

FORUM

The Other Side of Caesarism: A Genealogy of Italian Fascist Authoritarianism

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This contribution explores the cultural foundations of the concept of Caesarism, from the late positivist naturalization of national characters up to Fascism. The first section argues that the ill-defined concept of Caesarism circulating in Italian political discourse was based on the assumptions of late Tainian positivism, naturalistic and organicist, intertwined with a nationalist discourse. The second section traces how this imprint, combined with wartime, radical, antisocialist patriotism, forged a conception of the people modeled on the hierarchical military structure, sealing the genetic link between Fascism and the Great War. The third section illustrates how, after Fascism came to power, the combination of warlike hierarchical organicism and the principle of leadership took shape during the debate on constitutional reforms, particularly in the thinking of Giovanni Gentile and Alfredo Rocco. The fourth section suggests that the mutual hybridization of Rocco and Gentile's positions produced an original paradigm of "corporative Caesarism."

Introduction

The current Boulangist agitation clearly shows ... that the tendency to subjugate democracy to a dictator is persistent and alive in the French people and that the parliamentary republic is threatened very closely by the same enemy that overthrew it on 2 December 1851.¹

That the meteoric rise and fall of General Boulanger, who at that very moment was fleeing abroad to escape accusations of conspiracy, represented yet another manifestation of France's typical Caesarist tendency was an opinion circulating in the political discourse of the time. Of this tendency, Domenico Zanichelli, a Bolognese jurist of liberal conservative inclination, discerned three main causes. The first was historical, illustrated by Alexis de Tocqueville in *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, then reworked by Hippolyte Taine in his studies on the origins of contemporary France.² Following

¹Domenico Zanichelli, "Le cause del cesarismo moderno," *Rivista di scienze sociali e politiche* 8/1 (1889), 605–20, at 605. All translations from Italian are mine.

²*Ibid.*, 606.

in Tocqueville and Taine's footsteps, Zanichelli ascribed the cause of Caesarism to the extreme state centralization effected by the absolute monarchy and then inherited by the Revolution, the empire, and all subsequent regimes, so much so that "there is no Frenchman, no matter how republican, who is not at heart and even unconsciously monarchist, because there is no Frenchman who does not want a very strong central government, null or very weak local and regional autonomies, in the same way that Cardinal Richelieu and Louis XIV wanted them."³

The second cause identified by Zanichelli also derived from the centralization of power. Reversed in its political significance by the democratic revolution, absolutism had produced a radical conception of popular sovereignty, just as "absolute and unlimited" as the right of the sovereign of the Old Regime: "Instead of recognizing sovereignty in the king, it was recognized in the people and ... conferred and transmitted to those designated by them." This had produced the "false concept of the full and absolute power of the electors," "or, to use the fashionable phraseology," "the dogma of universal suffrage," which had combined with the conception of a popular sovereignty without counterweights to justify "revolutions and *coups d'état*."⁴ The third reason was the discredit into which the political class had fallen due to the granting of function allowances to members of parliament. This was seen as a consequence of the "revolutionary theory, which, overturning the concept of the Romans and the English, has made public office a right of citizens, to which all may aspire, provided the electoral body likes them," thus favoring "the petty and the vulgar ambitious" over the capable, disinterested, and responsible.⁵

Zanichelli's mention of the historical-political experience of postrevolutionary France was a transparent reference to the Tocquevillian thesis of the risk of despotism associated with the weakening of civil society in a democratic regime resulting from revolution and centralization of power.⁶ That democracy and Caesarism had much in common was a widespread belief among Italian liberal conservatives in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, which fostered a political mistrust towards representative institutions in general and parliamentarism in particular. The influence exercised by Hippolyte Taine's historical positivism magnified criticism of the post-unification political class's "abstract" liberalism, which was deemed unsuited to the real conditions of the country.⁷ Such criticism was leveled by the great Meridionalist

³Ibid., 607.

⁴Ibid., 607–8.

⁵Ibid., 613.

⁶Innocenzo Cervelli, "Cesarismo: alcuni usi e significati della parola (secolo XIX)," *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento* 22 (1996), 61–197; Regina Pozzi, *Tocqueville e i dilemmi della democrazia* (Pisa, 2006); Melvin Richter, "Tocqueville and French Nineteenth-Century Conceptualizations of the Two Bonapartes and Their Empires," in Peter Baehr and Melvin Richter, eds., *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism* (Oxford, 2004), 83–102; Alessandra Algostino, "Il fascino oscuro del cesarismo progressivo," in Gaetano Azzariti and Michele Della Morte, eds., *Il Führerprinzip: La scelta del capo* (Naples, 2024), 205–27.

⁷Regina Pozzi, *Hippolyte Taine, scienze umane e politica nell'Ottocento* (Venice, 1993); Pascale Seys, *Hippolyte Taine et l'avènement du naturalisme: Un intellectuel sous le Second Empire* (Paris, 1999); Jean-Paul Cointet, *Hippolyte Taine: Un regard sur la France* (Paris, 2012).

Pasquale Villari and circulated among leading political thinkers,⁸ from Gaetano Mosca to Vittorio Emanuele Orlando: “Taine thus became an essential point of reference for a non-theoretical but historically grounded criticism of the ‘pure parliamentary regime,’ born of the French experience and borrowed from it by Italian ‘doctrinaire liberalism.’”⁹

According to Zanichelli, at the root of Caesarist tendencies was the “character” of the French people, whose “profoundly monarchical” nature had been shaped by centuries-long struggles against feudalism.¹⁰ The late positivist theme of the “character” of peoples, also of Tainian origin and essentially a continuation of the above-mentioned argument, would become increasingly frequent, and would develop into that of the Latin and Anglo-Saxon “races.”¹¹ Ubiquitous in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, its naturalization led to the Italians, as well as the French, being considered particularly suited to a Caesarist model.

Well before the advent of Fascism, and before it was codified by the sociology of Weber and Michels—not to mention Gramsci’s thought¹²—the concept of Caesarism circulating in the Italian political discourse was a broad and ill-defined one, which nevertheless had wide circulation and resonated across disciplines and politics.¹³ It was based on historical–political assumptions that drew on the arguments of late Tainian, naturalist, and organicist positivism, and assumed that certain characteristics of peoples, particularly Latin ones, were propitious to the emergence of strong leadership, of a Caesar suited to that particular people. Given that the rhetoric of the leader was an intrinsic feature of Italian Fascist political culture since its inception, to the extent that its leader was given the synonymous title *Il Duce*, this article aims to shed light on another side of the phenomenon, namely the object upon which the leader’s power is exercised. It focuses on the rhetoric of the “Caesarist people” rather than the “Caesarist leader” and aims to highlight the nexus between Caesarism, Fascism, and the “character of the people” by tracing a trajectory in Italian political thought through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the turning point in the Great War, which leads from Caesarism as a generic characteristic of “Latin nations,” whose model was found in the French postrevolutionary experience, to the fundamental role of the Italian nation in Fascist discourse.

Along those lines, the first section of this contribution outlines a genealogy of the naturalization of “national characters” considered conducive to Caesarist outcomes during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the second section, the focus is shifted to the Great War, tracing how this naturalistic and organic imprint, combined with a radical antisocialist patriotism born out of wartime experience, forged a conception of the people modeled on the hierarchical military structure. The third section is intended to illustrate how, in the transitional years between the March on Rome of 1922

⁸Pasquale Villari, *Le lettere meridionali e altri scritti sulla questione sociale in Italia* (Florence, 1878).

⁹Luisa Mangoni, *Una crisi fine secolo: La cultura italiana e la Francia tra Otto e Novecento* (Turin, 1985), 103.

¹⁰Zanichelli, “Le cause del cesarismo,” 617.

¹¹Alfred Fouillée, “Races latines,” *Revue deux mondes* 156/3 (1899), 561–90.

¹²Francesca Antonini, *Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci: Hegemony and the Crisis of Modernity* (Leiden and Boston, 2020).

¹³Mangoni, *Una crisi fine secolo*, 13.

and the *leggi fascistissime* of 1925–6, a combination of wartime hierarchical organicism with the leadership principle took shape during the debate on constitutional reforms, particularly in the thought of the philosopher Giovanni Gentile and the jurist Alfredo Rocco. In the fourth and final section, it is suggested that the mutual hybridization of Rocco and Gentile's positions on the basis of hierarchical organicism, concerns for social conservation, and an authoritarian conception of the state produced an original paradigm of "corporative Caesarism," around whose distinctive features a consensus coalesced in the political discourse of Fascism.

Naturalism, determinism, organicism, and the naturalization of the "national character"

In Hippolyte Taine's organicist naturalism, the terms "race," "nation," and "people" were somehow osmotic and often interchangeable, as derivations of the climatic and environmental milieu, which also determined the psychological disposition of human groups: "We may consider the character of a people as an abridgment of all its preceding actions and sensations; that is, as a quantity and a weight, not infinite, since everything in nature is finite, but disproportioned to the rest, and almost impossible to lift, since every moment of an almost infinite past has contributed to increase it."¹⁴ This almost unliftable weight was not only at the origin of all manifestations of existing civilizations, but also allowed for a civilization to be the subject matter of the social sciences, because of the "law of mutual dependence" that linked various social manifestations into a coherent whole: "A civilization forms a body, and its parts are connected with each other like the parts of an organic body."¹⁵

The investigation of organic and collective phenomena fostered the epistemological emergence of the human and social sciences in the second half of the nineteenth century. This emergence took place in the face of a rapid social change towards an industrial society, which brought together large portions of the population in workplaces and residential areas, complemented by a progressive extension of suffrage that opened their access to the public sphere.¹⁶ The continuous, but uneven and unequal, access of ever larger masses to democratic processes produced friction between the concept of "mass" and that of "democracy," potentially calling into question the very foundations of the representative regime.¹⁷ The massive social change, the erosion of traditional social bonds, and the need for intellectual tools to counter the resulting

¹⁴Hippolyte Taine, *History of English Literature*, vol. 1 (1866) (Edinburgh, 1871), 11. Also: "The race emigrates, like the Aryan, and the change of climate has altered in its case the whole economy, intelligence, and organization of society. The people has been conquered, like the Saxon nation, and a new political structure has imposed on it customs, capacities, and inclinations which it had not. The nation has installed itself in the midst of a conquered people, downtrodden and threatening, like the ancient Spartans." Ibid., 9.

¹⁵Ibid., 17.

¹⁶Laurent Mucchielli, *La découverte du social: Naissance de la sociologie en France, 1870–1914* (Paris, 1998); Mucchielli, *Mythes et histoire des sciences humaines* (Paris, 2003).

¹⁷Richard Bellamy, "The Advent of the Masses and the Making of the Modern Theory of Democracy," in Terence Ball and Richard Bellamy, eds., *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2003), 70–103; Damiano Palano, *Il potere della moltitudine: L'invenzione dell'inconscio collettivo nella teoria politica e nelle scienze sociali italiane tra Otto e Novecento* (Milan, 2002); Carla Penna, *From Crowd*

disorientation favored recourse to the categories of the natural sciences. Extending the method of positive observation of natural phenomena to the study of the social sphere made it seem possible to elaborate paradigms to explain the functioning of human communities. Thinkers from Herbert Spencer to Hippolyte Taine and from Frédéric Le Play to Lorenz von Stein and Ferdinand Tönnies provided a highly usable frame of reference that could have repercussions in literature as well as in journalism, in political discourse as well as in the definition of new fields of knowledge.¹⁸ In the Italian case, the collective dimension not only was epistemologically foundational for the new social sciences, such as anthropology—where the concern for criminal behavior of its founder, Cesare Lombroso, was applied by his disciple, Scipio Sighele, to the study of the criminal tendencies of the masses—but also incited new directions in traditional fields such as legal science.¹⁹

What is at issue here, however, is not just the correlation between the emergence of the social sciences and the increasing relevance of the dimension of the collective, but also the process by which the collective dimension had progressively been defined in terms of national collectivity: in educated opinion, in political discourse, and in the social sciences. It was a process that paralleled, but did not entirely coincide with, that of the establishment of modern biological and ideological racism, on which research is now extensive. Revealing of this parallelism was the discourse on the Latin and Anglo-Saxon “races,” of naturalistic derivation and circulating since the mid-century but almost ubiquitous by the end of the century, which had a racist angle, but also a national profile.²⁰ The para-scientific publicist Gustave Le Bon loosely used it in a book on the *Psychological Laws of the Evolution of Peoples* that was clearly racist in structure and inspired by the hierarchy of superiority established by de Gobineau.²¹ For the historian (as well as Lombroso’s son-in-law) Guglielmo Ferrero, it had, above all, an institutional–political aspect. In his successful travelogue *L’Europa giovane*, Ferrero rather nonchalantly combined cultural attitudes, economic

Psychology to the Dynamics of Large Groups: Historical, Theoretical and Practical Considerations (London, 2023).

¹⁸Peter Wagner, *A History and Theory of the Social Sciences: Not All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (London, 2001); Robert Leroux, *History and Sociology in France: From Scientific History to the Durkheimian School* (London, 2018); Richard Bellamy, *Modern Italian Social Theory: Ideology and Politics from Pareto to the Present Day* (Stanford, 1987).

¹⁹Cesare Lombroso, *L’Uomo delinquente, in rapporto all’antropologia, alla giurisprudenza e alle discipline carcerarie* (Turin, 1876); Scipio Sighele, *La folla delinquente: Studio di psicologia collettiva* (Turin, 1891). See also Cesare Lombroso, *Delitto, genio, follia: scritti scelti*, ed. Delia Frigessi, Ferruccio Giacanelli, and Luisa Mangoni (Turin, 1995). For new directions in legal science see Paolo Marchetti, *L’essere collettivo: L’emersione della nozione di collettivo nella scienza giuridica italiana tra contratto di lavoro e Stato sindacale* (Milan, 2006); Giovanni Cazzetta, *Scienza giuridica e trasformazioni sociali: Diritto e lavoro in Italia tra Otto e Novecento* (Milan, 2007).

²⁰In the late 1850s a monthly *Revue des races latines* was published. See Maïke Their, “The View from Paris: ‘Latinity,’ ‘Anglo-Saxonism,’ and the Americas, as Discussed in the *Revue des races latines*, 1857–64,” *International History Review* 33/4 (2011), 627–44; Amotz Giladi, “The Elaboration of Pan-Latinism in French Intellectual Circles, from the Turn of the Nineteenth Century to World War I,” *Journal of Romance Studies* 14/1 (2014), 56–72.

²¹Gustave Le Bon, *Les lois psychologiques de l’évolution des peuples* (Paris, 1894); Jacques Novicow, *L’avenir de la race blanche: Critique du pessimisme contemporain* (Paris, 1897).

industriousness, and forms of government. The individualistic Anglo-Saxon “races” jealously guarded their freedom, founded on labor, and nurtured an industrial capitalism tending towards unstoppable growth and imperialist expansion. In contrast, the Latin “races”—Spanish, French, Italian—appeared destined for decadence because they were humanistic and unproductive. Moreover, they were inclined to divest themselves of their sovereignty in favor of charismatic leaders, tending towards Caesarism: “Caesarism is the society governed by classes that do not represent productive labor; that want to enjoy the pleasures of sense and high intellectual and artistic satisfactions, without demeaning themselves in the brutal occupation of producing.”²²

Of course, naturalizing the opposition between a virtually despotic Latin Caesarism and an aggressively industrialist Nordic individualism, which proliferated thanks to widely circulated books such as those mentioned above, entailed a hypostatization of the hierarchy between “Anglo-Saxons and Latins” in terms of superiority and inferiority, so much so that a French Leplayan sociologist, Edmond Demolins, thought it appropriate to ask *What the Superiority of the Anglo-Saxons Is Due To*.²³ On the other hand, in the same Anglophile circles, a few years later, the alleged weakening of Anglo-Saxon superiority after the Boer War was readily and smugly remarked.²⁴

As in Taine’s blueprint, the notions of races, peoples, and nations could blur. The radical politician Napoleone Colajanni intended to counter the stereotyped hierarchy of “inferior” Latin races and “superior” Anglo-Saxon, maintaining that “in the reality of the present hour there are no longer *races*, but *peoples*. And better than *peoples* today are *nations* living and acting on the world stage”; thus, instead of races, “we should speak of psychic characters and the collective evolution of nations.”²⁵

In the field of what was becoming known as collective psychology, the description of national character was often presented in comparative terms, as in the case of philosopher Alfred Fouillée, who concerned himself with education from a national perspective, then drew a psychological sketch of the French and European peoples.²⁶ Indeed, the subject of national pedagogy was often placed in a competitive perspective, as in the ongoing discussion on whether the English educational model should be imported into France as the most suitable for training a conquering imperial people.²⁷

²² Guglielmo Ferrero, *L'Europa giovane: Studi e viaggi nei paesi del Nord* (Milan, 1897), 418.

²³ Edmond Demolins, *À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons* (Paris, 1897).

²⁴ Jacques Bardoux, *Essai d'une psychologie de l'Angleterre contemporaine: Les crises belliqueuses* (Paris, 1906).

²⁵ Napoleone Colajanni, *Latini e Anglo-Sassoni (razze inferiori e razze superiori)*, con prefazione di Giacomo Novicow (Rome and Naples, 1906), 25, original emphasis.

²⁶ Alfred Fouillée, *L'enseignement au point de vue national* (Paris, 1891); Fouillée, *Les études classiques et la démocratie* (Paris, 1898); Fouillée, *Esquisse psychologique des peuples européennes* (Paris, 1902). See Michael C. Behrent, “Pluralism’s Political Conditions: Social Realism and the Revolutionary Tradition in Pierre Leroux, P.-J. Proudhon and Alfred Fouillée,” in Julian Wright and H. S. Jones, eds., *Pluralism and the Idea of the Republic in France* (London, 2012), 99–121.

²⁷ Demolins was convinced that a key factor in Anglo-Saxon superiority was their educational system and that adopting it could give the French the opportunity to emulate the Anglo-Saxons’ capacity for imperial expansion. See Edmond Demolins, *L'éducation nouvelle: L'école des roches* (Paris, 1901). Explicit in imperial competition was Max Leclerc, *L'éducation des classes moyennes et dirigeantes en Angleterre, avec un avant-propos par M. Émile Boutmy* (Paris, 1894).

Even the foundation of the ancestor of Sciences Po, the École libre des sciences politiques, whose program manifesto was drafted by Taine,²⁸ was driven by the objective of making the political education of the French elites competitive with that of nations at the forefront of military prowess, such as Germany, or imperial expansion, such as Great Britain. Its founder and director, political scientist and sociologist Émile Boutmy, wrote on constitutional history, on colonial administration, then on collective psychology.²⁹ His elitism was moderately tinted by distrust for democracy based on universal suffrage.³⁰ Universal suffrage in fact bore all the features that were considered conducive to a Caesarist outcome: it put the interests of the most numerous class above the national interest, and it made it so that the histrionic ability to stir the people's emotions was considered the greatest virtue of a politician. Universal suffrage was a trump card which, however, would lose the game: all those peoples who had played the card "must resign themselves to suffering the increasingly brutal and cynical consequences, one after the other, of force and number."³¹

The process of naturalization of national characters, the nationalization of collective psychology, and the conjunction of democracy and Caesarism that we have briefly reconstructed were potentially highly usable in the discourse of political nationalism that would take shape during the first decade of the century and would in fact innervate it. Their late positivist imprint entailed the persistence of a determinist and organicist perspective in the political discourse, which went beyond the historic defeat of positivism by neo-idealism.³² Especially when the singularization of collective characters coincided with the state-national dimension, organicism and nationalism interpenetrated. In this context Caesarism may be considered, rather than a political concept, a figure of speech, which did not merely designate charismatic leadership as a political model but, by extension, indicated a people, a "race," a nation whose deep-seated characteristics—such as a deficiency of individualism—favored the acceptance of charismatic leadership.

The order of hierarchy

In its Tocquevillian and nineteenth-century meaning, the concept of Caesarism implied a mass of isolated, "atomized" individuals, resulting from the dissolution of

²⁸See Hippolyte Taine, "Fondation de l'École libre des sciences politiques" (1871), in Taine, *Derniers essais de critique et d'histoire* (Paris, 1894), 77–98. See Pierre Favre, "Les sciences d'État entre déterminisme et libéralisme: Émile Boutmy (1835–1906) et la création de l'École libre des sciences politique," *Revue française de sociologie* 22/3 (1981), 429–65; Favre, *Naissances de la science politique en France* (Paris, 1989).

²⁹Émile Boutmy, *Études de droit constitutionnel* (France, Angleterre, États Unis) (Paris, 1885); Boutmy, *Le développement de la constitution et de la société politique en Angleterre* (Paris, 1887); Boutmy, *Le recrutement des administrateurs coloniaux* (Paris, 1895).

³⁰See Pierre Rosanvallon, *La contre-démocratie: La politique à l'âge de la défiance* (Paris, 2006).

³¹Émile Boutmy, "À propos de la souveraineté du peuple" (1904), in Boutmy, *Études politiques* (Paris, 1907), 86–7. See Laura Cerasi, "'Popolo', singolare nazionale: Emile Boutmy, fra ottimismo pedagogico e pessimismo contro-democratico," *Storia e Futuro* 30 (2012), at <https://storiaefuturo.eu/popolo-singolare-nazionale-emile-boutmy-fra-ottimismo-pedagogico-e-pessimismo-contro-democratico>.

³²Irene Stolzi, "Idealism and the Fascist Corporative State," in John Walker, ed., *The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought*, vol. 2, *Historical, Social and Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 260–76.

social bonds related to the advance of democracy, over whom an authoritarian despotism was exercised.³³ In the meaning that was becoming accepted at the end of the century, Caesarism was characteristic of some peoples rather than others, for reasons linked to national character, but also to historical conditions.

The Italian people might not have been as constitutionally prone to Caesarism as the French, on whom, according to Ferrero, the Napoleonic experience had left an indelible mark that from the original Caesarism of the Empire had generated an “oligarchic” Caesarism in the Orleanist period and a “parliamentary” and “administrative” Caesarism in the Third Republic.³⁴ But the Italians were a people afflicted by the backwardness and misery of the countryside, as proved by the uninterrupted flow of emigrants leaving Italy by the millions for the Americas, which so distressed Pasquale Villari.³⁵ It was an “exhausted and depressed” people, disintegrated, dispersed and incapable of valiant action, as proved by the defeat of Adwa in 1896, where to fight against the brave Menelik’s soldiers was sent, in Ferrero’s view, “a jumble of peasants in whom every virtue of courage was extinguished by a centuries-old tradition of docility; a jumble of poor, of servants, of the ignorant, of the indifferent, of the terrified.”³⁶ Among the Italian ruling class, contempt for such a spineless people was combined with humiliation and patriotic concern not only in registering the uninterrupted series of military defeats suffered after Unification, but also in acknowledging how the masses of people emigrating in their millions to the Americas were made up of an illiterate and unskilled workforce, reflecting a desperately backward nation.³⁷

This attitude underwent a profound change with the Great War, when an aspect of the Italian people’s Caesarist-inclined character was revealed that would later also be instrumental to the rhetoric of Fascism, namely the fact that, when disciplined in a rigid military system, the Italian people proved obedient. Indeed, it came as a pleasant surprise to discover that the Italian people in uniform, when engaged in the massive slaughter of the Great War, were capable of discipline and honor. Ferrero had been ready to retract his negative view of the Latin peoples: in a lecture in front of Italy’s French allies, he praised the virtues of the “Latin genius” against the Germanic destructive fury.³⁸ Benito Mussolini, in his wartime diary, observed that the qualities exhibited

³³Pozzi, *Tocqueville e i dilemmi della democrazia*, 80–86. Michele Battini, *L’ordine della gerarchia: I contributi reazionari e progressisti alle crisi della democrazia in Francia (1789–1914)* (Turin, 1995). Arguably, the derogatory use of “atomistic” reveals a critical attitude towards political modernity. See, for instance, Salvatore Talamo, “La questione sociale e i cattolici,” *Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali e Discipline Ausiliarie* 10/38 (1896) 181–224, at 212.

³⁴Guglielmo Ferrero, “Militarismo e cesarismo in Francia,” in Ferrero, *Il militarismo: Dieci Conferenze* (Milan, 1898), 269–325.

³⁵Pasquale Villari, *Discussioni critiche e discorsi* (Bologna, 1905). And yet, that Italy could easily fall prey to Caesarism was envisaged in the very aftermath of the Unification. See Giuseppe Lazzaro, *Il Cesarismo e l’Italia* (Napoli, 1862).

³⁶Ferrero, “Il militarismo italiano,” 357.

³⁷The speeches delivered by Pasquale Villari in his capacity as president of the Dante Alighieri Society for the support of Italian culture abroad are a poignant testimony to this concern: Pasquale Villari, *Scritti e discorsi per la “Dante”* (Rome, 1933).

³⁸Guglielmo Ferrero, “Il genio latino” (1916), in Ferrero, *La Vecchia Europa e la Nuova: Saggi e discorsi* (Milan, 1918), 221–43.

by the Italian soldiers would have countered the pessimism of the patriotic poet Giosuè Carducci: “If he were back in the world, in front of these men who were marvelous in their tenacity, their endurance, their self-sacrifice, he would no longer say as he once did: ‘Our Fatherland is vile!’”³⁹

It was, above all, the direct contact with the soldiers, especially infantrymen, that made it possible to acknowledge qualities hitherto unrecognized in the Italian people on a mass level. In this spirit, the philosopher Giovanni Gentile reported large excerpts from *Volontà*, a “trench journal” published by officers on duty at the front, to reject “the usual story of the incorrigible faults of the Italian people: undisciplined, lazy, volatile etc.”⁴⁰ Instead, the officers witnessed that the Italian soldier was

Good, docile, disciplined, hardworking to the point of exhaustion, affectionate, generous to the point of sacrificing his life. This son of the people, ignorant, dirty, rough ... if commanded by men morally worthy of him, remains and fights, on lines laboriously conquered and scourged by the enemy, for seven consecutive days, without respite, without rest, hungry, thirsty, bloody, ragged, but always serene, firm of heart and arm, often in good mood ... In the soldier we have come to know and love the great virtues of our people; of that great obscure part of our Italy that works and saves, that cannot read or write, but lives in honesty, in the cult of family and honor, that still intensely feels gratitude, friendship, and the moral commitment of the given word. Of this people the experience of war has made us proud.⁴¹

The trope of the soldier’s virtues reflecting the those of a peasant, obedient and genuine, would recur more than once, also in literature: in his *Viva Caporetto*, or *La rivolta dei santi maledetti*, the heretical Fascist writer Curzio Malaparte praised the illiterate Italian infantry as the force that “gathered the most forthright expression of our race and gave the measure of our possibilities, our tenacity and our spirit of sacrifice.” “Our infantry, the most Christian of all, launched itself in the assault humanly: once, twice, ten times in a row,” only because it had to be done: “Obedience is a virtue and fatalism a defect (or a virtue?) which Italians possess in the highest degree.”⁴²

As a matter of fact, an army of obedient fatalists could be an ideal army to be led to slaughter. Mussolini was cynically aware that “to the people who relinquished the spade to hold the rifle, we simply ask that they obey; and the Italian people, the people of the countryside and the people of the workshops, obey.”⁴³ Besides obedience, another feature of the Italian people that was mirrored by the soldiers was, according

³⁹ Benito Mussolini, *Il mio diario di guerra 1915–1917* (Milan, 1923), 82.

⁴⁰ Giovanni Gentile, “Edificare la patria” (1918), in Gentile, *Guerra e fede* (Naples, 1919), 89–94, at 91.

⁴¹ Ibid., 92. The journal *Volontà* is available at www.14-18.it/periodico/RML0020428/1918/n._1/001.

⁴² Curzio Malaparte, *Viva Caporetto! La rivolta dei santi maledetti* (1921) (Milan, 1981), first quotation at 42, second and third quotations at 46. See the broader discussion of the topic in Laura Cerasi, “They, the People: Italian Fascism and the Ambivalences of Corporative Populism,” *Modern Italy* 1/27 (2022) 19–34.

⁴³ Benito Mussolini, “La Vittoria fatale: Discorso pronunciato al Comunale di Bologna il 24 maggio 1918,” in *Scritti e discorsi di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 1, *Dall'intervento al fascismo* (Milan, 1934), 309–21, at 315.

to Franciscan friar Agostino Gemelli, later the founder of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, “their candor, their primeval character, sometimes puerile elements.”⁴⁴ The image of an infant people, only capable, at best, of vaguely guessing what the ruling and intellectual classes knew lucidly and rationally, was shared by the liberal socialist Gaetano Salvemini: “The people, the multitude of peasants, of workers, went to arms, silent and collected, without really seeing the ideal motives that drove us, but confusedly presaging them.”⁴⁵

A people passively virtuous, immature, and incapable of self-determination should therefore be incorporated through national pedagogy, as Gentile aptly suggested: “It is necessary for the superior Italy of culture and responsibility to take advantage of the treasure of moral energies hidden in the fiber of our people. Above all, we must cultivate the feeling of unity and social discipline.”⁴⁶ Historian Gioacchino Volpe’s instructions for army officers recommended that the soldier ought to be reminded that “the war was a great national effort in which all classes took part”: no matter how much he had suffered for his country, the soldier “must not be fed the idea that the war is only his doing.”⁴⁷

The convenient and recently discovered virtues of the Italian people in uniform could be put to good use, then, only within a framework of hierarchical and integrated order. The mass of the Italian people, appropriately given to obedience, had to be organized and directed, to be subjected to the command of a leadership. It was not a long step from here to the authoritarian Caesarism embodied by Fascism, and the step would soon be taken.

Because of the genetic link between Fascism and the Great War—without which, as historiography has now established, the former is incomprehensible—but also because of the persistence of late positivist organicism among the political elite, Fascist Caesarism was a coin with two sides. On the one side, there was the charismatic leadership of Il Duce, on whom torrents of rhetoric were lavished; historiography has long identified this as a distinctive feature of Italian Fascism, and there is no need to elaborate here.⁴⁸ On the other, there was an obedient, passive, but hierarchically organized people.

In the political culture of Fascism, the cult of the leader, embodied in the glorification of Il Duce, was intertwined with the legacy of hierarchical authoritarianism from the war period, often associated with the persistence of late positivist organicism in the conception of the nation. The result converged in the creation of a corporative state, as Fascism’s specific and original solution to the politicization of the popular classes and, ultimately, to democracy.

⁴⁴ Agostino Gemelli, *Il nostro soldato* (Milan, 1917), 116.

⁴⁵ Gaetano Salvemini, “Il nostro dovere” (1915), in Salvemini, *Opere*, vol. 3, part 1, *Come siamo andati in Libia e altri scritti dal 1900 al 1915* (Milan, 1973), 524–5, at 524. Some remarks on the societal racism of such an elitist attitude can be found in Cerasi, “They, the People,” 20–22.

⁴⁶ Gentile, “Edificare la patria,” 93.

⁴⁷ Gioacchino Volpe, “Idee da diffondere (la guerra, i contadini, i borghesi)” (1918), in Volpe, *Guerra, dopoguerra, fascismo* (Venice, 1928), 58–9, at 59.

⁴⁸ See above all the research carried out by Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

Organicism and state reform

This two-sided coin had obvious political connotations. In a famous article on Machiavelli published in his journal *Gerarchia* in April 1924, on the eve of the general elections, Mussolini dismissed the popular sovereignty that was soon to be exercised at the polls: “The adjective of sovereign applied to the people is a tragic joke. The people all, at most, delegate, but they can certainly not exercise any sovereignty.”⁴⁹ Deprived of its power when deemed appropriate, it bore the same features of passivity and obedience displayed during the war: “The people only have one syllable left, to say yes and obey. You see that the sovereignty graciously bestowed on the people is taken away from them at times when they might feel the need. It is left to them only when it is harmless or considered harmless, that is, in moments of ordinary administration.”⁵⁰

The process of disempowering popular sovereignty took place gradually, between the March on Rome in October 1922 and the enactment of the *leggi fascistiche* devised by Alfredo Rocco in 1925–6.⁵¹ The process was closely intertwined with the internal dynamics among Fascism’s main political actors,⁵² as well as the lively political debate within Fascism. This debate has often been branded inconclusive by historians, as it did not result in a precise plan for constitutional reforms, which were instead implemented through Rocco’s set of laws.⁵³ However, the arguments that unfolded during that transitional period are a piercing indication of the political culture that underpinned the Fascist elite’s intentions and are well worth consideration. Here, we focus on two aspects that emerge from the theoretical contributions of Giovanni Gentile and Alfredo Rocco, which can help highlight the “other side” of the coin of Fascist Caesarism.

In the summer of 1924, when the echoes of the direct responsibility of the head of government in the murder of the socialist MP Giacomo Matteotti were shaking public opinion and undermining the stability of the Fascist government, the Fascist Party appointed a commission of fifteen eminent political figures to study a plan of constitutional reforms to permanently change the liberal state according to the Fascist seizure of power. The commission was chaired by Giovanni Gentile and lasted until January 1925, when the changed political conditions announced with Mussolini’s speech on 3 January, in which he claimed responsibility for Matteotti’s assassination and declared his intention to build a dictatorship, led to the expansion of the commission to eighteen government-appointed members, again under the chairmanship of Gentile.

The Sicilian philosopher’s opening speech was delivered on 28 October 1924, to mark the March on Rome’s second anniversary; from the very first lines it revealed itself to be based on a late positivist approach to the history of state institutions, of Tainian organicist descent:

⁴⁹ Benito Mussolini, “Preludio al Machiavelli,” *Gerarchia* 4 (1924), 205–9, at 208.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ An essential text on the subject is still Alberto Aquarone, *L’Organizzazione dello Stato totalitario* (Turin, 1965).

⁵² See now Emilio Gentile, *Storia del Fascismo* (Rome and Bari, 2022), 656–707.

⁵³ Francesco Perfetti, *Fascismo e riforme istituzionali* (Florence, 2013).

Institutions, like laws, cannot take root and live unless they correspond to the needs, ideas, and sentiments of the people to whom they are given; every arbitrary innovation, even if Jacobinically rational, is neither effective nor lasting; the history of a people does not unfold by extrinsic and mechanical additions of elements that are the fruit of abstract contrivances, but rather by internal and spontaneous development, like a living plant that draws its lifeblood from the trunk; finally, no revolution was ever fruitful if its institutions did not limit themselves to giving form and force of law to progress that had already really or virtually taken place in the life and spirit of the nation.⁵⁴

The speech was also an exercise in fine-tuning the political application of Gentile's theoretical idealism, placing it within a historicist narrative that focused on the present. Gentile's historicist narrative was a correction of Benedetto Croce's teleology that had considered the prewar Italian liberal state the actual realization of the inevitable historical advent of the idea of liberty. In the course of embracing Fascism, Gentile perfected the narrative by depicting the latter as the result of a line of continuity that stemmed from the Risorgimento, coalesced in the war, and was guaranteed by the person of the king.⁵⁵ The interpretation of Fascism as the highest and most accomplished phase of liberalism entailed a pantheon of personalities through whom the idea had been asserted, first and foremost Giuseppe Mazzini.⁵⁶ It was an effective formula that circulated in the political discourse of Fascism and was reworked in such claims as "Liberalism in Italy, according to an inflexible logical alignment, is being lived today by Fascism."⁵⁷

In Gentile's 1924 opening speech, such continuity was embodied in the Albertine Statute of 1848 that was "immortal, like the Fatherland": "But like all immortal things it is a cell or organism that develops and survives by perpetuating itself in the perpetuity of the spirit, which renews itself incessantly, and in itself even renews its own memories."⁵⁸ It was a way of declaring that the Statute could be adapted to the purposes of Fascism, whose political agency was given full legitimacy within the existing institutions, which, in turn, were deemed expendable to increasing fascistization.

A year later, though, the work of the 1 met with Mussolini's silent coldness. Meanwhile, in a speech delivered in Perugia in August 1925, Alfredo Rocco, the minister of justice, had put himself forward, outlining his concept of the preeminence of the state over the social forces that were instrumental in Mussolini's ruling agenda, and rendered the commission's proposals obsolete.⁵⁹ The head of government in fact entrusted Rocco with the task of drawing a series of bills of constitutional relevance that

⁵⁴ Giovanni Gentile, opening speech to the Commission of Fifteen, published as "Riforme costituzionali e fascismo" in Gentile, *Che cosa è il fascismo* (Florence, 1925), 199–218, at 201.

⁵⁵ Giovanni Gentile, "Il mio liberalismo," *La Nuova Politica Liberale* 1 (1923), 9–11.

⁵⁶ See Simon Levis Sullam, *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Origins of Fascism* (London, 2015).

⁵⁷ Carlo Curcio, "Oltre l'equivoco liberale," *Critica Fascista* 20 (1924), 653–5, at 655.

⁵⁸ Gentile, "Riforme costituzionali e fascismo," 206.

⁵⁹ Alfredo Rocco, *La dottrina del fascismo e il suo posto nella storia del pensiero politico*, Pubblicazione n. 10 della Biblioteca dell'Istituto nazionale fascista di cultura, Milan, tip. La Periodica lombarda, n.d. [1925].

would have profound constitutional impact as the cornerstone of the authoritarian and corporative state.

Rocco's Perugia speech, despite being designed to replace Gentile's influence, was set along similar lines of organicism and historicism. It was based on elements of political nationalism that Rocco himself had contributed to forging before the war. In particular, it echoed the biological conception of the nation enunciated in his 1914 programmatic text *Che cosa è il nazionalismo e che cosa vogliono i nazionalisti* (What Is Nationalism and What the Nationalists Want), where Rocco assumed that "the individual does not live only in the class, and does not live at all in the society of all men, but lives instead and principally in that social aggregate, constituted by men of the same race, which is the nation."⁶⁰ It revealed a combination of Paretian and social-Darwinist suggestions:

While humanity is not today an organized social aggregate, and never will be, because societies are formed to protect certain common interests, as opposed to the interests of other aggregates ... the national society is the only social aggregate, which has serious specific interests to assert, vividly and continually opposed by other national societies, and must assert them, necessarily, by itself, with its own forces alone, because there is no organization superior to the nation, which can do justice to the nation.⁶¹

In 1925 (although he intended to reject "the so-called organic theories of the state" *à la* Leon Duguit, with its pluralist nature), Rocco retained the late positivist cast of his organicism:

Just as the human species is not the sum of the individuals living in the world, so the various human societies, which compose it, are not the sum of the various individuals who, at a given moment, belong to it, but the indefinite series of past, present, and future generations that have been, are, and will be part of it. And just as the purposes of the human species are not the purposes of the individuals living at a given time, but may be in contrast with them, so the purposes of the various human societies are not the purposes of the individuals who at a given time compose them but may be in contrast with them. It is well known that the preservation and development of the species, however, sometimes involves the sacrifice of individuals. The phenomenon of war is the greatest example of this.⁶²

He then moved from the Aristotelian definition of man as a social animal to dryly declaring "inconceivable" the "non-man" who did not live in society. Since the whole of mankind, as a species, was grouped into societies, it followed that

the various societies, therefore, are fractions of the human species, having a unitary organization. Since a unitary organization of the whole human species

⁶⁰ Alfredo Rocco, *Che cosa è il nazionalismo e che cosa vogliono i nazionalisti* (Padua, 1914), 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

⁶² Alfredo Rocco, *La dottrina del fascismo e il suo posto nella storia del pensiero politico: Discorso pronunciato nell'Aula dei Notari di Perugia il 30 agosto 1925* (Milan, 1925), 12.

does not exist, there is no human society; there are human societies. Humanity therefore only exists as a biological concept, not as a social concept. The various human societies, on the other hand, exist as a biological concept and as a social concept; socially they are fractions of the human species, having a unitary organization for the achievement of the ends proper to the species.⁶³

It was conceded that the individual was not to be completely annihilated, because “as part of his generation, [he] is still an element, albeit infinitesimal and transient, of society”;⁶⁴ rather, the individual’s goals ought to adhere to those of society, which in turn resolved itself into the state, especially the Fascist state; “the same rights of the individual, when they are recognized, are but a reflection of the rights of the State that the individual asserts as his own interest and as an organ of a social interest converging with that of the State.”⁶⁵ In Rocco’s view, the state, as the institutional form of the society, ought to establish its preeminence over the individual in all aspects of social life, and particularly in what he considered “the central problem of the modern world,” namely the relationship between capital and labor and the achievement of “justice between classes, which is a fundamental requirement of modern life.” This had to be done by preventing “class self-defense, a source, like the individual self-defense, typical of barbaric times, of disorder and civil war,” yet “class organization is a fact and a necessity and as such cannot be ignored by the State, but must be disciplined, controlled, framed within the State.”⁶⁶

In the tight rhetorical style that followed “the slope of logical deductions,” and that has been considered typical of his political discourse,⁶⁷ Rocco opposed Fascism to all other political theories, all seen as stemming from the same source, and assigning to society the aim of promoting the well-being and happiness of individuals, albeit through different means. “Liberalism, democracy, socialism appear to us, as they really are, not only as filiations of an identical theory of society and the state, but also as logical derivations from each other. The logical development of liberalism leads to democracy, the logical development of democracy leads to socialism.”⁶⁸ Fascism was their opposite:

For Fascism, society has its own historical and immanent aims of preservation, expansion, and improvement, distinct from the aims of the individuals who *pro tempore* [temporarily] compose it, and which may possibly be in conflict with

⁶³ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 17–18. Indeed, the absolute preeminence of the state over the individual was to be established everywhere, but an exception was to be made for the individual economic interest, which was to be safeguarded: “Fascism believes that it is normally useful to leave the development of the economic phenomenon to individual initiative, both in the production phase and in the distribution phase of wealth, because, in the economic world, there is no more effective means of obtaining the maximum result with the minimum effort than to enforce the drive of individual interest.” Ibid., 15.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 8; John Dickie, “Sententiousness and Nationalist Discourse: The Case of Alfredo Rocco,” *Nations and Nationalism* 1/6 (2000), 3–22.

⁶⁸ Rocco, *La dottrina del fascismo*, 9.

individual aims. Hence the possibility, which the dominant doctrines do not conceive, of the sacrifice, even total, of the individual to society and the explanation of the fact of war, the eternal law of the human species, which those doctrines do not explain except as an absurd degeneration or a monstrous madness.⁶⁹

In concluding by assigning Fascism its series of forerunners, Rocco could not help but reproduce the historicist succession already outlined many times by Gentile, from Machiavelli to Giambattista Vico, then to Mazzini: “In Mazzini’s conception of the citizen as a means to the attainment of the Nation’s ends, obliged by a superior mission to the duty of supreme sacrifice, we see anticipated one of the fundamental points of the fascist doctrine.”⁷⁰

A corporative Caesarism

While Gentile’s historicist pantheon influenced Rocco’s theoretical effort to legitimate Fascism, Gentile similarly incorporated Rocco’s indication that state control over organized labor was “the main problem of the contemporary age.”⁷¹ This occurred during Gentile’s chairmanship of the above-mentioned constitutional-reform commissions, and especially the intricate discussions that took place there concerning the role of trade unions in the nascent corporative state.⁷² In his opening speech in 1924, Gentile conceded that “the institutions needed to be updated to correspond to the real needs of the country and contain all the real forces of the people in the juridical organism of the State.”⁷³ And the main real forces that ought to be acknowledged were the trade unions: “Trade unionism may or may not be liked, according to one’s taste, or rather one’s culture, but it is one of those grandiose facts with a universal and necessary, solemn character, which sooner or later must be studied and understood.”⁷⁴

Through the tremendous war effort, all social forces had been engaged in the wartime economy, and trade unionism had acquired a national character:

As never before, the popular masses, no longer dispersed and confused in the amorphous quantitative accumulation of abstract individuals, all equal, postulated by the old atomistic and naturalistic liberalism of the 18th century, but the real people, the real citizen, as it is and is worth, and must be worth, in the organism of the productive forces that it is up to the State to recognize, guarantee, and

⁶⁹Ibid., 13–14.

⁷⁰Ibid., 29.

⁷¹Ibid., 17. Significant distinctions have been noted in Rocco and Gentile’s conception of the nation, such as the difference between naturalism and idealism respectively: for Rocco the nation had always been a naturalistic, a priori given, whereas for Gentile it was the effect of a constantly ongoing process which required the involvement of the will. See Alessandra Tarquini, “Alfredo Rocco e Giovanni Gentile: Riflessioni su Stato, nazione e politica di un regime totalitario,” in Emilio Gentile, Fulco Lanchester, and Alessandra Tarquini, eds., *Alfredo Rocco: Dalla crisi del parlamentarismo alla costruzione dello Stato nuovo* (Rome, 2010), 83–114.

⁷²Bruno Uva, *La Nascita dello Stato Corporativo e Sindacale Fascista* (Rome and Assisi, 1974).

⁷³Gentile, “Riforme costituzionali e fascismo,” 213.

⁷⁴Ibid., 216.

promote, according to its supreme ends, always essentially ethical, if it does not want to be overwhelmed by uncontrolled adverse forces.⁷⁵

This would give rise to a new civil society, no longer “abstractly conceived,” but “real, concrete, the only one that exists, the one that is the true content of the State,” where “individuals remain, but are grouped together, united and therefore promoted to a higher economic, moral, and intellectual power, by the very laws inherent to their social activity.” The representative system, “in consequence, must unfold and adapt itself to this new reality, whose features will not yet be definitive (what is definitive in history?), but are already clearly discernible.”⁷⁶ Fascism would integrate the past and the future, continuity and change, with the aim of erecting a strong anti-parliamentary state.⁷⁷

In a famous speech of March 1925 in Florence, which was republished several times, Gentile elaborated upon his teleological historicism, expounding his idea of the ethical state welded to conceptions of the individual and liberty, which he opposed to the individualistic liberalism of the Enlightenment and, before that, the Renaissance. Italian liberty was a recovery from the decadence of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, beginning with Giambattista Vico, Vincenzo Cuoco, and Vittorio Alfieri, and blossoming with Giuseppe Mazzini. The voluntarism that morphed into political religion, and the religiosity of the subject that acquired meaning only in the collective, the patriotic, and the national, both of which ideas Gentile drew from his rendering of Mazzini, were his specific contribution to the conception of liberty. Only by feeling within oneself, in one’s own conscience, that one’s self acquired meaning only if fused with the general will—and here the reference to Rousseau’s holistic concept was not accidental—only if the individual felt within himself that his own individual purpose coincided with that of the state, would the individual realize himself, and realize himself freely, because he was no longer the object of coercion, but the subject of will. And in exercising that dual will, individual and state together acted ethically. This was the state *in interiore homine*, within the individual, which constitutes the distinctive feature of Gentile statualism.

In this sense, liberty was authentic when it was the fusion of individual and state in the collective dimension of the nation. In this fusion, the state, like the individual, as a free subject had to have will. In order not to be “agnostic” like the old liberal state, the fascist state must have finalities; that is, it must act to achieve goals. And the goals were those indicated by the pressing needs of the time, above all the incorporation of social organizations into the state:

The ethical state must spring from reality and therefore adhere to it, and from this adherence derive its strength and power. That is why today fascism is striving to reorganize the working masses on a national foundation and in perfect accordance with its moral concept of the state: and it envisions a form of regiment that, by removing the state from the conventional lie of the old parliament

⁷⁵Ibid., 215.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid., 203.

of professional politicians, will bring together in a more durable and solid structure all of the dynamic social, economic, and intellectual forces that generate the healthy and frank political currents of the country.⁷⁸

In March 1925 Gentile did not indicate precisely how this objective of reorganizing the nation's economic, social and intellectual forces within the state was to be achieved, leaving the door open to different solutions. At the conclusion of the institutional-reform commission's studies, the solution was indicated in the realization of a corporative system. As a matter of fact, the commission did not yield a unanimous proposal, but a final report complemented by two minority reports. In essence, positions converged in favor of a corporatism-based reform of political representation, but disagreements remained on the implementation of such a reform. Gentile's introductory premise clarified how the corporative principle was the result of a merger of different positions:

In truth, the Corporative Order is the most innovative of the ideas advocated by the Commission. And it was therefore natural that it aroused doubts, perplexities, concerns, and objections within the Commission itself. The very proponents of this idea or adherents of it pondered it at length before embracing it. Some of its most convinced and ardent proponents and elaborators were radical critics and opponents.⁷⁹

The corporative order was a "complex idea," for which "ready and easy assent" was not expected. However,

It is an idea that deserves to be carefully and seriously examined, since, in the opinion of the Commission, it is the only one that can indicate a way to effectively contain the national productive forces within the circle of state action; to make the state adhere to the reality of which it is a form, and from which it cannot abstract and separate itself (as the liberal state tends to do because of its origins and its nature) without losing its concrete base and together with it its organic and organizational strength.⁸⁰

The corporative structure was therefore the form that the unity of national forces had to assume in order to meet the most pressing needs of political and social modernity, and at the same time to connect with the organic continuity of national life as it developed over time:

National unity (the fascists know this and feel it keenly) is not something that already exists at a specific time. It is rooted in the past and reaches out from the present to the future: and it lives today insofar as, with the vitality that is

⁷⁸ Giovanni Gentile, "Che cosa è il Fascismo?" (1925), in Gentile, *Che cosa è il Fascismo*, 9–39, at 37.

⁷⁹ Giovanni Gentile, "Introduzione," in *Relazioni e proposte della commissione per lo studio delle riforme costituzionali: Documenti per la storia del fascismo a cura dell'Istituto Fascista di Cultura* (Florence, 1932), ix–xxiii, at xv.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

the fruit of centuries, it looks to the near and distant future, and projects, intuitively, and envisions its greater destiny, which is its program, the spring of all its efforts, the *raison d'être* of its very life. The Fascist state is an idea that is vigorously implemented; but it is an idea, and as such it transcends every present and every contingent and materialistically defined form. That is why it emphasizes duty rather than right in the citizen's mind; and it urges him to go beyond himself and seek his present interest in the future, his personal advantage in that of the Fatherland, to which every sacrifice is due and from which every reward is to be expected.⁸¹

In the summer of 1925, before Rocco's set of authoritarian laws, a consensus had coalesced around the notion of the corporative state. It was an authoritarian, anti-parliamentary, historicist, organic, and corporate idea of the state, which would inform Rocco's decisive legislative intervention and last throughout all the years of the regime, forming the "other side of the coin" of Fascist corporative Caesarism. It was perhaps a less visible side of the increasingly glorified cult of Mussolini's leadership, whose choreography invaded ever more aspects of Italian public life and even now constitutes its distinctive and recognizable feature. But it was a side forged out of the disorientation that Italian and European culture had experienced in the face of the advance of industrial society and mass democracy, as well as the persistence of organicist responses to social transformations formulated in the culture of late positivism. Its authoritarian potential would be tragically realized during the war and, in Italy, welded together with the widespread societal racism towards the working classes that in the postwar period would promote the seizure of power by Fascism, with the conception of a corporative state serving as the Fascist version of democracy designed to counter the political agency of the working classes.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, xvi–xvii.