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Everyday Life in Fascist Venice, 1929-40

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A number of scholars have recently examined the ways in which Italians participated in, supported and/or resisted the Fascist project of radically transforming politics, society, and the citizens? private sphere, including the transformation of the boundaries between private life and the public arena. This book is a contribution to this historiography, and explores the extent to which Fascism was capable of affecting deeply the private lives of Italians.

The issue of consent/consensus goes back to the mid-1970s, when De Felice, and later a plethora of his followers, insisted in particular on the capacity of Mussolini and other leaders to create a vast consensus around the regime and to mobilise the masses through instruments of mass communication. Historians who opposed this interpretation, like Rochat, emphasised, among other aspects, that De Felice?s sources were exclusively from the records of Fascist and institutional groups contained in the Central State Archive, or the private papers of Fascist leaders. Like other works from the 1990s in particular, Kate Ferris?s book is based on a variety of private and public sources and moves from the institutional to the social aspects of Italian lives in the 1930s.

The Fascist regime created an efficient propaganda machine by utilising the press, radio and cinema to valorise in a spectacular way the regime?s successes (such as the ?Battle for Grain? or the reclamation of the

Pontine Marshes), with the aim of maintaining the masses in a state of permanent emotional mobilisation through collective rites and ceremonies. The major problem, however, is how to measure the extent of the impact this had on Italian lives. The book thus aims to compare the regime?s intentions with the population?s reception.

The concept of consensus is problematic also because of the tendency to consider ?Italians? as a generic group. Interpretations should vary depending on which social, geographical, or economic group is studied: it is difficult to describe a ?national? or a ?collective? identity and is more fruitful to be specific and provide circumscribed and well-documented case studies. This is what Ferris has done here, investigating the case of Venice, and within that, some particular aspects: youth; popular festivals; consumption during the Ethiopian war; and funerals. In all these cases, she seeks to assert the citizens? agency rather than assuming a direct relationship between propaganda and its reception. The difficulty in drawing conclusions is evident from the very first pages of the introduction, where the author suggests that the impact of dictatorship was not felt consistently in everyday life, nor was it entirely remote; however, what was taking place in the streets, bars, markets, and other public places, and even more at home, remains hard to assess.

A first chapter on Venetian life between the wars illustrates Venice?s peculiarity as a tourist city, where Fascism (just as the regimes of past centuries had done) expressed itself as a spectacle not only to the inhabitants but also to a global audience. It was particularly important to exploit the myth of the *Serenissima* in conjunction with that of imperial Rome, of which Venice was described by Fascist propaganda as being the principal heir in Italy: founded just as Rome fell, Venice continued to expand its influence in the Mediterranean, sustaining the link with the capital?s glorious past. Important allies in the establishment and re-enacting of that myth were the Catholic Church and the city notables, who claimed a *Serenissima* ancestry. In order to function, the Fascist project had to rely on discourses that were already understood and on pre-existing rituals. It is evident from other chapters too (the one on rituals of death in particular), that Venetians could empathise with beliefs and practices which were familiar to them.

The chapter on youth provides a thorough analysis of what children read, and contributes in this way to wider studies on the Fascist organisation of culture (Turi, Mangoni, Isnenghi, Gibelli, for example). The Fascist message, which sought to persuade children to see themselves as future citizen-soldiers, invaded their time at school (through to university) as well as leisure time. However, the difficulty in moving from the analysis of propaganda to its reception is evident: the fact that the act of reading is active and not passive, although important, is not in itself guarantee that children were immune from the Fascist message. Ferris?s research shows that children, when writing about their readings, did not demonstrate a clear interest in politics; however, it can be claimed that this would be typical of their age in any circumstances, at least as a general tendency. Naturally children enjoyed fairy tales and cartoons; in the same way, it can be argued (through an analysis of contemporary images, children?s writings and LUCE films) that when they attended summer camps they enjoyed the games more than Fascist speeches. The next step, and the problematic one, would be to understand the extent of the Fascistisation that occurred while reading fairy tales or playing games. The author reaches the balanced (but not conclusive) deduction, at p. 76, that children?s essays allow us to believe that Venetian children neither held pro-Fascist view, nor did they interiorise the propaganda messages.

The myth of the *Serenissima* Venetian Republic was mostly exploited with the creation of popular festivals, to which Ferris devotes a chapter. Particularly enlightening is the example of the Festa delle tre Marie, a variation on an early-Medieval festival in order to make it fit with the new demographic campaign and with both Fascist racism (anti-Slav, in this case) and Fascist foreign policy aims. This was not an entirely invented tradition, but an attempt to adapt an existing festival in order to reinforce among the city population Fascist ideals and beliefs that were rooted in a pre-existing outlook (the city?s centuries-long interest in the Balkans, conventional Catholic demographic principles). Again the problem is assessing its popularity among the Venetians, and the extent to which they participated in the event. Here the conclusion seems to be even more uncertain than in the other chapters. At p. 97 the author suggests that the fact that ?for whatever reason? the festival was abandoned after two years ?would perhaps? suggest that it was not popular. While there is no doubt that the claims of popularity in the local press (which was very favourable to the regime)

cannot be trusted, the opposite view is also difficult to sustain as the evidence found here is limited to a few photographs in the newspapers. Again, what Venetians thought personally remains hard to assess ? and the same difficulty would have lingered on even if the images showed masses of Venetians: as we know, interpreting the Fascist crowd presents complex challenges too.

The chapter on family consumption during the war in Ethiopia raises the important question of what Italians (in this case Venetians, but it is a stimulating issue for other parts of the country too) did and thought within their own homes. How did they *privately* react to sanctions and to a propaganda which sought to construct a Fascist home front while the war was fought in Africa? Ferris, as in other parts of the book, distinguishes the public and private levels, although she is aware they often intersect, and analyses the relationship between regime and family. In some cases, as in consumption and reproduction patterns, the family could serve as a site of resistance to, or at least retreat from, the regime?s impositions. The evidence provided, which pertains to both upper and lower social classes in Venice, seems to suggest (as the author concurs at p. 142) that responses were mixed. However, as elsewhere, there appears to be an inclination towards diminishing the impact of the regime on everyday life, even when the evidence is indeed diverse. The issue of non-compliance (discussed at p. 144) is an example of this: although non-compliance can be interpreted as non-adherence to the regime?s directives, it is hazardous to describe it straightforwardly as resistance, let alone an active expression of anti-Fascism. Episodes of non-compliance could be seen during the Second World War too, and in all belligerent countries (for example in relation to women?s behaviour regarding consumption and rationing), but did not necessarily acquire political connotation.

Finally, the book focuses on the regime?s attempt to Fascistise funerals and rituals of death. As in the rest of the book, the author provides interesting examples based on thorough research, and as for all the other aspects, she seems sceptical of the real participation of Venetians in the Fascist initiatives. Here again, however, the evidence provided leaves the reader uncertain about the conclusions drawn. This is because of the difficulty in interpreting the available data. For example, the author states, at p. 173, that over the decade 1929?40 only 56 per cent of death notices included the Fascist date; however, considering that it was not compulsory, this could be interpreted as not such a low number. On the belief in the ?Fascist death? among those who had fought in Spain and Ethiopia (p. 177), and for reflections on the consensus in that case, the important book by Nicola Labanca (1) would have brought some interesting critical reflections to bear.

By investigating everyday life in Venice in the 1930s, this book provokes crucial questions as to the extent to which the regime failed in its totalitarian aims. At times the author seeks to draw from mixed evidence the conclusion that Fascism had a limited influence on Venetians? daily lives. I wonder whether this can run the risk of emptying Fascists of Fascism. The image of Italians as ideologically and politically involved and convinced Fascists can indeed be as misleading as that of Italians accepting Fascism out of convenience or because they were forced to.

Notes

1. Nicola Labanca, *Una Guerra per l?impero* (Bologna, 2005).Back to (1)

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