How fascist was Mussolini?

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*Summary:* Though it is widely assumed that Mussolini was motivated by vanity and naked ambition rather than by ideas, Roger Griffin argues that a core vision of Italy’s renewal within a new order inspired him from an early age, and forms the underlying coherence of his frequent shifts in tactics, policies, and contradictory assertions. He goes on to claim that the myth of national rebirth forms the definitional core of fascism itself, and that in this sense Mussolini was a fully fledged fascist.

How fascist was Mussolini? The question is not as absurd as it sounds. There is no doubt that Benito Mussolini was ‘technically’ a Fascist, since between 1919 and 1945 he successively became the leader of a movement, a party, a dictatorship which retained the monarchy, and a republic all of which officially called themselves Fascist. But according to the regime’s propaganda, notably many speeches and statements made by Mussolini himself, to be a Fascist meant devoting one’s life totally to enabling the Italian people to fulfil its potential as a nation of genius destined to play once more a dominant role on the stage of world history. It has been widely questioned how far Mussolini ever had such idealism himself, no matter how much he inspired it in others. Likewise most historians doubt whether he had any real vision of where he was leading his people, even though he demanded blind trust from them that he was their infallible, irreplaceable *duce*.

Three years after he was killed by partisans in April 1945, one commentator spoke for many when he claimed that ‘Dilettante, approximative, and rambling in his views, that were, nevertheless, expressed with impressive eloquence, Mussolini was the original half-Fascist. His Fascism had always been a half baked affair, half farcical and half cruel.’ Yet this article will argue that not only is this a superficial and misleading assessment of Mussolini himself, but it is one that can lead to a serious misreading of the nature of Fascism itself, and of fascism in general. It thus matters to examine not just the sincerity of his Fascism, but the relationship of his conception of his own movement to ‘generic fascism.

**Mussolini the operatic performer**

Certainly the view of Mussolini as a master of empty rhetoric, as political play-actor, as a sinister buffoon has had wide-spread currency history ever since the 1920s. The excerpts from newsreels used in documentaries and teaching materials to this day often single out moments when he was
basking in the adulation of the ‘oceanic assemblies’ that listened to his speeches in rapt attention as he gestured melodramatically, puffing his cheeks and rolling his eyes before delivering a series of bombastic phrases about the latest or imminent triumphs of fascism. This was the image of the duce immortalized in Charlie Chaplin’s satirical film of Hitler and Mussolini The Great Dictators made during the Second World War to raise the spirits of their enemies.

It is a judgment to be found also in a stream of biographies which imply that he was little more than a charlatan, a cynical opportunist with no serious ideas other than that of conquering personal power and generating continuous pretexts to be fêted as the saviour of the nation. In 1961 Laura Fermi’s Mussolini assured the reader that Mussolini was ‘essentially a journalist who had read voraciously, indiscriminately...without submitting what he thought to stringent scrutiny’. Similarly, Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick in Mussolini. Study of a Demagogue (1964) dismisses him as a ‘sentimental poetaster [bad poet] who has read Nietzsche, made dangerous by a streak of egotistical ruthlessness with which to further his boundless ambitions’. Even the more academic work, C. Hibbert’s Benito Mussolini (1974), assures us that ‘his philosophical views were always the reflection of the book he had happened to read last’, and that in the early days as Fascist leader he was ‘constantly obliged to qualify a previous declaration, change a course previously pronounced unalterable, contradict himself’.

The idea of Mussolini as an opportunist devoid of an overall vision or goal was given its most thorough scholarly exposition by Denis Mack Smith’s Mussolini (1981), which asserts that his fickle personality was full of contradictions, and that ‘there is not a single belief or idea in all his voluminous writings which he does not directly contradict somewhere else’. In the Warwick Teaching Video devoted to ‘Mussolini and Italian Fascism’ Mack Smith is adamant that ‘ideology meant very little to Mussolini’ and that we can safely ‘forget about Fascist ideology’. Mussolini emerges from such portraits as a man of straw. At the heart of his eventful, dynamic life as duce there lay a vacuum, or so it would appear. Like history itself as described by Shakespeare in King Lear, he was, we are told, ‘full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’

**Fascism as an ideology-less movement**

If Mussolini was the driving force of Fascism and yet had no strategy, no vision, no goal other than becoming dictator, then it is all too easy for Fascism itself to be dismissed as ideologically hollow. It has thus been frequently treated as little more than a vehicle to destroy the power of progressive forces of democracy and socialism under the pretext of creating a ‘new Italy’. Despite its revolutionary claims, the regime was set up ‘really’ for the reactionary purpose of protecting the interests of established elites (a point which Marxists are especially keen to stress), and of fulfilling the naked ambition of its leaders, who were little more than gangsters in uniform. Given the immense human suffering it went on to cause directly and indirectly through its attempts to make Italy appear a great military and colonial power, Fascism thus comes across as a black comedy or a tragic farce, an elaborate confidence trick imposed on the Italians by a supreme con-man.

At this point the vast crowds who listened so enthusiastically to his speeches seem like a herd of sheep beguiled by empty rhetoric, while the countless references in the regime’s speeches and books to the values and ideals of Fascism, and all the policies, institutional changes, public works, and social and military campaigns undertaken under Mussolini ostensibly to fulfil them, appear part of an elaborate exercise in propaganda designed to create the illusion of a revolution without the substance. Fascism becomes a paper tiger, an elaborate political drama staged to deceive Italians into thinking they were living in a new, exciting era of history, while nothing really changed, and power remained in the hands of a small elite of self-serving cynics.

The consequence of these assumptions is that ‘generic’ fascism itself becomes a vacuous force,
full of a superficial dynamism and violence, but definable solely in terms of its outward features: the displays of fanatical nationalism, its theatrical, militaristic style of politics, notably the leader cult, and its readiness to use state repression and violence against its enemies. As such it is an essentially a pseudo-revolutionary force, with no ‘ideas’ for radically changing society. Thus the scholar Roger Scruton comments in his Dictionary of Political Thought that fascism has ‘the form of an ideology without the content’. The absence of a specific fascist ideology means that some would argue it is pointless trying to define it at all. In his book on Fascism John Whittam goes as far as to state that the quest to identify a generic ‘fascism’ is like ‘searching for a black cat in a dark and possibly empty room’. On such premises it becomes impossible to resolve whether the Third Reich, Vichy France, Zhirinovsky’s ‘Liberal Democratic Party of Russia’, Milosevich’s Serbia, or Jörg Haider’s Austrian Freedom Party are all examples of fascism. If it is external similarities alone that count, then they are, but no more so than any militaristic dictatorships with a nationalist outlook, which would include regimes as different as the Third Reich, Soviet Russia, Ceaucescu’s Romania, Pol Pot’s Cambodia, and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Since Mussolini’s Italy was much less repressive in the use of state terror than any of these, or than other regimes which have occasionally been described by their opponents as fascist, such as Communist China, apartheid South Africa, and some Latin American and ‘Third World’ dictatorships, perhaps he was a ‘half-hearted’ or ‘half-baked fascist’ in this sense as well.

**Mussolini the revolutionary**

Fortunately there is a small group of scholars who, while not taken in by the myth of Mussolini as the infallible genius, are equally resistant to the myth of Mussolini as an opportunist devoid of idealism, vision, and ideas. They have taken the trouble to examine the historical record of his life as a political activist in the period before he founded Fascism in March 1919, which reveals someone genuinely and passionately committed from an early age to the cause of bringing about the revolutionary transformation of Italian society. At the turn of the century he was one of many young Italians who were convinced that the economic backwardness, poverty, social injustice, and political corruption which plagued their country could only be remedied through a radical renewal of its institutions and values.

When he first became involved in politics, the main source of ideas for such a project was still Marxism. Many attempts were being made all over Europe to make it applicable to the realities of contemporary society, the most famous of which was Lenin’s, which eventually served as the basis for the tactics used by the Bolsheviks to such great effect in the Russian Revolution. The young Mussolini agreed with many Marxists in focussing on the possibility of carrying out a national rather than an international revolution made possible not through the unfolding of economic processes, but through the collective will to bring about change. In other words, revolution was a matter of faith, of utopian vision, of myth, not facts. This radical departure from the materialism and internationalism of original Marxism predisposed him to be impressed by some currents of right-wing, and hence anti-Marxist, nationalism in Italy which stressed the role of mythic energies, especially cultural and artistic ones, as the key to a successful revolution.

One of the main forums for these ideas in the decade before the First World War was a periodical published in Florence called La Voce whose main aim was to create a new culture which would provide the basis of a ‘Third Italy’ inhabited by a new type of Italian, the ‘new man’. In 1935 Mussolini still recalled how when he first read the periodical in 1909 it seemed like a ‘bolt of lightning’ which revealed ‘his destiny’, and gave him for the first time ‘the sense of being called upon to inaugurate a new epoch’. While he was immersed in such humdrum business as taking minutes at trade-union meetings, he was impressed by the way the ‘Vocianti’ (the intellectuals and artists who were contributing articles to the review) communicated the heady excitement of preparing for the birth of ‘a new world’. In short, several years before the First World War,
Mussolini’s revolutionary socialism had not only been blended with revolutionary nationalism, but he was convinced of his personal mission to lead Italy into a new era. It was this deep-seated conviction which motivated his apparently ‘fickle’ decision in 1915 to throw in his lot with the Socialists and put his weight behind the interventionist movement which was campaigning for Italy to join in the First World War on the side of Britain and France. Like all the interventionists, he looked to the war to generate the mythic energies needed to sweep aside the old ruling elites and weld the Italians into a national community united by a shared sense of purpose and destiny. What characterized his vision was the belief that the new elite would be based on a heroic spirit rather than on class, and would draw on all the productive, revolutionary energies of the nation in a revolutionary alliance against the ‘old Italy’.

Mussolini was not a theoretical animal, but a pragmatist, a man of action. He instinctively valued ideas for their effectiveness as mobilizing forces for changing reality rather than for the intellectual satisfaction they provided as ways of modelling of reality in theory. To promote his vision he set up his own newspaper, Il Popolo d’Italia, appealing to the ‘people’ in a way which synthesized left-wing ideas of class with right-wing ideas of nation. In December 1917, while the war was still raging, he published an article on the ‘trenchocracy’, which presented the men who had fought in the front-line as the core of a revolutionary process which had already begun. The future duce looked to them to be forged by the ‘community of the trenches’ into a new aristocracy, inspired by a thirst for social justice and national greatness which he describes as an ‘anti-Marxist and national socialism’, synthesizing class and nation. In March 1919 he founded the first Fascio di combattimento to harness the potential of the war veterans and of other groups who dreamed of a ‘new Italy’ such s Futurists, syndicalists. It was from this seed that Fascism grew.

The constancy of Mussolini’s dream of a reborn Italy

When Mussolini’s career is viewed through this lens, it becomes self-evident that until well into the 1930s his vision of himself as the leader of a renewed Italy governed by a new political class remained the article of faith which lay at the heart of all his speeches, articles, policies, and actions, however much he chopped and changed the specific beliefs and policies which he adopted to achieve this goal. Certainly it required extraordinary arrogance to believe in this vision, and extraordinary cynicism to make and break the allegiances and commitments which he undertook tactically according to the needs of the moment. He was at first a republican, then a monarchist, an anti-clerical then a defender of the Catholic Church, a ‘futurist’ who wanted to sever any connection with the past, then an emulator of the Roman emperors. He claimed Fascism was ‘not for export’ and then that it should be imitated by every other civilized nation. He mocked Nazi racism and then introduced anti-Semitic legislation of his own.

Moreover, a close study of his writings reveals that the thread of continuity running through all the phases of his career was an obsession with the renewal of Italy, and hence, indirectly, of a Western civilization which like many of his contemporaries, he considered to be in the final phase of terminal decline in its liberal manifestation. Once it is realized that he came to identify his life with the transformation of Italy, but was indifferent about precisely how this was to be achieved institutionally or ideologically, then many of the glaring contradictions in his pronouncements turn out to be paradoxes. This is why the Italian historian Renzo De Felice, who spent a life-time studying and writing on Mussolini comes to the conclusion that ‘if we do not bear in mind the ideological nucleus around which Mussolini came to conceive his world, his politics and his personal mission, it is in fact impossible to understand really his political action, the basic logic which connected up the individual displays of behaviour like so many pieces of a mosaic’.

Every allusion to Italy’s rebirth reveals the ‘basic logic’ of his mosaic, the pattern underlying the
apparent arbitrariness of the political stances he adopted. For example, in his autobiography which he published in English in 1928, Mussolini declares that he founded the *Fasci di combattimento* to ‘lay the foundation of a new civilization’ by embodying ‘a wholly new political conception, adequate with the living reality of the twentieth century, overcoming at the same time the ideological worship of liberalism, the limited horizons of various spent and exhausted democracies, and finally the violently Utopian spirit of Bolshevism.’ Towards the end he states that his objective as head of state is simple: ‘I want to make Italy great, respected and feared; I want to render my nation worthy of her noble and ancient traditions....I am tireless in my wish to see newly born and newly reborn Italians.’ He claims responsibility for the fact that ‘the loftiest civic and national vision to-day leads this people to its goal, this people which is living in its great new springtime’.

The conventional view would be that in such passages Mussolini was merely indulging once more in empty rhetoric designed to create the illusion of a revolution so as to gain power for himself. I would argue that the belief that he was inaugurating the rebirth of Italy, or what he called in his autobiography the ‘moral reawakening’ which would put an end to its ‘moral disintegration’, was fundamentally sincere, though in time it was a belief which became confused with and corrupted by his increasingly boundless vanity and egomania. It was this belief in Italy’s potential for renewal and restored greatness that drew supporters to him, though here again, the appeal of Fascism as an ideal became increasingly confused with and corrupted by the duce’s attraction as a ‘charismatic’ leader wielding absolute power. Shortly before his death in 1977 at the age of eighty, Vittorio Mussolini still had vivid memories of his father’s political ambitions, which he expressed in words which, if the approach adopted in this article is correct, can be taken at their face value as a testimony to the ‘ideological nucleus’ which De Felice claimed existed throughout his career:

> My father, Benito Mussolini, had a big dream. He wanted a strong and fierce Italy, respected for its law and order, and the highest form of social justice. He wanted a new Italian character, worthy of its Roman heritage and the brilliance of the Renaissance. Such a race could have been among the future leaders of the world.

If we take such assertions as expressing the kernel of Mussolini’s ideology, then it can be argued that every action undertaken by the Fascist regime under his rule was conceived to realize his ‘big dream’ of revolutionizing the Italian character and the Italian nation: the destruction of liberal institutions and the erection of the ‘totalitarian state’, the pact with the Vatican, the creation of a youth movement, the campaign to modernize Italy’s infrastructure, industry, and tenor of life, the constant rallies and cultural events, the ambitious architectural and town planning schemes, the creation of a corporatist economy, the build-up of the armed forces, the colonization of Abyssinia, and the pact with Hitler. No matter how unsuccessful the Fascist regime was an attempt to turn Italians into a new type of modern citizen, living life at a fever pitch of intensity and activity as part of the national community, and providing a beacon of hope in the new ‘dark age’ of modern civilization.

**Mussolini the Fascist**

From what has been said it is clear that Mussolini’s detractors are at least ‘half right’. A boundless egoism constitutes another continuous thread running through Mussolini’s career, fatefully intertwined with his idealistic vision of Italy’s renewed imperial destiny. There are clear signs that in the course of the 1930s he increasingly believed in the myth of his own genius and infallibility which was being disseminated through the official ‘duce cult’, and that his personality progressively degenerated into that of a lonely megalomaniac utterly estranged from reality. By the end of the war it would be a travesty to talk of him as someone who believed in much at all, other than that his grandiose schemes for the transformation of Italy had been
betrayed by the Monarchy, by traitors within the Fascist party, and by the Italians themselves, who so stubbornly refused to become Fascistized into ‘new men’. He had long ceased to be a revolutionary. His vision of national renewal had given way to an obsession with self-justification and pathetic fantasies of what might have been.

The dream of national rebirth was so deeply engrained in Mussolini’s construction of reality, however, that it is a theme which still recurs in *History of a Year*, written in 1944 after he had been installed by the Nazis as the head of the puppet state, ‘the Republic of Salò’, after being rescued from his mountain-top prison by the SS on Hitler’s insistence. Though a pale shadow of his former self, he declares that Italians must ‘drink to the dregs the bitter cup of defeat’ in order to ‘achieve redemption’ and ‘rise again’, and predicts that ‘the Fascist decade will return to thrill the young men of the second half of our century’.

Arguably it is precisely this vision of national rebirth, with the prospect of a phase of decadence, weakness, and defeat giving way to one of renewal, strength, and victory which was the core mobilizing myth of Fascism, the utopian vision which rallied Italians of a vast range of conflicting beliefs and values to devote themselves to Mussolini as incarnating the hopes for a new Italy. Even in the cultural sphere, where so many contrasting ideas over what constituted ‘Fascist art’ jockeyed for position, it can be empirically proved that the underlying assumption of all artists and intellectuals who devoted their creativity to the regime was that they were contributing to the ‘rebirth of Italy’ and the ‘regeneration of Western civilization’.

**Mussolini the fascist**

It is the core Fascist belief in the rebirth of the nation that (again ‘arguably’, because not all experts agree) not only provides the structural link between all the phases of Mussolini’s Fascism, and all the varieties of Fascism to be found among his followers, but which forms the definitional core of generic fascism as well. According to this approach, what characterizes fascist ideology is the belief in the possibility that through direct intervention in history the nation is about to be regenerated after a period of decline and decadence, not simply restored to how it was in some past ‘Golden Age’ but transformed and rejuvenated in a new order. This can be shown to be the common denominator between such outwardly different ideologies as Fascism, Nazism, and the many varieties of revolutionary nationalism which grew up between the wars and since 1945, ranging from the Romanian Iron Guard, the Spanish Falange, and the Hungarian Arrow Cross to the Afrikaner Werstandsbeweging, the British National Party, and the American neo-Nazi National Alliance.

Once we adopt this approach to defining fascism, as some leading scholars have done (notably Stanley Payne) then Mussolini, despite the obvious defects in his personality, was not a half-baked Fascist, an opportunist devoid of ideas, but a ‘fully-baked’ fascist. In fact for a time he was the role model of the ‘fascist new man’. If ultra-nationalist groups in France, Britain, Romania called themselves ‘fascists’ in the 1920s, and both liberals and socialists were soon using the term to describe their ideological arch-enemy, it is because in their different ways they sensed that Fascism combined extreme nationalism with a revolutionary urge to transform the state which was quite unlike the traditional conservatism, embodied, for example in General Franco’s Spain or Marshal Pétain’s Vichy France. A new ideological force had entered history, though for a long time its mythic driving force, the rebirth myth, has not been recognized by historians as its defining component. To this day there is considerable debate and confusion about the use and definition of fascism.

However, there is little controversy about the historical consequences of the decision of the leaders of what were (according to this definition) Europe’s only two truly fascist regimes, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, to form an alliance, the Rome-Berlin Axis, in November 1936.
It proved to be a key step towards Hitler’s realization of the Third Reich’s myth of Germany’s rebirth, one which involved the creation of a vast empire in Europe and the ethnic cleansing of all those which the regime held to be racially or ideologically degenerate. When Mussolini told the people of Cuneo a year before Hitler’s ‘seizure of power’ that Italy was ‘the only nation which has a word and a doctrine of salvation and life to give to all the civilized peoples of the earth’ he could have had no idea of the catastrophic consequences of the ‘fascism’ which he had done so much to put onto the historical map. In its Nazi permutation the ‘rebirth of the nation’ would lead to the horrors of war, persecution, and mass death on an unimaginable scale, and eventually to Mussolini’s own ignominious death in April 1945.

4,000 words

Words and concepts to note

dilettante
cynic
egotism
reactionary
arbitrary
permutation

Questions to consider

1. Can you give two examples of Mussolini’s readiness to contradict earlier pronouncements or policies?

2. How can such contradictory behaviour be explained as tactically necessary to achieve his goal of a ‘reborn Italy’.

3. How would you distinguish a ‘fascist’ from a non-fascist movement using Griffin’s model?

4. How do the violent acts of any contemporary examples of fascism be explained in terms of their attempt to bring about national rebirth?

Further Reading


John A. Davis and Denis Mack Smith, Mussolini and Italian Fascism, (Warwick Teaching Videos, University of Warwick, Coventry, 1991).


R. Griffin, Fascism (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995)
