Book review

James A. Gregor, *Reflections on Italian Fascism, An Interview with Antonio Messina*. Logos Verlag: Berlin, 2016; 134 pp.: ISBN 9783832541828, € 16,00 (PBK).

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James A. Gregor's latest intervention, a rich summary of sixty years of academic research on fascism, could not have been more timely. Given that the word "fascist" has recently become a pervasive, catch-all term for every form of modern political authoritarianism, books such as Gregor's, which attempt to clarify what fascism was, is, and most likely will be in the future, are increasingly necessary. In the introduction, Gregor explains that his intended audience is the general public, and, indeed, the language used throughout the book is clear and stripped of academic jargon. At the same time, *Reflections on Italian Fascism* serves as a useful introduction to some of Gregor's most fundamental interpretations of fascism for the academic reader unfamiliar with his previous works. The extended interview is an intellectual biography of sorts that explains the evolution of Gregor's ideas about fascism from the beginning of his career up to the present. The questions posed by his interlocutor, however, do not provoke or challenge Gregor's groundbreaking, and at times controversial, ideas on fascism. This might have to do with the fact that the interviewer Antonio Messina, also a historian of fascism, recently published a book, *Lo stato etico corporativo: sintesi dell'ideologia fascista* (2013), largely inspired by Gregor's work and for which Gregor wrote the introduction.

The interview begins with Gregor recounting his academic awakening to the study of fascism. He explains that when he first began his formation in political science at Columbia University in the sixties, fascism, as a political concept, belonged to the right, and it was generally not studied as a proper ideology. He laments the omnipresence of "Marxist-Leninist interpretations" of fascism, which he believes have erroneously lumped Hitler's National Socialism together with Mussolini's Fascism. His research was innovative because it set out to demonstrate that Italian fascism (1) did have a proper revolutionary ideology; (2) that it belonged to neither the right nor the left; (3) and that it differed vastly from Hitler's National Socialism. Through his extensive reading and studying of fascist doctrinal literature—in particular the works of Olivetti, Panunzio, Rocco, and Gentile—Gregor ultimately came to conceive of fascism as a mass mobilizing developmental system: "[fascism] presented itself as a revolutionary movement that had the rapid economic, and specifically

industrial development of the retrograde economy of the Italian peninsula as its 'project'" (p. 31).

Italian fascism is, according to Gregor, a form of socialism for capitalist systems that are not mature enough for a revolution to happen—that is, systems in which a conscious proletariat cannot yet exist because of the retarded state of capitalist development. From this standpoint, Gregor explains how Mussolini's autarkical policies functioned as a substitute for the phase Marx calls primitive accumulation because they helped the state to rapidly grow its industry. In order for this rapid growth to actually happen, however, Mussolini could not abolish private property, which still existed under fascism, albeit under a highly regulated, corporatist structure. Gregor asserts that autarchy as a substitution for primitive accumulation also occurred in Russia under both Lenin and Stalin, but, thanks to the Bolsheviks' abolishment of private property, this austere policy had much more drastic consequences for the Russian population than the Italian one. The conservation of private property under Mussolini, however, suggests that fascism in practice—even if many of its ideologues did originally come from a socialist or Marxist background—was essentially a right-wing political project.

Once Gregor has established that fascism was a developmental dictatorship, meaning that both its inception and subsequent development depended upon narrowly circumscribed economic circumstances and policies, it becomes clear that, according to his definition, Italian fascism and German National Socialism, have little in common, since Germany was at a considerably higher stage of capitalist development. Moreover, while Italian fascism was an ideology of many voices and ideologues, as Gregor demonstrates quite persuasively by presenting us with the colorful array of positions that comprised fascist doctrine, the ideology of National Socialism, in contrast, was the opposite: Hitler was the sole intellectual architect behind the utopian project of the Third Reich and its racist theories. Gregor explains that the improbable alliance between Italy and Germany was born out of nothing else but "a shared bitterness at their treatment by the advanced industrial powers" (p. 83). Gregor argues, additionally, that Italian fascism did not have a racist foundation and that the Italian Manifesto of Fascist Racism, which displayed a "lack of conviction" (p. 91), resulted from the military collaboration with Hitler. But fascism was a nationalist ideology based on the myth of a racialist Italian identity, and in order to keep this myth alive it needed to construct ideas of an inferior "other." Gregor rightfully states that "fascist doctrine did not harbor any genocidal or democidal intent" (p. 93); nevertheless, fascism flourished because of a series of terroristic actions that brutally targeted unions and socialist affiliates in the biennial preceding the March on Rome. While Gregor's insights about the differences between Italian Fascism and German National-Socialism were indeed groundbreaking, pointing out these differences should not result in a dismissal of fascist violence but rather in a more in depth and subtle study of the precise nature of that violence.

According to Gregor, fascism, intended as a political movement aimed at the rapid industrialization of a backward economy and detached from the horrors of national-socialism, persisted after the end of WWII. In his view, what constitutes a

fascist society is the presence of a “charismatic leader, leading the unity party, in an administered economy, all in a nation that aspires to a redress of perceived grievances” (p. 110). This is perhaps the most compelling aspect of Gregor’s work: in his definition, fascism becomes a transnational force that can move across time and space. Gregor speaks of “fascist continuities” (p. 110) (and not of neo-fascisms) visible in the African and Arab socialisms of the decolonization era. He also speaks of fascist continuities in Russia’s Putin and in post-maoist China, but not, however, in the jihadism, which he refers to as “a murderous ideology,” (p. 109) of the post-socialist Arab nations. Potentially then, fascism can spontaneously emerge where economic backwardness and collective humiliation characterize a certain society; but Gregor avoids commenting on the inherent violence of its processes and the human rights violations committed in their fulfillment. Gregor’s latest *Reflections on Fascism* is frequently persuasive and can certainly contribute to our understanding of “fascist continuities” in the present day, but his analysis does not offer a robust critical assessment or explanation of the violence that this ideology has wreaked on our world.