Racial Theories in Fascist Italy

Aaron Gillette

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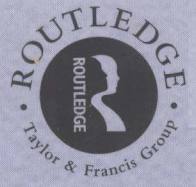

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To my grandfather, Dominic Pepp

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Racial Theories in Fascist Italy examines the role played by race and racism in the development of Italian identity during the fascist period. The book analyzes the struggle between Mussolini, the fascist hierarchy, scientists, and others in formulating a racial persona that would gain wide acceptance in Italy.

Aaron Gillette seeks to explain Mussolini's decision to add racism and racial theory to fascist ideology. He finds that the *Duce* settled on racism in a final effort to galvanize Italian nationalism and unity behind a fascist movement in decline. He also consider the insurmountable difficulties faced by this nationalism because of complex Italian regional differences. Were the Italians an "Aryan" people as were the Germans to the North? Or were they a Mediterranean people, whose proud classical heritage made them natural enemies of the northern "Goths"?

This is the first book to examine in detail the debates over racial theory in fascist Italy between the academic and scientific communities, and among the fascist leadership itself. Gillette analyzes the shifting official policies on race that resulted from the influence of Nazi Germany, prominent fascists and scientists, and Mussolini himself on racist theory. Rather than unifying the Italian people, the addition of a racial identity to fascism had the opposite effect.

Racial Theories in Fascist Italy will be of interest to historians, to political scientists concerned with the development of fascism, and to scholars of race and racism.

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Aaron Gillette
Germantown, Maryland
May 28, 2001

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Introduction

L'histoire ne servirait à rien, si l'on n'y met les tristesses du présent. [History has its uses, if only to place there the sorrows of our times.]

Jules Michelet

With race theories you can prove or disprove anything you want.

Max Weber

So we are fragmenting and retribalizing ourselves. We are doing so at a much more rapid rate, certainly, than we are moving toward any more humane kind of humanhood in the arrangement of our social and political affairs. Where this all has to go, where it can go, are still questions without answers in this time of great change.

Harold Robert Isaacs

The oldest of all questions [are] where do I come from, and who am I?

Léon Poliakov

Das Du ist älter als das Ich. [The "You" is older than the "I."]

Friedrich Nietzsche

Science, too, is founded upon belief; there is no such thing as a science free of suppositions.

Friedrich Nietzsche

We have made Italy; now we must make the Italians.

Massimo D'Azeglio

Several [participants] claimed they descend from the Celts, saying they have nothing in common with the peoples of the Mediterranean.
Report on Northern League rally, Veneto region, May 1997, by Sylvia Poggioli

In many respects, a profound chasm separates today's intellectual world from that which existed before the end of World War II. In the immediate post-war world, a whole reality, as it existed for many educated Europeans, was swept away. This intellectual revolution was based on the realization that many of the key shibboleths of early twentieth-century Europe – unbridled nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism, and science free from ethical oversight – had led to the near destruction of European civilization, and the slaughter of the majority of European Jews.

Thereafter, historians have sought to elucidate the role these shibboleths have played in European history, the better to prevent their resurrection. Indeed, as interest in the Holocaust grows, it becomes even more imperative that we seek to understand the interaction of science, racism, nationalism, and the relationship of intellectuals to political power in pre-World War II Europe.

This work will explore this culture of science and power in fascist Italy. In particular, I will explain how the notion of the Italians as a racial group evolved from its genesis in pre-fascist intellectual circles to the final collapse of the fascist regime in 1945. Some essential issues related to this topic include: Was the issue of Italian racial identity a topic of long-term debate in Italian society and culture, or merely a product of the fascist epoch? Why was a consensus on the racial composition and history of the Italian people so difficult to reach? What motivated intellectuals to embrace race as an explanation for history and human behavior? What caused particular individuals to support one racial theory over another? Were the racial animosities between different peoples in the early twentieth-century a product of ancient antagonisms, or a more recent phenomenon? To what extent did scientists contribute to this "racialization" of historical understanding? What was the relationship of "racial scientists" to the state: were they pawns of totalitarian regimes, or did they help to shape these regimes? To what extent did they help turn racial theory into bureaucratic practice in some twentieth-century states? To what extent did they use race theories and racism to promote their own personal objectives and careers? How did the growing divergence between the humanities and the sciences affect the development of racial theories? To what extent was Mussolini able to control the debate over racial identity in the Fascist Party, and in Italy as a whole?[1]

The complex history of Europe and adjacent regions was one of the most important factors influencing the development of European racism. Educated Europeans knew in the early twentieth century that dozens of major migrations had profoundly altered the course of European history over the millennia. The people of every European country had been affected by some of these migrations. How, precisely, they had been affected was still unclear. Therefore, numerous other considerations led individuals to identify themselves with one or another of the major racial groups then believed to have existed.

In Italy, the choice often depended on factors as diverse as regional or national affiliation, professional or political allegiances, or attitudes towards other European states. Generally, Italians concerned with this issue identified one of three groups as representing the "true" Italians: the *Mediterranean race*: a shorter, darker people responsible for ancient classical civilization; the *Nordic Aryan race*: a taller, fairer people associated with Northern Europe, who came into prominence in European history with the "barbarian" invasions co-incident with the collapse of the Roman Empire; or an indigenous *Italian race*: a people native to Italy from remotest prehistory who survived relatively free from admixture with peoples outside the peninsula.

Diverse intellectual traditions would also contribute to the diversity of racial ideologies. Since the eighteenth century, many historians, linguists, folklorists, and philosophers had been increasingly attracted to racial explanations for the development of different human cultures. They attempted to clarify the murkiness of the distant past, or simply the complexities of human behavior, with facile explanations that sought to reduce the intricacies of history down to the interaction of racial stereotypes. Often, these explanations relied on mysticism, spiritualism, and intuition as the foundations behind racial "truths."

For these "spiritual" racists, an irresolvable problem remained: racism by definition assumes the existence of a link between biological differences and behavior. Otherwise, there is only ethnocentrism, with the ever-present possibility that those of different races could assimilate into the "superior" culture, as was the case throughout Chinese history. Attempts by spiritual racists to link their concepts to racial biology were usually clumsy and transparently illogical.

Biological racism also grew out of the eighteenth century, through Enlightenment science's fascination with studying newly discovered organisms (or human groups) and classifying them in an ordered hierarchy. The science of anthropology resulted from these endeavors. Classical nineteenth-century anthropology, though it sought to use the long-accepted methods of science in its investigations, nevertheless often found its raw data inadequate and its research tools hopelessly crude. Therefore, imagination and speculation often took the place of more sound conclusions. Non-rational considerations, such as national identity or career opportunism, also contributed to the formulation of biased conclusions.

All of those willing to utilize race as a key determinant of Italian history and culture faced the same basic questions: Are Italians one ethnic group, with the same linguistic, historical, and cultural roots, or are they a forced aggregate of two (or more) ethnic groups uneasily sharing a peninsula and living in a precarious and artificial union that belies chasmic cultural differences? Why was there a large degree of physical and cultural variation among Italians from different regions? To what extent did Italy's climate affect the Italian people? Was such an effect hereditary? Was there a racial basis for "Latin" civilization? Did such a civilization even exist? If the Aryan peoples arrived in Italy at some point in history, what became of the indigenous Italians? Was there racial intermixing of the indigenous Italians and the Aryans? What survived of the indigenous culture? To what extent was Italian civilization due to immigrant Nordic Aryan peoples after the fall of the Roman Empire? To what extent could Rome's rise and fall, the brilliance of the Renaissance, the degeneration of early modern Italy, or the hoped-for revival of modern Italy be traced back to racial influences? What was the "natural" relationship between Germany and Italy, their peoples and civilizations?

These issues were already widely debated in Italy during the liberal period, but became even more critical in the fascist period. Fascism sought to dominate

Italian culture and thought, if not control it outright. Determining a fascist position on such basic questions as the racial nature of the Italians, although on the political back burner throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, became one of the regime's central projects as it sought to fascicize all aspects of Italian society by the late 1930s. Fascism hoped to settle this issue once and for all by propagating an official racial ideology.

Mussolini had a further incentive by 1938 to propagate a fascist racism: he hoped that a racial identity would finally unify the Italian people and transform them into the new *uomo fascista*, the "fascist man."[2] To understand this use of race by fascist ideology, we must consider the work of contemporary sociologists on the politics of identity. Indeed, many scholars, beginning with Max Weber a century ago,[3] have concluded that the concept of race exists only in the context of communal identity. Communal identity, whether based on nationalism or racism (or both), tends to subordinate the individual to a unity of which he is merely an atom, a link in a great chain of being that stretches into the distant past and forward to an (often idealistic) future. Communal identity is often based on an originating myth, a founding movement, or the belief in a predetermined destiny. It is molded and directed over time by those who inspire or orient action – scholars, prophets, and charismatic leaders.

Furthermore, as Émile Durkheim and others have argued, the existence of social deviants is necessary to define and clarify the boundaries of normality and good for any society. A particular group in a society might be *a priori* defined as deviant, and invested with all of those characteristics considered deviant. They would thereby serve as a sort of "anti-model" which would unify the remainder of society.[4] The community would define itself by reacting *against* what it was *not*. In addition, the society could be energized through efforts to expel these deviant and impure elements from the collectivity and thus purify it, ushering in a golden age.[5]

This sort of *differentialist* racism is all the more powerful when it is not based on social or historical arguments, but on appeals to such non-rational mystical principles as nature, biology, the cosmos, and Providence. Associating a people's self-identity with such primordial archetypes aids in both naturalizing and demonizing the "Other." The Other is redefined as a sort of virulent germ, and God has tasked the "chosen people" with eradicating this deadly plague. Hence we generally find in such societies the obsessive fear of miscegenation, appeals to racial solidarity, and a certain "medicalization" of the Other, rendering the Other an inhuman biological quantity.[6] How can one feel sympathy with a virus?

This study will argue that Mussolini believed that race had the potential to transform a society along the lines first enunciated by Weber and Durkheim, and so introduced an official racial ideology into fascism in 1938 in an attempt to unify the Italian peoples and eventually mold them into uniform copies of the fascist archetype. Furthermore, he transformed Africans and (especially) Jews into symbols of the deadly "Other," the anti-fascist nemesis whose existence helped to define the new fascist man.

But this peculiar attempt to use racism to redefine the Italians had a number of fatal flaws. For one, racial explanations of history and culture often posed more questions than they answered: what exactly was a race? What was the relationship of "Caucasians" to "Aryans," of "Aryans" to "Nordics," and of "Nordics" to "Italians"? Should each of these groups be considered a race, or were some of these groups races and others "subraces"? How could those Italians with the physical attributes usually reserved for Nordics or Mediterraneans be so similar when they looked so different? How could all miscegenation be deleterious, if Italians were a racial mix? How could Italians be all spiritually united in fascism, if they all looked and behaved so differently? How could Italians today be considered a great people if there was still so much room for improvement? How could the Catholic worldview be reconciled with the racist worldview when Catholics believed that all were equal before God and anyone could be redeemed? How could fascist ethics be explained on the basis of race?

In addition, although Mussolini interested himself in the racial question from the early days of his political career, he failed to ever consistently embrace the Mediterranean or the Nordic archetype in his attempt to define the Italians. Over the course of his life, he shifted between one model and the other, allowing political expediency, personal whim, or pressures from influential elements of Italian society and the Fascist Party to incline him to embrace first one model, then the other. Official fascist ideology was largely dependent on Mussolini's inclinations; therefore the policies, programs, and bureaucracies focusing on Italian racial identity experienced enormous strains, and had to constantly change in order to accommodate the wishes of the *Duce*. These strains were further exacerbated by the struggles of different factions of the Fascist Party to influence racial policies, sometimes in direct opposition to Mussolini's directives.

In the end these competing and often contradictory forces largely canceled one another out, leaving Italian racial identity as ill defined at the end of the fascist period as it was in the beginning. The only consistent elements of racial policy in the late fascist period were anti-Semitism and anti-Africanism, both of which had an impact on the Italian people, and led to the most dreadful consequences. The introduction of anti-Semitism into fascist ideology proved to be a serious miscalculation. The regime's anti-Semitism alienated many influential fascists and large segments of Italian society. This failure to achieve a consensus within fascism and within Italian society on some of the most basic issues of the day serves as an example of the internal divisions that plagued fascism and Italian society. As with many other issues, Mussolini sacrificed ideological coherency in pursuit of the momentary tactical advantage. This stemmed, in part, from Mussolini's own mercurial temperament. As important, however, were the pressures on the *Duce* to accommodate other power brokers, both those within fascism and those with an autonomous existence (e.g. the Church and the scientific community). This indecisiveness weakened fascism, revealing the regime's failure to effect any substantial changes in Italy's society and culture, or resolve any of modern Italy's fundamental conflicts.[7]

The history of racial theories outside of anti-Semitism has received relatively little attention from scholars. This gap in our knowledge is perhaps due to the overwhelming repudiation of racially based social scientific theories after World War II, and perhaps also due to an understandable concentration on anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. This lack of interest in the history of racial theories is unfortunate, since the preoccupation with race was a near obsession for many influential Europeans and Americans, and racial theories had enormous impact on western civilization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[8]

Naturally, the first works concerning the history of European racism, written after World War II, concentrated on the Holocaust.[9] Holocaust studies came into their own in the 1970s, and have gathered increasing momentum since then.[10] Interest in the Holocaust encouraged scholars to examine its roots in anti-Semitism and in European ideas on race in general.[11] Written in the shadow of the Holocaust, many of these works tend to see anti-Semitism as the *sine qua non* around which (or in opposition to) other racial concepts evolved, such as the Aryan race.[12]

Examining the research done on European racism in general, a number of critical questions become apparent. One of the most fundamental questions is: when did "racism," in any meaningful sense, first make its appearance in Europe? Why did the concept of race become so commonly accepted as the basis for understanding the differences between different peoples? Léon Poliakov traces European racism back to myths of origin of various peoples, and the antagonisms that their differences engendered. Others find the trans-oceanic voyages of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and European encounters with non-Europeans, as the critical moment when the concept of race took shape. Most scholars emphasize that modern racism was the product, at least in part, of an attempt by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century academics to apply rational and scientific methods to the classification of human populations.[13]

Once racism emerged, additional factors influenced these classifications toward a hierarchical ordering of races. Critical events often cited as influencing European ideas about race include the European encounter with less technologically advanced societies in the sixteenth through twentieth centuries, the Enlightenment's infatuation with classical Greek physiognomy, the development of anthropology, the cultural isolation of the Jews, the relationship of Judaism with Christianity, and the potential for (and desirability of) conversion of the Jews to Christianity.[14] A number of scholars, such as Hannah Arendt, Juan Comas, and Ivan Hannaford, see the Franco-Prussian War as a pivotal event in the evolution of race-thinking. They note that in the immediate aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, Bismarck, Nietzsche, Gumplowicz, and Renan all saw this and other conflicts as a product of racial struggle.[15]

To date, most work concerning the historical relationship between race and science in Europe has focused on early twentieth-century Germany, once again with the Holocaust in mind.[16] Science before the fall of Nazi Germany had a nearly unshakable reputation as a neutral, objective process for determining universal facts. This allowed scientists to legitimize their own prejudices, beliefs, and ideologies before an unsuspecting public.[17] Many books in the late 1930s and 1940s,

such as Joseph Needham's *The Nazi Attack on International Science*, argued that the Nazis sought to destroy German science.[18] Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish claimed in *Race: Science and Politics* (1958) that "legitimate" science had never accepted or promoted racism – rather, racism was the product of a distortion of science in the hands of politicians. German scientists themselves (as well as their Italian colleagues) heartily agreed with this assessment after the war. In their opinion, so long as one had concentrated on science rather than politics during the fascist period, one was free from blame.[19] Works such as Max Weinreich's *Hitler's Professors: The Part of Scholarship in Germany's Crimes against the Jewish People* (1946), which did not hesitate to link scientists with Nazi policies, were a rarity at the time.

This degree of complacency changed in the 1960s for several reasons. Michel Foucault's influence led many scholars to argue that popular interest in progress, evolution, and heredity was used by the biomedical community to advance their particular professions, expand their career opportunities, gain control of public health administration and ultimately assert their power over society.[20] Furthermore, a new generation of scholars, often displaying a more critical attitude toward science than had their predecessors, challenged the prevailing belief in the objectivity of science.

By the 1980s an entirely different view of the effect science had on social beliefs and norms prevailed. Robert Proctor's book *Racial Hygiene* provides an excellent summary of the current orthodoxy with regard to racial science in pre-1945 Europe. Proctor argues that science is essentially a social construct. Scientific "facts" have no objective reality, but are entirely dependent on the society and conditions that create them.[21]

The lack of complicity in Nazi crimes that German scientists had once touted in the post-war period was now revealed as a deliberate obfuscation of the powerful role scientists held in the Nazi regime. As Proctor explained:

> the case can be made that science (especially biomedical science) under the Nazis cannot simply be seen in terms of a fundamentally "passive" or "apolitical" scientific community responding to purely external political forces; on the contrary, there is strong evidence that scientists actively designed and administered central aspects of National Socialist racial policy.[22]

Those few scholars now examining science in fascist Italy would agree with this general assessment. Carl Ipsen, in *Dictating Demography*, provides for the reader an interesting guide into the intricate relationship of scientists and the fascist regime on the issue of Italian demographic policies. Ipsen explains that Italian scientists, far from being aloof and disinterested observers of reality, were intimately involved in crafting demographic policies in conformity with Mussolini's plans for Italy. Many Italian scientists were also eager to influence the direction of fascist policies, for personal or ideological motives.[23] As Sandra Puccini has shown, Italian anthropology followed this same pattern.[24] As I will demonstrate, Italian racial theorists were no different from their counterparts in

demography and anthropology – indeed, most of the racial theorists belonged to these professions.

Emilio Gentile, in a recent work, has examined Italian racism's relationship with nationalism. He concludes that the idealistic or "spiritualist" conception of the Italian state, as opposed to the deterministic and racial definition of the National Socialist state, operated to force Italian racism in the direction of a spiritualist, universalistic doctrine devoid of biological determinism.[25] Unfortunately, Gentile's propensity to review only the role of political theorists in the discussion of race fatally misses the critical role that others, especially those from the scientific community, played in the formulation of official fascist racial theory, and the influential deviations from official pronouncements at any particular time. Rather than a seamless consensus on the nature of Italian racism and racial theories, unbridgeable chasms separated many of those involved in the formulation of racial theory, and prevented a solid front concerning Italian racism and racial theory from ever forming.

Finally, we must ask: to what extent did the Catholic Church influence the development of modern European racism? This question has particular relevance for Italy, an avowedly Catholic country, regardless of the political elites' anti-clericalism. George Mosse, in *Toward the Final Solution*, entitled one chapter "Infected Christianity." He concludes that "the record of most Protestant churches and of the Catholic Church [in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries] was not one clearly opposed to the idea of racism."[26] Renzo De Felice would agree in the Italian case. In *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo* he explains that the Church in general and the Jesuits in particular not infrequently expressed a variety of non-racial anti-Semitic sentiments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "With the twentieth-century Catholic, or rather clerical, anti-Semitism became progressively linked to that of the Nationalists, and eventually, to the Sindicalist-Revolutionaries, and then the fascists."[27]

While the Catholic Church may have encouraged a certain type of essentially non-racial anti-Semitism, it also provided a barrier in Italy against the extreme eugenic measures seen in Nazi Germany. Pronatalist social hygiene was acceptable to the Church; Nazi-style eugenics was not. Mussolini was aware that the public's opinion on these matters was strongly influenced by the Church's attitudes (and likely agreed himself). Therefore, he kept his eugenic policies in line with Church pronouncements. Mussolini would not be so compliant on other racial issues, especially after 1937, as we shall see later.

This work will elaborate the conclusions outlined above in eight chapters. Chapter 1 will concentrate on the literary and historically based debates of the nineteenth century. In Chapter 2 we will turn our attention to the increasing involvement of scientists in this debate, in the first decades of the twentieth century. Chapter 3 will review Mussolini's and other Italians' ideas about the nature of and future of the Italian race as fascism developed, but before they took a strong stand on the debate regarding the racial nature of the Italian people.

Chapter 4 will discuss the implementation of state-sponsored Nordic racial theory in Italy, culminating with the Manifesto of Racial Scientists in July 1938, and the creation of a racial propaganda office in the Ministry of Popular Culture. Chapter 5 will explain the Mediterraneanist backlash against Nordic racism, as it unfolded from 1939 to 1940. The struggle between these two ideologies from 1940 to 1942 will occupy our attention in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 will explain Julius Evola's rise to ascendancy in the field of Italian racial theory from 1941 to 1943. Chapter 8 will describe the ideological stalemate in racial theory in the final years of the regime, and in the Italian Social Republic. The Epilogue will conclude the work by briefly examining the lives of the most prominent racial theorists after the war, and the remnants of the debate on Italian racial theory as they have played out to the present time.