A Biography of the State

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By

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An iconic image of the State : The Custom House at Night, Dublin.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE DEATH OF A THEORIST

Death of a Theorist

October 3rd. 1979. The French newspapers report news of a death. Nicos Poulantzas, a Greek sociologist and a political theorist of the left who worked in Paris, is dead. There is wide debate over what happened among leftist circles. Some simply accepted the notion that he committed suicide. For them, there were plenty of reasons why he should do so:

> Poulantzas committed suicide for a number of reasons, personal and political. He came from a family of big (Greek) landowners, and his father was a top man in a tribunal set up by the colonel regime - he had a complex about that. The strategy Poulantzas had advocated for Greece did not come into effect, and he was not run as a PCF candidate for the elections - something he had wished. His daughter was seriously handicapped. His wife was having all kinds of affairs (including one with Balibar), and was writing in feminist journals on how bad a lover he was. Academically, his lectures were no longer attended by serious people, but by the politically irrelevant left and third worldist elements who engaged in endless polemics.[1]

Others were less clear, and wanted to suggest that he was simply tired, and that the death was an accident. One reviewer argued that he jumped out of a window on the 20th. floor of the building he lived in. Others claimed he jumped from a friend's apartment window. Alain Touraine declared rather

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[1] A debate about this event is to be found in various leftist sources. This comment is attributed to Liam O'Ruairc, in a debate with Philip Ferguson at the website http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/marxism/2002/msg03750.html. (Recovered on March 18, 2013.) Poulantzas was Greek, and he was obsessed, in his writings and in his personal life, with the Greek dictatorships of the 1960s, both in terms of his family's involvement in these régimes, and his own intellectual and political response to them. A brief comment is made in Martin Jay's book *Marxism and Totality,* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, 1995) on page 397 where he speaks of Poulantzas's suicide at the age of 43.

cruelly that this death heralded the death of European Marxism. There is a brief, and somewhat light-hearted, mention in the Los Angeles Times.[2] By this account, Poulantzas is said to have jumped from a tall building with all his written work clutched in his arms.

Whatever happened, the event was striking, highly significant and shocking to people on the left. In 1979, I was at Stanford, coming to the end of my Ph.D. program in sociology. I was about to leave to go home to New Zealand to teach, when a student colleague, who I had no idea knew about Poulantzas, or cared about him, told me of his death. Neo-Marxism was not widely discussed in Stanford sociology in the 1970s, where a strict empiricism held sway, and Marxists were considered slightly whacky, if not positively dangerous. Some of the more progressive students read Althusser, Poulantzas, Edward Said, Foucault and the like.[3] But while some of the younger faculty certainly taught this material, it was hard to find a class in which the name of Poulantzas appeared.

This was surprising. Stanford was hardly an academic backwater, and many writers from the left were discussed. Nicos Poulantzas was, according to many critics,[4] the most important theorist of the left since the 1960s. His brief career was explosive and hard to ignore if questions of the State, social classes and power were your thing. I had spent two years in the bowels of the Greene Library at Stanford reading his work, which included his doctoral thesis, through which I stumbled in French. It was after one of those sessions in the library basement that I learned of his death.

It is a curious experience to read one particular author very closely for a long period of time. It's also a rare experience, something that only addicts of Jane Austen or crime fiction or graduate students ever get the chance to do. Even research faculty have to go to meetings, teach occasionally, speak to their families, write checks, and think of other things. But a graduate student at a well-funded university can spend hours, days, weeks, thinking and writing about the same thing. That thing for me was Nicos Poulantzas. So the news of his death, as I came to write up my thesis, was unmistakably traumatic. I

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[2] Ella Taylor tells us that everyone she read when she lived in Cambridge seemed to come to a bad end. Poulantzas was one of these authors. At http://articles.latimes.com/1995-06-04/magazine/tm-9821_1_book-group. (Recovered October 6, 2013)

[3] Foucault spoke at Stanford in the late seventies, but the Business School funded him!

[4] See Bob Jessop's *Nicos Poulantzas: Marxist Theory and Political Strategy*, Macmillan, London, 1985, page 4.

was turned around and brought to a halt. It was one of those moments when biography and theory intersect.

The Biography of an Idea

Nicos Poulantzas was one of the leading lights in the intellectual circles of the Left for some fifteen years, during which three dictatorships came to an end in Europe, and during which the May 68 events occurred in Paris. Poulantzas was one of the proponents of high theory, and especially in reworking Marx's theory of the State and his account of social class. He was involved in reinventing Marxism for the new age.

Reading 'Theories of the State' was fascinating when I was a student. The texts were dense, something of a foreign language, though mostly available in English. When you read these books and you spoke to others about them, there was a strong sense of the cult, of being an insider who 'understood', though what we understood was never quite clear. Understanding these theories, or trying to understand them, at least, was intellectually challenging, a kind of rite of passage to enable the reader to enter the halls of high theory. But it was also a strongly political act, tying oneself to a particular political cause – the cause of progressive politics, and the role of theory in unlocking the secrets of capitalism.

I began writing this book with the hope of demystifying this immensely important line of thinking, and planned to do this biographically. I planned to use my own experience to help demystify these ideas, as well as expanding on the biographical background of the writers involved to aid this purpose. My thought was that using biography was a humanizing strategy that might make sensible the unintelligible and inchoate writings of these obscure, though immensely significant, writers. I understood immediately that this approach would have been heretical in the heady days of deep structuralism, when Althusser, Miliband and Poulantzas were locking horns over the topic. To speak of the individual at all was to verge on apostasy, and to talk of agency, what people actually do, even in class terms, was to court extradition from some of the inner circles of State theory. It was a self-indulgent strategy which displaced the class struggle from centre-stage. It suggested naivety, and a lack of attention and dedication to the cause.

While this hyper-structuralist advice seems outdated and irrelevant in the present setting, the view still had enough weight to it to make me reconsider

the approach of the book. Under advice from colleagues[5] I soon changed the focus. My own experience in reading this material seemed beside the point. What appeared much more significant was the biography of an idea – the central idea of the book, and the idea with which these theorists were wrestling – *what role did the State play in securing the future of capitalism against all the odds, and what possibilities for a socialist future lay within the State?* Marx had predicted that capitalism would collapse under the weight of its own contradictions – the left argued that this failed to happen because of the State's intervention, especially during the Depression era of the 1930s. The State thus secured the capitalist future, but perhaps it also had within it the seeds of a socialist society beyond capitalism. So the primary focus of the book is to trace the biography of this central idea, starting with the writings of Antonio Gramsci, and ending in the present day, examining the State's role in securing capitalism's past, and exploring what role it might have in a progressive future.

I retain a belief however, that, while following the biography of this central idea is the most important line to follow, providing the biography of the main protagonists also has some explanatory value. Thus, I do provide biographical and contextual material about the major theorists involved in order to ease the reader into some very complicated and demanding texts. I use the biographies of the major State theorists to illuminate the social conditions in which they worked, and which they tried to explain. I'm also aware that I'm in the process of writing, mostly by accident, the biography of a generation or two of State theorists, and people on the edge of theorizing themselves, by which I mean the many thousands of students worldwide who attended classes in political science, political sociology, political philosophy and related classes who were taught by these theorizing individuals, or who came across their work in other professors' classes.

For quite a long time, this kind of theorizing held centre stage. It was the biggest game in town. It was rumoured that Foucault's students and Poulantzas's students fought pitched battles in the halls of the French Academy, and that the Chilean Generals, as they overthrew democratically-elected Marxist Salvador Allende's government in Chile, burnt Poulantzas's books on television to show the people who the enemy really was. It was heady stuff. It was the kind of theorizing that the self-styled 'most sophisticated students' talked about, read and pretended to understand. Thousands attended conferences about it. Many more read the books, tried to comprehend them and apply them to their own political situations, and

[5] Thanks to Rick Jobs, Professor of History, Pacific University, for this suggestion.

hoped for a better world. Whether all this theorizing and debating contributed to public welfare and progressive politics is an issue that will garner some attention as the book progresses. In one way, then, this is also the biography of a generation of leftist thinkers during the period from about 1960 to 1990 and beyond.

The Three Purposes of this Book

So, following the biography of an idea, I want to take a fresh look at the State and progressive thinking about the State. There are three very important reasons to write, and hopefully to read, such a book. *First, there is the problem of obscurantism to overcome. This brilliant line of theorizing about the State, in which Poulantzas plays a central role, is almost impossible to read.* Of course, such forms of writing play an important social role in the structuring of academic hierarchies. A colleague once mentioned to me that the best way to get a Nobel prize in Economics (he was an economist) was to write in a language that only three people in the world could understand. The same could be said about theorizing on the State. Much of the writing about the State is so obscure that unless you are willing to commit many hours of research and application to the task, the meaning will evade you. This creates an almost impermeable barrier around the upper reaches of State theorizing beyond which the high priests of the cult carry on their rituals untroubled. But such obscurantism isn't useful, and needs to be overcome.

The *second* reason to write this book is because State theory tackles an immensely important question, which is often hidden behind the scholarly rhetoric. It is the fundamental question of how capitalism does it. *How is it that capitalism survives all its tragedies and disasters, its periods of wildly excessive greed, its routinely disorganized and erratic national and global strategies, its failure to establish and maintain a durable social structure, and its consistent inability to deal with the extremes of poverty that it throws up all over the world?* The answer that this strand of reasoning offers is the State, of course, and the whole field of State theorising works on this question through a series of highly elaborate examinations. The reason that several generations of leftist intellectuals struggled with this extraordinary difficult writing, valorised it, worshipped at its altar, and added to it, is because they wanted to work out how the State helps capitalism survive its own absurdities, conundrums and confusions. There are very few questions of more importance.

The State remains, contra Foucault and others, a profoundly important social phenomenon to understand if we want to get our heads around 21st century politics in any nation or culture. While Foucault rightly argued, in direct

contrast to Poulantzas, that the State could not simply be seen as the condensation of power, and instead claimed the ubiquity of power as an image of central importance, this was never a convincing argument on its own. Power may indeed work everywhere, from the small to the very big. But the State is the very big, and it remains fundamental to a social understanding of the structures of power by the very weight of its economic, cultural and social influence. The State can hardly be ignored, even while the limits of its power are also clear.

The *third* reason I have for writing the book is to bring the reader to the texts as directly as possible, by providing an originary, primary account. My aim is to present very careful, detailed readings of these major theorists without the difficulty of having to wade through the vast secondary literature that exists around them. I use a critical reading of these texts, rather than a symptomatic reading. By a critical reading, I mean I look for the meaning beyond the text, rather than reading the text literally. Reading in this view is an active process in which the critical faculties come into play, and my hope is that my own critical reading will activate a similarly critical reading in the reader's mind. But I do not use a symptomatic reading, such as that proposed by Althusser and Balibar in *Reading Capital*,[6] where they suggest that we interrogate texts to see if they comply with the Marxist science they think they have discovered. I will leave it to the critical reader to make their own assessment. So what this means, I hope, is that reading this book will offer up a direct and detailed appraisal of the writing of these State theorists as they, in turn, struggle with the complexities of the State.

The first draft of this book was far too long, and to several of my critics, still impenetrable. I went back through the manuscript, and reduced its size dramatically to improve the chance that readers will penetrate to the meaning more easily. In addition, I have used italics and numbering routinely to indicate key points, and the direction of the argument. I am hoping these changes will aid the reader. At the same time, theorists wrote to me seeking more complexity. I have largely ignored their pleas, and aimed for a readable text. For those wanting even more details, longer versions of these chapters can be found at commons.pacificu.edu.

I start with Gramsci, and his writing that surround the origins of fascism in Italy. One could, of course, engage in an endless, fundamentalist regression, and indeed, many have. These arguments usually take the line of 'What Marx

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[6] Althusser, Louis & Balibar, Étienne (1970). *Reading Capital*. Translated by Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books.

Really Said', and one could substitute the names of Gramsci, Lenin, Althusser and others in this line of reasoning, as if some undeniable and unquestionable truth lies deep in the texts, if only we are patient enough and clever enough, and 'correct' enough to find them. The Greeks wrote about the State, Adam Smith did it, generations of political economists in his era were similarly engaged, and Marx famously established what Engels was happy to call 'scientific socialism'.[7] But such endless regression into the history of State theorizing smacks of a sort of rightist evangelical fundamentalism. I don't believe this is a fruitful line of inquiry, because, in my view, there is no final solution to be found, however hard we look, and however much we argue. Instead, I propose to examine how State theories are *used* to illuminate particular societies and particular human lives, and how these theories continue to stimulate and encourage new ways of thinking about these issues, and thus to throw up new political possibilities. Thus, I plan to start this account with Gramsci and his attempts to understand totalitarianism.

It is clear that the rise of the contemporary welfare State then becomes the next important phase of State activity, and the periods of Fordism and Post-Fordism that follow this development then come into focus. I complete the book with a discussion of some of the fascinating new developments in State theory that have been thrown up in recent years.

I have several people to thank in the writing of the book. The generosity of many on the left who make their manuscripts available through the web is gratefully acknowledged, and especially I am in debt here to Eric Olin Wright and Bob Jessop, who both make their work easily accessible, as do many others. Jules Boykoff and I exchanged emails on his material, and that of Naomi Klein and George Monbiot, and I am grateful for his thoughtful comments. I worked briefly with Wright, Jessop and with Bourdieu, and their personal generosity is also warmly acknowledged. Several colleagues at Pacific University were careful readers of drafts, and their comments have been especially welcome and fruitful. I particularly want to thank Larry Lipin and Rick Jobs for their thoughtful analyses, which aided me at several points in writing the manuscript. I especially want to underline Rick Jobs' very insightful argument that directed me towards the biography of an idea as a prevailing focus for the book. Finally, Cheleen Mahar, anthropologist and dutiful reader, must take much of the credit for chaperoning this text to the finish line. Without her insights, care and attention, as well as her continued

[7] He does this in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,* Marx/Engels selected Works, Volume 3, pages 95-151. (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1970)

encouragement, this might have been a more arduous task. As it was, it was a delight to write.

I hope the reader will find value in the book for these three reasons of clarity, importance, and the chance to get very close to the original writings of these theorists. Many people, both globally, and in the so-called advanced industrial societies, still live in conditions of poverty and social suffering. We now understand the state's potential role in easing these problems, and how its failure to do so has vast human consequences. We also understand that theorising the State's role in all this must be understood as a matter of political and human urgency. Thus my lasting hope is that the reader will find this book useful in getting closer to explaining to themselves how the State might realize its potential as an agent of social liberation, rather than an instrument of domination.

Chris Wilkes
August 23, 2017.

Benito Mussolini. © Alamy Images.

CHAPTER TWO

GRAMSCI AND THE MONSTROUS STATE

Antonio Gramsci

Why is Gramsci so important within this tradition of writing? To get to grips with the significance of his writing, we will need to start with the First World War and its residues. During and after the 'Great War', the left were trying to make sense of a wide range of new political and economic circumstances. As the First World War came to an end, European civilizations were in disarray. There had been a revolution in one of the least advanced societies, in Russia, and the possibility of revolution elsewhere. The social structure of capitalism was in turmoil. These were new circumstances and new understandings were required. One of these new understandings that was essential was to explain what exactly had happened in Russia, and, very soon afterwards, what form of society was developing in Italy under Mussolini's dictatorship. Were these entirely new forms of society? Nobody quite understood. It was Antonio Gramsci who tried most effectively to provide such understandings, and these understandings in turn offered a foundation on which many further explanations about these new forms of society and of capitalism were to be developed in the years to come. This chapter outlines the fundamental elements of this revolutionary understanding.

In the early 1920's, Gramsci was to become a leading light in the emerging Italian Communist Party. Because of his political activities, he was arrested in 1926, and much of his most significant writing thus took place in prison. Making sense of Gramsci's writings is therefore more complicated than usual, since he was writing from incarceration under the watchful eye of his guards. Thus he routinely wrote in code:

> Names of well-known Marxists and Communists are almost always given in the *Quaderni* (notebooks) in the form of a substitute or a circumlocution. Thus Marx is referred to as "the founder of the philosophy of praxis", Lenin as "Ilich" or "Vilich" [V. Ilich], Trotsky as "Leon Davidovitch" or "Bronstein" and so on. Similarly, certain identifiable concepts of Marxism Leninism such as the class struggle or the dictatorship of the proletariat are

> usually masked under innocuous sounding titles.[1]

As well, the chaotic and incomplete nature of Gramsci's original manuscripts, fragments and notes is well documented by his translators and editors. Gramsci frequently commented that his writing was partial, merely a preface to the finished article which never actually appeared, and that an intellectual biography outlining the steps he had taken to develop these theories would therefore be impossible to write[2]:

> … in a note in one of the Quaderni entitled "Questions of Method" he offers a warning, ostensibly about Marx but equally if not more applicable to himself, against confusing unfinished or unpublished work with works published and approved by an author during his lifetime. In the same note he also refers to the importance and to the inherent difficulties of reconstructing the "intellectual biography" of an author. To perform such a task, in relation to the Prison Notebooks, would be an immensely valuable but also intricate labour.

In this way, we might be led to argue that such writings are never complete, always in a provisional state, and continually subject to revision and renewal, part of an unfinished dialogue.[3] Certainly, this seems to have been the case with Gramsci's writings.

Gramsci suffered from ill health all his life. His period in prison exacerbated these problems, and it was only in 1933, when he was finally transferred to the prison clinic, that he began to systematise his work, and allow others to see more clearly what he was writing. But as his editors comment,[4] the notes themselves are still fragmentary, collected in thirty three notebooks, and erratically constructed. Thus it is not just the incomplete nature of the

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[1] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, International Publishers, New York, edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, 2014 printing, page xviii. (Cited below as *PN*) *PN,* op. cit., page xiii.

[2] *PN,* op. cit., page xi.

[3] See Gramsci's further discussion of method on pages 382-386 under 'Questions of Method'. In this view only material specifically written for publication under the author's authority are to be given proper validation. Letters, co-authored pieces and especially posthumous documents are to be treated with suspicion. There is a sense in which he is arguing that mature concepts 'settle down' in the author's writing, and come to be agreed upon, to be repeated and used often once theoretical maturity has been reached. His discussion focuses on Marx, and he argues that a careful review of an author's theoretical work has rarely, if ever, been accomplished. He notes a book on Engels by Mondolfo as a rare exception worthy of study. (Rodolfo Mondolfo, *Il materialismo storico in Federico Engels.* Genoa, 1912.)

[4] *PN,* Preface.

writing - their provisional status - that poses problems, but the disarray that later commentators faced when seeking to place a logic round Gramsci's written ideas. Gramsci speaks of needing an adversary to debate with in order to give his arguments substance:

> (I)n (a) letter to (his sister in law) Tatiana (15 December 1930: LC. pp. 389-92) he writes: "thinking 'disinterestedly' or study for its own sake are difficult for me ... I do not like throwing stones in the dark; I like to have a concrete interlocutor or adversary", and he speaks of the "polemical nature" of his entire intellectual formation.[5]

Collectively, these challenges put paid decisively to any question that the 'final intellectual solution' or some fundamental, unambiguous truth about the State is to be found in these writings. Instead, we discover highly original and thought-provoking analysis about the rise of the first fascist State, which, by the time of Gramsci's imprisonment, had been in power for four years. These arguments are contingent, provisionary, and written, as it were, in the heat of battle, as he struggled to survive in a fascist prison.

Fascism, the régime of Benito Mussolini which sustained control over the Italian State from 1922 to 1943, was a novel phenomenon, and political theorists, politicians and political activists scrambled to understand what was happening. Was this indeed a new phenomenon, or had we seen it all before? People on the left could not understand the class basis of the new State – was it a petty bourgeois insurgency, a working class uprising, or merely an instrument of the ruling class? No simple analysis seemed to fit, and fascism did not appear to align to any existing models of politics.[6] For some years under the new régime other political parties were allowed to exist, and communist members of parliament remained in the House. But by 1926, through a series of decisive and extreme repressions, the delusion of a multi-party system was put to rest, and the authoritarian State was put in place.

Gramsci had grown up in Southern Italy.[7] He had begun his life in Sardinia in 1891. Through scholarship support, he had gained entry to high school, and then to university in Turin. At this time Turin was a hotbed of leftist activity and thought. It was a large, industrializing city in which unions were gaining power, and in which FIAT was developing substantial industrial systems. During this period, the Left was deeply influenced by two factors.

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[5] *PN*, 10.

[6] *PN*, xvii.

[7] Much of this discussion is based on the introduction to the Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith edition of *Prison Notebooks*.

First, Italian involvement in World War One had split progressive opinion. The air of neutrality that hung over the socialist party in the early days of the war did not sit well with Gramsci. Mussolini, early on a socialist in charge of a leftist flank of the party, first supported a neutral role for the socialist party, but he soon changed his mind and came to support the cause. Gramsci first supported Mussolini's neutralism in writing, a position for which he was roundly criticised in later years. Very soon Mussolini changed his position, supported intervention very strongly, and was expelled from the party. Gramsci himself continued to be resolutely against the war, and the socialist party finally moved in this direction as the country itself found the war increasingly unpopular.

Second, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia occurred in 1917, and while the orthodox press in Italy argued that the revolution against the Tsar was probably a bourgeois revolution, it soon became clear that it had taken on a proletarian quality. Nothing could have been more important to the evolving communist and socialist elements in Italy.

In Turin, Gramsci first came into contact with intellectual life in its fullest form. By 1915, he was working fulltime as a political journalist, and he was writing about a large number of matters, not just politics, but culture, the arts and broader social fields. He was widely read. At the same time, Turin's politics were warming up. As news filtered through from Moscow of the uprising, there were those who thought that revolutionaries in Turin should 'Do a Russia', and act while the time was right.[8] There was talk of bringing weapons and bombs to political meetings. At the same time, it was hard to know what was actually going on in Russia. In one sense this was not, on the face of things, a Marxist revolution at all. It had not followed the bourgeois revolution, as Marx had proposed would happen. How could a revolution against the bourgeoisie occur if the bourgeoisie had yet to take power? Much remained unclear. As it turned out in Turin, there was plenty of revolutionary spirit but very little organization. There were brief uprisings, struggles over food, strikes and barricades, but these activities were brutally repressed by the authorities. Some activists were sent to the front; others were imprisoned. Yet more were killed in the fighting, but no revolution was to occur. Over the next several years, the powerlessness of the left was exposed time and time again.

Gramsci's fundamental political ideas were beginning to mature during this period. He was certainly to the left of the socialist party and he sought action, rather than reform. But he didn't adhere to principles at all costs, as some on

[8] *PN*, xxxii.

the left of the party had tended to advocate. As a result, by 1921, in opposition to the socialists, and with others organized around the journal *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Gramsci was involved in the formation of the Italian Communist Party (the PCI – Partito Comunista d'Italia), and became one of its leaders from the first.

In 1926, Antonio Gramsci, by now a member of the Italian parliament, found himself under arrest in the aftermath of an alleged attempt on Benito Mussolini's life. As a result, and as the General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, he was imprisoned. Famously, the prosecutor at his trial commented that 'For twenty years we must stop this brain from functioning'.[9] The prosecutor was to be profoundly disappointed. It was a rare historical moment when the power of intellectual work was fully acknowledged as a fundamental threat by the established authorities. While Gramsci wrote important works before he entered prison, his most famous and significant writing about the State[10] took place under conditions of incarceration, extreme privation and increasingly poor health. Indeed, he died in 1937, still in hospital.

The Rise of Fascism

In order to understand the polemic in which Gramsci was engaged during his prison years, we need to come to terms with the basic history of the period, and particularly to gain a clear understanding about where fascism came from, and what its main characteristics comprised. During the First World War, the immediate sources of Italian fascism[11] became more obvious. These origins were bound up with dreams of a larger Italy that expanded its territories through war, and which allowed Italians to think again of empire, harking back to the days of the Roman Empire many centuries before. But

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[9] *PN*, page xviii.

[10] Gramsci capitalized the word 'State' throughout his work, so I have followed suit in this chapter.

[11] The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that: "Fascism /faz(ə)m -sz(ə)m/ n. [mass noun] (is) an authoritarian and nationalistic right-wing system of government and social organization. - (in general use) extreme right-wing, authoritarian, or intolerant views or practices. The term Fascism was first used of the totalitarian right-wing nationalist regime of Mussolini in Italy (1922–43); the regimes of the Nazis in Germany and Franco in Spain were also Fascist. Fascism tends to include a belief in the supremacy of one national or ethnic group, a contempt for democracy, an insistence on obedience to a powerful leader, and a strong demagogic approach." Stevenson, Angus. *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Kindle Locations 140597-140605). Oxford University Press – A Kindle Edition.

these hopes were dashed by the tragedy of the actual war experience, and the resulting social unrest at home. What was to result from these conditions of turmoil was unclear at first. Many alternatives seemed possible, especially to the left. By 1921, Gramsci was opposing the view that a dictatorship was impossible. But Gramsci himself did not fully understand the sources of the new régime. He had imagined a social democratic alternative might emerge to replace fascism, and that this development might put the proletarian revolution on the agenda.[12] But more than contemporary politics was at work. The changes afoot also brought alive again the dreams of a new empire. When the Italian Fascist Party came to power, they made these connections to Italian history very clear. The Roman Empire was considered the first incarnation of this empire, the Italian Renaissance the second version. The new Italian fascists would bring about the Third Empire.

Italy had entered the First World War by signing the London Pact.[13] This agreement, signed and maintained in secret throughout the war, offered Italy the chance to recover territory lost in past years, and to gain new ones, in exchange for Italian support of the 'Triple Entente'[14] against Germany. Britain and its allies hoped to bring Italy into the war against Germany and Austria, in return for promising new territories to Italy. The acquisition of these territories, which included a good deal of Austria, as well as a series of German overseas territories, clearly depended on the Triple Entente winning the war, which they assumed would be a formality in 1915. The Triple Entente was in the business of cutting up Europe and its colonies under the threat of military intervention.

As might have been predicted, all did not go well. Certainly, the 'Triple Entente' were on the winning side of the war, but, from the Italian standpoint, the conditions of the Treaty were never met. The Italians did

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[12] Hoare and Smith make this claim in their introduction to the *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci had always seen the origins of fascism in its social base, and especially among the petty bourgeoisie. (*PN*, lxxiii)

[13] The agreement is more formally known as the Treaty of London. See Terence Ball, Richard Bellamy. *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought,* 2003, pp. 133ff.

[14] The 'Triple Entente' (or Three Way Agreement) connected the Russian Empire, the French Third Empire and the United Kingdom. They stood against the 'Triple Alliance' of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. The London Pact meant that Italy sided with the 'Triple Entente' and not with the 'Triple Alliance' during World War One. For a detailed description of this period of Italian history and the rise of fascism see Stanley Payne's *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945*, Taylor and Francis, Oxford and New York, among many other sources.

indeed enter the war against Austria in 1915, and, though there was a delay, formally opposed Germany in 1916. But, from the Italian position, most of those territories that had been promised in the words of the Treaty of London were never ceded to Italy. American president Woodrow Wilson claimed that since the Treaty had been signed in secret, it had no formal legal standing, and should not be honoured.

The Treaty was indeed meant to be kept secret, but the Russian October Revolution of 1917 put paid to that. *Izvestia*, a Russian journal expressing the view of the new Russian government, published the agreement in 1917, and the secret was out. The Treaty of Versailles, one of the major peace agreements signed at the end of the First World War, nullified the Treaty of London, and the Italian claims were rejected. This caused very serious resentment among the Italian political class and more widely among Italians of all backgrounds, especially since Britain and France were able to secure overseas territories from Germany. Many historians have since argued that this profound and widespread disillusion paved the way for the rise of Mussolini's fascist régime four years later, and this widespread sentiment certainly provides the *first* of several sources of profound unrest.

If national humiliation offers one source of explanation for the origins of fascism, then a *second* was widespread discontent with social conditions at home. One must not ignore the massive social unrest smouldering throughout the northern, industrialising centres of Italy, and, indeed, throughout most regions of Italy. The unrest in Turin was certainly the most formidable sign of resistance to the existing régime, but industrial unrest was widespread among the emerging industrial working class. A new political formulation would need to provide a solution to the tradition of class conflict that had been simmering for generations. With Mussolini's background as a leader of the socialist movement, a new way forward presented itself.

Thirdly, Italy was reeling from the material catastrophe of the war. Italy was now burdened down with heavy war debts taken on for the provision of the war, in the hope that a successful outcome to the war effort would reap huge benefits to the State in terms of new territories and extended opportunities for economic growth. These hopes proved to be utterly unfounded. The Italian Prime Minister returned from the peace talks at the end of the war empty-handed and disgraced. It was not hard to see this set-back as a profound insult to Italy as a whole. The Italian war effort, and the economic investment in the war, had proved catastrophic. In human terms, the soldiers returned to a bankrupt country, managed by liberal elites entirely unsympathetic to their plight, and to a country riddled with social unrest. The veterans were

despised, spat upon and thrown aside as a reminder of Italian humiliation. The anger of returning veterans and the need to restore national pride further fuelled the fire of fascism, and gave Mussolini a fertile source of violent supporters ready to fight for a new order.

The Nature of the Italian Fascist State

With this short history of the rise of fascism in mind, we can now turn to the matter of outlining what comprised the fascist State, and why we should consider it totalitarian.[15] This account can best be described under a series of headings. After a brief outline of what totalitarianism means, we review in turn a series of major elements of fascism itself – fascism's focus on corporatism and syndicalism; its dependence on a régime of violence; its relation to the Catholic church; its use of iconography; and finally, its focus on women and youth.

1. *Totalitarianism.* Perhaps a striking way to answer this first question about the nature of fascism is to quote Mussolini himself:

> Fascism is … for the only liberty which can be a serious thing, the liberty of the state and of the individual in the state. Therefore for the fascist, *everything is in the state, and no human or spiritual thing exists, or has any sort of value, outside the state.* In this sense fascism is totalitarian, and the fascist state which is the synthesis and unity of every value, interprets, develops and strengthens the entire life of the people.[16]

Totalitarianism in this view thus simply means that nothing should exist beyond the State. Individuals lived 'within the State', and nothing was beyond the State's control. The State is therefore the agent of history, of Italian

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[15] It is startling to remind ourselves that in the earliest days of the fascist movement, a program was put forward that was largely socialist in outline. See *A History of Fascism,* Stanley Payne, and especially chapter four, footnote 18: "The "postulates" of May 13 included abolishing the Senate, lowering the voting age to sixteen for both sexes, establishing the eight-hour day, worker participation in technical management, a national technical council for labor, old age and sickness insurance for all, confiscation of uncultivated land, development of a full secular school system, progressive taxation with a capital levy, an 85 percent tax on war profits, confiscation of the property of religious institutions, and declaration of the principle of the "nation in arms". Payne, Stanley G., *A History of Fascism*, 1914–1945 (Kindle Locations 11373-11377). University of Wisconsin Press. Kindle Edition.

[16] Benito Mussolini, Giovanni Gentile, *Doctrine of Fascism*, 1883-1945; Italy; 1968, page 1, recovered from http://www.historyguide.org/europe/duce.html on April 18th., 2017.

destiny, and the primary modernizing force in Italian society and culture. By implication, therefore, all personal ambitions and aspirations should be subsumed by the needs of the State and society as a whole.[17]

2. *Corporatism.* A second element of Italian fascism was a system of corporatism, in this case referring to the management of capital and labour within the structure of the State. While totalitarianism provided the mechanism to achieve national unity, and to ensure national success, this form of incorporation, which had elements of both traditional corporatism[18] and syndicalism in it, offered the possibility of easing industrial conflicts once and for all. Mussolini called this strategy a 'third alternative', eschewing the twin choices of capitalism and socialism. Instead, in Mussolini's emerging fascist State, employers and employees were to come together, under the guidance of the State, of course, to form cooperatives or 'syndicates', using the fascist terminology.

To begin with, Mussolini worked with the established principles of liberal economics. If we allow ourselves to assume the entire fascist State came into being overnight with Mussolini's ascendancy to power, we would be guilty of an easily-made, but simple and obvious mistake. Historians agree that from 1922 until 1925 the emerging State gave every sign of confusion, panic, changes of policy, incomplete implementation and endless false starts. And until 1925, economic policies followed the established tradition of liberalism – a balanced budget was achieved, and private enterprise was supported. Between 1925 and 1929, however, the policies and practices of the State gained a much sharper focus. And from 1926, economic strategy took a decidedly corporatist turn. The 'Pact of the Vidoni Palace'[19] meant that all non-State unions would be banned, and that henceforth all economic policies

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[17] Another example of fascist sloganing makes the same point: ("Everything in the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State") Used by Mussolini in a speech before the Chamber of Deputies, May 26, 1927. Disco del 1927; Milano, Alpes, 1928, page 157.

[18] Corporatism usually refers to the control of the State or other institution by certain interest groups, such as the business community or the unions. But in the Italian context the term could be said to describe the opposite situation, in which the State controlled business and union interests. Thus the prevailing ideology proposed a national solution by the State, rather than an interest-group 'takeover' of the State. Gramsci understood this new régime to be the latest stage in capitalism designed to appear as a national project. By 'Syndicalism' is usually meant a social movement from the left leading to the takeover of industry by the unions. Again, elements of this kind of thinking were present in the early discussions of the new State.

[19] James McGregor, *Italian Fascism and Developmental Dictatorship,* Princeton Legacy Library, Princeton, New Jersey, 1979, page 199.

would be managed by the State. State-led unions would supersede workers' councils, Christian unions and other forms of non-State unions, and, on the business side of the equation, control was not far behind:

> Mussolini identified the tasks that Fascism had assumed … The working masses must recognize that the enhancement of production and the development of the peninsula required disciplined collaboration under the aegis of the state. But this was not understood to mean that only labour would be subject to Fascist control. The state, Mussolini went on, must assume "imposing tasks". Ultimately, it must "control all the forces of industry, all the forces of finance, and all the forces of labour". Fascist intention, and the intention of the legislation on the syndicates, was totalitarian and hegemonic in purpose.[20]

At this time business and labour were organized into twelve syndicalist organizations which managed all labour contracts in every sector of the economy. Private companies, though nominally still in private hands, were in fact, controlled by the State:

> Mussolini … eliminated the ability of business to make independent decisions: the government controlled all prices and wages, and firms in any industry could be forced into a cartel when the majority voted for it. The well-connected heads of big business had a hand in making policy, but most smaller businessmen were effectively turned into state employees contending with corrupt bureaucracies. They acquiesced, hoping that the restrictions would be temporary. Land being fundamental to the nation, the fascist state regimented agriculture even more fully, dictating crops, breaking up farms, and threatening expropriation to enforce its commands.
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> Banking also came under extraordinary control. As Italy's industrial and banking system sank under the weight of depression and regulation, and as unemployment rose, the government set up public works programs and took control over decisions about building and expanding factories. The government created the Istituto Mobiliare in 1931 to control credit, and the IRI (Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale) later acquired all shares held by banks in industrial, agricultural, and real estate enterprises.[21]

3. The Use of Violence. Violence, threatened, imagined or real, had been at the heart of fascism from the very beginning. It remained so during the structuring of the new State. In his personal life, Mussolini had proved himself to be a violent child, a playground bully and a braggart. Violence was

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[20] Ibid., page 200.

[21] Recovered from http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/Fascism.html, August 26th., 2016, and authored by Sheldon Richman.

manifested in the life of his early followers, and especially the black shirts, the paramilitary wing of the National Fascist Party, so garbed because black was the colour of death. Behind all the acts of the emerging State was the possibility, the actuality, the inevitability of violence. Violence in a wide variety of forms had increased after 1919 from a variety of sources. There were the 'Sempre Pronti' (Always Ready) one of the many middle-class defence leagues that existed at that time. This group had carried out a planned assault in 1919.[22] This was only the start of a wider pattern of political violence:

> Violence in Italy generally increased after World War I, and several hundred deaths resulted from political disorders during 1919 and the first half of 1920, most of these the result of activities by Socialists or the army and police. Members of the Fasci di Combattimento had engaged in comparatively few such acts during the first year of their organization's existence, if for no other reason than numerical weakness. (But) (b)y the spring of 1920 the Fasci were organizing a political militia of squadre (squads) in various parts of the north, the strongest at the newly incorporated city of Trieste, an Italian island in a Slovene hinterland. Using the excuse of the murder of two Italian naval officers at Split on the Yugoslav coast, the Trieste *squadre* seized the offensive on July 20, carrying out the first in a series of assaults against both Socialists and Slovene organizations in the city and in the surrounding countryside. They soon dominated the streets and had the Socialists on the run, with local Italian military authorities watching complacently and even providing equipment. On July 3 *Il Popolo d'Italia* declared that the Fasci were neither "legalitarian at any price, nor a priori antilegalitarian," and said that "they do not preach violence for the sake of violence, but reply to all violence by passing to the counterattack," and so would use "means adapted to the circumstances."[23]

And:

> Violence continued through the electoral period. According to one record, during the first four and a half months of 1921 there were at least 207 political killings, with distinctly more Socialist than Fascist victims, while another ten Socialists were killed on the day after elections. Army and government employees were generally (though not universally) sympathetic to the Fascist offensive and in some areas helped the *squadristi* to obtain arms, though on April 20 the prime minister had issued strong orders to end such complicity. Not all violence was initiated by Fascists; on March 23 a bomb placed by anarchists in a Milan theater killed twenty-one people and injured perhaps as

[22] Payne, Stanley G., *A History of Fascism*, 1914–1945 (Kindle Locations 1765-1766). University of Wisconsin Press. Kindle Edition.
[23] Payne, Stanley G., *A History of Fascism,* 1914–1945 (Kindle Locations 1773-1777). University of Wisconsin Press. Kindle Edition.

> many as two hundred.[24]

Indeed, some critics have argued that because of the open-endedness of early fascist policies, the lack of clear doctrine, the shifts towards the left and then to the right, that the only enduring quality of this early brand of fascism was brute force.[25] This régime of violence continued both within the structure of the State itself, through the police and the military apparatus, but also in the informal organs of the fascist movement:

> Many studies have suggested that squad violence and pockets of illegality persisted throughout Italy, often on the margins of the Fascist Militia … into the late 1920s and early 1930s. In such cases, Fascist ras (leaders), together with their cronies and clients, continued to rule towns, small cities, and neighborhoods as private fiefdoms, engaging in a wide array of illegal activities, ranging from extortion to physical attacks. Local and central authorities often turned a blind eye to this type of criminality, but in special circumstances larger political forces compelled police and *carabinieri* to investigate and prosecute Fascists. Over the course of the regime, the political winds regularly shifted, most commonly in response to Mussolini's appointment of a new party secretary. During these periods, Fascists at the national and provincial levels engaged in factional struggles, smear campaigns, and denunciatory practices in order to win political offices and administrative positions … But the disgraced Fascist hierarch and his supporters never completely dropped out of the game. Political rehabilitation and opportunities for revenge, always remained possible … These shifts in political power thus led to serious, sometimes violent conflicts, as ambitious party men sought to capitalize on a changing political landscape.[26]

Overall, it was the threat of violence that had such great power over the actions of citizens, and which prevented the rise of alternatives and resistance to the emerging fascist régime. Even though the possibility of violence, the worship of violence and death, the willingness, even eagerness, to use violence to purge dissenters was commonplace, during the most violent years, the number of actual deaths on each side of the political divide was limited:

> The two years of maximal political violence were 1921 and 1922, when the Fascist offensive was at its height. The Fascists also suffered numerous

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[24] Payne, Stanley G., *A History of Fascism,* 1914–1945 (Kindle Locations 1824-1832). University of Wisconsin Press. Kindle Edition.

[25] Payne, Stanley G., *A History of Fascism,* 1914–1945 (Kindle Location 1894). University of Wisconsin Press. Kindle Edition

[26] *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy*. Michael R. Ebner. Cambridge University Press, 2011, pages 216-217.

> fatalities and sometimes referred to "thousands" of their member slain by "subversives", but the nearest thing to a detailed Fascist report indicates that a total of 463 Fascists were slain during 1919-22. A later Fascist government report indicated that only 428 members were slain through the end of 1923. The number of leftists, mainly Socialists, killed by Fascists was probably at least twice as high. Gaetano Salvemini later calculated roughly that approximately 900 Socialists had been killed by the end of 1922, and that figure may be close to the mark. Not all the latter were slain by Fascists, for official statistics reported 92 people killed by the police and army during 1920 and 115 the following year. The total number of deaths from political violence in Italy for the four years 1919– 22 may have amounted to nearly 2,000.[27]

4. The Church. An essential and important element of the emerging fascist State was embodied in its formal relationship with the Catholic church. As one of the most important elements of the justifying ideological structure of Italian society, it was not possible for Mussolini to ignore the church hierarchy. And, just as importantly, since the church held spiritual and cultural sway over large sections of the population, Mussolini was desperate to gain the ideological agreement of these spiritual adherents to his cause. He did this by signing a concordat with the church.[28] Early on, the Vatican were complicit with the new régime. The church leadership may have felt they had little choice in the matter, given the violence of the new political order and its followers. They may have considered that their best chance of survival was to reach a mutually agreed pact, in which both the fascist State and the church were able to gain some autonomy and legitimacy. Whatever the reasoning, the Vatican was not an unwilling partner. The church hierarchy, though not always the lay clergy, was hostile to the left, so, as the rightist quality of fascism became more obvious, the church increasingly found ideological agreement with Mussolini. This, then, was not simply a matter of survival, but also a mechanism whereby the anti-clerical left could be crushed. In any event, an agreement was reached:

> Overt, often intense, hostility between church and state had existed since unification in 1860, but as early as 1922 the Vatican had indicated it would not oppose a Mussolini government and appreciated Fascism's role in the defeat of the left. Signature of the three Lateran Pacts in 1929 completed the system. One granted the papacy full independent state sovereignty over an area around St. Peter's Cathedral now designated Vatican City, ending the

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[27] Payne, Stanley G. *A History of Fascism,* 1914–1945 (Kindle Locations 1946-1956). University of Wisconsin Press. Kindle Edition.

[28] Payne, Stanley G. *A History of Fascism,* 1914–1945 (Kindle Location 2209). University of Wisconsin Press. Kindle Edition.

> Vatican's long period as a territorial "prisoner" of the Italian state. A second agreed to terms of financial compensation for the seizure of Church lands by the liberal state in the nineteenth century, while the third created a concordat in which the Italian state granted official status to the Catholic religion, promised freedom for all nonpolitical activities of the large laymen's association, Catholic Action, and other Catholic groups, and provided for Catholicism to be taught in all state primary and secondary schools. For the Church it was an agreement that restored the status of religion and would promote the re-Christianization of Italy; for Mussolini it was a useful compromise that raised his government to a plateau of acceptance it had never enjoyed before.[29]

5. Iconography. One cannot overlook the iconography of fascism – the imagery embodied in fascist architecture, the speeches, the self-consciously propagandist public ideology, the discourse, style, display – all were used to influence and attach themselves to the social imaginary:

> Frequent and large-scale public marches were a common feature. Especially impressive were the opulent funeral services for the fallen, which had become a centerpiece of Fascist ritual, uniting the living and the dead in a tribute to courage and the overcoming of mere mortality. The massed response of "Presente!" to the calling of the slain comrade's name expressed the new Fascist cult of transcendence through violence and death.[30]

The original symbol was the fasces, which comprised a bundle of sticks with an axe. These items, with their origins in ancient Rome, symbolized the power of the magistrate in court, representing also the wider power over life and death. Various other elements of Roman tradition were used, including the SPQR motto.[31]

None of this iconography was more obvious, and to later eyes, more absurd, than the imagery of 'Il Duce', the 'Universal Genius' who at one time ran eight ministries on his own, and apparently embodied all human knowledge in the person of one small, dyspeptic, and very violent man.[32] Mussolini began to use the iconography of ancient Rome in an extensive way. By the

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[29] Payne, Stanley G., *A History of Fascism,* 1914–1945 (Kindle Locations 2209-2219). University of Wisconsin Press. Kindle Edition.

[30] Payne, Stanley G., *A History of Fascism*, 1914–1945 (Kindle Location 1930-1940). University of Wisconsin Press. Kindle Edition.

[31] Senātus Populusque Rōmānus, meaning the senate and people of Rome.

[32] Follo, Valentina, *"The Power of Images in the Age of Mussolini"* (2013). Publicly Accessible Penn Dissertations. Paper 858. Turro, Katherine, *"Aesthetics under Mussolini: Public Art & Architecture, 1922-1940"* (2012). History Honors Papers. Paper 16. http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/histhp/16.