

"Italian Fascism and Race"

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'The modern form of racial thought was developed in the second half of the nineteenth century.' Race was seen as genetic attribute, and as a factor that determined the nature, appearance and behaviour of the individual, as well as being 'the most important defining characteristic of a human being'. From that point on race became a central obsession of many Europeans and was regarded as such an important defining factor that in the United States of America (USA), in censuses in that country between 1890 and 1990, according to Marek Kohn, certain themes emphasising distinctions between black and white endure. He states,

In 1890, census enumerators were charged with the task of classifying people of mixed African and European descent as Mulattos (half and half), Quadroons (a quarter black), or Octoroons (one eighth black). This proved completely unworkable, and the mixed categories were discarded in 1900; the Mulatto class reappeared in 1910 and 1920. From 1930, the 'one drop rule' was subsequently adopted: 'one drop of black blood' consigned an individual to the black category.

In Australia, as I have written elsewhere, 'there were similarities between Nazi racial theories and those subscribed to by most Anglo-Australians during the 1930s and which had produced in this country a history of genocide, and white-supremacist attitudes that were the foundation blocks of the Federation of Australia'. Thus, it can be seen that even in (or maybe especially in) western 'democracies' such as the USA and Australia, notions of race based on biological difference and Social Darwinism were popular in the general public consciousness and public policy.

This situation was mirrored in the emerging Nazi movement in Germany of the 1930s. Furthermore, in Germany and central Europe, social-Darwinist ideas were manipulated to reinforce and justify a pre-existing history of deeply embedded anti-Semitism. But in an interesting twist, in Mussolini's Fascist Italy as late as 1937, these notions were almost completely absent, which necessarily questions the broad perception of racism being an integral part of fascism as an ideology.

As historian Roger Eatwell observes, 'The Jewish community in Italy was small; only 47,000 in 1938. Jews tended to be a socially important group, playing a particularly notable role in banking, commerce and the professions, but there was little anti-Semitism in Italy'. Indeed, a significant number of Italian Jews were members of the PNF, and in places like Ferrara Jewish community members were important financial patrons of the Fascist party. Eatwell says that 230 Jews took part in the March on Rome. Mussolini himself had a Jewish mistress, Margherita Sarfatti, who was associated with the Novecento art movement. All of these factors strongly suggest a degree of either assimilation of the Italian Jewish community, or at least an environment of acceptance of Jews in both Italian society and Mussolini's developing fascist movement.

Anti-Semitism was absent from early Italian fascist ideology; in fact, according to many historians, Mussolini had been scornful of Hitler's obsession about race and what Zeev Sternhell described as the Nazi's criterion of biological determinism. Richard Bessel says that 'the key contrast between Fascist and Nazi regimes is the latter's fixation upon race and its determination to put racialist ideology into practice...'. Lyttelton talks of 'the autonomy and centrality of Nazi anti-Semitism, for which we can find no equivalent in Italian Fascism.'

Furthermore, as late as 1934 Mussolini was still wary of Hitler's intentions (especially in Austria) and there was strong opposition among Italian fascists to Nazi racial ideas. Many historians maintain that in 1938 when Mussolini introduced new race laws that it was to appease Hitler, whose Nazi movement was now in ascendancy. But E.M. Robertson mounts a considerable case to suggest that Mussolini's policies in North Africa reveal a much more complex picture of Duce and his racial ideas.

Robertson states that whilst Mussolini in July 1934 had said that Hitler's racial theories were absurd, he nevertheless displayed in his African campaigns an unhealthy preoccupation about possible miscegenation between Italian troops and the natives. He was also said to have feared the 'spectacle of an Italian taxi-driver taking a tip from an Arab, or a Sicilian boy polishing the shoes of a wealthy native'. Further, Robertson, in his unfortunately turgid and convoluted style of writing, argues there was a correlation between the racial laws that Mussolini established in his African territories and the later hardening of his position on Anti-Semitism in the late 1930s. This seems to me to be a long bow to draw, in that an aversion to the radically different black and Islamic cultures of Northern Africa is a considerable distance from an anti-Semitism that until 1937 was largely non-existent in Italian society and Mussolini's writings and speeches.

Victoria de Grazia observes that 'Italian fascism was a chameleon-like movement, cuing its colors to potential allies and the shifting political terrain of the first postwar years.' Robertson paints a picture of some of Mussolini's maneuverings; like the suggestion that from 1934 to 1938 Mussolini had nothing to gain from attacking the Jews in Europe because he wanted to inhibit the union of Austria and Germany; and like in 1935 proposing support for Zionists to create a homeland in Palestine in return for Zionist aid for an Italian mandate in Iraq or Syria, and his later 'espousal of the cause of Islam'. This all seems to me to represent an incorrigible and enduring opportunism on the part of Mussolini, rather than give any indication of a deep seated racism.

Of more concern are the underlying notions and attitudes revealed in his attack on Ethiopia where his troop's brutality and the use of poison gas caused an international uproar. The subsequent occupation saw strict laws against miscegenation and talk of 'racial hygiene'. This suggests an increasing Social Darwinist antipathy to black races on the part of Mussolini and a small portion of his followers, but does not to me establish deeply embedded racism on the part of either Italian society or the Italian fascist movement. Indeed, Mosse has said that until 1938, the 'enemy' of Mussolini's new man was, 'the menace of degeneration that would sap the strength of the nation from within', rather than any racial minorities. Also de Grazia reminds us that until the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936 Italy 'never had any a minorities problem to speak of'.

Other historians (Wiskemann, Deakinand and Carr) suggest that Mussolini's attack on Ethiopia, which resulted in damaging sanctions by the League of Nations, as well as the outbreak of civil war in Spain, were factors that weakened Italy's position. This created a need for the Duce to seek closer relations with Hitler. It seems to me that it was an increasing reliance on, and subservience to Hitler, that was a major contributing factor to Mussolini belatedly embracing anti-Semitism.

Although John Whittam also attributes 'Italian contact with the black tribes of Ethiopia' as being the reason for the growth of racial prejudice in Italy after 1935. Whittam traces the development of the race laws in Italy after 1938 in the immediate aftermath of the Manifesto of the Racist Scientists on July 14. In November 1938 laws were introduced that meant that Jews were to be purged from the party, civil service, armed forces and a wide range of restrictions imposed. As Whitman states, 'Most

Italians deplored this discrimination' and the Church reacted very strongly, much to Il Duce's chagrin. But Mussolini's laws were considerably more lenient than Hitler's, and there were generous exceptions for Jews who had joined the PNF in the early days and for war veterans. Furthermore, there was a distinct attitude of non-cooperation on the part of most Italians. As Roger Eatwell observed, 'The healthy disregard for authority which characterizes Italian political culture...undermined the policy'.

It was not until the King dismissed Mussolini and Hitler came to his rescue and annexed most of northeastern Italy that extreme persecution of the Italian Jewish community began. This late persecution and deportations were largely conducted by, and at the behest of, the occupying German forces with their radically different notions and approach to the "problem". Thus, in the final analysis, the fact that only 7,682 Italian Jews out of 47,000 perished in the Holocaust does seem to indicate that there was something very different in Mussolini's fascists compared to Hitler's Nazis.

In conclusion I quote Zeev Sternhell who said, "Racism was not a necessary condition for the existence of fascism, on the contrary, it was a factor in Fascist eclecticism". In other words, if anti-Semitism and racism were apparently absent in the ideology and actions of the first, definitive and successful fascist movement, then that suggests that perhaps these notions might not be considered to be a fundamental, natural component of Fascism. This is not to absolve the Italian fascists of racial crimes they without doubt committed, but rather place those crimes in a context that enables us to see more clearly what the fundamental and essential ingredients of early Italian fascist ideology might have been.

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