

CASTOR OIL AND THE INTELLIGENTSIA
LA INTELIGENCIA Y EL ACEITE DE RICINO

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When fascism won over the state and the Eternal City, it also won over most of Italy's intellectuals. Some yoked themselves without reserve to its wagon and fortunes; others gave it their implicit consent; still others, the most prudent of the lot, adopted a benevolent neutrality toward it. The Intelligentsia takes pleasure in letting itself be taken by Force. Especially when force, as in the case of fascism, is young, daring, warriorlike, and adventure-seeking.

There was, moreover, a convergence of specifically Italian factors in the backing that artists and intellectuals gave fascism. All the latest chapters of Italian history are steeped in the discourse of Gabriele D'Annunzio: "The spiritual origins of fascism are in D'Annunzio's literature."¹ And Futurism—which was merely an aspect, an episode of the D'Annunzian phenomenon—is another psychological ingredient in the fascist mix.² The futurists greeted the Italo-Turkish War³ as the start of

1. The source of this quotation about D'Annunzio is not clear. Elsewhere, however, Mariátegui quotes at length from the historian Adriano Tilgher's analysis of D'Annunzio's cultural impact on Italian nationalism. For more information on Gabriele D'Annunzio, see footnote 4 in Mariátegui's "Scenes from a Civil War" in this collection.

2. Filippo Marinetti founded the futurist movement with the publication of "Fondazione e Manifesto del futurismo" on the front page of the Parisian daily *Le Figaro* in February of 1909. This manifesto, which would come to be influential across Europe, demanded a break with the complacency of tradition, and envisioned a new, revolutionary aesthetic embracing speed, dynamism, industrialism, aggression, war, and misogyny as some of its guiding values.

3. The *Guerra di Libia* was a year-long conflict with the Ottoman Empire beginning in late 1911 under prime minister Giovanni Giolitti. On the Italian side, the venture was driven by an agenda of expansionist, colonialist nationalism seeking to occupy the once Ottoman-ruled territories that now make up Libya.

a new era for Italy. Later, D'Annunzio would become the spiritual *condottiere* of Italy's intervention in the World War. Futurists and D'Annunzians alike fostered in Italy a mood combining grandiosity, anti-Christianism, romanticism, and grandiloquence. To the new generations—as Adriano Tilgher and Antonio Labriola have noted—they preached the cult of heroism, violence, and war.⁴ In a warm, southerly, and prolific nation such as Italy, ill contained and ill fed by its meager territory, there was a latent tendency toward expansion. And so these ideas found a favorable climate. Demographic and economic factors aligned perfectly with the ideas that literature was inspiring. The middle class made particularly easy prey for the D'Annunzian spirit (the proletariat, led and kept in check by socialism, was less vulnerable to these influences). This literature had collaborators in the idealist philosophy of Giovanni Gentile and Benedetto Croce, and in all the other imports and variations on German thought.⁵

Idealists, futurists, and D'Annunzians all perceived in fascism a work of their own making. They embraced this motherhood; an umbilical cord perceptibly joined fascism to most of the intellectuals. D'Annunzio didn't join up with fascism, as he couldn't be one of its lieu-

4. Labriola (1843-1904) was a philosopher, politician, and one of Italy's foremost Marxist critics. Tilgher (1887-1941), whom Mariátegui cites in other writings, was a philosopher, essayist, journalist, and literary critic who opposed the fascists.

5. Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944), philosopher and literary critic known for what he termed *idealismo attuale* or "actual idealism," that is, an idealism identifying absolute reality with the act of thinking. Transcending the Hegelian framework of his early years, Gentile asserted the convergence of subjectivity and objectivity in the "thinking thought" or *pensiero pensante*, without which the object loses all meaning. Mussolini appointed him to head of the education ministry from 1922 to 1924. Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) was a historian, critic, and philosopher often grouped with Gentile as a neo-Hegelian idealist. The two were close friends until ongoing political disagreements caused a definitive rift between them in 1924. Though Croce was critical of Mussolini, Mariátegui sees fascist undercurrents in the idealist tradition to which he belongs. Croce served as Italy's minister of education from 1920 to 1921, before the fascists took power.

tenants; but he kept cordial relations with it and did not snub its platonic affections. The futurists voluntarily enrolled in the fascist ranks. The most extremist of the fascist dailies, the Roman *L'Impero*, is still run by Mario Carli and Emilio Settimelli, two survivors of the futurist experiment.⁶ Ardengo Soffici, another ex-futurist, contributes to *Il Popolo d'Italia*, Mussolini's mouthpiece. Nor did the idealist philosophers hold back in surrendering to fascism: Giovanni Gentile, having implemented his fascist educational reforms, produced an idealist defense of the bludgeon. Finally, the solitary literati, in want of a school and a following, also demanded a place in the fascist cortege of victory. One of this category's foremost representatives, Sem Benelli, leery of donning the black shirt or *camicia nera*, collaborated with the fascists and, though not grouped with them, he approved of their praxis and their methods. In the latest elections, Benelli was one of the most distinguished candidates for the prime ministry.⁷

But this was happening at a time when the fascist geste was, or seemed to be, at its peak and plenitude. Once fascism went into decline, the intellectuals set about rectifying their stance.

Those who met the March on Rome with silence now feel the need to put it on trial and

6. Mario Carli (1889-1933), novelist and journalist associated with both Futurism and *arditismo*, a movement influenced by Gabriele D'Annunzio that emphasized adventure-seeking, physical toughness, and danger. *Arditismo* takes its name from the *arditi*, an Italian attack unit in World War I famed for their dangerous incursions into enemy lines. Together with the writer Emilio Settimelli (1891-1954), Carli founded and ran the fascist daily *L'Impero* from 1923-1933.

7. Sem Benelli (1877-1949), playwright. Staunchly pro-intervention, he fought in the First World War and was later elected to parliament in 1919. In a 1922 interview with *Il Popolo d'Italia*, Benelli counts himself among the forerunners of fascism. He broke publicly with fascism after the murder of the statesman Giacomo Matteotti (see note 9).

8. The *Marcia su Roma* was a decisive insurrection of fascist paramilitary forces coordinated by Mussolini in October of 1922. The threat of armed conflict as the fascist militias approached the Italian capital pressured prime minister Luigi Facta to ask the monarch Vittorio Emanuele III to approve a declaration of martial law. The king refused to deploy the army against the fascists, instead installing Mussolini as prime minister and asking him to form a government.

9. Giacomo Matteotti was the lawyer and socialist *deputato* whose June 1924 abduction and murder at the hands of *squadristi* set off a months-long political crisis for the fledgling fascist regime. In a May 30 session of parliament, Matteotti had denounced the violent methods of the *squadristi* and disappeared soon after.

condemn it.⁸ Fascism has lost a great deal of its intellectual clientele and following. The aftermath of the Matteotti assassination has hastened these defections.⁹

At present, this anti-fascist current is taking hold among the intellectuals. Roberto Bracco is one of the leaders of the democratic opposition. Benedetto Croce also proclaims himself an anti-fascist, despite sharing both the responsibility for and the laurels of idealist philosophy with Giovanni Gentile. D'Annunzio, seeming reclusive and ill-humored of late, has announced that he's retiring from public life to be, once again, the "solitary and prideful artist" he was before. Finally, Sem Benelli, along with some dissidents of fascism and philo-fascism, has founded the Italic League with the aim of inciting a moral upheaval against the methods of the *camicie nere*.

Recently, fascism won the backing of Luigi Pirandello. But Pirandello is a humorist. What's more, Pirandello is a petit bourgeois. Provincial and anarchistic, he's endowed with great literary talent and meager political sensitivity. His stance could never be symptomatic of a situation. In spite of Pirandello, it's clear that Italian intellectuals have fallen out with fascism. The intelligentsia's love affair with castor oil has ended.

How did this rupture come about? It seems

fitting to discard one hypothesis right away: the one claiming that intellectuals distance themselves from Mussolini because he hasn't valued or made use of their contributions. Fascism does tend to dress up in imperialist rhetoric and mask its lack of principles behind a few literary commonplaces; but it loves men of action over the wordsmiths. Mussolini is too sharp and too sly a man to surround himself with professors and literati. He is better served by a military council of demagogues and guerrilla fighters, experts at assault, tumult, and agitation. Between the bludgeon and rhetoric, he opts without hesitation for the bludgeon. Roberto Farinacci, one of fascism's current leaders and the leading figure of its last national assembly, is a monumental enemy of liberty, democracy...and grammar. But these things aren't enough to crush the intellectuals. Truly, Italian intellectuals never expected Mussolini to turn his government into some Byzantine academy; nor was fascist prose more grammatical then than it is now. Nor are the literati, the philosophers, and the artists—what Filippo Marinetti calls the *artecrazia*—horrified by the gruesomeness and brutality of the blackshirt geste. For the past three years they bore it without complaint or condemnation.

The Italian intelligentsia's new position is the sign and symptom of a deeper phenomenon. For fascism it isn't a serious development per se, but part of a greater development, as it were. The loss or gain of a few poets like Sem Benelli is of no importance for the reactionary Right or for the Revolution. The intelligentsia and the *artecrazia* reacted to fascism after the social strata in which they're embedded, rather than before them. It isn't the intellectuals changing their stance toward fascism. It's the bourgeoisie, the banks, the press, etc.—

the same people and institutions whose common consent allowed for the March on Rome three years ago. The intelligentsia is essentially opportunistic. Its role in history is in reality quite modest. Neither art nor literature, despite their grandiose delusions, direct politics; they depend on politics, like so many other less refined and less illustrious activities. Intellectuals make up the clientele of order, tradition, power, force and—when the need arises—of castor oil and the bludgeon. Some preeminent spirits and creative minds escape this rule, but they're exceptional spirits and minds.

Middle-class people, artists, and *letterati* generally lack the aptitude and the *élan* for revolution. Those now daring to rise in rebellion against fascism are totally innocuous. Sem Benelli's *Italic League*, for example, doesn't want to form a party and barely aspires to engage in politics. It defines itself as "a sacred union to develop its sacred program: for the Good and the Right of the Italic Nation; for the Good and the Right of the Italic man." This program may be very sacred, as Benelli says; but it's also very vague, very nebulous, and very naive.¹⁰ Benelli, his nostalgia for the past and his taste for archaic language so typical of the mediocre poets of our day, walks through Italy uttering, like a great poet of yore: *Pace! Pace! Pace!*¹¹ His powerless warning comes belatedly.

10. The full text of Sem Benelli's rambling September 1924 proclamation can be found in the September 2, 1924 edition of *L'Epoca*. The editors saw fit to include a disclaimer stating they were publishing the speech only as "political curiosity."

11. "Peace! Peace! Peace!" The reference is to song 128 of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* ("Italia mia, benché'l parlar sia indarno," 1344). This *canzone* calls for an end to the petty, but destructive, wars waged among the Italian nobility. In the final lines, the poet addresses his personified *canzone* and instructs it to use a pacifist slogan: "I' vo gridando: Pace, pace, pace."

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: In this 1925 piece from his first collection of essays, *La escena contemporánea* ("The Contemporary Scene"), Mariátegui reflects on the co-optation of the Italian literary establishment by Mussolini's fascist uprising. At the time when *La escena contemporánea* was published, it had been almost two years since Mariátegui had returned to Peru following his Italian exile (1919-1923). The mention of castor oil alludes to the violent methods through which Mussolini's fascist militia helped the movement consolidate power. In addition to beating, torturing, killing, and otherwise intimidating individuals opposed to the fascist regime—acts targeted at socialist organizers in particular—the *camicie nere* or "blackshirts" were known to force-feed their victims castor oil, causing gastrointestinal distress and the emptying of the bowels. Castor oil quickly became emblematic of the ruthlessness of the *squadre d'azione* or fascist squads.