

THE FASCIST CULTURE AND ITS PROTAGONISTS

ALESSANDRA TARQUINI

Beginning October 28, 1922, when twenty-five thousand people took to the streets in Rome in the name of Italy's national fascist party, and continuing all the way to July 29, 1943, when Vittorio Emanuele III had Benito Mussolini arrested, the fascists claimed that Italian existence could only make sense within the proposals and activities of their party and the government. [ILL.] For twenty-two years, therefore, they celebrated the primary position politics took over other



Mussolini addressing a speech, surrounded by a crowd of fascists, 1920

manifestations of modern life, believing that culture was nothing if not a tool for creating a new civilization.¹ This manner of interpreting the relationship between culture and politics, entirely to the second element's benefit, may at first glance seem like a negation in terms of the first; in truth, it was an expression of the totalitarian character of fascism, in other words of a totalitarian regime and single party that exercised a monopoly on violence, rendered politics sacred and extended its control over all social areas of the country in order to bend them to its aims.

GIOVANNI GENTILE AND SCHOOL REFORMS

From 1922 to 1927 the main exponent of Italian culture was Giovanni Gentile [ILL.], who could count on support from Mussolini and many other authoritative exponents of the regime, pleased to have a person of his stature among their rank and file. During that period, the philosopher wielded a level of power that no other Italian intellectual would have, and in 1923 accepted official party positions: Minister of Education in Mussolini's first government; President of the

¹ See "Contributo per una nuova cultura," in *Il Saggiatore*, year IV, nos. 6-7-8 (August-October 1933), pp. 243-381. For a synthetic overview on fascist culture see Alessandra Tarquini, *Storia della cultura fascista* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2016) where an extended bibliography of the studies published starting in 1954 is provided.



The first meeting of the fascist cabinet, Rome, October 1922. Far left, Giovanni Gentile

National Fascist Institute of Culture; Vice-president of the Superior Council of Public Education; Scientific Director of the Italian Encyclopedia; and President of the Commission of Fifteen. From October 1922 to June 1924, he wrote reforms that changed public education. In elementary schools, the most important development was the introduction of Catholic religion. The philosopher believed that, despite its numerous limits, "confessional" school would be able to prepare the children's souls to welcome absolute values. Gentile thought that religion could play the role of *inferior philosophy* and prepare children to study philosophy later. Convinced that school reform was part of a much broader project to build the State, he felt that Catholic religion, insofar as it was the religion of their fathers and part of the Italian tradition, would help train a national conscience.

Under the Gentile reforms, only a degree from a classical high school made it possible for students to enroll in all university programs. This was the school that was supposed to train the managerial class; the most prestigious and selective institution. In reality, following the 1923 reforms, the workload students had to face increased considerably: both enrollment in a top-ranked middle school and graduation to a secondary school required an admissions exam which, like the final exams given for high school graduation, were designed as government tests, and obligatory not only for students in private schools, but for those in public schools as well. The decision to include the state exam wasn't born of a desire to facilitate students' experience in private schools.

In Gentile's mind, the exam was born of a desire to exercise control over the school and make it possible for private citizens to organize their own institutions to absorb a school-going population that couldn't make it into public schools. In principle there were supposed to be few schools, but all of high quality: few public schools, while the rest would all be run as private institutions.

Gentile left the Ministry of Education in 1924 following the Matteotti crisis, which drove numerous conservatives away from fascism. In 1925 he participated in the Bologna convention held in April of that year and organized by the PNF to demonstrate fascism's ability to promote culture and debate the cultural foundations of the fascist movement. The initiative was supported by roughly two-hundred and fifty intellectuals, among the most important Italian artists and thinkers of that day, like Luigi Pirandello, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Ernesto Codignola, Gioacchino Volpe and Ardengo Soffici. In order to share the spirit that inspired the intellectuals, as well as to coordinate the various different cultural initiatives, a volume titled *Manifesto degli intellettuali fascisti agli intellettuali di tutte le nazioni* (Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals for the Intellectuals of All Nations) was published after the convention was finished, and the decision was made to establish a national fascist institute of culture. Both these tasks were entrusted to Gentile, who wrote the text for the manifesto himself and assumed presidency of the institute. The text contained nothing new compared to what the philosopher had been saying in the months leading up to the convention,



Mussolini during his visit at the Enciclopedia Italiana premises, Rome, January 1, 1931

basically reiterating Gentile's personal concept of fascism which, in his opinion, had both a religious and intransigent character that was born of the spirit of trench warfare and expressed through teamwork.

From that point forward he became the Italian intellectual who held the highest number of cultural institutional positions: director of the Enciclopedia Italiana institute [ILL.]; regional commissioner of the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa higher learning institution; president of the Istituto italiano di Studi Germanici; president of the Comitato nazionale per la storia del Risorgimento; president of the Istituto italiano per il Medio e l'Estremo Oriente; president of the Istituto mazziniano; commissioner of the Istituto Storico italiano per l'Età moderna e contemporanea; and president of the Centro nazionale di studi manzoniani and of the Domus Galilaiana. From 1927 to 1929 the philosopher publicly criticized discussions held by the catholic Church and the Italian government that would lead to the signing of the Lateran Pacts in February 1929. Nevertheless, and despite his frequent polemics with several exponents of the fascist party, during the 1930s Gentile did not elaborate a single line of thought that criticized the regime. On the contrary: in 1932 he wrote, together with Benito Mussolini, the entry for "Fascismo" in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* encyclopedia, a text that proved a true, genuine ideological manifesto.

FROM STATEHOOD TO MUSSOLINI: AN IDEOLOGY OF MYTHS

Right from the start, fascism presented itself as a movement that would recast the state's authority, undermined by the country's liberal managerial class. "Everything in the government, nothing outside the government, nothing against the government,"² stated Mussolini in 1925, synthesizing the central theme of fascist ideology, developed over subsequent years by Italy's top intellectuals: philosophers, lawmakers and historians, all ready and willing to collaborate with the new regime. Within this new political reality, the masses would have to be organized hierarchically. All components of society, economy and culture would have been deprived of autonomy. All institutions, new and those inherited from liberal Italy, would have to become articulations of fascism, subordinated to the realization of fascism's general goals, in other words the infinite expansion of the movement's power. By denying the existence of individual rights and the rights

of social groups that might limit the state's power, fascists believed they could found a new civilization, as emerges from the entry "The Doctrine of fascism," published in 1932 in the XIV volume of the *Enciclopedia Italiana*.

The text was built in two parts: the first was written by Gentile and titled "Fundamental ideas," while the second was put together by Mussolini and titled "Political and social doctrine." In the first part, the philosopher maintained that:

"...the stronghold of the fascist doctrine is its conception of the state; of its essence, its responsibilities, its goals. For fascism, the State is an absolute, before which individual and groups are relative. Individuals and groups can be considered only insofar as they are part of the State."³

This state would know no boundaries. It would express its power without limiting itself to simple functions like maintaining law and order, as happened in other, liberal regimes. A presence capable of reaching the hearts of men. For Gentile, politics represented a mission, a constant commitment of existence, a spiritual communion that would transform knowledge and establish a new State, giving all Italians a sense of their own identities. As he stated, it was the fulcrum of a concept of absolute, religious politics:

"Fascism is a religious concept, in which man is viewed in his immanent relationship with a superior law, with an objective Will that transcends any given individual and elevates him to awake and be an aware member of a spiritual society. Those who, within the religious politics of the fascist regime, stop to consider nothing more than mere opportunity, have failed to understand that fascism, in addition to being a system of government, is also, first and foremost, a system of thought."⁴

While the myth of State constituted the primary engine of fascist ideology, that of Mussolini was unquestionably more important, precisely because the man was a living myth.⁵ Unconditioned apex of political power, the undisputed dominator of the complex organizational machine set up by the regime and the fascist party, the head of Italian government was everywhere. Spread throughout Italian society thanks to a monopoly on the media, the capillary propaganda apparatus and his constant commitment to the education of younger generations, from 1922 to 1943 the myth of Mussolini held sway among the masses, who attributed extraordinary qualities to their chief-of-state, from limitless wisdom to immense goodness, absolute genius and remarkable physical prowess, recognizing in him the protagonist of an epochal mission to transform Italy and the world. [ILL.] The Mussolini myth was reinforced immediately after the march on Rome, when the new prime minister toured the cities and towns around Italy in an attempt to establish direct contact with the masses, demonstrating an entirely different style than his predecessors. At the time, most Italians were fascinated by this young head of state, active in first person in the spread of his own legend: a self-made man who had emerged thanks to the strength of his will, and for that very reason was celebrated and supported by the masses. As Ferruccio Parri has noted, from the very beginning common people placed "the head of state on a pedestal of unconscious faith, of ingenuous, almost physical admiration."⁶ For the bourgeoisie, Mussolini was a savior who had rescued them from Bolshevism and anarchy.

For the proletarian classes he was a son of the people who had become head of state without ever concealing — in fact celebrating — his humble origins. With these premises, and within a culture that was powerfully conditioned by religious sentiment, the myth of Mussolini incorporated several different "elements of popular Christian tradition," according to which the head of state became the object of devoted, superstitious worship, widely favored by the propaganda. Actually, during the regime's years in power, writing to Mussolini to send requests or complaints, voice support or mail in anonymous denunciations became a popular practice.⁷ "I'm a young Italian girl," wrote the daughter of a family to Mussolini in 1936, "enrolled in the Party since my first years in school, in other words since 1926, where I learned to admire Il Duce the same way one might admire God."⁸ On March 29, 1938 a little boy recorded in his diary, "This morning our teacher handed out passes for the Balilla and Piccole Italiane clubs. Each pass was printed with the pledge of faith we've learned right from our first days at school, and we try hard to be Il Duce's soldiers and serve the Fascist Revolution with all our



[Mussolini greeting a group of Piccole Italiane, Bologna, October 30, 1936

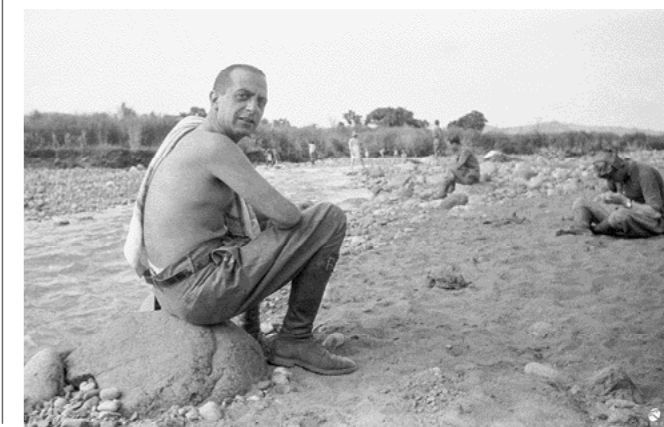
strength and, if necessary, our blood."⁹ More examples could be gleaned from the essays written by the Italian pupils and titled *Perché amo il Duce* (Why I love Il Duce), or with the countless letters written to the head of state. Mussolini was described as a sort of demigod in constant contact with the masses, the interpreter of their aspirations; a man who meditated on the fate of the world, watched over the destiny of Italy, and cared after the fates of all his children as only a father can. Pius XI, after signing the accords, defined Mussolini as "a man of Providence."¹⁰ This image of Mussolini became widespread not only among the general masses indoctrinated with the party's propaganda; even the highest levels of the regime, in other words the party managers and government representatives, voiced their dedication to Mussolini, as an authoritative exponent of Italian politics and culture between the two World Wars.

Giuseppe Bottai had met the head of state at the start

of fascism's rise, and had taken part in his battle to seize power. In 1932, upon quitting his position as Minister of the Corporations, Bottai told Il Duce that even in his private life he would continue to think of Mussolini as a guide and force for improvement.¹¹ And in his diary, in 1938, he wrote that Mussolini was capable of ordering strength and energy, of acting and rendering concrete political ideals in a way no other man could accomplish. In 1941, when his faith in Il Duce first began to waver, he shared all the anxiety he felt when imagining he might have to separate himself from Mussolini on the pages of that same diary. "Something has been beating in my heart for over twenty years. [...] Now I am alone, robbed of my leader [...]. Now I know what fear is: the sudden loss of the reason to live."¹²

A POLITICIAN IN SERVICE OF CULTURE: GIUSEPPE BOTTAI

Giuseppe Bottai was one of the most important figures in fascist culture [ILL.]: during the early years he was leader of the revisionist current, as well as the main supporter of the concept of modern, totalitarian politics. Convinced that fascism hadn't risen to power merely to restore a pre-modern political order, but on the contrary was another manifestation of the great European revolutions, supporter of populism and admirer of modern philosophies, Bottai worked to show the world a different kind of modernity than the one that had emerged during the XIX century in the wake of the French Revolution. For these reasons, during the early 1920s, he became Gentile's main ally. He believed that the philosopher would help elaborate and spread fascist thinking, and was convinced that the ideological definition of the movement would reinforce its identity. These beliefs of his waned somewhat toward the end of the 1920s, when he became the main supporter of a cultural policy that managed to unite modernists and traditionalists, Catholics and laypeople, early fascists and young university students, followers of Gentile and those who opposed him. In February 1939, when he had been Minister of National Education for little more than two years, Bottai presented



Giuseppe Bottai in Ethiopia, May 5, 1936

² Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia*, vol. XXI, edited by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel (Florence: La Fenice, 1962), p. 425.

³ "Dottrina del fascismo," in *Enciclopedia Italiana di scienze, lettere ed arti*, vol. XIV (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1932).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See Piero Melograni, "The cult of the Duce in Mussolini's Italy," in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 11, no. 4 (1976), pp. 221-237; Renzo De Felice, Luigi Goglia, *Mussolini. Il mito* (Rome/Bari: Laterza, 1983); Emilio Gentile, *Il mito dello Stato nuovo* (Rome/Bari: Laterza, 1982), pp. 105-138; Pierre Milza, *Mussolini* (Rome: Carocci, 2000); Alessandro Campi, *Mussolini* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001); Simonetta Falasca Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle. The Aesthetics*

of Power in Mussolini's Italy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Didier Musiedlak, *Mussolini* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2005); Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione* (Rome/Bari: Laterza, 2003), pp. 113-146. ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁷ See Alessandro Campi, *Mussolini*, cit., p. 15.

⁸ Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*, cit., p. 131.

⁹ Gianni Bertone, *I figli d'Italia si chiamano Balilla. Come e cosa insegnava la scuola fascista* (Rimini: Guaraldi, 1975), p. 64.

¹⁰ Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*, cit., p. 132.

¹¹ Emilio Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo* (Rome: Carocci, 2001), p. 145.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 146.



Members of recreation clubs ready to compete for the fastest swimmer contest, 1930s

a School Charter to Fascism's Grand Council¹³: a program document including twenty-nine declarations that formed the foundation of the new school. The main objective of the Bottai reforms was the "full and complete education of the new fascist man." For this reason the charter defined the political essence of the school, and rejected the concept of culture as part of an individual's personal growth. In addition to defining objectives for the school, Bottai introduced two important new elements into the academic lives of Italian students: the personal diary and a new concept of work as a teaching material, both aimed at establishing an increasingly close connection between school and politics.¹⁴ For the first time ever in Italy manual labor was considered a pedagogical tool in schools, as well as a means to promote integration of young people into society. It stood against the traditional subdivision of schools into humanities on one hand and technical institutes on the other, which had been central to the 1923 reforms.¹⁵ In May 1939 Bottai presented the Senate with a charter that would unite "the work of schools and that of (fascist organization) Gioventù italiana del Littorio, in terms of culture and physical and warrior education, the meditative cult of tradition and that of action that moves quickly forward and is headed into the future."¹⁶ [ILL.]

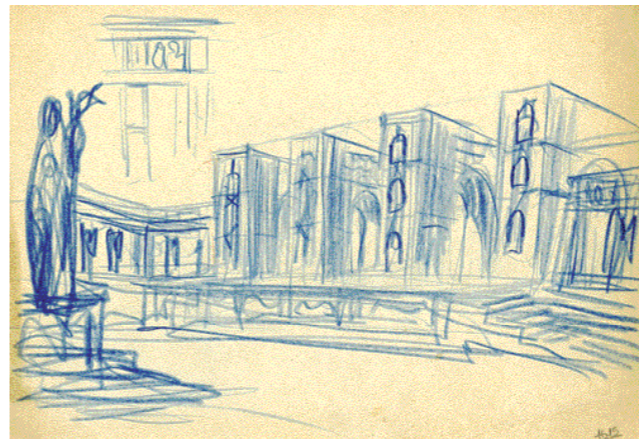


Giuseppe Bottai inaugurating of the Istituto Centrale del Restauro, Rome, October 18, 1941

Bottai was not merely an authoritative politician committed to managing the primary cultural institutions of the regime. From 1922 to 1943 he was also one of the main driving forces behind discussions and initiatives promoted by Italian intellectuals. [ILL.]

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS FASCIST ART?

In February 1927, after having heard the opinions of Italy's main artists concerning the existence or lack thereof of fascist art, the magazine Bottai ran concluded the inquiry by underlining once again that artistic expressions had to be led by "the same trends" present "in politics, and aimed at more solid, wider, stronger constructions in line with the great traditions of autochthonous Italian art, to be rediscovered alive and well even among the superimpositions and incrustations of all the foreign art movements."¹⁷ For this reason artists could not address any subject, couldn't deal with "psychoanalysis, foreign cultures and intimacy," could not propose "fragmentary visions" of reality and would have to prove themselves "faithfully militant for the fascist cause." Everything else would be "free creation," in the sense that choices of style, trends and aesthetic inquiries represented a problem that was secondary with respect to the main theme: declaring the subordination of all the different artistic disciplines to the political content of fascism. According to the authoritative magazine, defining art did not mean identifying an aesthetic that responded to the needs of the regime. The main question dealt with artists' ability to make the themes of politics their own, while discussions around style would have to remain within the sphere of reflection and considerations within each different discipline. Within those disciplines, from literature to philosophy, architecture [ILL.], cinema and so forth, while supporters of the different currents got involved in heated debates, they nevertheless remained fully aware, as Mario Sironi wrote in 1932, that "a hypothetical agreement concerning a single formula for art" was simply "impossible." Fascism asked the painter or novelist to express "a precise, express desire" to "liberate art from its subjective



Marcello Piacentini, study for E42

and arbitrary elements, as well as those of specious origins that are desired and fed by nothing more than vanity."¹⁸ [ILL.]

Therefore the absence of unitary aesthetic canons does not mean that the different disciplines didn't experience a profound and sweeping "fascist remodeling." If we look at



"Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista," Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, 1932

the discussions that animated individual intellectual and artistic groups, we see immediately that all the various protagonists were united by a drive to mobilize and a commitment to put their artworks in service of the Blackshirts' revolution. Among the many examples provided by the Italian cultural universe of the 1920s and 1930s, language constitutes a case at once less well known and of extreme importance.

THE WORDS OF FASCISM

In 1934 Giuseppe Bottai maintained that politics would "rise to the fore, above every other factor, in determining the renewal or creation of the Italian language."¹⁹ That year Fascist Critique hosted an inquiry that included politicians and intellectuals ready to declare that Italians now spoke in a different way than they had in the past.²⁰ This was underlined by Bruno Migliorini, one of the foremost linguists of that era, when in 1938 he stated, "the totalitarian policies of the regime and its capillary organization make it so that there is no Italian who remains untouched by its efforts and terminology."²¹ The high-flying declarations of Bottai and Migliorini are coherent with the spread of a true politics of language, which the fascist held to be particularly important, considering it

one of the essential aspects for the construction of a new Italian civilization. From 1922 to 1943 language policies were expressed in three different directions: an attempt to limit the use of dialects; reprimanding linguistic minorities; and outlawing foreign words. In a country in which 30 percent of the population still spoke only in dialect in 1922, the battle to spread the Italian language was a constant challenge. For this reason, in 1923, Gentile's reforms introduced the principle of a progressive move from dialects to Italian in elementary schools, while in 1934 the Minister Francesco Ercole eliminated dialect from scholastic programs altogether, as a departure point for arriving at Italian.²² In reality, the restrictive policies were reserved for "alloglotto" minorities, or those Italians living in a single territory and speaking a dialect that's different from the Italian spoken in the rest of the country, and Italians from Alto Adige in particular: starting in 1923 it was established that throughout the Italian territory all teaching programs and documents would have to be written in Italian, bilingual schools were abolished and the authorities would have to review the toponymy. As the geographer Ettore Tolomei, then director of the Institute of Studies for Alto Adige and a zealous promoter of assimilation, maintained that "Italy, a national and not multinational state," was not under "any obligation to subsidize foreign language middle or high schools."²³ With that same spirit, and once again in 1923, a new decree introduced taxation of foreign words that appeared in signs or windows, and four years later they were outlawed entirely.²⁴

Italianization of the "alloglotta" areas continued even for people's first and last names. In an attempt to eradicate traces of foreign languages and the presence of ethno-linguistic groups and their traditions (believed to be alien with respect to the Italian lineage), in 1926 a law decree established that "families in the Trento province" with originally Italian or Latin last names that had been "translated into other languages" would have to return to "the original name in its original form"; while those with foreign last names could request "the reduction into an Italian form by choice."²⁵ The battle against the use of foreignisms was particularly intense in the press as well, which often addressed linguistic issues. In 1932 the newspaper *La Tribuna* held a competition to substitute fifty foreign words.²⁶ And this was not an isolated event: in March 1932, and continuing for just over a year, the writer and journalist Paolo Monelli launched and ran an initiative in the Turin newspaper *Gazzetta del Popolo* that proved extremely successful: with the stated intent of cleaning up the Italian language, every day he explained which Italian words to use to substitute their foreign language counterparts.²⁷ In the second half of the 1930s, interest in lexical issues (which targeted the use of the Italian pronoun *lei*) extended to the highest

¹³ See Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce. II. Lo Stato totalitario. 1936-1940* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), pp. 117-130. For a further analysis see Alessandra Tarquini, *Il Gentile dei fascisti. Gentiliani e antigentiliani nel regime fascista* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009), pp. 330-344.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁵ *La Carta della Scuola con annesso grafico-guida*, cit., p. 5.

¹⁶ Alessandra Tarquini, *Il Gentile dei fascisti*, cit., p. 338.

¹⁷ "Resultanze dell'inchiesta sull'arte fascista," *Ibid.*, year V, no. 4, February 15, 1927, pp. 61-64 and Margherita Sarfatti, "Arte, fascismo e antiretorica," *Ibid.*, year V, no. 5, p. 82.

¹⁸ Mario Sironi, *Manifesto della pittura murale*, in *La colonna*, December 1933.

¹⁹ Giuseppe Bottai, "Appunti sui rapporti fra lingua e rivoluzione," in *L'orto*, year IV, no. 3, May-June 1934, p. 3. Fabio Foresti, "Proposte interpretative e di ricerca su lingua e fascismo: la politica linguistica," in Idem. (ed.), *Credero, obbedire e combattere. Il regime linguistico nel Ventennio* (Bologna:

Pendragon, 2003), p. 32.

²⁰ Fabio Foresti, *Credero, obbedire e combattere*, cit., p. xxx.

²¹ Bruno Migliorini, *Lingua contemporanea* (Florence: Sansoni, 1938), p. 28.

²² See Gabriella Klein, *La politica linguistica del fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986), p. 56.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁴ Fabio Foresti, *Proposte interpretative e di ricerca su lingua e fascismo*, cit., p. 60; Gabriella Klein, *La politica linguistica del fascismo*, cit., p. 93.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107. See also Patrizia Dogliani, "Lingua/dialetti," in Victoria de Grazia, Sergio Luzzatto (eds.) *Dizionario del Fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi), vol. 1, pp. 53-56.

²⁶ Fabio Foresti *Credero, obbedire e combattere*, cit. p. 51, particularly for the linguistic issues; Sergio Raffaelli, *Le parole proibite. Purismo di Stato e regolamentazione della pubblicità in Italia (1812-1945)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1983), pp. 156-159.

institutions of the regime as well, starting with the Accademia d'Italia, which published an updated dictionary of the Italian language. [ILL.] Work stopped in 1941 with publication of the first volume, while the Accademia's contribution to fascism's linguistic policies continued over successive years.²⁸ In 1940 a law decree established that writing in foreign languages on labels would have to be accompanied by the relevant Italian expression. The same year, the use of foreign words on signs and for advertisements was prohibited.²⁹ The institutional responsibility for choosing Italian substitute words was entrusted to the Accademia, which during the two-year period stretching from 1941 to 1943 heard from a commission of experts and gathered roughly one thousand five hundred proposals. Riccardo Bacchelli, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti [ILL.], Emilio Cecchi and Bruno Migliorini, among others, presented terms destined to become a part of the Italian language for-



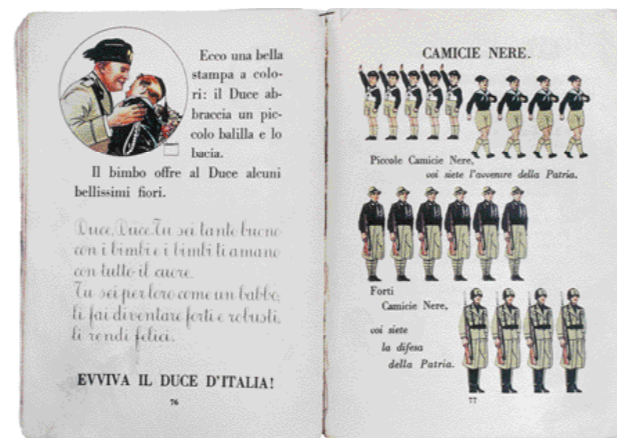
Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and his wife, painter Benedetta Cappa in the futurist room at the national competition of photography, Rome, 1930

ever, for example *regista* (director) instead of "régisseur"; *primato* in the place of "record"; and *autista* instead of "chauffeur." Other attempts at change proved less fortunate: even with time *pellucola* failed to substitute "film"; *teppista* never quite eliminated "Apache"; and "swing" and "menu" remained firmly in their places, refusing to give way to, respectively, *slancio* and *lista*.³⁰

From 1922 to 1943, fascism extended its control over every sector of the country, bending them to its aims and objectives, and placing particular emphasis on the education of young people. For a regime that expressed a concept of politics that hinged on the myth of humanity rebuilt in spirit and body, young people were obligatory interlocutors: human material that could still be molded and shaped in such a way as to guarantee the future. At the beginning of the 1920s Gentile was the protagonist of fascist cultural policies, and undoubtedly the most important intellectual of fascism, author of school reforms and also director of several cultural institutions created to spread the new culture and show the country (and the world) that fascism was ready to take advantage of contributions from authoritative figures



The "Anti-lei" exhibition, Turin, 1939



Pina Ballarino, second grade readings schoolbook, 1941

including the Sicilian philosopher himself. But already in the second half of the 1920s these cultural policies began to change, because many fascists who had welcomed Gentile into the ranks of their government and party pulled away, thinking that he could not possibly represent the ideology of their regime. From then, and all the way to 1939, the ministers of education who came after him intervened on Gentile's reforms, orienting Italian schools according to the political directives of fascism and taking away autonomy little by little, year after year. With the arrival of Bottai in 1939 this project was carried to completion, in the sense that with the School Charter, the Roman politician rendered an objective he'd been pursuing for some time concrete: integrating schools with the totalitarian policies of the fascist state. [ILL.]

For a state that entertained the ambition to transform Italians into a new community, carrying out and accomplishing an anthropological revolution, every segment of society would prove decisive, and in this sense the regime attempted to manage the free time of Italian workers both by controlling longstanding practices rooted in the country's cultural fabric, and inventing new pastimes in order to create masses that were daily audiences for fascist policies, fascinated by the spread of theater or silently listening to rural radio stations. Nevertheless fascist culture was also the expression of artists [ILL.] and intellectuals who contributed — through their actions and artistic production — to the regime's cultural universe. In every sector, amid vastly different forms of cultural expression and biographical pathways, the majority of Italian artists and intellectuals contributed to the expression of fascist culture and the construction of a totalitarian regime. In other words, they were ready to place their talents in service of the political cause and declare that their disciplines didn't need to be defended from politics, but on the contrary were ready to



Giuseppe Bottai, *Politica fascista delle arti*, 1940

²⁸ Sergio Raffaelli, *Le parole proibite*, p. 155.

²⁹ Claudio Marazzini, *L'ordine delle parole. Storie di vocabolari italiani* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009), p. 386; S. Raffaelli, *Le parole proibite*, p. 200.

³⁰ Fabio Foresti, *Crede, obbedire e combattere*, cit., p. 61; Gabriella Klein, *La politica linguistica del fascismo*, cit., pp. 124-136.

³¹ Sergio Raffaelli, *Le parole proibite*, cit., pp. 203, 225.



Members of the fascist railway workers' recreational club of La Spezia, 1929

welcome the themes, content and directives supplied by the regime. The actions of these intellectuals were directly linked to the maturation of an ideology, understood as the expression of a social group that had a specific vision for the world and was bent on pursuing determinate results, based on political myths. Most important among these was the State, the theoretical epicenter of fascist ideology that permeated every manifestation of Italian culture.

This infinitely powerful State was supposed to create a new Italian. A new, virile and athletic man, healthy in both body and mind; an active man, well aware of the difficulties present in life and ready to face them. [ILL.] A man who had nothing in common with the bourgeois and liberal Italians of the past. He would be the kind of man who viewed life as a battle; he would take his place in the group, and would



A Balilla parade in Piazza San Pietro, Vatican City, c. 1935.

be taught how to accept the regime's commands. In this sense, fascist culture of the 1930s was derived neither from traditionalist currents, nor from the actions of Catholics, who were conceptually far from the hegemony of a State that considered the Catholic religion an *instrumentum regni*. Undoubtedly the regime's culture drew strength from contributions made by several fascist Catholic intellectuals who saw in the regime an opportunity to build a new, different Italy from the liberal state it had become, and believed Catholicism would play a fundamental role in it, but this doesn't mean that Catholics represented fascist culture or that fascist culture derived from Catholic thinking. Fascist culture was the culture of young fascists, [ILL.] in other words those Italians who believed they had fully and profoundly assimilated the regime's values, myths and ideas. Raised amid the mythological universe created by fascism, young people felt that they represented — better than anyone else — a revolutionary new period in history, and presented themselves as the protagonists of this revolution; the ones who correctly interpreted fascist doctrine and deserved the space necessary to create a new, truly fascist managerial class. In this sense not only were they never secretly anti-fascist (as others have claimed), they were actually the most authoritative witnesses possible to the successful outcome of the totalitarian experiment that was fascism. Fascism must be studied in order to understand its cultural significance: analyzed the way historians analyze other periods of the past, in order to understand where we come from and to remind ourselves — as well as those who will follow us — that the parliamentary democracy Italians live in today is a fragile and imperfect creation. Simply put, it is something we must all work to protect.