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Italian Fascism, Roman Antiquity and the Spectre of Racism

Jan Nelis

One very peculiar, highly politicized and ideologized vision of classical antiquity is that constructed by Italian fascism. To be sure, in some cases the Italian fascist reception of classical antiquity has been treated as the somewhat younger and less significant brother of its German counterpart.¹ Yet valuable attempts have been made to examine the fascist ideal of *romanità*, «Romanness».² This latter concept could be summarized as the inheritance, the collective memory, of a distinct but at the same time very present Occidental, i.e. Roman, past. *Romanità* was not an entirely new idea, as it had been present in Italian (nationalist) discourse since the *Risorgimento*, but its scale and omnipresence during fascism were unprecedented, while some aspects, such as militarist imperial *grandeur* and the focus on the supremacy of Occidental culture, were also less present in pre-fascist discourse.³ As such it should be distinguished from the *umanesimo* principle, whose roots go back to the Renaissance.

¹ This is notably the case with Mazza, who does not wholly live up to the declared intention to clarify «the connection between the fundamental tendencies of historiography of antiquity, essentially in Germany and Italy, and the forming of reactionary ideologies into Europe» (Mario Mazza, *Storia antica tra le due guerre. Linee di un bilancio provvisorio*, in: *Rivista di storia della storiografia moderna*, 15/1–2 (1994), 7–46, 8; all translations from languages other than English are my own), offering little new insights in the Italian situation. The present article is inspired by Jan Nelis, The «Memory of Rome». Identitarian, Racist and Anti-Semitic romanità Discourse in Italy from the Fascist March on Rome until the Aftermath of the leggi razziali, in: Franziska Metzger/Heinz Scroll (ed.), *Abendländdiskurse und Erinnerungsräume Europas im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Vienna/Cologne 2022, 227–249.

² For the most recent study, and bibliography, on *romanità* see Elvira Migliario/Gianni Santucci (ed.), «Noi figli di Roma». *Fascismo e mito della romanità*, Florence/Milan 2022.

³ In this context see Andrea Giardina/André Vauchez, *Il mito di Roma (Da Carlo Magno a Mussolini)*, Rome/Bari 2000, which describes diachronically how the myth of Rome lived on through the centuries.

Whereas most aspects of *romanità* have been widely studied, the specific issue of racism⁴ has remained largely ignored for decades.⁵ Thus it is the aim of the present article to make an attempt at filling this gap, by presenting a selected reading of publications in which *romanità*, as a reference to the Roman, Occidental past, acquired a manifestly racist or also anti-Semitic dimension. Before turning to the core subject, however, I will provide a concise overview of current scholarship on fascism, whereby special attention will be paid to the role of culture in the latter movement and regime, as this latter aspect is at the heart of the debate on *romanità*.

Fascism and/as culture

Although a key thrust of modern academic research, spearheaded by scholars such as Richard Bosworth,⁶ follows a more traditional historiographical inquest process, and is reluctant to adopt a more culture-oriented approach, arguably, the latter approach has undeniable value. Indeed analyses of fascism that take into account the notion of culture, including those of identity and collective memory, which are identified as integrative components of fascism, are the basis and inspiration for this article.

It all starts around the mid-1970s, when the subject of popular «consensus» became the topic of a debate launched by Renzo De Felice. Opinions on this topic are widely divergent. Indeed whereas De Grand stated that the latter notion, when applied to Italian fascism, at best constituted a mere façade, a formal agreement,⁷ in reality many scholars appear to accept the thesis that a certain degree of «fascistisation» existed. Along those lines, much research of fascism since the 1970s has thus focused on two particular aspects: the «reception» of fascism, or the way in which the regime was experienced by the population; and above all, fascist identitarian politics, which included the development of a historicising discourse, whereby the supremacy of contemporary Italian and Western identity is a key element.

⁴ In the present paper, racism is intended as an extendible concept, i.e. as a process by which an individual or group of individuals are being considered as ethnically «other», this otherness generally being perceived negatively, whether directly or indirectly.

⁵ A notable exception is Alessandro Pagliara (ed.), *Antichistica italiana e leggi razziali. Atti del convegno in occasione dell'ottantesimo anniversario del Regio Decreto Legge n. 1779* (Università di Parma, 28 novembre 2018), Parma 2020, which focuses on the leggi razziali. Further incentives are, to give but one example, the conference «Italy's Imperial Debris. Spaces, Objects, and Fantasies of an Unburied Colonial Past» held at the University of Cambridge on 18 March 2023.

⁶ See for example R.J.B. Bosworth (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, Oxford 2009.

⁷ Alexander De Grand, *Italian Fascism. Its Origins & Development*, Lincoln/London 2000, 152.

Italian fascism was first and foremost an ideology in the abstract sense of the word, but it can also be argued that culture (visual propaganda, the written word, the arts etc.) was a central component to this ideology. This viewpoint on fascist culture as a series of aspects ranging from the aesthetic and more discursive field to the myths⁸ that were used to underpin fascism (World War I, *romanità*, etc.) is relatively recent. As Sergio Luzzatto indicated,⁹ Emilio Gentile proved to be one of the most productive and original researchers in this field, not falling into the deceptive trap of confusing fascist culture with fascism, or giving in to what could be characterised as an «autotelical culturalism».¹⁰

In the context of fascist myth, Gentile notably pointed at its evolving nature. The following observation applies to the myth of Mussolini, but it could easily be transposed to the myth of *romanità*:

«There have, in fact, been various «myths» of Mussolini which manifested themselves in various periods of his life, and originated in various contexts and political and cultural situations. And each of these myths contributed to the Mussolinian charismatic aura, preparing the conditions for the birth of the fascist myth of Mussolini and the institution of his personality cult during the years of the regime.»¹¹

A number of studies have shed fresh light upon some aspects of the nature, or the inner functioning, of fascist society. Rather than focusing on abstract ideological notions, these, usually limited, case studies focus on fascist culture in some of its most diverse manifestations, with a particular focus on the aesthetic. They do not only look for the «fascist in culture», but also for the «culture in the fascist», as they inject contemporary research into the cultural origins of Italian fascism. In the following pages, I will discuss a selection of some of the most interesting examples of these so-called «culturalist» studies.

Having also produced a study on fascist exhibition policies,¹² Diane Ghirardo investigated the way in which the fascist regime used architecture to enhance popular consensus and stimulate the creation of community feeling. For example, she

⁸ In the present paper, the notion of myth is intended in the classical sense, i.e. as the «mythos», the story or stories which circulate in society. We hereby follow the contemporary fascist interpretation given in Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*, Rome/Bari 2002, 150. For the role of myth in the «political religion» of fascism see below.

⁹ Sergio Luzzatto, The Political Culture of Fascist Italy, in: *Contemporary European History*, 8/2 (1999), 317–334, 323.

¹⁰ Renzo De Felice, Fascism and Culture in Italy: Outlines for further Study, in: *Stanford Italian Review*, 8 (1990), 5–11, 10.

¹¹ Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio*, Rome/Bari 2001 (1° 1993), 236.

¹² Diane Ghirardo, Architects, Exhibitions, and the Politics of Culture in Fascist Italy, in: *Journal of Architectural Education*, 45/2 (1992), 67–75.

pointed out that the so-called fascist «new cities» or *città nuove* were crucial elements in the regime's attempt to literally «reshape» Italy.¹³ Furthermore, there is also the work of Jeffrey Schnapp, author of, among other things, «Fascinating Fascism», which highlights the thought that the fascist regime tried to create a new, «italo-fascist» identity through a large-scale organisation of culture, visual as well as intellectual; in the words of Schnapp, it «sought answers to its identity crisis in the domain of culture».¹⁴

Examples such as these, which evidence the fascist stress on aesthetics, confirm the existence of an, as it were, «aesthetic ideology». Hopefully, scholarship pursuing similar lines of thought will continue, thus further contributing to our understanding of Italian fascism and the importance it attached to culture, an aspect that, as was observed by Mosse, was also «bound sooner or later to have its political consequences».¹⁵ Books such as Claudio Fogu's *The Historic Imaginary. Politics of History in Fascist Italy*,¹⁶ as well as, for example, Lazzaro and Crum's *Donatello among the Blackshirts*,¹⁷ confirm this tendency, continuing the exploration of the vast field of fascist aesthetics.

In addition, recent research has also investigated fascist aesthetics on a more abstract, less case-oriented level. Most interesting examples of this tendency are *The Aesthetics of Politics and Fascist Spectacle: the Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy*, authored by Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi.¹⁸ Inspired by Emilio Gentile's analyses of fascist myth and of fascism as a «political religion» (see below), Falasca-Zamponi produced an imaginative study of the way in which self representation, symbolism and public manifestations appearing under the fascist regime informed much about Italian fascism itself, of its intentions to legitimise itself and to obtain power through literal but also figurative language, i.e. the language of aesthetics.

¹³ Diane Ghirardo, City and Theater: The Rhetoric of Fascist Architecture, in: *Stanford Italian Review*, 8/1–2 (1990), 165–193. A similarly interesting study is Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, *Città Fascista: Surveillance and Spectacle*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31/2 (1996), 347–372.

¹⁴ Jeffrey T. Schnapp, Fascinating Fascism, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31/2 (1996), 235–244, 238.

¹⁵ George L. Mosse, Fascist Aesthetics and Society: Some Considerations, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31/2 (1996), 245–252, 247.

¹⁶ Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary. Politics of History in Fascist Italy*, Toronto/Buffalo/London 2003.

¹⁷ Claudia Lazzaro/Roger J. Crum (ed.), *Donatello among the Blackshirts. History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy*, Ithaca/London 2005.

¹⁸ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *The Aesthetics of Politics: Symbol, Power and Narrative in Mussolini's Fascist Italy*, in: *Theory, Culture & Society*, 9/4 (1992), 75–91, and Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle. The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1997.

Furthermore, the roots of Italian fascism can also be traced in the discourse developed by the intellectual avant-garde.¹⁹ Indeed, fascist ideology, in a broad, Althusserian sense, can be seen as deeply embedded in a number of early-twentieth century intellectual currents such as for example Futurism (Marinetti), Decadentism (D'Annunzio), literary nationalism (Corradini) and the thinking of the Florentine avant-garde (Prezzolini, Papini, Soffici etc.). These discourses harboured ideas of national strength and unity, of force and virility,²⁰ and looked forward to an idealised future, glorifying both the nearby (*Risorgimento*) and far-away (ancient Rome) Italian and generally also Western past – except for Futurism, which was against all that was considered as *passatista*.

In line with the above observation, a number of studies have also treated the subject of fascist «modernism», most notably, perhaps, Roger Griffin's 2007 *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, which traced the roots of (Italian) fascism back to the vitalism of modern, «risorgimental» Italy, as well as to the «palingenetic» climate after World War I. In his analysis of fascism born «from Modernism»,²¹ Griffin investigated the various expressions of fascist modernism, identifying fascism's readiness and willingness to create *ex novo*.²² By taking an «internal» view (see the work of Gentile above and below), as portrayed through fascist words and actions, and also through interpretations of artworks produced under fascism, Griffin argued that in essence, many acted «modernistically»: the fascist State desired to be dynamic and creative, to become the progenitor of a new totalitarian fascist art and culture, inspired by the essence of Western and Italian tradition, but essentially aiming at transforming or assimilating the latter into a fascist reality.

Finally there is the study of fascism as a «political religion», an idea already anticipated by Dante Germino in his 1959 study of the totalitarian fascist party.²³ However, it was not until the work of George L. Mosse²⁴ and above all Emilio

¹⁹ In this regard, see the still highly relevant Philip V. Cannistraro, Mussolini's Cultural Revolution: Fascist or Nationalist?, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, 7/1–2 (1972), 115–139, 118–119.

²⁰ For an analysis of the fascist ideal of virility see Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities. Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy*, Minneapolis/London 1996.

²¹ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, Hounds Mills/Basingstoke/Hampshire/New York 2007, 191–218.

²² Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism* (cf. note 21), 219–249.

²³ Dante L. Germino, *The Italian Fascist Party in Power. A Study in Totalitarian Rule*, Minneapolis 1959. In 1938, Angelo Tasca had already referred to a «religion for the poor» (Angelo Tasca, *Nascita e avvento del fascismo*, Milan 1999 (1° 1938), 553).

²⁴ Mosse, who mainly focused on German Nazism, illustrated how, through massive orchestration of the masses, a phenomenon which had roots going back to the French Revolution (George L. Mosse, *Fascism and the French Revolution*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, 24/1 [1989], 5–26), public life under fascism (in general) acquired a cultic, theatrical character.

Gentile that Italian fascism was coherently defined as possessing a highly cultic, religious character – a definition precisely set out in Gentile's *Il culto del littorio* (*The cult of the lictor*), which offered an analysis of some of the most important myths incorporated by fascism, as well as of the fascist stress on externalities.²⁵ Combined with his analysis of the cultic character of Italian fascist mass society,²⁶ the *Culto del littorio* has proved truly groundbreaking in this particular field of research. Already in 1990, Gentile defined his concept of political religion as follows, placing it alongside as well as in opposition to traditional religions:

«Fascist religion placed itself alongside traditional religion, and tried to syncretize it within its own sphere of values as an ally in the subjection of the masses to the state, although it did stress the primacy of politics. This, perhaps, was the most ambitious objective which the fascists set themselves, and they set about it with fanatical commitment, although they also followed a tortuous series of compromises. Moreover, although it did not have projects as regards de-Christianization, in order to succeed in this experiment fascism did not hesitate to enter into conflict with the Church, even before the 1929 conciliation, and then in 1931 and 1938. The reason behind the conflict was always the same: the fascist state wanted a monopoly over education, in accordance with the values of its own state-worshipping and bellicose ethic, and did not accept any reticence or reduction in citizens' total obedience towards the state and the nation.»²⁷

As such, the idea of fascism as a political religion presents itself as an ideal context in which to interpret the cultic and mythical aspects of fascism, including *romanità*.

Fascism and antiquity

Fascism did not propose a return to the past, but rather an alternative path into modernity, a *terza via*. Within its political religion, the concept of an ideological heritage from Roman antiquity was key to the regime's cultural, identitarian policies, summarised in the mentioned notion of «Romanness» or *romanità*. The new, fascist Italy was the bearer of collective, millenarian Western memory; it was said to incarnate the spirit and magnitude of Roman antiquity, whose culture and greatness it would not only emulate, but surpass. With this in mind, written

²⁵ Gentile, *Il culto del littorio* (cf. note 11).

²⁶ In his view, fascism was action, theatre, the enactment and at the same time the creation of the «fascist self», of the fascist «new State» and «new man» (Emilio Gentile, *Il mito dello stato nuovo dall'antigolittismo al fascismo*, Rome/Bari 1982). On the theatrical side of fascism see Emilio Gentile, *The Theatre of Politics in Fascist Italy*, in: Günter Berghaus (ed.), *Fascism and Theatre. Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925–1945*, Providence/Oxford 1996, 72–93.

²⁷ Emilio Gentile, *Fascism as Political Religion*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, 25/2–3 (1990), 229–251, 230.

and visual fascist propaganda repeatedly conveyed the idea of a new Rome, simultaneously inspired by the past, while at the same time being modernised and rejuvenated.

As noted, the regime had a particular focus on the use of the aesthetic; therefore, perhaps not surprisingly, this particular field was the first to become permeated by the myth of *romanità*, primarily with the development of a specific, modernised, neoclassicist architectural style, the so-called *stile littorio*. Excellent examples of this style can be seen in many representational buildings which can notably be found in both Rome's *Città Universitaria* and *EUR*-quarter. *Romanità* was also promoted through the medium of archaeological excavation, the subsequent «liberation» of archaeological relics and the re-introduction of «Roman» symbols such as the Roman salute and step. As stated above, it was also to some extent active in both theatre and the movies, as a reminder of ancient and above all present greatness.

The «memory of Rome», a myth and a *topos*, also tried to infuse the idea of the superiority of Italian civilisation at the level of temporal organization, for example through the inauguration of the feast of the Birthday of Rome on April 21st, replacing the original and traditional date for the celebration of May 1st. Apart from an Italo-Roman event, this *Natale di Roma* also came to represent the birth, *in nucleo*, of Western superiority, as first evidenced by the Punic Wars. In addition to this, a new calendar was introduced in 1927, the starting date of which coincided with the March on Rome in 1922, in itself a clear imitation of Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon two millennia before Mussolini. Much as would be the case with Augustus after him,²⁸ Caesar was seen as the incarnation of Western triumphalism.²⁹

At the same time as the idea of a neo-Roman fascist State was being diffused by more popular means, the scientific and pseudo-scientific study of antiquity also played its part. Indeed in this context, the «bimillenarian» celebrations of Virgil (1930), Horace (1935) and above all Augustus (1937–1938) presented themselves as excellent occasions on which to underline the greatness of the Roman past. This interest notably resulted in a number of publications and cultural events organized by scientific and cultural institutions such as, first and foremost,

²⁸ In this context, see Massimiliano Ghilardi/Laura Mecella (ed.), *Augusto e il fascismo. Studi intorno al bimillenario del 1937–1938*, Città di Castello 2023. See also below.

²⁹ On the fascist reception of Caesar see Jan Nelis, «Cesare in scena». Achter de schermen van theater ten tijde van het Italiaanse fascisme, in: *Documenta. Tijdschrift voor theater*, 24/1 (2006), 3–22, and Jane Dunnett, The Rhetoric of *Romanità*: Representations of Caesar in Fascist Theatre, in: Maria Wyke (ed.), *Julius Caesar in Western Culture*, Oxford/Victoria 2006, 244–265.

the *Istituto di Studi Romani* (see below). However, and as I have shown elsewhere, the propaganda surrounding *romanità*, and especially Augustus,³⁰ seems to have been as much the result of initiatives taken «from above» as it was the result of individual *antichisti* aligning themselves, for reasons of convenience, career advancement, etc., with the then generalised climate of exaltation of the Roman past.

The celebration of Virgil took place in 1930, five years after the official start of the Battle of the Grain or *Battaglia del grano*, an agrarian campaign aimed at boosting national wheat production. Consequently, Virgil became known primarily as the poet of country life (*Bucolica*) and most particularly of agriculture (*Georgica*). The *Aeneis* also allowed the *antichisti* to link him to the notions of Augustan peace, and empire. In addition, many authors used the *puer* episode in the fourth eclogue to associate Virgil with Christianity. Once again, Roman memory was to coincide with a focus on Western, c.q. Christian, values.³¹

Whereas in 1935 Horace, the man of Philippi, and to some extent the man of the *dolce far niente*, was being promoted mainly as the poet of the national poem *carmen saeculare*,³² around the same period the figure of Augustus began to dominate the spotlight. In his case, a grand scale exposition was organized, the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* («Augustan Exhibition of Romaness»),³³ which depicted the Roman emperor as a direct predecessor of and source of inspiration for Mussolini. The scale of the 1937–1938 Augustan celebration was unprecedented: now that the regime had conquered its own empire (after the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935–1936), Augustus, the original man of peace and of empire, became the subject of a large number of conferences, publications, as well as of the mentioned exposition.³⁴

The *Mostra* was the central event during the bimillenary year 1937–1938; it exemplifies some of the key issues in the fascist use of the myth of Rome or

³⁰ Jan Nelis, From Ancient to Modern: The Myth of Romanità During the Ventennio Fascista. The Written Imprint of Mussolini's Cult of the «Third Rome», Turnhout 2011, 104–120.

³¹ For more information on the *bimillenario* of Virgil see Luciano Canfora, Fascismo e bimillenario della nascita di Virgilio, in: *Enciclopedia virgiliana*, 2 (1985), 469–472.

³² For more information on the *bimillenario* of Horace see Mariella Cagnetta, Bimillenario della nascita oraziana, in: *Enciclopedia oraziana*, 3 (1998), 615–640, and Francesco Citti, Il bimillenario oraziano nell'era fascista, in: *Aufidus*, 16 (1992), 133–142.

³³ In this context see Friedemann Scriba, Augustus im Schwarzhemd? Die *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* in Rom 1937/38, Frankfurt am Main 1993, and Friedemann Scriba, The sacralization of the Roman past in Mussolini's Italy. Erudition, Aesthetics, and Religion in the Exhibition of Augustus' Bimillenary in 1937–1938, in: *Storia della Storiografia*, 30 (1996), 19–29.

³⁴ The same year, the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* (Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution), first organized in 1932, was reopened, reiterating the intimate connection between the fascist regime and ancient Rome.

romanità, and it also involved none other than Carlo Galassi Paluzzi, the key figure, together with Giulio Quirino Giglioli and a series of other scholars,³⁵ in the elaboration of the idea of the third, fascist Rome, resurrected on the Italian capital's «fatal hills».³⁶ It was a hugely successful propagandistic initiative, the ideal vehicle for the promotion, by the regime and some of its foremost scientists, of the myth of Rome as the cradle of Western civilisation. Special emphasis lay on the Augustan period, whereas at the end of the *percorso*, in the room dedicated to fascism, spectators also got a clear vision of the «Roman», neo-Augustan, present and future.

As said, many of these aspects of *romanità* have been at the core of contemporary scholarship, an observation which does not count for the tandem *romanità*-racism. Hence in the following I will take up the trail of the written imprint of this identification between Roman past and fascist present, this «invented tradition», tracing its trajectory throughout the *ventennio fascista* (the twenty years during which fascism was in power, from 1922 until 1943), with a focus on the ways in which it increasingly incorporated a racist element.

Fascism, antiquity, identity and racism

Before 1938, apart from traditionally quite widespread manifestations of European anti-Semitism, fascist Italy displayed no institutionalised racist tendencies. As for example evidenced in Mussolini's *Opera Omnia*, the racial issue was never of particular importance to the *duce*. Derogatory racial remarks, for example those denigrating Jews, were very rare, and when they did occur they seemed the consequence of ignorance rather than of an innate, let alone a «biological», racism. Even though it was undeniably present, anti-Semitism was arguably more widespread in Catholic circles than in those of the fascists.³⁷ This is for example evidenced, during the 1920–30s, by the Jesuit periodical *La Civiltà Cattolica*, which published some highly invective papers in which Jews were referred to in a particularly deprecatory manner.³⁸

As said, in the context of *romanità*, the role of racism has seldom been studied, apart from a number of analyses including Cagnetta's.³⁹ In the light of the above

³⁵ To name but a few: Emilio Bodrero, Roberto Pariben, Corrado Ricci.

³⁶ Mussolini in Edoardo Susmel/Duilio Susmel (ed.), *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini* (44 vols.), Florence 1951–1981, vol. 27, 269.

³⁷ In this context see also Mariella Cagnetta/Claudio Schiano, *Faschismus II. Politik und Gesellschaft*, in: *Der neue Pauly*, 13 (1996), 1096–1105, 1102–1103.

³⁸ For more information, see Jan Nelis, *Catholicisme et altérité: «La Civiltà Cattolica» de la montée du fascisme à l'après-guerre*, Brussels 2014, 107–119.

³⁹ Mariella Cagnetta, *Antichisti e impero fascista*, Bari 1979, 105.

observations, it is not surprising that the work of the (Catholic and) fascist *Istituto di Studi Romani*, and particularly its founder Galassi Paluzzi, contained a number of racist elements.⁴⁰ Galassi Paluzzi's «spiritual» – as opposed to biological – anti-Semitism⁴¹ can be attributed to his Catholic faith, while his anti-germanism stemmed from his classicist roots.⁴² These two aspects, and not merely «fascism», can be viewed as the motivation behind a statement Galassi Paluzzi made in 1927, more than ten years before fascism formally adopted the concept of racism:

«But the Jews are «anti-Rome», betraying the essence of Jewdom; on the other hand the essence of Protestantism, with its ensuing and accompanying Germanic criticism, is anti-Rome due to the essence of the Protestant doctrine, which is a betrayal of Christianity, and of Roman thought.»⁴³

Indeed in his paper, Galassi Paluzzi opted for a purely Catholic viewpoint on Western and Roman culture, which thus excluded, on a religious basis, Jews and Protestants.

Until 1938, fascism evidenced no really formal racist tendency.⁴⁴ Initially, within some publications, racism and fascism-*romanità* were sometimes even interpreted as being highly irreconcilable concepts. For example, in 1935, just as

⁴⁰ For more information see Antonio La Penna, *La rivista Roma e l'Istituto di Studi Romani. Sul culto della romanità nel periodo fascista*, in: Beat Naf (ed.), *Antike und Altertumswissenschaft in der Zeit von Faschismus und Nationalsozialismus*, Mandelbachtal/Cambridge 2001, 89–110, 106–107 and Romke Visser, *Storia di un progetto mai realizzato: il Centro Internazionale di Studi Romani*, in: *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Historisch Instituut te Rome*, 53 (1994), 44–80, 53.

⁴¹ On the relationship between «spiritual» anti-Semitism and Catholicism see Renato Moro, *L'antisemitismo cattolico*, in: Giuseppe Battelli/Daniele Menozzi (ed.), *Una storiografia attuale? Giovanni Miccoli e la funzione civile della ricerca storica*, Rome 2005, 229–250. See also Renato Moro, *Le premesse dell'atteggiamento cattolico di fronte alla legislazione razziale fascista. Cattolici ed ebrei nell'Italia degli anni venti (1919–1932)*, in: *Storia Contemporanea*, 19/6 (1988), 1013–1119.

⁴² At the beginning of the twentieth century, and certainly after the First World War, Italian *antichisti* started to react against the preponderance of German classicists, and of the German *Altertumswissenschaft* tradition in Italy. One of the central figures in this debate was the nationalist Ettore Pais (see below).

⁴³ Carlo Galassi Paluzzi, *Roma e Antiroma*, Rome 1927, 444.

⁴⁴ See for example the words of Mussolini (in Emil Ludwig, *Colloqui con Mussolini*, Milan 2001 [1° 1932], 54–56): «Of course no pure race any longer exists, not even the Jewish one. But that's just the point: good mixtures often provide force and beauty to a nation. Race: that's a feeling, not a reality; 95% is feeling. I will not believe that it is possible to prove whether or not a race is biologically pure or not. Those who claim the Germanic race is noble are themselves all [...] non-Germanic [...] There is no anti-Semitism in Italy [...] Italian Jews have always been good citizens, and brave soldiers. They occupy important positions in universities, in the army, in banks. A lot of them are generals [...] [on Jews in Germany:] The scapegoat!» Mussolini was indeed quite sceptical on the question of German anti-Semitism, as can be seen in the typescript of a 1934 speech: «Well, my reply is that there is no Germanic

Italy fulfilled its (supposedly) «civilising mission» or *missione civilizzatrice*, conquering its colonial «empire», Piero Pellicano was still writing about forms of racism and «badly understood forms of nationalism, all feelings which constitute the antithesis of empire, the negation of civilisation, the opposite of durable peace, the major obstacle to the only war worthy of that name, i.e. that war which *ex novo* changes the fate of humanity, or at least of a great part of it».⁴⁵ One could of course argue that these words primarily serve as a legitimization of colonial, and potentially also racist, aggression, but the fact remains that we are not here confronted with the «biological» form of racism present, for example, in Nazism, but rather with a *calque* of racial or in any case ethnic prejudice present, at that time, to some degree in almost every section of Western society. Furthermore, the reference to a link between «spiritual unity» and (Western) imperialism in Pellicano's work once more illustrates the intertwinement between a discourse on national greatness and Western ethnic supremacy.

This attitude is further illustrated in *L'idea imperiale del mondo antico* by Roberto Paribeni, whose entire discourse on Roman imperialism, influenced at that time by the 1936 conquest of Ethiopia and the ensuing economic sanctions proclaimed by the League of Nations, seems to have been formulated in order to bolster fascist imperialism, while at the same time offering a romano-fascist apology for some historical imperialist military actions.⁴⁶ However, even in this context, any possibility of ancient and modern Roman, and by extension Western, racism is denied:

«Rome has always tried to assimilate, educate, and elevate its inhabitants to the level of Rome itself and its image. Rome did not know any racial prejudice. In today's enemy it has always seen tomorrow's ally, friend, *socius*. Modern peoples never succeed in turning their colonial subjects into more than minor officials, janitors, drivers; Rome made them into writers, consuls, emperors.»⁴⁷

In 1938 the situation regarding racism quite rapidly evolved; the announcement of racial laws, a *calque* of the German example, took most Italians by surprise. The proclamation led Emilio Bodrero, in a publication entitled «Continuità

race. [...] It is not we who say that, nor the scientists. Hitler says that.» (Mussolini in Susmel/Susmel, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini* [cf. note 36], vol. 26, 309).

⁴⁵ Piero Pellicano, *Unità spirituale: Impero*, Rome 1935, 6.

⁴⁶ Roberto Paribeni, *L'idea imperiale del mondo antico*, Rome 1937.

⁴⁷ Paribeni, *L'idea imperiale* (cf. note 46), 10. Should these words not provide enough evidence in order to link Paribeni's text to Italian fascism, then in any case the following do: «Now [...] we cannot deny that the idea of unifying the human family, and introducing into it peace and tranquillity, is without a doubt [...] superior to all the surrogate experiments, the worst of which [...] is that one which, in a mix of unctuous idealisms and treacherous violence, will always render [...] the name of the city of Geneva infamous in history.» (Paribeni, *L'idea imperiale* [cf. note 46], 1).

della tradizione romana», to speak rather unashamedly of a pluri-millennial, international, «cosmic» conflict between East and West; it is a simple rhetoric, presenting history as a Manichean battle between black and white, Evil against Good: «The battle between east and west is to be seen as a cosmic fact rather than as a fact of history or politics, as it has been a constant, remaining unresolved for millennia, always with the same characteristics.»⁴⁸ Indirectly referring to fascism's continuous reliance upon the development of a political religion, Bodrero, who was one of the foremost *romanità* propagandists and a regular contributor to the activities of the *Istituto di Studi Romani*, paved the way for what would be a central tendency in *romanità* discourse during the final years of the fascist regime: a stress on the rootedness of Western civilisation as opposed to foreign, decadent influences.

A discourse on the roots of ancient Rome and Italy indeed suddenly became popular with some, although arguably not all, *cultori della romanità* («promoters of Romanness»), as is also evidenced by Pericle Ducati's *Italia preromana e stirpe italica. Il concetto di stirpe e civiltà di Roma antica*.⁴⁹ As with Galassi Paluzzi (see above), in this article, published by the *Istituto di Studi Romani*, Catholic faith and anti-Semitism align perfectly with the newly officially recognised racism. Ducati had already proposed the idea of a Roman, national Christianity; he now included anti-Semitism in this picture, as the «Jews are those inhabitants of Rome who were against any fusion, any amalgamation with Rome, opposed to Roman-ness. Hence the secular battle between Rome and the Jews.»⁵⁰

Ducati's development of such ideas seems to have been part of a wider programme intended to boost ideas of national greatness in times of increasing international tension. The Rome-Berlin Axis was becoming an ever more present reality, whereby within this new rhetoric, Rome is purported to have stood in constant opposition to «the other». As fascism increasingly began to define itself by what it «was not», the most virulent *romanità* propagandists therefore defined Roman antiquity by means of easily understood juxtapositions. Within this context racism was a very useful tool, being a totally unscientific, and thus in a sense highly unquestionable concept. The majority of contemporary publications show two main tendencies, especially during World War II: authors conscientiously treated «innocent» subjects, refraining from any mention of the political reality of the time, or when they did reflect upon the latter, did so in an exuberant, far from moderate manner. In other words, some authors chose to avoid by any means possible references to the political context, whereas others did exactly the contrary.

⁴⁸ Emilio Bodrero, *Continuità della tradizione romana*, in: Emilio Bodrero (ed.), *Roma e il fascismo*, Rome 1939, 54–71, 55.

⁴⁹ Pericle Ducati, *Italia preromana e stirpe italica. Il concetto di stirpe e civiltà di Roma antica*, Rome 1940.

⁵⁰ Ducati, *Italia preromana e stirpe italica* (cf. note 49), 27.

Whereas the first faction is, as said, not exactly the least important one, in the context of the present study it is of course more interesting to look at the latter, which included for example hard-line fascist *cultori della romanità* such as Roberto Paribeni and Carlo Cecchelli, both of whom, not surprisingly, also had close ties to the *Istituto di Studi Romani*. They produced studies very interesting in the context of our present research, although a number make difficult reading due to their particularly unscientific, propagandist nature. In this context, it suffices to consider the following lines, taken from *L'influenza dell'Italia nell'Africa Mediterranea dalla romanità all'età di mezzo* by Paribeni: «Africa has always been a country of minors: you could almost say that it is a physiological case of collective infantileness/senility. None of the peoples which have inhabited or inhabit it have been able to express, by their own means, an original or somewhat elevated civilization.»⁵¹ Such one-sided prejudice was not uncommon in the work of Paribeni,⁵² but the extent to which it could now be developed was unseen, this to such a point that Paribeni even launched an attack against mercantile, utilitarian Phoenicians, presenting these as incarnating the stereotypical eternally profiteering, «vegetating» Jew.⁵³

Whereas in the case of Paribeni, such ideas were the object of allusion, the mentioned Carlo Cecchelli reflected, in his *Mistero del Cristo*, writing the following words «for God and fatherland»:

«In modern times the Jewish people (especially the intellectual classes) have undergone the corrosive action of illuminism: and now Israel cannot but expect salvation to come from recuperation of the full consciousness of God, from renouncing material advantages, from the thought of celestial recompensation, and, first and foremost, from adhesion to the Christian law of Love.»⁵⁴

As such, these words can be considered the consequence of Cecchelli's total adherence to the Catholic faith. However, when one considers the date of publication, i.e. at a time when Jews both in Italy and elsewhere were the object of persecution (and active genocide), this purely religious image does not entirely stand.

The «civilising mission» of fascism

Finally, and by way of concluding this article on a treatment of the way in which «soft» – as opposed to outspoken – racism could also be present in a more subtle

⁵¹ Roberto Paribeni, *L'influenza dell'Italia nell'Africa Mediterranea dalla romanità all'età di mezzo*, Florence 1942, 3.

⁵² See for example also Roberto Paribeni, *I Giudei nella storia antica*, in: *Nuova Antologia*, 74/1603 (1939), 70–81.

⁵³ Paribeni, *L'influenza dell'Italia nell'Africa Mediterranea* (cf. note 51), 4–5.

⁵⁴ Carlo Cecchelli, *Mistero del Cristo*, Rome 1943, 54.

and discursively embedded way, some words on fascism's so-called self-attributed «civilising mission» are in order – the term in itself is already significant.

In 1935, Italy provoked an armed conflict with Ethiopia, thus initiating the conquest of its «empire» in East Africa. The time had come for the European nation to «get its (African) share», and the regime claimed that the Ethiopian campaign was simply a belated colonial expansion (although the action was condemned by the League of Nations). Notwithstanding the ensuing international sanctions, Mussolini went full speed ahead, allowing the Italian State to term itself *impero* for a number of years, and for its king to become emperor. Not surprisingly, and as has also been illustrated above, the conquest of Ethiopian territories and the accompanying atrocities against indigenous populations were legitimised through recourse to ancient Rome.⁵⁵

So while racism was still officially, and highly contradictorily, condemned (see above),⁵⁶ a developed discourse on empire could be noted after the *Proclamazione dell'Impero* in 1936.⁵⁷ Italy now had its empire; the conquered territories needed to be ruled; above all they must be controlled. The Italian population waited for a reward, for some compensation for the international sanctions. In this evolving political climate, the pacifistic «civilising mission» legitimised any colonial aggression. The African expansion was a «geographical necessity»⁵⁸, the consequence of Italy's «expansive power»⁵⁹ and of «Italy's intense geographical diversity [...] which makes the Peninsula desire the breath of a continent, multiplying its features, its impulses, its desires»⁶⁰. Many *antichisti* portrayed Italy as having answered a call for light, liberty and love generated by the African nation itself. Mussolini was the new hero of Africa:

⁵⁵ For fascist colonial policies see, among others, Angelo Del Boca (ed.), *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo*, Rome/Bari 1991, and Enzo Collotti, *Fascismo e politica di potenza. Politica estera 1922–1939*, Milan 2000.

⁵⁶ See Giovanni Federico, who in the context of racism spoke of an «ugly word» (Giovanni Federico, Orazio Flacco poeta della saggezza e della romanità. Conferenza tenuta nel r. Liceo di Formia per la celebrazione del bimillenario oraziano, Rome 1935, 7).

⁵⁷ See Mussolini's words on his recently conquered empire «of peace, because Italy wants peace for itself and for all and decides to go to war only when forced by imperious, irrepressible necessities of life.» «Empire of civilization and humanity for all the people of Ethiopia. [...] In this supreme certainty, hold high, legionnaires, the signs, the steel and the hearts, to salute, after fifteen centuries, the reappearance of the Empire on Rome's fatal hills.» (Mussolini in Susmel/Susmel, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini* [cf. note 36], vol. 27, 268–269).

⁵⁸ This idea of Italy's need for *spazio vitale* will be particularly elaborately discussed by the Jesuitical journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*, as evidenced by Jan Nelis, Negotiating the Italian Self: Catholicism and the Demise of Fascism, Racism and Colonialism, in: *Italian Studies in Southern Africa*, 21/1–2 (2008), 75–101.

⁵⁹ Roberto Bartolozzi, *Roma e Augusto*, Rome 1938, 32.

⁶⁰ Armando Lodolini, *La storia della razza italiana da Augusto a Mussolini, dedicata agli italiani di Mussolini e specialmente ai giovani e alle scuole*, Rome 1939, 18.

«The European civilisation has fought against the African barbarism, and it has won. Italy, master of law, has driven out [...] the racists [sic], the merchants of human flesh [...] He [Mussolini] has now become the myth of those unhappy populations which, tired of slavery, wanted compassion, light, love.»⁶¹

Popularising literature such as the one cited above developed a boasting discourse on Italian superiority, which for example portrayed the *civiltà romana* as being fascism's «gift» to the world. Augustus became the great example and incarnation of this mission, as can for example be seen in Luigi Arimattei's *La missione civilizzatrice di Roma*; here the author states that the ancient Romans, notwithstanding the harsh political climate, «were able to imagine, and capable of carrying out, a work of goodness and civilisation. The fertile silt of the sacred river of historical Africa, neglected, un-used by the lazy, work-shy barbarism of the same peoples that lived on its banks, again became beneficent and again produced riches, because the bright intellect, the rock-solid will of Rome was also capable of creating life!»⁶² Arimattei further reflected on contemporary Italy:

«The people of Italy today, as in ancient Roman times, have a sure guide. It is a Man and an Idea, but both are one thing, a compact mass, as hard and as brilliant as a diamond... [...] salvation can only come from Rome and from Rome it will come.»⁶³

Furthermore, not only Augustus, but also Caesar became important repositories of *romanità* propaganda. No wonder then that Caesar also became a guiding light for fascist legions, legions that, to follow the reasoning of Roberto Bartolozzi, «were not merely armed invaders, but nothing less than a part of Rome transported into the heart of the enemy.» «Rome extended itself in the Mediterranean with a unity of movement and a rational deployment of armed troops and a civilian population which was unique in the history of colonial conquest.»⁶⁴ Indeed Bartolozzi surmised: to get a good sense of the Roman legions, it is enough to imagine the «army sent to Abissinia by Mussolini in 1935».«⁶⁵

Thanks to the legacy of Roman antiquity, the example of Italy provided, officially at least, a warranty for universal justice, illuminating the world. Contextualised within our focus on empire, the Roman imperial idea «wants to unite people, because, fatally, divided peoples mean peoples without a Unitarian directive,

⁶¹ R. Malfa, *Alcuni colossi della Storia. Attraverso i tempi fino ad oggi*, Rome 1938, 14.

⁶² Luigi Arimattei, *La missione civilizzatrice di Roma*, Faenza 1937, 32.

⁶³ Arimattei, *La missione civilizzatrice di Roma* (cf. note 62), 84.

⁶⁴ Bartolozzi, *Roma e Augusto* (cf. note 59), 74.

⁶⁵ Bartolozzi, *Roma e Augusto* (cf. note 59), 74.

the one thing which can guarantee the life of men, as well as the life of the cosmos».⁶⁶ *Giustizia* and *incivilimento* were key words, as evidenced in numerous publications, popularising but also academic ones, such as for example *Roma dall'antico al nuovo impero* by Ettore Pais, as well as many others.⁶⁷

Indeed, around the time when Augustus was being celebrated, many scholars of antiquity, whether they were linked to the mentioned *Istituto di Studi Romani* or not, fully played the card of fascist *romanità*. A discourse on Western and Roman civilisation's supremacy became common, catalysed by academic opportunism, which replied to ideas developed by fascist leaders, ideas which of course were intended to meet propagandist ends, but which in some cases even seem to have been part of their intimate *habitus mentis*.⁶⁸

With the outbreak of the Second World War, this relatively stable situation deteriorated quite quickly. As early as the year 1940, strangers were being described as «the former barbarians who have been civilised by us».⁶⁹ The myth of an increasingly ethereal and religious form of *romanità* led to Augustus who, as I have shown, became a central protagonist of *romanità* between 1937–38, now being portrayed as the «representative of an idea that will last as long as the world: and it will always be revered or cursed, depending on whether people go in the direction of light or darkness [...] depending also on the fact that the word ‹Empire› represents a splendidly Latin concept of human solidarity and brotherhood, which makes possible the prosperity and progress of peoples under a superior form of justice...».⁷⁰ Clearly, there was no more room for negotiation; black or white, light or darkness. *Giustizia* was omnipresent; it was, from the viewpoint of Emilio Bodrero, «the best guarantee of an order's stability»⁷¹, and it would create a new order, «expression of our universal humanity».⁷² Arguably it never did.

⁶⁶ Lodolini, *La storia della razza italiana* (cf. note 60), 24. Fascist politician Giuseppe Bottai also praised fascist Rome's «civilising mission»: «Finally, Rome returns, not only in the material form of Empire, but with the wisdom of civilisation. Because where it fights, Italy sows and ploughs; where it conquers, it inhabits and proliferates; where it introduces the victorious signs of the Lictor, it educates and civilises» (Giuseppe Bottai, *Roma nella scuola italiana*, Rome 1939, 12). On Bottai, colonialism and *romanità* see Jan Nelis, *La «fede di Roma» nella modernità totalitaria fascista. Il mito della romanità e l'Istituto di Studi Romani tra Carlo Galassi Paluzzi e Giuseppe Bottai*, in: *Studi Romani*, 58/1–4 (2010), 359–381.

⁶⁷ Ettore Pais, *Roma dall'antico al nuovo impero*, Milan 1938, 214–215. For a more elaborate treatment of the *antichisti*'s reception of Roman imperialism in the context of fascist *romanità* see Cagnetta, *Antichisti e impero fascista* (cf. note 39).

⁶⁸ In this context see for example Nelis, *La «fede di Roma» nella modernità totalitaria fascista* (cf. note 66).

⁶⁹ Umberto Mancuso, Orazio Maggiore, Rome/Turin 1940, 9.

⁷⁰ Renato Macarini Carmignani, *Augusto e la formazione dell'Impero*, Lucca 1940, 3.

⁷¹ Emilio Bodrero, *Mistica fascista – L'ordine nuovo*, in: Emilio Bodrero (ed.), *Studi saggi ed elogi. Pubblicazione celebrativa per il XXV° dell'insegnamento Universitario*, Padova 1941, 185–200, 196.

⁷² Bodrero, *Mistica fascista – L'ordine nuovo* (cf. note 71), 196.

Italian Fascism, Roman Antiquity and the Spectre of Racism

One very peculiar, highly politicized and ideologized vision of classical antiquity is that constructed by Italian fascism, i.e. the fascist ideal of *romanità*, «Romanness». This latter concept could be summarized as the inheritance, the collective memory, of a distinct but at the same time very present Occidental, i.e. Roman, past. *Romanità* was not an entirely new idea, as it had been present in Italian (nationalist) discourse since the *Risorgimento*, but its scale and omnipresence during fascism were unprecedented, while some aspects, such as militarist imperial *grandeur* and the focus on the supremacy of Occidental culture, were also less present in pre-fascist discourse. As such it should be distinguished from the *umanesimo* principle, whose roots go back to the Renaissance. Whereas most aspects of *romanità* have been widely studied, the specific issue of racism has remained largely ignored for decades. Thus it is the aim of this article to make an attempt at filling this gap, by presenting a selected reading of publications in which *romanità*, as a reference to the Roman, Occidental past, acquired a manifestly racist or also anti-Semitic dimension. The article is introduced by a concise overview of current scholarship on fascism, whereby special attention goes to the role of culture in the latter movement and regime, as this latter aspect is at the heart of the debate on *romanità*.

(Italian) fascism – *romanità* – nationalism – identity – imperialism – racism – colonialism.

Der italienische Faschismus, die römische Antike und das Gespenst des Rassismus

Eine sehr eigentümliche, hochgradig politisierte und ideologisierte Vision des klassischen Altertums ist die des italienischen Faschismus, d.h. das faschistische Ideal der *romanità*, des «Römertums». Dieses Konzept könnte man als das Erbe, das kollektive Gedächtnis einer bestimmten, aber gleichzeitig sehr präsenten abendländischen, d. h. römischen Vergangenheit zusammenfassen. Die *romanità* war keine völlig neue Idee, da sie im italienischen (nationalistischen) Diskurs seit dem *Risorgimento* präsent war, aber ihr Ausmaß und ihre Allgegenwärtigkeit während des Faschismus waren beispiellos, während einige Aspekte, wie die militaristische imperiale Größe und die Konzentration auf die Vorherrschaft der abendländischen Kultur, im vorfaschistischen Diskurs weniger präsent waren. Als solches sollte es vom *umanesimo*-Prinzip unterschieden werden, dessen Wurzeln bis in die Renaissance zurückreichen. Während die meisten Aspekte der *romanità* umfassend untersucht worden sind, ist das spezifische Thema des Rassismus jahrzehntelang weitgehend ignoriert worden. Ziel dieses Artikels ist es daher, diese Lücke zu schliessen, indem er eine Auswahl von Publikationen vorstellt, in denen die *romanità* als Verweis auf die römische, abendländische Vergangenheit eine eindeutig rassistische oder auch antisemitische Dimension erhält. Eingeleitet wird der Artikel durch einen knappen Überblick zur aktuellen Faschismusforschung, wobei der Rolle der Kultur in dieser Bewegung und diesem Regime besondere Aufmerksamkeit gewidmet wird, da dieser Aspekt im Zentrum der Debatte um die *romanità* steht.

(Italienischer) Faschismus – *romanità* – Nationalismus – Identität – Imperialismus – Rassismus – Kolonialismus.

Le fascisme italien, l'Antiquité romaine et le spectre du racisme

Une vision très particulière, hautement politisée et idéologisée de l'Antiquité classique est celle construite par le fascisme italien, c'est-à-dire l'idéal fasciste de la *romanità*, la «romanité». Ce dernier concept pourrait être résumé comme l'héritage, la mémoire collective, d'un passé occidental, c'est-à-dire romain, distinct mais en même temps très présent. La *romanité* n'était pas une idée entièrement nouvelle, puisqu'elle était présente dans le discours (nationaliste) italien depuis le *Risorgimento*, mais son ampleur et son omniprésence pendant le fascisme étaient sans précédent, tandis que certains aspects, tels que la grandeur

impériale militariste et l'accent mis sur la suprématie de la culture occidentale, étaient également moins présents dans le discours pré-fasciste. En tant que tel, il doit être distingué du principe *umanesimo*, dont les racines remontent à la Renaissance. Alors que la plupart des aspects de la romanité ont été largement étudiés, la question spécifique du racisme est restée largement ignorée pendant des décennies. L'objectif de cet article est donc de tenter de combler cette lacune en présentant une sélection de publications dans lesquelles la *romanità*, en tant que référence au passé romain et occidental, a acquis une dimension manifestement raciste ou antisémite. L'article est introduit par un aperçu concis de la recherche actuelle sur le fascisme, avec une attention particulière au rôle de la culture dans ce mouvement et ce régime, car ce dernier aspect est au cœur du débat sur la *romanità*.

Fascisme (italien) – *Romanità* – Nationalisme – Identité – Impérialisme – Racisme – Colonialisme.

Il fascismo italiano, l'antichità romana e lo spettro del razzismo

Una visione molto peculiare, altamente politicizzata e ideologizzata dell'antichità classica è quella costruita dal fascismo italiano, ovvero l'ideale fascista della romanità. Quest'ultimo concetto potrebbe essere riassunto come l'eredità, la memoria collettiva, di un passato, distinto ma allo stesso tempo molto presente, occidentale cioè romano. La romanità non fu un'idea del tutto nuova, poiché era presente nel discorso italiano (nazionalista) fin dal Risorgimento, ma la sua portata e la sua onnipresenza durante il fascismo furono senza precedenti, mentre alcuni aspetti, come la grandiosità imperiale militarista e l'enfasi sulla supremazia della cultura occidentale, erano meno presenti nel discorso pre-fascista. In quanto tale va distinto dal principio dell'*umanesimo*, le cui radici risalgono al Rinascimento. Mentre la maggior parte delle caratteristiche della romanità sono state ampiamente studiate, la questione specifica del razzismo è rimasta largamente ignorata per decenni. L'obiettivo di questo articolo è quindi quello di tentare di colmare questa lacuna, presentando una lettura selezionata di pubblicazioni in cui la romanità, come riferimento al passato romano e occidentale, ha acquisito una dimensione manifestamente razzista o antisemita. L'articolo è introdotto da una sintetica rassegna degli studi attuali sul fascismo, con particolare attenzione al ruolo della cultura in quest'ultimo movimento e regime, in quanto quest'ultimo aspetto è al centro del dibattito sulla romanità.

Fascismo (italiano) – Romanità – Nazionalismo – Identità – Imperialismo – Razzismo – Colonialismo.

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