

Pareto, Mosca, Michels, and the Advent of Fascism

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Abstract

This article focuses on the attitudes of the classical elitists towards the advent of fascism, as elite theory represented one of the main reference points for many fascist thinkers. Born between 1848 and 1876, Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Roberto Michels had the opportunity to witness and evaluate the phenomenon of fascism firsthand. While all three scholars shared a deep fascination with fascism and its leader, there are several noteworthy differences in their thought, primarily due to their diverging intellectual journeys. The murder of Giacomo Matteotti in 1924 led Mosca to adopt a critical and oppositional position towards fascism and Mussolini, while Pareto died in 1923 and, thus, was unable to witness fascism's transformation into a totalitarian regime. Nevertheless, one could argue that Pareto, who cautioned against governmental overreach and the suppression of freedoms and advocated for the preservation of parliament, would have disapproved of such a regime. Michels, on the other hand, embraced fascism with conviction and fervour.

Keywords: elitists, history of sociological thought, fascism, democracy.

1. Introduction

Among scholars who have addressed fascism, there is little agreement regarding the existence of a unified fascist ideology, that is, a homogeneous and stable system of thought to which fascists have adhered. Instead, many have argued that fascism is a hodgepodge of ideas drawing from various intellectual traditions, hastily cobbled together to legitimise the coup de main that led to the establishment of the dictatorship and the climate of violence that ensued.

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Despite varying answers regarding whether a singular fascist ideology exists, we cannot disregard that elitist thought represents one of the main theoretical reference points for fascism – Benito Mussolini, who liked to boast about attending the lectures of Vilfredo Pareto as a student at the University of Lausanne, characterised elite theory as “the most brilliant conception of modern times” (Mussolini, 1908, p. 128)¹. Likewise, we cannot overlook the undoubted appeal that fascism held for classical elitists like Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Roberto Michels.

Analysing the relationship between elitists and fascism can follow three diverging yet complementary paths. The first focuses on the elitists’ academic works, which address the phenomenon of fascism from a scientific point of view. In this respect, it should be noted that both Michels and, to a greater extent, Pareto devoted a portion of their writings to the analysis of fascism (see, for instance, Michels, 1925, 1930; Pareto, 1922a, 1923a, 1923c). Mosca, on the other hand, did not devote as much attention to comparable analyses; however, he evaluated the phenomenon in the conclusion to the second edition of *Elementi di scienza politica* (1923a), in a few correspondences with his friend Guglielmo Ferrero, and in some speeches in the Senate.

The second path involves examining if and how the elitists’ ideas and theories laid the groundwork for the advent of fascism. In other words, did their critiques of democracy, anti-parliamentarism, and denunciations of the corrupt and inefficient political class contribute to an atmosphere of mistrust towards Italy’s representative and democratic institutions, and did this, in turn, support Mussolini’s seizure of power? In this regard, it must not be forgotten that several key figures of fascism, including Mussolini, often directly referred to the elitists.

The third concerns the elitists’ attitudes towards the advent of fascism. How did they assess its emergence? Did they praise it or condemn it?

This article is devoted to analysing this third vein of questioning. Its primary objective, therefore, is to reconstruct, from a historical and sociological perspective, the elitists’ positions on fascism, with each of the following sections addressing one of the three elitists mentioned above.

Before going into detail, it must be emphasised that the various ways in which the elitists related to the emergence of fascism depended on their different intellectual, personal, and political trajectories, whose salient features are briefly discussed in the following section.

¹ All direct quotations are my own translations.

2. The elitists' intellectual paths

Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Roberto Michels all belonged to the same generation, publishing their most important works between the end of the 19th century and the early 1920s. However, the three authors belonged to different political traditions: Mosca and Pareto could be placed within the liberal thought tradition, while Michels adhered to a typical Marxist theoretical framework (on Michels, see Federici, 2020; Federici & Montesi, 2021).

The early works of Mosca and Pareto were published in the years following the unification of Italy, which were characterised by profound difficulties due to the lack of national unity and the complexity of governing a combined population of previously separated factions. This led to transformism and cronyism, leading several scholars to strongly criticise the malfeasance of the ruling class. Mosca and Pareto were among the first to raise this criticism against Italy's parliamentary-democratic institutions and their underlying principle of popular sovereignty. According to them, the nature of the political relationship is characterised by the fact that there is always a minority group that governs a majority. Furthermore, both were staunchly against any state intervention in the economy because, they argued, it would hinder the natural course of events and, thus, lead to the destruction of wealth. Both authors also found it difficult to recognise the political citizenship of the popular classes, whose rise they strongly feared (on Pareto, see the worthy volumes of Mornati, 2016-2020; see also Barbieri, 2017). However, while Pareto largely remained faithful to the liberal-conservative principles that inspired his early writings throughout his life, Mosca, as early as the first edition of *Elementi di scienza politica*, published in 1896, took a favourable stance towards the parliamentary-democratic system – a departure from the disapproval expressed in his earlier work, *Sulla teorica dei governi e sul governo parlamentare* (1884).

As previously stated, Michels' intellectual formation followed a different path from that of Pareto and Mosca, being primarily shaped by the theoretical postulates of Marxism. In this respect, the youthful period during which Michels lived in Marburg has been accurately identified as a socialist and syndicalist phase of his thought (Sivini, 1980). The elitist was involved in the vicissitudes of the German Social Democratic party, which formed a central focus of his studies, and cultivated fertile relationships with intellectuals from the French and Italian working-class movement.

One of the first issues he addressed in his early writings was that of the correct socialist practice, which he argued was contingent upon two prerequisites: antimilitarist internationalism and general strike. However, Michels was, above all, attracted by the events that caused paradigmatic shifts in Social Democratic party, such as the Dresden Congress, held in 1903, during

which the revisionist faction was defeated, and the Mannheim Congress, held six years later, which saw the triumph of parliamentarism. Thus, he defined this phase of the German social democracy as a phase of sunset and ideological deterioration.

In 1907, Michels was compelled by his socialist ideals to leave Marburg University. He decided to move to Turin, where he met Mosca. During the Turin years, his theoretical perspective evolved, influenced by the pessimism and scepticism he harboured regarding the party's capacity to educate and unify the proletariat, a role that Michels had previously assigned to it. This pessimism led him to revise his ideas and elaborate the theory of oligarchy in the mass party. In this new perspective, the democratic system was reduced to the choice, by the masses, of the chiefs they would be obliged to obey – in essence, a choice between a Bonapartist or plebiscitary system.

3. Mosca

Mosca's first reference to the phenomenon of fascism dates back to November 1922, in a letter addressed to Gaetano Salvemini, who lived in England at the time, where he praised Mussolini for what he perceived as the restoration of order in Italian society. He wrote to his friend:

Dear Salvemini, someone told me you do not aim to come back to Italy, and you do not want to ask for a leave. I must sincerely tell you that I believe you can come back to Italy without having any trouble. Currently, we have a dictator who has enforced both individuals and their goods (Mosca as cited in Sola, 1994, p. 89).

This occasional reference to the leader of fascism did not alter the positive assessment of parliament that Mosca had expressed in both the first and second editions of *Elementi di Scienza Politica*. In the latter edition, he argued that the representative system had two undisputed advantages: the opportunity for nearly all political forces to participate in government and the ability to ensure the internal equilibrium of the political class through the distinction between its bureaucratic and political components, each serving as checks on the other.

The Italian elitist, however, thought that most European countries, despite having adopted a parliamentary system, were becoming progressively weaker for a variety of reasons, primarily the impoverishment and decay of the middle classes and the deterioration of moral cohesion, which he argued were caused by the rise of the socialist party, trade unions, and secularisation. According to him, there were four possible results or solutions to this crisis, three of which

were radical and, thus, deplorable, and one that was less radical and, therefore, more advisable.

The first solution was a proletarian dictatorship. According to this line of argumentation, the current political class would be replaced by a rougher and more violent class, which would provoke a crisis of civilisation. The second result would be bureaucratic absolutism, which would represent a return to the absolutist governments that were widespread in Europe not long before. In this vein, the means and functions of the state would multiply, thereby leading to an overwhelming bureaucratic dictatorship like the one existing at the end of the Roman Empire. The third radical solution was a syndicalist result. However, this would not be devoid of perils because the goals of the working class could be different and even in opposition to those of the state and the community. Furthermore, a small classist parliament, even if equipped only with consultative powers, would become the dominant sovereign body because its supreme position would be ensured by the political forces that supported it.

After rejecting these solutions, Mosca was left with only one: the restoration of the representative regime. On this matter, he wrote:

It is for these reasons that now, although more than a half-century ago, I tried, in an early work, to unveil the falsity of the representative regime's building blocks and the faults of parliamentarism [...], I feel compelled to recommend to the new generation the restoring, at least partially, of that political regime it has inherited from its fathers (Mosca, 1923a, pp. 1113-1114).

Achieving this hoped-for solution depended on two conditions. On the one hand, it hinged on the economic recovery of Europe and the consequent improvement of middle-class living conditions; this would only occur if the European states recognised the common interests and economic relations that bound them together. Similarly, it would require the political class to develop self-awareness and understand its rights and duties; only then could it accurately assess the actions of its leaders and enable the population to do the same. This new awareness could be achieved through an educational process, which would increase the level of the elite's political culture.

A noteworthy fact is that Mosca, by addressing the senate regarding the statements of the new government led by Mussolini, essentially urged the dictator, who had seized power through a coup de main and was poised to abolish the fundamental rights of citizens, to restore the representative government. He stated:

Honourable Mussolini, the task that weighs heavily on your shoulders is that of restoring the representative government. We who are here have the duty to help you in bearing this charge with all our strength. It should indeed not be forgotten that the restoration of the parliamentary government requires the re-organisation of the political parties, the re-establishment of order both inside and outside of parliament, and the replacement not of the entirety of the political class but of the four or five dozen individuals, among which the governors are chosen, who usually do not have the intellectual and moral qualities necessary for acceding to the highest offices (Mosca, 1922, p. 224).

In short, for Mosca, the advent of the fascist regime did not necessarily entail the abandonment of the parliamentary system, and he advocated fervently for its restoration.

Mosca's position on this issue can be better clarified if we take into consideration the intense exchange of letters he had with his friend Ferrero, who criticised his ideas and reproached him repeatedly. Ferrero agreed with the premise of Mosca's arguments in the senate, that if the representative government were abolished, a tyranny of force would suddenly emerge. However, he also highlighted the strong contrast between this premise and the conclusions drawn by Mosca. The more logically sound conclusion, according to Ferrero, would be to acknowledge that the fascist government, which aimed to minimise the representative government, would develop into a dictatorship of force:

You instead hope that the same Mussolini will restore the representative government! – write to Mosca – I fear that you will be waiting a while. The blow that the ruling class inflicted two months ago on the representative government, with a levity and foolishness that could be barely forgivable in a population in the centre of Africa, is so severe that I fear many years and great work will be necessary to repair it if this will be possible. This government is bound to rely increasingly on the use of force, and it, in fact, equips itself with its guard [...] how can a government, which simultaneously fights against the parliament and bureaucracy, maintain itself in power if it does not have access to a means of terror, Tcheka, red or black guards, and so on? We are slipping toward a regime of terror, like the Russian one [...]. I would like to be wrong, but I am afraid not (Ferrero, 1923, pp. 322-323).

The day after receiving this letter, Mosca wrote to Ferrero, saying that his arguments were without contradiction and that one could hope that Mussolini, having only been in power for a few days, would be compelled to restore the representative government. Moreover, he justified his speech in the senate by asserting that there would be no one else to turn to for support in his proposal

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to reorder the state institutions. Despite agreeing with the fears expressed by Ferrero and his general overview of the situation, Mosca stated:

Given that many different factors concur to affect people's lives, sometimes it's like what happens when young and strong organisms are hit by a serious infectious illness. That is to say, nature may have unexpected resources that help the sick person recover, even when the doctors have rightly given up on him. I know that this seldom happens; however, it is good for both the sick person and his relatives who take care of him to maintain a thread of hope. And in this case, both you and I would step into the shoes of the relatives (Mosca, 1923b, pp. 324-325).

After the murder of Giacomo Matteotti on 10 June 1924, the situation worsened, shifting Mosca's attitudes towards fascism in a more disapproving and oppositional direction. On 1 September 1924, he revealed his disappointment to Ferrero, walking back the statements he made in the previous letter. He wrote:

I would not like to speak to you about politics. *Tristis est anima mea* for a while. By now, I have almost lost hope (that) the situation will be resolved, as the doctors say, by lysis, when a crisis seems inevitable; the latter surely will be serious and distressing, and it perhaps will wipe out many institutions that ten years ago seem long-lasting. And what is worse is that I do not see the men fit to hold the helm when the unavoidable storm will break out (Mosca as cited in Sola, 1994, p. 86).

In a speech delivered before the senate during the deliberations for the draft law "Attribuzioni e prerogative del capo del governo, primo ministro segretario di Stato", Mosca declared that he would vote against the draft law because it would lead to the death of the parliamentary system. He emphasised that the law would drastically modify both the relationship between the president of the council of ministers and the ministers themselves and that between the executive and legislative powers. In the first aspect, the ministers, no longer having any relationship with the king, would solely answer to the chief of the executive, thus becoming mere executors of his will. Furthermore, the council of ministers, which was a deliberative body, would be transformed into an advisory body since nearly all the powers would be concentrated in the hands of the chief of government, who could appoint new ministers and abolish the ministry, alter the duties of the ministers, and take upon himself the decisions regarding the conflicts of competence between the ministers. In the second aspect, the primacy of the executive branch over the legislative would be established because the government would have the power to modify the

agenda drawn up by the chambers. This would enable them to prevent any unwelcome issues from being discussed, thereby hindering their power of initiative. Finally, Mosca argued that in Europe, representative monarchic governments had taken two distinct forms. The first was represented by a parliamentary government, in which the council of ministers would be collectively responsible to both the parliament and the king; the second one was that of a constitutional government, in which the chief of government would be solely responsible to the king.

After having argued that it was not the intention of the draft law to switch from one form of government to another – an issue that remains open to debate – given that “it does not want to grant to the king the free choice of his government, and it does not want this choice to be affected by parliament’s votes”, he closed his speech by saying, “We are witnessing the death of a form of government; I would never have believed being the only one to do the eulogy of the parliamentary regime [...]. I have always criticised the parliamentary government, and now I must regret its fall” (Mosca, 1925, pp. 227-228).

Subsequently, Mosca would go on to sign the *Manifesto* of the anti-fascist intellectuals prepared by Benedetto Croce. In this manner, he detached himself entirely from the open-minded perspective he had adopted when fascism first emerged.

4. Pareto

Vilfredo Pareto’s initial evaluation of fascism was not positive. In fact, in November 1921, Pareto confided his worries about the future of Europe to his friend, the economist Maffeo Pantaleoni, saying, with regard to Italy, that “the catastrophe will not be averted either by maces nor by revolvers of fascists, no more than the growling of Minos could prevent Dante’s fated going” (Pareto, 1921d, p. 229). Fascists, according to Pareto, were devoid of moral courage and without the fortitude necessary to overcome periods of crisis.

In his eyes, fascism represented a largely romantic episode, an unimportant event of a novel character (Pareto, 1921b). Moreover, he was worried about a situation that, according to him, was progressively sliding towards illegality. In a letter addressed to a friend, the Latinist Arturo Linaker, he wrote:

It seems to me that fascism is slipping toward a condition like that of the French White Terror during the restoration. It must be good living in a country where the peaceable wayfarer is surrounded by young heroes and is forced to shout, ‘Long live Italy!’ ‘Long live’ many other things! ‘To death’ many other things again! Or where who is quiet at his home must fly, under

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pain of fire and robbery, the tricolour flag when fascists invade the street. The red tyranny was not better. Should we not prefer those countries where neither the first nor the other one is present? (Pareto, 1921a, p. 169).

He expressed similar apprehensions towards Benito Mussolini, whom he referred to as Mussolino². “On Mussolino too”, he wrote to Pantaleoni, “remember what I told you when you were here [...]. He is a fixer. Also, here, an ideal is missing” (Pareto, 1921c, p. 285); he is moreover devoid of authority, he is not, ultimately, a leader.

When the fascists gained power, however, Pareto revised his position and judgments towards both fascism and Mussolini. Pareto began to see in fascism a vital force capable of contrasting the social disintegration caused by socialism and the red tyranny. He wrote:

If we did not want to arrive at anarchy and a state of destruction, we needed to stop ourselves in this direction; given that the governments of that time did not want or could not do it in a legal manner, it was necessary that others, able to oppose ‘illegality’ to ‘illegality’, came to the fore [...]. To ‘legality’, which leads to ruin, peoples end up preferring ‘illegality’ that saves (Pareto, 1923e, p. 1179).

Regarding Mussolini, he stated, “It seems to me that Mussolini is a valuable statesman, even if I do not know if he will be able to get rid of the dead weight of his followers” (Pareto, 1922b, p. 316). In a letter to the writer Carlo Placci, he added that Mussolini:

Turned out to be the man that the Sociology [i.e. the *Trattato di Sociologia generale*] can invoke. And now, I could conclude my two volumes with the same words used by Machiavelli at the end of *The Prince*. I would copy the passage that you know, and that says, ‘So, having reflected upon everything I have written about above, I have been musing over the question of whether in Italy at present it is propitious to recognise a new prince – whether there exists in Italy the matter that might offer a prince who has prudence and virtue the opportunity to give that matter form, bringing honour to him and prosperity to the majority of her people. It seems to me that so many circumstances are converging to further a new prince that I can think of no period more appropriate than the present’ (Pareto, 1923b, p. 105).

Now, in the eyes of Pareto, Mussolini seemed to be a first-class politician and statesman and, above all, a man of uncommon merit. He considered

² Musolino was a well-known brigand from Southern Italy.

Mussolini a charismatic leader, Machiavelli's prince, the man on whom Italy's survival depended. This shift to a more positive perception of Mussolini derived, in my opinion, from Pareto's acknowledgement that the phenomenon of fascism would follow one of the most important empirical propositions or laws. According to this law, communities where leaders possess a significant amount of first-class residues – namely, the *instincts of combinations*, such as intelligence, cunning, and the ability to innovate – and where, simultaneously, the mass exhibit a substantial proportion of second-class residues, characterised by the *persistence of aggregates* like courage, faith, and discipline, prevail over other communities (Pareto, 1923d). In fascism, therefore, revolutionary and conservative tendencies are not in opposition to each other; both equally contribute to promoting social utility. For Pareto, this also explained why fascism, and not socialism, defeated demagogy, whose triumph in 1919 seemed assured. In fact, the socialist revolutionaries were devoid of deep faith, strong ideals, and a state of mind open to sacrifices; the fascists, on the contrary, were led by a mystic ideal centred around the glorification of national feeling and a reaction against democratic and pseudo-liberal ideologies.

The approval that Pareto expressed towards fascism derived from all these factors. In a letter to the professor Lello Gangemi on 13 November 1922, he wrote, “The victory of fascism largely confirms the predictions I made in my *Sociologia* and in many of my articles. Then, I can be glad of this both as man and as a scientist; often, instead, despite being right, I had to regret when facts confirmed unhappy predictions” (Pareto, 1922c, p. 805).

However, the article *I provvedimenti del governo* (1923f) seems to indicate that Pareto's satisfaction primarily related to his perception of fascism as a force that would support the development of liberalism. He opens the article by arguing that in order to pass judgment on a particular measure, one should assess the consequences it produces across three spheres: the economic sphere, the sphere of sentiments, and the sphere of interests. From this premise, he attempted to pass judgment on the fascist's economic politics by analysing the provision of nominal credit instruments, initiatives intended to diminish capital, the nationalisation of public services, and measures aimed at reducing savings in order to increase consumption. The first of these measures implied significant economic damage while only slightly satisfying weak demagogic sentiments; thus, the government was right to revoke it. Efforts to diminish capital could be useful after the war for satisfying powerful sentiments; however, continued application could lead to serious economic malaise. Therefore, the government was prudent to halt these actions as well. Beyond causing significant economic disadvantages, the nationalisation of public services encouraged political intrigues and special interests contrary to the nation's welfare. The fact that fascism again reversed direction was positively assessed. As for the final

measures, Pareto believed they were detrimental to the economy and warned that if fascism did not work to rescind them, Italy would travel down a path similar to that of communism in Russia.

In conclusion, Pareto demonstrated a particular interest and sympathy for fascism because he saw in it an anti-statist, anti-centralistic, and liberalist force. After all, fascists, at least initially, championed decentralisation and economic freedom as key goals of their movement. Analysing Pareto's works that refer in some way to fascism highlights other important points worthy of reflection, particularly the perils associated with fascism.

The first of these concerns the abuse of force. Less than two months after the March on Rome, Pareto wrote to Pantaleoni, "In Italy, signs, very slight in reality, of a future less prosperous than what one could hope are springing up. The danger is that use of force shifts in its abuse" (Pareto, 1922d, p. 320). In the same letter, he supported the freedom to express one's own thoughts, even if they are biased. He also believed that it was necessary to guarantee freedom of religion, which he viewed as a precondition for maintaining a plurality of perspectives and preventing ideological conformity. Finally, while he acknowledged that freedom of teaching may be restricted in primary and secondary schools, he argued that it should remain unrestricted in universities, enabling the teaching of the theories of Newton, Einstein, Marx, or the historical school without any constraints (Pareto, 1923g).

According to Pareto, not implementing the necessary and no longer deferrable constitutional reforms represented the greatest danger. Despite having been a fierce critic of parliamentarism, in his final work, Pareto did not argue in favour of abolishing parliament. The maintenance of one chamber, as well as the referendum and freedom of the press, were considered useful for understanding whether the government was trusted by the majority. This chamber should deal with "high politics", whereas a strong government, supported by a state council and producers and consumers councils, should take care of concrete problems and affairs (Pareto, 1923h; on this, see Barbieri, 2023).

5. Michels

The history of the relationship between Roberto Michels and fascism strongly conveys the intellectual and political path followed by the elitist, which began with a critique of parliamentary socialism in the name of revolutionary syndicalism and a Rousseauian conception of direct democracy. From there, Michels went on to critique the democratic system based on parties that suddenly emerged across Europe in the aftermath of the First World War,

questioning its efficacy to give voice to the masses. The parties' oligarchies, he argued, even those within the socialist parties, represented a substantial barrier to the recognition of the masses and their participation in the political life of the nation (Portinaro, 2020; Tuccari, 2021). As his thought matured, Michels expanded his critiques to German imperialism and its endorsement by German Social Democratic party. He argued that weaker countries like Italy should counter such imperialist endeavours by implementing their own colonial policies, aiming to counter the emigration that was depleting the populations of these countries.

By adopting this perspective, Michels moved away from a materialistic interpretation of history, shifting his focus from the notion of class to the concept of nation. This shift was prompted by the empirical analyses of the time, which showed that national solidarity took precedence over class solidarity. Moreover, he argued that socialism, due to the absence of an organised working class and its failure to recover revolutionary subjectivity, had succumbed to a dynamic and vital political party, that is, the fascist party. In his eyes, the fascists were capable of resolving the problem of the political participation of the masses because they aimed to include the populace in political life through the plebiscitary support for the charismatic leader who embodied the national will (Sivini, 1980).

Michels greatly admired the chief of fascism, whose greatest merits, in his opinion, included avoiding excesses and drastic divisions and not falling into the sense of complacency that often follows the seizure of power. The biographies of Mussolini and Michels contain many overlapping points. For instance, both had agreed with the Second International's positions on the revolutionary left and its critique of parliamentarism as a means of adequately representing the working class. Furthermore, among the three elitists, it was Michels who maintained the closest contact with Mussolini. In January 1923, he sent Mussolini a series of articles on fascism published in the Swiss journal "Neue Zürcher Zeitung", and they met during the Easter period of the following year. Michels also expressed to Mussolini his wish to teach at an Italian university, a desire Mussolini promised to fulfil. In 1925, Michels sent Mussolini his work, *Socialismo e fascismo*. In May of the following year, at Mussolini's behest, Michels was invited to teach a course on political sociology at the University of Rome. In July 1928, he explained in Lipsia the fascist's *Carta del Lavoro*. The following year, he informed Mussolini that he had accepted an invitation from a Swiss publisher to write a book on Italy during the years 1860-1930. In accepting this invitation, he aimed to prevent the assignment from being given to untrustworthy writers and to demonstrate his admiration for the chief of fascism. This admiration often bordered on pure exaltation, as exemplified by the following statements:

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It is essential for fascism that Mussolini is, by nature, a high-level leader. He is indeed endowed with a good character, a sharp intuition for what is possible and achievable, an unwavering faith in himself and in his mission, an outstanding power of persuasion over the masses, and a truly rare courage (Michels, 1925, p. 51).

Since 1919, large sectors of the Italian population showed the most deep indifference towards the liberal state. The proud vessel of Risorgimento has suffered a dangerous leak over the years and taken on water. A vigorous man, [...] Benito Mussolini blew into this leak with all the power of his lungs (Michels, 1930, pp. 86-87).

From the shipwreck of liberalism, fascism pulled *amore et ira* Italian people close to it. Under the strong lead of Benito Mussolini, it provides evidence (that is rare in history) of a collective enthusiasm that has lasted for nine years, and no task seems too big for it [...] Benito Mussolini feels himself able to resolve even the most difficult problems of his time, and no goal is too high for him (Michels, 1930, pp. 109-110).

Mussolini is the model of what Max Weber meant by the term charismatic leader (Michels, 1930, p. 113).

Michels' admiration of Mussolini was premised on a declared preference for a political system based on the dominion of a strong elite. In *Corso di sociologia politica*, in fact, Michels argued that the democratic system, in which opposed elites take turns directing public affairs, is deeply unstable and that democracy implements the government majority's principle only in an apparent way. Contrasting democratic mystification with a clear monopolistic dominion, therefore, is not only necessary but also dutiful. He asserted, "By nature, the elite dominion will be frank, clear, concrete, direct. This kind of elite does not exercise its function through devious intrigues of court typical of the majoritarian and democratic regimes, but it emerges thanks to the monopolistic possession of central power" (Michels, 1927, p. 93).

However, fascism, according to Michels, was not immune to risks or mistakes. For instance, intolerance towards those with different opinions and beliefs could lead to acts such as cutting one's beard or forcing individuals to drink castor oil. Michels argued that such mistakes derived from the immature character of fascism, in that it was too impulsive. However, he added that drinking castor oil was neither a joke nor an "act of illegal physical or moral coercion, but, from a legal conceptual point of view, an act made by the same

patient after his reasoned self-persuasion, an act the responsibility of which rests only in the same patient” (Michels, 1925, p. 46).

For Michels, limitations on the right to express one’s opinion both in the press and in parliament represented, on the one hand, an expensive price that fascism must pay for its success and, on the other hand, the result of its juvenile character. Nevertheless, he argued that:

The fascist project of transforming the state organisation and the popular soul needed an imperious solitude and tranquillity. How could such an enormous plan have been achieved in the presence of a malevolent critique, of the press and parliament intrigues, of the permanent variation of the popular consent, of the public opinion, and of the ephemeral majorities? (Michels, 1930, pp. 107-108).

In both of these cases, Michel’s reflections developed similarly. First, he highlighted a danger or potential misstep, either an intolerance towards those with deviating opinions or suppressing freedoms of expression or the press. He then identified the causes of these mistakes, that is, the peculiar juvenile or vehement nature of fascism that would surely subside over the years. Finally, he concluded that, upon closer examination, these mistakes were justified by valid reasons and thus were not real mistakes. These reasons were, in the first case, the self-persuasion of an actor regarding the integrity of an ostensibly detrimental action towards himself (drinking castor oil); and in the second case, the misuse of freedom of expression and the press, resulting in seditious criticism and intrigues against the regime.

6. Concluding remarks

As we have seen, each of the three elitists was profoundly attracted by fascism and its leader. Despite this, numerous differences in their attitudes and assessments have emerged.

These classic elitists believed that any effort aimed at implementing a democratic form of government was futile, given that the deep structure of power was and always would be characterised by the supremacy of a minority over a majority (Femia, 2001). They, especially Pareto and Mosca, also believed that democratic ideals represent empty political formulas that, while serving to spur human beings to act, simultaneously veil a reality whose essence differs from the principles they claim to embody. They strongly criticised the widespread cronyism and corruptive logic that pervaded Italy’s parliamentary

institutions. Furthermore, being ardent liberals, both Mosca and Pareto feared the rise of the masses and the so-called “red tyranny”.

It is in this context that the elitists looked to fascism with hope-filled eyes. They saw within it a force capable of restoring order, warding off the risk of collapsing into a state of anarchy, and promoting the establishment of a strong government. It must be acknowledged, after all, that the popular fascism of the period between 1919 and 1920 was immensely different from the form of fascism that, some years later, transformed into a totalitarian regime.

However, as we have shown, the reflections of the elitists on fascism evolved in diverging directions. In the face of Matteotti’s murder, Mosca’s initially open-minded attitude towards fascism and Mussolini turned into dissent and opposition. Pareto’s position was less clear. Since he died in August 1923, he did not witness the events that led Mosca to distance himself from fascism. Nevertheless, his arguments against the government’s abuse of power and restrictions of the freedoms of expression, the press, and religion, as well as his advocacy for maintaining parliament, support the thesis that he would have begun, like Mosca, to disapprove of fascism and Mussolini. However, it is impossible to provide a definitive statement to this effect (see Barbieri, 2003; Susca, 2010, 2023). In the case of Michels, on the other hand, it seems clear that he endorsed fascism without reservation, approaching it from the perspective of his background in Marxism and syndicalism. He deeply admired Mussolini, considering him a hero and charismatic leader, and he enthusiastically approved the dictatorship that fascism had established, along with the brutal means the fascists used against their opponents.

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