

Italian Fascism: Ideology or Political Tool?

The *Doctrine of Fascism*, written by Benito Mussolini and published in 1932, is the single most prominent attempt at fascist self-definition. Providing readers with a supposed framework of essential values, objectives, and policies, the document sets out to define the fascist platform even going so far as to suggest fascism is “like all [other] sound political conceptions” as both an “action” and a “thought.”¹ However, when this document is analyzed more deeply, it becomes apparent that fascism isn’t an ideology at all; instead, the document inadvertently unveils fascism as, more accurately, a nonsensical conglomeration of constantly and consistently shifting reactionary talking points and idealistic promises which only come to prominence under political, economic, and cultural crises and stagnation, as evidenced throughout the doctrine’s core theme of sociocultural and political revolution and restructuring. Moreover, the implications of such a conception of fascism enrich historical analyses by redefining what truly gives rise to successful fascist regimes, outlining fascism’s junction between culture and politics, and complicating what regimes and movements can be considered fascist and non-fascist.

When first beginning to dissect the *Doctrine of Fascism* and its implications to the interwar period’s fascist movement as a whole, it’s vital to first explore the overarching, fundamental idea of fascism as both “spiritual” and “practical.”² This concept serves as the backbone to each of the document’s ‘policies’ while also addressing the fundamental issue of the time, the “spirit of the age.”³ This spirit is, generally, defined as the combination of the intellectual, gender based, and technological crises of meaning into the overarching desire to belong to a collective project, belief in irrationality, and wish to embrace mass group politics.⁴ Mussolini first asserts fascism as addressing this issue in 1932 by indicating fascism as a compromise between individualism and collectivism: “[fascism] sees not only the individual but the nation and the country” while also stating “the individual is not suppressed, but rather

¹ Mussolini, Benito, and Giovanni Gentile. “The Doctrine of Fascism.” Essay. In *Fascismo* 14, 14:847–51. Firenze: Enciclopedia Italiana, 1936.

² *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

³ Radcliff lecture 1/10; lecture 1/17; lecture 1/19

⁴ Radcliff lecture 1/26

multiplied.”⁵ This compromise, however, is contradictory, a fact expressed in special regard to the assertion “fascism stands for liberty, and for the only liberty worth having, the liberty of the State and of the individual within the State.”⁶ Liberty, by definition, is free, so to assert liberty of the individual while they’re also to maintain subordination as a core policy is fundamentally contradictory. Not only is it contradictory, though; this piece of the platform is also, simply put, never drawn out and explained. Instead, the doctrine continues to explain its policy through vague statements akin to the aforementioned one. As a result, an overall sense of ambiguity pervades which allows the doctrine to pander to any and every aspect of the “spirit of the age,” even when those ideas are in direct opposition. As another example, Mussolini gives Italians a sense of collective belonging by asserting they must “[renunciate their] self interest” while in the same sentence going on to state they — as an individual — “must create [their] own world.”⁷ This theme of ambiguity and compromise, of course, is no accident, functioning as the backbone to fascist policies which are already displaying themselves as more exploitative of the time’s political landscape than an ideology.

In further demonstration that the doctrine’s individual-collectivist compromise is reactionary and exploitative instead of consistently ideological, Mussolini’s first speech to the Chamber of Deputies in 1921, asserts a distaste for ‘socialization,’ the policy of social mixing and a staple of collectivism.⁸ Yet in the 1932 doctrine, Mussolini claims fascism embraces “the ‘collective’ century.”⁹ Similarly, in Mussolini’s 1920 fascist program, he neglects to assert a social doctrine indicating preference for either collectivism or individualism in the first place,¹⁰ instead opting for the only doctrine he “had practical experience with,” socialism.¹¹ However, socialism seeks economic egalitarianism, not cultivation of a mass sense of belonging parallel to individual freedom,¹² which is, supposedly, key to the ‘true’ fascist

⁵ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

⁶ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

⁷ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

⁸ Delzell, Charles F., and Benito Mussolini. “Mussolini’s First Speech in the Chamber of Deputies.” Essay. In *Mediterranean Fascism*, 23. New York: Walker and Company, 1971.

⁹ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

¹⁰ Delzell, Charles F., and Benito Mussolini. “Postulates of the Fascist Program.” Essay. In *Mediterranean Fascism*, 14–18. New York: Walker and Company, 1971.

¹¹ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

¹² Radcliff lecture 1/16

doctrine. Collectively, these points act as more evidence to the fact of fascism's as a reactionary tool used to pander to majority opinions, which in this case, were embodied in the "spirit of the age."

In addition and in tandem to the reasons for the document's platform of collectivist-individualist compromise, it also argues for Catholicism as Italy's chosen religion while expressing belief that there's intrinsic value in "tradition in records, in language, in customs, [and] in the rules of social life."¹³ Furthermore, the doctrine asserts man's value based upon his contributions "as a member of the family." Thus, this platform blatantly argues for reversion to previous cultural norms and customs, specifically traditional gender roles, while also appealing to the largest collective identity in Italy other than the Italian nationality itself — something addressed in the next paragraph.¹⁴ It's no surprise that in a nation which, at the time, had adopted strong anti-socialist rhetoric and was Catholic, would applaud social rule reversion — something unequivocally anti-marxist and pro-Catholic¹⁵ — and support for the church. Moreover, it was imperative for fascism politically to adopt a pro-Catholic platform which would help it build out political space, given the Italian Catholic Party was the second largest in 1919 and pursued an anti-socialist, anti-liberal, and pro-conservative platform. As a result, a clear pro-catholic leaning is apparent throughout the document: "Catholicism [is] the special, positive religion of Italians." However, similarly to what we saw with collectivism and individualism, this stance on clericalism was not always a staple of Italo-fascist policy,¹⁶ and in addition, was actually a massive difference between Italo-Fascism and the majority of other fascist regimes.¹⁷ In fact, Italo-Fascism was, preceding 1921, both so anti-clerical and anti-religion — "[Fascism insists upon] confiscation of all the properties belonging to religious congregations and abolition of all [their] revenues"¹⁸ — that in 1920 it proved "too much for [other fascists at the time] who quickly pulled out."¹⁹ Furthermore, conflict between catholicism and fascism isn't only present in past Italo-fascist doctrines; even in this 1932 program, incompatibility can be

¹³ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

¹⁴ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

¹⁵ Radcliff lecture 1/26

¹⁶ Radcliff lecture 2/16

¹⁷ Radcliff lecture 1/26

¹⁸ Mussolini., "Program of the Italian Fascist Movement." 13

¹⁹ Delzell, Charles F., and Benito Mussolini. "Program of the Italian Fascist Movement." Essay. In *Mediterranean Fascism*, 14. Walker and Company, 1971.

found as demonstrated by the doctrine's support for "anti-pacifism"²⁰ as an end²¹ — further codified by their actions in the 1922 fascist-socialist "civil war"²² — a belief that directly conflicts with the Catholic view of violence as a tool only justified "if all efforts to resolve an issue by peaceful means have failed."²³ As a result, it can again be surmised that the Italo-Fascist platform is a platform which panders to its constituency through reactionism, attempting to draw in as much support as possible even if it contradicts the values of the individual leading it.

In conjunction with the aims of the doctrine's pro-Catholic platform, it also advocates for a platform of social reorientation and unification — again pandering to the overarching desire to belong to a collective project — brought by the guise of nationalism and imperialism. The doctrine does this, most evidently, through idolization of Rome, seen in descriptions of the empire's fall as a "year of darkness and tragedy."²⁴ Such depictions obviously appeal to an overwhelming majority of Italians given their historical ties to the empire, but they also reinforce Mussolini's pro-Catholic sentiments by implicitly preaching masculinity in statements like "the roman tradition is embodied in a conception of strength."²⁵ This conjunction between the doctrine's pro-clerical sentiments and pro-nationalist and pro-imperialist ones is then further exacerbated through statements like "Roman Catholicism [is] the special, positive religion of Italians" and "imperial power [is] spiritual and ethical."²⁶ The combination of these policy platforms creates an implicit reason for Italians to adopt pro-nationalist and pro-imperialist tendencies — tendencies Mussolini later exploited through corporatism — while also strengthening the doctrine's nationalist and imperialist platform by tying it directly to Catholicism. However, again, we see a discrepancy between this doctrine's policy points and talking points and statements found in previous doctrines. For example, in 1920, Mussolini argued for "peaceful competition of the civilized nations" and

²⁰ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

²¹ Radcliff lecture 1/26

²² Matteotti, Giacomo, and Ernest W. Dickes. "The Conquest of Molinella." Essay. In *The Fascisti Exposed: A Year of Fascist Domination*, 103–19. Howard Fertig, 1969.

²³ "What Does Catholic Christianity Teach About War and Peace?" BBC News. BBC. Accessed February 16, 2023. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z2xxk2p/revision/4#:~:text=Many%20Catholics%20believe%20that%20war,to%20live%20by%20God's%20standards>.

²⁴ Mussolini, "Mussolini's First Speech in the Chamber of Deputies," pg 25

²⁵ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

²⁶ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

“revision of all contracts for supplying war materiel,” both clearly non-imperialist and non-nationalist policies.²⁷ Thus, nationalism and imperialism are another example of the doctrine’s general talking points and policies being crafted specifically to exploit general demographic trends and the spirit of the age in reaction to previous doctrines lacking the ability to find the substantial, effective political space — there were already too many left-wing parties — and popular support — they didn’t pander to the wishes of the time — they needed to succeed.

In addition to the brief mention of the topic of anti-pacifism earlier in this paper, the doctrine goes on to elaborate upon the concept in a more robust way, tying it directly to “work” and thus economy.²⁸ For example, the doctrine asserts life’s meaning as the combination of “duty, elevation, [and] conquest” which are each, according to the doctrine, found by engaging in the “essential value of work.”²⁹ There are, of course, clear undertones in the language here that suggest the doctrine is trying to hybridize and strengthen the reader’s subconscious connections between working and war, a connection substantiated by statements like “[work is where] man subjugates nature and creates the human world.”³⁰ Moreover, these undertones aren’t accidental or coincidental but instead, purposeful and act as the doctrine’s way of establishing “a smoke screen for [its] aggressive foreign policy.”³¹ Moreover, as we’ve seen time and time again with other policies, anti-pacifism specifically in regards to war wasn’t consistent in fascist ideology. For example, in 1920, Mussolini approached war as important for “winning the peace” instead of as an end.³² Thus, again, the reader is subjected to the doctrine’s unique approaches to conservative policies which are platformed by appealing to the spirit of the age; this time the spirit is tied to the sense of belonging a worker feels when working for a greater cause while also appealing to the pro-military and imperialist institutions and people Mussolini left intact post-1925.³³ As a result, the doctrine panders to the general worker, getting their support for pro-violence and general war efforts while also pandering to

²⁷ Mussolini, “Program of the Italian Fascist Movement.”

²⁸ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

²⁹ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

³⁰ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

³¹ Delzell, Charles F., and the Fascist Grand Council. “The Labor Charter.” Essay. In *Mediterranean Fascism*, 126. Walker and Company, 1971.

³² Mussolini, “Postulates of the Fascist Program.” pg 14

³³ Radcliff lecture 2/16

the elites beside him who want imperial conquest. Surprisingly, this strategy was massively effective for Mussolini as suggested by the broad range of representation fascism had, spanning every level of class and supported by the majority demographics in Italy.³⁴

The final topic referenced in the 1932 doctrine is corporatism, although these references are better described as minimal, far and few between hints. There is a place where the doctrine outlines corporatism as a system “in which divergent interests are coordinated and harmonized,” but that’s about all it gives.³⁵ In fact, I very nearly didn’t touch on corporatism at all given the doctrine has “almost nothing to say about either the corporative state or economic autarky.”³⁶ However, the actual lack of discussion on the topic is actually an indication of its centrality to the 1932 program. This is because, as Delzell puts it, “[corporatism] was a process designed to win employers over to fascism” through anti-labor organization rhetoric³⁷ and, according to Professor Radcliff, wasn’t so much a serious ‘to-be-implemented’ policy and structure as much as it was a performative policy aimed entirely at gaining support.³⁸ Given both of these analyses of corporatism in practice, it would seem that the reason why this 1932 program doesn’t touch on corporatism is because corporatism was never truly part of the fascist plan outside of garnering support for the regime.³⁹ That means that we’ve run into another clear indication that fascism is a tool used to garner support, not an ideology. Furthermore, Mussolini’s general approach to economic policies around the supposed time corporatism was being implemented (1927) was that of a capitalist designing policies to benefit capital interests through, for example, protectionism.⁴⁰ Thus, this final tenet of the fascism program — or lack thereof — more or less, literally or figuratively, seals the deal; fascism has, once again, demonstrated itself as a policy about reacting to ideas and beliefs with pandering to them in as

³⁴ Radcliff lecture 1/26

³⁵ *Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini

³⁶ Delzell, Charles F. “The Corporative State.” Essay. In *Mediterranean Fascism*, 107. Walker and Company, 1971.

³⁷ Delzell. “The Corporative State,” 107

³⁸ Radcliff lecture 2/16

³⁹ Radcliff lecture 2/16; Delzell. “The Labor Charter”

⁴⁰ Radcliff lecture 2/16

broad range as possible, even going so far as to simply make false statements about your objectives — something Mussolini clearly did often.⁴¹

Conclusion

The culmination of my analysis of Mussolini's *Doctrine of Fascism* is a definition that's loose in nature yet firmly cemented in the concept of reacting. It suggests, then, that fascism is, in its simplest sense, the action of conforming to a population's interests in an attempt to gain absolute power. Moreover, this definition's scope also implies that fascism doesn't actually belong to any particular political leanings and instead separates the consistent ideologies that are employed in fascist regimes — like conservatism in Italy — from fascism's reactionism. In explaining why conservatism was Mussolini's platform of choice, for example, my definition would suggest that conservatism was the only ideology that could pander to what Italians wanted at the time while also not suffering from stagnation, resulting in a right-wing fascist platform in Italy. However, this definition then also implicitly suggests a possibility that certain left-wing regimes may have been fascist. Such a possibility carries massive stipulations for the study of history and thus enriches historical analysis of all regimes during the interwar period, particularly regarding the USSR given its reactionist tendencies that are — in some rudimentary sense — shared with right-wing fascist movements like Italy: political stagnation, appealing to the crisis of meaning, mass movements, social revolutions, etc. However, these thought experiments are only so valuable. The far more valuable aspect of my new definition is its implications for our present political systems. Defining fascism as reactionary would suggest that the concern over fascism and drive to prevent its resurgence ought not to be directed towards particular ideologies but instead towards the potential collapse and/or stagnation of our political and social systems. It's there that fascism would, if it will, arise from again.

At its core, fascism is the embodiment of Nietzsche's irrationality. Mussolini's doctrine clearly supports that synopsis even before going on to further showcase its own lack of philosophical, and for that matter logical, substance or plan. It's here, in questioning fascism, that the *Doctrine of Fascism* complicates and enriches historical analysis; it's here that we find the core components of fascism and are

⁴¹ Radcliff lecture 2/16

able to determine their ideological validity; and finally, it's here that we see fascism's true nature as a nonsensical conglomeration of constantly and consistently shifting reactionary talking points and empty idealistic promises that only achieve power in times of political, economic, and cultural crises and stagnation.

Bibliography

Mussolini, Benito, and Giovanni Gentile. "The Doctrine of Fascism." Essay. In *Fascismo*, 14:847–51.

Firenze: Enciclopedia Italiana, 1936.

Delzell, Charles F., and Benito Mussolini. "Mussolini's First Speech in the Chamber of Deputies." Essay.

In *Mediterranean Fascism*. New York: Walker and Company, 1971.

Delzell, Charles F., and Benito Mussolini. "Postulates of the Fascist Program." Essay. In *Mediterranean*

Fascism. New York: Walker and Company, 1971.

Delzell, Charles F. "The Corporative State." Essay. In *Mediterranean Fascism*. Walker and

Company, 1971.

"What Does Catholic Christianity Teach About War and Peace?" BBC News. BBC. Accessed February

16, 2023. [https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z2xxk2p/revision/4#:~:text=Many%20Catholics](https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z2xxk2p/revision/4#:~:text=Many%20Catholics%20believe%20that%20war,to%20live%20by%20God's%20standards.)

[%20believe%20that%20war,to%20live%20by%20God's%20standards.](https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z2xxk2p/revision/4#:~:text=Many%20Catholics%20believe%20that%20war,to%20live%20by%20God's%20standards.)

Matteotti, Giacomo, and Ernest W. Dickes. "The Conquest of Molinella." Essay. In *The Fascisti Exposed:*

A Year of Fascist Domination. Howard Fertig, 1969.

Delzell, Charles F., and the Fascist Grand Council. "The Labor Charter." Essay. In *Mediterranean*

Fascism, 126. Walker and Company, 1971.

Delzell, Charles F., and Benito Mussolini. "Program of the Italian Fascist Movement." Essay. In

Mediterranean Fascism, 14. Walker and Company, 1971.