

Giovanni Gentile and the Idealist content of Italian Fascism

by Rex BAILEY, M.A.

Stagiaire aux communautés européennes.



The Rise of Fascism.

Like that of any political movement, the advent of Mussolini's Fascism in October 1922 was in no sense the spontaneous affair that the sensation of the event appeared to characterize. This becomes clear after even the most cursory examination of the situation in Italy following the first World War. It has continually been stated that Fascism was the inevitable product of the Italian political scenario of the time, in that such a régime in fact constituted the only « solution » to political and economic chaos, which to a significant degree had arisen out of the weakness, division, and ineptitude of the parties in the parliamentary system. This weakness was such that Mussolini imposed himself with almost nonchalant ease. He met with literally no resistance because the opposition had none to offer. Fascism became a mass movement because it seemed to offer a far greater guarantee of both national stability and private property (hence middle-class support) than had its immediate predecessors (1).

At the turn of the century, says Gentile (2) :

Italy seemed tired, sickened by the prosaic, bourgeois, materialistic life of the times, and eager for a return to the ideas, high aspirations, and great moral strength from which she had sprung.

(1) For an exhaustive treatment of the political currents and events leading up to 1922, v. Renzo DE FELICE, *Mussolini il Rivoluzionario, 1883-1920*, and *Mussolini il Fascista 1921-1925*. This work, eventually to constitute four volumes, is by far the best biography of Mussolini.

(2) G. GENTILE, *Origini e Dottrina del Fascismo*. My translations unless otherwise indicated.

Gentile maintains that between 1900 and 1915 there coexisted two currents of thought which by their nature were irreconcilable. That predominating at the turn of the century was related to materialism and positivism. Both conceptions of course embrace individualistic visions, and the state is thus reduced to a role of secondary importance.

About 1905, however, through the endeavours of a few intellectuals, a new national consciousness was created which was dominated by more idealistic overtones. This new spirit, which finally flowered into the Italian Nationalist movement (3), developed gradually and quite soon displaced its predecessor. The writers in question (4) sought a truly national ideal, something in which, on paper at any rate, everyone could fruitfully participate for the eventual good of the nation itself, which thus constituted the highest ideal. Gentile defines this idealism as follows (5) :

It is faith in the necessity of the advent of an ideal reality, a concept of life which must not enclose itself within the limits of fact, but progress and incessantly transform itself, making itself adequate to a superior law which acts upon the spirit with the forces of its own intrinsic worth.

For Gentile, the Risorgimento was a reflection of this ideal, and it was personified in Mazzini. To the latter, life was not a game but a mission, and such an outlook necessitated the sacrifice of personal gain, for the task at hand transcended the individual yet offered him a place as a valued and valuable member of society. Everyone had their own part to play and the parts were each subordinate to the whole. Gentile argues that this « sense of the ideal » prevailed in Italy until the fall from power of the *Destra Storica* or traditional liberal party which had unified Italy under Cavour and governed it since 1861, since its leaders had been the incarnation and continuation of the patriotic movement. With the advent of the Giolittian régime, the individual came to the forefront in the state-individual relationship (6). The result was (7) :

... the internal antithesis of postwar Italy can be seen in the two typically representative personalities of Mazzini and

(3) v. R. MOLINELLI, *Per una storia del Nazionalismo Italiano*, Urbino, 1966.

(4) CORRADINI, FEDERZONI, MARAVIGLIA, SIGHELE, PAPINI, PREZZOLINI *et al.* For collection of relevant writings v. D. FRIGESSI, *La cultura Italiana attraverso le Riviste*, Turin, 1960.

(5) G. GENTILE, *Genesis and Structure of Society* (Eng. translation by H.S. Harris).

(6) v. A.W. SALOMONE, *Italy in the Giolittian Era*.

(7) G. GENTILE, *Origini e Dottrina del Fascismo*.

Giolitti: this antithesis consists of the crisis which should have been resolved by the (first World) War, Italy being freed from the dualism which had wounded and paralysed her, and given a single united spirit and thus the possibility of action and life.

The reaction against materialism and positivism alluded to was the first step towards breaking Giolitti's stranglehold on the nation. The aim of the intellectuals was greatly assisted when the younger generation abandoned the quasi-collaborationist policy of the Socialists and became imbued with romantic and often aggressive patriotism, nationalism, and irredentism. Hence orthodox liberalism, socialism, and Freemasonry became the targets for a concerted attack, and from triumphant offensive were driven back to a position of defense. The outcome was, of course, Fascism, which for Gentile represented the incarnation of idealism.

Gentile's allegiance to Fascism and the attraction of the latter for intellectuals in general.

A point which is easily verifiable and which cannot be stressed too highly is that the situation in which Italy found herself at the end of the first World War was the real turning-point which lay at the root of Gentile's and other intellectuals' adherence to Fascism (8). Gentile and others had hoped that the war would bring about a spiritual revolution in politics and thus in the Italian nation itself. This expectation was not in any way fulfilled, resulting in Gentile's total disillusionment with parliamentary government, and his consequent adherence to Fascism. He always maintained that the latter in fact was the « embodiment of genuine Liberalism », meaning the spirit of Vittorio Veneto which the Liberals had, unforgiveably, allowed to perish. Implicit in this belief was the desire for spontaneous action: it had an air of recklessness and youthful abandon about it. Action, the keyword, did not presuppose any premeditated calculation, but rather was recognized as an end in itself (9).

It was in this light that Gentile considered Italy's participation in the war, although he saw wider issues embraced in the latter, and

(8) This is partly also the case with syndicalists such as the quadrumvir Bianchi: v. BAILEY R., *Italian Revolutionary Syndicalism*, in *Res Publica*, vol. II, 1971.

(9) Mussolini's assertions along these lines were one of his most frequently used appropriations from Gentile: D'Annunzio inspired him with vaguely heroic concepts of the same ilk. This plagiarist gave no acknowledgements to the many whose brains he picked.

indeed innumerable advantages and virtues. War had the effect of uniting man in the fight for a common cause. It required obedience, discipline, and self-sacrifice for the advancement and benefit of the nation. These virtues Gentile wished to see carried over into everyday life. The idea in itself may be unexceptionable and even laudable, yet it presupposes conditions which very rarely if ever obtain in everyday political life. On the battlefield the aim is clear and needs no lengthy elaboration. Antitheses invariably become reconcilable under wartime or other emergency conditions, but this is due only to the immediate fact of « kill or be killed ». In peacetime the issue must be quite another, because where the fundamental task is one of working out a common aim for discussion and a tug-of-war of interests which by an unspoken and virtually unconscious agreement is kept within certain limits, a complete reconciliation is possible. Ideally, of course, every antithesis even of everyday life ought to be capable of reconciliation. Gentile obviously considered that Fascism would provide the binding link in the chain. This one fact explains both his conversion and his unswerving adherence to his new faith, whatever inconsistencies an otherwise intelligent thinker such as he was must have incurred, and with increasing frequency as the bitter end drew nearer, kept faithful by his undoubtedly sincere belief that his dreams would some day be realized.

What attraction did Fascism, which so successfully if unwittingly allured Gentile, have for other intellectuals? It should be noted that the antecedents of this attraction can be clearly discerned in the development of Nationalism (10), whose vision of the ideal state Gentile praises unstintingly (11) :

a state which drew together into one spiritual unity the creative souls of its citizens : — not the drab state of the *raison d'état*, but the state whose very nature was identical with the cultural expression for which these men yearned.

Similarly, Fascism afforded the intellectual the opportunity of identifying himself with the movement, and of establishing a system of values that might be beneficial in uniting the dissident elements in society. It presented him with a new challenge. The liberal bourgeois period with its materialistic orientation (12) had resulted in corruption,

(10) v. MOLINELLI, *op. cit.*

(11) From G. GENTILE, *Genesis and Structure of Society, op. cit.*

(12) Pursuing what Ernst HAAS defines as « incremental-economic » policies as opposed to the highly « dramatic-political » ideas of the Nationalists.

decline, and decadence. Society in general was in need of a moral tonic. The evils of this period, as they were widely seen, had to be erased, and this could only be achieved by the restoration of cultural values and human creativity. These men saw in Fascism and its (borrowed) « national mystique » the prospect of fulfilling these essentially noble aspirations. For many Fascist intellectuals the supposed decadence of the present provided the springboard for their commitment to the Fascist utopia. A society where the spiritual unity replaced both the class struggle and human isolation, where order was reconciled with the irrational mainsprings of creativity, presented a world where ultimate values would triumph. Gentile considered Fascism to incarnate the *Spirito nuovo*, moving towards the *ethical* state. This search for spiritual values lay behind his entire philosophy, and led him to justify the use of violence and even brutality. He recognized violence to be a sort of moral force in its own right, and yet another spur when needed to the ultimate acceptance of the spiritual unity which he took to be the only valid foundation for human society.

Philosophical and theoretical background.

Fascism was very much a patchwork of other people's ideas, supported by pre-existing traditions. The absolute break with the past vaunted by Mussolini in instituting the new calendar of the *era fascista*, 1922 being year 1, was perhaps the greatest of the myths he cultivated. In fact Fascism before coming to power obviously had no need of establishing any kind of doctrine. The ideas were already there in profusion and it was only a matter of getting hold of someone who could co-ordinate them in a suitable manner for presentation and assimilation. An important part of this background was formed by the nineteenth century tendency towards hero-worship, especially in connection with the glories of the Risorgimento. The hero was the type of the « new man » who would come forth and change the world. As Gottfried Ben put it, « history sent a new biological type to the front ». This man was to be imbued with a Nietzschean self-will: the new man whom Fascism placed in the vanguard of its heroic struggle, the new man who was to be the symbol of the new society. It needs to be remembered here that in fact, in this context, the individual was significant only insofar as he formed a constituent part of the whole. Fascist theorists made much talk of considering all members of society as potential equals, which contravenes not only the practice of the régime but many of Mussolini's own statements.

Fascism received another indirect impetus from the ideas of Sorel and Revolutionary thinking in general, inheriting Sorel's own contempt for the existing parliamentary and electoral system. Fascism shares with Revolutionary Syndicalism (13) the longing for what in effect was dictatorship, for the country to be ruled by a determined minority, to be expressed in workers' organizations, and with a well-defined hierarchical structure. These concepts were to become part and parcel of Gentile's credo. Another important influence upon him was that of Hegel. In fact Hegelianism was the basis for his original thinking, and, having been nurtured by his friendship with Croce (abruptly terminated when the latter, after a period of initial errancy, stigmatized Fascism), remained so even when he subscribed to the régime's worst excesses. The tradition of Hegel served two purposes: it brought to Fascism the classical argument against liberal individualism, and it offered a ready-made idealization of the national state. In this context, the most pertinent tenets of Hegelianism are the following: man is a « social » being, and thus whatever rights he may enjoy and whatever acts he may carry out must be accepted by society, and enjoyed or carried out within the limits of its laws. Since man acquires his moral quality in society, and since the state is recognized as being the supreme arbiter and motivating force of all things within society, man's freedom and true self can only be found within these limits. Gentile adopted this *Weltanschauung* in stating (14):

Always the maximum liberty coincides with the maximum force of the state... Every force is a mutual force, for it is always an expression of will, and whatever be the argument — preaching or black-jacking — its efficacy can be none other than its ability finally to receive the inner support of a man and to persuade him to agree to it.

It can be seen therefore that Fascism succeeded in drawing together these two positions; the Hegelian tradition on the one hand, at least insofar as it expounds a nationalist ideology in which the individual is subordinate to the advancement of the nation as a whole, and on the other the ideas of Nietzsche and Sorel, which were drawn upon by the advocates of revolution and violent change in order to legitimize the right of a strong élite of superior minds based on their

(13) v. SANTARELLI E., *Il Socialismo Anarchico in Italia*, and BAILEY R., *op. cit.*

(14) From GENTILE, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, *op. cit.*

ability to lead the nation and to direct the lives of the individuals within it.

Gentile's task.

Gentile came to have many duties to perform within the Fascist state. All his endeavours were imbued with a highly idealistic « Fascist spirit ». His mind appears to have been continually preoccupied with notions of how the state ought to be, and not the realizations of how it actually was which should have been second nature to any serving politician or minister. His ideals were faithfully and individually nurtured, but never came to fruition. His was the task of justifying Fascist actions and developments from a theoretical viewpoint. The fact that Fascist actions were always justified *a posteriori* is put in its proper perspective if one recalls that Fascism came to power more because of the void which it found than because of its apparent intrinsic merits (or even threats of violence, which were more significant). In coming to power no doctrine was necessary. In any case, from its very inception the Fascists boasted of being a movement and not a doctrine. As Gentile says (15) :

It was not an association of believers but a party of action, which needed not definite and detailed programmes, but of an idea which would show a goal and the road by which it could be reached, the latter to be followed with a resolute will unmindful of obstacles, which would throw aside any it met.

Once Fascism began to exercise greater influence and control and generally to consolidate its position, it began to feel the need for a doctrine and for what Gaetano Mosca called the *political formula*, whereby those in power could justify their actions by relating them to the doctrine which had been established. This reasoning clearly constitutes a quite outrageous piece of deception. This « doctrine » had to contain a pot-pourri of thoughts and *bons mots* for almost every conceivable eventuality, for Fascism relied on opportunism for its very survival, and policies and acts nearly always depended on circumstances at any one time. Professor Gentile, basically noble-minded and idealistic, but unwordly and ingenuous to a degree, was allotted the unenviable task of erecting this monument of sham and rhetoric.

(15) From GENTILE, *Origini e Dottrina del Fascismo*, op. cit.

Some of the ideas contained in the doctrine have already been alluded to, but it would now be useful to give a fuller and lengthier catalogue of errors. The « political formula » that was to be laid down was the theory of the « ethical state ». The basic concept of « Fascist life » was deemed to be « spiritualistic ». The Fascist was supposed to cast aside any self-centred thoughts or self-seeking ambitions. Moments of ephemeral pleasure were unimportant. His thoughts and actions were relevant only insofar as they were of value to the state. Cohering with the state is the notion of a superior existence, and the Fascist had to feel himself to be an intrinsic and organic part of the life of the state, for outside the latter « nothing spiritual or human could exist ». Neither individuals nor groups must oppose the state for Fascism revolved around the very ideal of resolving class-conflict. The will of the leader must therefore become the ideals of all. It is for this reason that Gentile considered Fascism « to be the purest kind of democracy provided that people are counted qualitatively and not quantitatively » (16).

Gentile draws a comparison between Nationalist and Fascist theories. The Nationalists tended to oppose the nation to the individual, whereas the ideal of Fascist « philosophy » was that nation and citizen should coincide, for « the nation is not conceived as a transcendent natural entity but as a spiritual reality generated in consciousness ». Hence Gentile's claim that Fascism represented the apogee of democracy. The state was supposed to exist in the spiritual awareness of each and every individual, in his daily effort and devotion. The comparison is all-embracing (17) :

The Fascist state, in contradistinction to the Nationalist state, is an entirely spiritual creation. The Nationalist state was aristocratic, and needed to form itself on the strength conferred by its origin in order to impose itself on the masses. The Fascist state on the contrary is a popular one, and in this sense represents the democratic state *par excellence*.

H.S. Harris (18) tells us that the Liberalism which Gentile opposed so resolutely was the humanitarian creed of the French Revolution : a creed in which the individual has « natural rights » *against* the state

(16) From the article on Fascism in Treccani's *Enciclopedia Italiana*, signed by MUSSOLINI but obviously composed by GENTILE *et al.* Quoted in Mack SMITH, *Italy*.

(17) *Ibid.*

(18) H.S. HARRIS, *The Social Philosophy of S. Gentile*.

or any other social organism. Gentile's view was that the state is the foundation stone on which a person's ethical personality is built. One of the determining factors for Gentile in the state-citizen relationship was the question as to whether the citizen was prepared to sacrifice his life for his country, for a belief in something superior to his own being.

Fascism is idealistic, and proclaims a moral code of sacrifice and warfare, by which the individual must always be prepared even to meet death, for the sake of a reality which is above him (19).

In the light of this and similar statements, it is not surprising that Gentile had felt bitter in the extreme at the extensive neutralism in Italy during the first World War. His view of neutralism was as follows (20) :

[neutralism] seeks a refuge from duty in that it sees no advantage in sacrifice, measures the national fortunes by the yardstick of individual prosperity, and consciously avoids all questions likely to imperil concord and *quieto vivere*.

Fascism had included in its very earliest beginnings a substantial element of violence which was destined [together with the important Nationalist content of the movement (21)] to lead to imperialistic aspirations. Gentile was by no means blind to this fact. That he, a philosopher and a man of intelligence and probably integrity, accepted this, is a measure of the degree of his adherence to his beliefs. Though not meriting the label of a militarist in the strictest sense of the word, he was attracted by the idea of war, and he constantly eulogized Mazzini it as a means whereby the moral duty of man (there are strong echoes of Mazzini in all this) could be brought to the forefront. Sacrifice would demand a supremely virtuous act and the fulfillment of man's own moral personality. The war-minded orientation of Fascist doctrine (22) met with Gentile's full support, for he saw in it the way of keeping this consciousness alive. He called it « the eternal rhythm of human social life, the rhythm of moral development ». This being one of the foremost tenets of his entire philosophy, it was a foregone conclusion that he should give an acquiescent nod at

(19) GENTILE, *loc. cit.*

(20) GENTILE, *Che cos'è il Fascismo*.

(21) v. GAETA F., *Nazionalismo Italiano*, and MOLINELLI, *op. cit.*

(22) In its more bombastic and rowdy manifestations this was derived from MUSSOLINI himself and the *squadrista* elements in Fascism : the intellectual credo which later emerged to justify it had come from Corradini and the Nationalists.

Italy's declaration of war upon Ethiopia. In the necessity for words to be translated into deeds one detects an echo of the Mazzinian battle-cry « *Pensiero ed Azione* ». One might go as far as to say that the war against Ethiopia of 1935-1936 brought about a degree of unity among the Italian people which it had not known since the fateful year 1922. In Gentile's opinion the war marked the completion of the Fascist conquest of Italy. In an address in 1937 to foreign students who had come to Italy for a course in Fascism he propagated his thesis that there was a definite link between the cult of war and the ideal of civilization the world over. On this occasion he stated (23) :

The Fascist feels and affirms that life lies not in inertia but in movement, not in the peace dear to one who is well off and thus content to sit still, but in war, sacred at all times to him who does not carelessly give way to instinct, but feels in his heart the justice that yet remains to be done, and sees the tears that ought to be dried ; and in short conceives of his life as one of militant service to an ideal : — not the ideal of selfish domination over others, but the ideal of a world in which all legitimate aspirations are satisfied.

The degree of Gentile's appreciation of reality is borne out by the fact that he could say this in 1937, when, although the truly lunatic elements were not yet in full control, Fascism had visibly started on the road to decline, and the earlier quasi-socialist and egalitarian elements (partly a reflection of Mussolini's own antecedents, and the importance of the mass-recruited *squadrista* element, as well as of the adherence of many syndicalists, in the early days of the movement) had by now gone completely by the board. Nevertheless, as Mack Smith points out, in the final stage Mussolini did resort to a sort of primitive proletarian consciousness, though (due to an infantile party secretary, Vidussoni) this was mainly confined to trying to abolish sleeping cars and first-class carriages, and trying to prevent Grandi and Ciano playing golf.

Perhaps the two words which recur most frequently in Gentile's writings and speeches are discipline and sacrifice. These are the key-notes, those which rung out as time went on with increasing frequency and monotony. These terms were the embodiment of the « religious » character of Fascism, which to Gentile appeared to be something which transcended the party itself. It was the spirit which gave the

(23) Quoted in HARRIS, *op. cit.*

movement life: Fascism was not something created for the exclusive delectation of party members and hangers-on. Its effects, on the contrary, were intended to be far more far-reaching and pervasive, embracing at its zenith the consciousness of every individual. As a spiritual totalitarian (in the strictest sense of that term) outlook upon life it had consequently to infuse every aspect of human activity. Fascism, ordained Gentile, was a « total conception of life », and thus one could not be a Fascist in politics but a non-fascist at school or in the factory. In such a set-up there was obviously no room for dissent. The citizen's duty was to obey. It was in this light that Gentile saw the violence which characterized the initial development of Fascism and which to a large measure assisted it in coming to power. This to him was but a transitional stage in the genesis of the new movement, which would die a natural death once the latter had matured and consolidated. In order to achieve a « philosophical undertaking of its own liberty » had in the first place to exert its own authority. After all, « lo stato se non è forte, non è stato ». George Sabine remarks (24) that

every value, economic, cultural, or moral, is a national value, and the state overlaps and regulates them all; in this sense the state is « ethical » or totalitarian to the end that it may be strong.

The theory of the Corporative State (25) may principally be regarded as the economic link in this rather flimsy chain. The original concept of the corporative state, in the minds of Rocco and others, was, incongruously as it was to turn out, derived from Marxism, as a method, or rather as an idealist vision for surmounting the class struggle. It was an attempt to control from above the state and all facets of economic organization, thereby suppressing all forms of individualistic materialism and group interest. The state was to act as an arbiter between employer and employee with a view to augmenting national production. In setting up these institutions (the origin of which he of course never admitted), Mussolini announced that capitalism had been overcome (on coming to power he had announced to parliament that the era of its greatness was just about to begin) and that « the corpo-

(24) From SABINE G., *A History of Political Theory*.

(25) This in its more superficial aspects had already gained a preview during D'Annunzio's Regency of Carnaro at Fiume in 1919. The real author of the theory was Alfredo Rocco, and his ideas probably constituted the principal contribution of the Nationalists to Fascism, which technically had swallowed them in the 1923 fusion between the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* and the *Associazione Nazionalista Italiana*.

rations must be noticed directly by the masses as instruments through which they improve their standard of life » (a few years later he complained that Italians were too *simpatici* and « nice » and told Emil Ludwig that Italy was moving towards a period where people would live on a lower standard : a kind of latter-day Sparta). The syndicates must be organized within the framework of the state lest its citizens lapse once again into « degradation » in the search for personal gain. Perhaps this is not so remarkable when one considers the authoritarian, Sorelian bases of Syndicalism, and the developments within the Syndicalist movement after the first World War (26) : many Syndicalists found themselves perfectly at home in the Fascist hierarchy after 1922. To return to the point at hand, instead of the state the process would be inverted. The corporate organization of the state, moreover, was lauded by Gentile because in his usual idealistic way he felt that it emanated a sort of community consciousness which was to be of paramount importance for Fascist survival. In these hopes he got short shrift as will be seen below.

Gentile's Educational Reforms.

No stone had to remain unturned in the creation and completion of the Fascist ideal, as explicitly expressed in the slogan « Tutto per lo stato, niente fuori lo stato, niente contro lo stato ». There was no more obvious path for the propagation of the Fascist ideals than that of education.

Gentile was appointed Minister of Public Education when the Fascists came to power, and he wasted no time in carrying out his proposals for educational reform. After the foregoing remarks, it may seem paradoxical how much liberalism and plain common-sense one can discern in these reforms : again his actions were in line with what he thought the ideal outcome of Fascism should be, which, to put it crudely, as is well known had precious little to do with what in fact happened. The teaching of the Christian religion according to the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church became once more, after the anti-clericalism of the Liberals, a central feature of primary education. He considered it to be an important and necessary stage towards the appreciation of philosophy, which was taught at the secondary level and above. Gentile himself was undoubtedly concerned first and foremost in this field with propagating a higher level of

(26) v. SANTARELLI, *op. cit.*

genuine culture and learning. Other sensible measures adopted in his 1923 reform were the stipulation that examinations should concentrate on testing powers of expression, analytical thought, and judgement, and not merely on the parrot-like repetition of facts learnt by rote: this latter trait can be to some extent discerned in Italian school practice even today. Mack Smith comments as follows on the reforms (27) :

The education act of 1923 sponsored by Gentile was passed before Mussolini knew what he wanted. It had allowed considerable freedom to private schools and universities. It stressed the value of humanist education and promoted the teaching of philosophy at all levels. (...) Gentile's philosophical method became vacuous and rhetorical in the hands of lesser men, and it could be argued that Italy's chief need was not for more philosophy but for that very scientific and technological education which Gentile thought to be of minor importance. Nevertheless, Gentile's reform contained few of the usual Fascist banalities, and it helped to preserve some independence of mind in education during the dark days to come.

His reorganization of the secondary school was a rung in the climb towards organic unity, which received so much emphasis and was such a fundamental component of his philosophy of education. For each kind of pupil there was to be a different kind of school, and within each school was a strictly regulated curriculum. He hoped in the long run to impart this « new spirit » to the pupils through the media of education.

The autonomy of culture, however, should remain in the universities more than in any other institution. He insisted that Fascist doctrine should not be imposed on the universities (again this was one of the major fields where his work was totally undone, and his hopes cruelly deluded). No coercion was to be necessary in order that all the universities should take on a Fascist character, simply because all members would come voluntarily to accept the creed. It is to Gentile's credit that he announced (28) :

In the field of academic studies, science and critical thought, there can be no life without liberty and autonomy.

(27) Mack SMITH, *op. cit.*, p. 423.

(28) Quoted in HARRIS, *op. cit.*

The same passionately-held principle led him to acknowledge the value of an independent non-Fascist press alongside the official party newspapers.

As has been stated above, Gentile hoped that with the passing of time education would, as it were, automatically take on an entirely Fascist character, without the necessity for any form of coercion. As soon as he saw the power of the régime consolidated after about 1925, however, Mussolini, aided and abetted in particular by the rabble of half-educated plebeians and flibusters who by now formed such an important part of the party machine — Starace and Farinacci were probably the worst — began to have other ideas. Unfortunately, Gentile had neither the worldliness nor the cynicism to grasp the nature of the threats which faced him and his whole system. He had maintained that Fascism was not really anti-intellectual, anti-liberal, nor even anti-democratic, but instead represented a higher form of culture, symbolized by a more profoundly genuine liberalism and a more real *de facto* democracy. He had been blinded by his own ideals and faith. His belief in Fascism was such that he was hardly ever aware of its faults, « except as things to be justified or explained away ».

Incredibly, this was the attitude which he adopted when confronted with Mussolini's changes in his own educational reforms, which in fact amounted to a direct negation and reversal of what he had laid down. Early in 1928 it would appear that Mussolini (29) came to the conclusion that it was necessary to use the school system as a means whereby he might « transform the national consciousness ». From his point of view, there was no time to lose. Gentile countered this proposal with his own contention (30) that such a process could only be accomplished with success over a long period. As he had stated previously (31) :

Fascism is a new conception, or if you will, a new programme of life, which, like every programme, can only be realized gradually, as the intellectual, and above all the moral conditions though which its realization is possible, come into existence. And whoever has faith in its programme must have patience, and wait serenely and securely for the ripening of minds. The school will become ever more Fascist, as the Italian people become more and more Fascist, destroying the

(29) v. DE FELICE, *op. cit.*, *Mussolini il Fascista*, v. II (1925-1929), 1-III.

(30) *Q.v. supra*, HARRIS, *loc. cit.*

(31) GENTILE, *Che cos'è il Fascismo*, *op. cit.*

old man within itself and educating the new one. All impatience is sterile and sets us further from our goal.

In a famous speech in the senate in 1930, Gentile did strike back at the perversion and degeneration of his reforms by ministers who had succeeded him (and who were often semi-illiterate). Knowing however that Mussolini himself had master-minded subsequent developments, he accepted this meekly out of sheer faith in his leader (Gentile's was unfortunately not a strong personality): nevertheless he must have suffered the bitterest of delusions at realizing the way in which he and his ideas had been treated. As far as Mussolini was concerned, the time was ripe for the repudiation of intellectuals, and this, as George Mosse has pointed out (32), « was a conscious tactic of the Fascists finally to consolidate power ». Intellectuals had served their initial purpose and were now to be discarded.

This fact must have been brought home to Gentile once more by Mussolini's signing of the Lateran Pacts in 1929. It perhaps even signified for him the end of Fascist idealism. Fascism's existence from now on was to be almost entirely a question of opportunism, for the conclusion of the Lateran agreements cannot be seen as other than an opportunistic step on the part of the Duce. It was a calculated action taken to reduce the number and effectiveness of his enemies. It was a vote-catching, party-consolidating measure. One can reasonably assume, however, that the final nail was put in the coffin in 1936 when what was one of the principal, and certainly one of the most positive aspects of the 1923 reforms was shelved: this was the principle of the autonomy of the universities, which was set aside, institutions of higher learning coming under direct government control. Gentile's idealist world had been cynically destroyed around his feet, for he had always maintained most vehemently that, in the university sphere at any rate, liberty was very much more important than the maintenance of a discipline.

A Critique of Gentile's Philosophy.

This falls conveniently into two aspects: an estimation of how much of what Gentile envisaged in ideal terms became actual in the real world, and an examination of whether in fact this idealism had any hope of being transmuted into reality, given its premises,

(32) George L. MOSSE, *Fascism and the Intellectuals*, in *The Nature of Fascism*.

the circumstances to which it was to be applied, and the plethora of other relevant factors and constraints acting upon such a system. The point of departure must be the cardinal points of Gentile's ideology which have already been enumerated.

Against his assertion that Fascism was the highest form of democracy, Gentile failed to indicate (although the point was brought home to him subsequently) that this « democracy » can only be enjoyed by a convinced Fascist. (One is tempted at this point to succumb to cynicism in remarking that people were convinced Fascists only because, like Starace, they were idiots, or else, like Gentile, hopelessly unwordly idealists: men like Dino Grandi and Ciano probably never believed in much of the more esoteric Fascist hocus-pocus, but simply stayed on the bandwagon because it was a comfortable ride. They got off smartly in 1943 when they realized the enormity of the folly.) But in any case, whatever insistence Gentile might make as to the necessity for gradual progress and restraint, the process envisaged was nevertheless one whereby, in plain terms, one was coerced (sometimes with castor-oil) into submission. Whatever misuses of the term one cares to countenance, this cannot be termed democracy.

The Hobbesian principle that in any community the citizen must be bound by certain universally applied laws and restrictions of his « liberty », in order that the *de facto* liberty of the collectivity shall be the greater, is a type of discipline which has never been questioned. Fascist civic discipline, however, by coercion in most cases, produced a front of apparent solidarity which, very often, concealed a total lack of spiritual unity in the community. Many accepted Fascist methods because they had no choice: resistance, if it did not bring exile or uncompromisingly enforced silence, at least resulted in discomfiture for a man and — often a very useful pressure point — his family.

One has the unfailing impression that Gentile himself was possessed of singularly little *sensus politicus*. What is likely is that, upon seeing his dreams evaporate, he chose to close his eyes to the ugly truth, or else contorted his own vision of things (by consistently contradictory and ever more nebulous pronouncements) to fit the *status quo*. He justified and explained the violent methods of Fascism by recalling Vico and stating that these characteristics were those of a transitional stage in the formation of a new movement. He added innocently that they would disappear of their own accord as the situation matured and as the Fascist leaders themselves became more moderate and sagacious with time. Perhaps the most tragic thing about Gentile, and in a curious way one which demonstrates the pathetic side of

his character is that right up to his assassination by the partisans in 1943 he never ceased declaring that « Mussolini is always right », as if this had not been amply disproved by the whole axis story, which was really the nemesis of Fascism. A just and accurate verdict on Gentile's political career was given by Dr. Minio Paluello when he stated

Gentile and some of his followers, such as Codrignola, who entered the party, thought that they were giving Fascism an intellectual soul, which would lead the emotions along the right path. This marriage between philosophy and power was not very successful in the long run.

That Gentile's conviction was sincere and not opportunistic cannot be doubted. He had undergone an irrevocable conversion because he saw in Fascism the ideal way of solving Italy's problems. This is not so very remarkable when one considers that an intellectual of such international renown and unquestioned integrity as Benedetto Croce had this to say in January 1924, by way of reluctantly condoning the violence used to obtain a Fascist majority at the elections just passed (33) :

The heart of Fascism is love of Italy, the safety of the state, and the true conviction that the state without authority is no state at all. (...) Fascism is overcoming the traditional indifference of Italians to politics... and I value so highly the cure which Italy is undergoing that I rather hope the patient will not get up too soon from his bed and risk some grave relapse.

Croce condemned the régime in 1925 as an « onagocracy », or government by wild asses, but this anathema would have been rather more valuable if used in 1922 !

If only Gentile had been more conversant with human frailties, he would probably never have become a Fascist at all, but rallied to the opposition by the side of his erstwhile friend Croce. Ugo Spirito remarks :

When it is truly understood, idealism makes us aware that it has not given us a knowledge of the world, but has set it before us *as it ought to be*. And to say that the world is

(33) Quoted in translation by Mack SMITH, *op. cit.*, p. 383.

what it ought to be is in its turn an affirmation that is never a result, conquest, but only an ideal.

Gentile's strong feelings were commensurate with his high hopes.

It was one of Gentile's greatest misfortunes that, by the nature of the régime, Fascists had incessantly to change or reverse their policies in order to meet the exigencies of the moment. One reform continually cancelled out a previous one, and, what was worse, these *volte-face* were represented as characteristic of the *stile fascista* (as indeed they were!) and an indication of its greatness, which only a great mind such as Mussolini's was supposed to be able to fathom. It has been pointed out that Gentile believed that education, above all things, should continue to enjoy freedom of expression. Fascism must not impose its authoritarianism on this sector of life, which should absorb the spirit of the former gradually and voluntarily and not under coercion. Gentile had early on issued a warning in this connection :

... if we do not take care, discipline, instead of being, as it ought to be, a free adherence to an authority capable of interpreting its own inward needs, may be converted into external formal obedience, a lie and a source of corruption, the fount of that vile hypocrisy which is the ruin of the character.

As if this were not precisely what happened within ten years of the Fascists coming to power, if not sooner! This was one tenet of his philosophy which was always of paramount importance to him, and he endorses this in a major work as follow (34) :

... to be a man is to be conscious of oneself. Humanity is self-consciousness, and human character derives from the successful development of self-awareness. The stronger a man's self-awareness is, the bolder his character will be.

Mussolini was to have different ideas, and his totalitarian system denied any expression of individuality. One can in fact probably advance no logical justification for the suppression of individuality, but, characteristically, in Mussolini's kind of régime, no step could be more logical. Force had got him to his position, and force was, in effect, now keeping him there, allied to the fear that, if he allowed others to think or speak, his position would not be secure for very long. « By violence or intolerance one communicates only one's own fear, because

(34) GENTILE, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, *op. cit.*

that is all one seeks to create in the other » (35). Man must surely have the right to speak freely, for, moral judgements apart, this is the only manner in which faults are to be discerned and corrected, and progress made within society. Fascism ran directly contrary to nature in attempting to create a static society, where the mind has only one idea and is never allowed the slightest deviation from it. Mussolini himself had publicly declared (36) :

An Italy in which 36 millions of citizens should all think in the same way, as though their brains were all cast in the same mould, would be a madhouse or rather a kingdom of utter boredom and imbecility.

This was of course said before he came to power. It is a commonplace (after the bitter experience of this century) that if one man is permitted to subject all individuals with impunity to his own caprices, without having to justify his actions, then the time will come when he will abuse his power, as of course Mussolini did. Mussolini was not required to explain himself, because he was always right, and Gentile accepted this mum. The most powerful stimulus to self-questioning and self-correction was lost because no criticism was allowed. Was it possible to maintain that one was concerned with the vital interests of the nation when one would not lend it an ear? Mazzini had recognized some of these problems, and he saw that an opposition party was absolutely necessary, and, secondly, that education must retain its autonomous nature for the good of society. Mazzini says that pupils, at the conclusion of their education, should be dismissed with the following words (37) :

To you, destined to live under a common compact with us, we have taught the fundamental bases of this compact, the principles in which your nation believes today. But remember that the first of these principles is progress. Remember that your mission as a man and as a citizen is to improve the mind and heart of your brothers wherever you can. Go, examine, compare, and if you discover a truth superior to what we believe we possess, publish it boldly and you will have the blessing of your country.

It is matter of some regret that Gentile only partially accepted the ideas of Mazzini, although the latter in fact suffered from as much

(35) *Ibid.*

(36) MÜSSOLINI, *Opera Omnia*, edit. Susmel, Florence, 1951-1963, v. II.

(37) MAZZINI, *Dei Doveri dell'uomo*.

lack of pragmatism as he himself : Mazzini would have rebelled very early on and not waited to see the dismantling of the entire structure of his thinking. Because Gentile adhered to Fascism to the very end, he had to justify many things which which he cannot have agreed, and which must have left a bitter taste indeed in being swallowed. His fault was glaring lack of that very self-awareness to which he exhorted his countrymen (38). He also seems to have singularly little self-respect.

Gentile and others played some part in drawing up the plan of the Corporate State which was Rocco's legacy to Fascism, and for which he was principally responsible, to what extent is clarified by Gaeta (39) :

In reality the Fascist state was « Gentilian » only on paper : Gentile was a decoration which Fascism allowed itself because it felt the need for the allegiance of an ideologist of world renown : the real creator of the totalitarian state was Rocco.

According to Mussolini, this type of organization would bring about a better standard of living for all (40) and ensure a fairer distribution of means. In fact this set out to oppose materialism but ended as yet another « fictitious » structure which created nothing except a vast, elephantine, and quite useless bureaucracy which was a haven of graft and corruption and provided « jobs for the boys ». George Sabine tells us that the normal legacy of a Fascist state is to perpetuate an economy which always necessitates diminishing consumption on the part of the great majority of the population (41). Internally, those who possess the wealth keep a tight rein on the workers and on progress at the latter's expense. Externally, they impose their power on weaker countries so that they may set up a system of economic dependence. This is a further measure whereby the upper classes (or those who manage to get into them) seek to keep control and increase their wealth.

Thus promises for the economic emancipation of the masses were illusory. The outsized economic gains which the Fascists tried to reach brought them into wars, the burden of which, as always, was always borne by those least able to do so. There was no guarantee that any reward should be distributed to the needy (who usually do most

(38) Q.v. *supra*, p. 22.

(39) GAETA, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

(40) Cf MUSSOLINI's remarks to Emil LUDWIG,

(41) SABINE, *loc. cit.*

of the fighting) : it would be more realistic to expect that wealthy industrialists should reap the benefits, because, unless the latter were kept content, the whole system would probably have collapsed. In these circumstances, says Sabine (42) :

it is hard to see in the greatness of a Fascist nation more than the ideal that gilds a sordid reality. It is the emotional substitute for a tangible good that honest fanaticism or shrewd self-interest offers to simple-minded idealism.

It will have become apparent from this short survey that for Gentile there was no synthesis between the real and the ideal worlds : he had created his own brand of Fascism which turned out not to be Mussolini's. Gentile himself remained an occasional office-holder after his fall from grace following the signing of the Lateran Pacts, and deluded himself that he was able from these (usually purely ceremonial or representative) positions to put his ideas into practice. In fact he was a puppet who had been needed by Mussolini at the outset to provide moral justification for the assumption of power, which then opened the road to unshackled authority. Gentile's philosophy served as a kind of intellectual aid to what was happening, and also as an emotional agency for strengthening the will of the people. Once this had been achieved (certainly before 1930), Mussolini felt himself firmly in the saddle. That the régime existed for so long afterwards can be attributed largely to his brand of leadership and to the fact that his government was made up at all levels of mediocrities who kept the machine going as long as they could draw some advantage from it. Mussolini of course — a catalogue of his qualities would be out of place here — was a confidence-trickster of the first order, and an excellent publicist. He opportunistically used the means of propaganda to fan up waves of enthusiasm and fanaticism and thereby blind the people to the reality of their situation. Propaganda can be a valuable aid, but when shielded by dictatorial methods from outside criticism, then « the new God can make the average man always feel sacrificial ». Mussolini had said that a poor country could not afford freedom, and so he took it away : could a poor country afford the imperialistic foreign policy he envisaged and enacted ?

Gentile himself can be said to have been doomed to failure from the outset. It was tragic for him that he failed to match his ideals against the situation which was developing in front of him : if he

(42) *Ibid.*

saw any discrepancy he seemed reluctant to give voice to it even in the early days when his opinion might have been heard. In this way this intelligent, sincere, and humanitarian figure might have acquitted himself with honour and, as with Croce, caused the memory of a momentary error to be entirely erased. For all the blind obedience he later gave Mussolini's preposterous posturing and demagogy, Gentile cannot be called a criminal or censured for anything more than intellectual myopia and weakness of character. He had become by 1935 an instrument (a very secondary one at that: Mussolini kept **him** on probably because of the fact that he was too well known to be openly dispensed with) of Mussolini's régime, a far cry from the idealist Fascist state he had imagined. His attempts to put this into practice had culminated in ambiguity, disappointment, and finally tragedy. He was squeezed dry like a lemon and the peel thrown away.

Bibliography.

GENTILE Giovanni, *Che cos'è il Fascismo.*

GENTILE Giovanni, *Origini e Dottrina del Fascismo.*

GENTILE Giovanni, *Genesis and Structure of Society* (translated by H.S. Harris).

FINER H., *Mussolini's Italy.*

HARRIS H.S., *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile.*

SMITH D. Mack, *Italy: A Modern History.*

SABINE George, *A History of Political Theory.*

