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Tim Dougherty

UCSB Sociologist Deconstructs Fascism Under Mussolini

In the years leading up to Italy's disastrous entry into World War II, Benito Mussolini steadily gained power by adopting cultural symbols and rituals to define his regime in opposition to what he claimed was the passionless legalism of European democracies. More than a half-century later the world would do well to remember the lesson of his reign: Political movements that promise an alternative to parliamentary governance and urge the rejection of democratic values can turn fascist.

"Fascism had such an impact and was successful in part because it claimed to be different from the legalistic, dry approach of bureaucratic politics. To this day we see a kind of uneasiness with that brand of politics. People seem to be longing for a contrary model, one less rationalistic and process-oriented. But unless we analyze what could result from a more emotional approach to politics we could end up with governments that are more authoritarian and more dangerous," said UC Santa Barbara sociologist Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, author of the recent book "Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy" (University of California Press, 1997).

A revealing study of the role of culture in the consolidation of political power, Falasca-Zamponi's book marks the first scholarly effort to illuminate the development of a fascist regime beyond simply cataloging its violent excesses. A native of central Italy, she chose to focus on Mussolini because of her expertise with

the relevant archives.

"I wanted to study the making of fascism through its own representations---how the fascists described and defined themselves in words, the symbols they adopted, the rituals they performed, and the ideas they had about politics, people, war, the human body, and the economy. Representations and symbolic expressions are very important influences in the making of power. People tend to think of fascism as being a ready-made construct, when in fact it had to be created," she said.

Mussolini came to power in 1922 and dominated Italy for the next 20 years. Initially, however, the would-be fascists did not have a clear political vision, according to Falasca-Zamponi. Casting themselves as the vanguard of a non-ideological social movement without party affiliations and other political trappings, Mussolini and his supporters managed to amass power by exploiting an untapped nationalist sentiment and a general dissatisfaction with the political order of the day.

To accomplish this, Mussolini adopted a forceful speaking style, the Roman salute, and a host of other cultural symbols and rituals---all calculated to shape a political identity and a regime that was consistent with Mussolini's own mythologized conception of Italy. The effort included controlling behavior---at one point, shaking hands was prohibited, for example. Falasca-Zamponi terms the various elements of this strategy the "aesthetics of power."

"Mussolini tried to build a masterpiece out of Italian culture while completely disregarding his subjects as people. He was obsessed with his project, which was the construction of 'beautiful Italy,' the beautiful regime. It was an aesthetic undertaking in that it concerned what is defined as beautiful, though it had nothing whatever to do with artistic product, which has come to be the contemporary connotation of aesthetics," she said.

According to Falasca-Zamponi, Mussolini sought to create a spectacle, presenting himself as an alternative to movie stars and his regime as a counter model to consumer society---which the fascists feared because of its capacity to foment unbridled desires and demands. Ironically, the battered bodies of Mussolini and other fascists were ultimately strung up outside a Milan gas station in the closing days of World War II---a final, albeit macabre, spectacle punctuating the end of a tumultuous era in Italy.

"Some Italian Americans have accused me of trashing Mussolini, trashing the only good thing that Italy has had. They tend to condemn fascism while salvaging Mussolini, claiming he wasn't responsible for the brutality of his regime or that it was the result of Hitler's influence. In reality, his was a terrible, 20-year dictatorship and Mussolini himself was most responsible for treating people as if they were objects to be molded," she said.

"The fact he was Italian also poses a challenge to deconstructing Mussolini's mystique. Unlike the Nazis, whom we view as being irredeemably evil, Mussolini is looked upon as being charming and funny in the same way all things Italian are stereotypically seen as being innately dramatic and humorous."

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