

**Staging the Nation's Rebirth: the Politics and Aesthetics of Performance
in the Context of Fascist Studies**

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A new ideal type of generic fascism

With the possible exception of 'ideology', there can be no term in the human sciences which has generated more conflicting theories about its basic definition than 'fascism'. One area of academia does exist, of course, where a degree of harmony has prevailed. Like the smile of the Cheshire cat, Marxist social science seems destined to outlive the many regimes which have purported to be based on it, and among its intellectual custodians there has reigned a fundamental consensus. In the main they have remained faithful to Horkheimer's dictum of 1939 that 'whoever is not prepared to talk about capitalism should also remain silent about fascism'. Even here, a number of significantly diverging 'schools of thought' (Stalinist, Trotskyite, Austro-Marxist, Gramscian) have grown up, but the differences do not prevent a wide measure of agreement in seeing Nazism as a German permutation of fascism, or in treating as fascist all the right-wing authoritarian regimes which proliferated in the inter-war period in Europe, Latin America and Japan. Nor does the radical left, whether academic or militant, experience any problem with the concepts of 'non-European' and 'post-war' fascism since it assumes from first principles that fascism is a permanent tendency or virtual reality which liberal society will always harbour as long as it is committed to capitalism and resistant to 'real' socialism.

Outside the snug igloos of Marxist doctrine where the chill winds of post-modernist relativism and methodological scepticism blow there are almost as many characterisations of fascism as there are self-appointed experts who write about it. As a result there are only scattered pockets of inter-personal subjectivity to

pronounce authoritatively on whether the regimes of Salazar in Portugal, Vargas in Brazil, Perón in Argentina, Tojo in Japan or even Hitler are to be considered fascist, whether fascism outlived the defeat of the Third Reich, or whether its driving force was anything beyond racism, nihilism or sheer evil. Understandably, some scholars have seriously suggested that the social sciences would be better off without the term altogether. Nor is the severity of the Babel effect with respect to fascism merely frustrating to writers of political dictionaries. It has major practical implications for any attempt to carry out comparative studies of aspects of fascism, the theatrical culture with which it is associated being a prime example.

My recent contribution to the debate, *The Nature of Fascism*,¹ was written in a spirit of fostering the only form of objectivity open to 'liberals' in the human sciences, namely a broad consensus on the heuristic qualities of a particular approach. It offers a definition which, while corroborating widely shared 'common sense' perceptions of the subject, has two distinctive features: extreme concision (fascism is defined in a single sentence, albeit one which requires considerable 'unpacking' before it is intelligible), and a central emphasis on the mythic dimension of fascism as a key to its underlying ideological coherence and causal dynamics. Moreover, its premise is the obvious, but still relatively unusual one of treating fascism on a par with other political ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, imperialism or ecologism (all of which pose intrinsic definitional problems of their own), namely by defining it in terms of the vision (utopia) of the ideal society which determines its critique of the status quo.

To be more precise, the genus 'fascism' is assumed to be definable in terms of the *core myth* which is common to its different permutations, and which underpins its diagnosis of, and remedy for, the social and political 'crisis' of the present order of society. There is almost total consensus among experts over the crucial rôle played by 'illiberal' or 'integral' nationalism in fascism. There is also agreement among a

number of them that, rather than being a reactionary or conservative force, fascism aspired to create a revolutionary new order. Artificially forged into a single concept by the faculty of 'idealising abstraction', these two elements produce a new ideal type of the fascist minimum. When applied to Fascism the conceptual framework thus created reveals the structural link between the different, and in many respects conflicting, currents of political activism (Futurism, revolutionary syndicalism, the nationalism of the National Italian Association etc.) and the political careers of individual ideologues and activists (e.g. Gentile, Bottai) which formed an uneasy alliance within Mussolini's regime. The same core myth of revolutionary nationalism (though inevitably articulated through historical and symbolic discourses peculiar to the national culture in question) also can be shown to lie at the heart of the propaganda, policies and social dynamics of other movements and one regime widely associated with fascism (e.g. the Falange, British Union of Fascists, the Iron Guard, the Third Reich), but not all (e.g. Peronism, Franquism, Vichy France).

How are we to characterise the core myth of generic fascism which results from the fusion of a revolutionary project with anti-liberal but populist nationalism? It can be expressed in a single binomial term, albeit an initially cryptic one: 'palingenetic ultra-nationalism'. 'Palingenetic' refers to the myth of 'rebirth' or 'regeneration' (the literal meaning of 'palingenesis' in Greek). Clearly, the triumph of a new life over decadence and decay, the imminent rebirth from literal or figurative death, is a theme so universal within manifestations of the human religious, artistic, emotional and social imagination throughout history that it is in itself inadequate to define a political ideology. For example, the faith in the possibility of regeneration from a present condition perceived as played out or no longer tolerable, is arguably the affective driving force behind *all* revolutionary ideologies, be they communist, anarchist, or 'dark green' (or even liberal, as a study of the speeches of the leading French Revolutionaries such as Saint-Juste or Robespierre shows²). The adjective

'palingenetic' first acquires a definitional function when it is combined with the historically quite recent and culture-specific phenomenon of 'nationalism', and only when this takes a radically anti-liberal stance to become *ultra-nationalism*.³

Fascism thus emerges when populist ultra-nationalism combines with the myth of a radical crusade *against* decadence and *for* renewal in every sphere of national life. The result is an ideology which operates as a mythic force celebrating the unity and sovereignty of the whole people in a specifically *anti-liberal*, and *anti-Marxist* sense. It is also *anti-conservative*, for, even when the mythic values of the nation's history or prehistory are celebrated, as in German *völkisch* thought, the stress is on living out 'eternal' values in a *new* society. The hall-mark of the fascist mentality is the sense of living at the watershed between two ages and of being engaged in the front-line of the battle to overcome degeneration through the creation of a rejuvenated national community, an event presaged by the appearance of a new 'man' embodying the qualities of the redeemed nation.⁴

The ideal type of fascism presented here boils down to the following thesis: what all permutations of fascism have in common (i.e. the 'fascist minimum') is that their ideology, policies and any organisations are informed by a distinctive permutation of the myth that the nation needs to be, or is about to be, resurrected Phoenix-like from the forces of decadence, which, without drastic intervention by the forces of healthy nationalism, threaten to extinguish it for ever. Thus, when in an overtly anti-liberal and anti-socialist spirit Fascists celebrated the creation of a Third Rome, Nazis believed they were founding a New (national and European) Order, Mosley promoted the idea of the Greater Britain or Codreanu looked forward to the appearance of the Rumanian New Man, all were being true to the core mobilising myth of fascism. In their own idiosyncratic way they all invoked elements of 'traditional' values, but did so not to create a modern form of ancien regime based on the traditional ruling élites and institutions, but to inaugurate a new era for the nation

in which even the common man could form part of the élite charged with the mission to combat national decay.

The implications of this definition for the dynamics of fascism

To conceive fascism as a 'palingenetic form of ultra-nationalism' has a number of consequences for the way its dynamics are approached:

Fascism as a modernising ideology

Far from being a form of anti-modernism, cultural pessimism, nihilism, or 'resistance to transcendence',⁵ fascism is born precisely of a human need for a sense of transcendence, cultural optimism and higher truths compatible with the forces of modernisation.⁶ It offers to its followers *not* the prospect of returning to the idyll of a pre-modern society with its dynastic hierarchy and religious world-view intact, but rather of advancing towards a new order, one consonant with the dynamism of the modern world, yet able to purge it of the social, political, economic and spiritual malaise which liberal and socialist versions of modernisation have purportedly brought about. In particular, the regenerated national community promises to overcome the rootlessness and chaos, the anomie, attributed to the break-down of traditional community, cosmology and hierarchy under the impact of secularisation, materialism, pluralism, massification and industrialisation. It claims to do so by offering a *new* dynamic source of rootedness, community and hierarchy based on the organic nation, and many forms of it actively embrace modern technology and industrial civilisation, though only if integrated into a cohesive socio-economic order consistent with the needs of the nation.

Fascism as an anti-conservative and secular ideology

Due to its peculiar modernising and palingenetic thrust, fascism is at bottom anti-traditional and hence anti-conservative: in Weberian terms fascism is thus a radical rejection of 'traditional' authority. What blurs this point in practice is that fascism often draws on traditional values and may even have recourse to religious discourse and symbology to create the 'spiritual' climate it believes conducive to the new order. Moreover, where fascism has gained power it has been forced for pragmatic reasons to forge alliances with traditional élites, and the regime it has created superficially resembles a reactionary one both because of the hierarchical power-structures it creates and because of the profoundly authoritarian and anti-egalitarian implications of imposing a new order wherever adequate forces of 'spontaneous' consensus and mass-mobilisation are lacking.

Fascism as a charismatic form of politics

Fascism specifically repudiates the rationalist and political tradition of the Enlightenment, and in particular the principles of universal human rights, egalitarianism, methodological scepticism, pluralism, tolerance and individual responsibility. Indeed, it encourages the individual to subsume his or her personality unquestioningly *but willingly* within the greater whole of the national community caught in the throes of its transition to a new order, and so participate in the special historical destiny allotted to it. By a similar token it rejects all forms of socialism, whether as a revolutionary or reformist force, which promote the concepts of materialism, internationalism, or equality because they are held to undermine a 'healthy' national identity and the new hierarchy which is to accompany it. Some forms of fascism do however claim to represent a 'national' form of socialism whose task is to destroy capitalist values (though not all its institutions) and abolish class distinctions (though not hierarchy as such). In both cases, fascism thus rejects what Max Weber called the 'legal-rational' concepts of authority.

Being both anti-traditionalist and anti-rational, fascism is hence predisposed in practice (though not necessarily in theory, as the contemporary *Nouvelle Droite* demonstrates) towards a *charismatic* form of political ideology. This aspect expresses itself in fascism's drive to replace all genuine freedom of opinion and all democratic processes based on individual consciousness by a 'permanent revolution' founded on ritualised authority and an elaborate civic liturgy sometimes referred to as a 'civic' or 'political' religion,⁷ the most well-known manifestation of which is the leader cult. Fascism therefore operates as an *identificatory* ideology, encouraging total symbiosis with the ideological community (as opposed to an *integrative* ideology, which liberalism and socialism are in theory, encouraging individual conscience, a spirit of inquiry and the tolerance of difference).⁸

Fascism as an élitist form of populist nationalism

Fascism in principle offers solutions to three central problems of modern society: 1) the socio-political integration of the masses into society; 2) the need for a pervasive sense of personal identity and values; 3) the need for political institutions which create order and authority. It does so by creating a new type of nationalism which is neither the anti-democratic kind promoted by traditional (aristocratic or restorationist) conservative, or modernising ones (e.g. post-monarchist royalists, anti-liberal political Catholics, militarists), nor the populist variety associated with the liberal revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is a nationalism with a populist, revolutionary, hierarchic and charismatic thrust, bent on replacing the 'horizontal' democracy of the early French Revolution with a 'vertical' democracy based on the spontaneous emergence of a new élite, a new meritocratic aristocracy headed by an inspired leader. In a sense, then, fascism fuses the hierarchic elements of *ancien régime* absolutism with the democratic dynamic of revolutionary liberalism and socialism. It promotes the vision of a new state, a new leadership, a

new political and economic order born of a revolutionary movement (and not a mere 'party') arising from within the people itself.

The eclecticism of fascism's palingenetic political myth

An important feature of this charismatic and identificatory form of nationalism is its eclecticism: it can be rationalised through a wide variety of regenerationist myths drawing on historical or pseudo-scientific 'facts'. Both Fascism and Nazism, for example, accommodated many varieties of rebirth mythologies (pro-technological, anti-technological, urban and rural, religious, occultist, and secular) all of which had as their common driving force the myth of a regenerated nation. This allowed their protagonists to project onto Fascism or Nazism their own vision of the world and thus be absorbed into the movement or régime. This is completely consistent with research into the dynamics of ideological communities such as Nazism, which underlines how heterogeneous the inner motive, and hence the sociological basis, for belonging to a cause can be.⁹

The ultimate goal of fascism: the creation of a charismatic national community

If the definition of generic fascism as a palingenetic form of ultra-nationalism is adopted as heuristically useful, then it follows that the fundamental aim of any régime based upon it must be to bring about the rebirth of the national community. This involves the creation of the post-liberal and anti-Marxist 'new man' imbued with the vitalistic, heroic ethic which is presented as the polar opposite of the decadence encouraged by a 'materialistic' liberal or socialist society. The institutional implications of this programme are a series of structural changes designed to replace the pluralistic state of liberalism with one able to enforce ideological

uniformity on every aspect of society. This logically involves such measures as the abolition of liberal institutions (political parties, trade unions, basic freedoms, the separation of powers), the creation of single party State, the reshaping of the system of justice, the drafting of new laws of citizenship and nationality, the restructuring of economic institutions. Because of its charismatic and hierarchical nature, a fascist régime naturally tends towards the introduction of the leader principle and the glorification of youth as the raw material of a heroic new generation. The fact that fascism emerged in the wake of the First World War also led to its bid to militarise civic society, as well as to celebrate the front-line soldier as a role model for society because of his readiness to submit willingly to discipline and to sacrifice himself to a higher cause.

Apart from an extensive coordination and regimentation of society, a fascist régime has to resort to a centralised programme of social engineering to encourage the conversion of the mass of the population to the palingenetic world-view which originally fuelled what started out as an 'extra-systemic' movement of a minority. In practice this means propaganda on a massive scale, the radical overhaul of education and academic life, and the reshaping of cultural life, both at the level of 'high art' and of popular culture and leisure. Given the irreducibly pluralistic nature of modern society and the need to persecute alleged 'natural' enemies of the regenerated nation, 'actually existing' fascism also requires the creation of a terror apparatus to deter and punish deviation from the official world-view. Within the fascist mind-set, however, the apparent 'nihilism' of its persecutions, purges and violence are seen the 'cathartic' destruction necessary as a prelude for any act of reconstruction and regeneration.

Clearly, the régime described has every hall-mark of a totalitarian one. But an important consequence of fascism's nature as a revolutionary, populist and charismatic form of nationalism, is that a régime based on it does not try to regiment

the masses simply in order to control them. Rather it does so as part of an elaborate attempt to bring about what is conceived as a *positive*, life-asserting, transformation of how they experience everyday reality and their place in history by enabling them to feel spontaneously an integral part of the nation and its 'higher' destiny. Not *all* the masses can be involved in this project, however, because the extreme emphasis which it places on enhancing national identity means that liberal concepts of human rights and citizenship are rejected, and nationality is redefined in exclusive historical, cultural or ethnic categories, though not necessarily using criteria derived from biological racism. The central emphasis on the affective and subjective sense of permanent revolution, of living through a historical sea-change, of belonging to a supra-individual reality, leads to an all-pervasive use of myths, symbols and rituals, designed to replace the primacy of individualism and reason by a transcendental community and faith. Expressions of this are the veneration of a mythicised version of national history, the invention of new heroes, traditions and ceremonies, the celebration of national achievements in the spheres of social programmes, technology, architecture and art, the cult of the leader, the myth of the New Man, and the infiltration of national symbolism (e.g. the Fascist Lictor's rod, the Nazi Swastika) into the most intimate aspects of everyday life.

The taxonomic implications of this ideal type for fascist studies

The consequences of applying our ideal type on comparative studies of fascist régimes are fairly drastic. Fortunately for all those attached to integrative ideologies, history has provided only two cases of fascist movements being actually able to seize power and hence set about implementing their myth of national resurrection from decadence, namely Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. A handful of other fascist movements briefly formed governments, but either in an alliance with more powerful

conservative autocrats (e.g. the Iron Guard with Antonescu in Romania) or as puppet régimes of the Nazis (e.g. Szálasi's Arrow Cross under the SS in Hungary), but none had the relative autonomy necessary to carry out their palingenetic programmes. In contrast Mussolini and Hitler had sufficient autonomy to set about implementing transformations in the spheres of education, culture, foreign policy, economics and demographic policy, which, for all the differences in the specific nationalist myths underlying them, point to radical attempts, not to restore past values or hold the fort against social collapse, but to enter a new age based on the regenerated national community endowed with a new hierarchy and with new myths by which to live. However, even in these two cases the translation of ideas into reality was a highly mediated and compromised process.

Under both the Third Rome and the Third Reich, fascism was forced into an alliance with conservative forces in order to gain and hold power, and there were from the outset several rival currents of fascism at work, all jostling to impose *their* vision of the new order on official policy-making. Also, the practical problems of creating a homogeneous national community out of a highly pluralistic modern nation-state meant that, in glaring contrast with the official propaganda of a totally coordinated régime, both countries remained polycentric and heterogeneous. In addition, even if the two leaderships had formulated a coherent vision of the ideal fascist order, their commitment to expansionist schemes of foreign conquest meant that the stability and colossal resources necessary for its full implementation never existed and never could have existed. Everything in the history of the two régimes, then, points to the gulf between Utopia and reality.

Meanwhile, to a greater or lesser extent, a number of autocratic conservative régimes deliberately aped some of the superficial aspects of the Fascist and Nazi apparatus and style of power (e.g. single party, youth movement, leader cult, corporatist economics, secret police, State terror, rhetorical commitment to a new

State or new era). Portugal, Spain, Austria, Greece, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Rumania, and the Balvic States all provide examples of this *Ersatz* fascism, or what might be termed '*para-fascism*'. In these cases, although the façade of national regeneration was maintained, the State, as the representative of the interests of the traditional ruling hierarchy, repressed rather than encouraged those aspects of fascism which it rightly saw as life-threatening, such as the mobilisation of populist nationalism, the emergence of new élites through a genuine social revolution, or the diffusion of a heroic, tendentially pagan world view incompatible with the strictures of Christian orthodoxy. It did so either by banning or repressing a genuine fascist movement (Chile, Brazil, Portugal) or co-opting and subordinating it (Estonia), or a mixture of both (Romania, Austria).

Since two of the sections in the present book deal with the Franco and Vichy régimes, it is appropriate to dwell for a moment on the bearing which the new ideal type has on their relationship to fascism. According to the 'sophisticated Marxist' diagnosis proposed by R. Kühnl, these represent 'weak fascist régime' when considered as dictatorial systems. A very different picture emerges, however, when the criterion applied is the degree to which they pursued policies based on an ideology of 'palingenetic ultra-nationalism' as we have defined it. In Spain, the Falange was bent on creating a new Spain, both objectively through structural change and subjectively through the generation of a new ethos. Its leading ideologues such as Giménez Caballero and José Antonio Primo de Rivera were motivated by a powerful form of regenerationist nationalism, one so saturated with uniquely Spanish cultural and historical elements that Catholicism itself was embraced, not for its rôle as a source of metaphysical certainties and religious truths, but as a reservoir of populist palingenetic myth. But Franco himself was driven by quite different imperatives.

Fascist goals, such as a radical social and ethical revolution, the creation of

new élites and a new Spanish man, the mobilisation of the masses into a heroic agent of history, could not have been further from the *Generalissimo's* mind. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons he found it more useful to incorporate the Falangists into his dynamic conservatism than crush them as rivals (as his neighbour Salazar had done with Rolão Preto's National Syndicalists). They had proved an unexpected but valuable military ally in the critical early stage of the Civil War. They had a growing mass following amongst youthful anti-socialist revolutionaries. Above all, they were associated with the vision of a 'New Spain', which, precisely because of the nebulousness of its contents, could exercise a powerful mythic appeal for those disaffected with the traditional Right while repelled by the prospects for change held out by the Republican Left. Rather than neutralise the Falangists physically, with the risk of turning them into martyrs, Franco chose a more subtle tactic. In April 1937 he merged them with the *Requetés*, the militia of the Carlist monarchists (i.e. conservatives) to create the significantly named Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS, a political, legislative and cultural organisation strictly subordinated to State control. It is consistent with this general picture that dramatic performance under Franco generally celebrated traditional *mores*, even if production values may have made some concessions to the 'modern' age of the masses and of charismatic leadership: was the *Caudillo* not, after all, the saviour of both the Church and Spain from the horrors of Bolshevism and anarchy?

In terms of the radicalness of its goals and policies the Vichy régime is a much stronger candidate for being classified 'fascist' than Franco's Spain. Unlike Szálasi's Hungary, it was not a mere puppet régime of the Third Reich, nor was its ruling élite concerned simply with stemming the tide of liberalism and socialism: it wanted to turn France into a dynamic authoritarian State fit to be an integral part of the New European Order, and to do so by drawing deep on French traditions and culture. The institutions it created in the pursuit of this goal directly paralleled those of Italy

and Germany, and included a youth organisation (*Compagnons de France*), a mass-movement for men (*Légion des Anciens Combattants*), a paramilitary vanguard organisation (the *Milice*) and a secret service (*Service du Contrôle Technique*). Moreover, it pursued under the slogan of 'national awakening' a range of policies intended to bring about a moral revolution, a renewed sense of French identity, an invigorated agriculture and industry, and a 'healthier' French race. This last component was expressed not only in the constant emphasis on athleticism and physical well-being, but in a cultural and biological racism which led zealous régime officials not only to comply with the Nazi programme of genocide against the Jews, but on occasions to go beyond the orders of the SS. Furthermore, the ultra-nationalism, eugenics and anti-Semitism of Vichy tapped into a rich indigenous obsession with cultural decadence, as well as diffuse currents of social and political ideas for its transcendence. By the First World War the French 'revolt against positivism' rivalled the contemporary German one both in variety of expression and in intensity of hostility to the Enlightenment tradition.

Nevertheless, Vichy differed from the Third Rome and the Third Reich in several important respects. It had been brought to power not by a populist movement, but by military defeat. Also, while the new ruling élite represented a wide spectrum of ultra-right forces bent on destroying the 'decadent' forces of Bolshevism and Republican liberalism which they blamed for the ease of the Nazi victory, only a minority wanted a social and ethical revolution to sweep away traditional ruling classes and values. On the contrary, it was the ultra-conservative forces within the Church, the army, the civil service and the aristocracy that held sway. It should not surprise, therefore, that the leader was no youthful *arriviste*, but the aged General Pétain, more reminiscent of Hindenburg than Hitler. Nor is it strange that Marcel Déat, whose *Rassemblement National Populaire* was founded in 1941 as the French equivalent of the PFI or the NSDAP, was one of the few French fascists to

achieve high office in the collaborationist régime, and then only when its star was sinking fast

The official policies of Vichy aimed at re-establishing the 'traditional' national values summed up in the slogan Work, Land, Family (strictly mythic entities, of course) in a modern, efficient, authoritarian State. For this, the population was to be imbued with an uneasy blend of Catholicism, racist patriotism, respect of hierarchical power and concessions to the fascist style of politics. Thus it should not surprise if the theatre under the Vichy régime rarely expressed a radical vision of a populist revolution and the creation of a 'New Man'.

Implications of this ideal type for the study of 'Fascism and Theatre'

It should be clear from the above that the acceptance of 'palingenetic ultra-nationalism' as the definitional basis of fascism has major implications for a comparative study of the theatrical culture in inter-war Europe. First, it means that only Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany provide case-studies in institutionalised theatrical practice under fascism, although there are a number of para-fascist régime with theatrical traditions worth considering for comparative purposes. Indeed, the comparison which this book offers of the theatrical culture of the two genuinely fascist régimes with that of two para-fascist ones, Spain and France, provide some illuminating insights into the points of convergence between these two distinct types of political system, as well as the ideological gulf which separates them. Second, the ideal type proposed throws into relief a defining trait of any theatrical practice which is consonant with fascist ideology, namely that it should set out to promote the rebirth of the national community (often symbolised in the experience of a representative individual) from the alleged decadence of liberal and socialist society in a spirit which

goes beyond any purely conservative or restorationist goals.

In fact, the predominance of the 'positive' palingenetic thrust of fascist myth over a 'nihilistic' anti-dimension (which is something all ideologies have as a corollary of their positive ideals, even liberalism) is corroborated by several scholars who have specialised in the theatre in Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany with no concern for the debate over generic fascism. For example, Pietro Cavallo, sampled some of the 18,500 scripts voluntarily submitted for approval to the Theatre Censorship Office of the Ministry of Popular Culture in Rome between 1931 and 1943. He concludes that the basic scheme of these unsolicited (and therefore not in any straight-forward sense propagandistic) Fascist dramas is in essence 'an initiatic journey, of varying duration and involving various trials and tribulations. As in *rites de passage*, the new status is represented by entering a new experience of life(...)The progress towards fascism thus becomes _ and I cite the linguistic terms which recur most frequently in the titles _ the journey towards a "rebirth", towards the dawn of a new day.'¹⁰

Similarly Klaus Vondung, in his exhaustive investigation of the cultic aspects of Nazism, argues that central to Nazi theatrical projects in the narrowest and widest sense was 'metastatic faith', a phrase which clearly corresponds closely to what I term 'palingenetic myth' since it expresses itself in the belief in the imminent transformation of 'the old world into a new one'. He cites the example of how Nazi liturgical drama transfigured the abortive Putsch of 1923 into an 'act of redemption', which had 'brought about a metastasis': 'the "old" world was thus "over", life had only now become truly real, while life before the metastatic event and the lives of those who have not responded to the new revelation, appears insubstantial and in the deepest sense of the word, not "real"'.¹¹

Vondung shows that translated into political terms this meant that all citizens of the new Germany were encouraged to experience transcendence of individual death through the permanent revolution taking place in national life. Because of the

central stress in Nazism on the spiritual nature of the battle between 'health' and 'degeneracy', it was a revolution which was in many respects more subjective than objective, just as one of the major scholars of Nazism, Ian Kershaw, maintains.¹² Symptomatic of this core theme is the recurrent topos in Nazi theatre of renovation, renewal, rebirth (*Neugeburt*, literally 'new birth'). One example from the hundreds quoted by Vondung is a choral poem written for public performance in the Third Reich entitled *The New City*, which contains such lines as 'Thus everything new grows out of the new earth, The new human beings just like the new walls'.¹³ It is precisely this theme of total renewal, rather than just the healing of the nation through the return to traditional values, which is missing from para-fascist theatre.

It is the thesis of this essay, then, that a truly fascist theatrical theory or practice will express itself in a central preoccupation with the victory over decadence by youthful new forces and the resulting birth of a new national community made up of a new type of 'man'. If it lacks these definitional elements it is not ideologically fascist. However nothing in fascist studies is so straight-forward. Even if this ideal type, with its built-in discriminating and simplifying function, is adopted, two factors complicate its application. Firstly, a para-fascist régime may well accommodate genuine fascists who have projected onto it *their* anti-conservative, radically palingenetic vision of a new order, some of whom may well promote cultural initiatives designed to forge a new national community from below as well as from above. Giménez Caballero is an outstanding example in Franco's Spain, and the attempts by the theatre director and theorist Jacques Copeau to foster a *théâtre populaire* which would act as a source of 'union and regeneration' likewise went some way beyond Vichy's ultimately reactionary programme.¹⁴ What further complicates analyses of Fascism is that in Italy the reverse is equally true: it was heavily compromised by collusion with conservative forces (Church, army, monarchy, reactionary bourgeoisie) who continued to make their presence felt in the cultural sphere. Moreover, under

Mussolini censorship was relatively lax, so that even after 1925 considerable pockets of cultural pluralism persisted which were unimaginable under Hitler. As a result, 'theatre under Fascism' was only to a limited extent 'fascist theatre'.

Another complicating factor is that both Fascism and Nazism suffered the fate of all revolutions: once they had seized power the new régime they installed had to normalise everyday life for the 'people' as much as possible. This led to a paradoxical situation. A recurrent theme of State rhetoric was the imminent appearance of the heroic 'New Man', whose private existence would be totally subsumed within the higher organism of the national community. However, even in the public sphere considerable pockets of apolitical space remained available to people. In practice this meant that 'entertainment' was as important an ingredient of everyday life under Mussolini and Hitler as under any non-totalitarian regime. In fact, it would be highly ingenuous to assume that all art permitted under Mussolini or Hitler had an overt ideological or propagandist function: it could be argued that precisely because the bulk of magazine articles, books in print, films, radio broadcasts and plays were *not* overtly propagandist, the radical fascistisation of the spheres of life crucial to the hegemony of the régimes (institutions, news programmes, laws) could be more effective.

Thus theatre under fascism in both countries continued to produce a large number of pre-fascist or non-fascist plays, whether classical or essentially escapist, as long as no expressly anti-fascist message could be read into them. It should be stressed that the Nazis went far further than the Fascists in applying social engineering to the arts: they devoted considerable energy to defining what was aesthetically 'decadent' (and hence anti-fascist), to carrying out a systematic purge of such 'cultural Bolshevism', and to encouraging a theatre practice designed to promote 'healthy' racial life. It is also worth bearing in mind that the New Rome and the New Reich could no more be built in one day than the old ones, and that there

was inevitably a large degree of continuity between pre-fascist and fascist culture in both countries both at the level of popular culture and of high art. Indeed, this continuity too was a vital component of the normalisation of the régimes in the same way that the predominance of non-propagandistic art was.¹⁵ Finally, it should not be forgotten that the theatre was then, even more than now, a predominantly middle-class institution, while the fascist revolution was both ideologically and sociologically¹⁶ a trans-class rejection of liberalism, including the bourgeois ethos (though not, of course, the institution of private property). The daily consumption of radio-broadcasts, newspapers, and mass-circulation magazines were thus more central to fascist efforts in social engineering than the performing arts.

Thus there are a number of structural factors which point to the naïveté of assuming that even in a truly fascist régime the theatre would ever be transformed into a primary locus of total mobilisation, or that every play which the authorities allowed to be staged was necessarily a vehicle of indoctrination or an exercise in agit-prop. As with the cinema (a truly classless art form to which fascist élites were bound to pay closer attention as a vehicle for mass mobilisation or the normalization of the regime than the theatre), the precepts of the New Order were promoted as much by the censorship of anti-fascist works as through the sponsoring of *pièces à thèse*. In any case, much more comprehensive and insidious exercises in winning hearts and minds were taking place off-stage.

The locus of fascist theatrical culture: civic life

To restrict studies of the aesthetics and politics of performance under fascism exclusively on what went on in public playhouses would clearly be woefully

inadequate. It would be like writing a history of twentieth-century music which focused solely on concert halls, ignoring the way social space has become ever more saturated with pre-recorded non-classical music. In fact, one of the most important consequences of the fascist dream of creating a cohesive national State not only simultaneously democratic and aristocratic but *charismatic*, was the pervasive aestheticisation of politics.¹⁷ As alluded to earlier, this expressed itself in the continual creation of a cultic social environment, both in the forging of 'sacred' spaces through monumental public building schemes, and through the constant invention of public ceremonies and rituals imbued with symbolic significance for the regeneration of the national community, whether overtly political (party rallies, state funerals for national 'martyrs'), apparently apolitical (sporting events, art exhibitions), or quasi-religious (harvest festivals, solstice festivals, national feast days).

The rationale behind the inordinate emphasis which both fascist regimes were to place on communal spectacles to engender the ethos of the 'new order' is epitomized in an important article written by Jean-Richard Bloch for the avant-garde ultra-nationalist periodical *La Voce* at the height of the interventionist campaign. Entitled 'Democracy and Festivals' it diagnosed as the fundamental problem of modern life 'its lack of public festivals, of ritual and theatrical elements that could restore an aura of grand spectacle to increasingly impersonal and individualist world. Modern people had ceased to believe in Catholicism but had yet to find appropriate secular substitutes for its festivals.'¹⁸

It is important to stress that the aestheticisation of politics under fascism did not stem purely from the demand for effective propaganda, as 'totalitarianism' theorists of structural-functionalist persuasion would have it. Instead, it resulted from a profound confusion within the fascist mentality of the inner world of Utopian longings and mythopoiea with the outer world of politics and history. This confusion is characteristic of all revolutionary movements: one only has to think of European

millenarianism,¹⁹ the French Revolution,²⁰ the Russian Revolution²¹ or the Hippy counter-culture²². In this context, the transformation of political life into a continuous display of civic liturgy staged by the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio as self-appointed regent of Fiume in 1920 can rightly be seen as a dress-rehearsal for what was to come under Mussolini,²³ but also as the first fully-fledged expression of fascism in action. The most famous emblem of the synthesis of Utopia, ideology, manufacture of consensus, aesthetic politics to produce a 'political religion' is perhaps Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (significantly Goebbels wanted the film withdrawn from cinemas because of its overtly propagandistic nature). Fascist ideologues themselves sometimes drew attention to the fusion of the aesthetic with the political so characteristic of charismatic politics. Thus Degrelle's described Hitler, Mussolini and Codreanu as the 'poets of revolution',²⁴ or when José Antonio's declared that 'peoples have never been moved by anyone save poets, and woe to him who, before the poetry which destroys, does not know how to summon up the poetry which gives hope!'²⁵

The recognition of the intimate link between fascism and an aestheticised, (liturgic, religious, dramatic) style of politics is common to many of the leading experts in fascist studies. According to George Mosse, the Futurist Marinetti's declaration that the economic hell of post-war Italy could be overcome by the staging of innumerable artistic festivals 'anticipates the success and function of much of the political liturgy of European fascism'.²⁶ Maria Stone's article on the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution (which attracted nearly three million visitors between 1932 and 1934) argues that it aspired to 'turn the fascist assumption of power into a "public cult"', and that 'the ritualisation of the day on which fascism took the reins of government tied the participant to the experience on an emotional level, using the mystification of the historical event to create a common community'. Characteristically she is prompted to use a theatrical metaphor to evoke fascism's aestheticised and

charismatic style of politics, entitling her article 'Staging Fascism'.²⁷ Another academic reaches for the same metaphor in the analysis of the pervasively liturgic aspect of political culture in the Third Reich, talking about the 'stage-management of National Socialism'.²⁸ It thus seems only natural if in his highly influential typological definition of generic fascism Stanley Payne identifies as one of its traits 'the emphasis on the aesthetic structure of meetings, symbols, and political choreography, stressing mystical and romantic aspects'.²⁹

Perhaps Emilio Gentile best sums up this dimension of fascism, as well as its intimate link with the myth of 'palingenesis' (Vondung's 'metastasis', or what he calls here 'metanoia') so central to fascist ideology in *Il culto del littorio*, which explores the cult of the Lictor's rod or the fasces, the symbol of Mussolini's New Italy. In the conclusion to the most exhaustive analysis of the pervasive political aestheticisation and theatricalisation of public life under Fascism to date, he suggests that

movements like Bolshevism, Fascism and Nazism have asserted themselves as *political religions* and have intensified the sacral aura that has always surrounded power, appropriating from religion the function of defining the significance of life and the ultimate purpose of existence. Political religions reproduce the typical structure of traditional religions, articulated in the fundamental dimensions of faith, myth, ritual and communion, and propose to bring about, through the State and Party, a 'metanoia' of human nature out of which shall come forth a regenerated 'new man', totally integrated into the community.³⁰

In short, fascism, if it can seize power, is able to remain true to its core myth and legitimate itself only by generating an elaborate civic liturgy (or a 'civic, 'secular'

or 'political' religion) based on the myth of imminent national rebirth. In the two cases where it managed to conquer the State, it rapidly developed its own characteristic rites and ceremonial, its own iconography and symbology, its own semiotic discourse, aping (but only aping) any established Church. It is in this context of a general ritualisation and aestheticisation of civic shot through with palingenetic myth that a new order was being born that the performing arts under fascism are to be studied.

Conclusion: the place of theatrical studies within the debate over the nature of fascism

It should be clear by now that the title of this paper, 'the staging of the fascist revolution', does not imply that the sense of participating in a benign revolution which both the Fascist and Nazi régime induced in so many of their subjects is to be dismissed as an elaborate piece of illusion, as when an audience is carried away by a skilfully staged open-air rock concert. To analyse dispassionately the experience of national revolution which fascism succeeded in conjuring up in its most ardent followers does not imply the absence of deeply held ideological convictions on the part of those responsible, any more than an analysis of the semiotics of faith in medieval Christian society would cast doubt on the convictions held in the Vatican (which, after all, bequeathed the world the very term 'propaganda'). The 'myth' of fascism can only be perceived as such from outside, and the mechanics of the illusions it generated are transparent only to the agnostic. There is good evidence, for example, that Mussolini and Hitler too were believers in their private version of palingenetic myth, no matter how cynically their underlying scorn for the masses allowed them to manipulate their emotions with rhetoric and propaganda worthy of

modern Princes.

Apart from stressing the need to take fascism seriously as an attempted political and cultural revolution, this essay has addressed two problems posed for researchers into theatrical culture in the age of fascism. The first is to distinguish fascist from non-fascist or para-fascist régimes so that the operational environment of the theatre concerned can be established from the outset. The second is to know what aspects of a specific sample of theatrical culture might be considered fascist (whether produced under a fascist or non-fascist régime), and hence structurally linked to other samples of fascist cultural production. If the ideal type sketched out here is used as a heuristic device, then both problems can be resolved by paying close attention to the ideology, either of the political liturgy fostered by the régime, or of the performance aesthetics under consideration. In other words, attention must be paid to *which* Golden Calves the masses or the audience are being called upon to worship, to *which* Moloch they are expected to sacrifice individual conscience, critical detachment and humanist values. One central criterion should always be: are these the graven images of a *new order ruled by a new élite*, or merely old idols being worshipped in a revised, more 'up-to-date' form of service tailored to meet the demands of the modern age? Is the regeneration of the national community at stake, or simply the restoration of an older stage of society? Is the New Man, the Reborn National Community the hero, or is it the State, the Church, the Family, the traditional icons of conservative authoritarianism?

What has also emerged is that even when the application of this yard-stick has reduced the number of fascist régime to two, and anticipated a paucity of overtly fascist *theatre* in both, any reduction of the field of study is more than compensated for by the over-abundance of *theatricality* in the sphere of public life. Social reality under Fascism and Nazism might be seen as an on-going political miracle play punctuated by regular intervals of deliberately de-politicising leisure and light

entertainment. Seen in this way, what might at first have appeared a neglected but navigable backwater within fascist studies becomes a truly oceanic topic. To study fascist theatre is to bring together the definitional, the methodological, the political, the social-psychological and the cultural-historical in a comparative perspective, and thus leads to an unusually sophisticated perspective on the fascist era as a whole.

Within this perspective certain texts which might have been dismissed as empty rhetoric acquire new significance as testimonies of an ideological faith which kept fascism alive for its followers. Here is an example taken from an article on 'magic realism,' published in Year 6 of Mussolini's *New Italy* (July 1928) in the Fascist modernist literary magazine *1900* (i.e. 'Novecento' or 'Twentieth Century') by one of the régime's most noted writers and literary critics, Massimo Bontempelli:

There is a strange and spontaneous correspondence(...) between the theoretical ideals which 'Novecentism' espoused from the outset in a purely literary sphere, and the whole spirit in which Italian life has been renewed. We called for the deliberate creation of the myths for the new era: and is it not true to say that today the whole of Italy at every level, in every walk of life, in the most prosaic of activities, in politics and industry, in agriculture and fashion, is working as if intent on writing a mythic poem, with a precise sense of its rôle as the protagonist on the stage of a theatre, which is the theatre of history?³¹

Within this perspective the deeper logic behind certain fascist events also becomes transparent, such as the apparently perverse decision by Hitler's Minister of Armaments, Albert Speer, to destroy the call-up papers of the members of the Berlin Philharmonic in April 1945. At the very moment when the capital of the 1000 Year Reich was being reduced to rubble around his ears, he felt it appropriate that, rather

than hold weapons they should take up musical instruments to play a final concert, the last ever performed in Hitler's Germany. It featured not only Beethoven's violin concerto and the Bruckner symphony, but Brünnhilde's last aria and the finale from *Götterdämmerung*. It was a programme which, as Speer himself boasted, was deliberately chosen its pathos and melancholy and hence as a 'gesture pointing to the end of the Reich'.³²

Notes

1. Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, London, 1991, 1993.
2. See, for example, Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution*, Berkeley, California, 1984.
3. For an elaboration of this distinction see Roger Griffin, 'Nationalism', in R. Eatwell and A. Wright (eds), *Contemporary Political Ideologies*, London, 1993.
4. For a more thorough exposition of these points see Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, op. cit., ch. 2.
5. The allusion is, of course, to the theory of fascism expounded by Ernst Nolte in *Three Faces of Fascism*, New York, 1964.
6. See Roger Griffin, 'Modernity under the New Order: The Fascist Project for Managing the Future', Oxford Brookes School of Business Occasional Papers, 1994.
7. Fascism is certainly not to be confused with 'politicised religions' such as Islamic fundamentalism, since it seeks to bring about a rebirth of the nation within human history, through human agency, legitimating itself through human authority. However, Emilio Gentile has convincingly demonstrated (e.g. in his *Il culto del littorio*, Rome, 1993) the value of the concept 'political religion' in the analysis of Fascism when it is used in a way which broadly

corresponds to the concept 'civic religion' coined by Rousseau, i.e. a secular political system which generates elaborate civic creeds, rituals and liturgy in the attempt to integrate all citizens within the nation-state. As long as it is recognised that such 'civic religions' operate as *substitutes* for metaphysical religions based on tradition or 'revealed truth' (e.g. Holy Scripture), then this is a valuable heuristic device which is extensively compatible with the emphasis on 'palingenetic myth' so central to the ideal type applied in this essay. In his recent *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, Walter Adamson, also makes extensive and fruitful use of the term 'secular religion' in this sense.

8. For this distinction see Roger Griffin, 'Integration and identification: conflicting aspects of the human need for self-transcendence within ideological communities', *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1994, pp. 11-23.
9. See for example G. M. Platt, 'Thought on a theory of collective action: language, affect and ideology in revolution', in M. Albin (ed.), *New Directions in Psychohistory*, Lexington, Massachusetts, 1980.
10. Pietro Cavallo, 'Culto degli origini e mito del capo nel teatro fascista', *Storia Contemporanea*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1987, pp. 302-3
11. Klaus Vondung, *Magie und Manipulation*, Göttingen, 1971, pp. 164-5
12. Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship*, London, 1985, p. 141.
13. Vondung, *Magie und Manipulation*, op.cit., p. 174
14. See Serge Added, *Le Théâtre dans les années Vichy 1940-1944*, Paris, 1992, pp. 235-42.
15. On this point see the chapter 'Public show and private perceptions' in Detlef Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany*, Harmondsworth, 1989, pp. 187-196.
16. See Detlef Mühlberger, *Hitler's Followers*, London, 1991.
17. The phrase is reputed to have been first used by Walter Benjamin in his

- Theorien des deutschen Faschismus*, vol. 3 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main, 1977.
18. 'La democrazia e la festa', *La Voce* (28 June 1914). The summary of the article cited here is provided by W. A. Adamson in *Avant-garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, p. 191.
 19. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, London, 1970.
 20. L. Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution*, op. cit.
 21. Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, Oxford, 1989.
 22. Theodor Roszak, *The Makings of a Counter Culture*, London, 1970.
 23. George Mosse, 'The poet and the exercise of political power: Gabriele D'Annunzio', in *Masses and Man*, New York, 1980.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
 25. Quoted in Eugen Weber, *Varieties of Fascism*, London, 1974, p. 177.
 26. George Mosse, 'The political culture of Italian futurism: A general perspective', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 25, Nos. 2-3, 1990, p. 258.
 27. Maria Stone, 'Staging fascism: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 28, 1993, pp. 215-241.
 28. W. Benz, 'The ritual and stage management of National Socialism', in J. Milfull (ed.), *The Attractions of Fascism*, New York, 1990.
 29. This is part of Stanley Payne's 'Typological Description of Fascism' under the heading 'style and organization' in *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, Wisconsin, 1980, the most influential ideal type of generic fascism to date.
 30. Gentile, *Il culto del littorio*, p. 309.
 31. Quoted in S. Guglielmino, *Guida al novecento*, Milan, 1971, p. 236.
 32. Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, London, 1971, pp. 618-9.

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