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Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943 by Tracy H. Koon

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Thus the book is unable to go beyond a conformistic level of interpretation. Some of the research that has been done on the level of microsociology (by Anton Blok, e.g., or Sydel Silverman) has in fact had a much broader perspective, offering not only general applications of information derived from specific problems but also the forging of theoretical tools and interpretive concepts—concrete proof of the contribution that local studies can make to the renewal of social and anthropological history. Sarti's basic tools are familiar: they are, for example, George M. Foster's "limited good" and the "unloved homeland" of much of social anthropology. The end result is a somewhat old-fashioned description of a world that is static except as it reacts to politics or economics in the larger sphere beyond. He offers us, once more, a dualism between the hub and the hinterland, between the greater tradition and the lesser, that is no longer acceptable. Fundamental issues such as the reciprocal interaction between the state and the local scene or the power of local interests to condition and shape national policy in Italy are not adequately addressed. Asymmetrical power is not a sufficient explanation of the significance of factions, the formation of groups, or the true roles of kinship or property. Local politics cannot be explained solely on the basis of stimulus and response: we also need to consider how local political life becomes an organic culture capable, in a complex relationship with other peripheral areas, of influencing and conditioning the policies of the central government.

One can only regret that a book written with such affection for its subject is not based on more convincing historical research.

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Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922–1943.

By *Tracy H. Koon.*

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985. Pp. xxi + 343. \$29.95.

Under the slogan "make way for youth," Italian fascism mobilized against "senescent" demo-liberalism. Once in power, Mussolini vaunted his vigor and staked his regime's durability on "malleable" future generations. In the next fifteen years his dictatorship built up a far-flung network of institutions that involved millions of young people. Yet, by the late 1930s, Mussolini too had a "youth problem": how to reinvigorate his own now ideologically flaccid dictatorship to appeal to the restive cohort born in Italy's post-World War I baby boom.

Tracy Koon's *Believe, Obey, Fight* offers the first comprehensive English-language account of the panoply of policies, propaganda ploys, and institutions devised to secure the political loyalty of Italian youth. Aside from its detailed treatment of the educational system proper and of explicitly political groups such as the Balilla and fascist university groups (GUF), the work is noteworthy for its treatment of the highly charged relations between church and regime, the impact of Mussolini's anti-Semitic legislation on Jewish Italians in the educational system, and the growing disenchantment of students in the late 1930s. Even so, this lengthy and detailed study does not add much to the conventional wisdom on the subject: namely, that fascism put a premium on

organizing the young and involved huge numbers of them in its youth groups, that the offspring of the northern urban middle classes were disproportionately represented in these organizations, and, finally, that the regime failed to devise a coherent cultural program or to sustain any real political loyalty. Similar arguments occur in recent Italian-language works and are sustained with more verve and nuance in the late Edward Tannenbaum's *The Fascist Experience* (New York, 1972).

Why such an ambitious and well-intentioned work should yield such unnovel results is explained at least partly by its sources. One can sympathize with the author for not wanting to brave chaotic fascist record keeping and the byzantine custom of present-day research facilities to dig into local archives. Yet the author often buries the huge documentation she scrupulously assembled from the National Archives and published sources behind glib and occasionally misleading characterizations of people, events, and theories that are quite extraneous to her argument; almost always this same documentation could have been interpreted with more sensitivity. Some sources, such as reports by local police or political spies, deserve more skeptical treatment; for example, in reports addressed to central authorities, carping about failures was notoriously a way of venting spleen or discrediting rival politicians rather than an objective account of fascist success or failure. Other sources could have yielded more meaning. Thus the custom of portraying Mussolini in elementary school manuals as the wise patriarch, Good Shepherd, or white knight in children's fables was perhaps not as ham-handed a policy as it is made out to be here (pp. 75–83). In any case, Koon's assessment must remain inconclusive without a more nuanced and systematic reading of such texts and a more adequate grasp of how children's belief systems are formed and how they relate to political culture.

But the more fundamental problem is conceptual: this is new wine in old bottles. The author shares the now thoroughly dated premise that Italian fascism was a variety of totalitarianism, although this model—never very enlightening about the internal dynamics of interwar dictatorships generally—always fit Italy especially badly. Like others who have forced Italian fascism into the totalitarian mold, Koon both overestimates the violent intrusiveness of the regime into daily life and exaggerates the risible failures of its totalizing pretensions. Whether in fact such dictatorships exercised total power over their subjects is, in any event, a different question from how they went about shaping their subjects' social perceptions and values. Moshe Lewin's work on Stalinist Russia (*The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia* [New York, 1985]), like that of Tim Mason on Nazi Germany ("Labour in the Third Reich, 1933–1939," *Past and Present* 33 [1966]: 112–41), demonstrates that regimes capable of mustering far more force than Mussolini's, as well as having stronger statist traditions behind them, were similarly stymied by the resistances of civil society and had to resort to subterfuges and compromises of all kinds to penetrate it.

How societal resistances might have conditioned fascist educational policies certainly bears more consideration than it is given here. For example, in its endeavor to socialize Italian youth, the fascist regime had to deal with the Catholic church, family, and community, as well as with the aspirations of young people themselves. The dictatorship also had to deal with the ambitions of volunteer staffs and the teaching profession. Thus, at the same time as it gratified the school bureaucracies by upgrading their social status, perquisites, and salaries, it infuriated them by meddling with school curricula. The failure

of fascist policy to secure youth loyalty was likewise conditioned by the social frustrations of young people. How much loyalty could be commanded by an educational policy which, by creating an ever more elitist school system, excluded young men or failed to adequately equip them for the job market? To what degree could the regime exclude women from the school system if young women, backed up by their parents, sought access to all levels? The resistance to fascist projects is nowhere more evident than in the fact that the number of women in the university system increased notably during the 1930s, in spite of fascist efforts to discriminate against female education; moreover, plans for separate girls' high schools were also defeated in the face of the demand by girls, their parents, and female educators for equal education.

But the more significant question here is whether a proper "political socialization" through schooling and the like was the real root source of the regime's hold over young people or even the primary way in which it shaped their values. A political culture consists not just of attitudes toward a regime or leader; it is also an evolving set of beliefs, values, and techniques for solving problems and is passed on from generation to generation through all sorts of social activities. Textbooks, speeches, and drills were certainly laced with hokum about the Duce. Yet schools, youth clubs, camps, and commercial entertainment also exposed young people to civic-cultural messages about work, family, class, and gender. Were not such values as significant in shaping attitudes toward the social order as were explicit messages about the nation or about national political leaders? For example, did fascism's slogan "Mussolini is always right" diminish paternal authority or enhance it? Did fascist antifeminism teach disrespect for working mothers? Finally, is it not also conceivable that values such as the intensely Catholic altruism taught in the schools or the fraternal bonds promoted among boys in youth camps might even have undercut allegiance to the Duce?

The conclusion that fascism failed to achieve political socialization because it gave young people "nothing to believe in, no one to obey, and nothing for which to fight" begs the question of what impact fascism *did* have on the political culture of Italian youth. Nor is it made clear under what circumstances disaffected young people were willing to embrace other values, ideologies, and movements. In fact, the only real evidence Koon offers of fascism's ostensibly failed cultural politics is the spluttering ill humor of male university students who, in their memoirs, often confused a growing distaste for the regime with firm commitments to antifascist movements. Yet, until 1941, only handfuls of students had joined the Resistance. The fascist university student groups, whatever frondist sympathies they harbored, were still quite lively debating clubs. But even once these young elites had broken with the regime, their outlooks were not necessarily wholly revolutionized. If the negative attitudes toward women, the "masses," and Jews are taken into account, it could be argued that many young people only slowly and unevenly shook off fascism's cultural legacy. As Koon correctly concludes, the "generation of the Littorial" ultimately broke faith with the regime. But that it did so only after 1941 demonstrates that hard-nosed calculations about impending military conscription and the disruption of career prospects as a result of the war may have mattered as much as the putative failures of fascist cultural politics.

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