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# International Futurism in Arts and Literature

Edited by Günter Berghaus



deGruyter

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Günter Berghaus

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## Editor's Foreword

The idea of editing this volume of essays came at a conference on "Futurism in an International and Inter-disciplinary Perspective", which I organised in 1995 for the Institute of Romance Studies in London. At this gathering, experts from a variety of disciplines and countries presented results of their recent research, discussed new initiatives of other scholars, and examined areas that still needed further investigation.

After decades of primarily ideologically motivated neglect, Futurism has become a major field of study, covering the fine arts, literature, theatre, music, etc., both in Italy and other countries too. In addition, the general public has been able to re-evaluate the significance of Futurism for the development of modern art. Major museums and galleries have presented the works of all key figures and hundreds of minor artists belonging to the movement and have documented their influence on the artistic life of Italy and abroad.

Naturally, one conference or one volume cannot hope to cover the myriad of activities carried out by the Futurists all over the world. Considering the fact that Italian Futurist painting has been the subject of a large number of monographs, and that Futurist influences outside of Italy have already been given treatment in other collected volumes,<sup>1</sup> contributors to the 1995 conference and to this volume were asked to concentrate on those topics and issues which deserved further discussion and exploration. This, of course, is not to say that the countries and artistic disciplines not represented in this volume are unworthy of further study; rather, it was the restriction of space in a one-volume publication that necessitated selection and exclusion. Media which in the end were effected by this elimination process were photography, ceramics, and fashion design. All of these have already been the subject of several monographs, which readers will be able to locate in the bibliography at the

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1 See *Les Futurismes*. Two special issues of *Europe. Revue littéraire mensuelle*, March and April 1975; *Présence de F. T. Marinetti: Actes du colloques international tenu à l'UNESCO, 15-17 Juin 1976*. Ed. by Jean-Claude Marcadé. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1982; Sergio Lambiase and Gian Battista Nazzaro, eds: *F. T. Marinetti, futurista: Inediti, pagine disperse, documenti e antologia critica*. Napoli: Guida, 1977; Giovanni Lista, ed.: *Marinetti et le futurisme: Études, documents, iconographie*. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1977; *Futurismo Futurismi*. Special issue of *Alfabeta / La Quinzaine Littéraire*, May 1986.

end of this volume. Countries originally considered for inclusion were Hungary, Poland, Mexico, and Argentina. Naturally, I needed to seek the advice of specialists to see if substantially new insights or useful complementary evidence could be expected from a fresh "revisitation" of those countries and fields of artistic experimentation. Potential authors whom I approached with the view of writing about these domains did not come up with a convincing proposal, abstract, or draft essay, and consequently the volume's table of contents underwent a quite natural process of deselection.

At the conference in 1995, all speakers and participants were academics, critics, and scholars with a special interest in Futurism, and hence an extensive knowledge of the movement, its aesthetics, and historical development. However, this book is intended to reach a much wider readership. Therefore, contributors were requested to rewrite their papers and to provide both general information on the topic for the general reader, and more specific points related to current academic debates. Thereby we hope to make the many-faceted aspects of Futurism more accessible to the non-specialists while at the same time providing a much-needed reassessment of Futurist aesthetics and historical developments for an academic readership. All essays in this volume are self-contained, and overlap with other contributions has been avoided as much as possible, although certain artists or works of art are discussed by several authors.

As regards references to original publications by Futurists or scholarly literature on Futurism, we have followed the rule that works that are listed in the bibliography at the end of the volume are quoted in the footnotes only in short form. Works of a more general nature (literary studies, art historical overviews, creative writings by non-Futurist authors, etc) are referenced in full and are not included in the bibliography. Rather than providing a long alphabetical list of all works cited in the essays, I have attempted to compile a bibliography which may serve as a kind of "reference shelf" for anyone interested in the many facets and key figures of the Futurist movement, in Italy, and elsewhere. I have therefore also included works not quoted by contributors, but which I regard as essential or significant publications in the areas covered by this volume. Since currently no comprehensive and up-to-date bibliography of Futurism is available, this final section will act, I hope, as a useful reference tool to scholars from many disciplines and serve to orientate the reader towards further studies.

## Acknowledgments

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In a period where academic research is increasingly hampered by rising teaching and administrative duties, I have to register my gratitude to Bristol University, which through the Dean of Arts, Michael Liversidge, the chairman of the Arts Faculty research fund, Charles Martindale, and the Head of the Drama Department, Janet Thumim, provided time and funds for bringing this project to completion.

Bristol, April 2000

Günter Berghaus

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EMILIO GENTILE  
University of Rome

## Political Futurism and the Myth of the Italian Revolution

For a long time after the Second World War, Italian Futurism fell into oblivion or was treated with great mistrust and suspicion. The responsibility for having exalted war and supported Mussolini's Fascist régime weighed heavily over it. Only since the 1960s has there been a reawakening of interest in the Futurist movement, an interest which has grown more and more over recent years. Once the old prejudices had been removed, young or new scholars investigating Futurist art and literature have discovered, or rather: rediscovered, the manifold aspects of the movement and its fundamental importance for the history of twentieth-century avant-garde art.

There is general agreement today that Futurism, at least up until the First World War, was one of the most original and prolific elements of the modernist movement. One aspect, however, still remains the subject of differing interpretations: the politics of Futurism and its relationship to Fascism.

Between 1909 and 1915, Italian Futurism was, politically speaking, predominantly a nationalist movement. It glorified war as the "only hygiene of the world", propagated Italy's entry into the First World War, and its members were amongst the first to volunteer for military service. In 1919, the principal exponents of the Futurist movement participated in the founding of the Fascist movement. After 1925, many Futurists were followers of Mussolini's régime, and their work contributed to Fascist art and the "Lictorian cult".<sup>1</sup> Some of them, including Marinetti, remained faithful to Mussolini right up until the

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1 For a detailed study of this see Emilio Gentile: *Il culto del littorio*, translated as *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*. Several of my previous publications have analysed with greater depth the political orientation of the Futurist movement and its connections with Fascism. See, in particular, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista*, "La politica di Marinetti", and "The Conquest of Modernity".

years of the Republic of Salò. For his part, Mussolini was reluctant to recognise his intellectual and political debts to Futurism, although in a private conversation he confided that without Futurism there would never have been a Fascist revolution.<sup>2</sup>

However, despite the indisputable evidence of Futurist participation in the cultural and political life of the régime there has been considerable debate, since the beginning of the 1920s, about the nature and the significance of this “collaboration”. In 1923, Giuseppe Prezolini denied that there was any coherent connection between Futurism and Fascism and maintained that Futurism was anti-traditionalist, individualistic, libertarian, anti-moralist, anti-Catholic, whilst Fascism was classicist, hierarchical, authoritarian, moralistic, catholic.<sup>3</sup> Benedetto Croce on the other hand expressed the opposite opinion. In 1924 he declared: “For all those who have a sense of historic processes the intellectual roots of Fascism can be found in Futurism.”<sup>4</sup> In support of his affirmation, the philosopher recalled the Futurist orientation of Fascist ideology and political praxis: the cult of action, the susceptibility to violence, the intolerance towards dissenting voices, the contempt for culture, the glorification of youth.

One can say that both Prezolini and Croce were right and wrong. The same applies to the differing opinions expressed by scholars who have continued to debate Futurism and Fascism right up until today, sometimes emphasising agreement, sometimes disagreement between the two movements. In fact, there is validity in each of these interpretations if, as Prezolini and Croce did, one isolates and generalises certain aspects of Futurist ideology and political action, or if one chooses to focus on one particular moment in the history of the Futurist movement, for example the period of 1919–1920, when Futurism was closely allied to the Fascist movement. However, to overcome this contrasting interpretation of the Futurist-Fascist relationship it is not sufficient to limit oneself to writing a parallel history of the two movements, indicating areas of agreement and discord, for this would only confirm what was already evident to the very protagonists themselves, be they Fascist or Futurist. The history of the relationship between the two movements was anything but uniform: during the period of Futurist affiliation to the *Fasci di combattimento* and later to the Fascist régime there were moments of both understanding and discord. The Futurists were by no means docile missionaries of Mussolini’s politics, rather they made vociferous demonstrations against some of the

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2 See de Begnac: *Taccuini mussoliniani*, p. 425.

3 Prezolini: “Fascismo e futurismo”.

4 Croce: “Fatti politici e interpretazioni storiche”.

Duce's decisions. The relationship between Futurism and Fascism was characterised by both affinity and contrast, which could take on specific and concrete forms depending on the historical situation and ideological issue.

Even if I were of the opinion that it is wrong to identify Futurism with Fascism, I could not claim that the Futurist alliance with Mussolini and Fascism was accidental. Similarly, I discount the theory that reduces Futurist participation in the Fascist régime to a marginal or personal factor, the result of an individual's decision, with no connection to Futurist aesthetic and ideology. Its significance can only be understood when considered within the general framework of relationships between Futurism and politics. In particular, one must consider the brief but important experience of the Futurist Political Party and the active participation of Futurists in Italian political events in the interwar period.

Some scholars have underplayed the ideological character of Futurism, or have considered the politics of Futurism to be a propaganda tool for spreading the word of the aesthetic movement, an eccentric factor, extraneous to the substance of Futurist aesthetics and "morality".<sup>5</sup> In my view, the Futurist political engagement was no calculated device or improvised adventure, but rather a consequence of the very nature of a movement which aimed to abolish the gap between culture and politics. The Futurists sought to achieve a comprehensive revolution which was to be not only artistic but also moral, and as such would change the whole of life, not only artistic practices.

Futurism became a political movement as a result of its aesthetic ideology. Even so, it also had its own characteristics as a political movement. Much of this was confused and contradictory, but it certainly cannot be identified with Fascism. Futurism's original aims encompassed political action, coherent with its conception of an artistic revolution that was to overturn both the artistic world and life in general, and radically transform aesthetic sensibility and human character. When, in 1913, Giovanni Papini – at that time still a Futurist – wrote in *Lacerba* an article entitled "Let's Give a Damn About Politics", Marinetti reacted: "We can't abrogate politics, because art and politics are inextricably intertwined".<sup>6</sup>

The Futurist revolution aimed to transform every aspect of individual and collective life, to change mentality and habits, to create the New Man, the Italian of the modern era. As such, the Futurist revolution could not avoid the call of

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5 See Renzo de Felice's foreword to Marinetti: *Taccuini*, p. X.

6 Papini's essay, "Fregiamoci della politica", appeared in *Lacerba*, 1 October 1913. Marinetti's response is preserved in a letter in the Fondazione Primo Conti in Fiesole. In the next number of *Lacerba* (15 October 1913) he published, on the front page, the Futurist Political Programme.

politics. Marinetti formulated a plan of radical political renewal which gave to intellectuals and artists the role of spiritual guides to a New Italy. This activist concept of culture as a means of constructing a new totality of life and creating a new and modern Italian was not only a Futurist idea. In the years preceding the Great War, other young intellectuals found themselves called to the mission of intellectual and moral reform. They, too, sought to achieve the regeneration of Italian public life and the renewal of a nation, which would lead Italy to achieve supremacy in modern civilisation. Out of the movements of the modernist avant-garde, which started to emerge in Italy from the beginning of the twentieth century, was born the myth of the "Italian revolution", conceived above all as a spiritual revolution. The political dimension was inevitably present within this revolutionary programme, but it was not considered an area of immediate priority.<sup>7</sup>

The myth of the "Italian revolution" found different, and contrasting, interpretations in the ideologies of the various groups which made up the Italian avant-garde, such as the Nationalist movement, the intellectuals of the journals *Leonardo* and *La voce*, and the Futurist movement itself. Each proposed a new concept of nation, indicating different methods and strategies to achieve a programme of national regeneration. Each of them propagated a different model of the new State which was to replace the existing liberal State, deemed to be decadent and incompetent. These movements did, however, have certain common aims, which were essentially political and which together constituted the myth of the "Italian revolution".

The key ingredient of this myth, which was effectively at the basis of the politicisation of the modernist avant-garde, was *l'italianismo*, that is, that Italy was destined to take the role of the great protagonist in the history of the twentieth century. Italy was to achieve a spiritual supremacy and stamp the modern world with its mark of a new civility. Common to all these avant-garde movements was their dislike of the existing parliamentary system, the ruling class and the democratic parties.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the myth of the "Italian revolution" was a banner of a general revolt of youth against old age. Young people considered themselves the new aristocracy of the mind. They were opposed to the old professional politicians and they elevated themselves to the rank of future ruling class of a New Italy. For these young people, political revolution had to be the consequence of an intellectual and moral revolution, capable of accelerating the modernisation of the culture, conscience and habits of all Italians.

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7 See Gentile: *Il mito dello Stato nuovo*, pp. 3–29, and Adamson: *Avant-garde Florence*, pp. 52–94.

8 See Gentile: "From the Cultural Revolt of the Giolittian Era to the Ideology of Fascism".

All the aims which made up the modernist myth of the “Italian revolution” were present in Futurism from its very beginning. They were constitutive elements of a political ideology – an ideology that was no negligible appendix of an aesthetic concept, but grew out of the identification of the Futurist revolution with the conquest of power in the new Italian nation. “Artists to Power” was the slogan of political Futurism. It conveyed the conviction that the Futurist movement was the only avant-garde movement possessing awareness of modernity, and as such had the revolutionary force to inspire the creation of a modern “New Italy”. *Italianismo* was in effect the predominant theme of Futurist aesthetics and politics. Umberto Boccioni expressed the view that Futurism was the greatest demonstration of the “marvellous youthful atmosphere which is emerging, and by means of which Italy has started on its way to becoming a great working and military power.”<sup>9</sup> To this he added: “Today Italy is a youthful and strong country, which shall become great and that is enough! Everything has to be spiritually, and therefore aesthetically, re-fashioned.”<sup>10</sup>

In the political manifesto published for the elections of 1913, Marinetti, Boccioni, Carrà, and Russolo proclaimed the dogma of Futurist political thought: “The word ITALY has to dominate the word LIBERTY”.<sup>11</sup> After the Libyan War, the artist Carrà, an anarchist, converted to *l’italianismo*, and stated that to disown Italian nationalism meant to associate oneself with the nationalism of others.<sup>12</sup> Futurism was a demonstration of modernist nationalism, which was another theme cherished by the Italian avant-garde.<sup>13</sup> This nationalism had nothing in common with the cult of the past and fetishistic concern with tradition, rather it enthusiastically looked towards modernity and the industrial transformation of Italy. Futurist nationalism was anti-authoritarian, anti-clerical and libertarian. Nor did it rule out the possibility of joining forces with the revolutionary Left, the anarchists and syndicalists in order to combat the common enemy: bourgeois liberal society and the bureaucratic and centralist State. The Futurists declared themselves anti-Socialist, because the Italian Socialist Party was both pacifist and internationalist. The Futurists, on the other hand, wanted to bring about the emancipation of the proletariat through nationalist “pride, energy, and territorial expansion”, as was stated in the first

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9 Boccioni: *Opera completa*, ed. 1927, p. 39.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

11 “Programma politico futurista.” Marinetti: *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, p. 291.

12 See Carrà’s letter to Soffici, dated 12 June 1913, in Drudi Gambillo and Fiori: *Archivi del futurismo* vol. 1, p. 271.

13 See Gentile: “The Conquest of Modernity”, pp. 59–61.

# LACERBA

Periodico quindicinale

Qui non si conta al modo delle rane.

Anno I, n. 20

Firenze, 15 ottobre 1913

Costa 4 soldi

CONTIENE: Programma politico futurista — PAPINI, Postilla — PAPINI, La vita non è sacra — GOVONI, Fotografia meccanica del temporale — GARRA, Pittura passata — Illustrazionismo, Pittura futurista — Pittura — BOCCIONI, Disegno — MAX JACOB, La conversion d'Emile Cordier — MOSCARDELLI, Spasimo — DISTASO, Siate senza pensiero del domani — CANGIULLO, Scoppio fabbrica pirotecnica — SOFFICI, Giornale di bordo.

## PROGRAMMA POLITICO FUTURISTA

**ELETTORI FUTURISTI! col vostro voto cercate di realizzare il seguente programma:**

- Italia sovrana assoluta. - La parola ITALIA deve dominare sulla parola LIBERTA.**  
Tutte le libertà, tranne quella di essere vigliacci, pacifisti, anti-italiani.  
**Una più grande flotta e un più grande esercito; un popolo orgoglioso di essere italiano,**  
per la Guerra, sola Igiene del mondo e per la grandezza di un'Italia intensamente  
agricola, industriale e commerciale.
- Difesa economica ed educazione patriottica del proletario.**  
**Politica estera cinica, astuta e aggressiva. - Espansionismo coloniale. - Liberismo.**  
**Irredentismo. - Panitalianismo. - Primato dell'Italia.**  
**Anticlericalismo e antisocialismo.**
- Culto del progresso e della velocità, dello sport, della forza fisica, del coraggio temerario,**  
dell'eroismo e del pericolo, contro l'ossessione della cultura, l'insegnamento  
classico, il museo, la biblioteca e i ruderi. - Soppressione delle accademie e dei  
conservatori.
- Molte scuole pratiche di commercio, industria e agricoltura. - Molti istituti di educazione**  
fisica. - **Ginnastica quotidiana nelle scuole. - Predominio della ginnastica sul libro.**
- Un minimo di professori, pochissimi avvocati, moltissimi agricoltori, ingegneri, chimici,**  
meccanici e produttori di affari.
- Esautorazione dei morti, dei vecchi e degli opportunisti, in favore dei giovani audaci.**  
**Contro la monumentomania e l'ingerenza del Governo in materia d'arte.**  
**Modernizzazione violenta delle città passatiste (Roma, Venezia, Firenze, ecc.).**  
**Abolizione dell'industria del forestiero, umiliante ed aleatoria.**

1 The Futurist Political Programme of 1913, as it appeared on the front page of *Lacerba*.

Futurist political manifesto, published for the elections of 1909.<sup>14</sup> But because this *italianismo* conditioned Futurist ideology and politics, it inhibited the ability of the movement to overcome the distrust of the proletariat and Left-wing subversives. Despite all intentions and attempts at common action, the Futurists' *italianismo* prevented a stable alliance with the forces of the Left, especially after the Great War.

The interest of Futurists in politics went through various phases of development. Up until the outbreak of the Great War, it is really more correct to talk of a Futurist "attitude" towards politics, rather than of a true political creed. Political engagement was limited to a few manifestos, irredentist demonstrations against Austria, and glorification of the Libyan War. Anti-socialism, anti-clericalism and anti-pacifism were the more readily used formulas of the Futurist political programme. The first commitment to political action came with the Libyan War in 1912. From this point on, politics assumed a major role in Futurist propaganda and action, within a framework of a general radicalisation of the political struggle in Italy, characterised by a violent conflict between interventionists and neutralists.

In August 1914, the Futurists were the first to take to the streets and call for intervention against Austria and Germany. When finally Italy entered the war, they joined the voluntary forces, with Marinetti at their head. War was taken seriously and some even lost their lives. The Futurists had declared war to be the "hygiene of the world", but that was not meant as glorification of war for the love of war: they were convinced that war, and similarly revolution, would bring the Futurist prophecies to realisation. It was believed that the outbreak of war would undermine the foundations of the old order and signal the beginning of that which Marinetti called the "Italian revolution".

The Futurists were interventionists, above all for their *italianismo*, but also for their dislike of Germany and Austria, and for love of France. With the outbreak of the war they had prophesied and hoped for, history seemed to be progressing in line with the Futurists' political creed. The Great War was seen as a "Futurist situation", which involved the whole nation in a bloody rite of collective initiation into modern life. The idea of regenerative violence, by means of war or revolution, was one of the cornerstones of Futurist political ideology (just as it was part of all other Italian avant-garde movements). For the Futurists, the auspicious "baptism with blood" had to be a part of that acceptance of life's brutality, which they believed was a true characteristic of modernity.

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14 See Marinetti: *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, p. 290.

With the war commenced the period of true political commitment of the Futurist movement, which was to last up until the end of 1920. The creation of the Futurist Political Party in 1918 was no improvised act, but rather the consequence of their interpretation of war and the role of Futurism in the “Italian revolution”. The proposal to form a Futurist Political Party began to mature in 1917<sup>15</sup> and was first mentioned on 9 December 1917 in *L’Italia futurista*. Emilio Settimelli described the character of the new Party, which would be distinguished from the artistic movement by its “adaptability”. The announcement of the Futurist constitution came in February 1918, and in order to spread the ideas of the new party, *Roma Futurista* was founded by the captain of the “arditi”, Mario Carli, together with Marinetti and Emilio Settimelli. In their support came students, intellectuals and above all, the “arditi”.

We do not know much about the organisational substance of the Party, but one comes across traces of its presence and activity from the beginning of 1919 to the end of 1920. Even if it only existed for a brief span of time, it was an original experiment: it was the first political party to be born directly of an artistic movement, with the aim of putting artists in the driving seat of a revolutionary transformation of State and society. It was a new phenomenon which found favourable conditions for a short-lived achievement, albeit of modest proportions, in the revolutionary atmosphere of the initial postwar period, a time full of hopes, ambition, and messianic expectations.

The Futurist Party Programme contained all elements of the myth of the “Italian revolution”, together with a plan for social and political renewal, but leaving aside any aesthetic considerations.<sup>16</sup> The only conditions for joining the Futurist Party were interventionism, the glorification of war, struggle against the neutralists, the liberal State, the monarchy, and the Church. The ultimate aim was the realisation of a free Futurist democracy, inspired by a willingness for modernisation of Italian society and a renewal of the capitalist industrial system, which would, according to the productivist myth, unify capital and the working classes. The symbol of the Futurist “Italian revolution” was the flag of the new Party, which was a bold red over white and green. The Futurists wanted a republic, the expulsion of the Pope, the introduction of the “easiest divorce”, State education for all, the abolition of the right of succession and landed private income, worker participation in the direction of factories, and fair division of profit. The new Futurist State, prefigured in Marinetti’s book *Democrazia*

15 See Gentile: “Il futurismo e la politica”, pp. 120–123.

16 The programme was first published on 11 February 1918 in *L’Italia futurista*, and in an altered version on 20 September 1918 in *Roma futurista*. See also Marinetti: *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, pp. 300–303.



*futurista* of 1919, sought to reduce State control over society to a minimum. The Futurist programme proposed a wide-ranging administrative decentralisation, streamlining of bureaucracy, a government of young people, the abolition of prisons, and voluntary military service. Furthermore, the Futurist State sought the abolition of the family by means of free love and State education for all children. It wanted to guarantee all citizens an equal start in life, allowing the development of personality by the unleashing competitive spirit of individuals in an atmosphere of total freedom. In reality, Futurist democracy was no modern mass democracy of the era of great nation States: in spite of the pretensions to modernity, the ideal of political Futurism was a small anarchic and individualist community.

One could easily dismiss political Futurism as a literary Utopia. But in the buzzing atmosphere of the immediate postwar period, full of hopes, revolutionary fervour, and palingenetic myths, many Futurists believed that the Utopia of a Futurist democracy could be realised. Had it not been possible for the poet d'Annunzio to take power in Fiume and found a new State? "Today, poetry is in command", declared Mario Carli in response to d'Annunzio's annexation of the city, and indeed, to some extent and on a small scale, the Futurist dream seemed to come to fruition in occupied Fiume.<sup>17</sup>

It was in this climate that the encounter between Futurism and Mussolini took place. The basis for the union was *l'italianismo*, interventionism, and the Combatants' movement during the "two red years" of 1919/1920. The common aim was the struggle against the liberals, socialists, and Catholics in order to realise the "Italian revolution". The Futurists were amongst the first Fascists; Marinetti became a member of the central committee of the *Fasci di combattimento*; Fascism drew much inspiration from the Futurist party programme.<sup>18</sup> Throughout 1919, Futurism and Fascism lived side-by-side without losing their own individual characteristics: one was a movement of artists seeking to influence politics, the other was a movement of politicians who wanted to use art to extend their sphere of influence. Together, Futurists and Fascists carried out the first anti-socialist actions, such as the raid on the premises of *Avanti!* on 15 April 1919.

Throughout 1919, political Futurism was a movement which had considerable influence on the forces who challenged the liberal State and the Socialist Party, even if some Futurists did in fact sympathise with socialism and the Bolshevik revolution. Fascism assimilated from Futurism, but also from other sources, such themes as the myth of modernity, the enhancement of vitality by means of battle and conquest, the cult of masculinity, speed and the machine,

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17 See Carli: *Con d'Annunzio a Fiume*, p. 71.

18 See de Felice: *Mussolini il rivoluzionario*, pp. 475–477.