In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest in the origins and nature of Italian fascist culture. One important result is that we now have an enhanced appreciation of the way in which fascist culture was produced as a response to the crisis of modernity that European intellectuals experienced in the two decades prior to the first world war. Yet, though studies of fascist culture generally assume that it had roots in pre-war culture and was not merely a pathological response to the war, they are divided in their understanding of how to characterize those roots.

One view, associated above all with Zeev Sternhell, is that fascism should be regarded as an ‘anti-materialist’ revision of Marxism, as an effort to develop a ‘revolutionary’ politics and culture by fusing nationalist myths with elements of a traditionally leftist political programme. The great theorist of this fusion was Georges Sorel, whose ideas inspired many Italian intellectuals and led to the creation of a ‘national socialism’ in Italy after the war. In his most recent work, Sternhell has come to acknowledge that cultural avant-gardism, especially futurism, also played a role in the fascist synthesis, but he continues to trace the ‘anti-materialism’ or ‘spiritualism’ to the revision of Marxism associated with Benedetto Croce, Giovanni Gentile, Vilfredo Pareto and Sorel at the turn of the century. Fascism, then, is above all a response to the crisis of Marxism as articulated by such thinkers, and it sought to develop itself primarily as a coherent, ideological alternative to Marxism and liberalism, as a ‘third way’. Finally, Sternhell maintains that this third way, though at odds with ‘the rationalism, optimism, and humanism, of the eighteenth century’, was not ‘reactionary’ but was, rather, a ‘revolution of another kind’, one that would ‘change the nature of the relationships between the

individual and the collectivity without destroying the impetus of economic activity’.5

The other view, with which I associate my own work as well as that of Emilio Gentile, George Mosse and Jeffrey Schnapp, is that Italian fascism should be understood as an effort to ‘sacralize politics’, that is, to ‘nationalize the masses’ by means of a new political liturgy and pageantry through which the cultural disorder, nihilism, and anomie of fin-de-siècle culture and liberal politics would be overcome. Here fascist anti-materialism is read far more in relation to Nietzsche than to Marx, and emphasis is placed on the aestheticization of politics and the secular-religious rhetoric and practices within fascism rather than upon its ideology or doctrine. Fascism’s aim, in this view, was not merely to gain popular ‘consent’ but to create a new more spiritual form of civilization, and toward that end it developed aesthetic-political practices whose tremendous variety cannot be explained in terms of anything so utilitarian as consent.6 Moreover, these practices were often profoundly ‘reactionary’ in their pessimistic view of human nature, their rejection of independent thought, and their appeal to tradition; even if they did not reject modernity, they sought to redefine it radically. And, in so doing, the fascists drew upon the cultural avant-gardes of pre-war Italy who anticipated their interest in an anti-bourgeois ‘spiritual revolution’.

Despite their varying emphases, the two views have much in common — the spiritual emphases within fascism, the role of cultural avant-gardism in its origins, the idea that ‘the cultural revolt preceded the political’ one and that fascism sought to develop itself as an alternative political culture.7 Nor are the views incompatible. Perhaps each view simply accentuates a particular aspect of fascism which it then reads as the whole: national syndicalists are the perfect exemplars of the first view, the provincialist, para-military squadristi and Fascist Party (PNF) stalwarts, of the second. Yet I believe the second view is superior for at least three reasons. First, it treats the ‘revolt against materialism’ in a broader way that takes all of pre-war European culture into account rather than focusing narrowly on Marxism. The claim that fascism was a ‘national socialism’ is forced and exaggerated; Mussolini owed almost nothing to socialism after 1914, and by 1908, when Sorel published Reflections on Violence, he was more indebted to Bergson and Nietzsche than to Marx. Secondly, once it is acknowledged that fascism was intensely spiritualistic, there is no reason not to
explore its self-presentation as a secular religion. The claim that fascism had a coherent ideology need not be incompatible with this exploration. Finally, the denial that fascism had reactionary elements makes no sense in the Italian case where such elements played an important part in its intellectual culture. Such a denial also ignores the role that reactionary thinking like that of Joseph De Maistre played, not only for fascism but for the cultural avant-garde tradition of Baudelaire and Flaubert that ultimately underlay the proto-fascist avant-gardes in Italy.

In one sense, however, both views of the origins of fascist culture are too simple. One cannot merely regard fascist culture as emerging within fixed political and intellectual fields. Not only did those intellectuals both in and outside the regime who wished to construct and realize a new fascist form of civilization need to readjust their views continually according to what Mussolini was saying and how the masses were or were not responding to the construction of a fascist culture, but new historical forces also appeared on the horizon which crystallized into positions that profoundly altered the terms of debate. One very important example of this was the ascendance of American power and its consumer culture in the 1920s, a force that entered Italian cultural debate under the rubric of Americanismo.

Prior to 1926 when Americanismo began to be debated in a major way, the fascist quest for a more spiritual culture could be juxtaposed to a variety of images, especially the liberal Italy of bourgeois affarismo and corrupt trasformismo, and the Bolshevik Revolution, grounded in dialectical materialism and atheism and focused on crude material goals. It could also be developed positively in relation to the culture of the trenches and the masculinist camaraderie of squadrismo and the March on Rome. In each of these images, which were central to the period of the early fascist movement, fascism could present itself as a progressive alternative to the status quo. But when the spectre of a trans-Atlantic invasion of Americanism arose, fascist intellectuals were thrust on the defensive, and it brought out their more reactionary associations with the nationalist imagery of Catholicism, the Roman Empire and the Italian ‘paese’. For them, Italy had been brought under attack by an insidious force that threatened the very essence of the Italian way of life (italianità), an attack that gave new meaning to the ‘revolt against materialism’.

I want now to turn to one of the groups of Italian fascist
intellectuals that best illustrates the impact of *americanismo* in Italy — the Tuscan circle around *Il Selvaggio*, a journal edited by the artist Mino Maccari (1898–1989), which included such prominent fascist artist-intellectuals as Ardengo Soffici, Curzio Malaparte, Piero Bargellini, Giovanni Papini, Ottone Rosai, Berto Ricci and Leo Longanesi. In addition to providing a focus for the impact of *americanismo* on fascist culture, the circle of *selvaggi* helps make clear what the project of spiritualizing politics meant for at least one important group of fascist intellectuals. Moreover, *Il Selvaggio* illustrates how the notion of cultural avant-gardism was transformed under the stimulus of the fascist movement, ultimately producing a concept of intellectual life markedly different from the earlier Florentine avant-gardism of *Leonardo, La Voce* and *Lacerba*, in which many of its older members had participated.

The intellectual culture of fascism was actually a loose set of groups dispersed regionally and with important variations in the styles and ideals to which they attempted to fit an emerging notion of ‘fascist civilization’. In this set of groups, *Il Selvaggio* certainly played a very important role. It was widely known among Italian intellectuals, drew close attention from Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, and gave birth to one of the most famous fascist styles — that of *strapaese* or ‘hyper-country’ — which was ‘created to defend with drawn sword the rural and village character of the Italian people, [to be] a bulwark against the invasions of foreign fashions and ideas’. However, it was no more or less typical of fascist culture than rival groups such as the artists of the *Novecento* around Margherita Sarfatti, the literary *novecentisti* around Massimo Bontempelli, or the politically reformist group around Giuseppe Bottai’s *Critica fascista*. My interest here, then, is necessarily more modest than reaching conclusions about the nature of fascist culture generally. Yet only via the deeper exploration of groups like *Il Selvaggio* will such conclusions ultimately become possible.

When *Il Selvaggio* sprang forth in Colle Val d’Elsa near Siena just after the Matteottì Crisis of June 1924, it took its place in a long history of Tuscan avant-garde journals. Its more senior writers, like Soffici (1879–1964), Rosai (1895–1957) and Fernando Agnoletti (1875–1933), had played important roles on *Lacerba*, the Florentine-futurist journal that in its heyday (1913–15) had been the
leading such journal in the whole of Italy. And Soffici, who spent seven of his early years in Paris fraternizing with Picasso, Apollinaire and others in its cultural avant-garde, had also been central to Florence’s Leonardo (1903–7) and La Voce (1908–16). When he became Il Selvaggio’s leading writer in the late 1920s, he had established himself as one of Italy’s most prominent aesthetic theorists and artists.

Yet cultural avant-gardism in Tuscany meant something rather different in 1924 to what it had in 1914. La Voce and Lacerba had been full of excited analysis of Parisian art and French cultural and philosophical ideas. Indeed, leading French intellectuals from Charles Péguy and Romain Rolland to Rémy de Gourmont and Guillaume Apollinaire had contributed to them. These journals were committed to the view that avant-garde culture could blaze the way to a spiritual renewal, and they had promoted the myth of a great war as the means of overturning liberal, bourgeois Italy and replacing it with a new modernist culture of their own design. The realities of the first world war, however, had doused these dreams with an ice-cold alpine shower. When Soffici and his friends returned from the front in 1918, the institutions of the pre-war avant-garde were dead, the sense of political crisis in Italy was so great as to create not simply the hope but the expectation of an impending system change in politics, and the threat of Bolshevism in Italy loomed large. In this atmosphere, the lacerbiani soon subsumed their earlier enthusiasms in the new fascist movement. Fascism, they now hoped, could realize the modernist spiritual revolution through a genuine mass movement that would assume political power. Yet this implied an aesthetic politics based on nationalism rather than the internationalism of their pre-war days, and that in turn suggested that artistic experimentalism should give way to the communal celebration of Italy’s artistic heritage and to a restoration of classical aesthetic values. Soffici, especially, wrote harsh words against those who continued to pursue an avant-gardism of the pre-war sort, ‘tumbling among their “dadas” as we stop to build our own house’.

In aesthetics, then, the lacerbiani renounced their old allegiances in favour of a ‘return to order’, an ‘italianismo artistico’, and a recognition that in negating classical principles they had lost their cultural bearings. Yet, if the content of their aesthetic changed, their sense of the need for spiritual renewal that had driven their pre-war modernism was actually heightened. Rosai, Maccari and
Malaparte were avid participants in the Tuscan *squadrismo* of 1920–2, and all of the other selvaggi-to-be favoured the spirit of *squadrismo* against the normalizing and bureaucratizing tendencies that would become apparent soon after the establishment of the new fascist regime. For them, *squadrista* violence, which had its origins in the first world war in the sense that many of its leaders were ex-officers, was, like the war, the group celebration of the Italian ‘warrior spirit’ and ‘revolutionary soul’, the pathway to a newly vital and spiritually replenished nation. It was also at the heart of what Tuscan avant-gardism had become.

The impulse to launch *Il Selvaggio* came in the wake of the Matteotti murder, when the pro-*squadrista* wing of the Fascist Party (PNF), already concerned by Mussolini’s embrace of the conservative Nationalists (ANI) and his open courting of the Vatican in 1923, feared that the regime would be forced to compromise further, or might even fall. In the maiden issue of 13 July, editor Maccari, who had been active in Tuscan *squadrismo* as well as in the Sienese delegation to the March on Rome, made an impassioned plea for *squadrismo* as ‘the most important and the most alive of the various currents in fascism’. Writing contemptuously of those who regarded *squadrismo* as one of those ‘necessary evils’ that was no longer needed, Maccari appealed to history. Except for the ‘Garibaldean parenthesis’, modern Italy had been corrupted by a tradition of ‘bourgeois beer-belliedness’ and ‘slipper-wearing’. The whole of Italian liberalism — he named Cairoli, Sforza, Nitti, Bonomi and Orlando — was mere ‘surrenderism’ (*rinunciatarismo*), and liberal politics was largely responsible for the ‘softening’ of the Italian spirit. Now it was time to revive the ‘warrior tradition of our race’, which ‘foreigners do not appreciate’; time to restore the virtues of ‘force, virility, and will’.

The one element in the account that may come as a surprise is Maccari’s appeal to the socialist uprising in Ancona of June 1914, commonly known as ‘Red Week’, as the first true break with this liberal decadence. Yet, for him, this event fitted, not into a narrative of the Italian socialist revolution that failed, but into one whose succeeding events were the *fasci rivoluzionari interventisti*, the war against Austria, and the rise of ‘fascism of the squadrist type’, as implicitly distinguished from conservative or normalizing fascism. The implication is that those who would pacify fascism are actually part of an insidious tradition of post-Risorgimento flatulence.
Over the next two years, Maccari and his friends added many
details to this picture of the Italian national condition and made
clear how they intended to see it renewed. Too much of modern
Italian political and cultural life had been shaped by foreign influ-
ences. Thus Cavour's politics were 'made in England'; he operated
'not in the name of a race but from liberal principles'. Such
principles had corrupted the national character, lending prestige
to the commercialism of city life and undercutting traditional ways
of life associated with the small provincial towns and countryside.
As one selvaggio put it:

The province is healthy and the cities are polluted; the provinces produce and
the cities consume; the provinces create and the cities falsify; the provinces have
faith in their ideals and the cities don't know what they believe; the provinces
love sacrifice in order to make people more noble, the cities love money in
order to doll themselves up and enjoy; the one wants men of action and thought,
the other wants buffoons and schemers. 19

Cities also bred bureaucrats and fascist 'reformists', while the
country bred 'tribes' like the selvaggi who cultivated their ruralism
and encouraged others to 'return to the earth'. 20 Such tribes were
exceptional even there, however. The condition of Italy was such
that one could have very little faith in the common man. 21

Yet the issue that most absorbed Il Selvaggio in 1925 was the
much more concrete matter of Roberto Farinacci. The ras of
Cremona and one of the PNF's most implacable squadristi, Farina-
cacci was appointed party secretary in February in what appeared
to be a sign of Mussolini's support for fascism's radical wing in its
struggle with party conservatives and the old conservative ruling
class. Il Selvaggio crowed that its politics were vindicated, that a
mandate had been given to a new wave of squadrismo. 22 But when
eight liberals and masons were killed in Florence in front of
tourists in October, Mussolini abruptly ousted Farinacci and
replaced him with a nondescript party hack, Augusto Turati. The
editorial reaction at Il Selvaggio was ambivalent; they defiantly
reaffirmed their 'estremismo fascista' and their faith in Mussolini,
but conceded that they had been 'abandoned' and that they would
have to devote themselves to new, less directly political goals.
'Misery oppresses us but faith exalts us', wrote Maccari in what
would prove to be the last issue from Colle Val d'Elsa. 23

Moving boldly and quickly, Maccari sought Soffici's help in
transferring the journal to Florence in order to rededicate it as a
forum for art and culture rather than for party politics. Paradoxically, in this new more urban phase, Il Selvaggio would intensify its commitment to rural values as part of a general move toward 'the great constructive and wilful work of the Revolution' and against the 'politics of small change' (politica spicciola). This meant that Il Selvaggio had 'closed its squadrista period and chosen the cultivation of art as the task for its new life' in the Tuscan capital. Maccari vowed to deliver a 'droll journal, Florentine and Sienese, bizarre and sometimes mysterious'. He wanted to help fascism laugh and 'in the most honourable of senses, to amuse Mussolini'. Yet, despite such intentions, what most characterized the Florentine Il Selvaggio was a strident and very fearful critique of the transformations in recent Italian cultural life.

The alarm was sounded by Soffici in April. 'With increasing dismay and disgust', he wrote, 'the inhabitants [of Italian cities] are witnessing the multiplication of testimonies to the most shameless architectural barbarism and debasement of the beauty and harmony of its piazze, streets, and dear and famous places, sacrifices to the triumph of bad taste, vulgar mercantilism, and garishness' (pacchianeria). Why this aesthetic plague should have descended just then would become clear in another article six months later. The culprit was 'the Americanism that is being diffused in Europe, which after having ruined Germany, pushing it to the point of collapse, is now contaminating England, France, and almost every nation on our continent'.

To focus on a personalized enemy, often one with stereotyped attributes suitable for scapegoating, was characteristic not only of Il Selvaggio but of the tradition of Tuscan avant-garde rhetoric that went back to Leonardo. Yet such personalization often gave the enemy a false concreteness, and it is difficult to isolate precisely what the Americanism Soffici began to perceive in 1926 meant to him. In the article just cited, he first associates it with 'the contaminating force of modern plutocracy' that is reducing the European nations to 'prostitutes', a characterization that would seem to identify the enemy with the modern American corporation and perhaps the American government. Yet in the next sentence he writes that 'Americanism is the plague that spreads, vulgarizing the world, rendering it stupid, bestializing it, humiliating and destroying high, luminous, glorious, millenial civilizations' — an image that suggests something more generally cultural as its object. And, indeed, Soffici then goes on to argue for a
global identification of money with the Antichrist and for America as ‘the herald in the process of dissolution whereby the dominion of gold triumphs over every other force of order’. America, it turns out, is simply the current standard-bearer for ‘the Anglo-Saxon nations animated by the pure spirit of Protestantism and democracy’.

Americanism, then, is partly associated by Soffici with the institutions of postwar American economic might and partly with a civilizational principle going back three or four centuries. With the latter association he recalls, and is very likely indebted to, the argument made by Malaparte in 1921 — that Italy’s fate as a modern nation and culture had been shaped by the domination of the ‘northern and western’ European spirit that had grown out of the Reformation and that had everywhere supplanted the ‘southern and eastern’ (Latin, Mediterranean) spirit during the second half of the sixteenth century. According to Malaparte, this new cultural spirit was ‘metaphysical’ rather than ‘physical’ (anchored in nature) and produced a sense of unease that was paralysing to cultural creativity. If contemporary Italy was to bring forward a new kind of modern civilization in which people would regain their sense of spiritual connectedness to the earth, and thus the possibility of cultural creation that would express human power while leaving them at peace with themselves, it would necessarily have to return to the aesthetic principles of the Italian classical tradition.

Unlike Soffici in 1926, Malaparte in 1921 saw a bright, unencumbered future for the advance of a fascist civilization. He saw fascism as a progressive alternative to the status quo. He was not on the defensive. His aim was primarily an aesthetic clarification. But in providing historical depth to justify that aim (one that Soffici and others in the ‘return-to-order’ movement had already articulated), he pointed to a northern European enemy and, in characterizing that enemy, defined the spiritual principle of classical Italy. The Reformation, he argued, had a tremendous impact not only in the fields of religion and politics but also in art and culture. What began to happen about 1550 was the ‘decomposition of the traditional classical forms, a deformation — I would almost say — a pollution of the very old and distinctive plastic sense of the Mediterranean race’. The Italian artist, who had created those classical forms, was
... a realist and practical man *par excellence*, half blood and half earth, a plant from the waist up and an animal from the waist down, a kind of centaur of the three kingdoms of nature, a concrete being who thinks as he acts, rich in physical fantasy, poor in dreams, sometimes human to the point of bestiality, often idealist to the point of madness, whom Spinoza would have called the hero of 'natura naturata'.

But the earth-bound, plastic art he created had been replaced by a 'metaphysical' art created by individuals cut loose from their natural moorings and anxiously in search of some new equilibrium. This northern spirit fostered a kind of titanic madness that tried to overcome its sense of unease by accenting the fantastic, the unexpected and the monstrous. The implication was that the spirit of romanticism and decadence that characterized European culture in the nineteenth century, and even up to the present, had its origins in the era of Luther and the Baroque culture that followed. If a new Italian fascist civilization was to be created, it would have to break free from this northern cultural hegemony and recultivate its own historic values — spiritual, moral and aesthetic.

Soffici incorporates this argument and draws from it the same conclusion, but, in so doing, he necessarily creates a more complex conceptual network. The problem of fascist civilization has now become twofold. Fascism must redefine modernity in relation to classical Italian values once hegemonic in Europe but eclipsed for nearly four centuries by a rival set based in the Protestant north. But it must also withstand the new challenge of Americanism assaulting all of 'old Europe'. Even though this Americanism is understood at least in part as an extension of post-Reformation European culture, and thus as interconnected with the first problem, there are now two relatively distinct challenges to be faced. Culture must be redefined against the spirit of Romanticism and decadentism associated with northern Europe, and it must then be kept free from contamination by the power and attraction of American money and material values.

Let us first consider some aspects of the latter challenge and then turn back to the former. At the most basic level, Americanism is a challenge to Italian national autonomy. Thus America's domination of international finance is connected in the minds of the *selvaggi* with its desire to 'disarm Europe' and, thus, in effect to conquer her. Americanism is also a challenge to Italian cultural autonomy since, unfortunately but undeniably, it is attractive to the Italian masses. 'America descends to the sound of dollars, with
its black idols, the cocktail, jazz, fashion, the imbecility and dazzling glitter of a civilization that is all sea-foam and no land, all machine and no heart', writes Orco Bisorco. 'Am I American enough?', he continues. 'That is the secret question that pushes young people to look fashionable at every moment and occasion of their day.'31 And, because of the pervasiveness of that question, they have grown incapable of defining themselves without regard to what 'foreigners' want them to look like and to be.32

Yet the problem is not confined to youth or to the apolitical and non-fascist. The power of Americanism threatens the ranks of fascism itself. American automobiles, for example, have become status objects for its bureaucratic 'hierarchs', who buy them despite the fact that doing so undermines an important Italian industry.33 Under the influence of Americanism, fascism is succumbing to the 'corruption and ethical disorder of past regimes'. Mussolini remains true to fascist principles, but too many under him are becoming affaristi. There is a need to return to the martial virtues that launched fascism in the first place.34

Americanism also represents a threat to Italian and specifically Tuscan traditions of artisanship. For it brings with it concepts of labour — Taylorism and Fordism — based on a quantitative approach to production that 'standardizes' the product and deadens the spiritual aspects of genuine work.35 Moreover, the concept of standardization becomes connected with all aspects of public life — the notion that Italian cities all need identical arterial roads, that local ordinances should be the same in all cities, that the Italian countryside should have the same laws, codes, and norms as the cities, and so forth.36

At a deeper level, Americanism is connected in the minds of at least some of the selvaggi with the threat of losing not only their cultural but also their racial identity as Italians. This is a complex point. On the one hand, one reads testimonies like the following one from Soffici:

Italy for me is superior to all other nations also for this reason, that it is the melting-pot of various races, from the German to the Arab, from the Illyrian to the Gallic, from the Norman to the Greek, and it takes the best from each one, in this way forming a synthesis that represents the perfection of the European type — I might even say, of the human type.37

The statement is at once a defence against being crudely racist
(even if Eurocentric) and a defence of the legitimate right of Italian culture to have been, and to become once again, hegemonic in Europe. Yet, on the other hand, one finds in Il Selvaggio many associations of Americanism with the alienness of ‘Jews’ and ‘Judaism’. And when one explores these associations, one finds them connected in turn to so many other enemies — from Protestants, Anglo-Saxons and ‘Europeanists’, to homosexuals, decadents, masons and democrats — that it is difficult not to conclude that the selvaggi are operating with a highly restricted sense of who may legitimately be thought of as Italian.38

This insularity is connected too with the other challenge noted above, that of redefining modern culture against the spirit of Romanticism and decadentism associated with northern Europe and in line with classical Italian traditions. In the major statement of his new anti-futurist aesthetics, published in 1928 as Periplo dell’Arte, Soffici argued that the pre-war avant-gardes had been corrupted by influences from non-Latin nations, particularly Germany. ‘So-called Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism presented patent examples of a continually increasing inclination toward that deprecatory and frightening bad taste of the Germans.’ Fin-de-siècle Paris had been ‘invaded by entire legions of foreign painters — Germans, Scandinavians, Swiss, Russians, Poles, Slavs, Armenians, Americans, Japanese, Africans, many of them Jewish — who were ruled by a universalist charlatanism’.39 Six years later, Maccari went even further. The aesthetic modernism of the pre-war avant-gardes and their postwar successors like the Dadaists and Surrealists, in his view, was a ‘Jewish rebellion’ that ‘in a Europe in search of moral and economic arrangements . . . constitutes the principal obstacle, the negative element, the gravest cause of every difficulty and loss’.40

Italy is well known for having produced a number of important studies of so-called decadentismo in the 1920s and, especially, the 1930s.41 Less known is the fact that the concept functioned as the cultural correlate of americanismo in the strapaese aesthetics of Il Selvaggio and Longanesi’s Bolognese L’Italiano.42 In this view, decadents, like the D’Annunzio of the 1890s, the writers for Florence’s Il Marzocco, the futurists, Luigi Pirandello, and the writers for Massimo Bontempelli’s Novecento, all seek to break with the bourgeois cultural order. But they fail to do so because they remain bound up with materialism. Theirs is simply another consumption style within the same individualist and hedonist
order, even if it breaks with the cruder forms of utilitarianism. The only real alternative to the bourgeois order is a community which draws upon the tradition of the nation and, as a nation, is capable of harmonizing the various social strata into a unified whole. And the aesthetic support for such an order can only be one that rejects all forms of ‘Europeanism’ and experimental avant-gardism in favour of an art securely rooted in local traditions, like the painting of Bologna’s Giorgio Morandi and Tuscany’s Ottone Rosai.43

Consider the case of Pirandello. Undeniably a great dramatist, he writes in a style that is too generically philosophical and un-Italian, despite being ‘Italian at heart’.

Pirandello is translatable into every language; but true poetry is never translatable into any foreign language. . . . The statutes of Christian Science and of the YMCA are also translatable into every language, but fascism, and even Bolshevism for those who understand it, are not; and, in general, every genuine product cannot be fitted to foreign ways.44

Similarly, D’Annunzio — the ‘pompous, courtly, rhetorical, priestly’ D’Annunzio of pre-war aestheticism rather than the D’Annunzio of the intervention campaign, the war and Fiume — shares far too much in the ‘abstract, rhetorical, professorial, and demo-masonic mentality’ of the liberal Italy he so despised. For him, and especially for the many dannunziani he spawned, ‘pseudopagan naturalism’ became a surrogate for a life rooted in real nature; ‘rhetoric became life’.45

Even sharper attacks were levelled against Marinetti’s futurism and Bontempelli’s novecentismo, both explicitly treated as the Italian cultural concomitants of americanismo. With its commercial appeal and stylistic linkages with the world of advertising, Marinetti’s futurism is a primary vehicle by which ‘America is emigrating to Italy’. Indeed, Marinetti himself should be seen as ‘the official representation of America in Italy’.46 That, at least, is what he has become. The ‘first futurism’ of the pre-war and war years was ‘an effort to massage a tired and sluggish national body’, and as such it had value. But ‘later futurism’ (futurismo ‘di-poi’) commits all the worst sins of the day — ‘internationalism, mannerism, conventionalism, democracy, philo-Bolshevism’ — and is

. . . absolutely incompatible with fascism which, as everyone knows and sees, is the restoration of secular values like tradition, hierarchical order, discipline —
necessary and indispensable presuppositions for the carrying-out of our revolu-
tion and the attainment of its goals, the foremost of which is a modernity that is
ours, an Italian modernity.47

Similarly, novecentismo, or what Malaparte calls stracittà, is a
movement for those who do not wish to cultivate native cultural
and literary traditions but who prefer to follow the fashions of
such as Philippe Soupault, Ramón Gómez de la Serna, James
Joyce, Ilya Ehrenbourg and André Malraux, as well as by publish-
ing Italian authors in French translation, it cultivates a ‘literary
Europeanism’.48 As such, its effect is to contribute to the ‘standard-
ization of literature’.49 It also furthers the tendency among avant-
garde painters to work in the style of a kind of ‘pictorial Esper-
anto’, that is, an art that pursues abstract universals so exclusively
as to negate the particular ‘subjects, lands, nations, and sentiments’
that alone can render painting vital and authentic.50

In general, then, the vision of a fascist culture that emerged
from the second or Florentine phase of Il Selvaggio was something
like a restored Italian Renaissance with its many independent city-
states, each with disciplined, public-minded citizens living close to
the land, doing work that expressed their artisanship and satisfied
their spiritual needs, and living free of the commercial distractions
that produce the softness of the modern bourgeoisie. These regions
would then be knit together by means of a national consciousness
promoted by an active, vibrant, fascist public life, by the strong
spiritual presence of the Catholic Church, and by artist-intellec-
tuals who would define and redefine the cultural styles associated
with public life, but always from within the nation’s artistic tra-
dition. Ultimately, the attractions of the new Italian civilization
would help to reshape modernity itself away from the Protestant,
democratic, liberal, individualist, romantic, decadent, anomic and
Americanist version that had so far prevailed. It was a vision,
then, at once ‘revolutionary’ in the scope of change sought and
‘reactionary’ in the models, ideals, values and other contents
associated with the goal culture.

There were many uncertainties, vagaries and ambiguities in this
vision. It attacked urban culture indiscriminately and yet was
itself a product of an urban culture. It attacked liberal values yet
persisted itself only because of liberal concepts of toleration and
press freedom inherited from the regime it deplored. It proclaimed
belief in a fascist culture yet lacked faith in actually existing fascists. It pictured artist-intellectuals as having a major role in the new fascist civilization yet complained of the inattention they were receiving in the present one. It claimed to be modern and yet could not explain how the modernity it advocated could avoid the ills associated with cities and commerce and still remain modern. It claimed to be realist and yet recognized the attractions of its Americanist enemy and had no idea of how to combat that attraction. And, most troubling of all, it had little faith that the Italian public would ever be able to live up to its ideals.

Early in 1929, Maccari moved Il Selvaggio back to Siena. A few months later came the world stock market crash, the onset of the Depression, and the resulting demoralization of the West. Meanwhile, Mussolini had signed the Lateran Pacts with the Vatican, an appropriate and necessary step in Il Selvaggio's view, yet one that put the last nail in the coffin of 'radical' fascism. The nightmare of normalization had arrived and with it, the selvaggi began to fear, fascism was losing its attraction for the masses, especially the young. Il Selvaggio would move again — to Turin in 1931 and then to Rome in 1932, where it remained until the end of the Roman regime in 1943 — yet the phase that began in Siena may be thought of as its third and final phase, the years of doubt, extreme defensiveness, and eroding self-confidence.

The new mood was foreshadowed by Maccari in a 'balance sheet' he wrote for the final issue of 1928. Predictably, he looked back upon 'squadrismo [as] the radiant dawn of the fascist season'. He acknowledged some more recent 'woes' but saw 'undeniable nobility, warmth, and awareness characterizing the development of the young Italian art of this period, which will therefore be fascist art'. Overall, the balance sheet on the past five years of Italian life was favourable. The only forces actively arrayed against 'the rural idea' were a 'rotten aestheticism, a gloomy anti-Catholic philosophism, masonism, and so-called “pagan imperialism”'. If Italy is healthy, if it still has elements of vitality in its heart, it will know how to free itself from these cancerous humours and expel them.'

Still, the 'ifs' in this assessment would prove prescient. In its final phase, Il Selvaggio would become embittered and increasingly isolated. On one front the selvaggi fought against the 'rationalist' architecture they associated with Marcello Piacentini and Giuseppe Pagano, fascists also, but far too influenced by American-
On another, they worried intensely about how to make their movement more attractive to youth, whom they perceived as increasingly restless and disillusioned with the regime. They debated a fascist corporatism as a possible solution to this problem but could not agree on how to conceive or implement it. On yet another front they became paranoiac about their aestheticist and modernist rivals. Their Catholicism became deeper and darker. ‘Modern man’, wrote Piero Bargellini, ‘is a Job in reverse: he is full of sin and a dung heap lies inside him; but out of all his ulcers flows the juice of his justification.’ They recoiled in horror at the advance of Hollywood cinema, which they labelled ‘public enemy number one’. And finally, traces of apocalypticism became increasingly evident in their writings. In one such piece, Pellizzi predicted that even as the second world war was not yet concluded in 1944, there would arise from ‘all the most civilized nations of the world, on a scale never before witnessed, the phenomenon of “return to the earth” ’.

Having begun with the belief that its ideals were already realized in squadrismo violence, by the mid-1930s Il Selvaggio had arrived at the despairing conclusion that its ideals could only be realized as the result of some future world conflagration. Between these two points, the selvaggi had moved through three quite different phases. Yet these phases have little to do with changes in core beliefs — their strapaese ideology was continuous even if the word was coined only in 1926 — and a great deal to do with changes in the overall Italian political and intellectual fields. Initially, Il Selvaggio was a ‘radical’ journal of squadrismo; it sought to push fascism in a non-normalizing direction at a time when the regime was young and the vistas of possibility relatively open. But, even if Mussolini had embraced such a position in the best of all fascist worlds, he was too mindful of the ultimate weakness in his own support, and he skilfully used Farinacci both to placate the radicals and, ultimately, to deliver a sacrificial lamb to his wealthier and more conservative backers. This move pushed the selvaggi in a less directly political direction; they had little choice but to accept and even applaud Mussolini’s verdict.

So they turned to the big issues about what a fascist civilization could be. And they became aware of how imperilled it was in the new international context of the 1920s, so different from the first two decades of the century. Then they had faced off primarily against their own fledgling and self-doubting bourgeoisie; now
they saw that fascism was up against a powerful international force, a materialist juggernaut with new industrial, marketing, and cultural techniques that, in toto, were nearly irresistible to modern mass societies, including their own. To this they responded with great indignation and fervent posturing about the efficacy of their own counter-ideals drawn from the rich resources of the Italian national and cultural tradition. And, though thrust on the defensive, for three years in Florence they succeeded in convincing themselves that they were still leading a ‘revolution’ towards a new form of modernity, one that would express the power of Italian Renaissance society transferred to modern terrain rather than of its northern, Protestant challenger. But when economic times turned gloomy and Mussolini’s embrace of conservatism became so obvious as to shatter any and all illusions that there was any ‘revolution’ or ‘new civilization’ arising out of Italy, they retreated into depths of self-doubt. In this context their fascism became a single-mindedly reactionary onslaught against all those new cultural forms associated with the reigning northern and Americanist modernity, despite their increasing recognition that Italy had little or nothing with which to replace it.

Notes


2. Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 5–6. Similarly, Griffin argues that at the core of fascism was an ideology of ‘national rebirth’ or what he calls ‘palingenesis’, one that incorporated populism and that was neither reactionary nor a political religion; see his *The Nature of Fascism*, 26–32; and ‘Modernity under the New Order’, 3–4.

3. Sternhell makes repeated use of the phrase ‘national socialism’, which he appears to take literally as an effort to achieve some sort of socialism by means of a political symbology drawn from nationalism. See *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 11, and *Neither Right nor Left*, 215. Sternhell claims further that fascism, as the practical embodiment of this national socialism, had a ‘body of doctrine no less solid or logically defensible than that of any other political movement’; see *Neither Right nor Left*, x.


13. On the earlier phase of Tuscan avant-gardism, see my *Avant-garde Florence*. For Gramsci’s view of it, see the *Selections from Cultural Writings* (Cambridge, MA 1985), 318–20 and 326–30.


15. On Soffici’s transformation in this period, see my *Avant-garde Florence*, 244–47, and ‘Ardengo Soffici and the Religion of Art’ in Mark Antliff and Matthew Affron (eds), *Fascism and Art in France and Italy* (Princeton, forthcoming).


17. On ‘italianismo artistico’, see Carlo Carrà, ‘Italianismo artistico’, *Valori plastici* (April-May 1919), 1–5. As a Milanese futurist, Carrà was not in the *Lacerba* inner circle, but he did write a good deal for it, became very friendly with Soffici, and went through a similar metamorphosis at war’s end.
18. Maccari, ‘Squadristismo’, Il Selvaggio, 13 July 1924. Three days earlier, Mala-
parte had made a similar plea in the first issue of his new journal, La Conquis-
ta dello Stato. See the discussion in Renzo De Felice, Mussolini il fascista (Turin
20. See Raffaello Portigiani, ‘Ritorniamo alla terra!’ Il Selvaggio, 16 August
1925; Mino Maccari, ‘Selvaggi del fascismo’, Il Selvaggio, 9 November 1924; Curzio
Suckert [Malaparte], ‘Il partito deve controllare la burocrazia’, Il Selvaggio, 8 April
1925.
22. Unsigned editorial, ‘Pel Selvaggio Farinacci Alalà’, Il Selvaggio, 23 February
1925.
23. La Redazione, ‘Non Tacebo!’ Il Selvaggio, 3 February 1926.
26. Pacchiano and pacchianeria were especially favoured words for the selvaggi,
probably because they mediated precisely between the twin evils that the sel-
vaggi perceived themselves as confronting: americanismo and decadentismo.
28. Ibid.
29. Curzio Suckert [Malaparte], ‘Commemorazione del Seicento’, Valori plastici
(1921), 80–7. Malaparte develops the argument at greater length in L’Europa
vivente (1923) and Italia barbara (1925), now reprinted in L’Europa vivente e altre
1927.
1927.
35. L’Abbordatore, ‘La “standardizzazione”, l’originalità e l’anima’, Il Selvaggio,
30 September 1927; Lorenzo Braccaloni, ‘Lavoro al modo italiano’, Il Selvaggio, 15
July 1928.
1928.
38. See, for example, Soffici, ‘Aforismi a buon mercato’, Il Selvaggio, 7 October
1926; the unsigned ‘Spuntature’, Il Selvaggio, 15 May 1927; Soffici, ‘Noterella’, Il
Selvaggio, 31 December 1928; the unsigned ‘Intelligenza degli ebrei’, Il Selvaggio,
15 May 1933; and Mino Maccari, ‘L’Agonia del modernismo’, Il Selvaggio, 20 April
1934. See also the anti-semitic excerpt from Dostoyevsky, ‘Gli ebrei — status in
stato’, reprinted in the issue of 30 November 1927.
39. Soffici, Periplo dell’arte: Richiamo all’ordine (Florence 1928), 15–19, 27–33,
81–3. See also his ‘Semplicismi’, Il Selvaggio, 30 January, 15 February, 15 March,
30 April and 31 May 1927.
41. Some of the best-known are: Francesco Flora, Dal Romanticismo al Futur-
ismo (Milan 1925); Mario Praz, La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura
romantica (Milan and Rome 1930), translated as The Romantic Agony by A. Davidson (Oxford 1933); and Walter Binni, La poetica del decadentismo (Pisa 1936). See also the important passage on decadentismo in Benedetto Croce, ‘Aesthetica in nuce’ (1928), now in Ultimi Saggi (Bari 1948), 27–8, a passage surprisingly akin to the view of decadentismo in Il Selvaggio.

42. As Soffici argued in 1927, at its core Americanism involves an anarchy of values, where everything is up for discussion and nothing holds firm. In politics this implies bourgeois democracy; in aesthetics it implies romantic individualism, the culmination of which is decadentismo. See his ‘Tornare al segno’, Il Selvaggio, 15 January 1927.

43. For a discussion of Morandi and Rosai as the ‘two best painters of our generation’, see Maccari, ‘Rendicono o quasi con un quasi programma’, Il Selvaggio, 31 December 1928. The article is unsigned but there is little doubt about its author.


46. Orco Bisorco, ‘Gazzettino Ufficiale di Strapaese’, Il Selvaggio, 30 March 1928. On the linkages between futurism and advertising that were developing in this period, see Claudia Salaris, Il futurismo e la pubblicità: Dalla pubblicità dell’arte all’arte della pubblicità (Milan 1986).


48. Curzio Malaparte, ‘Strapaese a Stracittà’, Il Selvaggio, 10 November 1927. Curiously, Malaparte failed to mention that a French translation of his own 1921 article on the Seicento (cited in note 27) appeared in the spring 1927 issue of the journal and that he was involved in the origins of the journal in 1926. Because of this participation, Il Selvaggio had initially applauded Bontempelli’s creation of the journal ‘900; see the unsigned ‘La Voce’, Il Selvaggio, 16–30 April 1926. By 7 September, however, it had turned against Bontempelli, depicting in a humorously captioned cartoon how Bontempelli and Malaparte were in fact at odds with one another.


55. See the exchange between Pellizzi and Maccari in the issues of 30 October and 30 December 1931, and 31 March 1932.


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