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1

‘I am no longer human. I am a Titan.
A god!’

The Fascist Quest to Regenerate Time*

The ‘revolutionary festival’

Some two decades ago, Mona Ozouf’s *Festivals and the French Revolution*¹ provided impressive testimony to the centrality of myth and ritual in the dynamics of even a ‘modern’, ‘rational’ revolution purportedly carried out in the name of Enlightenment principles. Now that, at long last, some scholars are taking seriously the proposition that Fascism² as well as Nazism³ attempted to create a new type of culture, it seems an appropriate moment to consider whether the conspicuously ritualised, theatrical component of both Fascism and generic fascism can be illuminated by the concept of ‘the revolutionary festival’. As we shall see, applying such a concept has a particular heuristic value when applied to fascist ideology and practice, despite the radical differences which clearly separate the largely spontaneous explosion of populist mythic energies unleashed by the French Revolution from those deliberately engineered in ordinary citizens by Fascist and Nazi elites. By the time he wrote *Mein Kampf* Hitler was already aware of the need to emulate the power of the mass demonstrations held by communists which

burned into the small wretched individual the proud conviction that, paltry worm as he was, he was nevertheless part of a great dragon, beneath whose burning breath the heated bourgeois world would one day go up in fire and flame and the proletarian dictatorship would celebrate its ultimate final victory.⁴

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The notion that there can be qualitatively different experiences of time is pivotal to such an investigation. The issue of subjective 'times' is clearly one of enormous psychological and anthropological complexity, and is by its nature susceptible to any number of conceptual schemes. Yet it is significant that not only countless poets⁵ but also several major Western intellectuals have suggested that a dichotomy between 'ordinary' time and 'special' time persists in the age of modernity. Émile Durkheim, for example, not only distinguished between 'sacred' and 'profane' time,⁶ but devoted considerable attention to 'effervescent assemblies' in which individual, anomic time gives way to a collective sense of belonging and temporal purpose. Similarly, one of the effects which Max Weber attributed to the progressive 'rationalisation' of all aspects of modern existence was 'disenchantment' (*Entzauberung*), the erosion by secularisation of the religious, magic dimension of reality that bound together pre-modern communities, though he recognised that it might re-emerge capriciously and spasmodically in the form of collective charismatic energies to temporarily release human beings from their iron cage of reason.⁷ More anthropologically oriented cultural commentators such as Joseph Campbell, building on Carl Jung's pioneering studies of the 'archetypal unconscious', have explored how mythic consciousness still provides the substratum of 'modern' human experience, lifting individuals out of ordinary time whenever their lives intersect with primordial patterns of cosmological ('mythopoeic') and ritual consciousness.⁸ One of the most influential figures in the investigation of the distinction between profane and sacred time is Mircea Eliade, who, in a stream of writings, has documented the constant recourse by human beings to myth and ritual in order to stave off the 'terror of history', the invasion of life by the all-consuming *chronos* of meaningless clock-time.⁹

Seen from such a perspective, the cultural rebellion against the Enlightenment project which gathered such strength from the 1880s onwards in Europe – generally known today as 'the revolt against positivism'¹⁰ – can be seen as the appearance of a number of highly idiosyncratic quests to put an end to 'decadence' (i.e. a 'fallen', disenchanted, entropic, private, 'old' time) and inaugurate a 'rebirth' (i.e. enter a 'higher', magic, regenerative, collective, '“new” time').¹¹ If confined to the experiential sphere of individuals or small groups, this might involve no more than the cultivation of visionary, mystic states of consciousness, or the quest for sources of knowledge and insight neglected by mainstream Western culture to the point of causing the cults of Carl Jung, William Blake, and Carlos Castaneda during the counter-cultural 'revolt' of the 1960s. However, so widespread was the disaffection with the official cult of material, liberal progress in linear time that intellectuals and artists all over Europe were attracted to the idea that their own bid to break free from a stultifying 'normality' was part of a wider impulse, a sea change in history. They were convinced they were living through a watershed in the evolution of Western civilisation. In individual

experiences, this was often existentially characterised by a qualitative change in time itself, from the personally meaningless to the collectively significant. Leading personalities in the occult revival, and many pioneers of artistic modernism, fit this pattern. Thus, figures like Helena Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner, William Butler Yeats, Richard Wagner, Igor Stravinsky, Wassily Kandinsky, Pablo Picasso, Vincent Van Gogh, and Rainer Maria Rilke, and artists from such disparate movements as Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism were, in their very different ways, concerned both with the achievement of 'ecstasy' (states which allowed them to 'stand outside' ordinary time) and with acting as a catalyst for the diffusion of new forms of consciousness to 'save' the West from what they saw as a process of spiritual atrophy. For some, the very notion of the 'modern' was infused with a sense of cultural regeneration, the birth of a new age.¹² For example, Hermann Bahr wrote in 1890:

It may be that we are at the end, at the death of exhausted mankind, and that we are experiencing mankind's last spasms. It may be that we are at the beginning, at the birth of a new humanity and that we are experiencing only the avalanches of spring. We are rising to the divine or plunging, plunging into night and destruction – but there is no standing still.

The creed of *Die Moderne* is that salvation will arise from pain and grace from despair, that a dawn will come after this horrific darkness and that art will hold communion with man, that there will be a glorious, blessed resurrection.¹³

An investigation of the late nineteenth century European *avant-garde* on the basis of its philosophy of time and history would show how deeply associated both are with the passionate belief that routinised, sclerotic ways of feeling and seeing – associated with the age of materialism and philistinism – can be transfigured individually or collectively through the awakening of visionary faculty better attuned to a 'higher' time. Indeed, this could well prove to be the main, if not the only, common denominator which underlies the rich profusion of so many conflicting aesthetics and nuanced visions of reality that are embraced by the terms 'modernism' and 'avant-garde'.

Nevertheless, occultism and visionary art were not the only channels through which such longings could be expressed in the '*fin de siècle*' – the very concept of which implied not only that a whole era of values and sensibility was closing, but that another might be opening. Other figures attempted to contribute to the inauguration of a new time through philosophy and social theory, Friedrich Nietzsche and Georges Sorel being outstanding examples here. Both thinkers specifically looked to (differently conceived) mythic energies rather than Enlightenment reason as the basis for of the regeneration of European society. The extraordinary resonance which their works found amongst their

contemporaries can be best explained by the fact that European culture was pervaded by an unfulfilled palingenetic expectancy which demanded articulation. Unlike Nietzsche, Sorel trespassed from 'pure' cultural and philosophical speculation into uncharted territory for another major outlet for palingenetic aspirations, namely revolutionary politics. This revolutionary approach, by definition, attempted to create a new time by advancing the utopian idea of a better society so underpinning its affective driving force, no matter how systematically such politics may be rationalised by doctrines and theories.¹⁴

The origins of Fascism in projects to inaugurate a new experience of time

Locating Fascism's genesis within the context of a European culture saturated with longings to recapture a 'magic' or 'epic' sense of time throws into relief the fact that the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* [PNF] is not reducible to an arbitrary and ideologically vacuous decision made by Mussolini in the spring of 1919 for reasons of personal ambition.¹⁵ Instead, Italian Fascism may be more profitably comprehended though a wave of intense politico-cultural speculation and activism which flooded Italy between 1900 and 1915, much of which centred on the project of national renewal. An example bearing heavily on the present topic is an article published on the eve of the outbreak of the First World War under the title 'La democrazia e la festa'. It claims that the fundamental problem of modern life

was the lack of public festivals, rituals and theatrical elements that could restore an aura of grand spectacle to an increasingly impersonal and individualistic world. Modern people had ceased to believe in Catholicism, but had yet to find appropriate secular substitutes for its festivals. Without religious and seasonal festivals the world had become sad.¹⁶

Conventional historians have largely ignored the hard documentary evidence that Mussolini was part of this subculture long before he became a Fascist. Indeed, it was one particular current of palingenetic agitation, the Florentine avant-garde associated with Giovanni Papini and the periodicals *Il Regno* [The Kingdom (of Italy)], *Leonardo*, and *La Voce* [The Voice], which exerted a decisive influence on Mussolini's own sense of revolutionary vocation several years before the First World War.¹⁷ In 1935, Mussolini declared to his biographer Yvon De Begnac, 'I first had the feeling of being called to announce a new era when I started corresponding with the *Voce* circle.'¹⁸ The writings of some Syndicalists – theorising the desired Marxist revolution in terms of myth, voluntarism, and the nation rather than socio-economics, determinism, and the Communist International – had also helped convert him from an internationalist to a

national socialist well in time for Mussolini to become an interventionist in the spring of 1915.¹⁹

But of all the tributaries of ideological energy which influenced the young Mussolini, and subsequently flowed into Fascism in its formative period unto 1925, that of Futurism was undoubtedly the most extreme, both in its rejection of the past and in its belief in the imminence of a renewal envisioned to contain both an international as well as a strictly national dimension.²⁰ Futurists consciously conceived their revolution as a metamorphosis in the experience of space and time. Indeed, in the very first of many Futurist manifestos Filippo Marinetti had proclaimed:

We stand on the last promontory of the centuries! [...] Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed.²¹

Mussolini, the national revolutionary, obsessed with the idea that a new historical cycle in the life of the nation and indeed the Western world impended, was thus very much a child of his age, the product of a cultural climate pervaded with longings for a new society; a new experience of time.²² He owed his 'charisma' to his instinctive ability to recycle, synthesise, and re-present myths of the nation's imminent renewal; and thus to embody, crystallise, and give organisational form to the mood of national palingenesis which was 'in the air' breathed by Italy's intelligentsia even before 1915, thereafter to be dramatically popularised and radicalised as a result of Italian intervention in the First World War. The veterans who were to form the backbone of the *Fasci* and the paramilitary 'action squads' were men who had returned from the trenches with the conviction that the war marked a turning point from an old Italy governed by a spineless gerontocracy to a new one led by a youthful, courageous ruling elite; a 'trenchocracy'. They nurtured heady fantasies of forming the vanguard of a national renewal, inspired by the terrible sacrifices which they – and their less fortunate comrades who had not survived – had made to defend and advance the honour of their country.²³

The need to explain the rise of Fascism in terms of mythic currents and ideological structures, rather than the personal ambitions of Mussolini or the machinations of capitalism, is underlined by the profound impact on the popular imagination made quite independently by the ageing poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, who established his Regency in Fiume as the expression of his own, essentially aesthetic, palingenetic vision of Italy's destiny. For D'Annunzio and his supporters, Fiume signalled the country's entry into a new, epic cycle of greatness and heroism, one which would put an end to the pusillanimous age of mediocrity suffusing the Giolittian era.²⁴ Once the threatened 'March

on Rome' had persuaded the King to appoint Mussolini head of state, both the Nationalists and Giovanni Gentile as well as lesser-known Futurists and Dannunzians were able to project their own schemes for the nation's renewal onto Fascism, ensuring that new currents of palingenetic myth – not to mention the policies to achieve them – intensified the momentum of the movement. By the time Mussolini set about creating a totalitarian regime in 1925, the *litto-rio* or 'lictor's rods and axe' could be seen to symbolise the radical shift from the leftist rhetoric of San Sepolcro Fascism to an authoritarian, rightist force in which the myth of a reborn Rome now played the dominant role. But such a confluence also represented the nature of Fascist ideology itself: a loose alliance of different, and often contradictory, strands of revolutionary nationalism held together in a single-party state prepared to use violence to crush any opposition. The force which held them together was the common belief in the imminence of a new age.

Yet if Mussolini was able to dominate this alliance, it was partly because he had few scruples about the ideological compromises and contradictions wrought by such wanton syncretism. The core of his own revolutionary drive between 1909 – when his profound attraction to *La Voce's* call for cultural renewal can be first documented²⁵ – and the formation of the first *Fasci* in March 1919 was little more than the nebulous myth of a new Italy brought about through the agency of '*homines novi*' ('new men'). For Mussolini, the significance of the war rested upon its phoenix-like creation of a new elite to provide the mass base for such a movement of renewal.²⁶ The tablets of the old law were crumbling and the new ones had yet to be written. He saw the period leading up to the establishment of the Fascist regime as a time not only for programmes and doctrines, but for action.²⁷ His conspicuous lack of interest in providing a definitive doctrine and a cogent set of policies to 'rationalise' Fascism before the early 1930s was not just tactically necessary in order to guarantee the new regime as wide a support base as possible. This reticence also reflected his own deep-seated reluctance to commit himself to a particular version of the palingenetic myth. In a way, then, it was the vision of renewal itself which became the adhesive linchpin for fascist ideology, rather than any particular set of policies or clearly conceived theory of state.²⁸

This vision was deeply bound up with Mussolini's recurrent stress on Fascism's epochal significance in history. The regime was living proof that 'Italy did not exhaust herself in creating its first and second civilisation, but [was] already creating a third.'²⁹ The core of this revolution was not institutional but ethical: Fascist vitalism would lift the apathetic, cynical individual of the Giolittian age into a new spiritual orbit.

'I don't give a damn' (*me ne frego*) [...] sums up a doctrine which is not merely political: it is evidence of a fighting spirit which accepts all risks.

It signifies a new style of Italian life. The Fascist accepts and loves life; he rejects and despises suicide as cowardly. Life as he understands it means duty, elevation, conquest; life must be lofty and full, it must be lived for oneself but above all for others, both nearby and far off, present and future.³⁰

In different permutations, the belief that Fascism's creation of a new type of state was the materialisation and externalisation of a subjective revolution in values and national character was a recurrent *topos* in Fascist thought. To cite just two examples, a chapter on 'Fascism and the Future of Culture' in a 1928 tome entitled *Fascist Civilisation* affirms that the significance of the Fascist revolution was not just evident in the creation of a new regime, but an entirely new cosmology:

When we affirm the divinity of our beautiful Italian nation, we mean by that we are announcing a religious idea in the true sense of the word, capable of creating a whole new development in culture, practical and theoretical via which we can arrive at new conceptions of God, cosmic reality, and human destiny, at a new way of ordering our interior life and external social life.³¹

Similarly, on 19 December 1925, Giovanni Gentile devoted his inaugural speech to the National Institute of Fascist Culture on this new force 'which, despite the obstacles in its path, which at times seemed to block its effects, has gradually regimented the whole nation' and 'infused it with a single sentiment: the passion for greatness at any price, at the cost of any sacrifice'.

What has come over us to endow us with this sensibility, the sign that new spiritual needs and new directions are being taken by life and thought? [...] It is a religious sentiment [...] one which takes life seriously: really seriously [...] and no longer separates doing from talking, deed from thought, literature from life, reality from programmes, life and death from the triumph of ideals which we have faithfully served: this is the new spiritual value which Fascism has planted in the Italian soul: it is to these heights that we are now trying to raise national culture.³²

The temporal implications of this 'religious' conception of Fascism are made clear in Gentile's subsequent definition (my emphasis) for the *Enciclopedia Italiana*:

The world seen through Fascism is not this material world which appears on the surface, in which man is an individual separated from all others and standing by himself, and in which he is governed by a natural law that makes him instinctively live a life of selfish and momentary pleasure. The man of

Fascism is an individual who is nation and fatherland, which is a moral law, binding together individuals and the generations into a tradition and a mission, suppressing the instinct for life enclosed within the brief round of pleasure in order to restore within duty *a higher life free from the limits of time and space*.³³

The Fascist bid to regenerate time through social engineering

In concrete terms, the reordering of 'the interior and exterior social life' to create a 'new style of Italian life' led to the ritual style of politics striking generations of scholars as the outstanding feature of life under Fascism. One of the first academics to draw attention to this aspect of the new Italy was an American, Herbert Schneider, who, during his study of the regime carried out between 1926 and 1927, recognised the existence of a 'Fascist religion'. Presciently, he commented on the fact that 'less subtle and more generally effective' than Gentile's school reforms for winning over youth to the regime was 'the new Fascist art of secular celebrations':

It is not for nothing that Fascism is so ritualistic. The marches, salutes, yells, songs, uniforms, badges, and what not, are giving a new focus to the imagination of the Italian youth, are linking their social life to political organisations and are filling their minds with political – I will not say ideas, but political – feelings. This is perhaps the greatest of the fascist revolutions. Good Italian youths still go to mass and participate in religious festivities, but their sentiments, their imaginations, their moral ideals are centred elsewhere.³⁴

Schneider also notes how the Italian calendar was 'assuming a secular structure', citing as examples the way the regime had given certain dates a twofold mythic significance. Thus March 23, Youth Day, commemorated the founding of the *Fasci*; April 21, Labour Day, the founding of Rome; May 24, Empire Day, the entry of Italy into the First World War; September 20, Italian Unity, the incorporation of Rome into the Kingdom of Italy; and October 28, the Fascist Revolution, the March on Rome.³⁵ In 1931, the regime even introduced a 'Fascist Epiphany' which, in Milan, included a 'Christmas Day's distribution of gifts in the name of the *Duce*, to be known as "the *Duce's* Christmas".³⁶ In this way, ordinary Italians were encouraged to experience the unfolding of the Fascist Revolution in secular time as a phenomenon with a transcendental core on a par with the metaphysical reality underlying Christianity, which also intercalated working days with 'giorni festivi' (also known simply as 'feste', i.e. not just holidays but holy-days or feast days).

The outstanding example of this attempt to appropriate a religious concept of time, and to make it an integral part of the experience of the new Italy, was

the superimposition of a specifically Fascist calendar on the Gregorian one. The year 1922 thus became 'Year One' of the Fascist era, and most publications were dated in terms of both *Anno Domini* and the time which had passed since the March on Rome. In this way, Italians were encouraged to feel that Mussolini's conquest of power signified the inauguration of a new dispensation in the history of an 'eternal, Italian civilisation'.

Some six decades passed before scholarship moved beyond Schneider's insights, especially regarding the centrality to the Fascist Revolution of the deliberate staging of events designed to create a collective sense of sacred time. Emilio Gentile's ground-breaking *Il Culto del Littorio* (translated as *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*) meticulously documented the concerted efforts by the Fascist regime to create a state religion. By inventing an elaborate political liturgy and symbology Italian Fascism sought to create a civic and political religion to 'realise a "metanoia" in human nature, whence a "new man" would emerge, regenerated and totally integrated into the community'.³⁷ Though Gentile does not explicitly focus upon the meaning of 'political religion' for the fascist experience of time, the primary evidence he adduces clearly demonstrates that some Fascists consciously conceived their movement as a temporal revolution. Thus Dario Lupi wrote in July 1923:

He who joins us either becomes one of us in body and soul, in mind and flesh, or he will inexorably be cut off. For we know and feel ourselves in possession of the truth; for of all the ideologies, past and present [...] we know and feel ourselves to be part of the only movement in marvellous harmony with the historic time in which we live.³⁸

Gentile's insights are extensively corroborated by Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi's study of 'the aesthetics of power in Mussolini's Italy', which documents the way in which the fabric of daily life under the regime reflected how it

strove to produce cultic values and hailed spiritual principles as the basis for the regeneration and renewal of Italian society. Born as a countermovement to the 'lifeless' politics of liberal government, fascism claimed its will to create a new world on the premises of a Nietzschean return to the ideal.³⁹

The profound temporal implications of such a project are implicit in her extensive treatment of the central role played by myth in the socio-political life of the regime. Occasionally, Falasca-Zamponi alludes to operant myths directly, as when she comments on the Futurist concept of war which had such a major influence on Mussolini's thinking (my emphasis):

Because the futurists stressed action and glorified the future, only war could respond to the ideal of a never-ending movement. War embodied

the perennial necessity of fighting: *it was a festival* in which the expenditure of energies, almost in an ethnological sense, emphasised life's fullness. As the 'only hygiene of the world', war granted the expansion of human potentialities. It was a purifying bath from which a new person, who perceived the world through categories of action speed, and confrontation, would be born. War would thus clean Italy from *passatismo* and open the way to future renewal.⁴⁰

Another contemporary scholar, Jeffrey Schnapp, has also fully grasped that the deeper significance of Fascism's ritualised and aesthetic style of politics lies in its attempt to mass-produce a qualitatively different experience of reality. Schnapp's fascinating analysis of the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution shows how the regime deliberately manipulated the aesthetics of architecture, exhibitions, symbols, space, and song to contrive for the visitor an experience of passing from the chaos of the immediate post-war years to the sublime harmony of the Fascist era. The last room, the climax of the entire exhibit, simulated a Fascist rally. Yet this was no ordinary rally, but instead 'a rally of the living dead, a rally taking place in some indeterminate secular otherworld, "immortal" yet of this world, where history's victims are forever present to each other'.⁴¹ The exhibition did not serve as a state memorial to the March on Rome, but was intended as

a *living* monument capable of serving as the focal point for mass happenings that would mobilise the Italian nation as a whole, from the highest government offices to the factory floor. To this end, the exhibition set out to be revolutionary: new, ultramodern, audacious, free from the melancholy and mourning that usually accompany the remembrance of things past. Instead of simply embalming the movement's origins, it strove to [...] present fascism's 'heroic era' with such shocking intensity and immediacy that it would almost literally be brought back to life [...] No sense of loss or discontinuity would divide the past from the present.⁴²

If the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution is taken as the epitome of the regime's calculated bid to transform the nation as a whole, then it becomes clear that at the heart of its 'totalitarianism' lay neither Mussolini's 'will to power' nor the obsession of conservative or capitalist elites to maintain their grip on the levers of power. Its driving force was instead the urge to lift Italians out of the anomic experience of time under liberalism by reconnecting them with the epic life of the nation. Fascism was the medium through which they would be reconciled and reunited with the living organism of the Italian state. The *Risorgimento* would be completed, the task of 'making Italians' finally fulfilled. Ordinary citizens would, for the first time since the Roman era, once more be able to

participate mystically in Italy and hence, in its imminent destiny, to become once again the focal point of world civilisation and progress – yet another manifestation of the 'eternal genius' of the race producing the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church, and the Renaissance. In the context of such a vision the 'monumental' – such a major feature of Fascist (and all totalitarian) art – acquires specific connotations. It refers to a cult of remembering practised not in a conservative spirit, but in a revolutionary one: the past is to be remembered in order to regenerate the present and transform the future. This paradox is best expressed in the slogan of the post-war *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (the direct descendant of the PNF), 'Nostalgia for the Future'.⁴³

The academic best illuminating the specifically temporal aspect of this enterprise is Mabel Berezin. She identifies the central drive of Fascism as a political ideology that attempts 'to fuse public and private self' in a new 'community of feeling'.⁴⁴ Berezin goes on to demonstrate the vital role played by ritual in enabling ordinary Italians to imagine that they belonged to a 'new political community', then – crucially for our thesis – she devotes a whole chapter to the Fascist bid to 'colonise time'. Using Verona as a case study, Berezin documents the extraordinary lengths to which the regime went to reshape the experience of time and history itself through a combination of official events which she classifies as celebrations, symposia, commemorations, demonstrations, and inaugurations. In just 20 years (1922–1942) the citizens of Verona could participate in 727 such events: an average of 36 per year, or one every ten days!

The ultimate purpose of such a systematic subsuming of private time by regime time was the obliteration of the old self, and the making of a Fascist self. The underlying palingenetic thrust thus emerges clearly from a May 1926 speech made by Augusto Turati, National Secretary of the Fascist Party. He told listeners in Verona that the Fascist 'crowd of a million arms, legs and faces' had a 'single soul, a single song, and a single hope: Italy in every heart, Italy above every heart'. The *Patria* [or 'fatherland'] was 'a living thing [...] something truly inside us [...] If the *Patria* is the memory of the Dead, then the *Patria* lies in the will to rebirth and transformation.'⁴⁵

Nazi correlatives to the Fascist bid to transcend anomic personal time

Given that Nazism shares Fascism's mythic core of palingenetic ultranationalism, also constituting a permutation of generic fascism, it is not surprising to find constant allusions in its ideology to regeneration and rebirth.⁴⁶ In a spirit directly paralleling the Fascist conception of a temporal (and political) revolution, the Nazis set out to inaugurate a new era by reattaching Germans to what Schnapp called the 'intermediate otherworld', one constituted by an epic

sense of national history. One of Hitler's earliest biographers records that he was obsessed with 'the concept of a great turning point in the history of the world. A new age was beginning; history was once more setting the mighty wheel in motion and apportioning lots anew'.⁴⁷

Though Nazism's racial, eugenic, and scientific concept of the national community meant that this vision was conveyed through discourses far different from the ones used by Fascism, the premise that the new regime was carrying out a total, and hence totalitarian, cultural revolution, through which the individual would transcend anomic time, is common to both. Thus Hitler's speech on art, in his address to the Seventh Nuremberg Rally in September 1935, has striking parallels with Giovanni Gentile's inaugural address cited earlier:

When the poor human soul, oppressed with cares and troubles and inwardly distracted, has no longer a clear and definite belief in the greatness and the future of the nation to which it belongs, that is the time to stimulate its regard for the indisputable evidences of those eternal racial values which cannot be affected in their essence by a temporary phase of political or economic distress. The more the natural and legitimate demands of a nation are ignored or suppressed, or even simply denied, the more important it is that these vital demands should take on the appeal of a higher and nobler right by giving tangible proof of the great cultural values incorporated in the nation. Such visible demonstration of the higher qualities of a people, as the experience of history proves, will remain for thousands of years as an unquestionable testimony not only to the greatness of a people but also to their moral right to existence.

Hitler went on to ask,

What would the Egyptians be without their pyramids and their temples and the artistic decorations that surround their daily lives? What would the Greeks be without Athens and the Acropolis? What would the Romans be without their mighty buildings and engineering works? What would the German emperors of the Middle Ages be without their cathedrals and their imperial palaces? And what would the Middle Ages itself be without its town halls and guild halls etc.? What would religion be without its churches? That there was once such a people as the Mayas we should not know at all, or else be unconcerned about them, had they not left for the admiration of our time those mighty ruins of cities that bear witness to the extraordinary epic qualities of that people, such ruins as have arrested the attention of the modern world and are still a fascinating object of study for our scholars. A people cannot live longer than the works which are the testimony of its culture.⁴⁸

As in Fascism, the corollary of this project to recreate the 'epic' sense of time felt to be the hallmark of all 'great civilisations' was the creation of an all-pervasive political liturgy, its effects reinforced by the extensive use of propaganda, social control, and terror. As a result, the everyday life of Germans – at least of those who were not deemed to incarnate biological or moral degeneracy – was infiltrated by the ethos of the Third Reich to the point that it became an act of heroic resistance to keep a firm grip on alternative values, let alone assert them publicly; even the path into 'inner emigration' was far from easy.

One major contribution aiming to comprehend this cultic dimension of Nazism – paralleling what Gentile's *Culto del littorio* has done for Fascism, is *Magie und Manipulation: Ideologischer Kult und politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus* [Magic and Manipulation: The Ideological Cult and Political Religion under Nazism].⁴⁹ Here, Klaus Vondung records the intense efforts of the regime to develop a political liturgy in order to bring about a subjective revolution in the Germans' experience of time itself. A striking example is the elaborate ceremony, or *Heldnischer Feier* (Heroic Celebration), designed by Gerhard Schumann for the 'memorial day for the fallen of the movement'. It was designed to be performed on the steps of the Feldherrnhalle in Munich's Odeonplatz, built to commemorate the martyrs of the failed November putsch in 1923, thus reviving them as national heroes, and semiotically recoding the square and the hall itself into a temple to Nazism and the religion of the reborn German race. Vondung analyses in detail the texts and ritual choreography of the ceremony, showing how it, like countless other examples of Nazi liturgy, was calculated to generate 'the collective feeling of participation in the permanent revolutionary process of fermentation and in the transcending of individual death through an ill-defined "after-life" within this continuous revolution'.⁵⁰ As a result,

9 November 1923 is interpreted within National Socialist myth as a turning-point at which the old era finished and something totally new began. The verse by Boehme [...] makes this clear: 'The earth died with your death, with your glory our lives begin'. 'The beginning of life' means here the beginning of a transformed, new, essential life, means a quite specific change in the structure of human life, a metamorphosis of the human condition. The vision or prophecy of a process of transformation from an incomplete to a complete existence is a *topos* of historical speculation. Eric Voegelin calls this phenomenon 'metastatic faith'.⁵¹

What Vondung's impressively scholarly investigation demonstrates is that Nazism cannot be fully understood if we ignore its efforts to bring about a sense of 'metastasis', or rebirth, subjectively experienced as moving from a

mere 'existence' of *anomie* and isolation into a qualitatively different time in which individual life and death itself is transcended by becoming merged with the eternity of the nation and race.

The concern over breaking out of 'ordinary time' and into a collective 'magic time' presumably predisposed some future Nazis – notably Hitler in his Vienna days before the First World War as well as Heinrich Himmler – to flirt with occultist ideas about the origins of civilisation and the imminent rebirth of the Aryan super-race.⁵² Certainly, the testimony which Hermann Rauschning provides of his conversations with Hitler suggests not only that the latter, like Mussolini, harboured notions that he had been called upon to inaugurate a new era, but that for him the forces which would bring it about were of an awesome, almost supernatural power:

We had come to a turning-point in world history – that was his constant theme [...] He saw himself as chosen for superhuman tasks, as the prophet of the rebirth of man in a new form. Humanity, he proclaimed, was in the throes of a vast metamorphosis [...] The coming age was revealing itself in the first great human figures of a new type.⁵³

Yet such a passage does not suggest that the Third Reich was such an eruption of occultist energies, however much this notion might appeal to those whose historical imaginations have been corrupted by an *X-Files* perspective to the point that they mistake sensationalist bestsellers (such as *The Dawn of the Magicians*) for serious history.⁵⁴ In fact Hitler went to some length to dissociate Nazism from occultism.⁵⁵ What Rauschning does corroborate is the important realisation that all dialects of Nazism, whether 'blood-and-soil', militaristic, cultural, or technocratic, together shared the belief that there was a higher spiritual and temporal reality bound up with the history and destiny of the race that remained hidden to decadent, 'non-Aryan', minds.

When the individual experienced the moment of union with this sublime plane of reality, it could produce a sense of ecstatic rebirth, one whose psychological implications have been explored in such forensic psychoanalytical detail by Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*.⁵⁶ One primary source for his analysis is Joseph Goebbels' semi-autobiographic novel *Michael: Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern*⁵⁷ [*Michael: The Diary of a German Destiny*], which traces the transformation of the central character's *ennui* into a sense of collective belonging. Commenting on the way the conflict between despair and hope is resolved, Theweleit notes (my emphasis):

At the end of the book, Michael joins the ranks of the 'workers'; he begins to work in a mine. This offers him an opportunity to invoke the intensities of work as a form of *intoxication*, which, like the blackouts and intoxications

of the drill, guarantees 'redemption': 'I have no wish to be a mere inheritor'. The purpose of 'work' instead is to allow Michael to become a new and self-born man within an apparatus which strips him of his ego boundaries. *'I am no longer human. I am a Titan. A god!'* [...] 'If we are strong enough to form the life of our era, it is our own lives that must first be mastered. A new law is approaching – the law of a labour realised in battle and of the spirit that is labour. The synthesis of these three will be internally and externally liberating; labour will become battle and spirit labour. Herein lies redemption.'⁵⁸

Goebbels' novel expresses the subjective dimension within the concept of the 'new man'; the *homo fascistus* which Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile describe from the outside. To become a Nazi is to be stripped of ego-boundaries, and thus become ready for absorption into a regenerated national community which will one day become synonymous with the state itself. The moment of conversion to Nazism (which is also described in *Michael* in ecstatic terms) is one of intoxication, of rebirth, of redemption – a transcending of the old self and the decadent age that produced it.

The core experiences which the Nazi manipulation of society, in all its aspects, sought to induce was that of being reborn from meaningless individual time into the epic communal time of the *Volksgemeinschaft* – a consideration fully borne out by scholars working on the minutiae of culture under the Third Reich. Iain Boyd Whyte's reconstruction of the May Day festival held in Berlin in 1936, for example, shows how the entire event was deliberately staged through the creation of liturgical space, choreography of the crowds, and the enactment of a ritual invented for the occasion in order to superimpose onto a spring festival of seasonal regeneration a Nazi concept of national renewal.⁵⁹ For this to happen, ancient pagan customs had to be reshaped into what the art historian Hans Weigert, in 1934, called 'the deepest maternal foundations of blood and soil'.⁶⁰ The Nazis' act of mythic appropriation and subversion is epitomised by the huge swastika crowning the maypole. The painting subsequently recording the festival completed the transfiguration of a stage-managed piece of political propaganda transformed into the icon of a transcendental moment in the history of the reborn *Volk*.

Further examples of the deliberate manipulation of time in Nazi culture are provided by Linda Schulte-Sass' *Entertaining the Third Reich: Illusions of Wholeness in Nazi Cinema*.⁶¹ In her study of the film *Hitlerjunge Quex* [Hitler Youth Member Quex], for example, she shows the way in which the scene when Heini is drawn away from the Communist camp and towards the Hitler Youth camp 'is the film's first encoding of birth or passage into a new world'. The climax of the film, in which Heini is killed by Communists, is shot in such a way as to imply that his death is 'his third and final stage of

“rebirth” ’ into what Jeffrey Schnapp called in the context of Fascism a supra-individual, quasi-religious ‘indeterminate secular otherworld’, an ‘ill-defined after-life’:

The film’s final montage sequence that follows Heini’s death is again of feet, this time masses of feet multiplying Heini’s spirit hundredfold, marching towards the spectator, as if to march right off the screen and into life (and death!), depicting retroactively the geographical and spiritual reappropriation of ‘home’, not only for an individual but for a collective.⁶²

Another Nazi film, *Wunschkonzert* [Request Concert], traced the story of a pair of lovers, Inge and Herbert, whom fate thrusts together at the Berlin Olympics and then wrenches apart when Herbert is called up to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Herbert is able to signal to Inge that he has never forgotten her by having a radio show play the music they heard at the Olympics when they fell in love. This emphatically supports Schulte-Sass’ central thesis that the Nazi cinema aesthetically engineers an alternative temporality to that of Hollywood or liberal democracies. The love-story of two individuals is framed first within the vast physical community forged by the Olympics which not only had unleashed a flood of nationalistic pride, but in the film comes to represent ‘a timeless, unsurpassable experience of wholeness, of life as a dream or work of art, that National Socialism constantly aspires to achieve’. It is then played out as a disembodied bonding of two individuals who form part of the imagined community of Germans listening to the record requests, thus ‘synthesising the timeless interpellation of music with a timely mystification of the radio’s transcendence of time and space’.⁶³ By constantly evoking images of supra-individual wholeness in this way, the Nazi cinema not only aestheticised the Third Reich, but presented reality to the film-goers in such a way that they were encouraged to feel their own lives had been transfigured and subsumed into the epic destiny of a truly imagined (identically and ultimately mythic) community, the *Volksgemeinschaft*.

Such examples of Nazism’s manipulation of time could be easily multiplied. It would be fascinating, for instance – especially given recent anthropological work on the significance of Stonehenge as a site for shamanic rituals designed to mediate between natural, human time and the supernatural world of the spirits – to investigate the function of the vast ritual spaces that Albert Speer created for the Third Reich, specifically for rallies and parades. There would surely be some mileage in analysing the Zeppelinfeld, the vast parade ground constructed by Albert Speer to stage the Party congresses in Nuremberg as a ritual space deliberately created as a generator of ancient shamanic energies within a modern context. Here the swirling swastika replaced the archetypal vortex⁶⁴ as the symbol of access to a higher reality, while Hitler acted as chief shaman, attended by lesser medicine-men to induce a collective

trance state in the choreographed masses. In establishing the difference between the genuinely metaphysical concept of reality underlying shamanism and the pseudo-supernatural dimension of 'national destiny', scholars could sharpen the distinction between the connotations of sacred time immanent in authentic religious traditions and experiences, and its grotesque travesty in 'political religions'.

In short, there is ample evidence to suggest that Nazism conspired to create a sense of festival time, of 'party-time'. Tragically for humanity, the party generating it was the type associated not with the coloured costumes of the Brazilian Carnival, but with the brown shirted thuggery of the NSDAP. The contrast between the dance and the march, between the samba and the strains of the *Horst Wessel Lied*, points to the gulf separating a life-asserting community from a community which exists only by creating a demonised other.

The cult of sacred time in neo-fascism

While 1945 may have signalled the end of Fascism and Nazism as regimes, the paligenetic longings which fuelled them have proven remarkably persistent and adaptable in a post-war climate which, at least in liberal democracies, has remained profoundly inhospitable to revolutionary ideologies of either left or right. Since the concept of 'festival time' is so entrenched in fascism's myth of national regeneration, we should not be surprised if it continues to recur in various guises as part of its crusade against the Enlightenment concept of history.

One of fascism's most influential ideologues in Italy, for example, has been Julius Evola. His impact is largely attributable to the way his occultist theory of reality and arcane philosophy of history satisfy the need experienced by post-war fascists for a comprehensive 'vision of the world' – one catering to the subjective sense of access to 'sacred' time.⁶⁵ This same need also explains the extraordinary way a number of 'fantasy' writers, notably John Tolkien, have become part of the staple diet for neo-fascists.⁶⁶ Sometimes the call for 'festival time' becomes explicit. One of the contributors to a 1981 conference organised by the extreme right, Franco Cardini spoke about the need to create a new culture for the transmission of fascist ideas. His lecture was entitled 'A quest for the roots of a conception of the world to come. The community is recreating itself: myth, ritual, liturgy, play, festival [festa]'. Cardini went on to assert that

To restore 'la festa' means opposing the omnipotence of the capitalist-technological system; it means rediscovering an 'extraordinariness' which acts as a qualifying limit to the everyday, and hence recreating the foundations of everyday reality itself so as to resist the temptation to conceive

time as a homogeneous entity and hence life as waiting for inevitable and irreversible destruction, as an anguish which can only be escaped through oblivion. Rediscovering festival time means rediscovering the non-primacy of economism and productionism, it means rediscovering the whole man.⁶⁷

There are curious echoes of this theme in a brilliant essay on fascism under the title 'Between festival and revolution'. This text was written by Marco Tarchi, editor of *Diorama letterario* – one of the foremost organs behind the rethinking of neo-fascist ideology in the 1970s and 1980s – and author of a major study of the role of a crisis in 'collective identities' in the fascist seizure of power in Italy and Germany.⁶⁸ Tarchi concludes by suggesting the attempt to bring about a temporal revolution through creating a national community is the definitional feature of generic fascism:

The choice of the qualitative and organic community [...] is a constant of fascist movements transcending the level of historic contingencies to find articulation in the realm of cultural expression in the full sense of the term, namely in political philosophy and doctrine: the myth of the 'community of destiny', the moment of supreme collective identification, and the pivotal concept of the 'new politics' intuited by Mosse and buried by the catastrophe of the Second World War, is both its emblem and its culmination.⁶⁹

But north of the Alps too, neo-fascism is profoundly preoccupied with breaking out of 'profane time'. One of the most important books in the renewal of fascist thought in Germany, France, and Italy is *The Conservative Revolution: A Handbook*. According to Armin Mohler's analysis within it, the central concern of the interwar German artists and authors he identifies was the ending of a decadent cycle in an *Umschlag* (sudden metamorphosis) and rebirth. Such an event and temporal shift would finally close the 'interregnum' into which history had decayed since the end of the Second Reich.⁷⁰ In the 1970s and 1980s, many ideologues of the New Right, notably Alain de Benoist in France and Marco Tarchi in Italy, adopted either the Conservative Revolutionary, Nietzschean, 'nominalist' concept of cyclic time advanced by Mohler, or instead Julius Evola's mythic, metaphysical alternative to it.⁷¹ More recently, the international New Right (which now includes Russia) has become increasingly interested in 'Indo-European' concepts of the 'sacred', another symptom of the same paligenetic longings to escape the 'decadent' time now identified with the globalisation of time and space under the hegemony of the 'American way of life'.

The implications for Fascist Studies: The centrality of a sacred time to fascist ideology

Undoubtedly a neglected area of Fascist Studies concerns the attempts by Fascism and Nazism to engineer a subjective revolution in the experience of time as an integral part of their project to regenerate the nation. It is suggested here that while much scholarship exists on the fascist project to create a national community – and some scholarly attention is at last being paid to fascist culture – the temporal aspects of both topics have received scant attention. This is no doubt partly because most academics are heirs to the Enlightenment rationalist tradition, and perhaps because the nature of their work means that they tend to operate conceptually from within the subjective confines of individual, profane, normal time, rather than collective, ecstatic, festive, holiday time. As a result, an 'outside in' approach has characterised most studies of fascism to date, rather than stray into forbidden territories of psychology and anthropology to shore up the findings of 'methodological empathy' with fascists as historical subjects.

An instance of this neglect is the way Walter Benjamin has been introduced into studies of fascist culture. References to 'the aestheticisation of politics' are *de rigueur* in such studies. But I have yet to see a single reference to his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' concerning the French Revolution despite its considerable bearing on fascism. Part of Benjamin's argument (written while persecuted by the Nazis) reads as follows:

History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now (*'Jetztzeit'*). Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate.

In other words, a revolution is a moment when a mythically charged 'now' creates a qualitative change in the continuum of history, a change that fundamentally opposes undifferentiated 'clock' time, the invisible medium in which all events 'happen'. Benjamin continues (my italics),

The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action. The great revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera. And, basically, it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness *of which not the slightest trace has been apparent*

in Europe in the last hundred years. In the July Revolution an incident occurred which showed this consciousness was still alive. On the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris.⁷²

Given our discussion on fascism thus far, this is an extraordinary statement. Benjamin is writing in 1940. Two European regimes have gone to elaborate lengths to break entire nations out of a chaotic experience of time widely felt to be mythically discharged and degenerating. One was activating the myth of Rome, the other a myth of Aryan blood. Both introduced a new calendar,⁷³ and made it a central goal to fill their subjects' lives with a sense of ritual 'nowness'. So why is Benjamin, who actually lived through the rise of Nazism until he was forced into exile in 1933, so blind to the fascist bid to shoot down the clocks of liberal time taking place in front of his eyes?

The answer lies, surely, in the way his Marxism paradoxically both enabled him to arrive at his brilliant conception of the aestheticisation of politics and limited his grasp of its applicability to historical events. Fascism was not the attempt by capitalists to mystify their retention of power by coating the state apparatus – modern technology, work, the regimentation and exploitation of the masses, and war itself – with an artificial 'aura' of magic and aesthetic significance. Nor was fascism a pseudo-revolution cynically staged in order to stave off a 'genuine' revolution. For believers in national regeneration, fascism was a genuine bid to use the unprecedented resources of the modern state to recreate the 'auratic', the 'magic', and the 'numinous', which they sensed was not just draining away from works of art, but from the texture of historical time itself. Thus fascism was an attempted revolution, both aesthetic and temporal: a bid to create a new total culture in the sense that the Romans and the Mayans were a total culture; a bid to inaugurate a new era. Had Benjamin realised that the 'aura' fascists wanted to recreate was of the same stuff as that of the mythic 'nowness' comprising the French Revolution, that the aestheticisation of politics under fascism was profoundly linked to the explosion of festival time in the French Revolution, then he would have provided himself with a powerful heuristic device to unlock its secrets as a political phenomenon. Instead, the aestheticisation of politics merely implied a film-set reality, which is all that most students of fascism have seen since.

This chapter contends that if we do not treat the fascist attempt to retool the experience of time seriously, the logic underlying the fascist revolution and its terrifying human consequences will remain elusive. Fascism's concepts of society, human nature, history, and culture were all so perverted by nationalism, militarism, racism, and male chauvinism that the bid to realise their socio-political dream was bound to lead to disaster. Nevertheless, the failure of fascism and the catastrophes it led to – and would lead to again if it ever seized

power⁷⁴ – should not blind us to the deadly earnestness with which its most fervent supporters sought to carry out its revolutionary mission. We should thus be prepared to devote proper scholarly attention to the fascist *jihad* against the secular time of liberalism, one undertaken in an attempt to banish 'the terror of history' with a fortress of mythic energies. To build such a fortress, two regimes forged a formidable alliance between the modern state's powerful arsenal for social engineering and the primordial force of ethnic nationalism and the myth of collective rebirth. The result was the mass-production of 'History', which was only crushed by the conventional forces of history at the expense of some 55 million lives.

The Italian scholar Giorgio Galli has rightly observed

There is need for a historical reconstruction of the magic and esoteric component of 'historical fascisms', albeit carried out with the caution stressed by Furio Jesi in his *Cultura di destra* in which he criticises the approach adopted in *The Dawn of the Magicians*, but without the habitual diffidence shown to the topic by traditional historiography.⁷⁵

While this is a worthwhile enterprise, what would contribute even more to the historiography of fascism is a thorough investigation of the 'secular otherworld' at the centre of its imaginings as well as the 'revolutionary festivals' they led to. Hopefully, this chapter has at least highlighted the relevance and scope of such an undertaking, even if it has also demonstrated how much still remains to be done.

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