The Politics of Prefiguration: Fascist Gestures in Predappio, Italy

Paolo Heywood

'I myself remember how, in the 1930s, even in the midst of our anti-fascist engagement, we could only laugh at Mussolini's posturing and gestures – the rigmarole of fascist ritual – without attempting to understand their true import'. (George L. Mosse)

A crowd of men in black clothing filled the open area in front of the cemetery and stretched back down the road to the village. These were not mourners however, but celebrants, and at periodic intervals they raised their right arms, palms outstretched, and shouted 'a noi!', to general enthusiasm.

The cemetery was that of the church of San Cassiano, just outside the small Apennine village of Predappio in central northern Italy. The cemetery is a striking example of monumental architecture, but otherwise possesses only one distinguishing feature, namely that of hosting the body of Benito Mussolini together with those of several of his close kin and affines. Mussolini was born in Predappio in 1883, and over the course of the 1920s and 1930s transformed the village into a kind of fascist Disneyland, a place of pilgrimage for Italians to come and marvel at the humble origins of their Duce and the urban engineering feats of his regime.

After the war, and a series of misadventures (Luzzato, 2011), Mussolini's body was returned to the family tomb in 1957. On the day it was reburied a crowd of several thousand neo-fascists attended, and since then Predappio has again become a centre for neo-fascist pilgrimages. Around 100,000 such tourists visit it every year, and on three days in particular – the anniversaries of Mussolini's birth, death, and of the so-called 'March on Rome' – thousands come to march from the main square of the village to his tomb in the cemetery, where they will often stand for speeches, right arms raised in the Roman salute (Heywood forthcoming).

There is certainly plenty that is ridiculous and futile-seeming in such rituals, as local residents will happily point out, dismissively referring to them as 'carnivals': elderly men wear the uniforms of the fascist youth organisation; dogs are dressed up in Mussolini-themed bibs; visitors buy pasta made into the

shape of Mussolini's face. Many commentators have long seen the parades as historian George Mosse once saw Mussolini's 'posturing and gestures': laughable, pointless, and absurd. They seem futile to observers because of both their superficiality (no coherent ideology unites these marchers, just as no coherent ideology united historical Italian Fascism) and their apparent purposelessness: they are 'merely' gestures, or 'the rigmarole of Fascist ritual', in Mosse's terms.

Yet, as Mosse goes on to point out, the 'true import' of such apparently futile, non-instrumental gestural politics lies in the gestures themselves. Indeed, anthropologists of left-wing activism have a developed analytical language with which to describe seemingly pointless or absurd instances of gestural political action. Stine Kroijer (2015), for instance, has written of the extensive concern for 'good style' displayed by anti-globalisation activists in Copenhagen. They 'do not scale single actions against…a universal form…an end-point…or an ideological programme…'good style' is internal to the phenomenon itself' (Kroijer, 2015: 87). Similarly, David Graeber describes the ways in which direct action ideology is 'embedded' in the practice of direct action activism itself, in which 'the structure of one's own act becomes a kind of microutopia, a concrete model for one's vision of a free society' (Graeber, 2009: 210).

We have become used to the application of these sorts of notions to progressive political movements, but Graeber also notes the seminal influence of Georges Sorel on both Leninist and Fascist understandings of the importance of form and style in political action (Sorel, 2004: 18-19). Sorel was a huge influence on Mussolini (Sternhell, 1994). Like Sorel, Mussolini was an anti-theoretical Marxist: neither had much time for the theories of surplus value or historical materialism, and, following Sorel, Mussolini came to understand Marxism as a mobilising myth in the service of revolution. It didn't matter whether the revolution was bound to lead to socialism; what mattered was that socialism – as a myth, not a doctrine – lead to action in the form of revolution, a valuable end in and of itself. At the heart, in other words, of the origins of fascism is the importance of actions and gestures in and of themselves, as both the means and ends of politics. In a sense, fascism had its own theory of prefiguration, and of the collapse of means and ends.

As Mosse and a great many other recent historians of fascism have come to argue, non-instrumental, gestural political action was also fundamental to the fascist style of politics during its time in power. Emilio Gentile has famously written of the 'sacralisation of politics' in Italian fascism, in which spectacular, stylised, and ritualistic features of the regime served to generate mass appeal and genuine faith (Gentile, 1996). To this vision of politics again what is at issue is not the instrumental value of political gestures – which may thus look absurd and futile to observers – but the gestures themselves, which create (or re-create, in Predappio) an imagined world of masculine militarised virility.

There is much that is seen as absurd about the men and women who come to march through the streets of Predappio three times a year. But in a sense what they have achieved is precisely what a Sorelian politics of gesture aims to achieve: in maintaining Predappio as a space in which it is possible to march in a black uniform and perform the Roman salute, they have kept alive their particular vision of what the world should look like (retro-figurative action, perhaps). Whether or not in doing so they have 'prefigured' the broader success of this vision remains to be seen, but it is certainly the case that the rise of the far-right in Italy and beyond means they look to many like less and less of a laughing matter.

References

Gentile E (1996) *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Graeber D (2004) *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Graeber D (2009) *Direct Action: an Ethnography*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Heywood P (2019) Fascism, uncensored: legalism and neo-fascist pilgrimage in Predappio, Italy. *Terrain* 72: 86-103.

Krøijer S (2015) Revolution is the way you eat: exemplification among left-radical activists and in anthropology. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21: 78-95.

Luzzato S (2011) *Il Corpo del Duce*. Turin: Einaudi.

Sternhell Z (1994) *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Cite As

Paolo Heywood (2020) The Politics of Prefiguration: Fascist Gestures in Predappio, Italy. Anthropological Theory Commons. Url: http://www.at-commons.com/2020/10/16/the-politics-of-prefiguration-fascist-gestures-in-predappio-italy/

About the author(s)

Paolo Heywood is a Junior Research Fellow at Cambridge University and, from September 2020, Assistant Professor in Social Anthropology at Durham University. He is the author of *After Difference: queer activism in Italy and anthropological theory*