

SPECIAL ISSUE

They, the people. Italian Fascism and the ambivalences of corporative populism

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Abstract

This paper argues that, in terms of their view of the 'people', leaderistic plebiscitarianism and corporative organicism are two sides of the same coin, which resulted in aspirational fascist totalitarian democracy. The binary – and intrinsically ambiguous – view of the 'people' is examined first in the passive and indeterminate qualities attributed to the Italian population, then in the institutional device designed to lead it. The resulting twofold paradigm of corporative populism is reviewed with reference to the model put together and popularised by Giuseppe Bottai, which is presented in three different forms.

Keywords: Fascism; people; corporative state; totalitarian democracy; Giuseppe Bottai

Introduction

Scholars have recently addressed the issue of populism in the Italian Fascist regime, establishing a genetic link between fascism and the popular appeal of populism (Finchelstein 2017). This article seeks to take the issue a step further, problematising the populist features of Italian Fascism by encasing them in the ideological apparatus devised to provide the distinctive 'fascist' response to the crisis of the liberal institutions: the corporative state.¹

Indeed, although popular appeal was an important aspect of Italian Fascist politics and essential to the demagogic choreography that formed its distinctive political liturgy, it cannot be considered the sole factor in its foundation, unlike, for example, the concept of *Völk* in Nazi ideology. The authoritarian brand of corporative organicism was instead a defining political feature of Italian Fascism, which was supposed to replace political franchise with an all-encompassing representation of the entire *popolo*, or 'people' (Stolzi 2007, Gagliardi 2010, Cassese 2010, Pasetti 2016, Costa Pinto 2017, Melis 2018, Costa Pinto and Finchelstein 2019).

The corporative state, devised as a means to encompass the pluralistic arrangement of interests in a monistic but 'modern' state, originally stemmed from the ideological formula derived from Giovanni Gentile's philosophical actualism (Stolzi 2013), and was then developed by Giuseppe Bottai, undersecretary and then minister of corporations until 1932. He was more committed than anyone else to investing in corporativism as a resource for a new statehood, and managed to implement a vast training network and

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instigate widespread cultural debate (Cassese 1971, Mangoni 1974, 1977, De Grand 1978, Galfré 2000).

Despite the breadth and variety of the discussion on corporatism, which has long captured scholarly interest (Santomassimo 2006), what is of relevance here, more than its (undoubtedly interesting) application in specialist fields such as economics or statistics (Augello, Guidi and Bientinesi 2019, Cerasi 2019), is the mainstream political formulation that emerges through Bottai. This amalgamation of ideas, welded together in the late 1920s, showed significant capacity for dissemination in later phases, which we consider through three instances from the second half of the 1930s. Analysing the discourse across these instances, an original concept of a corporative ‘people’ emerges, with ambivalent features that demand scrutiny. Authoritarian corporatism assumed a structured, organised and de-politicised ‘people’, defined by hierarchically arranged social affiliations and not trusted to act politically unless firmly governed.

‘The people only have a one-syllable word left, to affirm and obey’

The genetic link between Italian Fascism and populism, or at least between Fascism and populism’s popular appeal (Finchelstein 2017), was embedded in the fact that the very newspaper where Benito Mussolini started his career as a fascist was named *Il Popolo d’Italia*, and was founded to advocate the cause of Italy’s intervention in the Great War. Right from its inception, the ‘people’ Fascism intended to address was a people-at-war, shaped by the demands, requirements and imperatives of conflict. Rather than being depicted as an idealised, romanticised entity, it was often portrayed as possessing some of the qualities most essential to wartime conduct, first and foremost passivity and obedience. As Mussolini himself acknowledged in his wartime diary, describing his fellow soldiers at the front, ‘Do these men love war? No, they don’t. Do they loathe it? Not at all. They accept it as an unquestioned duty’ (Mussolini (1917) 1934, 128–9). And later, more explicitly: ‘For the people who relinquished their spades for rifles, we simply ask that they obey; and the Italian people, the people of the countryside and the people of the workshops, obey’ (Mussolini (1918) 1934, 315).²

It is worth remarking that these virtues of compliance were claimed by Mussolini to defend the Italian people against the accusation of cowardice advanced following the defeat at the Battle of Caporetto. The argument was used a number of times. Curzio Malaparte, for instance, in his *Viva Caporetto*, or *La rivolta dei santi maledetti*, first published (and censored) in 1921, described the Italian infantry as the force that most captured the essence of the Italian people. Although illiterate, it ‘encapsulated the most forthright expression of our race and gave the measure of our possibilities, our tenacity and our spirit of sacrifice’. Despite repeated onslaughts, it headed towards enemy lines without heroic gestures, but ‘with that little trot, displaying noble courage and resignation’: ‘Our infantry, the most Christian of all, launched itself into the assault with human spirit: once, twice, ten times in a row’, simply because it had to be done:

And the boys are struggling up the bald slopes, trotting, against the machine guns and the nets, not out of thirst for blood, but because you have to obey. Obedience is a virtue and fatalism a defect (or a virtue?) that Italians possess in the highest degree. (Malaparte (1921) 1997, 41–7)

Yet, as Franciscan friar Agostino Gemelli argued in his wartime applied psychology essay, having assumed that ‘the psychological life of our soldier mirrors the virtues and faults of our people’, it should be made clear that it mirrored above all ‘their candour, their primeval character, sometimes puerile elements, weaknesses, contrasting high

feelings and selfishness'. From this perspective, widely shared in various parts of the political spectrum, the 'people' were the lowest stratum of the hierarchy of the nation, a notion of inferiority that was particularly apparent when compared to the self-awareness of the interventionist élite. Liberal democrat and former socialist Gaetano Salvemini took it for granted that *they*, the people, were different from *we*, the interventionists, even while marching to the front: 'The people, the multitude of peasants, of workers, took up arms, silent and collected, without really seeing the idealist motives that drove us, but confusedly presaging them' (Gemelli 1917, 116). Similarly, in his aforementioned war-time notes, Mussolini remarked that 'It is useless to request from the humble proletarian folks a great national conscience that they cannot have, simply because we have done nothing to give it to them' (Mussolini (1918) 1934, 315).

This was a widely shared elitist attitude, with more than a hint of societal racism towards the common soldiers. Indeed, however virtuously the soldiers behaved, it was advisable not to offer too much praise. Historian Gioacchino Volpe, while drafting instructions for army officers to boost their men's morale in the fourth year of warfare – again, a task undertaken on a large scale after the Caporetto retreat – was not averse to encouraging them to praise the common soldier:

And the humbler he is, and the more he has toiled in the trenches, the more he has almost merged with the earth, without great machines at his side, without great reserves of patriotic ideals to use, only with his modest rifle and his patient courage, the more it is good to praise, exalt and recognise. (Volpe (1918a) 1928, 59)

At the same time, Volpe recommended that after acknowledging the extent to which the soldier had suffered for his country, his contribution should be encompassed within the entire nation's endeavours: he ought to be reminded that 'the war was a great national effort involving all classes', as 'the soldier must not be fed the idea that the war is only his, that is, the peasants' doing' (Volpe (1918a) 1928, 59). Volpe, already a nationalist at the time, was keen to avert the danger that the war be felt as a 'soldier's' war, because soldier meant peasant, and peasants alone did not constitute a whole 'people', let alone a fighting one. A 'people' redeemed itself from the condition of plebs and servitude, and so became historically relevant, only when it had recognised in itself the reflection of the nation organised within the state. 'Outside of this inner and sincere adhesion of the popular conscience to political life in its actual dynamic ... there is Bolshevism or, as it was once said, anarchy' (Volpe (1918b) 1928, 111–12).

However, it was by fighting in a war that a people could reveal its inner quality. A few weeks after Caporetto, with the retreat halted and the front stabilised on the Piave line, philosopher Giovanni Gentile pondered the averted danger of the army's dissolution in the face of the enemy advance, concluding that a country that failed to bounce back after a military defeat did not deserve to exist: 'It would not have been a people that deserves to live in a free state, but instead, as our enemies like to portray us, a jumble of men without discipline of any kind' (Gentile (1917) 1919, 62). A few lines later on he put it even more clearly:

The momentary defeat of a people, when not an artificial improvisation, is a great test of its methods, and therefore a great lesson, providing the only way to learn what it needs to know in order to live: to live, that is, not a fictitious and fruitless life, but a true life, involving continuous improvement and progress in its vigour and power in all its organs and as a complex whole (Gentile (1917) 1919, 63).

The blurring of the lines between the concept of the ‘people’ and that of the nation was ingrained in the wartime political discourse. Only when lining up to march to the front could a people be considered a single and united entity, ‘a whole people, in which every citizen is already a soldier, with no will of his own, other than that of those who guide him to the battle’ (Gentile (1915) 1919, 31). Indeed, without a will of its own (indeed, on the eve of the war it had proven to be largely averse to the interventionist and patriotic campaign), and stripped of its political subjectivity, the ‘people’ acquired an evanescent, dematerialised state, which could be seen as equivalent to that of the nation. The nation, in turn, possessed a distinctive political subjectivity: ‘A nation without a determined conscience, without a formed personality is not a nation: and the more a nation is built, the more it acquires strength and the more its personality is enriched with traditions and aspirations. This, mind you, is not a different personality from that of the citizens: it is the very same conscience of every citizen, which implements in its will the will of the nation’ (Gentile (1915) 1919, 26).

On the other hand, when the ‘people’ was not contained within and dissolved in the nation, but was left to itself, then it was a mob, a disorderly and temperamental multitude governed by base instincts, whose emotions – as a young and still socialist Mussolini was cynically aware – were to be exploited and controlled in order to accumulate the amount of force necessary to achieve his revolutionary goal: ‘in certain cases and at certain times, we are “hooligans” too’ (Mussolini (1904) 2019).

Unsurprisingly, 20 years later, on the eve of the general elections where he would seize power, Mussolini did not deem it necessary to rouse the mob’s instincts any more. In a famous article on Machiavelli published in his journal *Gerarchia* in April 1924, he denied the ‘people’ any substantial tangibility in the political realm: ‘First of all, the people was never defined. As a political entity, it is purely abstract. It is not known exactly where it begins, nor where it ends.’ Then he dismissed the popular sovereignty that was soon to be exercised at the polls: ‘The adjective “sovereign” applied to the people is a tragic joke. The people all, at most, delegate, but they certainly cannot exercise any sovereignty’. And finally, he based his conception of power on the same features of passivity and obedience that the people displayed during the war:

The people only have a one-syllable word left, to affirm and obey. You see that the sovereignty graciously bestowed on the people is taken away from them at times when they might feel a need for it. It is left to them only when it is harmless or considered harmless, that is, in moments of ordinary administration. (Mussolini 1924, 208)

This standpoint, once advanced, was rapidly shared in the Fascist political discourse. Sergio Panunzio remarked that the Italian population was, if anything, the best fit for a plebiscitarian democracy, and fascism was the political regime that best suited its essential qualities. He maintained that ‘the Italian people do not lack any of the qualities needed to be a world-class people’, being ‘thrifty, frugal, modest in consumption, enjoyment and pleasures’, as well as being endowed with ‘lively intelligence’ and ‘great incomparable strength of will’. However, ‘the Italian people, which has all these virtues, needed only one thing to achieve its national and global purpose: to be directed, to be guided in its ideas and material aspects, and it found this in fascism’ (Panunzio 1924, 39–40).

This set of arguments was so effective that it was deemed suitable to inform a political handbook for the ‘people’s schools’, written by the National Fascist Party (PNF) secretary Augusto Turati: a collection of question and answers designed to ‘capture in a basic form the most important concepts of our political structure’ (Turati 1929, 7–8), including the claim that fascism was ‘already born in the people’ before its seizure of power (Turati 1929, 12). In this respect, the ‘people’ was tantamount to the national conscience, the

fatherland and the race. Its components were soldiers in peacetime: 'A faithful servant of fascism is every fascist who considers himself a soldier even if he does not wear the military uniform; a soldier even when he works in the office, in the workshops, in the yards or in the fields; a soldier bound to the rest of the army', observing 'silent, active and devoted' discipline (Turati 1929, 19–20).

Organic hierarchy and totalitarian democracy

This idea of authoritarian and plebiscitary democracy, legitimised by the passive nature of (Italian) popular sovereignty, mirrored the leaderistic populism heralded by the Mussolinian political liturgy. But the dialogue between leader and crowd, the patriotic sacralised politics, and other traits of the populist choreography that formed the distinctive political rituals explored by George Mosse and Giovanni Gentile, so ingrained in the early representations and historical interpretations of fascism, might be quite deceptive in this respect. In fact, if the people-at-war was defined by its virtues of obedience and passive compliance, this same people-at-war also had to be compact and integrated, with its parts structured hierarchically to form the unity of the nation. As Augusto Turati remarked in his catechism of fascism, the Italian 'people' with latent fascism in its inner soul tended to coincide with the nation, which in turn was reflected in the state, which was 'the national corporate state, the state that gathers, controls and accords the interests of all social classes'. This brand of corporatist statism was clearly asserted: 'Is this integral corporatism possible? Yes, but only on the terrain of the state, because only the state is above the conflicting interests of individuals and groups, in order to coordinate them to a higher end. The implementation is made more rapid by the fact that all the economic organisations recognised, guaranteed, protected in the corporative state live in fascism; that is, they accept the doctrine and practice of fascism' (Turati 1929, 48).

Indeed, the 'oceanic' gatherings of cheering crowds, reflecting the absolute centrality of the Duce's charismatic leadership over a 'people' atomistically composed of indistinct individuals, were counterbalanced by the pageants held to mark civil festivities, formed by diverse and orderly groups. Turned into a weekly occurrence by the launch of the *Sabato Fascista*, following the same genetic code of political violence practised by *squadristo*, codified from the very first celebrations of the anniversaries of the March on Rome and generalised by the network of mass organisations, these pageants emphasised the secularisation of ethos and military order that underpinned the regime's social life (Falasca Zamponi, 2003; Ben-Ghiat, 2004).³

From this perspective, the 'people', as well as coinciding with the nation, tended to reproduce the complex fabric of society, its modern and industrial features included, as was implied in the primeval focus on the *produttore*, or 'producer', which the *Fasci* displayed from the early 1920s onwards. Alfredo Rocco was keenly aware early on of the organised nature of the social fabric in its relationship with the state, when in November 1920, after the wave of industrial strikes and factory occupations and at the outset of the violent fascist surge, he famously warned of the danger of the state's sovereignty being overwhelmed by the growing strength of social and political movements: 'The state is in crisis; the state is dissolving day by day into a multitude of minor aggregates, parties, associations, leagues and unions, which bind it, paralyse it, suffocate it; the state is losing, with uniformly accelerated motion, one by one, the attributes of sovereignty' (Rocco (1920) 1938, 631). At the time, Rocco envisaged a way out, intimating that the state should recover its strength and reassert it over the societal organisations: 'The existence of trade unions is not bad in itself. It is bad that they constitute a state above the state.' The state was to reassert itself over society; 'the state is not separate from or superimposed onto society; it is society itself insofar as it organises itself, that

is to say insofar as it exists and lives, because organisation is life. To have faith in the future of the state is therefore to have faith in the future of civil society, to have faith in the future of civilisation' (Rocco (1920) 1938, 644–5). A few years later, he could claim to have accomplished the task by means of his syndical and corporative law for the juridical regulation of collective labour relations (issued 3 April 1926), which, he argued, 'has contributed most to giving the fascist state its character and its action a concrete social content', and has also 'solved the problem of Italian society being organised based on profession' (Rocco 1927, 21). This problem was at the core of the liberal state's fragile framework, and its 'fundamentally erroneous conception of social life, which disregarded the organic nature of society, the necessary differences between men, their different values, and the diversity of the functions entrusted to each individual in the complex and varied mechanism of social life'. Tackling the issue of an organic vision of society, he said, had been 'one of the most important tasks of the fascist state', one it managed to resolve through 'the reorganisation of society on the basis of the productive function exercised by each individual, ... which gave the fascist state a new strength and a new life' (Rocco 1927, 22–3).

As is well known, the laws authored by Rocco, which initiated the construction of the authoritarian corporative state, partly replaced the unsuccessful institutional reform project drafted by the Commission of Eighteen, or Soloni, chaired by Giovanni Gentile, and rejected by the Grand Council in October 1925. The Commission of Eighteen was composed of Fascist 'supporters' inclined to an authoritarian interpretation of the Albertine Statute, and did not satisfy Mussolini, who appointed Rocco alone to carry out the task (Uva 1974). However, it is worth mentioning that in his capacity as chairman of the Commission, Gentile, in his concluding report, declared the need for 'the differential character of the Fascist State', and that there should be 'contact between the State and the national productive forces, whether or not they are unionised, whether or not they can be unionised, that is, with all the forces that exist and operate within the nation, which is the contents of the state' (Gentile (1925) 1932, 21). Gentile's acknowledgement of the need to redefine the relationship between the state and social organisations was particularly relevant when it came to illustrating the wide reach of the 'realistic' concern of connecting with productive society. Gentile later widened his perspective, remarking that this realistic concern called into question the very foundation of liberal individualism, in a sentence often quoted by Irene Stolzi: 'when [the fascist state] has to reach the individual, it does not seek him as that abstract political individual which the old liberalism assumed to be an indifferent atom; instead it seeks him as only it can find him [...] as a specialised productive force' (Gentile 1928, 50; Stolzi 2007, 167; Stolzi 2012, 500). In comparison, Rocco's angle was clear-cut:

The fascist state is, in fact, the state that accomplished the utmost power and cohesion in the legal organisation of society. And society, in the fascist view, is not a mere sum of individuals. Rather it is an organism, which has its own life and its own ends, which transcend those of individuals, and its own spiritual and historical value. Even the state, which provides the legal structure for societies, is seen by fascism as being distinct from the citizens who are part of it at any given time, and having its own life and its own goals, which come before those of individuals and to which the individuals' must be subordinated. The fascist state is therefore a truly social state, whatever type of society is organised within it. (Rocco 1927, 13)

However, this ability of the fascist state to connect with the 'modern' shape and structure of society by encompassing organised labour within its boundaries, as in Rocco's constitutional strategy (Battente 2005, 425–49; Cerasi 2018; Cerasi 2019), was grounded on a

concept of the ‘people’ that remained ambiguous. It was a ‘people’ divided between two opposite yet complementary dimensions: the cheering crowds and the orderly arrangements of the pageants; the obeying nature of the peasant soldier, and the constructive activity of the *produttore*. To combine the two sides of the coin, to put together a ‘people’ able to act as a political subject, it then had to be imbued with a political soul and character. A soul which only the ruling Fascist party was able to provide, thereby triggering a circle of self-referentiality that underpinned Fascism’s main political weakness.

A political soul for the Italian people

The role of the Fascist party to provide a political soul to a defective Italian ‘people’ was acknowledged by Giuseppe Bottai at the time of its ‘revisionist’ campaign in the mid-1920s (De Grand 2000, 41). At first, in his deliberate manufacturing of a self-reliant strategy within mainstream fascism, he envisaged the dissolution of the party in the regime-building process (‘Is it necessary, in other words, to overcome the party? Abolish it?’ Bottai 1925a), and to transfer the original fascist revolutionary drive into the state, in order to achieve its complete conversion into a fascist state (Bottai 1925b; Mangoni 1974, 113). He later retracted his steps when confronted with the *fait accompli* of Mussolini’s resolution to leverage on the party one of the many readjustments of the strategic purpose assigned to the PNF: ‘In these conditions of life and struggle, the Party must still be a Militia under the orders of the Leader of the Revolution and cannot indulge in excessive criticism and introspection that could dampen action and weaken willpower’ (‘Il Congresso del Partito’ 1925, 241). From then on, he settled on a twofold stance: on the one hand, it had to be acknowledged that the state had in effect become a fascist state, but on the other hand, in order to remain politically viable, it had to undergo a revolutionary ‘second wave’, or at least aim for progressive improvement. He saw the best means of achieving this in the corporative state, as the realisation of totalitarian democracy.

As part of this careful positioning, the notion of the ‘people’ used by Bottai resulted in a very straightforward view of totalitarian democracy. Moving away from the historicistic trope of the unfinished nature of the Risorgimento for want of revolutionary participation by the people, and from the anti-liberal argument of corrupted parliamentary customs, Bottai denied that modern Italy had ever been a democracy before the arrival of Fascism: ‘if by democracy we mean both the material and spiritual participation of the people in the state, we can say that democracy has never existed in Italy since the particularistic democracy of the communes.’ Indeed, coming as it did after the Great War, ‘Fascism is the revolution of the people that [had] remained outside the state’: in order to ‘turn the people into a nation, the state had to be subverted, and while socialism had no intention of doing this, Fascism understood it, born in the squares to call the people to get revenge against the false shepherds’. A new kind of democracy was in order:

While until now Fascism has not been against the people, from now on it must be with the people. It was anti-democratic to sever the illusion of a false democracy, but with this crushed, today it addresses the people so that the democracy destined to govern the Italian state comes from within its ranks (Bottai 1925c, 401–03).

Bottai’s ability to seize the crux of the political debate, while managing to foster and steer its advancement, has been widely recognised in existing studies on the topic (Mangoni 1974; De Grand 1978; Galfré 2000). It might be worth remarking that, in this perspective, his own standpoint was as sharp and incisive in its argument as it was middle-ground in its strategic positioning, with an ability to integrate – rather than

reinforce – the different angles. His moderate balancing helped him to escape the ‘revisionist’ discussion with Roberto Farinacci about the role of the PNF, by stressing the need to defend the party ‘at a time when Fascism is about to face its decisive challenges’ (Bottai 1925d). This same ability allowed Bottai to rapidly envisage the corporative issue as the most suitable new terrain for promoting closer interpenetration of fascism, the people and the institutions, and ultimately the making of a totalitarian democracy.

There is no space here to delve into the thriving literature on fascist corporatism and its capacity to generate a steady stream of political, economic and juridical discussion (Santomassimo 2006; Stolzi 2007; Gagliardi 2010; Cassese 2010; Pasetti 2016; Costa Pinto 2017). However, one highlight of this was a complex and intense debate about fascism and the French Revolution, and ultimately about totalitarian democracy (Tarquini 2011, 141–5). This concept was developed by Bottai, who created an original blend of the various strands of the discussion as a conclusion of sorts to the debate. The result was a combination of authoritarian statism, references to the wartime experience as political legitimation, and an organic concept of corporative organisation as a reshaping of statehood to meet the social and productive requirements of modernity. As he claimed as a newly appointed professor of corporative law in his opening speech at the University of Pisa, the universality of the democratic principles of 1789 could only be achieved through fascism. The passage is worth quoting:

The conclusion and definitive solution of the principles of 1789 is therefore a state in which the life of the citizen is truly and completely fulfilled, in which the citizen genuinely finds and composes his moral personality, in which he finds effective and total regulation of his life. The liberal state is an empty form that does not serve the citizen. ... The corporative state ... is the only form that can contain modern life ... The corporative state, as we have repeatedly stated, is the solution to the problems of contemporary life, and the form towards which the social substance of the modern world yearns; it must therefore inevitably be the heir and bearer of the whole of modern history, which in its political tone and legal systems is a consequence of the French Revolution. (Bottai 1930, 441–5)

The reason, from this perspective, that only the corporative state could fill the void vacated by the empty form of the liberal state, was because corporative citizenship encompassed the *produttore* as well as the voter; social and economic life as well as political life. The corporative ‘people’, therefore, was a varied, solid, three-dimensional entity, capable of reflecting the diversity of social and economic life within an orderly and well-organised hierarchy, and so solving ‘the problems of contemporary life’. In this ‘realistic’ assumption, the corporative ‘people’ was able to give (organised and hierarchical) substance not only to the vacant liberal subject, but also to the indefinite, impalpable and passive body whose main feature was to obey. In terms of their view of the ‘people’, plebiscitarianism and corporative organicism are therefore two sides of the same coin, namely totalitarian democracy. And the two sides could not be detached: on the one hand, when connected with leaderistic plebiscitarianism, organic corporatism was prevented from acquiring that deliberative capacity which was to a certain extent envisaged in its first drafts, such as those sketched out by Gino Arias in the Soloni constitutional committee (Ottonelli 2012), and became prone to authoritarian outcomes such as those provided by Alfredo Rocco. On the other hand, when combined with organic corporatism, leaderistic plebiscitarianism acquired the hierarchical order derived from the military and wartime experience and was integrated into the national dimension.

The two sides were welded together by a shared view of the ‘people’: passive, obedient and hierarchically unified. From this perspective, the distinctive brand of fascist

totalitarian democracy was grounded in the negative qualities attributed to the 'people' of which it was the political outcome. How far those negative qualities ultimately derived from the original elitism professed by the socialist Mussolini, with his cynical appreciation of the crowds' potential, as we mentioned above, is a matter of debate; in any case, these different yet integrated features resulted in a loose pattern, multifaceted enough to encompass different sides.

Giovanni Gentile in 1925, when head of the Soloni committee for constitutional reforms, was anything but sanguine on the corporate and organic framework the fascist state was to assume; yet three years later, in 1928, he acknowledged the 'democratic' nature of the fascist state, and regarded the corporative structure as the most suitable tool to achieve it. Not only did he declare that 'the fascist state ... is a popular state, and in this sense a democratic state par excellence' (Gentile (1928) 1934, 49), he also reckoned that 'this character of the fascist state is the source of the great social and constitutional reform that fascism was carrying out, by establishing the syndical corporative regime and moving towards replacing the liberal state with the corporative state' (Gentile (1928) 1934, 48).

This great reform is underway. Nationalism, syndicalism and the same liberalism that, in its doctrine, had largely criticised the old forms of representation of the liberal state and called for a system of organic representation, are flowing into it. (Gentile (1928) 1934, 49)

It is worth noting that the fact Gentile came to consider the corporative fascist state as a combination of nationalism, syndicalism and liberalism, which was able to surpass all three by establishing a new and modern form of statehood, was facilitated by his unique historicism (Roberts 2007, 8–24). By the end of the 1920s, however, an effective synthesis of the various arguments on this topic had been reached: as in Bottai's argument, elements of different origins were combined, creating a paradigm that could easily be used at different levels. The two-sided notion of plebiscitarianism and corporative organicism, of the leader's charismatic appeal and the corporative state's integrated hierarchy, was a rhetorical scheme repeated over and over again across the next decade: anyone reading political publications or browsing academic journals will see it employed frequently.

An extensive study of the use of this two-sided paradigm in different domains of Fascist political culture during the 1930s would be instrumental in appreciating its influence and the true extent of its dissemination. The paragraphs below, however, present a selection of its usages in different contexts, and offer a tentative interpretation.

Bottai's brood and the people

In spite of his undisputed importance, Giuseppe Bottai has not yet received the full attention he deserves. In particular, with the exception of De Grand's pioneering book, and some major in-depth studies focused on his actions in the corporative sphere (De Grand 1978; Amore Bianco 2012), his contribution to the organisation of the regime's political culture has not yet been thoroughly examined. What Mussolini called Bottai's 'brood' included not only, as the expression might suggest, a bunch of followers and pupils, but rather, according to his own recollection, a wider 'group of older and younger friends', committed to maintaining a critical attitude and conducting a constant work of revision 'to prevent anything from bringing about a disconnect between Fascism and the country' (Bottai (1949) 2008, 49–50).

The group's reach in the political debate was wide and varied (Mangoni 1974), and not solely due to the prestige of Bottai's main political journal *Critica fascista* and its special

spin-offs including the *Archivio di studi corporativi* and *Il diritto del lavoro*, nor his effective promotion of academic corporative studies. The group functioned as a think-tank: its members were active in the public debate, and also occupied key roles in government, party and trade union organisations and initiatives. Gherardo Casini, for instance, was deputy editor of *Critica fascista*, but also general editor of the Confederation of Fascist Trade Unions' house organ, *Il lavoro fascista*; Ugo D'Andrea was a regular contributor to *Critica fascista* and to mainstream newspaper *Il Giornale d'Italia*, but he also worked as a national trustee at the Centres for Corporate Culture and Propaganda, a network of centres based on Gentile's National Fascist Institute of Culture (Vittoria 1982, Vittoria 1984, Vittoria 1986, Vittoria 2021). Riccardo Del Giudice, as well as writing for a variety of 'Bottaian' journals, was a trade union leader, then member of parliament, professor of labour law, and undersecretary to the minister of education during Bottai's tenure (Parlato 1991; Parlato 2000).

The group's influence also went beyond the efforts of its most dedicated members. Bruno Spampanato, for instance, a professional journalist and trade union leader,⁴ did not strictly belong to the 'brood' – indeed, he was a radical fascist – but he made a name for himself in 1932 by initiating the famous 'Rome or Moscow' debate with an essay published in *Critica fascista*, in which he compared Italian fascism to Soviet communism, seeing them united by both being popular revolutionary regimes (Mangoni 1974, 226–77). He pushed his case further in a brochure entitled *Popolo e regime*, arguing that the alternative was 'not Rome or Moscow, but Rome and Moscow, or old Europe' (Spampanato 1932, 65). His main aim was to present his set of ideas on fascism for the use of 'unknown comrades' (Spampanato 1932, 14), including his own reworking of the two-sided paradigm of the 'people'. Indeed, his entire argument hinged on a vague and unsubstantial concept of the 'people', which he saw as equivalent to the nation ('The nation is geographically, politically and historically the body in which the people circulate ... the nation is the becoming of the people' (Spampanato 1932, 19). In a similar way to Gentile, he drew on the nationalist topic of Fascism fulfilling the task of integrating the masses into the state that the Risorgimento had failed to achieve: 'The revolution of the Blackshirts is national, because it aims to complete the unitary process, creating in Italians a national conscience, a solidarity of the people, a sense of the state' (Spampanato 1932, 95). He also drew on Mussolini's trivialised Paretian argument of the circulation of the elites as the inner workings of politics: fascism aimed for 'healthy, complete democracy, which gives the masses the possibility of consciously circulating in the state, and the state the possibility of regulating this circulation' (Spampanato 1932, 40). The outcome was 'a totalitarian, organic democracy, in which the people live not merely to exercise political activity, not merely to claim social rights, but to serve the idea of the state entirely on every level, to become its body and soul, to be its interpreter at every moment, at every time': a totalitarian democracy which 'will make the myth of popular sovereignty reality through the substantial and complete adherence of the masses to the institutions' (Spampanato 1932, 42). In 'Bottaian' terms, therefore, the most advanced tool for integrating the masses was the corporative state, which 'achieves this sum of political, economic and idealist life because it is built on the indestructible structures of the complete, perfect organisation of the people as a whole in the fascist system', thus proving the superiority of Rome over Moscow: 'A totalitarian state: this is the state of the fascists. It is a sign that the whole people participates in it' (Spampanato 1932, 96).

One of Bottai's fields of influence – and one to which little attention has yet been paid – was the creation of a system of trade union schools (Parlato 2000, 80–88; Cerasi 2020). These were an interesting cultural experiment within the newly established network of Centres for Corporate Culture and Propaganda (guaranteed by the presence of two of Bottai's close associates, journalist Ugo D'Andrea and jurist Dario Guidi), whose structure

was modelled on the wide-reaching network of the National Fascist Institute of Culture, founded in 1925 by Giovanni Gentile to incorporate and replace the extensive web of provincial cultural institutes formed under liberal rule (Vittoria 1982; Vittoria 2021). Established at the end of the 1920s in some of the main Italian cities (including Florence and Genoa, which were the first to be founded), and incorporating aspects of education, popularisation and academia, the trade union schools were aimed at trade union leaders, but operated through the support of university bodies and teachers: indeed, they did not depend on the trade union organisations, but were eventually attached to the local university. Bottai wanted them to provide technical training for a new generation of trade union leaders, following the political guidelines of corporative fascism. According to Gino Arias, professor of political economics in Florence and organiser of the local trade union school, they were meant to be ‘real schools of corporative culture’, and to address not only professional trade unionists but all those who ‘feel the need to understand the value of corporative doctrine, in all its moral and political meaning’ (*Notiziario* 1932, 13). Due to their position at the juncture of political popularisation, professional training and academic culture, the classes and their teachers were well suited for playing a key disseminating role.

Augusto Fantechi was one of the founders of the trade union school in Florence. His career gathered momentum in the late 1930s, when he was appointed to the Chamber of Fasces and Corporations and then, in February 1940, was named president of the Istituto Luce. His main publication, issued in 1938, dealt with the transformation of the concepts of democracy and the ‘people’, reworking, almost to the letter, the aforementioned tropes, and particularly the two-sided notion of the ‘people’ (Fantechi 1938). The Italian ‘people’, which was late to establish political unity, acquired ‘a clear and precise awareness of itself and of its own greatness’ (Fantechi 1938, 10) only with the Great War, while ‘at the same time, the need for energetic and authoritarian leaders to govern this people and for this people also emerges’, revealing the Italian people’s obeying nature (Fantechi 1938, 13). Fascism was therefore a legacy of the war in more than one sense: most notably in that its doctrine aimed to continue the ‘greatest revelation of modern war’, which was that ‘the people reconciled with their homeland must be included in the life of the state’ (Fantechi 1938, 14). This inclusion, achieved through the ordeal of the war and accomplished by fascism, transformed the very concept of democracy and of the ‘people’, who were ‘no longer seen as the sum of individuals who are foreign to one another, but as a complete and perfect fusion of citizens ... that achieved their potential only in the state, in the sense of a unified and unbreakable whole of people and nation’. The ‘identifying of the people with the state’ accomplished through fascism (Fantechi, 1938, 15) should be considered as a ‘higher phase of the democratic idea’, and ultimately a ‘totalitarian and authentic idea of democracy’, stemming from the historical experience of the people’s war, of which Fascism was a legacy. Indeed, if ‘by democracy we mean the government of the people, we shall see that this has so far been unrealised and is unrealisable in parliamentary democracy’ (Fantechi 1938, 17).

If by democracy we mean government for the people and with the people, we will be able to consider the fascist regime as a new form of democracy because in it the people, having overcome all class and partisan divisions and reconstituted themselves into a spiritual unity, participate actively and directly in the life of the state, identify themselves with it and form an organic whole with the men in power, to whom precise responsibilities are entrusted, according to a unitary and hierarchical order in which those at the top incorporate the sum of their individual responsibilities. (Fantechi 1938, 18)

The new democracy, in the sense of ‘the people’s participation in government’, that would revolutionise twentieth-century political life would therefore be ‘authoritarian and hierarchical’, and would put into practice ‘the ideas proclaimed by the French Revolution’ (Fantechi 1938, 21–4). From this perspective, the ‘people’ coincided politically with the concept of nation, and legally with that of the state (Fantechi 1938, 74–5), Referring to Mussolini’s pronouncement ‘The people is the body of the state and the state is the spirit of the people. Under the fascist concept, the people is the state and the state is the people. the instruments through which this identity is realised in the state are the party and the corporations’, (Mussolini 1935, 33), and relying on Bottai’s set of ideas, a corporative version of totalitarian democracy was proposed, in which the ‘people’ that would constitute its foundation was dissolved into the social bodies that formed the corporative system:

Fascism, abandoning every atomistic conception ... not only proceeded to recognise the individual and the groups, but also ordered the state in such a way that the groups, legally recognised, themselves became part of the state. In other words, the state has ordered the organisations in a corporate way and invested them with legal functions, so they have become, as we have already seen, ‘instruments’ of the state and of the people at the same time. (Fantechi 1938, 146)

This outcome was echoed in a booklet published by Francesco Ercole in the same year of 1938, part of a series published by the National Fascist Institute of Culture and designed to reach a wide audience. The legal historian and former minister of national education outlined a version of statist corporatism that allowed him to further develop the equivalence between ‘people’ and ‘state’. Through its unique corporative system, the fascist state succeeded in ‘bending trade unionism from being an organ of disintegration into an organ of political integration’ (Ercole 1938, 43). Therefore, the Fascist state not only has its foundation in the ‘people’, but the ‘people’ can be fully integrated with the state:

We can apply the formula first spelt out by Mussolini on 20 October 1925 at La Scala: ‘*Everything for the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state*’: a formula which, in the mind of its author, translates into exactly the same thing: ‘*everything for the people, nothing outside the people, nothing against the people*’. (Ercole 1938, 44)

What prevented the ‘people’ dissolving completely into the state and entirely relinquishing its identity was the corporative frame, which formed the basic structure for its legal existence:

Fascism has thus transferred sovereignty from the electoral masses, brute and amorphous forces, placed outside the state, to the great institutions that frame and constitute the very armoury of the state: in other words, it has transferred sovereignty from the inorganic forces that precede or are extraneous to the state, to a system of state institutions that absorb and elaborate the whole of social life. ... What the French people did in 1789, Fascist Italy has done today. (Ercole 1938, 48)

This extreme totalitarian democracy, based on the identification of the ‘people’ in the state, which dissolved the ‘people’ into the state leaving only the corporative framework as the mark of its legal existence, was argued for in Ercole’s authoritarian statism, but could also be phrased in syndicalist terms, as Tullio Cianetti – at the time head of the industrial trade unions – did in September 1938. Cianetti also believed that Fascism was a ‘genuine people’s regime’, a ‘state that achieves perfect democracy’, the latter understood ‘in the legal sense, because in the fascist view, the people is the state and

the state is the people: the instruments for achieving this identity in the state are the party, the trade union and the corporations': in short, 'the equivalence of the people and the state can be seen in the concept – now clear to everyone – of a totalitarian state' (Cianetti 1938, 13–14). Again, only in fascism could true democracy be achieved: corporative political representation was the true 'representation of the interests of the nation', creating an 'organic state which, as we have said, is the truest and simplest definition of the regime, [and which] no longer admits the distinction between people and state' (Cianetti 1938, 89). The distinctive feature of Cianetti's perspective was the emphasis on the professional basis of the corporative system (i.e., on the *categoria*, or 'category'): Cianetti stated that 'the people manifests itself through the "categories", which achieved 'the identifying of corporative representation with the interests of the people':

To be precise, the essence of representation stems from the categories that express self-government within the corporations. This means that, for the first time in history, democracy is not the empty word it usually is, because self-government is nothing other than the faculty to decide on one's own interests, regarding them as the interests of the nation and the community. The identity of the people and the State also seems to us to be demonstrated in another way, because the corporate state is nothing but the juridical expression of the people organised into categories. (Cianetti 1938, 97)

Conclusion

By the end of the 1930s, the two-sided paradigm of a passive and obedient people and of its hierarchical and organic arrangement had taken another step forward. The paradigm was a legacy of the wartime experience, which Fascism appropriated, and which was crafted by Bottai into an eclectic synopsis, disseminated through the channels of his wide cultural influence, and then, during the second decade of the regime's governance, was gradually assimilated into the actual functioning of the corporative system. The dissolution of the people into the state, which we have seen argued from three different angles, accentuated its position as an object, not a subject, of political will. Still, this extreme statism, which obliterated all subjective characteristics of the 'people', allowed the corporative framework to emerge as the only possible outline of the people's actual existence.

This was not just a conceptual development. The reform of political representation, which began with Rocco's syndical and corporative laws in 1926 and was completed in 1939 with the turning of parliament into the Chamber of Fasces and Corporations, was actually based on the 'category'. As opposed to 'class', which destroyed the unitary national dimension, the 'category' was a functional part of the productive economy, and was carefully included in the corporative institutional framework (Gagliardi 2010; Melis 2018). As recent research has found, the first tentative social security rules, integrated within the corporative framework and enforced from the 1930s onwards, had the 'category' as their cornerstone. Not only was healthcare granted differently according to the beneficiary's profession, but a whole array of social policies was contribution-based: the 'category' was the system of measurement used to determine the social protection and public welfare a citizen was entitled to, and this was channelled through the corporative structure (Cerasi 2020; Giorgi and Pavan 2021). This non-universalist pattern was handed down as a legacy to the postwar governments, and had a strong influence on the subsequent building of the welfare state; its roots can be detected in the combination of leaderistic plebiscitarianism and corporative organicism that stemmed from the Fascist conception of the obedient, evanescent yet corporate 'people'.

Competing interests

The author declares none.

Notes

1. I prefer to use the adjective 'corporative' instead of 'corporatist' to refer to the authoritarian corporatism implemented by the interwar Italian Fascist regime. I am aware of the extensive literature on the matter and of the predominant use of 'corporatist' in English with reference to both the pluralist economic organisation of interests and authoritarian and fascist corporatism (Cawson 1985; Grant 1985; Williamson 1985; Williamson 1989; Costa Pinto and Finchelstein 2019). Nevertheless, despite it being a loan word from Italian, I feel comfortable with 'corporative' because it was not unknown in interwar English-speaking literature on corporatism. Indeed, it was often used to denote the fascist variety of the corporatist state, both in essays originally written in English and in translations from Italian (Pitigliani 1933; De Michelis 1935; Röpke 1935; Cole 1940; Ahern 1941).
2. All translations from Italian are mine.
3. Three seminal studies on this topic are De Grazia 1981; Gentile 2001 and Gentile 2008.
4. In 1919, at the age of 17, Bruno Spampanato joined the Fascist movement, which he considered from a nationalist perspective to be the ideal continuation of the Risorgimento; he took part in the March on Rome, graduated in law and began to collaborate with major newspapers including *Il Mattino di Napoli* and *il popolo d'Italia*, before becoming editor-in-chief of the Neapolitan daily newspaper *Lo stato*. He headed the agricultural workers' union in the province of Avellino, and from 1941 was head of the confederation of retail workers. In 1943 he joined the Italian Social Republic (RSI): he was the editor of *Il Messaggero*, helped to draft the Manifesto of Verona – the constitutional charter of the RSI – and, with Junio Valerio Borghese, founded the weekly magazine *L'Orizzonte*, the house organ of the Decima Flottiglia MAS (Tenth Assault Vehicle Flotilla). After the war, he was prominent in the neo-fascist ranks: he was one of the founders of and a member of parliament for the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), and general editor of its house organ, *Il Secolo d'Italia*.

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Italian summary

In questo articolo si esamina la nozione di popolo corporativo nella cultura politica fascista, sostenendo che ne facciano parte, come due lati della medaglia, sia il leaderismo plebiscitario di cui si nutre la coreografia politica del fascismo, sia l'organicismo corporativo che ha avuto una prima formulazione nella cultura di guerra, entrambi compresi nell'aspirazione alla democrazia totalitaria. La duplice e intrinsecamente ambigua valenza dell'immagine del 'popolo' nel discorso politico del fascismo qui raffigurato emerge in primo luogo dalle caratteristiche di passività e indeterminazione attribuite al 'popolo', e poi dai dispositivi politici designati a guidarlo. Il paradigma, altrettanto duplice e ambiguo, di populismo corporativo è quindi ricostruito con riferimento al modello elaborato e popolarizzato da Giuseppe Bottai, presentandone tre diverse varianti.