



## REALISM: THE TRUE CHALLENGE OF FASCISM

BY LOTHROP STODDARD

**T**HAT Fascism militant challenges our times is generally understood. Yet the full extent of the challenge is hardly appreciated. Most persons see in Fascism a disturbing political portent. Few observers perceive that it also interrogates certain established ideas and ideals in startlingly novel fashion.

The reason for this inadequate appreciation is that, outside Italy, Fascism's critics and admirers alike err in neglecting its intellectual side. Fascist acts and policies are closely watched, and pronouncements of Mussolini are carefully read. But the logic of Fascist thought is seldom accorded the attention it deserves.

The prevailing opinion in the world to-day is that, while Fascism can act a-plenty, it has little new or constructive to say. In America, for instance, many people visualize the Fascisti as a bunch of political rough-necks, violently assaulting the Goddess of Liberty, and then adding insult to injury by giving her a dose of castor oil. Others look at Fascism as a strictly one-man show, with Mussolini cast in a role varying between Napoleon and the Kaiser. Still others regard Fascism as a sort of "White" Bolshevism, and see no essential difference between the present governments of Rome and Moscow. Even those who heartily endorse Fascism usually do so because of material benefits such as order and efficiency, and not because of any novel contribution to the stock of human ideas.

To the writer all this seems shortsighted, because his studies of Fascist thought and his personal contact with Fascist leaders have alike convinced him that Fascism has something to say which is bound to challenge our traditional thinking, regardless of how the present Fascist regime in Italy turns out. Mussolini may lead his people to disaster, and the Fascist government may collapse. Nevertheless, the intellectual challenge of Fascism as an attitude and philosophy of life will remain, and will have to be reckoned with throughout the civilized world.

### II

What, then, is this novel element which constitutes Fascism's true challenge to our times? It can be expressed in one word: *Realism*. The keynote of the Fascist philosophy (as distinguished from mere propagandist screeds or popular outbursts of emotion) is a thoroughgoing revolt against the sentimentality and phrase-worship of our age. Indeed, no better illustration of this realism can be given than by stating that, should any of Fascism's accredited spokesmen read these lines, they will undoubtedly register a mental protest against my use of the word "philosophy"; because so sternly realistic are the Fascisti that they deny having any such thing! Opposed to theorizing as they are, they consistently try to keep their minds from crystallizing around formulas of any kind, except as working hypotheses which they may scrap to-mor-

row. Similarly, tradition and emotion are recognized as useful tools and powerful stimuli; yet these are to be valued in a relative, not an absolute, sense.

That such uncompromising realism should enthrone itself in Italy may to many persons appear a singular paradox. Yet a moment's reflection should make it seem less exotic. Realism is not foreign to the Italian spirit. Beneath the luxuriant emotionalism of the Italian temperament there runs a strain of hard-headed practicality which often disconcerts those who do not know their Italians really well. Italian history is full of striking examples, from the cold diagnostics of Machiavelli to the shrewd *Realpolitik* of Cavour. And in the late war, when the other belligerents vied with one another in high-sounding slogans like "Kultur," "Rights of Small Nations," and "Making the World Safe for Democracy," was it not an Italian statesman who announced that "Sacred Egoism" determined his country's policy?

No, the Fascisti are genuine Italian products. What renders them especially noteworthy is that they stress and exalt one aspect of the national temperament which had hitherto been deemed of minor or occasional import. Yet their intellectual significance transcends Italy, since in formulating their realistic doctrine they have borrowed freely from other lands—from thinkers as far apart as Bismarck, Georges Sorel the syndicalist apostle, and our own William James. It is interesting to note the effect of James' "pragmatic" philosophy upon Fascist thought. James tersely defined pragmatism as: "Does it work?" Now that terse phrase is precisely the acid-test continually employed by Fascist leaders in considering their problems. Indeed, it largely characterizes Fascism's intellectual attitude toward the entire scheme of things.

Let us see how Fascist thinkers view our age. In their eyes the world has long been going on a wrong tack—especially since the days of Rousseau and

his fellows. For the past century and more, say the Fascisti, we have become increasingly obsessed by theoretical abstractions condensed into phrases or single words which we have set up like idols and to which we have superstitiously bowed down.

Consider some of our present-day idols. Their names are Democracy, Liberty, Equality, Inalienable Rights, Parliamentary Government, and more besides. Look at them closely. What do they really mean? In themselves, they mean nothing. Theoretical abstractions that they are, they have no concrete significance. Yet there they sit, like Gods in a heathen temple, paralyzing the creative thought and energy of mankind! Before them we meekly lay our problems.

Is this not so? Look you! A situation confronts us. What do we do? Do we study the special facts of the case and then act according to those facts in the light of our common sense? We may do this in our private lives, but we rarely act thus in public matters. Instead, we seek the will of our idols! In other words we strive to find a solution which shall be "democratic" or which will not offend such "sacred principles" as liberty and equality.

"What arrant nonsense!" cries Fascismo. "And—what dangerous nonsense, too! Such idolatrous blindness gets us nowhere; or, rather, lands us in a bog of troubles. Wherefore: Down with our idols! Down with Democracy! Down with Equality! Trample the somewhat decomposed body of Liberty! Out with the word 'Rights'—save, perchance, when coupled with the word 'Duties'! Sweep these false gods into the dust-bin along with the other fallen idols of the past! Thus, and thus only, may we clear our vision, free our common sense, and regain the path of true progress."

Such is the uncompromising "pragmatism" of Fascismo—a fierce revolt against precedent, formal logic, doctrinal authority, and phrase-worship of every

kind. To be sure, the Fascisti do not hesitate to use such things for propagandist purposes, to arouse popular enthusiasm and subdue the fickle passions of the crowd. But they do it with the tongue in the cheek, and this cynical disregard of consistency is, after all, another proof of their basic realism.

Here, indeed, is something new! For stark realism has often characterized closeted philosophers, and has even been enthroned in the person of an "enlightened despot" like Frederick the Great. But when has it inspired the ruling class in a modern State? There is a phenomenon with which our world must seriously reckon. It is a portent of far-reaching significance.

In the light of all this, how absurd appear current assertions that Fascism and Bolshevism spring from the same root. Despite certain similarities in method, the two movements are philosophically far asunder. For the Bolsheviks are not realists—they are subject to the most rigid dogmatism. No medieval Schoolmen were more bound by Scriptural texts and the authority of the Church Fathers than the Bolsheviks are by the gospel of Karl Marx, the glosses of Lenin, and the doctrine of economic determinism. Here again we see how necessary it is to go behind the acts and propaganda of the Fascist Government if we are to grasp the underlying spirit of Fascist thought and understand Fascism as a movement in the intellectual realm.

### III

With this aim in view, let us consider some of the matters wherein Fascism most sharply challenges traditional ideas. Perhaps the most striking instance is the Fascist attitude towards the doctrine of Nationalism. The outstanding feature of traditional nationalism has everywhere been a tendency to become a *doctrine*, suffused with patriotic mysticism and buttressed by *ex parte* historical precedents. From Ireland to Anatolia, your typical nationalist recognizes no

historical "statute of limitations" and sublimely ignores present-day realities. A French nationalist eloquently arguing his "right" to the left bank of the Rhine by citing the geography of Ancient Gaul and Charlemagne is just as dogmatic as Greek, Bulgarian, and Serbian nationalists "proving" their rival claims to Macedonia by dragging in everybody from Alexander the Great to Stephen Dushan. And the extraordinary thing is that these folk usually so persuade themselves by their own arguments that they really believe what they say.

Amid this general trend, Fascist nationalism presents an interesting variation. Of course, Fascism's nationalist aspirations are as grandiose as any others. The Fascisti are nothing if not patriotic; the power and glory of Italy are ever in their minds. And equally, of course, the Fascisti realize the emotional appeal of traditional methods and use them freely for propagandist purposes. The whole classic panoply to-day spread over Italy, with its symbolic fasces—the axe bound with rods, its legions, and its continual evoking of the imperial past are skillfully employed to get and keep the Italian people in what Fascist spokesmen describe as "a Roman mood."

And yet, despite all this, the fact remains that here as elsewhere the Fascist attitude is rooted in realism, so that at bottom Fascist nationalism is neither mystic nor dogmatic like that of its neighbors. To illustrate the difference I cannot do better than quote the remarks of a Fascist thinker, made to me during a conversation on this very point.

"I will explain to you," said he, "how our nationalism differs from the nationalism of most other peoples. Elsewhere you will find nationalism largely based upon abstract rights and historical precedents. We Fascisti disregard all this as beside the point. For us there are no abstract rights—not even the right of a nation to bare existence. A nation, like an individual, must deserve its existence—and must continue to deserve it. For example: We Fascisti do not claim that

our Italy acquires any special rights because, on this geographical area, there was a Rome, a *Cinquecento*, a *Risorgimento*; because its soil nourished a Dante or a Julius Cæsar. No. Our belief in Italy's present and future greatness rests upon what we living Italians are, do, and will do."

Cynical? "Machiavellian"? Certainly. But also—how bold—and how refreshingly novel! Here again we encounter a strain of original thinking which the world must take into account.

From Nationalism, let us turn to another field, that of Government. Here again we find Fascism entering the temple and laying profane hands upon another cherished idol—Parliamentary Democracy. During the past century popular representative government came to be regarded as a panacea for all political ills. Best developed and most successfully practiced by the English-speaking peoples, this type of government gained immense prestige throughout the world. In Continental Europe, in Latin America, and in the Orient it was the same story. Everywhere peoples aspired to set up legislatures elected by popular suffrage as the goal of political well-being. England was termed "The Mother of Parliaments," and the American Congress furnished a kindred model which was widely copied.

Unfortunately, many of these copyings did not yield the success of their Anglo-Saxon models. With some, the political machinery creaked badly, while others were obvious failures. In Italy parliamentarism was not a brilliant success. Political life was at once usurped by a caste of professional politicians who evolved the system known as *trasformismo*—a sublimated "pork barrel" which ate the heart out of the parliamentary regime. Divided into a number of political cliques based on personalities rather than principles, ministries were made up of shifting *blocs*—temporary party groupings, bound together more by desire for the spoils of office than by intention or ability to do any-

thing constructive once they were in power. The upshot was that Italian political life was extravagant, inefficient, and, above all, purposeless. As for the general public, it became increasingly bored and disgusted, but for a long time no practical alternative to the parliamentary regime suggested itself.

The war and its aftermath showed up the hollowness of Italian political life. Deeply disillusioned, Italy fell a prey to profound disorders threatening civil war or social revolution. The old political caste did nothing but temporize and play politics, thus proving itself wholly unable to cope with the situation. Then the Fascisti took a hand, overthrew the tottering government, and established a frank dictatorship.

Nowhere is Fascism's stark realism more strikingly exemplified than by its reflections upon government. Discarding phrases and getting down to the brass tacks of actuality, it asserts the following propositions: That the true aim of and reason for government is to do things and do things worth while; that the test of "good" government is, not abstract forms or particular institutions, but a government that will *work* in the above-stated sense; that the parliamentary regime adopted from England has not worked in Italy, but got steadily worse over more than half a century until the Fascisti threw it into the discard; that this long record of failure apparently proves that Anglo-Saxon parliamentarism is not suited to Italy; finally, that the only hope for the future is to face facts, study them, and try to evolve new political ideals and institutions more in harmony with the Italian mind and temperament. For the present, add the Fascisti, their dictatorship must continue, not only in order to imbue the Italian people with the Fascist philosophy but also because the post-war world is such a dangerous place and Italy is so badly situated therein that only a strong, patriotic regime can put Italy where she belongs or even save her from disaster.

## IV

Now, whether the Fascisti are right or wrong in their particular diagnosis of Italian politics does not here concern us. What we are interested in is the pragmatic, realistic view of government in general which is implied. To most Anglo Saxons, especially, such a view is apt to come as a rather startling novelty. Down to a few years ago, shortcomings in democratic institutions anywhere were wont to be ascribed, not to limitations in the idea itself, but to faulty or partial application. To critics of the democratic theory one stock answer was ordinarily made: "The remedy for democracy is more democracy!"

To-day we are not so sure. The ill-success of our institutions when transplanted to Latin America, the Orient, and even many parts of Europe, culminating in the downright repudiation of parliamentary democracy both in Fascist Italy and Bolshevik Russia, gives much food for reflection. After all, why should we assume that what is politically good for us is necessarily good for everyone else? May not the truth be that the world is big enough for several distinct types of government, suited to the respective temperaments and capacities of the various human groups? In other words, is not the pragmatic attitude toward government the only sound one to assume? But, once we adopt that attitude, the old shibboleth about the remedy for democracy being more democracy will (as applied to peoples of different caliber) be about as sensible as to assert: "The remedy for fits is more fits!"

Certainly, a dispassionate survey of the world would seem to show that capacity for our sort of government is really marked only in those peoples among whom it spontaneously arose. These are the peoples of North-European stock—the stock to-day best represented by the Anglo Saxons, the Scandinavians, and the Dutch. Throughout their history the North-European peoples have

shown an instinctive tendency towards democratic self-government. The constitutional history of England is a commonplace, and wherever Anglo Saxons have gone it has been the same story. One of the most significant lines ever penned on this matter is the casual remark of an early English colonial official that, a few years after the colony was founded, "a House of Burgesses *broke out* in Virginia." No legislature had been specified in the colony's charter, but, almost immediately, one *happened*! Those transplanted Englishmen *broke out* into self-government as spontaneously and inevitably as a bird breaks forth into song.

Furthermore, this political tendency is not confined to Anglo Saxons, but is shared by their blood-relatives of kindred stocks, as is abundantly shown by the history of the Dutch and Scandinavian peoples. Indeed, the most extreme example of democratic self-government in all human annals is furnished, not by the Anglo Saxons, but by the purely Scandinavian people of Iceland.

Iceland is by nature about the last place that one would look for a record in democratic self-government. This strange island of snow-fields and volcanoes, lying far away in the recesses of the Arctic Ocean, is so poor and barren that it might seem offhand as though its sparse, scattered population would be too oppressed by the struggle for bare existence to have time for corporate life or thought. Also, the first Norse settlers were culturally on a very primitive level. They were rude viking-farers, addicted to piracy, worshipping heathen gods, and quite out of touch with European civilization. Yet those rough barbarians who landed on the bleak Icelandic coasts over a thousand years ago had in their blood a strain of political efficiency which enabled them to found a republic of a most extraordinary kind. This republic had as its sole organs of government a legislature and a court. Neither an executive nor a police force was needed. The elected representa-

tives of the people met and decided what should be done and how the law should read. The court interpreted disputed questions arising under the law. The people voluntarily did the rest. And this extraordinary government endured successfully for several centuries.

Let us now consider yet another instance where Fascism invades the temple and assails perhaps an even more cherished idol: Equality. "All men are created equal!" That is a slogan which has stirred the enthusiasm of countless millions and which has profoundly influenced our ideals and institutions. Yet against this popular doctrine Fascismo raises an uncompromising challenge. To "Equality!" the Fascisti oppose the watchword: "*Gerarchia!*"

*Gerarchia*. That is the Italian word for "hierarchy." And it implies a theory of society which flouts equalitarian democracy in no uncertain fashion. Instead of preaching men's equality, Fascism stresses their inequality. Men being thus unequal, democracy, in the ordinary sense of the word, is an unrealizable absurdity. The Fascisti's ideal social structure takes the form, not of a level plain, but of a towering pyramid. They glimpse a society in which individuals shall be graded according to their natural capacities and limitations. Over a year ago the Fascist Government announced a policy of careful selection of the most talented youth in the schools and colleges, who were to form the nucleus of a new Fascist aristocracy destined to rule Italy.

Now here again, has not Fascism said something which must reverberate portentously in the intellectual sphere? For, whatever may be the outcome of the Fascist Government's neo-aristocratic experiments, Fascism's challenge to doctrinaire equalitarianism is in accord with the trend of scientific discovery. Modern science proclaims in no uncertain

tones that men are *not* created equal; that, on the contrary, men are born with an infinite diversity of inherited abilities and deficiencies ranging all the way from the genius to the idiot, and that however important environment and training may be, these can only work within the limits of the inborn capacity which the individual inherits from his ancestry. Of course, this is recognized and appreciated by scientists and well-informed laymen the world over. But in most countries these scientific findings have had little effect on politics, which is still swayed by the equalitarian, environmentalist notions of past times. Italy is the first instance of a modern nation ruled by men who have definitely repudiated the equalitarian tradition. If Italy's rulers become correspondingly alive to the importance of scientific discoveries of human values and translate them into positive legislation, Fascist Italy may show the world some surprising results.

Such are the outstanding items in Fascism's challenge to our times. Can any dispassionate observer deny that here is a real challenge that must profoundly affect modern thought, whatever may be the destiny of the Fascist Government installed in Rome to-day? Errors of judgment, blunders, excesses, even sheer bad luck, may bring "Il Duce" and his followers to disaster; nevertheless, the group of thinkers and doers headed by Mussolini have "started something" in the intellectual world more far-reaching, perhaps, than they themselves imagine. *Eppur si muove!*

Fascism's realistic, pragmatic temper, brutal and cynical though it may sometimes be, has a distinct tonic value. Lastly, even if Fascism be considered an exaggerated protest, it is at least a healthy, virile protest against the sentimentality and phrase-worship of our age.