



---

The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism by David D. Roberts

Review by: Victoria de Grazia

*The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Sep., 1980), pp. 542-545

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1876961>

Accessed: 19/11/2014 18:04

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*The University of Chicago Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Modern History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

published in 1901 (a fact that Bütler does not seem to have noticed).

In spite of these discrepancies, Bütler's work is an important piece of research which substantially contributes to a better knowledge of Salvemini's life. It is to be regretted that such a rich and beautifully produced book does not have an index of names.

ROBERTO VIVARELLI

*University of Florence*

**The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism.** By *David D. Roberts*.

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979. Pp. x+410. \$22.50.

The ambiguous social origins and cultural antecedents of Italian fascism, its uncertain political complexion before the March on Rome, and its unceasingly complicated internal dynamics while in power cannot be understood without taking stock of Fascist syndicalism. The syndicalists were the "organic" intellectuals of Italy's disaffected lower middle class of technicians, small functionaries, and free professionals who joined Mussolini's *fasci* in such large numbers before 1922. They were also the theoreticians of "integral corporativism" and, eventually, the organizers of fascism's own labor bureaucracies. Repudiating Marxism before World War I, they had broken with the Left labor movement, gradually piecing together an original, if not especially rigorous, program that drew on both an anti-Marxist populism with roots deep in Mazzinian republicanism and the organizing strategies of a revised revolutionary syndicalism. This neosyndicalism, originating on the Left, with its espousal of militant tactics (at least until 1925) and its projects for a radical restructuring of Italian society through economic planning, government decentralization, and the organized participation of the masses in the state through mixed employer-worker syndicates, should not be confused with the authoritarian national syndicalism of Alfredo Rocco and other ideologues close to heavy industry, whom historians have commonly identified as the primary source of official Fascist doctrine. Certainly both supported an imperialist foreign policy, and in their antiliberal, anti-Socialist rhetoric, they were often indistinguishable. Yet it was the syndicalism of S. Panunzio, of A. O. Olivetti, and of A. Lanzillo, with its proposals for a new "national democracy," that more closely responded to the aspirations of Italy's new middle class; and it was through the organizing campaigns of the syndicalist movement that corporativist principles were disseminated after the war. As a movement syndicalism was, in very broad terms, a succession of strategies, short-sighted and opportunistic as movements of the petty bourgeoisie are wont to be. As a body of doctrine that attacked liberal capitalism yet proposed to supersede it without damaging property, that sought to end class conflicts without fundamentally altering class relations, neosyndicalism, more than the elitist statism of Rocco, was the ideal public ideology of the regime: its technocratic effect endorsed by some of Mussolini's closest advisers and most dynamic political appointees, its populist appeal a solace to frustrated Fascist trade unionists with little to offer their worker constituents except promises of future reform; its revolutionary potential an inspiration to middle-class students in the 1930s still waiting for fascism's "second wave."

As the first English language study of this important subject, David D.

Roberts's *The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism* thus deserves very serious consideration. Roberts has carefully delineated the theoretical differences between nationalists and neosyndicalists; he has examined the complicated process of transformation in the syndicalist program from its break with Marxist orthodoxy in the decade before the war to its elevation as the official "Left" doctrine of the regime in the 1930s. In the persuasive early chapters of the study, he has shown how, in the crisis of liberal politics and socialist reformism, syndicalists were able to present themselves to the middle classes as offering a viable political alternative, addressing themselves to the complexity of developing a technological society while at the same time responding to the specific grievances of the petty bourgeoisie. Although Roberts perhaps overemphasizes the real viability of the syndicalist project, he has demonstrated convincingly nonetheless that petty-bourgeois fascism can no longer be dismissed as a backward revolt against capitalism or a mere cover for big business reaction. Indeed, in his emphasis on the modernist face of syndicalism he has provided empirical support for Renzo De Felice's stimulating if much-contested hypothesis that early fascism was the standard-bearer of an unfulfilled radical bourgeois revolution.

This said, Roberts's approach, which is to analyze minutely the prolix statements of syndicalist theoreticians, never fully explains the broader social meaning of the syndicalist movement. The decision to take seriously admittedly "second-rate" or "middling ideas" is useful for assembling the sources of neosyndicalism in the work of G. Sorel, É. Durkheim, E. Bernstein (though evidence for this is less convincing), and especially Pareto. But the analysis of the ideas of "organic" intellectuals, far more than that of the highly mediated conceptualizing of "traditional" ones, demands an especially rigorous grounding in the social event. Syndicalist theoreticians had a different, more distant relationship to their movement than did the Socialists to theirs, and consequently their invention of doctrine was unusually individualistic and rhetorical. Yet too often Roberts simply reproduces their arguments, without referring to the political occasion in which they were generated or to the particular audience to which they were addressed. The result is a dispersiveness that merely compounds the inconsistencies of the syndicalists' own proposals for a "national revolution." Worse, Roberts takes much too seriously the syndicalists' own assessments of the society in which they were operating, frequently failing in the text to distinguish whether it is he or some syndicalist polemicist who is chronicling the ills of liberalism or the misdeeds of socialism. This confusion is especially visible in his treatment of the Marxist tradition, which is almost wholly couched in syndicalist terms. From this study, it would appear that there was no response on the Left to the tired orthodoxies of reformist socialism until A. Gramsci founded the Italian Communist party in January 1921—it is symptomatic that Antonio Labriola is mentioned but once, as the Italian translator of Sorel. The result is to exaggerate out of all proportion the function of the syndicalists in revising Marxism in Italy, while giving undue weight to the argument that the strength of their movement derived from its ability to give a more realistic assessment of Italian "backwardness" than could the Socialists.

In the end, the weakness of Roberts's analysis of Italian society undercuts the novelty of his own extensive research. Thus while giving an adequate, if routine, presentation of the "defects" of liberal policy, he fails to characterize with sufficient clarity those structural features which led the lower

middle class to feel the need to seek a movement outside of the liberal political system: not only the absence of a middle-class party and the exclusiveness of a conservative governing apparatus, but also the inflexibility of the humanistic educational system. Nor does he adequately address the nature of the social relations between middle and working class which, as Robert Michels so clearly observed in his *Borghesia e proletariato nel movimento socialista italiano* (Turin, 1908), were peculiarly close in Italy and which may have accounted for syndicalism's love-hate rapport with labor. Finally, by ignoring the social dimensions of syndicalism, he fails to explain the influence exercised by syndicalist ideas on the Fascist movement and the regime, which surely came less from their incisiveness or consistency than from their diffusion through a broad-based social movement.

This emphasis on ideas alone is especially misleading for understanding the impact of syndicalism on the regime itself. Roberts contends that the syndicalist tradition somehow maintained its integrity after 1922 and was thus able to exercise a moderating influence on the regime. Yet to speak of a "left fascist idealism" in 1929 (p. 249), citing as its exponents G. Bottai, A. Turati, and P. Orano, seems a little disingenuous when, at the time, they were, respectively, undersecretary of the Ministry of the Corporations, national secretary of the Fascist party, and a leading professor of political theory. It is equally unclear what in fact determined the pattern of receptiveness to syndicalist ideas, for, except for the obligatory reference to the Matteotti crisis, there is no discussion of the major events that rekindled debates about corporativism: the Great Depression, the Ethiopian War, and the resurgence of labor unrest in the late 1930s. The proposition that it was because the syndicalists "continued to insist on their conception of fascism that the regime moved forward to a totalitarian corporativism after 1924" (p. 18) is thus unsubstantiated, at least if syndicalism is equated with its publicists. Such movement forward as there was—if such is an accurate term for the halting improvisations by means of which fascism finally secured itself in power—resulted rather from the pressure of the syndicalist *movement* which, by virtue of having a mass base, periodically had to respond to pressures from below. Ultimately it was the persistence of class conflicts under fascism, rather than the force or coherence of syndicalist ideas, that accounted for syndicalism's influence in the Fascist state.

Without some analysis of the social context in which syndicalism was operating, it is equally difficult to understand why its programs failed to be implemented as a "third" way between liberal capitalism and socialism. Along with their overblown rhetoric and flaws of analysis, Roberts cites, as the chief reason for their failure, the syndicalists' inability to achieve an alliance with labor that would have given them the political force to have pressed for their reforms. In fact, from 1914, the syndicalists' proposed alliance with labor was always tactical, and the objectively antiworking action of the syndicalist movement in supporting the Fascist movement could hardly have been concealed from any observant workingman after the first *squadristi* attacks on the reform Socialist labor associations in late 1920. Any possibility of such an alliance disappeared after 1925–26 with the wage-slashing policies that business and the regime considered necessary to ensure economic stabilization. In the face of worker resistance, these certainly could never have been enforced without the kind of malleable, antilabor organization of the working class established by the regime, the personnel and ideological cover for which were readily supplied by the syndicalist movement.

Robert's argument for the significance of syndicalism under the regime would perhaps have been served better by stressing the involvement of the syndicalists in the actual government of Italy under fascism, a presence that certainly suggests that the articulate forward-looking lower middle class had, if only in a subordinate capacity, been finally absorbed into the Italian ruling bloc. If the author had sustained this line of argument, one might be able to place in proper perspective his extraordinary statement on page 306 that "the whole tragic experience [of fascism] dissolved some of the long-standing cultural traumas that made fascism possible—though not necessary—and created a cultural framework enabling Italians to respond to modern problems in a genuinely creative way." As it stands, this note of rehabilitation suggests once more the unfortunate influence of "modernization" theorists on those American historians seeking to redress the ostensibly old-fashioned moralism of traditional liberal historiography with a "value-free" analysis of fascism.

VICTORIA DE GRAZIA

*Rutgers University*

**The Forgotten Frontier: A History of the Sixteenth-Century Ibero-African Frontier.** By *Andrew C. Hess*. Publications of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, number 10.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. Pp. xiv+278. \$24.00.

The great strength of this book is the author's familiarity with both Ottoman and Spanish primary sources, a qualification which very few historians possess. Challenging Fernand Braudel's unitary vision of the Mediterranean world, Hess argues that the separation of that world into different, well-defined cultural spheres is the main theme of its sixteenth-century history. "Even though the time was marked by such events as inflation, population increase, disease, climatic change, and other manifestations of an underlying life rhythm that was culturally neutral, the main theme of Mediterranean history during the sixteenth-century was the cumulative divergence of its two civilizations" (p. 207).

To achieve his aim, he has concentrated on a frontier zone that was historically important as a scene of cultural exchange and innovation—North Africa and Southeastern Spain—in order to analyze how the rulers of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires dealt with a common periphery. He has used the interaction of the two militant civilizations, the Latin Christian and the Turko-Muslim, along this frontier zone to support his arguments about the course of Mediterranean history. He describes how this old zone of mixed cultures was reduced to a thin line between two well-organized and mutually hostile societies. He explains clearly and convincingly why these two societies evolved as they did and why they held so fast to their respective religious beliefs.

In dealing with the *Moriscos*, he stresses that their strong sense of social solidarity rested upon the patriarchal extended family and its larger kinship units. "Two distinctive features characterized the extraordinary stability of these structures in Muslim Spain, as elsewhere in the Islamic world: the maintenance of social identity by a line of descent running from parents to children on the male side, and the advancement of the extended family's interests through carefully planned marriage alliances" (p. 137). On the Spanish side, the pressure to achieve religious unity during the sixteenth