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Center and Periphery in Fascist Italy

This edited collection brings together in-depth research by a number of scholars of Fascist Italy, with the aim of exploring the links between center and periphery in the workings of the National Fascist Party (PNF). As explained by the editors in their introduction to the volume, the problem with many local histories of Fascism is that they tend to remain isolated, unable to explain many aspects of the regime at a national level. The relationship between the party locally, the PNF, the ministries, and state bureaucracy needs to be examined further. According to its totalitarian project, the Fascist state sought to control the provinces and present itself as a unitary whole in which local independent initiatives would not be feasible. The reality, however, was the emergence of profound tensions at the local level that reverberated nationally, provoking continuous mediations and negotiations. As different chapters included in this book demonstrate, Fascist institutions, such as among others the GUF (Fascist University Groups), ONMI (National Organisation for Maternity and Childhood), and the Fascist trade unions, did not act locally as mere ex-

ecutors of instructions received from the center, but constructed complex and dynamic relations with it.

The important question that runs through all the book chapters is: who effectively ran the provinces? On the one hand, local Fascist party secretaries tended to share the belief that they were the main local leaders and often made clear their intolerance of orders coming from Rome; on the other hand, as commonly reported in archival documents on public opinion across Italy, large parts of the population tended to mistrust local authorities. A typical response to the imposition of local rule, or to the malfunctioning of local institutions, was the claim that had the Duce known the situation would have been different. As Paul Corner's most recent book, *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini's Italy* (2012), has emphasized, this was largely due to a lack of competent Fascist leaders at the provincial level: their reputation declined sharply in the 1930s in particular. In its attempt to control the provinces and avoid mismanagement of power, the regime abolished local elections and imposed unelected mayors: the *podestà* (Fascist un-

elected mayor) was appointed by the ministry of interior following advice from the prefect. In this way, the local ruling class was chosen from the center; in the same way, from the time of Augusto Turati's term as PNF secretary, local party leaders were no longer elected by the members but selected by the party in Rome, consistent with the totalitarian aims of the system. The extent to which this experiment succeeded is analyzed in individual chapters that focus on specific institutions of the regime.

In the first section, on the general background, two contributions respectively by Tommaso Baris and Elisabetta Colombo investigate the rarely studied question of the organization of municipal Fascist power. For example, they examine the imposition of the *podestà* as an attack on local institutions, because it strengthened the regime's control over peripheral regions that had hitherto remained outside central purview, such as parts of the South, the Piedmont, or sections of Veneto. A similar attempt, analyzed by Alessio Gagliardi, was made by a number of public institutions created by the regime with the aim of providing social welfare to the provinces in order to reduce economic differences between North and South: an attempt that failed, because it was based on preexisting networks and resources, but one that provoked the emergence of *mediators* who dealt with both local and central authorities. The endeavor to fascistize the *Italy* of one hundred cities is examined from the perspective of local finance in the final chapter of this section. Andrea Guiso shows the importance of local taxation and municipal budgets for the regime, a crucial node that has been largely ignored by historiography. In this case, too, the state achieved only limited success as it was evident, by the mid-1930s, that Italian communes were heavily indebted.

A second section of the volume explores the concrete ways in which the regime sought to colonize local societies and communities. In his study of the GUF, Simone Duranti follows the institution's penetration among students in local Italian universities but also its gradual loss of support after the Ethiopian and the Spanish military campaigns. Domenica La Banca examines the impact of welfare organizations in the peripheries; particularly revealing is the role of the female *fasci*, practical as well as political. This can be linked with the idea of Fascist voluntarism, and was one of the ways in which the PNF could infiltrate Italian families. Francesca Cavarocchi, in her analysis of tourist organizations, provides a reflection on the relationship between national institutions, such as the General Direction for Tourism, and local committees and organizations. Her contribution demonstrates how

the regime's efforts, directed both at facilitating international and internal tourism (through propaganda, but also reduced prices of transport, hotels, petrol vouchers, and so on, contributed to strengthening the consensus in the peripheries. The results, however, were strongly polarized: they were mostly successful in parts of northern Italy rather than in the South, where the lack of resources, means of transport, and infrastructure left much of the area marginalized. In the last chapter of this section, Roberto Parisini presents a study of the Fascist trade unions in the Po Valley as an example of the relationship between local elite and Fascist government. The *struggle of the centre* (p. 161) is apparent here not only because of the high levels of local autonomy but also because of the capacity of the agrarian elite to represent its own interests nationally, without facing significant impediments from the corporative system.

The third and last section of the book explores the relationship between center and periphery through the lens of the *geography of power*, with chapters that allow a comparison of the state of affairs in different parts of Italy. The case of Siena, examined by Saviero Battente, illustrates the local struggle by *podestàs* and the prefect to marginalize the attempts by intransigent Fascist elements to emerge as an alternative ruling class. Continuous substitutions of personnel in municipal and provincial positions resulted in the capacity of the traditional elite to maintain its supremacy. In this instance, peripheral public institutions worked effectively as an instrument for the resistance of the local rulers to interference from Rome. Focusing on a very different context from that of a small Tuscan city, Matteo Di Figlia sheds light on the complex relationship between local elites and Fascism in Palermo. The difficulties of the regime in overthrowing the power of the mafia in the Sicilian capital resulted in the massive employment of *commissari prefettizi*, imposed by the center to replace the *podestàs*, whose position often reflected the expression of rival interests in the numerous communes of the Palermo province. The case of Sardinia, too, like that of other parts of southern Italy, was characterized by a complex dialectic between regime and local notables, as evinced by Gabriele Rigano's research on Sardinian Fascism. The intransigent rhetoric of the new Fascist leaders, who generally came from the interventionist movement of the First World War, soon highlighted the division between the challenge of breaking with liberal Italy on the one hand and the need to come to terms with the preexisting ruling class on the other. This class showed itself to be the ideal interlocutor to the new regime and a useful means to obtain

local support.

Two chapters are finally devoted to the border regions of the North and the Northeast of Italy. Anna Maria Vinci presents a study of the ways in which border fascism of the Venezia Giulia constructed its image around the struggle against both Slav identity and socialism. Compared with other parts of Italy, this resulted in a high number of new local Fascist leaders; for example, the majority of prefects in the province of Trieste, Gorizia, and Pola had been first hour Fascists, or had a history of militancy in the PNF. Roberta Pergher's contribution on the province of Bolzano illuminates a very different picture, where the state could not trust local leaders who tended to be pro-Austrian, in a region that was incorporated in the nation-state mostly during the Fascist period itself. The appointment of public functionar-

ies from other parts of Italy clashed with local realities and revealed a lack of understanding of those regional identities that could not comfortably be reconciled with a strongly nationalist dialectic.

In conclusion, this volume, based on original archival research on aspects of the subject that have not yet received sufficient historiographical attention, suggests a nuanced interpretation of issues that are at the core of the question of Fascist consensus. It is an important book, and one that would stimulate wider debate if translated into English: a translation would benefit scholars who are not Italianists, but who are interested in comparing the workings of Fascist dictatorships in the twentieth century, as well as non-Italian undergraduate students of Fascist Italy.

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