Third Rome: Reconciling Antiquity and Modernity in the Fascist Conceptualization of Time

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ABSTRACT

Despite the ideological diversity that exists across fascist movements of recent history, one characteristic has come to be seen as endemic: the glorification of a national past and/or lost national character. In the case of Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime, the Italian nation-building project required the resurrection of a much older past – namely, Italy's Ancient Roman heritage. This recourse to antiquity appeared in the regime's public communications, literature, and propagandist media. However, in this paper I argue that this turn toward the ancient was not indicative of an *anti-modern* stance. Rather, the regime's classicist language coexisted with broader modernization projects. Narratives around time served different functions in different domains – both material and immaterial. This paper moves beyond an analysis of fascist political rhetoric to consider the *spatial* projects mobilized under Fascist rule, specifically in the areas of modernist architecture and urban planning.

Keywords**:** Fascism, Third Rome, romanità, temporality, fascist rhetoric

When Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini unveiled the Augustan Exhibition of Romanità in Rome's Palazzo delle Esposizioni in 1937, he left an inscription at its door: "Italians, you must ensure that the glories of the past are surpassed by the triumphs of the future." Not only did Mussolini's remark establish a symbolic relationship between Ancient Rome and Fascist Italy, but it also indicated the unique way in which fascism constructed temporality.[2] From its conception, Italian fascism had neither a delineated ideology nor unified programming across its many sects. Early Fascism, as developed by Mussolini, was much less a party than an "anti-party": a multifaceted category comprising distinct subsects, generally with a shared animus against liberalism. Under one title, fascism subsumed many often-clashing ideologies and aesthetics, incorporating aspects of national syndicalism, revolutionary nationalism, corporatism, and Futurism, among other movements and trends.[3] The Fascist regime that ruled over Italy during the *ventennio* (1925-1945) exemplified this lack of discernible ideology, and this tension appeared particularly in the regime's relationship to *temporality*.

Corresponding to the heterogeneity of its constituents, Mussolini's Fascist regime presented a highly eclectic conceptualization of time, marked by the unification of contradictory temporal models.[4] Characteristic of Italian fascism was the tension between its clear classicism, on the one hand, and its model of modernity, on the other. "*Romanità*," the political and cultural

[2] Flavia Marcello, "Mussolini and the Idealisation of Empire: The Augustan Exhibition of Romanità," *Modern Italy* 16, no. 3 (2011): 230.
[3] A. James Gregor, *Mussolini's Intellectuals: Fascist Social and Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 54.
[4] Helen Roche, "Mussolini's 'Third Rome', Hitler's Third Reich and the Allure of Antiquity," *Fascism* 8, no. 2 (2019): 131.

concepts comprising Ancient Roman identity, was highly regarded by Mussolini, and it manifested presently in his public rhetoric. In *The Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini and co-author Giovanni Gentile stated that the fascist conceptualization of life venerated "duty, elevation, and conquest."[5] The authors posited fascist values, such as discipline and the spirit of self-sacrifice, as fundamentally imperial. Their idealization of the Roman Empire appeared not only in literature but also in physical space, which supplied a form of *material rhetoric*. Mussolini's architectural projects throughout Rome reclaimed and developed ancient monuments and public spaces to revive a lost imperial aesthetic.[6]

This paper will argue, however, that Fascism's recourse to classical Roman virtues and motifs cannot be viewed as definitively nostalgic, as Mussolini's prescriptions of *romanità* were inherently transformational and forward-looking.[7] Although there has been a dominant strain in historical scholarship to characterize fascism as staunchly "anti-modern," with its criticism of liberal, multicultural societies, its stance on modernity is not quite so dichotomous. Rather, the fascism of the *ventennio* exists in a transient chrono-political space. While it sought to usher in a mythic "new" era using the achievements of development and modern technology, it paradoxically posited said era as a revitalization of the *past*. Thus, the fascist conceptualization of temporality can be characterized by the aesthetic and cultural modernization of Italy and a simultaneous hearkening back to imperial Rome through classicist and nationalist rhetoric.

At the core of Fascism's surge to power, as well as its own ideological eclecticism, was the lack of unified national identity present in early twentieth-century Italy. Although the unification of the Kingdom of Italy in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, otherwise known as the *Risorgimento*, contributed to a newfound sense of national *identity*, it did little to create any resounding sense of national unity; various socio-political movements sprung up as a result.[8] The nation had long been culturally, infrastructurally, and linguistically diverse, so, despite its eventual unification during the *Risorgimento* and occasional nationalist movements, internal tensions and domestic unrest within the population inevitably remained. Following the nation's victory in the Great War, nationalist sentiments generally heightened among Italians, which would render Mussolini's political messaging all the more compelling. With the rise of fascism came increased appeal specifically toward Italy's former status as a unified and expansive empire. When Mussolini stepped into power as dictator in 1925, glorification of Ancient Rome became a consistent feature of his rhetoric and vision for Italy as a new Fascist state. Ancient Rome was a unifying national symbol with which all Italians could identify and for which they could feel universally nostalgic, despite regional differences. Manifestations of this nostalgia ranged from tangible reforms, such as the declaration of April 21 (the mythical "founding of Rome") as a national holiday, replacing May Day celebrations, to more substantial political projects.[9] The expansionist regime claimed to have spurred the rebirth of the Roman Empire, as Italy entered the imperial scene and invaded current-day Ethiopia (then known as Abyssinia). However, this glorification functioned emblematically as well; Mussolini increasingly ascribed to himself the qualities of a Roman

[5] Benito Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism* (Florence: Enciclopedia Italiana, 1932).
[6] Borden Painter, "Mussolini and Rome," in *A Companion to the City of Rome*, ed. Claire Holleran and Amanda Claridge (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2018), 683.
[7] Roche, "Mussolini's 'Third Rome,'" 151.
[8] Ibid., 144.
[9] Ibid., 134.

emperor, likening himself to Caesar and forging a metaphorical connection between Italy under Augustan rule and Italy as a fascist dictatorship.[10]

While *romanità* (and the pursuit thereof) was never an *explicit* normative demand of the Fascist state, it was acutely present in the literature of prominent scholars, intellectuals, and political leaders of the time. Moreover, ordinary citizens accessed this rhetoric from the likes of artists, teachers and scholars of antiquity, and mass media.[11] One such example is Pietro De Francisci, a professor of Roman Law at the University of Rome, who published many works in the 1930s codifying and canonizing *romanità* in the Fascist ideology. As a result of his steadfast propagation of *romanità*, he was highly regarded by Mussolini himself, and his work was circulated among the regime. However, with the regime eliminating virtually all academic and journalistic freedoms, it was not always the autonomous choice of teachers and public figures to support the regime's presentation of history. Rather, the regime mandated that all schoolteachers and university professors swear an oath of allegiance to the party and *Il Duce*. The press was also carefully curated, with Mussolini's cabinet personally selecting and granting approval to newspaper editors. Once approved, the press would disseminate Fascist propaganda and patriotism to the masses on behalf of the regime.[12] As a result, the regime was able to create the impression of not only a "free press," but of universal support for the party.

This strategy deliberately targeted children, as well. Imperial patriotism became an integral, mandated feature of the history curriculum in primary and secondary schools. With the compulsion of the regime, scholars and the press were able to posit classical Roman history as Italian *national* history, not only in the minds of adults but in those of children at crucial developmental and formative stages.[13] The "cult of *romanità*" and its propagandizing ability were not merely the result of "top-down" messaging. Rather, the power of *romanità* as a nationalizing force lay in the fact that it was distributed from a higher authority and then propagated by many at a local level, making it accessible to various sub-sects of the larger populace.

The familiar yet temporally distant figure of Ancient Rome offered a flexible point of reference for the Fascist regime. The notion of "Ancient Rome" could be used opportunistically to validate a wide range of ideals, whether that be vaguely defined "Roman virtues," architectural projects, or the pursuit of colonial expansion. Additionally, and arguably most significantly, it provided necessary political imagery and symbolism for the ideologically eclectic Fascist Party. An idealized image of Ancient Rome provided Mussolini and his administration a means of cementing Fascist power, as it acted as a symbol of a powerful and unified mythic past — an appealing offer to both classicist intellectuals and ordinary citizens seeking respite from regional and social divisions. As professor of architectural history Flavia Marcello indicates in her spatial analysis of Fascist exhibitions, "the idea of Rome took on material aspects through a kind of 'recognition effect' for the visitor by presenting *Romanità* as a collective mirror in which to view an image of their own social visage."[14] Upon this image, the regime could shape a *new* revitalized

[10] Painter, "Mussolini and Rome," 683.
[11] Romke Visser, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the Romanità," *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, no. 1 (January 1992): 8.
[12] Ibid., 10.

[13] Ibid., 6.
[14] Marcello, "Mussolini and the Idealisation of Empire," 227.

civilization and gain much aesthetic inspiration, not only for a common cultural identity but also for architecture, visual arts, journalism, and other media.

Members of the Italian bourgeoisie maintained a particular attraction to fascism's apparent classicism, though they required a more "scientific" convincing than a dogmatic one, as was generally the case with the general public.[15] The historical aims of the regime appealed to educated, wealthy Italians, who had positivist proclivities and were likely impressed by the measurable results and successes of Fascist governance. Such achievements included the introduction and development of the corporatist state; Italy's growing colonial presence; and the Lateran Treaties, wherein the papacy recognized the state of Italy with Rome as its capital, and Italy in return recognized papal sovereignty over the Vatican City. Classicism and the cult of the *romanità* were also of particular importance to the many right-wing intellectuals who supported the Fascist state, such as reactionary Catholics and monarchists. In their view, fascism appeared to defend their conservative and generally nostalgic interests.[16] The regime needed this base of bourgeois intellectuals -- in addition to propagandized masses, as established bourgeois conceptualizations of history often corroborated fascist ideals. Fascism's usage of cultic and patriotic approaches toward *romanità* was thus able to attract intellectuals and otherwise unlikely demographics to its doctrines.

It is important to note, however, that the Fascist Party did not *invent* romanità or any such approaches toward examining the Roman past. Rather, it took advantage of this existing notion that had appeared in many colonial and bourgeois discourses from the late-nineteenth century onwards.[17] In fact, one can look as far back as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to see *romanità*'s earlier incarnations. The Italian Renaissance period can reasonably be considered the start of the sociopolitical and national rebirth of Italy, as its intellectual authorities venerated Ancient Greco-Roman systems of thought and aesthetics as the peak of human civilization. Many of the key figures involved in the eventual *Risorgimento* considered the movement to be an imperative historical event, as they held the glorious Roman past in high regard — in some ways, even, as a *paradigm*. Garibaldi and Mazzini, prominent figures of the *Risorgimento*, both believed that Ancient Rome served a symbolic purpose, particularly because one could consider the Roman era to be the only period of national unity and cultural prosperity in Italian history prior to the unification of the peninsula.[18] Additionally, during the early-twentieth century, various aspects of Roman history were used frequently in conservative and reactionary propaganda, though not so emphatically.

The *romanità* of the Fascist era was not merely a rhetorical feature of lofty discourses and propaganda; it also had tangible manifestations, in practice — albeit often in opportunistic ways (the regime was generally inconsistent and would direct support to any institutions that provided it with historical justifications for its goals and projects). However, if we consider the transformational way that *romanità* was presented and injected into quotidian Italian life, in tandem with the prominent temporal philosophies of the time, we can begin to see how fascism, in fact, utilized history as a means for achieving modernist aims. Mussolini frequently framed

[15] Visser, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the Romanità," 9.
[16] Ibid., 10.
[17] Ibid., 9.
[18] Roche, "Mussolini's 'Third Rome,'" 150.

fascism as the forward-thinking movement that would usher Italy into a wholly new era. As he stated in *The Doctrine of Fascism*, "a nation, as expressed in the State, is a living, ethical entity only insofar as it is progressive."[19] This progressive conceptualization of time is fundamentally modernistic. If we look to Gentile, considered by many to be the father of Fascist philosophy, we see language that corroborates this notion. Based on his philosophy of actualism, Gentile argued that history "belongs to the present."[20] In saying this, he rejected the notion of history as a discrete past containing fixed or objective truth. Instead, Gentile articulated a unique view of history as mutable and interpretative in the historic imaginary of a people. In this sense, he rationalized the use of *narrative* for politically expedient purposes, suggesting that history was wholly submissive to its contemporary deployment. This actualist philosophy was culturally modernist, positing fascism as a historical agent called upon to interpret history to the present masses and revitalize it accordingly.

Another relevant reference is the contemporaneous Futurist movement, which argued a similar position. Founded by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the flourishing artistic and social movement often worked closely with Fascists, as it too had a modernizing mission for Italy. Adherents of Futurism were self-described radicals who glorified modernity and hoped to overthrow backward-looking tradition with force and virility.[21] Naturally, the philosophies of Futurism and Gentile's fascism were highly compatible, and they soon became inextricably connected by their modernist aims.

While the modernist movement is typically understood in terms of aesthetic renewal, the notion of modernism necessarily extends to social organization and social reform. As Mussolini's close associate, Gentile wrote numerous essays on the ways in which fascism was a necessary alternative to liberalism, communism, *and* socialism. In this regard, fascism was a clear attempt at modernist societal renewal, as the regime aimed to birth an entirely new culture and era. Numerous scholars have characterized Mussolini's aim of subverting both capitalist democracy and communism as fundamentally anti-modern. However, his regime continually embraced and acknowledged the utility of modern technologies, mass media (as a tool for the dissemination of propaganda), elements of welfarism, and urban renewal.[22] Fascism was a project of *total* cultural renewal in reference to a gallant history, and necessary to this project was a modernist approach towards societal evolution. Not only were modernist ideals being amplified within literature and public discourse, but modernist architecture also flourished under Mussolini.[23] Throughout its tenure, the Fascist regime granted approval to numerous modernist architectural projects, designed predominantly by members of the Rationalist School — an architectural current which would lead to the development of the Modernist style.

The architecture of the Fascist period often paralleled the regime's consistent recourse to antiquity, a concept which manifested in a specific style of architectural neo-classicism known as *stile littorio*.[24] This architectural style attempted to create structures that were classical yet

[19] Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism.*
[20] Claudio Fogu, "Actualism and the Fascist Historic Imaginary," *History and Theory* 42, no. 2 (2003): 199.
[21] Felipe Fernández-Armesto, O*ut of Our Minds: What We Think and How We Came to Think It* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 350.
[22] Roche, "Mussolini's 'Third Rome,'" 128.
[23] Painter, "Mussolini and Rome," 685.
[24] Jan Nelis, "Back to the Future," *Fascism* 1, no. 3 (2014): 9.

minimalist and abstract, influenced by both traditional and modernist ideas (with touches of functionalism and art-deco). *Stile littorio* was most observable in buildings and structures in the capital, built by Futurist and Rationalist architects. For Rationalists, an element of classicism was necessary, as this celebrated the achievements and timelessness of ancient architectural forms; yet they simultaneously transformed these styles by re-interpreting certain critical elements and ultimately modernizing them.[25] The EUR area of Rome offers a particularly salient and renowned example of Fascist architecture and planning. Now a bustling residential and business district, the EUR (*Esposizione Universale Roma*) area was originally established with fascist rationale. Although it was completed decades after the demise of the Fascist regime, the urban project began in the 1930s under the direction of Mussolini, who hoped to establish a location for a World Fair celebrating twenty years since the March on Rome. The area contains many Fascist-era buildings and sculptures, but one of the urban project's most epochal components is the *Palazzo della Civiltà del Lavoro*, constructed between 1938 and 1943 and referred to by many as the *Colosseo quadrato* ("square Colosseum").

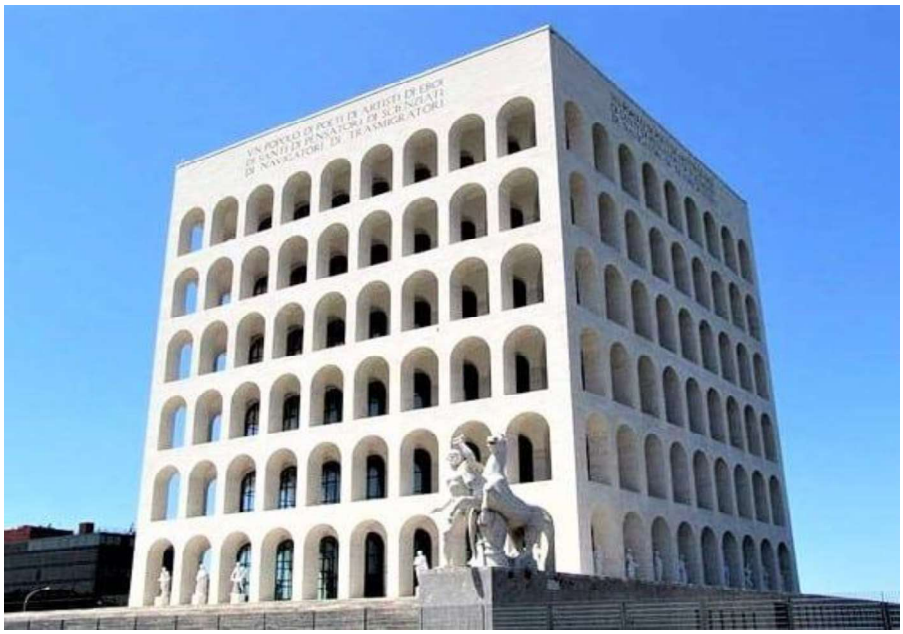

Fig. 1. Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, designed in 1938 by architects Giovanni Guerrini, Ernesto La Padula, and Mario Romano.

As a renewed take on a classical form, the *Palazzo della Civiltà del Lavoro* offers a paradigmatic architectural translation of Fascism's primary aim: to mingle antiquity and modernity. As with many other structures in the area, the building features modern, angular axes, while being made of traditional materials associated with the Roman Empire, such as limestone and marble. Although he did not necessarily *enforce* any particular architectural style, Mussolini himself encouraged this eclectic approach toward design among his commissioned architects — a

[25] Aristotle Kallis, "Futures Made Present: Architecture, Monument, and the Battle for the 'Third Way' in Fascist Italy," *Fascism* 7, no. 1 (2018): 50.

notion that came to be known as "aesthetic pluralism."[26] Under the regime, Italian architecture and urban planning became the token medium used to materialize the Fascist "Third Way" — a purposeful interaction between futurity and tradition, which overcame a previously established polarity.[27]

Ultimately, Mussolini's Fascist regime intended to both restore *and* innovate Italy, and its mission to do so manifested clearly in both its public rhetoric and its aesthetic projects. It is admittedly difficult to characterize a temporal model which is both nostalgic and forward-looking. Thus, the fascist conceptualization of temporality can most appropriately be labeled as just that: fascist. The regime's approach towards classicism and modernity is a unique construction that evades strict definition — and it is possible that this was intentional. *Risorgimento* activist Mazzini once famously proclaimed: "After the Rome of the Caesars, after the Rome of the Popes, there will come the Rome of the people."[28] In the eyes of Mussolini and his party, fascism achieved this revolutionary "Third Rome" not only through its totalitarian politics but by embracing both an imperial heritage and a supreme modernity. In the words of Mussolini himself, "the Fascist State [was] not only the present; it [was] also the past and above all the future."[29]

[26] Painter, "Mussolini and Rome," 688.
[27] Kallis, "Futures Made Present," 58.
[28] Roche, "Mussolini's 'Third Rome,'" 150.
[29] Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism.*

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