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The father of 'sovereignism': d'Annunzio in Fiume between the crisis of liberalism and the critique of democracy

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Abstract

The essay investigates the occupation of the city of Rijeka (1919–20) by an irregular army led by Italian poet Gabriele d'Annunzio, focusing on the concepts of sovereignism and populism. While people with different mentalities and ideological horizons took part in the endeavour, it was d'Annunzio that gave the occupation its profound meaning. The poet attempted to put into practice his political vision centered around a 'noble people', composed of warriors and producers, opposed to the liberal elites and in competition with revolutionary socialist movements. In this sense, the Free State of Rijeka grew into the prototype of a new society based on the integration of racial, plebiscitary, corporate, aesthetic, and political themes. At the same time, the city became a beacon of opposition to the new international order proposed by US president Woodrow Wilson, since it advocated and worked towards the birth of sovereignty for small countries resisting new supranational bodies such as the League of Nations.

Keywords: Gabriele d'Annunzio; populism; sovereignism; First World War; Rijeka/Fiume occupation; Fascism; interwar period

The conceptual tangles of sovereignism

> Celui qui aujourd'hui ne voit, obstinément, étroitement,
> que la seule cause de son peuple envers et contre tous,
> le trahit, car il travaille aux massacres
> où ce peuple retombera pêle-mêle avec les autres.[1]

The year 2020 was the 100th anniversary of the conquest of Fiume. On this occasion, many contradictory attempts were made to reinterpret Gabriele d'Annunzio's occupation of the city. The political and ideological implications connected to the Fiume enterprise have been the subject of many respected studies that valued it historically and politically, and considered it more than just an adventure of d'Annunzio and his Legionaries. It has been described as a moment in city's long and dramatic history (Kirchner-Reill 2020; Pupo 2018); a symbol of the crisis of the Italian liberal system and a revolutionary attempt that somehow – and even unintentionally – anticipated Fascism (Simonelli 2021;

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Mondini 2020; Serventi Longhi 2019; Vilari 2019); or as a generational and libertarian revolt that was assimilable to youth protests and anti-globalisation movements, almost a prefiguration of the 1968 movement (Salaris 2019; Guerri 2019). This last interpretation is somewhat controversial, but is popular with the Italian audience, ready to once again legitimise Gabriele d'Annunzio and free him from the pre-Fascist label that anti-fascist historiography has given him.

However, in the more recent past, Bruno Guerri's reading has been questioned even within the Italian right, one of whose leading figures – Marcello Veneziani – has recently discussed the events of Fiume, placing them within a long trajectory that paved the way for populist and sovereignist movements: 'Today we would say that sovereignism, love for the homeland, and populism were the ideological cornerstones of the Charter of Carnaro. A fusion of poetry, trenches, and syndicalism' (Veneziani 2020). The ambivalent and elusive definition of 'sovereignism'– polemically used by Veneziani – opens up new avenues of historical and cultural legitimation of the episode that are starkly different from the libertarian stereotypes.

Today, populism and sovereignism are at the core of the political debate of large and popular movements. They are often embraced by the majority, and are in power in many countries (Gervasoni 2019; Tarchi 2015a; De Mattei 2011; Boulanger 2008; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). Beyond the strictly political connotations – and discussions – scholars have accepted Mudde's (2004 and 2007) definition of populism as an ideology that sees society as divided into two antagonistic groups, the homogeneous 'people' and a corrupt 'elite'. They have also noticed how, from a scientific perspective, the concept is bipartisan and trans-ideological, and it is hard to apply it univocally to specific national and local contexts (Urbinati 2019; Eatwell and Goodwin 2019; Finchelstein 2017; Copsey 2004, 177–82; Taggart 2000).

Other political scientists (Brubaker 2019; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Day and Thompson 2004) have devised a framework for populism-nationalism with a vertical top-down axis that contrasts the 'noble people' with a vile and corrupt liberal ruling class, and a horizontal inside-outside axis in which external elements are excluded from society. The question of sovereignism can extend this framework to an international dimension. On the vertical axis, the 'noble people' are opposed to transnational elites, while on the horizontal axis, the 'inside' parameter defines not so much the terms of exclusion, but rather those of identity homogeneity – especially in terms of ethnicity and social positioning – which are necessary for the legitimisation of the sovereignty of a specific territorial and cultural space.

The concept of sovereignism is often associated with populism (Verzichelli 2020; Basile and Mazzoleni 2019; Kallis 2018), sometimes with questionable superimpositions and integrations that have even led to the birth of neologisms like *PopSovism* (De Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijs 2017). The ambivalent character of sovereignism is especially evident when it comes to instances of autonomy and independence *from* national states (Quebec, Catalonia, Basque country, etc.). These cases, even if contradictory, are traditionally recognised as progressive. The defence of national political autonomy, the strengthening of international borders, the protection of national identity, and the safeguarding of domestic economy from the effects of global market integration and foreign cultural hegemony have characterised, across the twentieth century, popular movements and political avant-gardes from any political front (Urbinati 2020; Tarchi 2015a; Tarchi 2015b). A number of thinkers have identified the spreading of sovereignist mindsets, stemming from both the right and the left, as a possible answer to the decline of the nation-state, to the legitimacy crisis of supranational organisations and, more generally, to the socio-economic tensions of the new global society (Becchi 2019; MacCormick 2002; Krasner 2001; Sassen 1996). Sovereignism is considered like a vulture, roaming over the corpses of political representation and liberal democracies, weakened by their own contradictions (Müller 2016; Roberts 2014; Janse 2011).

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From a historical perspective, it is important to specify that sovereignism is not simply a strategic discourse. It translates into concrete projects of foundation and redefinition of national frontiers, both material and immaterial (Kallis 2018). The question is even more relevant when we use the conceptual lens of sovereignism to interpret the many palingenetic conceptualisations of a new world that developed in the interwar period (Boyce 2009). The apocalypse of the Great War engendered in the countries involved in the conflict the conception and planning of a new balance between the powers of the state, as well as a different relationship between state and society, and between the economic and the military spheres (Kolla 2017; De Vergottini and Frosini 2013; Quaglioni 2004; Ferrajoli 1995). In such a transitional phase – also called an interregnum – a number of intellectuals personified this palingenetic spirit as they evaded and questioned the given conceptual rational frameworks derived from the French Revolution and liberal reasoning, and took on a possibly amoral attitude that was almost always violent and iconoclastic, but that also faced the crisis of modernity with an original and creative approach. The peculiar postwar European context was especially welcoming to those currents that Roger Griffin has called 'ultranationalist' and that had emerged as a reaction to socialist forces with the intent of forging a new age:

> The quest for a 'rooted modernity' meant that elements of highly mythicized and selective edited national histories were integrated into ultranationalist bids to bring about an anthropological and cultural revolution not within 'humanity', but within a particular geopolitical space and ethnicity …, imagined as the homogeneous 'nation/state'. The result was the attempt to establish a political culture fusing archaism with hypermodernity in a way which caused many scholars in the past to misread fascism's futural temporality as a form of reactionary 'anti-modernism'. (Griffin 2015, 116)

The activities of ultranationalist intellectuals in between the two world wars allowed for the overlapping of poetic *fictions,* used by artists to shed a certain light on some elusive aspects of their times, and the politicised *myths* that had become part of the ideological reasoning on which they wanted to base their radical social transformation (Griffin 2007, 23–4). In Europe, d'Annunzio became the most famous 'of the artists exposed to the tempest of modernity', who could usher in a 'new dawn', rooted in a mythical and symbolic universe that drew from the past – in this case Latin culture – while also being recast in a present and a future filled with economic and military complications. Fiume's occupation was the first coherent attempt to mould this new understanding of society, or, as George Mosse (1973) suggested, to assimilate the masses within the nation using a specific sovereignist vision.

D'Annunzio between populism and sovereignism

As efficiently shown by Canovan, the same 'popular sovereignty' is an idea that can be grasped and understood in its theory, but it is harder to identify in its solid political and social dimensions. The only occasions in which it seems to become manifest are related to moments of fracture imposed by revolution or war – civil or military – when 'popular sovereignty' has the character of 'occasional community of action' (Canovan 2005, 121). Canovan's analysis limits this incidental feature – in which popular sovereignty manifests itself – to historical processes connected to progressive and democratic experiences. The revolutionary crises of the twentieth century took many shapes and sizes, and also, if not often, had reactionary and dictatorial outcomes. The years between the world wars were a time of crisis for the liberal model and, in part, for the concept of

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sovereignism itself. Since the French Revolution, sovereignism had come to gain two different and yet parallel meanings. On the one hand there was an inner sovereignty, connected to governance, and based on diminishing the authority of the state, thanks to the separation of powers, the rule of law, and fundamental human rights. On the other hand, there was also an outer sovereignty, in which the authority of the state was made absolute in terms of foreign policy and international law through wars and colonialism (Ferrajoli 1995). After conservative jurists had begun to concern themselves with the metaphysical primacy of the state, and had conceived the judicial experience of peoples as necessarily bound to it (Schiavone 1986), the new national-socialist movements born out of the First World War broke away from progressive and conservative traditions. They aimed to render absolute inner sovereignty, too, with the absorption of social parts into collective entities, both cultural and economic, that came before state and law.

The Fiume endeavour was one of the most dramatic examples of how difficult it was to demobilise a warring society, and of how the shift from war to peace bore the fruits of the new national socialist order. Fiume was also d'Annunzio's attempt at politics, the logical ending to a long aesthetic and moral trajectory – as explained elsewhere – that had begun at the end of the nineteenth century and had focussed on the idea of 'people' (Serventi Longhi 2020). D'Annunzio switched from an initial aristocratic rejection of the people and of the masses, seen as the failure of liberal progress, to an understanding of the people as the best possible antidote to the challenges of the new politics. The war played an increasingly decisive part in favouring this metamorphosis. His time as a soldier transformed, over time, d'Annunzio's faith in a 'noble people', in contrast to the corrupted elites that were incapable of grasping and restoring a deep national spirit. The 'noble people' were identified with connotations that were racial (the myth of the Latin race), cultural (the blurring of aesthetic and politics) and social (the permeation of the military and civil spheres). In d'Annunzio's populist vision, ample space was given to the *Vate,* the prophet-poet. Only he could interpret and reveal the true nature of the nation. The *Vate*, according to a lyrical and aesthetic interpretation, would later become the military *Comandante,* the Commander, foreshadowing the image of the *Duce* as a political myth that could integrate racial, cultural, and social elements: 'The sovereignty of the people needs an interpreter that cannot be questioned. … Obedience is our duty. Discipline is our duty. Devotion is our duty' (Gerra 1974, 216).[2]

Therefore, the sacralisation of politics was a fatal consequence of d'Annunzio's populism. It was followed by a plebiscitary institutional logic, and by an idea of sovereignty based on a feeling of belonging to a patriotic community, identified with the military life and with economic production. Federico Simonelli recognised in the Roman salute an example of a new mythical and symbolic apparatus. In Fiume, extending the arm became a celebratory moment binding together the leader with the people in a new political model: the *Arengo* – the national council. This was the magical and symbolic space where the mystical union of leader and masses occurred, outdating parliamentary representation in favour of an authority that worked through assemblies in which decisions were made by acclamation (Simonelli 2021, 258).

In the spring of 1919, d'Annunzio (1919b) already thought of his audience as the most genuine expression of the main will of the nation, and the tribune as the only one capable of revealing it. The 'noble people' had to 'cross over, without hesitation or conciliation, from a lying representative regime, to a form of sincere representation'. The shape of this 'sincere representation' was made manifest in the executive politics of the Fiume cabinets, that pursued the Italianisation of the city, as well as the nationalisation of the economy, and the ethnic cleansing of the working sectors of the population, primarily made up of Slavs (Serventi Longhi 2016; Kirchner-Reill 2020). The occupied city therefore became an authentic political laboratory that aimed to project warfare in a context of

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peace, and to experiment with those particular institutional solutions that had led only a few months before to the full deployment of human resources and materials.

Command of Fiume allowed the development of an ambiguous foundational vision that is still discussed today by historians and jurists. The European context was at the time particularly propitious for the development of constitutional experiments, as the German and Austrian Republican statutes show. In the process of formation and transformation of many territorial sovereignties that followed the Treaty of Versailles, a number of constitutions, mostly liberal ones, were implemented, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (Wolff 2020; Papuashvili 2017).

Following this trend, d'Annunzio in 1920 announced the birth of the Free State of Fiume, based on a constitutional text known as the Charter of Carnaro:

> As devoted interpreter armed with the free will expressed by acclamation by the majority of the ruling people of Fiume united in parliament …, I proclaim the Italian Regency of Carnaro. And I swear … that this Italian land will be forever part of Italy (D'Annunzio 1920).

The initial democratic character of the new constitution can be traced back to Alceste de Ambris and his republican, syndicalist, libertarian, and independentist views (Serventi Longhi 2011; De Felice 1966). Later on, this outlook was rejected and substituted by d'Annunzio's political mysticism, which was not easily compatible with formal freedoms (Gentile 2009, xxv). The Italian *Vate* reworked de Ambris' text by inserting in it constant references to the constitutional traditions of historical Italian entities, stressing the importance of race in a noble people (De Vergottini 2020, 29).

D'Annunzio's intervention placed the Charter of Carnaro outside those processes of rationalisation of parliamentary governance that characterised the majority constitutional experiments of the time, especially in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Fiume's state order was brand new, and organised around a directorial government based on the authority of seven minsters (*rettori*). *Primus inter pares* was the Minister for Foreign Policy, whose role varied but was connected to the power granted by the implementation of a state of exception (De Vergottini 2020, 34–5; Cadin 2009), which would have turned the government into a sort of military dictatorship. Through such a measure, conceived as unique and temporary, 'all political, military, legislative, and executive powers'[2] would be given to the Commander, with no outside interference. De Ambris wished to limit the duration of the *imperio* to a maximum of six months (De Felice 1973, 79), but d'Annunzio's final version granted to the *Arengo* the ability to extend its duration indefinitely. The *pro-tempore* dictator would possess the virtues 'of one who can unite the force of the people for war and victory'.[3] This was in line with the populist conception of the Commander, intended as the only one who could reveal, interpret, and lead his citizens.

While it is true that d'Annunzio's constitution only envisaged a state of exception as a temporary solution justified by 'extreme danger', it is also true that a very malleable understanding of what 'danger' was could provide a rationale for the implementation of the *imperium* at any time. Even more so since the Fiume occupation occurred during an interregnum characterised by a mix of civil war and revolution that prevented states from growing steadily. D'Annunzio cherished this state of political flux, as his political agenda was based on the notion of permanent war.

The constitutional structure of the Charter of Carnaro removed the boundary between the state – intended as a community of warriors and producers rather than in rational terms – and civil society. This community did not identify with an absolute state any more, but was organised around the sharing of a well-defined and organised normative

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space. The normalisation of the state of exception and of plebiscitary principles unravelled the idea of law itself, breaking away from the Italian monarchy and bringing about a new and dangerous type of *sovereign dictatorship*. I have previously discussed sovereign dictatorship (Serventi Longhi 2016), and I intend to develop the concept around reflections that draw explicitly from Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* (1985,1922). According to the German philosopher, a sovereign dictatorship, unlike the commissary one, aimed for the temporary suspension of the law not in order to strengthen it, but rather to create the conditions for the imposition of a new constitution (Schmitt 1921, 136) Fiume's endeavour, connected as it was to the Great War, reveals – according to a reading that early Fascism shared – the need for a new sovereign subject, both a fighter and a producer who would represent the purest and most *truthful* essence of the national spirit. D'Annunzio, as we have seen, used to call this subject 'the noble people', turning it first into a mobilising *myth*, and then into a *community* in action, aiming to foreshadow a new model of politics.

Sovereignism as a criticism of international democracy

Fiume's sovereign dictatorship developed also because the city had no definite international *status*, which left it in a sort of suspended position while waiting for the peace accords. Before d'Annunzio's conquest, Fiume was a *corpus separatum* from the strange two-headed entity that was Austria-Hungary. The citizens of Fiume lived within a 'layered sovereignty', as a few historians have defined the Empire's legislative system (Burbank and Cooper 2010; Benton 2010). The Empire's demise led to a transition from a 'layered sovereignty' towards 'colliding sovereignties' (Kirchner-Reill 2020, 114), as well as the beginning of a civil war, just as was happening in many other regions suddenly freed from the control of empires (Wheatley 2019). Because of the interregnum phase that followed the fall of the Habsburg Empire, the problem of Fiume's sovereignty immediately acquired a political and diplomatic character.

Conflicts did not simply end with the conclusion of the First World War. In Europe, intense and bloody civil wars erupted, and new sovereign entities were born out of peace treaties (Barkin and Cronin 1994). At the same time, the Russian Revolution brought about new challenges for the revolutionary avant-gardes, especially on a national level, in terms of relations with the masses and traditional institutions. What has been inappropriately defined as the 'triumph of the nations' was more like an earthquake, as the birth of new national entities was accompanied by revolutionary and paramilitary unrest, as well as by exceptionally brutal and violent civil wars (Gerwarth and Horne 2012).

It has recently been recognised how the Fiume events shared little with other European paramilitary exploits such as those of the German *Freikorps* or the Baltic, Balkan, or Turkish groups (Kirchner-Reill 2020, 70–71). This is only true in terms of the use of violence, employed cruelly in, for instance, Lithuania or Armenia. However, it does not take into account the 16 months of occupation against the Slavic population of Fiume, the consequences that the enterprise had on the brutalisation of Italian civil life, and the ideological influence that d'Annunzio had on the aesthetic-literary currents that supported paramilitary groups all over Europe.

In terms of relationships with other states, we can not really talk about actual foreign relations, because Fiume lacked political recognition (Sinagra 2000). Because of this, d'Annunzio's ideological attacks against the international scene became ceaseless and sharp, and especially oriented towards the democratic powers that had won the First World War. US president Woodrow Wilson's attempt to form a new order based on his Fourteen Points, the League of Nations, and lines of nationality went quickly astray, leaving space for bilateral accords and protectionist conceptions (Ferrell 1985). Newly born

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institutions – like the International Labour Organisation – struggled to get going, even if they were, much like the League of Nations, the forefathers of organisations created after the end of the Second World War.

Woodrow Wilson was especially hostile towards Italy's most daring territorial claims, which included Istria and Dalmatia (both mentioned in the Treaty of London) as well as Fiume, because of the controversial Italian character of the city. While Gorizia, Trieste, Istria, Trentino, and South Tyrol became part of the Kingdom of Italy, Wilson opposed the assimilation of Fiume and Dalmatia, while also unilaterally recognising the Kingdom of Serbs, Croatians, and Slovenians, to which the contested regions were to be assigned (Bernardini 2019). Italy could only count on a small number of allies. That is why Italian authorities did not oppose a rebellion against Yugoslavia, and secretly supported Croatian and Slovenian dissidents. This clandestine network converged on Fiume, around Giovanni Giurati, the first Cabinet Secretary of the city. Croatians, Slovenians, Montenegrins, Albanians, Magyars, and Macedonians were, according to d'Annunzio's propaganda, 'oppressed people' under Serbian rule (Salotti 1991, 23–4).

In terms of foreign policy, d'Annunzio did not want to return to the prewar political order, based on an outdated concept of *power*. He wanted, instead, to counteract the concession of national power to supranational organisations, and in the meantime to build a new order based on a novel idea of popular sovereignty, capable of reaching past Jacobinism and the *Risorgimento* through national-socialist themes that rejected cosmopolitanism and internationalism, paradoxically unifying universal commitments – the freedom of nations oppressed by democracies – with a particular dominance – the role of Fiume as the *beacon* of a new conception of sovereignty and people.

The fight against Western democracies had been central in d'Annunzio's thought since the summer of 1919, during the peace negotiations. Speaking to the aviators of Centocelle airport in Rome (1974, 97), d'Annunzio mentioned the need to find allies among post-imperial peoples against the democratic and liberal hegemony. Looking towards the East was not just about discovering new aerial routes, it was rather – to use the *Vate*'s words – 'to turn our back on the West, which every day is growing more sterile, infected, as it dishonours itself with obstinate injustices and obstinate servitudes'. The West had turned into 'an immense Jewish bank serving the ruthless transatlantic plutocracy', a phrase that does not shy away from antisemitic undertones in propagandising against the new world order.

In Fiume, the connection between independence struggles and people's resistance against democratic oppression was strengthened. Italy's territorial claims were also reinforced and depicted as a model for the liberation and civilisation of countries oppressed by plutocracy. In '*Vittoria nostra, non sarai mutilata*' ('Victory of ours, you shall not be mutilated') d'Annunzio (1918) hailed the 'sovereign tunes, the holiest amongst the holiest hymns, risen from the agony of the oppressed who hear the liberators at the gates', in relation to the territorial claims of many countries that had been turned down by the plutocratic powers. The Commander clearly defined the terms of the 'cause of the soil' and of the *blood.* In his speech '*Italia e Vita*' ('Italy and Life') of 24 October 1919 (D'Annunzio, 1919a), Italy's territorial claims were explicitly connected to the liberation of peoples oppressed by the financial dictatorship of Jewish-Anglo-Saxon banks and US hegemony. Contrasting Italy's vital space with the 'wave of barbarian slavery' – an expression referring to the people of the Balkans – and connecting national sovereignty with the 'insatiable Anglo-Saxon jaws', d'Annunzio hoped to build an alliance between new young nations. Through this association, the highest nations would elevate the most backward ones. Even pan-Germanism, criticised and fought during the First World War, could be accepted when reorganised as a position understandably hostile to the order produced

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out of the Treaty of Versailles and to the new international balance that humiliated racial rights (especially of Sudeten Germans and Upper Silesia Germans).

Additionally, in Fiume d'Annunzio confirmed the bond between people and race that he had already argued for in 1919. He did not dislike the idea of a world order based on the hierarchy of nations, headed by a Latin state. Latin culture had been prolific, and also full of the revolutionary energy that characterised young and incomplete nations. In his speech '*Con Me*' ('With Me'), of 30 March 1920, d'Annunzio (1974, 87–8) was even more explicit:

> Before the nation and before the world, in the shadow of two continents, our flag flies higher. It is hoisted at the apex of heroic passion. It is hoisted by the strength of the human will to suffer, struggle, resist, free itself, and win. It is hoisted where life and death are alternating forces, of creation and transfiguration. Those who today suffer oppression and humiliation look up to this symbol. I have said … all insurrections of the spirit against the devourers of raw flesh catch fire thanks to our far-reaching flames … To a conspiracy of privileged thieves and cheaters we shall oppose a ray of pure energy.

Citing again several cases of resistance against the British, the speech hailed the occupation of Fiume as an example of sovereignism against the democratic powers. He announced the birth of a noble order founded on a fighting spirit, the purest expression of the vitality of the race, rather than on nationality. Borrowing from Mosse's study on Fascism (1999, 52), we can argue that Fiume was also part of a struggle in which 'young nations with their dynamic fascist youth confronted the old nations with their ancient pot-bellied parliamentarians'. If the new world had already been corrupted by democracy and by market interests, the heroic, aristocratic, and warrior spirit of humanity could only be regenerated through national battles against the new democratic order. The Commander proclaimed himself champion of many national causes: Irish, Egyptian, Flemish, Georgian, Indian, Algerian, Afghan, Cuban, and Baltic, as well as of ethnic minorities oppressed in democratic regimes, like Black and Chinese people in the United States (Cuzzi 2007). The *Vate* embraced any type of political friction that involved the enemy forces of democratic plutocracies – the United States, Great Britain, and France (Tedeschini Lalli 1983, 611).

The League of Fiume, 'that raises the flag of revolt against the League of Nations', had been forged 'out of the will of all the spirits that yearn for the liberty of all people mangled by injustice and oppression'.[4] The League would be a symbolic antithesis to the Western international organisation, as well as a patriotic alternative to Marxist internationalism. The times called for 'a new crusade of all poor and impoverished nations, a new crusade of all poor and free men, against the usurper and wealth-hoarder nations, against predatory races and the moneylender caste' (D'Annunzio, 1919a). These radically different experiences were connected by the common state of economic and material subordination to the victorious powers, and by the same nationalist spirit. The project of the League of Fiume merged criticism of the League of Nations with the positive ideal of the 'small homelands' that together, like a mosaic, would create a large movement opposing the 'capitalist triumvirate': USA, UK and France (De Ambris, 1920).

The project of the League of Fiume crashed because of financial hardships, but also because the small nations approached were not keen on losing the support of the United States. Socialists also refused to engage with the League. Eugenio Coselschi, a close advisor of d'Annunzio, replaced the group of poet-warriors as head of foreign policy. He explicitly tried to readjust the tensions of *sovereignist* imperialism – 'the ideal principle of Fiumanism' – by returning to the idea of destabilising Yugoslavia – 'the opportunity to

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keep alive the anti-Serbian movement' – to plan an economic and cultural penetration towards the East.[5] This tension, initially ascribed to nationalists and conservatives, grew subversive when it became evident that it conflicted with the diplomatic policies of the liberal Italian government (Bracco 1998; Alatri 1959).

Fiume's Command progressively even accentuated its incompatibility with the monarchy, which promoted a cautious diplomacy within an international context that sacrificed Italy's autonomy. The First Article of the Charter of Carnaro mentioned an 'unquestionable and unbreakable sovereignty' of 'the sovereign people of Fiume', words that reveal the fear of international interferences in the life of the city.[6] As Giuseppe de Vergottini (2020, 46) has shown, Fiume's constitution 'was also a manifesto that would propel d'Annunzio's innovative agenda internationally, rather than only in the Adriatic region'. The constitution would have been both the solution to Italy's national question, and a tool of Latin cultural hegemony abroad.

D'Annunzio's and his followers' universalism might seem not to sit well with their territorial claims and their efforts to force Italianisation. However, this apparent contradiction can be explained. In the Charter of Carnaro, there are many references to the possibility of granting foreigners citizenship and the right to do business, but the executive practice of the powers of the Regency between September and December 1920 confirms the xenophobic and anti-Slav nature of d'Annunzio's Command. The contradiction is only illusory. Granting civil rights and responsibilities irrespective of race or religion does not conflict with a sovereignist and pro-Italian perspective. The Italian language, defined as an 'illustrious privilege', was important in Fiume's schools, gradually relegating other languages to supplementary courses (Cattaruzza 2007, 171).

With the Treaty of Rapallo of 12 November 1920, Italy formally recognised Yugoslavia and agreed to stop supporting separatist movements (Caccamo 2000). For a brief time, this solution seemed to quell the fire spreading from Fiume. D'Annunzio's and his legionaries' rejection of the treaty between Italy and Yugoslavia induced Giolitti's liberal government to employ the use of force to remove the occupiers.

Conclusion

Only an account embracing a long-term perspective could provide answers, especially in relation to the twentieth century, when the long and troubled process of building supranational powers was pervaded by opposing forces arguing for the primacy of the national dimension.[7] Therefore, if we combine sovereignism, nationalism, and populism in a long-term perspective we can better detect a mobile, shifting, and highly adaptive ideological structure and discursive architectonics, capable of emerging and become a hegemonic and propulsive force of transition for liberal systems in their times of crisis.

The emphasis on the people/elite and the citizens/foreigners, the expectation of being able to interpret the real will of the people, the desire to be outside the political and cultural establishment, the claim for the primacy of nations and small countries against the economic hegemony of plutocratic powers, and the demand for new constitutional processes, place d'Annunzio and his enterprise within twentieth-century radical national-populist and sovereignist tendencies, rather than as a prefiguration of Fascism. His vision highlighted the centrality of war, of productive work and of the ethnic myth that informed a new sovereignty legitimised by the direct relationship between the Commander and the Noble People. In line with a description by Finchelstein on the nature of populist movements, d'Annunzio also suggested a conception of power 'based on the notion of leaders who, without institutional mediations and while positioning themselves away from elites, equate their voice with that of the people', wishing to 'establish a closer relationship between those in power and the people' (Finchelstein 2019, 420).

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D'Annunzio and De Ambris also proposed other additional syndicalist and corporative solutions, stressing the social function of property and the need for a plebiscitary government that would supersede parliamentary representation and that did not exclude, even formally, a military dictatorship (Serventi Longhi 2011). In the interregnum following the end of the First World War, the *sovereign dictatorship* of Fiume, thus conceived, was to be a model for an alternative modernity and for a new type of post-liberal national community. The constitutional process of a new republican and syndicalist regime was designed to inspire other young nations to question the imperialist superpowers without having to adhere to socialist internationalism. It was intended as the epitome of the integration of the fight against the international world order and the redefinition of national identities in a way not incompatible with a modern concept of democracy, but not exempt from dangerous and unpredictable consequences.

From a historical perspective, a few issues remained unresolved: the fracture within the army, where loyalty to the interests of the people substituted that to a legitimate government and led to coup temptations; the radicalisation of anti-socialist positions, which led to the rise of violent *squadrismo* trends; the marginalisation and defeat of thinkers like De Ambris, who wanted to frame Fiume as an example of social and democratic renewal, which facilitated the *fascistisation* of former *legionari*. The myth of a noble people itself and the formalisation of a state of exception proved to be more capable of creating, in the interwar period, a new conception of legality, defined as state-power (*der Machtstaat*) (Fraenkel 1941; De Felice 1989, 496–9; Sheuerman 1994). Fascism, in particular, combined different right-wing forces – gathered around traditional institutions such as the king, diplomacy, and the army – with d'Annunzio's national-populist drives, absorbing his aesthetical and ideological features and providing *squadristi* and *legionari* with the same legitimisation, but with a new precise mission: the conquest – legal or illegal – of the Italian state. By the time of the Fascist victory, the populism and sovereignism experimented with in Fiume and intended as original tools to overcome the liberal system, both nationally and internationally, had pretty much been sacrificed in favour of a new politics. The key features became *stabilisation*, *consensus* and *mass organisation*. Overshadowing Fiume, the Fascist strategy turned fully totalitarian, the relationship between state and society grew evidently hierarchical, and foreign policy finally embraced war and imperialism.

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Notes

1. 'Whoever today believes, stubbornly and rigidly, that the cause of his people is just, above that of all others, he betrays his cause, since he promotes the massacres in which his people will be caught up along with the others.' Henri Barbusse, '*A Gabriele D'Annunzio*'. *Le Populaire*, 1 April 1919.
2. On attempts to historicise populism and sovereignism, see, in addition to the ASMI London conference of December 2019, *Promised Land of Populism?'Populist' Culture and Politics in Italy 1900–2019*, a current project run

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by La Sapienza University of Rome and the University of Siena, entitled *Populism and Anti-Europeism. From the interwar period to the present (1920–2020).*
3. All quotations were translated by Maddalena Chiellini.
4. Art. XXXXIV of the Charter of Carnaro. In other regulatory frameworks, like Weimar, the transfer of exceptional powers was limited and in the hands of the parliament (Mortati 1973, 106).
5. Leaflet '*Con Me*', circulated in Italy's main cities. Museo Centrale del Risorgimento, Rome. Cod. Id. RML0346104, http://www.14-18.it/foglio/RML0346103_01.
6. Eugenio Coselschi, *La politica fiumana nella penisola balcanica*, Fiume, 31 July 1920. In Central Archives of the State, Rome. Fondo Guastoni-De Ambris, case 4, file 15.
7. Art. I of the Charter of Carnaro.

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Italian summary

Il saggio si propone di approcciare il tema all'occupazione della città di Fiume (1919–1920) ragionando attorno ai concetti di *sovranismo* e *populismo*. Animata da protagonisti di mentalità e orizzonti ideologici profondamente eterogenei, il senso profondo dell'impresa dal punto di vista storico-politico è senz'altro riconducibile alla figura del poeta-soldato che ne era alla guida: Gabriele d'Annunzio. Egli mise in opera quella sua visione della politica che aveva al centro il 'popolo nobile', guerriero e produttore, contrapposto alle élites liberali e in concorrenza coi movimenti rivoluzionari di taglio socialista. In questo senso, il laboratorio dello Stato libero di Fiume fu un prototipo di società nazional-socialista basata sull'integrazione di temi razziali e plebiscitari, corporativi e dittatoriali, autonomistici e centralisti. Allo stesso tempo, servì a sviluppare a livello internazionale un'opposizione radicale al nuovo ordine internazionale proposto da Wilson. La peculiare esperienza dello Stato libero di Fiume propose quindi un sovranismo delle piccole patrie da contrapporre ai nuovi organi sovranazionali come la Società delle nazioni.

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