

Fascist Italy in the age of corporatism. Searching for a third way

by Alessio Gagliardi, London, Routledge, 2026, 198 pp., €39.19 (soft cover), ISBN: 9781032713243

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BOOK REVIEW

Fascist Italy in the age of corporatism. Searching for a third way, by Alessio Gagliardi, London, Routledge, 2026, 198 pp., €39.19 (soft cover), ISBN: 9781032713243

In the title of Alessio Gagliardi's book is couched a deliberate choice: that of situating the establishment of the Fascist corporative state and the political and institutional processes involved in the broader context of the quest for an alternative to the liberal economy and to the principle of political representation that took shape in Europe during the interwar period. This choice is mirrored in the organization of the material which, whilst adhering to an internal chronological order, takes care to connect Italian occurrences to the contemporary trends in the European economy and politics. In particular: to the phase of rethinking the liberal state in the immediate post-war period, aimed at adapting its structure to the emergence of mass politics, which had become widespread and powerful during the War (Chapter 1); to the impact of the 1929 crisis on national economies, which undermined confidence in market self-regulation and gave rise to various proposals for a planned economy (Chapter 5); and to the autarkic fragmentation of the global market in the second half of the 1930s, which heralded the outbreak of the Second World War (Chapter 9). The transnational perspective is also reflected in the treatment of the subject matter, such as the dissemination of the Italian corporatist experiment as a model for other nations, which is presented not only as an effective vehicle for cultural diplomacy by Mussolini's Italy abroad, but also as a key factor in its domestic legitimization (Chapter 3). Also, references to discussions and reactions abroad to Italian achievements are scattered throughout various sections (see Chapter 7).

This choice was not obvious: Gagliardi is the author of a seminal study *Il corporativismo fascista* (2010) that contributed to release the history of Italian corporatism from the stigma of the thesis, originally put forward by anti-fascists in exile and disseminated by Gaetano Salvemini, that it was a sham concealing a complete discrepancy between theory and reality. Whilst retaining a critical assessment of the historical phenomenon on the whole, the author focused his analysis on the actual functioning of the corporatist institutions, in particular the role of the National Council of Corporations, established in 1930, and the interplay between trade unions, economic interests and corporatist bodies, showing how the latter played a significant role as a forum for negotiation and as a channel facilitating the access of economic interests to political power. Thanks also to subsequent studies on trade unions, the middle classes, the civil service and other aspects of the trade union-corporatist framework, Gagliardi played an integral part in a body of scholarship that has broadened our understanding of Italian

corporatism, removing it from the myth of the 'third way' as well as from the reductive view of it as a mere bluff.

Indeed, *Fascist Italy in the Age of Corporatism's* central chapters build upon this solid foundation of research. The gradual alignment of the Fascist élite with the statist model of authoritarian trade unionism set out by Alfredo Rocco and enacted through the promulgation of the laws of 1926 and Charter of Labour is recounted in Chapter 2. In tracing the complex dynamics between Fascist trade unionism and corporative bodies, it is argued that the regime's claim to encompass and politically lead the whole of society was not based on a mere polarization between the latter and an all-pervasive central power, as a simplified interpretation of its 'totalitarian' drive would suggest; rather, 'the correlation between individuals and the state would appear to have been complex and diverse and based not only on atomised masses but also on a highly organised society' (Chapter 4, 70). The most vital phase of the Fascist corporatist experience is identified as the period 1930–1933, following the creation of the National Council of Corporations and corresponding to the height of Giuseppe Bottai's influence, both in terms of political direction and stimulation of cultural debate (Chapter 6). The events of 1934, when the corporatist structure was actually established with the creation of the twenty-two corporations and the implementation of a corresponding overall reorganization of the trade unions, are described as compromise arrangements, and, in fact, as the beginning of the decline in the experiment's innovative potential (Chapter 7).

The combination of this first-hand core research with a broader outlook on the transnational dimension of the corporatist phenomenon in which the Italian case is situated makes a valuable contribution to international scholarship on Fascism. It enables fascist corporatism to be read against the backdrop of contemporary European events, whilst at the same time highlighting the specific characteristics of the Italian experience which can thus take its place alongside the well-studied cases of Mediterranean Europe: all in a concise and accessible format.

Admittedly, achieving an overview of a subject as vast and multi-layered as this may involve neglect of relevant research, for example, Giovanna Procacci's study on the *Warfare-welfare* nexus (2013), which is the historical blueprint of the statist and authoritarian corporatism adopted by Rocco. Or it may result in crucial factors being overlooked that define the specific nature of the Italian case itself, such as the contribution of the Catholic world. Whilst partly adhering to the fascist corporatist model and partly diverging from it, on the whole the Catholics came to terms with the existence of the modern state through the corporatist experience, thanks to the ethical-political purpose that fascist corporatism conferred upon it. Also, the proposed periodization does not really take into account the final phase, which culminated in the replacement of Parliament by the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations (1939), whose relevance consisted not so much in the formal abolition of political representation as in its being part of a framework of planned reforms – such as that of social security as the cornerstone of the corporatist system – aimed at bringing Fascism's political programme to fulfilment, thereby revealing the intended nature of the fascist regime in its maturity.

The overall picture of fascist corporatism is perhaps outlined at the price of a certain flattening of the argument. The subject matter is presented as having been fully explored, with no further avenues of research yet open; whereas, for example, in the field of economics – with which the author is well acquainted – new studies are currently underway (see the special issue of *Studi Storici*, 1/2024, *Capitalism and the Regime. Social Classes and Interest Groups in Fascist Italy*). Some other aspects also warrant further examination, such as the very identification of corporatism with Fascism, endorsed by Mussolini after the 1929 crisis and again in 1933 following Hitler's rise to power, but never truly embraced and always instrumentally managed. The very topic of the 'third way' indicated in the title might seem a step backwards compared with the author's own insights.

Nevertheless, the book deserves full recognition for having appropriately placed Italian Fascist corporatism on the map of international historiography, where it rightfully finds its place.

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