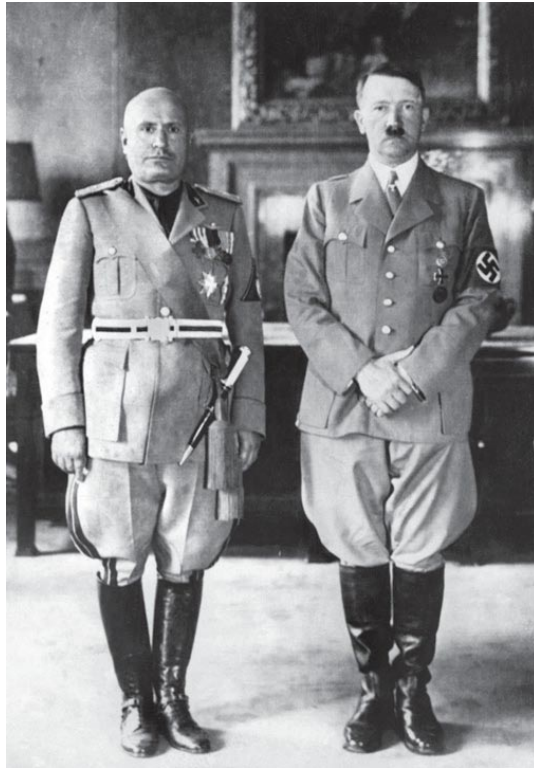
However, what appears as disputable in such enunciations is a surprising omission: the collective rites of the Third Reich were way more theatrical than the fascist ones, and reached unmatched levels of organization and suggestive power. The führer himself, as a charmer, was not less gifted than the duce, and revealed himself as a master in the art of transforming the political action in

dramatic action. In his speeches, the internal logic was less important than the rhythm; and the modulation of the voice, from the almost restrained tones to the paroxysmic roars, had an almost hypnotic effect. Why, then, was Mussolini a tenor and an actor, and Hitler was not? Why were the Italians a theatrical audience and the Germans were not? Because, of course, in one case they participated in the representation of power and, at the same time, possessed the power; while, in the other case, they were restricted to the representation. But this interpretation, as said before, is not but a retrospective contamination.

In order to understand the fascist theater of romanity, one has to renounce to the divagations on the theatrical nature of the Italians, and to insert it, as some scholars have been doing for some time, into the track that was opened by George Mosse, in the picture of an aesthetics of politics that goes back as far as the French Revolution, and in the big process of nationalization of the masses. In a moment of exaltation for the conquest of Ethiopia, Luigi Pirandello mentioned the duce as a “true man of the stage, an opportune hero that God, at the right moment, chose to grant to Italy”, and who acted as the “author and leading character in the Theater of the Centuries” (Quadrivio, 3.11.1935). Those words, written by the greatest playwright of that time, were highly complimentary and corresponded to the self-definition of Mussolini as the artist that molds the masses: the duce brought the history onto the stage with the talent of a man of the theater, but that history was not fictitious (the very Pirandellian poetics of the relation between mask and life makes superfluous such statement). Pirandello’s judgment can be compared, just to give one example, to the one of Robert Brasillach, who defined Mussolini as a “poet of the revolution”. The artists revealed, therefore, a sharp sensitivity when they noticed the particular bond between aesthetics and politics that was established by Mussolini.

Even before his ascension to the power, the duce had identified the importance of associating the updating of the myth of Rome to the adoption of a ritual and of gestures that represented a Roman and fascist style, destined to become the style of all Italians. The “official” biography of the duce describes efficiently how fast the diffusion of this model was: “a certain look in the eyes, a certain way of walking, a certain expression in the face enabled and enable us to identify the fascist, even with no badge on the jacket. A fashion, a style, even the physical type of the fascist were formed”; the Roman component of this style had not taken shape as a result of an erudite retrieval, but “with the automatic spontaneity of an ancestral instinct” (Sarfatti, 1926, p.244ss).

Even not failing to display the total refuse of the equality principles of the French Revolution, the fascism had perfectly understood the importance of the Jacobinical political ritual in the construction of a laic religion. Mussolini had immediately sensed by intuition the usefulness of generalizing several aspects of the political liturgy invented by Gabrielle D’Annunzio in Fiume. According to the duce, the symbols and rites of the ancient Rome helped also to potentiate the



Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, 1937, in Germany.

“mystical side” of the politics: since the true driving power of the masses was not reason, but feelings and emotions, those symbols and rites were, among others, the most efficient instrument to provide the masses with a soul, fitting them in the politics. With an artist’s hand, the duce had identified the way to give shape and color to the people: “The Roman salute, every chant and formula, the dates and celebrations are indispensable to preserve the pathos of a movement. That is what happened in ancient Rome” (Ludwig, 2000 (1932), p.93).

In order to diffuse the cult of romanity, the speeches were more significant than the writings, both those that were made from the balconies and those transmitted by radio (although the diffusion of the radio sets in Italy was still very strict, and, anyway, beneath the one in Germany, the auditions were often collective). The ancient and modern monuments and the images were still more significant than the speeches:

The Italians made contact with romanity essentially by means of a visual approach, by means of the rich emission of images, emblems and signs, taken from the culture of Rome, that could support the hermeneutics of romanity at the level of the masses. The repetition and frequency of the symbol-image allowed that, outside a cultural reading, the fasci, eagles, columns, triumph arches acted on the public with an immediate and primary perceptive relationship, similar to the one of the advertising slogan. (Malvano, 1988, p.153)

An important role was played by the newsreels of the Luce National Institute (an educative cinematographic organization), founded in 1924 with the purpose of diffusing the popular culture and general knowledge by means of the cinematography. In 1926, the display of the newsreels became mandatory in every Italian movie theater, and by means of those messages the public became familiar with the regime and romanity. On the other hand, the lack of interest of the twentieth century cinema by the Roman history is surprising. Among the several hundreds of movies that were produced within that period, only two had a Roman theme: *Nero*, played in the theater by Ettore Petrolini and shot by Alessandro Blasetti (1930), and *Scipione l'Africano*, of Carmine Gallone. This latter one was shot in 1936, contemporaneously to the campaign of Ethiopia, and had a clear purpose of celebration: the story of the commander that lands in Africa, defeats Hannibal and conquers Carthage was intended to illustrate the vitality of the warrior's spirit that the Roman history had transmitted to the contemporaneous Italy. The movie was not a big success, which can be explained less by the scarce participation of the audience in the fascist idolatry of Rome, and more by its macroscopic defects: the boring dialogues, the ridiculous gestures, the atrocious recitation of the protagonist and other actors, and the unbearable soundtrack.

To the centrality of the Roman world in the fascist ideology corresponded a similar centrality in the teaching of ancient history, literature and classic languages in the schools, with the obvious prevalence of the disciplines with a Roman theme. This romanity hegemony was reinforced by the reform that was performed in 1923 by the minister of Public Instruction, Giovanni Gentile. Within the picture of a global reform, inspired under many aspects in innovative pedagogic principles, the teaching of the classic disciplines was assigned the fundamental objective of conveying the awareness of the cultural and civil tradition that was born with Rome and perpetuated in the contemporaneous Italy. In the classic lyceum, regarded as the cornerstone of the Italian school, as the place where the future ruling class was being formed, the study of Antiquity was dominant by prestige and number of hours.

The Roman history, the history of the Latin literature and the Latin language were, however, significantly present in the schools of every level, even in those that, according to the reformer's intention, should receive the less gifted students, coming from lower social groups and destined to subaltern jobs. The concept of Rome constellated the whole pedagogic trajectory and had a determinant share in the students' formation, leading them to the understanding of the historical and moral depth of the national civilization: "The classic teaching" – read the reform text – "should look closely at the classical world, should plunge into it in order to fully understand our world." (Cagnetta, s. d., p.309-427; Scotto di Luzio, 1999).

It is less easy to evaluate the true contribution of the scholars to the romanity cult. Even if the issue, already deeply assessed by others, is not

encompassed by the aspects analyzed in this article, it cannot be avoided at the moment of the conclusive reflections. The specialists of the Antiquity – historians of the Roman world, jurists, philologists, historians of art, archeologists – had never been in such prominence as during the fascist period. The up-to-dateness of the Roman world, proclaimed by the regime, placed its official chairs and its persons in the center of the cultural politics, conferring them prestige, honors and even government office positions. It was clear to see that the fascism claimed a mystical relationship with romanity and discouraged the attempts of resolving such relationship only at the erudition sphere: it feared that its own image should appear as dusty and old-fashioned.

At the moment in which the regime established the principle of the politics autonomy with regard to the books of the specialists of the ancient world, it requested of them, in exchange for the so unexpected prestige, an active ideological participation, the scientific and intellectual support to the Roman themes used in the political sphere, and eventually some good suggestions in the quest for the analogies between the fascist history and the Roman history. The myth of romanity had been placed by the politicians on the teachers' desk; enraptured, the teachers returned it to the politicians almost identical in the substance, but with an addition of respectability and information. No new aspect in the composite magma that the fascist ideology was proceeded directly from the historians. They helped to enrich the set of problems (mainly within the scope of the State doctrine and the racial politics), to provide confirmations and arguments, to suggest words and stylemes: the Roman history was, in the first place, a great reservoir of authority, to which one resorted in second instance.

It has been said that the myth of romanity was weak and shallow for not being rooted into the masses' conscience, differently from the Nazi myth in the ancient German customs; that it boasted of a strong popular tradition and went back, at least, to the nineteenth century. Mazzini would not agree with that:

We could raise evidence of how true our ancient conviction regarding the power of the concept of Rome was in the conscience and mind of the Italians: we have seen how morally strong this concept was across the whole nation, at every social stratum, in every kind of person: it appears as endowed with an extraordinary energy, evoking, from the depths of the national conscience, the grandiose manifestations that attest the essential laws of life: this is the nation's life itself. (La Riforma, 3.10.1870)

Even if the comparison with Germany maintains its validity, the crisis of the myth of Rome should be mainly construed as a portion of an ampler crisis – that of the consensus, of the consciences, of the very concept of nation – that started to occur in Italy after the promulgation of the racial laws and in the course of the war. The concept of Rome, for the use that the fascism had made of it, was a plastic idea, which could adjust itself to a variety of situations; but it could not be exploited beyond a certain extent. Such limit was mainly represented

by the alliance with Germany: it was impossible to conjugate the feeling of romanity with the German fraternity and with the hate for France, since Italy, no more than twenty years ago, had had over seven hundred thousand dead in an anti-Germanic war that was presented as a conflict between civilization and barbarism, and during which, at the same time, the sisterhood with the “Latin sister” had been exalted.

The myth of Rome, as the campaign of Ethiopia had demonstrated, gave rise to enthusiasm if used in a colonial perspective, to corroborate the birth of the empire over the overseas territories; but it was inert, if not counter-productive, if used in a European war. Moreover, the Roman myth did not tolerate secondary roles, and the subordination of the fascist Italy to the Nazi Germany (which was evident way before the entering in war) fell upon this myth as a serious injury.

Not even the racial politics succeeded in harmonizing itself with the myth of Rome. On one hand, racism and anti-Semitism were not among the most diffused and rooted feelings of the Italians, although, nowadays, the emphasis is placed precisely on the unfounded character of the absolutory mythology that makes of Italy a country that is immune to racist ideologies and practices. On the other hand, racism, either aimed to the Jews or to the African Negroes, stained the image of Rome and made it vain, jeopardizing the very concept of civilization that had animated the campaign of Ethiopia.

In Nazism, on the contrary, race was an amalgam and a powerful ideal, which perfectly satisfied the origins and the present situation. In spite of the presence of different orientations within it, Nazism was not concerned in creating a new man: for the Nazi ideology, it was sufficient to create, in soul and body, the ideal type of the ancient German. Fascism, on the contrary, did not intend to simply recreate the ancient Romans. The Romans of modernity were not a replica of their ancestors: they had transmitted some cells to the fascist people, but the “new man” was construed as an original creature (Mosse, 1989, p.5-26). Therefore, fascism was forced to define this new man’s personality, but did it in a vague and approximative way, and, thus, the projection of romanity into the future remained enwrapped in mist.

The very cult of the duce became, in the course of time, an obstacle for the myth of romanity. Mussolini was the incarnation of the Roman, and, at the same time, the personification of great men such as Caesar or Augustus. The Italians discovered themselves as Romans thanks to him, but would they have continued to be Romans when the artist, the molder of the masses, had disappeared? Hitler was, on the contrary, the symbol of a transcendent principle, the spirit of the race, and the Germans would go on being Germanic even without him.

Notes

- 1 For the precedent ones, cf. Salvatori (2006, p.749-89).
- 2 About the first Exhibition, cf. Schnapp (2003).
- 3 For these facts, see Cederna (1980) and Vidotto (2001, p.178ss).

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ABSTRACT - This essay aims to analyze how the myth of Rome was used by Mussolini to create a fascist specificity that coincided with a specificity of the Italian nation. Ritual practices, gestures, values and symbols were retaken, sometimes arbitrarily, in order to build a myth that generated new ambiguities and that, different from Nazism, constituted a hindrance to the survival of "romanity" after Mussolini.

KEYWORDS - Fascism, Ancient Rome, Myth, Religion of Politics.

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