

THE SOCIAL BASIS OF EUROPEAN FASCIST MOVEMENTS

Edited by
Detlef Mühlberger

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Edited by DETLEF MÜHLBERGER

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For Sue and Tania

PREFACE

It is over a decade ago, in June 1974 to be precise, that a group of historians and social scientists met at a conference at Bergen in Norway to deliberate on the question of the sociology of European fascist movements in the period 1919 to 1945, the proceedings of which were published in 1980. In the intervening years considerable further effort has been devoted to establishing the social types attracted to fascism, based on relatively extensive empirical data which has either not previously been subjected to detailed evaluation or has only been discovered in recent years. The present volume summarises these findings and provides an up-to-date review of the current research in the field.

As editor I obviously owe grateful thanks to the efforts of the contributors, who have made the idea behind this volume a reality. My thanks are also due to my colleague Roger Griffin, who undertook the translation of the essay on Italy at very short notice. To Gill Brooks I am much indebted for her sterling efforts in word-processing the manuscript. Also much appreciated was the advice and assistance given to me by Julia McKendry of the Oxford Polytechnic Computer Department. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement I have received from Richard Stoneman of Croom Helm, and thank him above all for his patience in the various delays to the manuscript.

Oxford

Detlef Mühlberger

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Chapter One

ITALY

Marco Revelli

Translated by Roger Griffin

There is now a wide consensus among political sociologists that fascism is in some way or other connected with a pathological interaction between modernity and backwardness. That in other words it is one of the possible permutations of modernisation.

There is however less unanimity on the chief characteristics of such modernisation. To what category of 'perverse modernity' does it belong? Then again, what level of backwardness should be taken as the yardstick for measuring the degree of underdevelopment, and, in the same context, what type of backwardness are we to take as our model? Gino Germani, in the essay which has since become a classic, *Fascismo e classe sociale*, seems in a way to be referring to a predominantly political type of backwardness when he ascribes the gravity of the crisis of the early 1920s to the inadequacy of 'channels of integration' offered by the Italian political system which might have contained the radical mobilisation of the masses which followed the First World War.¹ Simultaneously, however, he refers to a relatively advanced stage of economic and social development when he considers fascism primarily as the product of a secondary mobilisation accomplished, that is, by members of the 'middle classes' whose secure position of social pre-eminence was already being undermined by the growing strength of the working-class movement. In the interpretation by A.F.K. Organski, on the other hand, the overriding impression given is one of economic backwardness. In fact, in his *The Stages of Political Development*, political phenomena are presented as strictly related to the stages of economic development defined by Rostow's model, and hence to the various phases in the process of

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industrialisation, in terms of which fascism is identified with a low category of development.² In contrast to Nazism, which he associates with the advanced stage of the 'welfare state', fascism is seen in fact as one of the political forms typical of the second stage, that of 'forced accumulation'. What is more, it is according to him one of the least modernised examples of these forms in that, as a compromise between residual agrarian elites and emerging industrial elites it clearly qualifies as the product of 'retarded industrialisation'. To take another example, the analysis of Barrington Moore Jr. focuses on the various permutations in the process by which the city becomes divorced from rural life and forms an elite endowed with a mercantile and entrepreneurial mentality, giving rise to a concept of backwardness which is more specifically *social*.³ According to this approach fascism is seen as the outcome of two aspects of society being drastically out of phase: on the one hand the advanced stage reached by the rapid development of a mass-society in some countries which had started industrialising late but were subjected to violent social pressures in the 'take-off' period, and on the other hand the backward nature of the elites (and hence of the political institutions) called upon to govern in such a dynamic situation. A parallel diversity of points of view is to be found in the controversy over the quality and type of social representation peculiar to the fascist movement. This topic forms, as it were, the 'subjective dimension' of the debate on backwardness, once the social groups which formed the mass-base and exerted hegemony within it are - in terms of their response to the forces of innovation within the social structure - treated merely as the embodiment of demands and attitudes which are broadly speaking 'modernising', and in some respects the product of relatively advanced levels of social development. Was fascism, as Lasswell and Lipset maintain, the political expression of the psychological characteristic of the early stage of industrialisation, and thrown into panic when confronted by processes of concentration and organisation symptomatic of advanced capitalism?⁴ Was it, therefore, to use the definition offered by Parsons and Bendix, a radical form of resistance to rationalisation?⁵ Or, on the contrary, did it not constitute a specifically modern form of mobilisation carried out by the new technical and technocratic caste which emerged at

the heart of advanced industrial and social structures, as Burnham seems to argue?⁶ Or was it on the other hand, to quote the famous definition formulated by Dimitrov at the 18th plenary session of the Third International, the manifestation of the extreme stage in the development and crisis of capitalism, embodying the most destructive and corrupt section of the bourgeoisie, 'the most reactionary, chauvinist and imperialist elements of finance capital'?⁷

Unfortunately, in the face of such a lively theoretical debate and such a wide spectrum of conflicting points of view, the data and the methodologies which might allow an empirical verification of the different interpretations when applied to Italian Fascism are far from adequate. The statistical records compiled by public bodies on Italy's demographic and economic structures, indispensable to locate the genesis of fascism within the socio-economic continuum of her industrialisation process, are patchy. The *Inchieste*, or official inquiries, carried out by government agencies into the country's social conditions (dealing with family incomes, salary structures, consumer spending, social mobility, etc.) are practically non-existent. Research to produce documentary evidence concerning the ruling class and its forms of political organisation and association, whose traditions were nevertheless well established in the period leading up to the First World War, has been totally neglected.⁸ Even in the spheres of science and political culture Fascism, in fact, marked a profound break with the past which contributed to the dissolution, or at least the dilution, of the positivistic and scientific climate in the social matters which had brought about a significant apparatus for carrying out statistical surveys in the first two decades of the century. Having come into being in the 'Giolittian era' as a direct product of the growing concern with the 'social question', the Italian statistical bureaux had become a source of annoyance and embarrassment at a time when everything was meant to be subordinated to the 'national question'. Moreover, reliability and objectivity of data was hardly to be expected in a political situation in which heavy-handed government interference in the operations of the bureaucratic and administrative apparatus was the order of the day. What is more, the take-over and monopoly of the state agencies by a single party with a charismatic leader inevitably

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marked the end of the practice of official parliamentary inquiries which had provided such precious material to politicians and academics of the liberal era, and simultaneously sealed the fate of all documentary or statistical work sponsored by other political organisations (whether parties or trade unions).⁹ Once the Fascist Party was in power it controlled, true to its totalitarian principles, the information channels on all aspects of the country's political life, issuing its own abundant ideological and propagandistic bulletins, but keeping confidential data relating to its own organisational structure and membership. The modern Behemoth shows its head but keeps its body well-hidden. What strikes the reader of the *Annuari del Partito Nazionale Fascista* (Statistical Year Books of the National Fascist Party) is precisely the total lack of any statistical information when contrasted with the detailed documentation on every single activity and every public appearance of the party leadership. This perfectly reflects the image of a movement which claimed to epitomise, in a way which is both classless and anti-class, the unity and totality of a nation by means of the creative force of a heightened spirituality and radical nationalism. A movement which thus tended, in the presentation of its own social make-up, to lay special emphasis on the all-embracing 'totalitarian' power of its own ideology.

The studies on Fascism which have appeared since the Second World War have been dominated, at least until recent years, by a historiographical approach rather than by applying methodologies based on sociology or political science.¹⁰ It is thus easy to understand the difficulties involved in trying to arrive at a definitive socio-economic classification of Fascism and hence the largely theoretical nature of the debate over the most appropriate interpretation.

I

As things stand, if we discount the data provided by the ten-yearly government *Censimenti* (censuses) of Italy's population and economy,¹¹ the only source we have to go on for a socio-economic analysis of Fascism are two systematic and scientifically carried out reworkings of data which give us, in complete chronological sequence, an overall picture of its demographic and economic dynamics. These are

the *Documentazione statistica di base* compiled by P. Ercolani for the period 1861-1972,¹² and the *Appendice statistica* published by R. Romeo as an appendix to his *Breve storia della grande industria in Italia* (1861-1961).¹³ As for the analysis of social classes in Italy, the only documentation providing systematic quantitative data is still the *Saggio sulle classi sociali* by P. Sylos Labini.¹⁴

What emerges from these is a picture of a country both agrarian and industrial. On the one hand it clearly possessed a solid manufacturing base in an advanced stage of development, which in its leading sectors had already reached an 'oligopolistic' stage with a few companies dominating the market. At the same time the economic and social hegemony of the rural world still remained intact and continued to influence in various ways the majority of the population and make the most significant contribution to private incomes and to the national product. In short, a hybrid country in which over 60 per cent of the population still lived in rural areas and where nevertheless the iron and steel industry was producing more than a million and a half tonnes of steel a year. At the beginning of the 1920s, when Fascism came to power, 54.8 per cent of the active work-force was still employed in agriculture, as against 25.1 per cent in industry, 15 per cent in the tertiary sector and 5.1 per cent in public administration.¹⁵ Moreover, in 1922, 34.2 per cent of the gross national product (in terms of output by value) was contributed by agriculture, as against 25.2 per cent by industry, 32 per cent by the tertiary sector and 18.6 per cent by public administration.¹⁶ If we consider only the gross product of the private sector (leaving aside the rather remarkable figures attributed to the State's productive activities), the hegemonic role played by agriculture is even more in evidence: it accounted for as much as 41.3 per cent, as opposed to 30.5 per cent from industry and 28.2 per cent from the tertiary sector.¹⁷ The overall situation is thus one of relative backwardness (but not of underdevelopment, given the presence of a substantial industrial base already well established), which seems to situate the origins of Fascism within the delicate phase of development in which take-off had already had its characteristic technical repercussions, but where, nonetheless, the social consequences of the great transformation had not yet affected a configuration of social classes and groups which has remained essentially similar to

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that of traditional societies. This is amply demonstrated by the pathological hypertrophy of autonomous middle-class groups, both rural and urban, which was a feature of Italian society in the inter-war years, and which in many respects formed an exception, or at the very least an anomaly, when compared with the profile of industrialised countries in general. In fact in Germany and Great Britain the social polarisation brought about by the second industrial revolution had reduced the traditional middle-class groups (both urban and rural small independent producers, artisans, tradesmen, etc.) to being a relatively minor percentage, partly replacing them with a new class of white-collar workers integrated into the technological structure of modern companies. Thomas Geiger has calculated, for example, that in the Weimar Republic the 'traditional middle class' did not exceed 34 per cent of the total population and that another 34 per cent was made up of employees with average to high-level qualifications.¹⁸ By contrast there are some extraordinarily high figures for the most 'obsolete' elements of the Italian middle class, which was already overrepresented (53.3 per cent of the total population according to the estimate by P. Sylos Labini): in fact 37 per cent of the population would seem to be classifiable as rural 'independent petty bourgeois' and another 10.3 per cent as urban 'independent petty bourgeois', while only 3.2 per cent are included under the heading 'white-collar petty bourgeois' (see Table 1.1). If to this we add the fact that the bulk of the proletariat was made up of wage-earning agricultural workers (21.8 per cent as compared with 19.6 per cent of wage-earning industrial workers), we gain some idea of the enormous pockets of social immobility and resistance to change which existed in Italy, an expression of economic practices and life-styles which were in many respects antagonistic to the basic demands for rationalisation exerted by the new industrial processes and bound to react radically to the threats being posed to the social status quo. This was the class whose composition was therefore in many ways backward, but undoubtedly was not inert. Even less was it 'normalised'. It was already being affected by the tensions which in the course of the next fifteen years would, in the economic sphere, bring about a reversal of the relationship between agriculture and industry (in the 1930s the latter made the major contribution to the GNP), as well as the transfer of about one million men from

Table 1.1: The major social groupings in Italy, 1921-36 (by %)

	1921	1936
Haute bourgeoisie (upper class)	1.7	1.6
Subtotal	1.7	1.6
White-collar petty bourgeoisie	3.2	5.0
Independent rural petty bourgeoisie	37.0	35.6
Independent urban petty bourgeoisie	10.3	11.5
Other petty-bourgeois elements	2.8	2.7
Subtotal	53.3	54.8
Wage-earning agricultural workers	21.8	16.2
Wage-earning industrial workers	19.6	21.4
Others	3.6	6.0
Subtotal	45.0	43.6
TOTAL (%)	100	100

Source: P. Sylos Labini, *Saggio sulle classi sociali* (Bari, 1974), p. 156.

agricultural to industrial work. It is precisely against the background of tensions, of growing insecurity throughout wide strata of society and of the frenetic processes of political mobilisation triggered off by them, that the institutional crisis took place which, on the eve of the advent of Fascism, was to paralyse the Italian political system.

II

In the two years between September 1920 (the 'Occupation of the Factories', the high-water mark of social agitation in the aftermath of the First World War) and October 1922 (the 'March on Rome' by about 50,000 Fascist *squadristi* and the appointment of Mussolini as head of government), there was a succession of as many as four different experiments in forming a government (Giolitti, Bonomi, Facta I and Facta II), all very feeble and ineffectual. It amounted to an extremely serious power vacuum - not

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to mention an actual dissolution of the political system - which had come about in the midst of an explosively tense social crisis coupled with an extreme polarisation of civil society into antagonistic factions.

The causes of such a crisis in the stability and efficiency of a liberal political system are complex. First of all they are to be sought in the erosion of the 'liberal middle ground' which had served as the basis of the national state ever since the unification of Italy. This erosion came about as a result of the rise of mass politics which occurred in the period immediately before and after the First World War. The Italian political system had in fact emerged profoundly transformed from the twin electoral reforms of 1913 (the introduction of universal suffrage) and of 1919 (the adoption of proportional representation on the model of the Weimar Republic). These reforms had been introduced as an attempt to accommodate and integrate into the political system the increasingly broad and radical pressures exerted by the lower classes, but had the effect of depriving the already fragile political system of its centre, signalling the decline and fragmentation of the old 'parties of notables' and the appearance on the scene of modern 'mass parties'. The *Partito Socialista* (Socialist Party) - in many respects conforming to the model of 'parties for the integration of the masses' outlined by Kirchheimer¹⁹ - which as early as 1913 had obtained 57 seats in parliament, won as many as 156 in 1919.²⁰ The *Partito Popolare* (Popular Party), on the other hand - a party based on religious convictions with no class boundaries - did not exist until 1919 when it obtained 100 seats straight away, taking from the Liberals a substantial percentage of their voters, especially in rural areas. At the same time the 'Giolittian centre', which had traditionally ensured the equilibrium of the political system, disintegrated, the 200 seats it had obtained in 1913 being reduced to 91 in 1919, without the formation of any other block which was capable of providing a rallying point to serve as a stable political force.

The instability was aggravated by a second factor which highlighted the profound historical watershed brought about by the war and the corresponding transformation of the socio-political situation, namely the emergence of unprecedented splits within the same political factions, and in particular the division between 'neutralists' and

'interventionists'.²¹ Adding an extra dimension to the traditional division between right and left, this new element had the effect of further fragmenting parliamentary allegiances, creating a 'horizontal' schism across the whole political spectrum. When this fragmentation was perpetuated even after the end of the war, it led to a further restriction of the already narrow room to manoeuvre and limited opportunities for the formation of effective coalition alliances, thus creating new barriers. Liberals on the right (Salandra, Sonnino, Orlando) as well as the moderate left (Nitti), both interventionists, refused to support the neutralists under Giolitti. Nor could this centre block restore equilibrium to the system by taking advantage of the parliamentary strength of the *Partito Socialista* (neutralist), which was undergoing a severe crisis in its relations with its own social base and was incapable of making any definitive pledge to collaborate with the government. On the other hand, given the moderate and sectarian character of the Popular Party, any alliance between it and the Socialist Party was out of the question.

As a result, while the 'parties of the notables' were inexorably losing control of parliament, the new forces which were making their presence felt, the new 'mass-parties', were not succeeding in establishing the stable hegemony which on paper the parliamentary arithmetic made possible. This was the beginning of a period of vertical crisis in the institutional system which was to culminate in the Government of Mussolini, a period which Italian political science, in particularly P. Farneti²² - ingeniously adapting the model proposed by Bracher for Germany in the early 1930s²³ - has subdivided into three successive phases. A first phase, whose central feature was the 'progressive loss of autonomy of the political society'²⁴ - i.e. the 'loss of power' by the traditional political establishment and the inability of political institutions to mediate in the struggles within civil society. This corresponded to the final period of Giolitti's time as head of government (October 1920 to June 1921). In these tumultuous months the now aged Liberal leader made exhaustive efforts to win political allies via a series of concessions to the most varied and contradictory social and political interest groups, which only succeeded in dissatisfying all of them and definitively losing their support. The growing hostility of the right was compounded by the weakening of the domination of the

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reformist left and the growing strength of the ultra-radicals. The second phase, that of the 'exhaustion of legitimate political alternatives', leading to the spate of extra-parliamentary agitation carried out on the 'piazza' or from the 'barracks', opened with the Bonomi administration (July 1921 to February 1922) and closed with the two successive governments presided over by the Right Hon. Facta. In the course of this phase any residual good-will necessary to bring about a government majority by co-opting the interventionist factions within the Popular Party and Socialist Party was exhausted. The power vacuum created by the failure of such hybrid alliances, by the total impotence of the institutional decision-making machinery, and by the progressive fragmentation of Parliament, in which there were now as many as twelve main factions, was filled by the increasingly widespread and ruthless use of extra-parliamentary violence. Tasca has calculated that in less than ten months of activities during 1921 the *squadristi* destroyed in Italy 700 premises used by working-class organisations, killed 166 workers, and wounded a further 500.²⁵ Salvemini refers to over 1,500 workers and peasants being killed by Fascists and by the police by October 1921.²⁶ Thus, in this intermediary phase which witnessed the decline, and the ebbing of the tide of working-class agitation unleashed in the years immediately following the war, as well as the dramatic paralysis of the forces of law and order, the Fascist movement, still in its infancy, launched its own campaign of violence, thus forcing the pace of developments towards the third phase: that of the 'seizure of power'. On 16 November 1922, Mussolini, leader of a faction whose deputies in Parliament numbered a mere 35, obtained in the *Camera* the vote of confidence to become head of government with 306 votes for, 116 against and 7 abstentions. In the *Senato* the votes against were only 19. Achieving hegemony over the entire right and winning the consensus support of the representatives of the moderate mass-vote (the Popular Party), Fascism thus succeeded in monopolising the 'political society' of the day, and brought about a genuine 'change of regime'.

III

But 'Who were the Fascists?'. And what was their numerical strength? In the beginning their numbers

were small - very small in fact. In his report to the First Congress of the *Fasci di combattimento* held in Florence on 9 October 1919, the secretary of the new movement, Umberto Pasella, spoke of 137 *fasci* formed so far with 40,385 registered members. But less than three months later, after the disastrous electoral failure of 16 November when the Fascists who stood at Milan obtained as little as 2 per cent of the votes (4,657 out of 270,000 votes cast), the figure had dropped to only 31 *fasci* and 870 members.

In this phase Fascism - Fascism *statu nascenti*, one might say - was still a volatile and fluid amalgam of frustrated minorities drawn from the most varied political and cultural backgrounds (nationalism, individualist anarchism, revolutionary syndicalism, socialism, futurism, etc.). Their common denominator was a radical rejection of the political realities of the day and, characterised above all by the *combattentismo*, the war-veteran's cult of the fighting spirit. It was first and foremost an urban phenomenon, a phenomenon of the big cities in fact, almost exclusively confined to the North, and found especially in Milan, the only large-scale concentration of industry and commerce in Italy. Of the 112 'founders' of the Fascist movement present at the meeting of 23 March 1919 in Piazza San Sepolcro, as many as 60 were Milanese and another 14 came from the immediate surroundings (such as Monza and Sesto San Giovanni). Of the remainder, ten came from Lombardy, eight from Liguria, seven (including the *squadrista* Farinacci) from Emilia, five from the Veneto region, three from Piedmont, and one from Sardinia. Only one came from Rome and two from the South.²⁷ Among these 112 there were nine lawyers, five army or navy officers, five professors, five doctors, three accountants, two parliamentary deputies and one senator. All the rest appear to have had no particular professional or academic qualifications. Over a year later, in May 1920 when, on the occasion of the Second Congress of the movement, a new census of its organisational strength was carried out, of the 118 *fasci* referred to in the report by the secretary Pasella (representing a total of 24,430 registered members), as many as 82, amounting to 70 per cent of the total, turn out to be centred in Milan. The fact that the most important executive body elected at the congress, the *Commissione Esecutiva Integrata* (Integrated Executive Commission) made up of regional representatives, had the same social composition noted

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earlier, testifies to the persistence of the prevalently urban and petty-bourgeois character of the movement. It included, in fact, six lawyers, two freelance professionals, two teachers, three journalists, three clerical workers, two railway workers, one tradesman, one artisan and one manual worker:²⁸ a blend, in many ways novel, between, on the one hand, 'classic' middle-class groups, mainly with an education in the humanities, self-employed and embodying the professional structures typical of what, in the last analysis, is a superseded and obsolete phase of urbanisation, and, on the other, newly emerging groups whose social and cultural profile was still not established, partly 'produced by' and partly 'displaced by' the war. All of them, however, had certainly become politically active as a result of being caught up in the 'total mobilisation' that continued well beyond the end of the war itself.

It is precisely the hybrid, contradictory and novel character of the social base of Fascism in its initial stage which makes it difficult to classify using traditional political categories, starting with the antithesis 'left/right' and the closely related 'progressive/conservative' dichotomy. However, this phase was of short duration.

From the middle of 1920, in fact, processes were already at work which in a very short space of time were to bring about both an extremely rapid numerical growth in the support of Fascism and a profound change of its political identity and its social composition, a change in a conservative direction. The month of October added to the endemic institutional crisis of the parliamentary system the catastrophic failure of the 'Occupation of the Factories', heralding the final collapse of the revolutionary expectancy of the lower classes and the profound crisis which was to convulse the entire working-class and trade union movement in Italy. On the 21 November of the same year the Palazzo d'Accursio massacre in Bologna had been the first and bloody episode of a protracted 'civil war' which was to drag on for the next two years, and marked the 'quantitative leap' in the use of extra-parliamentary violence. From that moment on the ranks of the Fascist movement swelled unabated: from 88 *fasci* and 80,476 members in December 1920, to 317 *fasci* and 80,476 members in March 1921, to 1,333 *fasci* and 218,453 members in December 1921, to reach their highest point in May 1922 with 2,124 *fasci* and 322,310 members (see Table 1.2). The increase in the

Table 1.2: The strength of the Fascist Movement between March 1921 and May 1922

		Number of <i>fasci</i> (branches)	Total Membership	Average number of members per <i>fascio</i>
March	1921	317	80,476	253
April	1921	471	98,399	208
May	1921	1,001	187,098	186
June	1921	1,192	204,806	171
July	1921	1,234	209,385	169
Aug	1921	1,253	221,919	177
Sept	1921	1,268	213,621	168
Oct	1921	1,311	217,072	165
Nov	1921	1,318	217,256	164
Dec	1921	1,333	218,453	163
April	1922	1,381	219,792	159
May	1922	2,124	322,310	151

Source: R. de Felice, *Mussolini il fascista* (2 vols., Turin, 1966), vol. 1, pp. 8-11.

period March 1921 to May 1922 amounted to over 300 per cent, and had all the signs of extensive dynamics (typical of rapid and superficial territorial expansion 'through contagion'), rather than of the intensive dynamics necessary for a movement to put down deep roots. The figures for branches (*fasci*) formed grew much more rapidly than those for new members, and to such an extent that the average number of new memberships per *fascio* fell steadily throughout the period, from its maximum of 253 in March 1921 to a record low of 151 in May 1922. This means that the territorial gains by new party organisations, their spread into new areas of recruitment, was not matched by a corresponding growth in the size of the individual organisations themselves, which in fact seem to be reduced to a state of relative stabilisation, not to say stagnation. As will occur so often in the course of the two decades in power, Fascism responded to the sudden change in its social and political identity without due qualms about coherence or continuity, trying to ride out events as best it could and turn them to its own advantage (this is a decidedly modern trait).

The geographical distribution of the movement

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Table 1.3: The regional distribution of the Fascist membership, March 1921 to May 1922

	March 1921 Membership		December 1921 Membership		May 1922 Membership	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Piedmont	2,411	3.0	9,618	4.4	14,526	4.5
Lombardy	13,968	17.4	37,939	17.3	79,329	24.5
Liguria	2,749	3.4	7,405	3.4	8,841	2.7
Veneto	23,549	29.3	44,740	20.4	46,978	14.3
Northern Italy	42,677	53.1	99,702	45.5	148,774	46.0
Emilia	17,652	21.9	35,647	16.3	51,637	16.0
Tuscany	2,600	3.3	17,768	8.1	51,372	15.9
Umbria	485	0.6	4,000	1.8	5,410	1.8
Marches	814	1.0	2,072	0.9	2,311	0.8
Latium	1,488	1.8	4,163	1.9	9,747	3.0
Abruzzi	1,626	2.0	6,166	2.8	4,763	1.5
Central Italy	24,657	30.6	69,816	31.8	125,240	39.0
Campania	3,550	4.4	13,423	6.1	13,944	4.4
Apulia & Lucania	4,211	5.2	19,619	9.0	20,683	6.4
Calabria	712	0.9	2,406	1.1	2,066	0.6
Sicily	3,569	4.4	10,110	4.6	9,546	3.0
Sardinia	1,100	1.4	3,372	1.5	2,057	0.6
Southern Italy	13,142	16.3	48,930	22.3	48,296	15.0
Totals	80,476	100	218,448	100	322,310	100

Source: De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista*, vol. 1, pp. 8-11.

emerged considerably altered from this development. The original concentration in northern Italy was to give way to a more balanced - or, rather, a less unbalanced distribution (see Table 1.3 above). It could be said that in this way Fascism

'nationalised' itself, transforming itself from an almost exclusively local phenomenon into a *national* movement, with a presence in every province of the Peninsula, the form and extent of which admittedly varied widely. Between March and December 1921, in fact, the percentage of members registered in the North fell from 53.1 per cent to 45.5 per cent, while that for the South rose proportionately from 16.3 per cent to 22.3 per cent. The figures for the Centre remained constant (rising only from 30.6 per cent to 31.8 per cent), but were to grow instead over the first five months of 1922, eventually reaching 39 per cent. What changed above all was the relationship between metropolitan and peripheral areas, between recruitment in the big cities and recruitment in the country, symptomatic of a cultural and social transformation in the nature of Fascism. From being a strictly urban phenomenon it became an ambiguous phenomenon with a dual identity, both urban and rural, dynamic and regressive. If at the beginning of 1921 membership in the big cities (Turin, Milan, Trieste, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Naples, Palermo) accounted for 39.4 per cent of the total number of militant Fascists (see Table 1.4), at the end of the year they were to plunge to 28.9 per cent to level out by May 1922 at 25.2 per cent (a completely unexceptional percentage, and, if anything, a low one in some ways, in view of the city's traditional role as a centre of intense politicisation, much more conducive to activism and political commitment than the provinces). If we take into account only the major cities of the North (which are precisely the ones where the movement was born), the transformation is even more obvious: the percentage of members actually fell from 26.5 per cent at the beginning of 1921 to 14.2 per cent in December of the same year, to sink to a mere 8.5 per cent by May of 1922. While at the start of the period under consideration more than a quarter of the Fascist movement proves to have been concentrated in the metropolitan zones of the North, on the eve of the 'seizure of power', after a period of frenetic growth and 'turn-over' of support, this percentage turns out to have dwindled to less than a tenth. Fascism, apart from becoming 'nationalised' had, so to speak, also become 'provincialised'. Milan, which in March 1921 represented 42.9 per cent of Fascists in Lombardy, could by May 1922 only lay claim to 17.6 per cent of the membership. Trieste, which accounted for 62.7 per cent of the total number of Fascists from the Veneto, declined to having

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Table 1.4: Fascist membership in the big cities in relation to the total size of the membership of the movement, 1921-1922

	March 1921 Membership		December 1921 Membership		May 1922 Membership	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Turin	581		4,312		2,922	
Milan	6,000		10,000		13,697	
Trieste	14,756		16,697		10,522	
Northern Cities	21,337	26.5	30,991	14.2	27,411	8.5
Bologna	5,130		11,845		11,773	
Florence	500		6,353		20,880	
Rome	1,480		4,163		9,747	
Central Cities	7,110	8.8	22,361	10.2	42,400	13.2
Naples	2,850		9,545		10,395	
Palermo	380		380		1,030	
Southern Cities	3,230	4.0	9,925	4.5	11,425	3.5
Total Big Cities	31,677	39.4	63,177	28.9	81,236	25.2
Total Membership	80,476	100	218,448	100	322,310	100

Source: Calculations based on data provided by De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista*, vol. 1, pp. 8-11.

only 22.8 per cent. Turin suffered the same fate if only on a smaller scale (but Piedmont is generally regarded as peripheral to the epicentres of the Fascist movement): a fall from 24 per cent to 20.1 per cent. The wave of new recruits shifted from the great centres of population to the periphery, from the city to the countryside.

All this seems to confirm the thesis put

forward by some historians which maintains that the delicate transitional phase between 1920 and 1922 was a watershed for Fascism, marking a significant change in its dynamics as a movement, suddenly abandoning positions which were 'subversive', and to some extent 'revolutionary' - at any rate representing a radical break with the prevailing social and political order - to take up conservative and reactionary ones.²⁹ The reasons for this they see in the grafting onto the original body of Fascism of a new component destined, at least in the ensuing period, to gain hegemony: so-called 'agrarian fascism', openly siding with the landed interests, rural and violent in nature. A component which was thus the expression of 'backward' socio-economic interests, defined in terms of political objectives by the urge to wipe out the organisations which had grown up in defence of the new wage-earning working masses, and in terms of methods by the systematic use of *squadrista* violence.

The social make-up of the Fascist movement - statistically 'photographed', as it were, on the occasion of the Congress of Rome in November 1921 - reflects the nature of the transformation and the emerging dichotomy between 'urban fascism' and 'rural fascism' (see Table 1.5). A survey of 151,644 members of the *fasci* represented at the congress - equivalent to about half of the total membership - shows that the urban petty-bourgeois component, divided as we have seen into traditional independent middle-class groups (15.8 per cent) and salaried middle-class groups (14.1 per cent), had ceased to be the sole major constituent of the movement. Tradesmen, artisans, freelance professionals on the one hand, along with public and private officials and teachers on the other hand, amounted to no more than 29.9 per cent of all the members involved. Even when we add the figures for students (13 per cent) this percentage only rises to 44.9 per cent. Alongside these there was now in evidence a substantial block of more than 36 per cent formed by members from rural districts, a fair number of whom (12 per cent) was made up of large, medium and small land-owners. These provided - on this historians are unanimous - the backbone of the Fascist movement in the countryside, acting as catalysts of agrarian *squadristo* and forming its hierarchy of command. In addition to these there is a figure of 15.4 per cent for workers, whose level of qualifications and provenance is however not specified (industry, transport, the construction

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Table 1.5: The social composition of the Fascist Movement in November 1921 (the data relates to half of the total membership)

	Number	% of sample
Industrialists	4,269	2.8
Agrarians (large, medium and small landowners)	18,094	12.0
Free professions	9,981	6.0
Tradesmen and artisans	13,979	9.2
Private employees	14,989	9.8
Public employees	7,209	4.8
Teachers	1,668	1.1
Students	19,783	13.0
Workers	23,410	15.4
Agricultural workers	36,847	24.3
Totals	151,644	100

Source: PNF, *Il Partito Nazionale Fascista* (Rome, 1935), p. 26.

industry?), and a further 2.8 per cent made up of industrialists. The only common denominator capable of uniting to some extent people from such diverse social backgrounds is the fact that the bulk of them (57 per cent or 87,182) were ex-servicemen, which underlines the decisive role played by the war in determining the preconditions for the existence of Fascism.

The breakdown of the membership into social categories presented to the Third Congress captures and epitomises the image presented by Fascism at this significant cross-roads in its history. It was precisely at the Congress of Rome, in fact, in November 1921, that the Fascist movement was in the process of completing its own internal conversion to a right-wing position, incorporating the nationalist faction (traditionally monarchist, conservative and rabidly anti-socialist), turning itself into a party. The *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF - National Fascist Party) originated as an amalgam of politically heterogeneous forces, but with an increasingly clear steer towards a reactionary, authoritarian and anti-proletarian position. It came into being as a 'politico-military machine', its goals the seizure of state power and the totalitarian

representation of the nation within the framework of a political programme of 'order' and restoration. In many respects its internal composition reflected its new political identity. In fact, if the data concerning the social make-up of the party membership are compared with those for the stratification of Italian society (given in Table 1.1), it can be observed how the social structure of the party was a fairly faithful reflection of the general distribution of classes and occupational groups (achieving in a sense the ambition of representing organically and faithfully the whole nation), except for some significant cases of over- and under-representation in certain categories. Industrialists, for example, accounted for 2.8 per cent of members (while, according to the figures given by P. Sylos Labini, the entire *haute bourgeoisie* numbered at the time only 1.7 per cent). The figures tally almost perfectly for the middle classes (56.5 per cent in the party compared with 53.3 per cent in society), but there was a conspicuous imbalance in favour of the petty bourgeoisie formed by white-collar workers in the public and private sectors (15.7 per cent in the party as against 3.2 per cent in society). On the other hand workers were underrepresented (a mere 3.2 per cent discrepancy). Thus the social structure of the PNF in this phase appears to be partly determined by the presence of two poles, economic power on one side and social renewal on the other, with the industrial class forming the decisive element in assuring the internal equilibrium of the dominant class, while middle-class professional groups constitute the rising social group within a more general trend towards the rationalisation of the mode of production ('scientific organisation of work') and bureaucratisation (the growth of the state apparatus as a function of the increasing role of the state in controlling economic and social developments). These are features which would explain the extraordinary dynamism of Fascism at the level of political movement, and its ability to occupy the social and political void created by the crisis of the liberal system and by the defeat of the working-class movement, maximising its own advantages and achieving hegemony in an extremely disjointed and ambiguous political situation. They both coexist in a state of contradiction with the other basic component of Fascism in its phase leading up to the seizure of power, namely 'agrarian fascism', undoubtedly less dynamic and involving radically

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'anti-modernising' pressures, but no less 'innovative' for all that. It is the presence of 'agrarian fascism' which accounts for the massive influx of a *squadristi* element and the systematisation of the use of violence: a 'political innovation' through and through (marking a drastic break with the parliamentary and institutional tactics applied by the other political forces), which put the political faction resorting to it first in a position to 'capitalise' on the crisis (suggesting an analogy with the 'innovative entrepreneur' in Schumpeter's theory). This dramatically new factor may also explain the remarkable spread of Fascism 'by contagion' in these two years. The interaction of these two elements (the urban and the agrarian, the dynamic and the regressive) will give rise to the 'political oxymoron' which Fascism has been held to represent as a phenomenon simultaneously revolutionary (in its methods) and conservative (in its ends), which was to manifest itself in all the decisive moments of its chequered history.

Table 1.6: The membership of the PNF, 1922-33

1922	299,876
1923	782,979
1924	642,246
1925	599,988
1926	940,000
1927	1,262,824
1930	1,723,400
1931	2,411,133
1932	2,418,123

Source: PNF, *Il Gran Consiglio nei primi dieci anni dell'era fascista* (Rome, 1932), pp. 31-411; PNF, *Il Partito Nazionale Fascista*, pp. 9-40; De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista*, vol. 1, p. 57.

The beginning of the third phase in the evolution of Fascism can be dated from 28 October 1922. The three years following the appointment of Mussolini as head of government saw the progressive 'fascistisation' of the state. In other words the transformation of institutions to embody an authoritarian and anti-liberal spirit via a process of creeping reform (the assumption of full powers, the promulgation of new legislation using governmental

decrees, the Acerbo electoral law, etc.) culminated, after the Matteotti assassination, in the so-called coup d'état of January 1925 (emergency laws, dissolution of political organisations, the gagging of the press). The formation of the PNF heralded the conversion of Fascism into a mass-movement. At the end of 1923 it claimed to have 782,979 members and in 1926, after a drop in recruitment due to the crisis which resulted from the killing of Giacomo Matteotti, this was to exceed 900,000 (see Table 1.6). Even the territorial distribution, already altered, as we have seen, in the two previous years, would progressively even out. In July 1923 some 36.7 per cent of members turned out to live in the North, 40.3 per cent in the Centre and 23 per cent in the South and the Islands (see Table 1.7). Admittedly the 'original' heartlands of the movement, Lombardy, Emilia and Tuscany - where 'agrarian fascism' had always had its strongholds - continued to present anomalies (they accounted for 40.2 per cent of the national total by themselves). But in general the distribution from now on appears more even, though central Italy turns out to be surprisingly overrepresented when compared to the North and the South, which have percentages of membership lower than the average territorial distribution of the population (North 48.2 per cent; Centre 16.3 per cent; South 35.2 per cent). The same make-up of the executive bodies of the party, on the other hand, suggests extreme concern to ensure uniform representation throughout the nation: in the *Comitato Centrale* (in the first phase when this body still existed) and in the *Direzione politica* the members prove to be distributed relatively equally according to region.

But the numerical expansion of these years also coincided, paradoxically, with the beginning of a twin process of 'autonomisation' - the Fascist state became independent from the party on the one hand, and the party from its *squadrista* component on the other - which was to bring about a relative weakening of the PNF within the Fascist system of power and a certain blurring of its identity.

As far as the first aspect of this process of 'autonomisation' is concerned - the emancipation of Fascism *qua* state from Fascism *qua* party - the turning-point came with the elections of 7 April 1924, which marked the electoral triumph of Fascism. The so-called *listone* (the list of candidates which included all the factions in the government bloc with an overwhelming majority of Fascists) obtained

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1.7: The regional distribution of the membership of the PNF, July 1923

	Number of members	% of total membership
Piedmont	46,655	7.5
Liguria	19,675	3.1
Lombardy	100,230	16.0
Venezia Giulia	13,050	2.1
Venezia Tridentina	4,000	0.6
Veneto	46,503	7.4
Northern Italy	(230,113)	(36.7)
Emilia	68,848	11.0
Tuscany	82,526	13.2
Umbria	14,567	2.3
Lazio	36,060	5.8
Marches	12,274	1.9
Abruzzi	37,446	6.1
Central Italy	(251,721)	(40.3)
Campania	45,325	7.3
Basilicata	10,913	1.8
Puglia	35,100	5.6
Calabria	19,135	3.0
Sicily	25,031	4.0
Sardinia	8,052	1.3
Southern Italy	(143,556)	(23.0)
Italy (totals)	625,290	100

Source: PNF, *Il Gran Consiglio*, pp. 67-8.

66.3 per cent of the votes and, in compliance with the Acerbo electoral law, 75 per cent of the seats, 374 out of a total of 535: a virtual monopoly of parliament.³⁰ But these elections also demonstrated that the distribution and composition of the electoral consensus behind Fascism was different and, in many ways, independent from what they were for the PNF. As a result Mussolini's conception and control of the state became divorced from the action

of the party, which was thereby partially relieved of its political responsibilities (policy-making now became mainly the responsibility of the state) and relegated to subsidiary functions within the movement (mediating between the various pressure groups and factions inside the movement, propaganda, support for government initiatives, recruitment of youth, etc.). The *listone* secured the greatest amount of support precisely in the South (81.5 per cent of the votes for the government, 18.5 per cent for the opposition) where, as has been noted, the PNF was organisationally at its weakest. However in the North, where the Fascist movement was born and the party had retained a solid structure and wide support, the *listone* actually failed to secure a majority vote (48.8 per cent of the votes cast). Only Central Italy registered a relative equilibrium between the 'electoral weight' of Fascism and the 'organisational weight' of the party: the government coalition prevailed over the opposition with 76 per cent of the votes. Particularly in regions where 'agrarian fascism' had been at its strongest and best organised - and where the destruction of opposing organisations, whether socialist or communist, had been the most ruthless - its electoral success was spectacular.

The dynamics of consensus and the dynamics of the organisational strength thus reveal themselves to be in many respects independent of each other. All of which only tended to reinforce, on a statistical and quantitative level as it were, a process which has been highlighted by historical research into the actions taken by the government and the choices made by Mussolini in the period after the March on Rome: namely the tendency of the *duce* to make his party (which, it should be said, he had always treated with a remarkable lack of scruples and a relative detachment) increasingly peripheral to the running of the government and to rely instead on his own capacity for political manoeuvring and on his control of state institutions to consolidate his own power and to widen the consensus behind him.

The *squadrista* element, with its activist wing and organisational backbone, proved to be a hindrance to this move by Mussolini, or at least to pose problems for him. It was the most 'intransigent' component of Fascism, partly 'subversive' and revolutionary, partly 'agrarian' and ultra-reactionary, and either way it was committed to defend its own role as the 'soul of Fascism' as well as its own organisational territory, independent