

Revolutionary reaction

A. JAMES GREGOR

IF ONE CHOSE TO SCANDALIZE, it would be difficult to find a less likely agent for that purpose than Professor Renzo De Felice. An urbane and critical democratic socialist, he seems entirely innocent of any qualities that might scandalize anyone. For all that, De Felice has written a series of books that have outraged so many on the Italian peninsula that his academic works—like all academic writings, unlikely candidates for popular attention—have been catapulted into the best-seller lists.

For Americans all this is at first more than a little hard to understand. As a consequence of his work, De Felice has been characterized by some of his countrymen as motivated by dark political impulses, possessed of insensitivity, handicapped by professional incompetence, and afflicted with an impaired moral sense. The immediate cause of such abuse was the recent appearance of his interview with the American Michael Ledeen (an interview now available in English translation as *Fascism: An Informal Introduction to Its Theory and Practice*, Transaction Books, 1976), in which De Felice ventilated some unconventional opinions about Mussolini's Fascism. In his exchange with Ledeen, De Felice ventured to suggest that Fascism had a number of affinities with the "left-wing" traditions of the West; further, that Fascism displayed some features commonly called "progressive"; and, finally, that it was, in fact, a "revolutionary phenomenon."

These judgments, of course, were not coined on the occasion of his interview with Ledeen. He had introduced them into currency long before, but they had been buried in the thousands of pages of his impressive biography of Mussolini

(which already amounts to four large volumes and will run to six). They also appear in the work under consideration here, which was first published in 1969 and has since undergone successive revisions (the translation into English follows the text of the fifth edition). But once they were exposed to public scrutiny in the fewer than 100 pages of the text of an informal interview, they provoked anguished cries from virtually every quarter.

That Italians should find such judgments highly irritating is, on consideration, perfectly comprehensible. For years after the Second World War, they were content to repeat the omnibus evaluations of foreigners (mostly Americans), who conceived Fascism to have been little more than benighted reaction, devoid of ideological substance, or else a case of temporary demonic possession and an inexplicable "parenthesis" in Italy's modern history. Fascism and Hitler's National Socialism were looked on as all of a piece—the Italians even coined a barbarism, *nazifascismo*, to immortalize the identity.

BUT FOR ENGLISH-SPEAKING readers, particularly Americans, De Felice's assessment of Fascism as revolutionary and perhaps "progressive" will present less of a problem than the ambiguity of some of his politically less sensitive conclusions,

as I shall suggest later. That is not to say that there is not a great deal that we can learn from De Felice's work. The book takes us through the many interpretations offered to enable us to understand one of the most fateful sequences of political events of the twentieth century.

In Part One, De Felice reviews the "classic interpretations," those offered by Catholic writers, social scientists, and authors who, like Ernst Nolte, view Fascism as "metapolitical"—as a phenomenon bursting through the limits of ordinary politics. Among the views cited is that of Jules Monnerot, that "Fascism brings into contemporary focus the principle of social solidarity for a historical collectivity . . . from this point of view Fascism is socialist in the etymological sense" (p. 99).

In Part Two, De Felice treats interpretations of Mussolini's Fascism by Italian authors, beginning with chronological accounts of the complex sequence and ending with interpretations that exploit "cultural and historiographic orientations." All of this is done with skill and insight. In a "Conclusion" of fewer than two dozen pages, De Felice delivers some summary judgments that are the fruit of a quarter of a century of study and reflection.

De Felice maintains that an adequate understanding of Fascism



A. JAMES GREGOR, a political scientist, is the author of *The Fascist Persuasion in Radical Politics*.

can be acquired only through an appreciation of its history. "A definition of Fascism," we are told, "implies above all else writing the history of Fascism"; as a consequence, "Fascism" is necessarily restricted, in space, to Europe, and, in time, to "the time span encompassed by two World Wars." Fascism was a European, more specifically an Italian event. It was, by and large, a "middle class" phenomenon, involving "farmers, merchants, professionals, small businessmen . . . white collar employees, accountants, and salaried intellectuals. . . ." De Felice argues that these elements of the Italian population, alienated by the "errors of the working-class parties and the fear of Bolshevism [were] impelled . . . toward Fascism. . . ."

THE LEADERS OF FASCISM, like the leaders of all revolutionary movements, were of middle-class provenance either "involved in movements of the extreme Left where they held responsible positions, or they were war veterans." In De Felice's view, the "declassed" character of its leadership, and its middle-class social base, allowed Fascism a considerable degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the "upper bourgeoisie." Fascism was not, in fact, a "tool" of "big business." Its international policies were actually in conflict with the general interests of Italy's most "privileged classes," and in general, it "pursued objectives that would increasingly diverge from the natural goals of capitalism."

For at least these reasons, Fascism was a "revolutionary" phenomenon, according to De Felice. It did not represent the interests of "capitalism," much less the interests of the "upper bourgeoisie." Any interpretation that conceives Fascism to have been simple capitalist reaction is substantially in error. Similarly, whatever truth there is to be found in the generalizing "social science" interpretations must be lodged in the above framework, which, in turn, must be fleshed out with historic detail if a convincing account is to be forthcoming. De Felice is unremittingly historical in orientation—any treatment other than that of a detailed historical narrative of a specific temporal sequence can only provide "working hypotheses" or "conceptual stimuli."

Given these methodological commitments, the study of Fascism, it would seem, can be nothing other than a concern with the dead and finished past. The author counsels us not to seek

out comparative insights other than those that are most transparent. Fascism and Hitler's National Socialism, for example, may have had some affinities, given their geographic and temporal proximity, but one should not attempt to make too much of them. In this sense, De Felice maintains, the social sciences—the "generalizing" disciplines—can be expected to "contribute little" to understanding phenomena such as Fascism.

But for all that, De Felice recommends the study of some generalizing and comparative works, for instance Ludovico Garruccio's *L'industrializzazione tra nazionalismo e rivoluzione* (1969), in which Italian Fascism is conceived as the first exemplar of a modernizing movement in an environment of retarded industrialization. Garruccio suggests that many contemporary regimes in the Third World display features characteristic of Mussolini's Fascism: the functional role of the "vanguard party," mass mobilization, formal ideology, the presence of a "charismatic leader," emphasis on military postures, opposition to "capitalist plutocracies," insistence on the restoration of the nation's "lost territories," the institutional necessity of a strong, centralized and highly bureaucratized state, and the inculcation of obedience, commitment, and sacrifice. Not long ago, Walter Laqueur alluded to just such properties to be found in varying measure among Third World nations as evidence of a "second coming" of Fascism in the contemporary world.

ULTIMATELY, IT IS NOT AT all clear what De Felice is proposing to us. Is Fascism to be understood as a phenomenon restricted exclusively to the Italian peninsula during the period between the wars—or does Fascism have a larger significance for our own time? But if we grant that Fascism shares some species-traits with an indeterminate collection of contemporary movements, how can we come fully to understand the phenomenon by pursuing its history exclusively on the Italian peninsula?

Brenda Huff Everett has given us a good translation, but as one might expect, there are some errors. In one place, for example, someone succeeded in dropping a line or two of the original text, and what should have read ". . . the Nazi system was not a form of the politics of modernization, but a variant of the politics of welfare," reads instead ". . . the Nazi system was not a form of

the politics of welfare" (p. 101). Happily, most of the remaining errors are not so misleading.

For his part, Charles Delzell provides an interesting introduction. The bibliographical material following the text is itself almost worth the price of the book to anyone seriously interested in the scholarship of the subject.

Finally, although De Felice goes to considerable lengths to resist it, it may be that in coming to understand Fascism, we might come to understand something of great significance in the modern world—something about politics, revolution, and the contemporary challenge to political liberty. De Felice's brief book is a point of departure in our search for an adequate interpretation of Fascism. It is a superb beginning—not a terminus. □

ECONOMIC REGULATION AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST: The Federal Trade Commission in Theory and Practice, by Alan Stone. Cornell University Press, 314 pp., \$15.00.

In restraint of trade

D. T. ARMENTANO

AT LEAST SINCE THE appearance in 1963 of Gabriel Kolko's pathbreaking business history, *The Triumph of Conservatism*, there has been increasing skepticism concerning the real origin, intent, and effect of trade regulation legislation in this country. Kolko challenged the venerable legend that "progressive" legislation in the early years of this century was enacted in order to protect consumers and enhance the general welfare. According to Kolko and other revisionists, most of the legislation and regulation is more accurately viewed as intending to lessen competition and promote existing business interests. What businessmen were unable to ac-

D. T. ARMENTANO is professor of economics at the University of Hartford and author of *The Myths of Antitrust*.