

THE FIN-DE-SIÈCLE AND FASCIST IDEOLOGY

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I. Introduction

To suggest that fascism contained anything of intellectual value or interest seems at best a distortion or at worst an outright lie. That fascism was the product of intellectuals, academics and other members of an earlier age's literati frightens many contemporary intellectuals, myself included. Historian of fascism Eugen Weber perhaps best summarizes the scholarly sentiment towards fascism: "Fascism is a plague from outer space, to be stamped out, not placed in human context."¹ But as unsettling as it may seem, many studies of fascism in the last forty years have consistently shown that fascism did indeed have a human context and, worse yet, an intellectual context that originated in the closing years of nineteenth century Europe. In establishing an originating era for fascism these studies have also sought to identify the specific originators of fascistic thought.

The so-called fathers of fascism have come under increasing scrutiny in order to better understand their role in the development of fascist ideologies through the exact ideas they fostered, redefined or otherwise popularized in the pre-1914 era. Yet, the matter of which pre-1914 thinker merits inclusion as a father of fascism remains highly contentious. Just as historians are not inclined to exonerate previously established proto-fascist thinkers, they are also hesitant to accuse a past intellectual of aiding the development of such a destructive movement, particularly in light of Zeev Sternhell's anti-defamation case. Fellow historian Robert Wohl makes the crucial point that historians of fascism like Sternhell must clearly define what separates fascist intellectuals from those who merely shared similar concerns and desires, either politically or socially.²

¹ Eugen Weber, "Fascism(s) and Some Harbingers," *Journal of Modern History* 54, no. 4 (December 1982): 746.

² The Sternhell case serves as a reminder of the dangers historians can encounter when associating living persons with socially unfavorable political movements like fascism. After the publicans of the French edition of *Neither Right Nor Left*, Zeev Sternhell was taken to court for defamation by one of the living actors he cited as a fascist. While eventually losing the case, Sternhell received only a symbolic financial punishment and was not ordered to remove the offending passage from future editions of his text. Still, historians should remain careful about what

It is this internal struggle that historians face in identifying and utilizing proto-fascist intellectuals that the present study will focus on. To the general audience the links between fascism's *fin-de-siècle* origins and the more familiar regimes of interwar Italy and Germany are not readily apparent. As a consequence, the historians of fascism must act as guides and mediators between the nascent proto-fascist period and the more familiar era of fascist Europe. One means for bringing those links between the proto-fascist and the fascist eras to the surface has been to "stress the coherence of the years between the 1890s and 1930s as a unitary context." In stressing that unitary context the "broader, deeper-lying, and less visible ideological consensus" that supported the fascist regimes becomes the primary object of study. The challenge to historians of fascism thus lies in their ability to convey that ideological consensus without validating or otherwise confirming its power. The quest of historians of fascism then is one of the dispassionate explanation of fascism's ideology and culture without presenting fascism as morally acceptable.³

Historians of fascism have responded to that moral challenge by using a cultural analysis of how meaning was produced in cultures that saw the rise of fascism. Particularly for the proto-fascist period, meaning and definition are of key importance. This focus on meaning in fascist and pre-fascist culture requires the study of the works of various intellectuals of the proto-fascist period and the culture that informed those works. Such an approach uses the works of particular figures in the proto-fascist era as touchstones of fascism's cultural development. It allows historians to trace the various paths from the amorphous collection of sentiments and ideas of pre-1914 Europe to the fascist movements and regimes of the interwar years. Moreover, through the texts of the intellectuals of the proto-fascist period historians have a point of entry into the

labels the attach to historical actors. Robert Wohl, "French Fascism, Both Right and Left: Reflections on the Sternhell Controversy," *Journal of Modern History* 63, no. 1 (March 1991): 91, 92.

³ Geoffrey Eley, "What is Cultural History?" *Cultural History/Cultural Studies*, *New German Critique*, no. 65 (Spring-Summer 1995): 36, 34.

‘world of representation’ that informed and influenced the proto-fascists and even the fascists themselves. Even so, relying on particular *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals as lenses into the proto-fascist period becomes highly problematic when attempting to directly connect those same intellectuals to fascist ideology itself.⁴

For the sake of clear definition, the proto-fascist intellectuals were those intellectual who either first proposed or redefined the new ways of seeing the world and possible cures for the ills of Western civilization that would later form the basic structure of fascist ideology.⁵ The proto-fascists were generally members of the so-called ‘generation of 1890’—a label given to the intellectuals of France, Italy and Germany who sought answers to apparent growing disconnect between external reality and the internal observation of that reality; a disconnect that classical Enlightenment thought could not provide an answer for. The many of the responses of the generation of 1890 would later find usage in the ideologies of fascist movements during the interwar years. But any attempt to use the writings of the generation of 1890 to study fascism’s ideological development must wrestle with the problem of dividing between those intellectuals who actively participated in the building of a fascist ideology and culture and those who were merely appropriated by fascist ideologues to grant fascism a degree of intellectual legitimacy.⁶

Among the intellectuals of the *fin-de-siècle*, four thinkers stand out for their apparent importance to fascism’s ideological development—Georges Sorel, Gustave Le Bon, Henri Bergson, and Friedrich Nietzsche. These four intellectuals represent several of the most notable names associated with the proto-fascist era.⁷ But in studying the relations between these intellectuals and fascist ideology historians encounter the methodological and theoretical

⁴ Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 11.

⁵ Robert Paxton, “The Five Stages of Fascism,” *Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 1 (March 1998): 11.

⁶ H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 15-17.

⁷ Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 24, 25, 27, 28.

problems when attempting to both describe the proto-fascist period and link it to the fascist era. As cultural historian Geoffrey Eley has suggested, studying the production of meaning in the proto-fascist and fascist periods requires a methodological apparatus designed for defining words and their usage.⁸ One method that holds great potential for cultural history is the theory of language proposed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his last work, the *Philosophical Investigations*. His “meaning-as-use” theorem was his method for examining how meaning is created and how to uncover that meaning. In light of Eley’s comments on the need to examine the production of meaning in fascist and pre-fascist culture, Wittgenstein’s theorem offers an effective tool for analysis.

‘Meaning-As-Use’

The theory of language Wittgenstein presents in *Philosophical Investigations* argues that the meaning of a word is not an intrinsic part of that word. Instead, meaning is derived by the function of a word in usage. Language, in Wittgenstein’s argument, is a public act and one cannot attach real meaning to a word that is not used in public. Meaning and definition are thus in constant evolution, ever changing over time. Wittgenstein defines this public act of language as a language-game “consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven.” The language-game forms a basic structure governing meaning. The rules of governing language do not form a unitary system but instead are a series of games, each with their own prescribed rules, such as in chess or in baseball, but all sharing a familial relationship in being games. More importantly, Wittgenstein stresses that each of the language-games are not “everywhere circumscribed by rules” but frequently bend rules or omit them entirely. Wittgenstein calls the language-game “a concept with blurred edges,” meaning that the language-game does not need to have a rule for everything to remain useful, just as in baseball no rule exists concerning the

⁸ Eley, “What is Cultural History?” 26, 32.

specific height of a player or the minimum speed of the ball. The rules only exist insofar as they allow the game to continue and do not need to define everything. Words may carry from language-game to language-game but the meaning is determined primarily by its function within a particular game.⁹

What makes Wittgenstein's seemingly rough-and-tumble theory work for cultural history is his idea of 'meaning-as-use'—that the meaning of a word is found in how that word is used. The language-game acts as a form of contextualization, providing a way of limiting the possible definitions of a word by restricting it to the game being played. To use Wittgenstein's example of a primitive language, two builders may use simple utterances such as 'slab' or 'block' and mean a variety of things. One use finds the first builder pointing to a slab and saying "Slab!" with the intent of telling the second builder the name of a certain object they will later use. Another use comes when the first builder makes the same utterance, "Slab!" but instead of naming an object he is ordering the second builder to retrieve a slab. In the first instance, the builders played the language-game of naming by ostension. The second game was one of ordering. Instead of requiring an entire phrase such as "This is a slab" or "Go get the slab" the meaning of the word is imparted by its use within a certain language-game.¹⁰

One obvious point about the 'meaning-as-use' theorem is that meaning is tied to a particular time and place; it is contextual. Contextualization lies at the heart of the language-game as Wittgenstein's theory requires both the language used and the actions surrounding that language to impart meaning. The language-games the primitive builders play would not work without the totality of the moment informing the usage of a word. The parallels between the language-game and Louis Althusser's conception of ideology as a public ritual reflect the

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 5, 33, 34, 39.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3, 20.

language-game's role in structuring experience. For cultural historians, particularly those concerned with the role of ideas in the development of fascist ideology, the language-game offers a means of understanding the intellectuals of *fin-de-siècle* culture through the use and interpretation of their words.

By focusing on the language and its interpretations of historical actors, historians have another avenue to understand the subtle distinctions of meaning between one actor and another. The assumptions of *fin-de-siècle* culture are crucial to understanding the thought of its thinkers. Terms such as materialism, liberalism, and socialism not only have a distinct meaning for contemporary historians, but also for nineteenth century anti-materialists, anti-liberals and anti-socialists. The case is even stronger when considering terms like *Übermensch*, *élan vital*, or *Volk*. The meaning of these terms has changed from person to person and period to period. When attempting to connect a *fin-de-siècle* thinker such as Friedrich Nietzsche to fascist ideology it is worth examining whether the fascists had the same meaning for *Übermensch* as Nietzsche did.

Employing Wittgenstein's theory of language will hopefully avoid some of the methodological complications of labeling a *fin-de-siècle* intellectual proto-fascist. As historian of fascism Robert Paxton pointedly noted: "Ideas count in fascism, but we must be precise about exactly when and how they count."¹¹ While Paxton was referring to the influence of ideas on the actions of fascism when in power, his comment is equally applicable to the study of the proto-fascist period. Figures like Sorel and Le Bon are relatively clear examples of *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals who had a strong hand in influencing the shape of fascist ideology, but the case is not so clear for the likes of Bergson and Nietzsche. Calling a particular *fin-de-siècle* intellectual a proto-fascist poses a serious question as to when and how the ideas of a proto-fascist counted to fascist ideology. Historians must remain cautious lest they let the ideas of the proto-fascists

¹¹ Paxton, "The Five Stages of Fascism," 7.

overshadow the actual shape of fascist ideology. By creating a pantheon of proto-fascist thinkers historians risk confusing or outright substituting real fascist ideology with the ideas and concepts of the proto-fascists.

Conversely, historians must also take care not to falsely label some pre-1914 thinkers as proto-fascist based solely on the similarities of thought or claims of inspiration by fascist leaders. Thinkers such as Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche are examples of potential false identification. Both Bergson and Nietzsche introduced or recast many of the ideas that later underpinned fascist thinking and thus require close examination. But it becomes highly problematic to directly connect Bergson and Nietzsche to fascist ideology as their writings do not lend themselves to easy interpretation and analysis. The density of thought present in Nietzsche and Bergson's philosophies give great latitude to interpretation; great enough that it is possible that their ideas, as originally conceived by either intellectual, may not have influenced the shape of fascist ideology. But, as is in the case of Nietzsche, even contemporary historians and philosophers do not agree on the meaning of his texts, let alone any political doctrines he possibly professed.¹²

The line between a true proto-fascist, an influencer of fascist thought, and an intellectual bystander is difficult to draw, not least because of the role they might play in an overall theory of fascism's intellectual development. From the theories purporting to explain fascism to the narratives that structure those theories to the very concept of fascism itself, there remains a degree of confusion when it comes to describing the years between 1919 and 1945. Any effort to incorporate earlier thinkers into our current narrative of fascism must grapple with an essential

¹² Allan Megill, "Historicizing Nietzsche? Paradoxes and Lessons of a Hard Case," *Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 1 (March 1996), 115; Steve Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany: 1890-1990*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 3; Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2000), x, xv.

question: does one particular thinker truly fit within the confines of a particular theory of fascism?

One's definition of fascism plays heavily into their broader theory of fascism, as does the narrative grounds that theory is built upon. Any theory of fascism cannot simply absorb the work of a thinker like Sorel or Bergson without fundamentally altering that theory. The traditional theories of fascism point to this problem as they have a difficult time expunging exonerated thinkers previously labeled as a forefather of fascism. The syndicalist theory of fascism, on the other hand, runs against the problem of determining which thinker to *exclude* from its narrative (even though it primarily limits itself to non-German forms of fascism). Even the 'new politics' theory presented by über-historian of the fascist aesthetic, George Mosse, risks accusations of cherry-picking its intellectuals when constructing its pre-fascist narrative.

Within each of these three veins of fascist narrative definition plays a key role not only in the way fascism is understood but in the way other ideas such as nationalism, ideology and culture are defined, conceptualized and presented in the narrative. With that said, the limitations of this present study are somewhat apparent. By focusing on the role of *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals in the formation of fascist ideology, the present study does not aim to construct a new theory of fascism. Instead, it merely offers observations on how well intellectuals like Bergson, Nietzsche, Sorel and Le Bon are treated by existing theory. A limited definitional analysis of the pre-fascist intellectuals will hopefully shed new light on the role these intellectuals play in fascism's ideological development. The more culture and ideology based theories of Zeev Sternhell, Emilio Gentile, Stanley Payne and George Mosse present fertile grounds for testing the viability of a language-based examination of fascism's intellectual founders. At the same time, the classical theories of fascism offer a starting point for examining how the usage of pre-fascist intellectuals has altered the shape of fascist studies.

A Tentative Definition of Fascism

Naturally, the first term we must consider is the term ‘fascism’ itself. In 1979 Gilbert Allardyce presented an article in the *American Historical Review* that challenged the usefulness of the term ‘fascism’ as a historical concept. Where Allardyce found fault with the concept of ‘fascism’ was in the habit of historians to read more into fascism than actually existed, or worse, force evidence to fit within the confines of their particular theory. Due to this flaw, historians of fascism risked creating an artificial ‘fascism’ through the construction of theoretical models that did not accurately reflect the movements those models sought to describe. It was in this realm of theory where Allardyce battled the concept of generic fascism as he contended that fascism, even if granted status as a generic concept, was not an ideology and devoid of intellectual content.¹³

In attacking the intellectual history of fascism, Allardyce also attacked the methodology used to construct that history. Allardyce accused other intellectual historians of artificially constructing a fascist ideology “far more consistent and universal than anything created by the fascists themselves.” In brief, Allardyce contended that historians manufactured an intellectual history of fascism by initially isolating an idea of a well-known fascist ideologue, then finding an earlier thinker who originated, modified or popularized a similar idea. Thus is fascist ideology connected to an earlier, ‘pre-fascist’ thinker. The use of selected quotes by ‘classic’ fascist or proto-fascist intellectuals served only to reinforce this image of a unified, consistent ideology. The confusion on the ground in Fascist Italy alone contrasted with such an image, Allardyce argues. Yet, through the efforts of intellectuals historians, fascism has attained a proto-fascist stage complete with early ideologues and an intellectual tradition.¹⁴

¹³ Gilbert Allardyce, “What Fascism is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept,” *American Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (April 1979), 378, 380.

¹⁴ Allardyce, “What Fascism is Not,” 381, 379.

The ideological backdrop of fascism plays a large role in Stanley Payne's and Ernst Nolte's responses to Allardyce's criticism. Presenting a more nuanced approach to fascism as a generic concept, Payne, in his commentary and later in both *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* and *A History of Fascism*, argued that while fascism lacked uniform content or a common ideology, the use of fascism as a generic concept allows historians to examine a particular grouping of ultra-nationalist movements between 1914 and 1945 that defy inclusion in other categories like communism, liberalism, or simple rightist authoritarianism.¹⁵ In Payne's argument, the term 'fascism' serves more as a placeholder for a particular cluster of movements rather than a political theory with a distinct and exportable ideology. The definition Payne worked towards was one that "taken as a whole" would collect under the label of fascism "what all fascist movements had in common without trying to describe the unique characteristics of each group."¹⁶

Continuing in the same vein as Payne, Ernst Nolte wrestled with the broader theoretical aspects of fascism as a generic concept. Heeding Professor Allardyce's criticisms of fascism as a concept, Nolte believed that each historian should, as a matter of course, remain wary of too general of a concept. Even so, Nolte does defend the usage of fascism as a generic concept on the grounds that, despite the wide variations between groups labeled as fascist, each group reflects elements of a "fascist type." Moreover, the term 'fascist' refers to a particular era of European history, one that, for lack of an alternative name, can comfortably bear the title of the 'fascist era'. Finally, Allardyce's criticism struck Nolte as a nominalist criticism—one that would label all historical theories as 'constructs' and consequently ahistorical.¹⁷ That said, Allardyce did make a strong case against *a priori* concepts of fascism. In his final reply to both Nolte and

¹⁵ Ernst Nolte and Stanley Payne, "[What Fascism is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept]:Comment," *American Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (April 1979), 389-391.

¹⁶ Payne, *A History of Fascism*, 4, 8; Stanley Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 5, 14.

¹⁷ Nolte, "[What Fascism is Not]: Comment," 392, 393.

Payne, Allardyce twisted the previous arguments of his fellow historians by stating that the issue was not over whether seemingly dissimilar movements are related, but whether seemingly similar movements are related at all.¹⁸

Against Allardyce's criticisms Wittgenstein's theories on language can give some comfort to historians like Payne and Nolte. In the process of explaining the relation between various language-games Wittgenstein introduces the idea that the relation between games is similar to that of a family photograph. In the family portrait no single person features all of the traits shared within the family. Instead traits overlap from generation to generation, person to person, or in the case of fascism, from movement to movement. Wittgenstein takes note of a criticism of his family resemblance conception of language-games that his concept is one with blurred edges. In responding to that criticism Wittgenstein also responds, in a way, to the criticisms of Allardyce. The blurred concept is sometimes preferable to that of a sharply distinct one as it allows for a word, a language-game, or a concept such as fascism to fully encompass the range of possible meanings yet still contain concrete expression.¹⁹

This need to create a theory of fascism that does not artificially limit the scope of inclusion in such a theory while simultaneously allowing historians of fascism to concretely speak of a particular fascist movement is not a sign of poor intellectualism on the part of historians. As Wittgenstein has shown with the blurred concept, the vagaries of a generic concept of fascism does not detract from that concept's ability to accurately speak of an individual movement. But the debate between Allardyce, Payne and Nolte does highlight the difficulty in examining a movement that has such a charged and predominately political atmosphere.

¹⁸ Gilbert Allardyce, "[What Fascism is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept]: Reply," *American Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (April 1979), 396.

¹⁹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 32, 34.

II. Fascist Narrative and Theory

The Dilemma of Narrative and Classical Theories of Fascism

Such an opaque discussion over the usefulness of a generic concept of fascism might cause some head-scratching. Yet when confronted with the legion of theories purporting to explain fascism one does wonder whether the term ‘fascism’ has any meaning left in it at all. As early as 1966 Hugh Seton-Watson commented on the “polemical and inexact use of the word” while even today historians such as Robert Paxton can confidently make such statements as “everyone is someone’s fascist.”²⁰ Comments like Paxton’s and Seton-Watson’s are reflective of fascism’s impact on Western history and culture. The term ‘fascism’ in Seton-Watson’s view has become “a smear-word.”²¹ Contemporary usage of the word aside, the term ‘fascism’ does retain some meaning, tied to a particular time in history and to a series of particular movements. The difficulty historians face in narrating such seemingly ambiguous movements that consumed so many lives is only compounded by the need to explain why those movements ever started in the first place.

Historical narration is necessary for the memory of the Holocaust to survive, wrote Hans Kellner. And the problems of narrativization only arise when one seeks to tell the story of real events. As historiographer Hayden White argued, moralization is an inherent part of constructing a narrative. Any narrative, whether factual or fictional, requires a plot and, by the inherent function of a plot, value and meaning is applied to facts and events in order to provide coherence and structure. But the typical historical narrative tends to breakdown over issues of how to properly convey the meaning of the Holocaust. Robert Braun remarked, in his essay on Holocaust narratives, that historians continue to wrangle with issues of morality and appropriate

²⁰ Hugh Seton-Watson, “Fascism, Right and Left,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 1 no. 1 (1966): 183; Robert Paxton, “The Five Stages of Fascism,” *Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 1 (March 1998): 8.

²¹ Seton-Watson, “Fascism, Right and Left,” 183.

representation of the Holocaust without imposing an ahistorical moral view on the event. This effort for proper narrative seeks to highlight and examine the morality of the time and of the people within the Holocaust while minimizing the appearance of contemporary moralities. Indeed, as White argued, narrating the events of fascism and the Holocaust stands as a crucial test for how historians balance their social responsibilities to the present with their intellectual responsibility to objectivity in their own studies of the past.²²

The history of fascism written immediately after 1945 highlights both the need to accurately detail the events of the past two decades and the dangers of over-moralization. The concept of singularity was used immediately after Germany's defeat in 1945 as a means of sharply dividing Nazi Germany from the new Federal Republic while still affirming the disastrous effects of the Holocaust. What historians argued in those early histories was the idea that the whole of fascism was singular and incommensurable with normal historical continuity—that the years between 1919 and 1945 were a separate historical entity. Yet, as Wulf Kansteiner noted, setting the Holocaust outside of normal historical continuity created the minor problem of denying that the Holocaust had a *real* history. Kansteiner's conclusion derived from the nature of the historical narrative itself.²³ Through its function as a method of ascribing meaning to real events the historical narrative implicitly attaches itself to a point in space and time. Thus any historical narrative of the Holocaust cannot define the Holocaust as separate from historical continuity without also rejecting its claim to represent real events, let alone the true meaning of those events.²⁴

²² Hans Kellner, "'Never Again' is Now," *History and Theory* 33, no. 2 (May 1994): 128; Hayden White, *The Content and the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 4, 9, 14; Robert Braun, "The Holocaust and Problems of Historical Representation," *History and Theory* 33, no. 2 (May 1994), 182; White, *The Content and the Form*, 76.

²³ Wulf Kansteiner, "From Exception to Exemplum: The New Approach to Nazism and the 'Final Solution'," *History and Theory* 33, no. 2 (May 1994): 149.

²⁴ White, *The Content and the Form*, 28, 43.

Without a history the Holocaust becomes incomprehensible, existing solely within the narrative of a historical morality play and understood only by its thematic structure. Without a history the meaning of the Holocaust, and consequently fascism as a whole, is determined almost entirely by the historian's own moral and political leanings. And yet, as White argued, by structuring the events of the Holocaust in narrative form historians rightly attempt to present what they believe is the real story. That said, the meaning of the event symbolized in the narrative is joined to the style of narrative used and simple adherence to the factual record does not prevent a distortion of that meaning. Accordingly, the key to appropriate narrative representation lies in the historian's ability to limit the meaning of particular events to only that meaning which was possible at the time of the events. In other words, to properly convey the meaning of a certain period historians must discover the language-games in common use during that period.²⁵

Standing in the way of a more concerted definitional and cultural analysis of fascism was, in Jeffrey Schnapp's opinion, the need to "dismantle fascism's cultural and political claims."²⁶ The fear was that any comprehensive study of fascist culture might lend validity to fascist ideology. The incommensurability thesis has allowed historians to emphasize fascism's abnormality while implicitly dismissing fascist culture as something unknowable. Dominating the narrative of fascism since the collapse of Nazism, the incommensurability thesis formed the basic structure for the classical theories of fascism. Like the incommensurability thesis, the classical theories emphasize the discontinuous nature of fascism as a way of categorizing fascism as something abnormal. Robert Paxton argued that this interpretation of the nature of fascism stemmed from several aspects of fascism's rise and influence.

²⁵ White, *The Content and the Form*, 28; Kansteiner, "From Exception to Exemplum," 167; Geoffrey Eley, "What is Cultural History?" *Cultural History/Cultural Studies*, *New German Critique*, no. 65 (Spring-Summer 1995): 32.

²⁶ Jeffrey Schnapp, "Fascinating Fascism," Special Issue, *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, no. 2 (April 1996): 236.

In Paxton's eyes, the rapid and unexpected arrival of fascism on the European political scene left many scholars scrambling to explain the new phenomenon. The lack of a "Fascist Manifesto" or central thinker forced many scholars to derive a theory of fascism from the contradictory statements and actions of the fascist regimes. To complicate matters further other authoritarian movements of the time drew inspiration either in ideology or appearance from fascist movements, who themselves differed greatly between each other. What scholars were left with was an almost incoherent assemblage of traits and statements that did little to explain the 'why' of fascism.²⁷

Following from the incommensurability thesis, the classical theories of fascism tended to focus strictly on the years between the Great War and World War II. The basic themes of the classical theories present fascism in a variety of ways, each attempting to both explain what caused fascism to appear and what fascism sought to achieve. Stanley Payne's comprehensive histories of fascism list twelve principle interpretations that form the most commonly presented theories:

a violent, dictatorial agent of bourgeois capitalism; a unique radicalism of the middle classes; a twentieth-century form of "Bonapartism"; a typical manifestation of twentieth-century totalitarianism; a new form of "authoritarian polyocracy"; a cultural revolution; a product of cultural, moral, or sociopsychological pathologies, a product of the rise of amorphous masses; a consequence of unique national histories; a reaction against modernization; a product of the struggle for modernization or a stage of socioeconomic growth; and a unique metapolitical phenomenon.²⁸

What is notable in Payne's list is the tendency for the classical theories to concentrate on non-fascist causes for fascism's rise; i.e. that fascist movements and fascist ideology themselves were not responsible for fascism's dominance of European interwar politics. In an earlier work on generic fascism, Payne argued that the classical theories of fascism generally sought to expose fascism's underlying, *true* nature usually by examining fascism's sources or causes. Hugh Seton-

²⁷ Paxton, "The Five Stages of Fascism," 2-5.

²⁸ Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 442.

Watson's 1966 essay on fascism displayed that tendency of the classical theories by labeling fascism as a reactionary ideology. In other words, Seton-Watson's essay defined fascism in terms of what he claimed fascism was reacting *against* and not what fascism actually *was*. For Payne, the idea of defining fascism by what it reacted against in the trifecta of anti—anti-liberalism, anti-materialism, and anti-positivism—does not provide a substantive definition. Yet, as historian of fascism Walter Adamson critically noted, since the purpose of the classical theories was to deny fascism any cultural or political validity, any direct study of what fascism was might grant such validity.²⁹

The reactionary interpretation of fascism was popular among historians early on. One segment of the classical theories argued that fascism was a pathological response by society to the Great War itself. If not a social pathology then fascism was nothing more than an imposed ideology from a coercive minority.³⁰ The theme of fascism as a manipulation of the people formed the basis of Roberto Vivarelli's interpretation of Italian fascism. Vivarelli's 1991 essay embodies the lasting strength of the classical theories and even the narrative of incommensurability itself. For Vivarelli, the shift in Italy toward fascism was not due to the internal strength of fascism but due to the inherent weakness of the old liberal parliamentary structure. Indeed, Vivarelli hinged his assessment on the idea that fascism was simply another in a long line of minority conservative movements bent on undermining liberalism. What set fascism apart was the collapse of traditional conservatism after the Great War. Thus fascism was denied the old religious or intellectual justifications of other reactionary conservative movements and had nothing left to rely on except violence.³¹

²⁹ Stanley Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 177; Seton-Watson, "Fascism, Right and Left," 183, 184, 186; Walter Adamson, "Fascism and Culture: Avant-Gardes and Secular Religion in the Italian Case," *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 3 (July 1989): 412.

³⁰ Adamson, "Fascism and Culture," 411.

³¹ Roberto Vivarelli, "Interpretations of the Origins of Fascism," *Journal of Modern History* 63, no. 1 (March 1991): 29, 39, 40, 42.

Interpretations like Vivarelli's remain commonplace among studies of fascism. Even the incisive Robert Paxton continues to define fascism as primarily a political force directed at attaining and then holding political power.³² Paxton's dismissal of cultural and intellectual analysis beyond a particular point in fascism's history exposes a basic misunderstanding of cultural and intellectual analysis, one that has defined the classical theories and traditional narratives of fascism. But Paxton takes a slightly different approach from the typical fear of validating fascism's claims. Instead he argues that due to the ever-changing nature of fascist culture, historians are unable to construct a unifying culture-based theory of fascism.³³ Objections to cultural analysis like Paxton's represent another component to the classical theories of fascism: that due to fascism's internal incoherence, there was little use to understanding fascism from the perspective of a fascist sympathizer.³⁴

It is this issue—how to understand fascism from the perspective of a fascist sympathizer—that has animated the effort to unbind fascism's "binding machine."³⁵ What the classical theories of fascism fail to express is the world of representation affecting popular and elite consciousness in countries with a strong fascist movement. Paxton's assertion that historians are unable to examine how deeply fascist ideology rooted itself in the popular consciousness stands at odds with the work of cultural historians like Geoffrey Eley and Roger Chartier. The kind of cultural analysis Chartier promoted actually thrives on a culture constantly moved by new texts, songs, posters and other cultural artifacts that shift opinions and interpretations. Culture is examined by studying how meaning is constructed through that kind of interaction between people and cultural artifacts. What cultural analysis attempts to do is offer a method for understanding the whole cycle of cultural production—how a culture comes to a

³² Paxton, "The Five Stages of Fascism," 8.

³³ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁴ Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 215; Adamson, "Fascism and Culture," 412.

³⁵ Schnapp, "Fascinating Fascism," 237.

particular worldview and how that worldview is altered by the further production of texts, art, posters, monuments, and nearly any other item that requires public consumption and interpretation.³⁶

At this point, it is almost repetitive to say that cultural analysis cannot build a static model of culture and still have something to say. Understanding fascist culture means focusing on how fascist ideology was constructed from cultural preconditions, from fascist and pre-fascist language-games, and the new meanings fascist ideology sought to create. Two credible but unconventional theories of fascism have attempted to examine how fascist ideology was initially constructed and how fascist culture constructed meaning for nations like Germany and Italy. The theory of fascism presented by intellectual historian Zeev Sternhell sought to reveal how fascist ideology developed out of a union between an anti-materialist revision of Marxism that occurred in the 1890s and the revolutionary syndicalist movement of pre-1914 Italy. Sternhell persuasively argued for the consideration of a fascist ideology with the same intellectual heft as liberalism or Marxism. By emphasizing the influence of social theorist Georges Sorel on both the syndicalists and revisionist Marxists, Sternhell firmly planted fascism's intellectual origins in *fin-de-siècle* thought.

A second theory has a much longer intellectual heritage and takes a broader, more inclusive approach. The 'new politics' theory, as presented by George Mosse in his 1977 work *The Nationalization of the Masses*, has antecedents in Ernst Nolte's *Three Faces of Fascism* and even Mosse's own work on Nazism in the 1960s. To Mosse, the aim of fascist culture was to create a new political religion. The rise of fascism went hand in hand with the nationalist tendency towards the sacralization of politics. Collectively, these two theories of fascism attempt

³⁶ Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 11, 14.

to do what the classical theories could not—embed fascism in the cultural milieu of interwar Europe and trace its origins past the boundary of 1919.³⁷

The Syndicalist History of Fascism

The syndicalist vein of fascist theory signified a radical departure from the classical, anti-ideology narrative of fascism. For Sternhell, the main proponent of the syndicalist theory, fascist ideology developed out of a meeting between the anti-materialist revision of Marxism and the revolutionary syndicalist movements of early twentieth-century Italy. Fascism, as Sternhell defined it, was an anti-materialist movement that sought to repair the moral damage brought by modernization while reversing the polarizing effects of socialism and the excessive individualism of political liberalism. Originating conceptually at first with the socialist French literati dissatisfied with the political state of Marxism, the earliest elements of fascist ideology was put into practice by the revolutionary syndicalists of pre-1914 Italy. The revolutionary revision of Marxism was the center-piece of Sternhell's theory as he argued that concept of fascism was not possible until after the revolutionary spirit of Marxism was co-opted by a desire for a moralistic national renewal. That revision, according to Sternhell, produced an anti-materialist, anti-rationalist, and nationalistic theoretical system that, in the hands of Italian syndicalism, would mutate into the earliest fascist ideology.³⁸

Sternhell's focus on the revolutionary revision of Marxism, and its primary architect Georges Sorel, highlights the significance of intellectuals and ideology in fascism's development. Only through the basic theoretical structure for social action that the revision of Marxism created were the Italian syndicalists turned into "an intellectual, social and political

³⁷ Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder, and Maia Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, trans. David Maisel, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 4; Stanley Payne, "Review: Historical Fascism and the Radical Right," Special Issue: Shell-Shock, *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 1 (January 2000): 109-110; George Mosse, "Fascism and the French Revolution," *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 1 (January 1989): 6, 7.

³⁸ Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 4-6.

force.”³⁹ Linking the revolutionary revision and the syndicalists together was the cultural force of integral nationalism and the intellectual force of engineer-cum-social critic Georges Sorel. It was specifically the synthesis of those two elements—organic integral nationalism and the Sorelian revision of Marxism—that Sternhell argues produced fascist ideology.⁴⁰

The Sorelian revision of Marxism underlines Sternhell’s conception of fascism as “antimaterialism in its clearest form.” Sternhell contended that the rejection of materialism represented a dramatic shift in the revolutionary wing of Marxism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Narrowly defined by Sternhell as the rejection of rationalism, individualism and utilitarianism, anti-materialism allowed Marxist theory to move beyond concerns of the economic structure. In the hands of revisionists like Sorel, Marxism could now defend the benefits of the market economy while seeking change in the “nature of the relationship between the individual and the collectivity.” The incorporation of integral nationalism would serve only to reinforce Sorel’s anti-materialistic revolution by de-emphasizing the need for class and material polarization. Crucially to Sternhell’s theory of fascism, Sorel’s revision of Marxism advocated the use of violence, being a “source of morality and greatness,” as a means of regenerating a decadent society. Through the use of social myths as a motive force, Sorel argued that violence could bring about the spiritual revolution the new Marxism sought.⁴¹

But why was Marxist theory revised to incorporate the basic precepts of organic nationalism and a fervent anti-materialism? Moreover, why was such a revision sought at all? Until Friedrich Engel’s death in 1895, Marxist theory had generally maintained its original shape. Yet with the death of Engels no figure existed to mediate over disagreements of theory. By the end of the nineteenth century there was a growing sense that the great prophecy of

³⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 20, 6.

⁴¹ Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 8, 7, 24; Zeev Sternhell, “The ‘Anti-Materialist’ Revision of Marxism as an Aspect of the Rise of Fascist Ideology,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 22, no. 3 (July 1987): 379-380.

Marxism—that of social polarization leading to the total collapse of the market economy—not only was not imminent but looked increasingly unlikely. Pressured by the democratization of politics and the rise of a national consciousness, classical Marxism appeared to lose relevance as a theory for social change. As Sorel was found to say in *Reflections on Violence*, socialism had been compromised by parliamentarianism and risked losing its revolutionary potential. The revolutionary revision sought to reexamine Marxist theory in order to better place it at the service of the revolution. The key questions the revisionists asked were whether Marxism continued to accurately explain the nature of man and his social and economic realities while still providing a means for transforming the world.⁴²

The rejection of compromise with the prevailing social and political orders left the revolutionary revisionists with few options. What resulted was a series of choices among the revisionists that would fundamentally alter the nature of Marxist theory:

Having to choose between the proletariat and revolution, they chose revolution, having to choose between a proletarian but moderate socialism and a nonproletarian but revolutionary and national socialism, they opted for the nonproletarian revolution, the national revolution.⁴³

The proletariat, it was believed, no longer had the means nor the desire to act as the primary agent of the revolution. In Sorel's view, the expected polarization over material interests never materialized as the lot of the working class had actually improved since Marxism's inception. Therefore, Sorel argued, not only was it unnecessary for the Marxist revolution to change the social and economic realities but it was now essential to the "revolutionary dynamic" that the market economy remain in place. What the revolution needed was another form of division, a "psychological and moral cleavage" that would compel society into a moral and spiritual

⁴² Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 12, 13, 14, 16, 20; Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T.E. Hulme, (New York, B.W. Huebsch, 1941), 54.

⁴³ Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 27.

revolution. This new moral revolution would free society from its means of existence and allow it to revitalize its own morality.⁴⁴

By rejecting materialism and calling for a psychological cleavage, revisionists like Sorel turned toward the myth of the general strike as a unifying and morally energizing force. The myth of the general strike, “a total moral revolt” that would animate the masses through the irrational apocalyptic imagery of the eternal struggle against decadence, was Sorel’s answer to inciting the nation to bring about the revolution and thus change the world. But the moral revolution the revisionist sought needed a new agent. Since the purpose of the moral revolution was the regeneration the whole of society, it was a natural enough step for the revisionists to consider the nation, “the great rising force of the modern world,” as the appropriate agent of that revolution.⁴⁵

For Sternhell, the kind of nation envisioned by the revisionists and syndicalists placed Marxism on the path to fascism. The idea of the nation as found in the revolutionary revision had taken on new meaning in the decades preceding the critique of Marxism. Sternhell argued that the kind of nationalism incorporated into the revolutionary revision was of a deeply organic, Social Darwinist sort. This new nationalism viewed the nation as an organic entity with no law or ethical value higher than itself. In the view of French authoritarian Maurice Barrès and Italian syndicalist Enrico Corradini, the only good law was that which aided in the survival of the nation. A strong unified nation ready for war was essential since the natural state of relations between nations was that of war. The concept of individual rights, the old Enlightenment belief in parliamentary government, and even the idea of competing class interests, were all harmful to

⁴⁴ Ibid., 23; Sternhell, “The ‘Anti-Materialist,’” 391, 392.

⁴⁵ Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 55, 50; Sternhell, “The ‘Anti-Materialist,’” 384.

the unity and strength of the nation. The only absolute necessity was the obedience and sacrifice of the individual to the needs of the nation.⁴⁶

With this conception of nationalism informing Marxist revisionism, it became, in Sternhell's view, a very different proposition. The previous effort to liberate the working class from the illusions of bourgeois ideology had transformed into an effort to liberate *all* of society from the decadence of modernity. The old liberal order was still regarded as the enemy of the revolution, but now the classical, *materialistic* Marxism became another enemy. But, as Sternhell noted, while moving away from the materialistic and political aspects of Marxism, revisionists like Sorel continued to embrace Marxism's belief in the benefits of violent action.⁴⁷

Sorel's rendition of Marxism, according to Sternhell, "was a philosophy of action based on intuition, the cult of energy and *élan vital*."⁴⁸ More than creating a psychological rift through the violent imagery of social myths, Sorel argued for the moral value of violence both as a means of mobilizing the masses and as a weapon of combat against the decadent bourgeois values. Action was supreme for Sorel and since "the masses could not be activated by reason," an irrational myth, the myth of the general strike, was necessary to incite the masses.⁴⁹ Forming around Sorel's philosophy of action were the syndicalist movements of France and Italy, inspired by the myth of the general strike and the social discipline required by integral nationalism.⁵⁰

Syndicalism itself was a variant of Marxism but whereas Marxist socialism emphasized political action, the syndicalists sought revolutionary change solely in the economic structure. For the Italian syndicalists, the objective of syndicalism was to create a society of free workers, a society that enjoyed "a creative, fruitful capitalism" while combating the immorality of parasitic finance. Political liberalism and its associative material values was the enemy of syndicalism,

⁴⁶ Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 10-12.

⁴⁷ Sternhell, "The 'Anti-Materialist,'" 379, 380.

⁴⁸ Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 104, 152.

thus political action through the state or parliaments was deemed unnecessary if not harmful. The syndicates, in the eyes of the revolutionary syndicalists, were the primary means of changing the economic conditions and the proletariat the primary agent of that change. Within the envisioned society based around the syndicates, the ‘new man’, the producer, would arise with the creative vitalism necessary to overthrow the liberal materialistic values and fully regenerate society. The new man would embody the heroic values of the younger bourgeoisie while maintaining the creative ethic of the proletariat.⁵¹

What the syndicalists lacked was the ethical structure necessary to unify society against bourgeois values and the motive force to incite the revolution against materialism. Syndicalism needed a set of binding myths. In Sorel and his book, *Reflections on Violence*, the syndicalists found a theoretical structure that would bind their unions together and offer a practical means of attaining their desired goals. The syndicalists saw in the *Reflections* a theory could rescue them from the “parliamentary-liberal-bourgeois quagmire.” The syndicalist adoption of Sorel’s theory of social action was not done along strict lines as political realities pushed the Sorelian revision in a more pragmatic direction.⁵²

One consequence of this pragmatic Sorelian Marxism, and the final element of the fascist synthesis in Sternhell’s opinion, arose out of the syndicalist response to the Great War. As Sternhell described it, the myth of the general strike, while beneficial in motivating various parts of society, did not have the necessary force to completely overthrow bourgeois society. World War I placed pressure on the Italian syndicalists. The parasitic nature of production during war—that weapons built by the proletariat were used against the proletariat—collided with the belief that war undermined capitalism. With the Sorelian revision emphasizing the role of the nation as

⁵¹ *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Syndicalism,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syndicalism> (accessed May 2, 2006); Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 107, 121, 144, 145.

⁵² Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 152.

the agent of the revolution and the failure of the myth of the general strike to incite social change, the Italian syndicalists eventually adopted a position in favor of the war. A new myth was found in that war between nations. Such a myth was a logical conclusion for the syndicalists. The internal discipline required by integral nationalism was favorable to syndicalist theory as was the direct action needed to incite such war. Through the pressures of the Great War the revolutionary syndicalists became convinced that only through war would the revolution arrive.⁵³

By the end of the Great War, Sternhell contended that a coherent and complete fascist ideology had formed. The union of syndicalism with the revolutionary revision of Marxism was complete as was the turn toward the myth of war as the motive force for social change. While revolutionary syndicalism would become fascism in practice, the theory of fascism Sternhell constructed turned on the role of ideas like Sorel's conception of social myths. The attention Sternhell paid to the role of intellectuals in the development of fascist ideology is invaluable to historians studying the early years of fascism. As Stanley Payne would say in his early comparative history of fascism, Sternhell's theory firmly established the role of French intellectuals in fascism's intellectual heritage.⁵⁴

Yet the ideology of fascism Sternhell constructs seemingly suffers from the criticism Gilbert Allardyce laid against previous histories of fascism ideology—that the ideology Sternhell presented was far more coherent and consistent than anything the fascists actually constructed. Other historians such as David Roberts, Tobias Abse and even Walter Adamson argue that Sternhell over-emphasized the role of Sorel and French rightist thought in fascism's ideological development. Particularly for Roberts, Sternhell relied too heavily on French definitions of myth, violence and most importantly, nationalism. Moreover, Roberts contends Sternhell did not fully examine the impact of fascist ideologue Giovanni Gentile on fascist ideology throughout the

⁵³ Ibid., 158, 162, 174-176.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 229; Payne, *Fascism*, 129.

decade of the 1920s. By not accounting for the influence of intellectuals after 1922, Roberts claims Sternhell missed many important aspects of fascism that might have undercut his contention that Sorel was the key influence on fascism's ideological structure.⁵⁵

The criticisms of Roberts represent only one of the limitations of Sternhell's work on fascist ideology. In focusing so much attention on the role of the revolutionary revision of Marxism in fascist ideological development, Sternhell ignored other cultural influence. The theories of Sorel, while vital, do not offer a complete explanation of fascism's ideological power nor how fascist ideology attained the shape it did. Despite Sternhell's contention that fascism was as much a cultural phenomenon as it was a political one, no sustained analysis of fascist or pre-fascist culture is offered. Finally, Sternhell's analysis specifically omitted the development of fascism in Germany, claiming that due to the Nazi obsession with race, Nazism constituted a separate category.⁵⁶

The syndicalist theory of fascism Sternhell presented does serve an important function in fascist studies though. By establishing the influence, however great or small, of intellectuals on fascism's ideological origins, Sternhell has effectively shown one of the greatest limitations of the classical theories. As Sternhell puts it, "anyone who regards fascism as no more than a byproduct of the First World War, a mere bourgeois defensive reaction to the postwar crisis, is unable to understand this major phenomenon of our century." The classical theories, unable to account for the pre-1914 movements that informed later fascist movements, has difficulty understanding the role of intellectuals like Giovanni Gentile or even Mussolini himself and their own intellectual development that certainly occurred during and before the war. For all of its limitations, Sternhell's syndicalist theory, particularly with his focus on Georges Sorel's work,

⁵⁵ David D. Roberts, "How Not to Think About Fascist Ideology, Intellectual Antecedents and Historical Meaning," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 2 (April 2000): 191, 197, 199; Tobias Abse, "Syndicalism and the Origins of Italian Fascism," *Historical Journal* 25, no. 1 (March 1982): 252; Adamson, "Fascism and Culture," 412.

⁵⁶ Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 3, 4.

has given further credence to another theory of fascism that attempts to examine fascism's cultural and intellectual origins—the 'new politics theory'.⁵⁷

The New Politics

At its core, the 'new politics' theory places fascism in the framework of a civic religion. The idea of fascism as a political religion is not a recent one. As early as 1966 Ernst Nolte argued that the rise of fascism was a Western response to the secularization of European society that had been ongoing since the eighteenth century.⁵⁸ But it was with George Mosse's work on fascist culture and fascist aesthetics that the idea of fascism as a political religion attained its shape and intellectual heft. As his student Stanley Payne has said, Mosse did not only study culture under fascism but "used the study of culture to understand fascism."⁵⁹ For Mosse, and subsequent historians like Jeffrey Schnapp, Emilio Gentile, Walter Adamson and Payne himself, the study of fascist aesthetics and culture exposed the methods that fascism used to create a new moral universe for its people. With the 'new politics' theory fascism did not simply act to fill the void of religion lost through secularization, as some have argued nationalism has done. In point of fact, fascism took from nationalism's myth-making and ritualistic nature to create a form of sacralized politics.⁶⁰ Fascism became, according to George Mosse, "a non-traditional faith which used liturgy and symbols to make its belief come alive" and through those symbols give new meaning to society and the individual.⁶¹

The fascist ideologues recognized the power of social myths as a unifying force. By using myths to transform, or 'nationalize' the masses, the fascist leaders saw a means of bringing

⁵⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁸ Adamson, "Fascism and Culture," 415.

⁵⁹ Payne, "Review: Historical Fascism and the Radical Right," 113.

⁶⁰ George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, (New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1999), xiii.

⁶¹ George L. Mosse, "Fascist Aesthetics and Society: Some Considerations," Special Issue: The Aesthetics of Fascism, *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, no. 2 (April 1996): 245.

society into an “organized moral community under the command of a hierarchy.”⁶² Permanent symbols like monuments and flags functioned as an ever-present expression of national unity and strength. Myths, like the leadership cult Mussolini and Hitler cultivated, instructed society on the ideal type of citizen. The myth of war was another instructive myth as life in the army was seen as a prime place to instill a sense of national consciousness, “uniting physical education with moral formation.” Furthermore, the myth of a political revolutionary war that fascism envisioned gave war veterans the belief that they could participate in the spiritual renewal of the nation.⁶³

But perhaps the most important element of the fascist myth was the concept of beauty. For Mosse, fascist conceptions of beauty were present in nearly every aspect of fascist culture. Beauty, according to Mosse, “objectified the dream world of happiness and order while it enabled men to contact those supposedly immutable forces which stand outside the flow of daily life.” The new meaning of the universe fascism attempted to instill in its people required the use of symbols and thus necessitated an aesthetic that represented the vitality and creativity of the artist. That aesthetic required images and myths that “stood outside the ordinary course of history” and only those who “heroically defended” the myths truly understood them.⁶⁴ The ‘new fascist man’, as exemplified by the image of Hitler or Mussolini, was an idealized image the heroic defender and masculine beauty. Most of the terms commonly associated with fascist ideology—vitalism, a will to power, and the supremacy of action—stem from this classically Greek conception of the male form. As fascism was primarily a visual ideology, the image of masculine

⁶² Emilio Gentile, “Fascism as a Political Religion,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 23, no. 2/3 (May-June 1990): 241.

⁶³ George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism & Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*, (New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 2001), 8; Gentile, “Fascism as a Political Religion,” 237; Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 8, 17.

⁶⁴ Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, 20, 6, 21.

beauty was all important as it represented the dynamism and discipline fascism sought for society.⁶⁵

The image of the ‘new fascist man’ was also what fascism desired out of citizenship. The concept of beauty applied to the whole of the people in the sense that the ‘people’ exemplified the aesthetic of the soul fascism sought to exalt. With Germany, the model of citizenship derived from the *Volk*. In Mosse’s text on modern German ideology, the *Volk* referred to the union of people whose transcendental essence “was fused to man’s innermost nature, and represented the source of his creativity, his depth of feeling, his individuality and his unity with other members of the *Volk*.”⁶⁶ The fascist revolution in Germany sought to bring about the union of the state and the *Volk* to create a genuine, more spiritual national unity. Fascism in Germany drew its ideas on the relation between man and the world from the youth movements and other bourgeois social organizations who espoused an irrational and emotional Romanticized image of the *Volk* as the pure German.⁶⁷

For Italy, the ideal citizen, the ‘new fascist man’, was one who embodied the rebirth of ancient Rome. The Italians under fascism were the heirs to the Roman Empire and just as their ancestors had defied fate so too would the new Italy defy fate and create their new civilization. But unlike the image of the *Volk* as a return to a legendary past, the ‘new fascist man’ in Italy was steeped in the Futurist ideal of movement and love of the modern. This imagery of the *Volk* and the new Roman as the fate-defying transcended citizen worked well with the idea that a moral revolution would overcome the limitations of a material existence.⁶⁸

The idea of casting fascism as a political religion frees fascist studies from many of the complications present in the classical theories. Most importantly, historians no longer need to fit

⁶⁵ Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution*, 49; Mosse, “Fascist Aesthetics and Society,” 248.

⁶⁶ George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 4.

⁶⁷ Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, 13.

⁶⁸ Gentile, “Fascism as a Political Religion,” 247; Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution*, 144, 9.

fascist ideology into the confines of more classically defined ideologies like Marxism or liberalism. Fascist ideology becomes a kind of experience of faith, something unconscious and outside the material realm. Here, with the anti-materialist aspect of fascism, the ‘new politics’ theory collides with Sternhell’s syndicalist theory. But unlike Sternhell, the ‘new politics’ theory holds that the anti-materialism of fascism derives more from the desire to renew a decadent culture than from a rejection of Marxist principles perceived as harmful to the revolution.

Despite its advantages, the ‘new politics’ theory does have its limitations. As historian Robert Paxton rightly points out, thinking of fascism as a political religion does not, in itself, explain how fascism became more than a fringe movement; it does not explain how fascism gained power in the first place. Yet, Paxton’s criticisms of the ‘new politics’ theory does expose an element of fascism that runs through nearly all the variations of fascist theory—the importance of nationalism in fascism’s ideological and political development.

III. Fin-de-siècle Culture

The Nationalist and the Fascist,

The one constant element of fascist ideology—nationalism—is of prime importance to the cultural/intellectual interpretations of fascism. The nationalist component of fascism is perhaps the most crucial one in understanding why fascist movements varied widely between each other. Paxton explains these nationalism-based variations as part of fascism’s bid for authenticity by drawing from the common identity of its host nation.⁶⁹ Historians who support the ‘new politics’ theory of fascism, such as Mosse and Stanley Payne, argue that fascism was an extension of nationalism, a radical take on an existing cultural identity. For Payne, fascism was “the most extreme form of modern European nationalism,” while Mosse saw fascism as the

⁶⁹ Robert O. Paxton, “The Five Stages of Fascism,” *Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 1 (March 1998): 3.

culmination of modern nationalism and nationalism's politicization of the masses.⁷⁰ In the eyes of other historians like Zeev Sternhell, the role of nationalism in reshaping the focus of Marxism was critical in the revolutionary revision's development into fascism. However argued, nationalism's importance to the growth and establishment of fascism is clearly immense.

But what do historians mean by 'modern nationalism' or 'European nationalism' and what did 'nationalism' and the 'nation' mean to the proto-fascists and the fascists? While it is generally agreed that nationalism in the modern sense of the word first appeared at the end of the eighteenth century, the term 'nationalism' itself was not invented until the closing decades of the nineteenth century. According to the eminent historian of nationalism, Eric Hobsbawm, the term nationalism was originally used to describe a distinctly rightist, chauvinistic celebration of nation and flag. Hobsbawm attributes this chauvinistic style of nationalism to the formation of a popular consciousness produced by the democratization of politics, "for if 'the country' is in some way 'mine', then it is more readily seen as preferable to those of foreigners." But the popular consciousness of the people was not an overtly ideological one. Instead, as Benedict Anderson argues in his groundbreaking work *Imagined Communities*, this kind of popular consciousness lies more in the realm of cultural sentiment, something akin to a religious or communal sentiment. Nationalist movements, as both Hobsbawm and fellow historian of nationalism Ernest Gellner argue, are motivated by such a spiritual sentiment, by the desire to see that 'my nation' is represented by 'my state'. But by the end of the nineteenth century, this spiritual desire for the union of nation and state took on new proportions and a new virulence.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 14; George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism & Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*, (New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 2001), 4.

⁷¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 102, 121, 88, 9, 92; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Verso, 2003), 5, 12; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 1.

At issue for those of the *fin-de-siècle* was the question of national unity and the quest to create a *nation-state* versus a mere political state. The myth of nationalism held that the union of nation and state was not only in the natural order of things, but was preordained and that it was the duty of the nationalist to bring about that union.⁷² But the creation of a politically unified nation does not, in and of itself, create a dominant national identity as the official ideology of the state does not necessarily define the total set of identifications the people share.⁷³ France's path toward the nation-state and a national consciousness exposed how those competing identities resulted in a disjoint between nation and state that political unification did not resolve. As detailed in Eugen Weber's study of French peasantry in the nineteenth century, the nationalist project of the French Revolution did not sweep away all the old localisms in one broad stroke. The post-Revolution French knew they were of one nation but that knowledge was, for the most part, nothing more than an abstract notion. Thus many French peasants of the nineteenth century, lacking a concept of uniform patriotism, remained primarily localized in consciousness and sentiment. It was not until nearly the end of the nineteenth century that intense localism was replaced by a national market, a national language, a national politics and a national consciousness. Even then, Weber argues, the transition from a purely local consciousness to a national one only occurred when national interests were translated into local ones. But while for the French the process of translating the national to the local occurred over the course of a century, German and Italian nationalists sought to condense that timeline into a decade or less, if not instantaneously.⁷⁴

By the 1870s both Italy and Germany had managed to attain political unification of their respective nations. Ostensibly those nations were filled with Germans and Italians. Yet as both

⁷² Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 47, 48.

⁷³ Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 11.

⁷⁴ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1780—1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 113, 114, 486, 242, 257.

Mosse and Emilio Gentile note, the effort for spiritual unity continued unabated even after political unification was achieved. Political unification in both countries was perceived as, at best, only a partial one and, at worst, the outright failure of the nationalist project. For Italian patriots the Risorgimento was an “incomplete national revolution” as many felt it was only a partial unification lacking moral unity to compliment its political unity.⁷⁵ What was missing in the minds of many radical Italian patriots was the sense that political unification had not just made the Italian state but had made *Italians*. This was equally the case for Germany as the bourgeoisie continued to advocate “a return to Culture” and the “German revolution” that political unification had not achieved. As Mosse incisively notes, “a united Germany had not produced the good society for all its people.” Modernization placed new challenges on German culture, challenges that political unification had not solved.⁷⁶ The state, it was believed, had to completely embody the national will. Anything less was a disservice to the people.⁷⁷

This idea of creating *Italians* or *Germans* animated the nationalist movements of the late nineteenth century. But the efforts of nationalists in both countries to create fellow countrymen beg the question of what kind of countrymen they sought to create. The model of citizenship is a key element to discerning the shape of late nineteenth century nationalist ideology. Anthony Smith makes the point that nationalist ideology believed self-governance was not sufficient. Only through heroic self-sacrifice of individual interests and welfare would the dynamic nation fully realize its internal energy and force.⁷⁸ Such a conception of the role of the citizen derives from both Rousseau’s and Hegel’s theories on liberty and free will. Mosse’s contention that the nationalism of fascism originated with the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution relies on

⁷⁵ Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 5.

⁷⁶ George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 7, 3, 4.

⁷⁷ J.W. Burrows, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914* (London: Yale University Press, 200), 124.

⁷⁸ Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 49.

Rousseau's notion of free will that claims "only when men act together as an assembled people can the individual be a citizen."⁷⁹ Hegel's notion of liberty does not differ much from Rousseau as it holds that only when an individual voluntarily sacrifices their own interests for the well-being of the community does that individual attain a state of liberty. The national unity Italian and German nationalists wished to create relied on such ideas of liberty and citizenship.

Built around such conceptions of citizenship was a particular kind of nationalism. The nationalism Hobsbawm speaks of, the rightist and chauvinistic nationalism of the *fin-de-siècle*, incorporated two highly transformative elements into its ideology: Social Darwinism and a Hegelian conception of the state. What was once a popular nationalism that celebrated nation and flag became integral nationalism. For the integral nationalists Darwin's theories on speciation and evolution were applicable to nations and states as well. Nations were not only the product of the natural course of history but were, as Hegel claimed, the "perfect political form."⁸⁰ The state—singular and autonomous—was "the embodiment of the highest ethical life human beings could attain" and as such no higher law existed; certainly not one governing its relations with other nations.⁸¹ Moreover, relation between nations was competitive pitting nations against each other militarily, economically and culturally. Only the strongest nations would survive and the strongest nations were only those that could secure the strongest unity of people and their absolute allegiance to the nation.⁸²

Informing the integral nationalism of the *fin-de-siècle* was another kind of nationalism Zeev Sternhell describes as "tribal nationalism."⁸³ One of the features of tribal nationalism was

⁷⁹ George Mosse, "Fascism and the French Revolution," *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 1 (January 1989): 5.

⁸⁰ Helmut Walser Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 9, 34.

⁸¹ Burrows, *The Crisis of Reason*, 133, 134.

⁸² Helmut Walser Smith, *German Nationalism*, 9.

⁸³ Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder, and Maia Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, trans. David Maisel, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 9.

its belief in the power of unconscious, even mystical forces over conscious reasoning. Such a conception of nationalism was touted by political authoritarian and ‘national socialist’ Maurice Barrès in the 1880s and 1890s. Barrès argued against reason on the basis that it removed the substance of the national being.⁸⁴ For Barrès only a strong figure of authority could embody the will of the people. Moreover, by turning to the people and invoking their ‘natural’ vigor and ‘genuine’ essence could the nation purify itself of the destructive forces of rationalism, liberalism and materialism.⁸⁵

Interestingly though, those who espoused the binding force of integral nationalism as a means of unifying the nation were the intellectual elite of the nation. As Anthony Smith points out, nationalism was generally the project of the urban and professional classes, specifically those “exposed to modern, secular, particularly western, science and culture.”⁸⁶ Yet, for the intelligentsia of the *fin-de-siècle*, the nationalist project took on new meaning as a wave of doubt spread over them. The rejection of the previous generation’s values and beliefs in reason, science and material progress affected the intelligentsia’s perception of the nation as well.

A Nationalist Intelligentsia

But the question remains how this new definition of nationalism, citizenship and the nation affected the thinkers of the *fin-de-siècle*? The connection between late nineteenth century integral nationalism and the intellectual crisis of the 1890s seems tenuous at best. Yet, in the interpretation of one historian of nationalism, the rise of nationalism itself may have played a role in creating that intellectual crisis while simultaneously offering a possible solution. For historians like Hobsbawm and Mosse, the motive force of nationalism derived from the democratization of politics. But to Ernest Gellner, nationalism was a product of modernization

⁸⁴ Zeev Sternhell, “National Socialism and Antisemitism: The Case of Maurice Barrès,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 8, no. 4 (October 1973): 50-52; Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 10.

⁸⁵ Sternhell, “National Socialism and Antisemitism,” 51; Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 10.

⁸⁶ Smith, *Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 25-26.

and the new social organization it required. In Gellner's interpretation, nationalism was "rooted in a *certain kind* of division of labor," one that continually mutated and prevented the formation of deep class and caste divisions. This new kind of division of labor produced a highly mobile society through the need for adaptability in social and economic roles and a national standardized general education that allows for such adaptability and dialect-free communication. Out of that highly mobile society a new social organization around a homogenous egalitarian culture was produced. The history of the spread of a national consciousness among the French peasantry Weber described represents an example of the effects modernization had on social organization.⁸⁷

The homogenous egalitarian culture modernization produced does not go without definition in Gellner's interpretation. While the shift in social organization produced by modernization meant the further loss of legitimacy afforded by more traditional doctrine, the high culture remained pervasive. Moreover, the literate high culture became the normative culture through the spread of their "literate idioms and styles of communication." For Gellner's interpretation, nationalism was about the "entry to, participation in, identification with, a literate high culture." Nationalism, in the eyes of Gellner's student Anthony Smith, was a project of the educated urban elite. But a consequence of this increasingly homogenized egalitarian form of social organization was the creation of homogenized egalitarian desires and perceived entitlements. With the acknowledgement of economic and social mobility the limits of that mobility became more apparent as well. Those limits of mobility became a political boundary and only when inside that boundary could one identify with the high culture, with *their* culture.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 24, 25, 35.

⁸⁸ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 50, 73, 95, 111; Anthony Smith, *Nationalist Movements* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 25-26.

The consequences of mobility's limitations and the disruption caused by the shift toward a new social organization were reflected in the opinions of those in the intelligentsia. Summing up the embitterment modernization had produced Ernst Weber writes:

Social barriers were breaking down, altered patterns of life were showing the first signs of standardization, human relations became more complicated as they broadened, accelerated change picked away at stabilities, the progress of the press reduced the gap between the tastes of fashionable elite and those of the masses, placing a premium on being with it, ahead of the crowd. As exclusive society gave way to the mass public, fashion replaced style, distinction replaced originality.

At the end of the nineteenth century several themes and movements that had informed the previous century collided in the minds of the literati. The movement toward greater secularization along with the inability of parliamentary liberalism to adapt to the rise of mass democracy and the failure of positivism to offer suitable cures to contemporary dilemmas crystallized in the decades straddling the turn of the century. Modernization, with all of its attendant complications, only deepened the sense of disenchantment among the intelligentsia culminating in what is known as the cultural and intellectual crisis of the 1890s.⁸⁹

In its most basic definition the cultural crisis of the 1890s was “a mood of rejection toward dominant values of the preceding generation.”⁹⁰ Weber, in his study of *fin-de-siècle* France, presented an image of a literati believing that society was in decline. Socially and economically, many of the literate high culture found it increasingly difficult to achieve success in careers of high status befitting their education. The popularization of Social Darwinism would only further reinforce the inequality the intelligentsia felt as their inequality was no longer only social or economic but hereditary as well. Beyond the socio-economic stage another perceived

⁸⁹ Ernst Weber, *France: Fin-de-siècle* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1986), 151.

⁹⁰ Stanley Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 39.

form of decline in literary and artistic works was seen by the intelligentsia as pointing to a general decline in culture. Intellectuals like Georges Sorel and Charles Péguy turned from literary critics to social critics in an effort to find new ways to explain the world.⁹¹ As previously touched on, the generation of 1890 began to seriously question the old explanations of reality. H. Stuart Hughes' text on the intellectual climate at the turn of the century focuses on the intelligentsia's renewed attention to the disconnect between external reality and the subjective experience of that reality.⁹² The material world, indeed, materialism as a whole, was placed under a new scrutiny that had less faith in positivism, empiricism and reason as effective tools for examination.

The intellectual crisis of the 1890s was, in a sense, a return to first principles as exemplified by the revolutionary critique of Marxism. But more than a re-examination of the world and the tools used to examine that world, the rejection of positivism, materialism and liberalism "encouraged interest in mystery and the supernatural, appreciation of faith for the sake of faith."⁹³ For most of the nineteenth century, secularization had spread to nearly every aspect of European culture. The process of secularization, in the mind of historian Owen Chadwick, was the repudiation of "any kind of pressure upon the man who rejected the accepted and inherited axioms on society."⁹⁴ By the beginning of the nineteenth century several movements of ideas accelerated the process of secularization. Whether it was the consideration of liberty, the nation, science, or the collective as the ultimate moral good, the spiritual in European society receded under the force of competing moral ends.

⁹¹ Weber, *France: Fin-de-siècle*, 14, 142.

⁹² H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 16.

⁹³ Weber, *France: Fin-de-siècle*, 32.

⁹⁴ Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 23.

The establishment of moral consensus, once the purview of the state, further eroded under the destabilizing influence of the press. But as Chadwick notes, the press only reflected society. The press acted only as a means of framing the tensions of an increasingly confused and contradictory society, of exposing society's polarities. Moreover, the press thrived on controversy. Thus by giving voice to radical opinions, the press reinforced the opinion that society was at a breaking point. The state, stripped of its moral responsibilities, no longer could assuage the tensions of society. By the middle of the nineteenth century it was believed that political freedom was not sufficient. One's religious and communal identities could still remain the primary identity. As discovered by the radical nationalists of Germany and Italy after unification, individualism stood in the way of spiritual unity. Even Marxism sought to bring society back to its foundation not only by stripping away religion, but the radical individualism of liberal democracy.⁹⁵

One final aspect of the secularization process—the role of positivism—became representative of the sickness European society suffered from. Positivism, as perceived by those reacting against it, led to an overly mechanistic and material view of the world. At the end of the nineteenth century positivism was used to explain far more than its originally rational and empirical foundations allowed. What the anti-positivists reacted against was the tendency to use scientific theory to explain a whole host of human characteristics. The definition of positivism was so loose by the 1890s that it was frequently substituted with other terms such as materialism, mechanism and naturalism.⁹⁶ The anti-positivist response was to embrace notions of intuition, psychology and metaphysics as an equally valid method for examining the world.

When arrayed against each other the elements of secularization, positivism, nationalism and liberal individualism produced a deep psychological reaction among the intelligentsia. What

⁹⁵ Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind*, 38, 39, 31, 57, 65.

⁹⁶ Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 37-38.

defined the generation of the 1890s was a sense of, in H. Stuart Hughes opinion, “psychological *malaise*” that produced a fear of the future and a grave sense of self-doubt.⁹⁷ What could they, the intelligentsia, do to save the world? As Weber keenly notes, the intelligentsia was concerned that even if they brought a new means of living to the world the people might not listen. Furthermore, what would happen if the intelligentsia freed the people but left them without guidance? How could the intelligentsia renew the past while remaining committed to the future?⁹⁸

What resulted was an emphasis on intuition, spiritual unity and unconscious forces as possible solutions to a society believed too sick to continue much longer. But, in a fit of irony, it was nationalism that afforded the disenchanted intelligentsia the best opportunity to implement their vision of liberty and citizenship “based upon affiliation which reaches back into a mysterious and pure era of virtue and innocence, uncontaminated by market forces, urban luxuries and petty officialdom.”⁹⁹ It was nationalism, in its most integral and Hegelian of forms, that could restructure society in a way that allowed for a strong authoritarian leader while providing the spiritual unity so desperately wanted.

The forces at play for the generation of 1890 turned its best minds onto the subjects of psychology, integral nationalism and moral revolution. Intellectuals like Sorel, Le Bon, Bergson and Nietzsche were at the very center of this effort for spiritual revival. When placed in the context of a culture that rejected positivism, individualism and parliamentarianism (in both its liberal and socialist varieties) the theories of those four intellectuals do not seem as radical or as prophetic. Any examination of these four intellectual’s philosophical contributions must account for the influence of the cultural crisis.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁹⁸ Weber, *France: Fin-de-siècle*, 152.

⁹⁹ Smith, *Nationalist Movements*, 23.

IV. The Fin-de-siècle Intellectuals

Georges Sorel

Sorel as a nexus of *fin-de-siècle* thought

Of all the intellectuals of the proto-fascist period none hold a position quite like that of French social critic Georges Sorel. Credited as a, if not *the*, foundational intellectual of revolutionary syndicalism, Sorel's work has come to represent the truest example of a proto-fascist intellectual possible. Through his critique of the modern world and his theory of social action Mosse argues that Sorel was one of the intellectuals who prepared the intellectual ground for fascism.¹⁰⁰ At the very least, Sorel's theory of social action opened "the conceptual space in which the theoreticians of revolutionary syndicalism evolved."¹⁰¹ Influenced by Le Bon's theory of the crowd mind and Bergson's philosophy of intuition, Sorel constructed a theory of social action that emphasized the use of social myths that would simultaneously bind the crowd together and incite the crowd to produce social change. Moreover, by championing "the importance of nonrational approaches to social organization," Sorel provided the revolutionary syndicalists with an adaptable and practical theory for inciting their socialist revolution.¹⁰²

The Social Myth in Marxism

The basis of Sorel's theory of social action was his conception of the social myth. Sorel defined the myths that comprise Socialism as "a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by all Socialism against modern society."¹⁰³ What enticed Sorel so to social myths was the perceived inability to refute them, to break them into their constituent parts. Myths, in being a historical force, could refuse analysis. The social myth was eternally present and sought to act only on the

¹⁰⁰ George Mosse, "Introduction: The Genesis of Fascism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, no. 1 (1966): 15.

¹⁰¹ Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder, and Maia Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, trans. David Maisel, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 20.

¹⁰² Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 28.

¹⁰³ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T.E. Hulme, (New York, B.W. Huebsch, 1941), 137.

present. The myth, to Sorel, was action and the will to action. Myths served as force of preparation for combat and radical changes.¹⁰⁴ The promises of the future any myth might make were unimportant so long as the myth incited action. It was of little consequence to Sorel if the myths were wholly delusional and inspired great crimes during the course of the revolution. If the aims of the revolution were achieved then the myths served their purpose. “It is the myth,” Sorel writes, “in its entirety which is alone important.”¹⁰⁵ The power of the myth existed only when the myth was taken uncritically as a whole.¹⁰⁶

Within Sorel’s theory of social action, the social myth functioned both as a means of inciting the masses and of pulling socialism from the hands of the intellectuals. Socialism had fallen ill in Sorel’s view. Under the influence of “intellectualistic utopia” socialism had grown stale and idle. Myths were the cure for the idealism of Utopia and the endless discussions of dilettante socialists. The myth of the general strike purifies the image of revolution, casting off the “fine things” of the sociologists, social reformers and the Intellectuals of Socialism.¹⁰⁷ Sorel cast myths, particularly the myth of the general strike, as the returning of high morals to socialism by bringing “the pride of men” to the fore and protecting the people from “the quackery of ambitious leaders, hungering for the fleshpots.”¹⁰⁸ The social myth was the means to a “new type of political action, an eternal spring of regeneration and moral heorism.”¹⁰⁹ Through the social myth the masses were placed in the realm of historical legend and instilled a belief of invincibility to their cause. No longer would the socialists *explain* to the proletariat “the

¹⁰⁴ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 32, 136; Ben Halpern, “‘Myth’ and ‘Ideology’ in Modern Usage,” *History and Theory* 1, no. 2 (1961): 138.

¹⁰⁵ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 136.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 27, 33, 151.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁰⁹ Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 58.

greatness of the revolutionary part they are called to play.”¹¹⁰ The myth of the general strike would *show* the proletariat their role by rousing them to action.

The political action the social myths inspired were what Sorel called “*the revolutionary and direct method.*” Violence had the potential for heroism by virtue of the “happy consequences” that might spring from violence acts. Versus the classical Marxist stance that viewed violence as anticipating the revolution, Sorel argued that violence was the revolution. Sorel defended the use of violence, even violence characterized as criminal, on the basis of future benefits. War was the image of violence Sorel had in mind, a great war where force was “displayed according to its own nature, without ever professing to borrow anything from the judicial proceedings which society sets up against criminals.” Through violence Sorel argued the European nations would “recover their former energy.” Moreover, the myth of the general strike would, for the first time, make the tenets of Marxist theory intelligible to the masses.¹¹¹

Sorel’s Revision of Marxism

The abandonment of Utopian thinking allowed Sorel to also abandon any concern for economic conditions and the organization of industry to the capitalists. Utopian thinking represented the influence of intellectuals seeking only superficial change. Utopian thinking restrained rebellious thought by forcing into the realm of logic and calm optimistic reason. The optimist thinks only of “small reforms” as a means of bringing about the utopian society. Moreover, since the idea of utopia lies in the realm of logic, one can break it apart and evaluate its claims to truth. Sorel argued for detaching concerns for capitalism on the basis that any examination of the utopian economic conditions leaves Marxist theory open to a refutation of its claims to represent reality and realistic social change. Additionally, capitalism had the important function of acting as the primary economic impetus to create a new society. No other force had

¹¹⁰ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 85.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 70, 45, 122, 90; Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 64.

the same modernizing power capitalism. In arguing that the effectiveness of Marxism depended on leaving the capitalistic market alone, Sorel successfully detached the economic factor from Marxist theory. What Sorel was left with was Marxism's value as a weapon of combat. In Sorel's revision the true role of Marxist theory "was to act as an instrument of war."¹¹²

With Marxist theory divorced from concerns for the future economy, Sorel claimed that the true enemy of Marxism was political liberalism and its ideology. For Sorel, the socialist revolution would destroy the normative values of political liberalism and the bourgeois ideology that supported those values. Sorel accused political liberalism of luring socialism into its byzantine system and slowly choking off the vitalism of Marxist theory. Furthermore, the omission of economic concerns in Marxist theory transformed the struggle for a better material existence into a "total moral revolt" that would bring about better spiritual conditions. The workers who participate in a strike do not seek to cooperate with their employers but to defend their spiritual existence. The myth of the general strike, according to Sorel, would inspire the striking worker by crafting images of a new society where the moral value of the worker was supreme.¹¹³

The conclusions Sorel reaches reflected his desire to bring Marxist theory back to the spirit of Marx. Under the label of revisionist, Sorel argued the "new school" of socialist thought would rescue socialism from the obscure discussions of contemporary Socialists who no longer understood the ideas of Marxism. Sorel acknowledged the divergence between his revision and classical Marxism but claims to represent the true Marxist theory by "recognizing the necessity

¹¹² Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 34; Halpern, "'Myth' and 'Ideology,'" 138, 139; Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 33; Sternhell, Sznajder, and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 44, 50.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 24, 55; Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 151, 187.

of the improvement of morals.” Just as the material improvement of machinery allow for greater production so too does the moral improvement of the worker.¹¹⁴

The Theory of Syndicalism as Precursor to Fascist Ideology

Without abandoning the terminology of Marxism Sorel did concede that Marxism was slowly becoming the “theory of revolutionary syndicalism—or rather as a philosophy of modern history, in as far as it is under the influence of this syndicalism.”¹¹⁵ Revolutionary syndicalism under the ‘new school’ rejected the positivist, middle-class materialism while advocating the destruction of the political system. In revolutionary syndicalism Sorel saw the implementation of his theory of social action. Revolutionary syndicalism had the potential for the instantaneous and complete emancipation of the people through direct moral action. Much as the fascists understood the role of visual images in controlling the crowd, so too did Sorel advocate the use of images and social myths as a means of directing the crowd into moral revolution. The myth of the general strike, as employed by revolutionary syndicalism, proved for Sorel the power of mythic imagery in inspiring the masses to great moral heights.¹¹⁶

While Zeev Sternhell has already established the importance of Sorel’s theory in the development of fascist ideology, it bears repeating that Sorel’s influence was still a limited one. As Robert Nye remarked in his comparison of Sorel and Gustave Le Bon’s theories of the crowd and social action, it was Le Bon who was the more common name during their life times. Moreover, Mussolini’s tacit acknowledgement of Sorel’s influence does not immediately equate to Sorel’s primacy in fascism’s ideological formation. While the confluence of Mussolini’s brand

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 140, 52, 261, 262.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹¹⁶ Robert Nye, “Two Paths to a Psychology of Social Action: Gustave LeBon and Georges Sorel,” *Journal of Modern History* 45, no. 3 (September 1973): 427, 430; Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 43.

of socialism with Italian syndicalism does imply a degree of Sorelian influence, Sorel was not the only influence.¹¹⁷

Gustave Le Bon

Gustave Le Bon, theorist of the crowd

Alongside Sorel's work on new methods for crowd motivation lies the work of French psychologist Gustave Le Bon. It was during the same time that Sorel was first formulating his critique of Marxism in the late 1890s and early 1900s that Le Bon introduced his groundbreaking analysis of crowd psychology. To many of the generation of 1890 Le Bon was better known than Sorel and recognized as one of the founders of modern social psychology for his theory of crowd minds. In point of fact, as historian Robert Nye argues, Le Bon most likely had a significant influence on the shape of Sorel's conception of mass action.¹¹⁸ Zeev Sternhell expands on Nye's contention by claiming that Le Bon had influenced not only Sorel and even Freud but "virtually every political thinker and social scientist of the turn of the century."¹¹⁹ Le Bon's work and conclusions are strikingly representative what H. Stuart Hughes called the "problem of consciousness" and the great retooling of the Enlightenment's first principles concerning the relation between external reality and individual perception. In Le Bon's work that new consciousness is first noted by his observations on the dramatic shift within European civilization. Resting on the twin observations that all the old political, social and religious beliefs had fallen by the wayside and the very Marxist observation that new conditions of existence has

¹¹⁷ Nye, "Two Paths to a Psychology of Social Action," 413; Tobias Abse, "Syndicalism and the Origins of Italian Fascism," *Historical Journal* 25, no. 1 (March 1982): 252.

¹¹⁸ Nye, "Two Paths to a Psychology of Social Action," 428

¹¹⁹ Zeev Sternhell, "The 'Anti-Materialist' Revision of Marxism as an Aspect of the Rise of Fascist Ideology," *Journal of Contemporary History* 22, no. 3 (July 1987): 384.

arisen through modern scientific and industrial advances, Le Bon sees civilization entering an “era of crowds.”¹²⁰

The theory of crowd psychology Le Bon developed was inspired by the influences of the Boulanger movement of the 1880s and the work of psychologist Théodule Ribot in the 1890s. During the late 1880s General Georges Boulanger stood at the center of a movement that sought a restoration of a monarchy and revenge against Germany for the humiliating French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War.¹²¹ The movement built around Boulanger that would see him installed as dictator of France presented Le Bon with a concrete example of mass politics in action. To Le Bon, Boulangism exposed the power of a strong leader, like Boulanger, who was able to inspire the masses into action. Crucially, Le Bon would recall in his most notable work, *The Crowd*, the mass belief that Boulanger would cure “all injustices and all evils.” The second influence on Le Bon’s theory came from the new school of thought in psychology, the École de Paris. The most notable figure of this new school was Ribot who, in the 1890s naturally, had written and taught on the independence of emotional states and their common, unconscious influence over other intellectual functions. Under Ribot’s guidance Le Bon would come to argue for the primacy of unconscious, emotional and irrational motivations for human action. The dominance of the conscious individual in determining the fate of society was supplanted by the emotional crowd. The crowd, exemplified by the authoritarian leanings of Boulangism, placed its stamp on the new era for Le Bon.¹²²

Crowd Mind

¹²⁰ H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 15; Nye, “Two Paths to a Psychology of Social Action,” 423; Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 14.

¹²¹ *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Georges Boulanger,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georges_Boulanger (accessed April 18, 2006).

¹²² George L. Mosse, “Fascism and the French Revolution,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 1 (January 1989): 14; Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 85; Nye, “Two Paths to a Psychology of Social Action,” 425; Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 5, 15.

Found in its most definitive form in 1895's *The Crowd*, Le Bon theory of crowd psychology argued that crowds were primarily motivated by unconscious sentiments and were continually "at the mercy of all external exciting causes." The crowd mind formed whenever individuals, gathered into what Le Bon calls an organized or psychological crowd, lost their sense of individuality and became a singular collective mind. Le Bon compared the crowd to an organic being with each individual mind acting much like a single cell. Just as an organic being is more than the sum of its constituent parts so too was the crowd mind more than the sum of the collected personalities, opinions and conscious thoughts. To Le Bon, the crowd mind exhibited distinct personality characteristics. In Le Bon's analysis those characteristics appeared as exaggerated emotional sentiments.¹²³

With such an unconscious but unified mind, crowds could only think in the simplest of images of the most intense nature. For the crowd mind nothing could stand in the way of its desires since crowds, "being incapable of reflection and of reasoning, are devoid of the notion of improbability." Indeed, it was typically only the most improbable of ideas that were the most striking to the crowd. Ideas, in Le Bon's view, were only accepted by the crowd after undergoing the most drastic transformation into simple images. Particularly for highly complex ideas, the transformation necessary had the potential of divorcing the simplified idea from its original meaning. Even then, it was not so much the facts of an idea but the way in which the idea was presented that would impress the idea upon the crowd mind.¹²⁴

In a later work, *The Psychology of Revolution*, written on the eve of the Great War, Le Bon made the point that ideas have no force of their own. With that Le Bon concluded that only by surrounding an idea with the mystic aura of a faith could an idea impress itself on the

¹²³ Ibid., 9, 41, 26, 30.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 75, 79.

crowd.¹²⁵ Le Bon argued that the foundation of all religious and most political beliefs was the mystic spirit. The ideas that had the most power over a crowd were those ideas that held a “mystic temperament” which were embodied “in the forms of idols, fetiches, words or formulæ.”¹²⁶ Formulaic mantras and chants, or rather slogans and rally cries, take on a mystic quality for the crowd mind. The “grandiose and vague images” such formulaic cries invoked only served to reinforce the sentiment of a mystic, transcendent power.¹²⁷

Caesarian Oration

But what is a crowd without a leader? How can one harness the power of the crowd and direct? Stemming from the example of Boulangism, Le Bon placed the legendary leader as the prime mover of the crowd. Without a leader the crowd lacks direction and would never act. Historian J. W. Burrows cynically notes that in Le Bon’s theory “crowds are above all suggestible and are dealt with by their leaders as hypnotic subjects are by the hypnotist.”¹²⁸ This idea of the hypnosis of the crowds does reflect Le Bon’s contention that the mystic qualities of ideas suitable for crowds produced an intense need for adoration.¹²⁹ The crowd needed a figure to laud and believe in, just as Boulanger had crafted the belief that he and only he could save society.

The power of the leader in Le Bon’s analysis lies in the leader’s ability to seduce the crowd and provoke action through suggestion.¹³⁰ As Le Bon states, “it is legendary heroes, and not for a moment real heroes, who have impressed the minds of crowds.”¹³¹ The great leaders—those who, using Le Bon’s term, kept their prestige—constantly kept the crowd at a distance,

¹²⁵ Gustave Le Bon, *The Psychology of Revolution*, trans. Bernard Miall, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004), 65.

¹²⁶ Le Bon, *The Psychology of Revolution*, 87.

¹²⁷ Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 129.

¹²⁸ J.W. Burrows, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 99.

¹²⁹ Le Bon, *The Psychology of Revolution*, 109.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹³¹ Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 54.

never allowing the crowd to ask questions but forcing them to forever admire.¹³² Le Bon goes on to describe the type of legendary hero crowds embrace as something akin to a Caesar: “His insignia attracts them, his authority overawes them, and his sword instills them with fear.”¹³³ Built around that imagery of a Caesar-like leader the crowd mind desired a leader with virtue, values and vitality unattainable in real life. Those leaders were men of action, men of the moment, and as such superior beings in the eyes of the crowd, had the power to change, even save the world, through the force of their own will.¹³⁴

The Crowd Mind in Mass Democracy

Revolution and social change were the focus for much of Le Bon’s work. It was Le Bon’s contention that by understanding how the crowd mind worked one could affect great change upon the world.¹³⁵ Much like Sorel, Le Bon advanced the idea that for movements like socialism to succeed they needed to appeal “to the affective, dreamlike, and chimerical qualities of human nature.”¹³⁶ Le Bon noted, just as Sorel did, that personal and material interests were poor motivators to the crowd. To Le Bon, the inability of the crowd to react to such ideas as material interest and surplus value were part of the nature of the crowd mind. A revolution would only succeed once the ideas of the revolution had settled in the minds of the masses. Yet the mass could not generate revolutionary ideas themselves, the ideas had to come from more elite sources. It was the onus of the great and legendary leaders to present the masses with revolutionary ideas as a call to action.¹³⁷

It was the task of the leader, informed by Le Bon’s psychology of the crowd naturally, to inculcate the ideas of the revolution in the masses—to, as Le Bon put it, “say what they did not

¹³² Ibid., 159.

¹³³ Ibid., 61.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 58; Le Bon, *The Psychology of Revolution*, 109.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 66.

¹³⁶ Nye, “Two Paths to a Psychology of Social Action,” 427.

¹³⁷ Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 65; Le Bon, *The Psychology of Revolution*, 64, 66.

intend, and vote what they would not have wished to vote.”¹³⁸ The great leader had to present the revolutionary ideas as calls to action. Indeed, the success of the leader depended on his ability to incite the crowd into action. By creating a strong faith, strong enough to supersede its own internal contradictions, the leader could bring about the desired social change. But in the closing passages of Le Bon’s study of revolutions, he remarks that while action is inherently good only “properly directed” action would result in truly positive results.¹³⁹

Fascism and the Crowd Mind

With *The Crowd* Le Bon established a theory of crowd action and social action that held great sway over the minds of many social commentators of the *fin-de-siècle* and beyond. In *The Crowd* Le Bon wrote on the changes taking place in the motor of history. The new era, the era of crowds as Le Bon called it, was driven by the emotional and the unconscious. By the time he wrote *The Psychology of Revolution* a decade later Le Bon fretted over the perceived need for change. As Le Bon wrote near the close of the text:

While our legislators are reforming and legislating at hazard, the natural evolution of the world is slowly pursuing its course. New interests arise, the economic competition between nation and nation increases in severity, the working-classes are bestirring themselves, and on all sides we see the birth of formidable problems which the harangues of the politicians will never resolve.¹⁴⁰

Le Bon stated that the most difficult problem facing western civilization was the inability to reconcile the tenets of equality at the heart of liberal democracy with the growing natural and material inequalities.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 105, 110, 111, 196, 214, 330.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 316.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 296.

Socialism offered no serious answer as Le Bon accused the movement of immobilizing the creative energy found in individual ambition. Even syndicalism only offered a partial solution to the problems of modern industry. The problem for both socialism and syndicalism, as with democracy, was the ideological drive for equality. Nature, Le Bon contended, admitted no equality. The individualism Le Bon spoke of was not born from liberalism but from economic and biological laws. Here Le Bon fully embraced an elitist position as the individual, like the legendary leader, had a necessary place as the generator of ideas. In a way though, Le Bon worried that the rational admission of Nature's incompatibility with the idea of equality would not sway the true believer.¹⁴²

George Mosse called both Mussolini and Hitler disciples of Le Bon and argued that not only had fascism legitimized its actions in part through Le Bon's theory of the crowd mind but followed Le Bon's suggestions on how to successfully lead the crowd.¹⁴³ Fellow historian Stanley Payne presents Le Bon as part of the lineage of proto-fascist thinkers for his avocation of strong leadership.¹⁴⁴ Described as elitist, anti-Christian, anti-individual and an ardent Social Darwinist, it is easy to see Le Bon as promoting the power of mass action while maintaining the need for a strong authoritarian leader. Yet Le Bon plays the role of prophet for the coming fascist era just as well as he does proto-fascist. In one instance in *The Crowd* Le Bon described the legendary leaders a crowd most desires as "morbidly nervous, excitable, half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness."¹⁴⁵ Placed against contemporary conceptions of Hitler and his personality, Le Bon's comments seem almost clairvoyant.

But beyond Le Bon's assertions on the need for strong leadership and the nature of the crowd lie his belief in the role of politics as a creator of a strong, *spiritual* faith. The fall of

¹⁴² Ibid., 296, 300.

¹⁴³ George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1999), 38; Mosse, "Introduction: Genesis of Fascism," 15.

¹⁴⁴ Payne, *A History of Fascism*, 27.

¹⁴⁵ Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 134.

traditional consensus led, in Le Bon's mind, to the fall of creative activity. It was the task of the intellectual and the great leader to provide the crowd with a new mystic spirit, a new Messiah. The crowd, the nation, the race all needed that mystic foundation. While Le Bon may not have had the influence some historians argue it is difficult to avoid the similarity between Le Bon's ideas and the ideology of fascism, particularly in terms of fascism's focus on the mystic temperament and the need for a politics that avoids the problems of liberalism and socialism.¹⁴⁶

Henri Bergson

“The Most Fashionable”

Among the intellectuals chosen for examination in the present study few had the popularity in their own time that French philosopher Henri Bergson did. Called the “most fashionable philosopher” of the *fin-de-siècle* Bergson's lectures after the publication of *Creative Evolution* became social events as the upper classes and even tourists ventured to hear his talks on intuition and morality in philosophy. What made Bergson's lectures so popular was his conception of intuition as a legitimate means of gaining knowledge as well as the vital force in evolution, better known as the *élan vital*. Bergson made his philosophy against positivism the hallmark of his work developing a well-rounded metaphysics based on the ideas of intuition, duration and conscious self-reflection.¹⁴⁷

Intuition and Positivism

The metaphysics of Bergson represented one of the truest example of a return to first principles. Much as Descartes proceeded from an initial questioning of self-awareness to an examination of external reality Bergson starts with a questioning of consciousness. But Bergson twists the old Cartesian method by questioning another side of consciousness and self-awareness—the role of intuition in constructing our knowledge of the world. The basic

¹⁴⁶ Le Bon, *The Psychology of Revolution*, 150, 87, 109.

¹⁴⁷ Payne, *A History of Fascism*, 25; Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 114, 35.

distinction Bergson attempted to draw was that one could not reason about life in the same way one does about inanimate matter. Bergson proposed that intelligence was not superior to instinct but complementary and in some ways dependant on instinct. But whereas the intellect could only understand crude matter intuition innately understood the flow of life for intuition was a part of life. By emphasizing the kind of knowledge intuition has access to Bergson explicitly denied the positivism claim to explain everything through science. Even so, Bergson did not deny that science does provide some form of knowledge, but that scientific knowledge was incomplete. The proposition Bergson sought to establish was that through the use of both science *and* philosophy would a more complete knowledge come about.¹⁴⁸

One of the aims behind Bergson's contention that science does not provides answers for everything comes from Bergson's conception of life and reality. Bergson perceived reality as a unified whole but the atomizing effect of scientific knowledge obscured the true nature of reality. Scientific knowledge, deriving from intellect, could not understand the unified nature of biological reality or the consciousness such reality is based on. One example Bergson repeatedly comes back to was the difference between an intellectual grasp of time and an intuitive grasp. Bergson did admit that the intellect could understand real time but only in a fragmentary way. Intuition, on the other hand, was not overpowered by the unified, constantly evolving nature of time. Like time, the intellectual perspective of things and states only told of one aspect of reality. For Bergson, things and states, understood intuitively, represented the becoming of reality.¹⁴⁹

The *élan vital*

Part of Bergson's contention against positivism was his belief that universal laws of biology and evolution did not exist. For Bergson there were only "*directions*" that life moves in.

¹⁴⁸ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1998), 13, 135, 267, 199.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 200, 248.

Bergson's conception of evolution rested on the twin notions of duration and the *élan vital*. Duration in Bergson's mind was simply his conception of time where the "past presses against the present." Comparing duration to the formation of consciousness, Bergson argued that the flow of time caused the continual creation of new consciousness in which the past and the present form a continually evolving thought. Bergson opposed duration with the conception of time held by the scientific mind, dissected and atomized, which he believed led to a misunderstanding of the nature of evolution. Time cannot exist in the static systems of physics and geometry yet time goes to the very heart of evolution.¹⁵⁰

Bergson's purpose behind his conception of time as duration lay in his conception of evolution and life: "We do not *think* in real time. But we *live* in it, because life transcends intellect." Here Bergson tweaks his notion of intuition by building it on the base of instinct. Intuition was instinct turned in on itself, "disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely." Philosophy then, of the metaphysical variety, was the process of turning the intellect back in on itself in order to expose its ground and the "ocean of life" that continually creates it. In one of his more radical moments, Bergson argued that one must "thrust intelligence outside itself by an act of will."¹⁵¹

The concept of duration was the basis for Bergson's argument on the motive force of evolution—the *élan vital*. Life was in constant evolution, "an unceasing transformation," and is driven by a need for creation. Moreover, the "impetus of life" was simply the accumulation of energy "and then to let it flow into flexible channels, changeable in shape, at the end of which it will accomplish infinitely varied kinds of work." Time, understood as duration, was the continual creation of a unified conception of the past and the present with each new moment further

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 16, 21, 27; Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey, ed. *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, by Henri Bergson, (New York: Continuum, 2002), 9.

¹⁵¹ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 46, 176, 191, 193

incorporated into that conception. Only by falling back to intuition would one understand the flow of time and the vital impetus behind evolution.¹⁵²

For Bergson, understanding evolution and time was a spiritual exercise. The purpose of using intuition to understand the *élan vital* was to remind oneself that the spiritual life was not distinct and separate but pervaded all of life. In Bergson's philosophy, consciousness was inherently free but through the use of intellect attaches itself to the material world. Since the intellect acts as crude matter does, only in static states, the use of intuition allows the consciousness to free itself from crude matter, or rather the material world. The intellect, forever settling on the material world, would only construct an artificial image of the world that serves as a substitute for action. Consciousness, freed by the use of Bergson's philosophy of intuition, would return the life of man back on the path of spirituality.¹⁵³

Sorel and Bergsonism

The anti-positivism of Bergson certainly marks him as an intellectual of the 1890s. But beyond his rejection of positivism as the *only* means to knowledge Bergson shared few sentiments with the social critics of his time. While intellectuals like Sorel claimed Bergson as a central inspiration Bergson's continued self-confinement to the realm of philosophy and science eventually drove many to find other intellectuals whose work was more suitable for development into social theory. Moreover, Bergson strongly disapproved of the attempts by social theorists to turn his metaphysical philosophy into a philosophy of action and social change.¹⁵⁴ Part of the problem in translating Bergson's anti-positivist philosophy into a theory of social action lies in the fact that Bergson went to great lengths to wrap his metaphysics in a logical cloak.

¹⁵² Ibid., 230-231, 251, 253-254.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 268, 269, 270.

¹⁵⁴ Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 123.

Even the sense in which Bergson understood intuition differed greatly from that of typical anti-positivists. As told earlier, Bergson viewed intuition as complimentary, if sometimes superior, to intellect but never denied the truth-telling abilities of the intellect. Instead, intuition was a means of accessing certain truths unavailable through intellectual inquiry. The tension between intuition and intellect was part of a larger point Bergson made that science (intellect) could not determine the bounds of something like metaphysics (intuition) as they are two separate but mutually responsive systems. The point behind separating intuition from intellect for Bergson lies in his belief that the intellect derives from intuition. Consequently, the intellect could never truly examine the ground of its own being since that ground exists beyond the intellect.¹⁵⁵

Another point of contention when attempting to mark Bergson as a proto-fascist intellectual comes from his respect for his heritage. While born as a Jew, Bergson had grown as close as possible to the tenets of Catholicism without actually converting. Yet after the fall of France to the Nazis Bergson refused a special exemption from anti-Semitic laws the Nazis were implementing and registered as a Jew. It was said that Bergson gave up conversion to Catholicism and exemption from the anti-Semitic laws as a means of showing solidarity with his Jewish brethren. Even so, at his funeral, per his instructions, a priest was present to read the prayers.¹⁵⁶

A direct influence by Bergson on fascist ideology seems unlikely given the logical constraints he constantly sought for his philosophy. Moreover, the inability to translate his philosophy of intuition into a theory for social action exposes the primary limitation of Bergson's type of metaphysics. Bergson was not a fascist nor did he support fascism. Bergson did not even support the social theorists who sought to use his philosophy as a means of enacting political

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 121; Pearsons and Mullarkey, *Henri Bergson*, 33, 38.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., xi; Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 119-20.

change. For Bergson, the path to spirituality his philosophy encouraged was to take place within a free society as it was the path only an individual could take, not society as a whole.¹⁵⁷

Friedrich Nietzsche

How to Read Nietzsche

The place of Bergson in the proto-fascist pantheon is tenuous at best. The difficulty in pinning down Bergson's influence, if any at all, on proto-fascist and fascist thought derives from the kind of influence Bergson is credited with. The same problems appear when attempting to highlight the influence of German über-philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Credited as "the most famous and influential harbingers of the new trends" Nietzsche paradoxically presents both the most obvious and the most ambiguous case for consideration as a proto-fascist thinker. Common perceptions of Nietzsche place him and his work at the center of Nazi ideology and as the prime inspiration for the most destructive and inhuman aspects of the Nazi regime. Even before the rise of fascism Nietzsche was considered a bloodthirsty philosopher and partially responsible for the German aggression of World War I, or "the Euro-Nietzschean War" as a London bookseller would call it not long after the outbreak of hostilities. Sternhell cites Nietzsche as an influence on Sorel's thought through his avocation of the cult of revolt. For Mosse, Nietzsche's influence was most pronounced among the revolution-seeking student groups, such as the one led by Stefan George, who looked to Nietzsche as the transcended leader, the *Überdeutscher*. Even historian Roger Eatwell claims the proto-fascists and fascists found comfort in Nietzsche's belief that at times of crisis a new man would rise and restore culture. But, much like Bergson, when compared to the most obvious cases of proto-fascist thought found in the likes of Sorel and Le

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 123.

Bon, Nietzsche's work does not immediately appear as proto-fascist, non-fascist or as any other kind of specific political thought.¹⁵⁸

In part the difficulty in accepting the common interpretation of Nietzsche as a proto-fascist stems from the myriad of interpretations one can draw from his works. No single authoritative interpretation of Nietzsche's works exists nor can one distill it down to an essential core. Some even argue that to do so would lose the constantly shifting meaning of Nietzsche's work. Confusion reigns when considering Nietzsche's work and indeed that seems almost intentional. And yet, despite the apparent vagueness of his philosophy, Nietzsche was highly concerned with the final product. One of Nietzsche's goals in his writing was the transformation of his readers. Nietzsche sought to inspire self-reflection through his work and a re-evaluation of views and values. One consequence of that desire was Nietzsche's noticeable lack of doctrinal or systematic writing. As philosophers Kathleen Higgins and Robert Solomon note, Nietzsche left a lot of the intellectual lifting for his readers to do. Another consequence was Nietzsche's desire to find readers on par with him intellectually, who understood his ideas, even his jokes and could follow the same paths as he did. Those two consequences, Nietzsche's lack of systematic writing, and his desire for readers as intelligent as he, left his work appearing peculiarly dense and prone to misinterpretation.¹⁵⁹

When considering Nietzsche's influence strictly from the standpoint of the fascists and proto-fascists it become highly important to remember the kind of readers Nietzsche sought. In

¹⁵⁸ Stanley Payne, *Fascism*, 24; Michael Tanner, "Nietzsche," in *German Philosophers: Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche*, ed. Roger Scruton, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 345; Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany: 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of Berkeley Press, 1992), 128; Sternhell, "The 'Anti-Materialist,'" 385; George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 205, 206; Roger Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, (New York: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1996), 10.

¹⁵⁹ Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000), x; Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy*, 3; Solomon and Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said*, x; Tanner, "Nietzsche," 349; Allan Megill, "Historicizing Nietzsche? Paradoxes and Lessons of a Hard Case," *Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 1 (March 1996): 122; Solomon and Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said*, 53.

the mind of historian Steven Aschheim, the influence of Nietzsche is found in the “dynamic interaction between the peculiar, multifaceted qualities of his thought and its appropriators.”¹⁶⁰ Those influenced by Nietzsche, like the fascist, had a tendency to take from Nietzsche’s work only what was useful. Additionally, the onset of Nietzsche’s ascent to wide-spread cultural recognition occurred only *after* his descent into madness in 1889. In part, the selective editing of Nietzsche’s works by his sister encouraged the cult of Nietzsche as a prophet of the future culture.¹⁶¹

One highly illuminating example of the selective appropriation of Nietzsche’s works comes from the French intellectuals of the 1890s who used Nietzsche as a sword to combat the Symbolist movement. The one of the first of Nietzsche’s works translated into French was *The Case against Wagner*, the text that announced, with quite a bit of vitriol, his break with former associate and well-known composer Richard Wagner. During the 1880s Wagner became something of a cultish figure for the Symbolists as his musical and literary works advocated an extreme idealism that sought refuge in the dream realms of the mythic. The cult of Wagner and the whole of the Symbolist movement dominated the French literary intelligentsia during the 1880s but by the beginning of the 1890s some had grown weary of its decadent idealism and rejection of external reality. Nietzsche, in part for his breaking with Wagner, served as a rallying point for those French intellectuals seeking a new philosophy that radically broke from the Symbolists.¹⁶²

Apart from his break from Wagner, Nietzsche also provided the French literary anarchists with a philosophy of regeneration that “inspired and legitimated a vitalistic desire for a radical

¹⁶⁰ Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy*, 2.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 9; Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 34; Burrows, *The Crisis of Reason*, 188.

¹⁶² Christopher E. Forth, “Nietzsche, Decadence, and Regeneration in France, 1891-95,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54, no. 1 (January 1993): 102, 100.

change in the status quo.”¹⁶³ (Forth, Nietzsche, 98) Moreover, as tensions with Germany became more pronounced Nietzsche the Francophile became an effective weapon against German culture. (Forth, Nietzsche, 117) This transformation of Nietzsche from a weapon against Wagner and Symbolism to French cultural warrior serves only to reinforce the idea that which of Nietzsche’s texts were first available, i.e. read, greatly affects one’s entire view of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Unlike the French, the Austrians were privy to Nietzsche’s earliest works that lauded Wagner and others like Schopenhauer. And even after Nietzsche’s break with Wagner, many Austrian Nietzscheans would continue to interpret him within the framework of his earlier writings.¹⁶⁴

The French use of Nietzsche offers a clear example of how one reads Nietzsche affecting how one interprets Nietzsche. Steven Aschheim’s text on Nietzsche’s influence throughout German history goes further to argue that Nietzsche’s influence was determined more by the influence of other ideas and ideologies than by Nietzsche’s works. Still, the continued reference back to Nietzsche’s philosophy by fascist and proto-fascist intellectuals does, at the very least, seem to imply a degree of influence. The question then is how Nietzsche’s work was interpreted and whether the meaning Nietzsche constructed around his ideas matches the meaning in fascist ideology. As Aschheim notes, the use of Nietzschean words in the political lexicon points to some sort of influence. Whether that influence was direct or original lies at the heart of whether Nietzsche was a proto-fascist intellectual.¹⁶⁵

Nietzsche and Superman

The most widely known Nietzschean concept to make it into fascist ideology was Nietzsche’s writings on the *Übermensch*. Moreover, understanding what Nietzsche meant by the

¹⁶³ Ibid., 98.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 117, 101.

¹⁶⁵ Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy*, 15.

term *Übermensch* serves as a point of entry into the meaning of his larger body of work. The basic idea of the *Übermensch* first appeared in Nietzsche's wild polemical text *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. But the image Nietzsche present in *Zarathustra* differs strikingly from the image of the blond-haired blue-eyed Aryan man of Nazi myth. For Nietzsche the blond beast was a lion who fought the great dragon named "Thou Shalt." Nietzsche's purpose behind the blond lion's challenge to the great dragon Thou Shalt was the dismissal of all the old values a free the will of man from the weight brought by two thousand years worth of morality. But Nietzsche makes the clear distinction from the liberating aspect of the blond beast and the value-creating aspect of the child who comes from the lion. The blond beast could not create new values on its own. For that Nietzsche argued a child who speaks a sacred "Yes" to his own will was necessary.¹⁶⁶

But this image of the blond beast is not the same as the image of the overman, the *Übermensch*. The new fascist man or the Aryan man embodied many aspects of fascism's desire to create a new ethic and culture. The new fascist man must "though his looks, body, and comportment, project the ideal of male beauty."¹⁶⁷ The image of male beauty fascism, both in Italy and in Germany, was of classical Greece. Sculpted in opposition to the idle and talkative intellectuals of socialism and liberalism, the new fascist man was one of action and will.¹⁶⁸ Yet unlike the deep individualism of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* the new fascist man could only achieve the realization of his own will through complete subservience to the collective as per fascism's conception of liberty and good citizenship.

The image of the *Übermensch* as described by Nietzsche sharply contrasts with the kind of new man fascism sought to create. When Nietzsche claims that "Man is something that shall be overcome" he is speaking of the values of man. And the path to realization of one's own

¹⁶⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 138, 139.

¹⁶⁷ Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution*, 49.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 30, 31, 48.

values comes one's own rejection of man's old values. The will to power in Nietzsche's work, meant that path to self-realization, that acceptance of both good and evil and the new self-valuation. (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke*, 124, 225) Specifically Nietzsche cautions people not to trust those who exalt their own goodness and justice for "they would be Pharisees, if only they had—power." (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke*, 212) And in a phrase that speaks against the cults of the Führer and the Duce Nietzsche warned, "Beware lest a statue slay you."¹⁶⁹ (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke*, 190)

Nietzsche's *Übermensch* was not his means of calling for a great leader but a means for calling on each individual to transcend their old values—to become *Übermensch* of their own. Perhaps it is best to compare Nietzsche's *Übermensch* to another image, that of Superman of DC comics fame. In an essay on the identity of Superman comic writer Mark Waid writes that Superman only feels fully realized when putting his gifts to use. In an interesting twist on the notion of heroism Waid argues that "by acting in his own self-interest" does Superman aid others. To live in his authentic identity Superman helps those in need and in doing so acts with a supreme self-awareness.¹⁷⁰ The noble type, the master in Nietzsche's thinking, "does not need approval" as it is a "triumphant affirmation of itself."¹⁷¹ Anything that diminishes man, that seeks to lessen life, is what Nietzsche calls 'evil.' The overman comes as one who reaffirms life by not denying his greatness, his identity. The spiritual weakness Nietzsche challenges through the image of the *Übermensch* is overcome by living in one's authentic identity. But with self-realization, with the transcendence of values, Nietzsche argues comes the understanding of suffering and the complete acceptance of *this* reality to such a degree that the individual would willingly repeat the experience.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 124, 225, 212, 190.

¹⁷⁰ Mark Waid, "The Real Truth about Superman," in *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice and the Socratic Way*, ed. Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 10.

¹⁷¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 395, 472.

¹⁷² Solomon and Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said*, 10, 15, 16, 18.

Nietzsche and the Cult of Regeneration

The position Nietzsche takes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was one of prophet warning against the future of the Last Man if a European-wide change is not undertaken. For Nietzsche the choice was between freeing oneself of all life-denying values and creating new values or plunging into the abyss of nihilism.¹⁷³ Liberal democracy and bourgeois materialism were life-denying values to Nietzsche.¹⁷⁴ But as Albert Camus argued in his illuminating text on man in rebellion, *The Rebel*, Nietzsche's philosophy was not "a philosophy of rebellion" but a philosophy *on* rebellion. Nietzsche sought to create a new language-game, one that inspired the individual to act of their own accord. The death of God in Nietzsche's mind simply meant that man was responsible for life and every act of suffering in it.¹⁷⁵ But in the hands of those seeking philosophical legitimization for their ideology of regeneration, such as the French literary anarchists and the student groups of Germany, Nietzsche served as their prophet for the coming revolution.

The language-game Nietzsche plays was one of regeneration, but one of individual regeneration and not of the whole of society at once. In Nietzsche's mind, the regeneration of the individual would result in the end of politics.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, the state was the enemy, "the coldest of all cold monsters," to individual morality and creation.¹⁷⁷ And Nietzsche was doubtful that such a European-wide change could take place.¹⁷⁸ Yet this did not stop proto-fascist and fascist from taking Nietzsche's ideas on the overman and the regeneration of morals. As Aschheim argued at the end of his text on the Nietzsche legacy, Nietzsche provided Nazism with the "thematic and tonal links" for Nazism ideology. Even so, and in spite of Aschheim's claim that the fight over

¹⁷³ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 65, 66.

¹⁷⁴ Nietzsche, *The Basic Writings*, 307; Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 163.

¹⁷⁵ Camus, *The Rebel*, 68, 70.

¹⁷⁶ Solomon and Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said*, 16;

¹⁷⁷ Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 160.

¹⁷⁸ Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, 12.

Nietzsche's role in Nazism and fascism represents Nietzsche's normative nature as Nazism's central thinker, it becomes rather obvious that the desire for regeneration existed before knowledge of Nietzsche's works did. Nietzsche did not inspire the cult of regeneration in the sense that he originated it but he did give them the philosophical legitimacy they needed.¹⁷⁹

Still, among the four intellectuals selected for the present study, Nietzsche and Bergson represent two intellectuals who played language-games that did not directly lead to fascist language-games. The image of the *Übermensch* Nietzsche presents, while compelling, was not the same as what the fascists had in mind. The will to power was for the individual and not for the whole of society nor did the new values the will to power created call for the submission of the individual to the state. Nietzsche and the fascists had very different meanings for such ideas and for the future world the will to power would create.

Despite the disconnect between Nietzsche's ideas and those of the fascists, Nietzsche does serve an important function in representing the search for new values that informed the minds of the *fin-de-siècle*. As Payne has stated, Nietzsche was a harbinger of the transformation of values that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century. But the uses Nietzsche's philosophy was put to did not reflect the meaning Nietzsche had in mind. As such, while Nietzsche's philosophy remains useful in studying the cultural milieu that produced fascism the direct application of his philosophy to fascist ideology is misleading at best.

V. Conclusion

In today's online culture the usage of the terms 'Nazi' or 'Hitler' have become something a "handy trope" trotted out to discredit someone's ideas. Mike Godwin, lawyer for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, formulated a law in 1990 for online discussions. Known as 'Godwin's Law of Nazi Analogies,' or simply 'Godwin's Law,' the law states that "as an online discussion

¹⁷⁹ Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy*, 235, 255.

grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving the Nazis or Hitler approaches one.” In a 1994 *Wired* article Godwin describes the intent behind his law as a counter to the hyperbolic comparisons to Nazism and Hitler which, as he argues, “trivialized the horror of the Holocaust and the social pathology of the Nazis.” Additionally, Godwin characterizes the Nazi analogy as a meme, or an idea that functions much like a virus jumping from mind to mind. The meme, in Godwin’s analysis, can “crystallize whole schools of thought” and prevent serious discussion from proceeding.¹⁸⁰

Ideas like ‘Godwin’s Law’ should only serve to reinforce the efforts of historians of fascism to concretely define fascism and caution all academics when invoking images of the Holocaust and fascism in general. What Godwin believed was, though a comparison to fascism and its leaders might have some justification, the emotional content attached to fascism negates the rational benefits of the comparison. Historians must act as a counter force to popularized ideas of fascism that neither accurately portrays fascism nor those involved, no matter their degree of involvement. As has been shown, thinkers like Bergson and even Nietzsche did not see the world in the same way the fascists did and as such do not belong in the pantheon of proto-fascist intellectuals. Hugh Stuart-Hughes makes a strong point in favor of Nietzsche’s and Bergson’s distance from fascism. As Stuart-Hughes argues, many intellectuals of the *fin-de-siècle* rejected the anti-intellectualism some of their works encouraged.¹⁸¹

The question is not whether intellectuals like Bergson or Nietzsche had an influence on fascism’s ideological development. The question is whether that influence is overstated by intellectual historians in search of fascism’s ideological origins. As Steven Aschheim noted of Nietzsche’s influence on German culture there came a point where the usage of Nietzschean

¹⁸⁰ Mike Godwin, “Meme, Counter-meme,” *Wired*, October 1994, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/2.10/godwin.if.html> (accessed May 3, 2006).

¹⁸¹ H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 17.

concepts was done without any knowledge of its origins.¹⁸² That the proto-fascists like Sorel and fascist ideology as a whole found inspiration in Bergson's conception of the *élan vital* is not at issue. It is whether the concept of *élan vital* as Bergson saw it was what influenced fascist ideology. The fact that Sorel eventually admitted that he could not construct a theory of social action based on Bergson's ideas only serves to reinforce the idea that certain ideas as conceived by fascist ideology had little to do with the intellectuals who originally proposed them.¹⁸³ The influence of both Bergson and Nietzsche is not found in their direct contributions to fascist ideology but in their ability to reflect the cultural climate of the proto-fascist period.

Moreover, the influence of clear proto-fascist such as Sorel and Le Bon still requires a degree of qualification. Certainly, intellectuals like Sorel and Le Bon were anti-positivists but not because they did not believe in positivism's power to explain the world. All they sought was to remove the sacred aura of infallibility, not to mention primacy, from positivism as a method to truth. And the theories of social action such intellectuals proposed reflected more of a desire to regenerate a society perceived as gravely ill than of a pathological desire for power and destruction. As historians like Mosse and Gentile have established, the main thrust behind fascist ideology was that desire to cure civilization while providing the spiritual unity long sought after.¹⁸⁴ That such an ideology turned violent is not surprising. The French experience of nationalization took more than a century to complete. Yet the nationalists of Germany and Italy sought the same kind of unity in a very short period of time. The exaggerated images chosen to rapidly achieve national unity relied on violence and apocalyptic destruction, whether of one's enemy or of one's own culture. The spiritual essence of the people, particularly in the imagery of

¹⁸² Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany: 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of Berkeley Press, 1992), 30.

¹⁸³ Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 123.

¹⁸⁴ George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 4; Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 5.

the *Volk*, necessitated the exclusion of others who were perceived not to share the same ground of existence as the true culture.¹⁸⁵

The kind of language-games fascist ideology attempted to create for itself define the people in terms of their transcendent essence, the state as the representative of the people and consequently their essence, and the leader as the spiritual representative, the ideal citizen already transcended. What intellectuals like Sorel and Le Bon did was create the initial framework of fascism's language-games by giving a theoretical structure to those definitions of citizenship, leadership and the role of the state. Additionally, through the process of the language-games new meaning was attached to particular terms like *Übermensch* and *élan vital* wholly different from their original definitions. Yet, as Wittgenstein argued, the nature of language allowed for such evolution of meaning.

The major themes of this study of fascism—that fascism was a definable movement with a definable ideology; that fascist ideology was more in line with an Althusserian sense of the word as it functioned as a governing practice not only in ritualized form as seen in the mass rallies and youth movement but in the everyday experience as well; and that the primary means of understanding that ideology and by de facto culture is through understanding what the people who lived within the fascist regimes meant by certain words and actions—all leave the position of the *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals open to interpretation and reinterpretation. While from the standpoint of Sternhell's syndicalist theory and Mosse's 'new politics' theory intellectuals like Bergson and Nietzsche do not fit the profile of those intellectuals who sought a new means of social change, future examination may prove just the opposite. And the placement of Le Bon and Sorel in the pantheon of proto-fascist intellectuals seems rather firm, further studies might prove the connection between their theories and fascist ideology did not exist. Cultural and definitional

¹⁸⁵ Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, 4.

analysis requires repeated examination, particularly as new methods and new foci of study arise. The narrative of fascism is not complete as the nascent intellectual period still remains relatively unexamined outside of those who follow the Mossean school of thought. Even so, the examination of intellectuals cited in fascism's ideological development must proceed with the greatest caution as placing too much weight on intellectuals like Bergson or Nietzsche can lead to key misunderstandings of fascism's true ideological shape and origins.

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ABSTRACT

THE FIN-DE-SIÈCLE AND FASCIST IDEOLOGY

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Fascism's intellectual origins remain a difficult area of study, not least due to fascism's lack of a single originating author. The challenge historians face lies in identifying those pre-fascist intellectuals who contributed to fascism's ideology. Yet, the risk of misidentifying a 'proto-fascist' continues to plague historians. This paper focuses on both the historians of fascism and the *fin-de-siècle* era that spawned fascism. By examining the works of supposed pre-fascist intellectuals, this paper seeks to identify how the use of certain pre-fascist intellectuals has influenced the common understanding of fascist ideology. Using both the methods of cultural history and Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'meaning-as-use' theory of language, this paper hopes to better delineate between those who did and those who did not have a direct influence on fascism.