

“*Infelice di Bellezza*”

The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919-1929, by Adrian Lyttelton, *New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973. 544 pp. \$17.50.*

Italia, Italia, by Peter Nichols, *Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1974. 346 pp. \$8.95.*

THESE TWO BOOKS afford a valuable insight into the making of contemporary Italy. Mr. Lyttelton presents us with a historical study of Fascism against which we may examine Mr. Nichols' survey of post-Fascist times. With Mr. Lyttelton's book, we are plunged into the analysis of the exact nature of Fascism as a political phenomenon. It is a ma-

major work of original scholarship, based on much research in the Italian state archives, and it is the most extensive account yet published either in Italian or English of the way in which Mussolini established his power, and of the complicated interaction of the Italian state and the Fascist party in the years 1922 to 1929. It is not an easy book to read, packed as it is with detail and with the unfamiliar names of people who are not always explained, and the non-expert would do well to prepare himself by first reading a more general study. But it is a fascinating work which does explain in precise political terms what happened.

These middle years of Fascism may lack drama, but their fascination lies in the intrigues and quarrels through which Fascism shifted from a movement into a régime. The suddenness of Mussolini's victory in 1922 caught him without much idea of what to do with his new authority. During the subsequent years, shifting now to one side, now to another in order to confuse all the issues, he encouraged the rival factions within Fascism to fight each other. This left him in command and able to indulge in the personal enjoyment of power which was the mainspring of his existence.

If followed in detail it is hardly a simple story, but for those who want a simplified conclusion the most obvious is that Mussolini was a cynical and superficial thinker interested only in power, and consequently his ideological affirmations cannot be taken seriously. In short, there is not much value in searching for a rational theory behind Fascism: it was rather a pragmatic movement which exploited irrational instincts and used programs as a tactical device.

Far more interesting than theories are the different expedients which Mussolini chose to consolidate his success, and often these expedients were adopted less by deliberate choice than by instinct and chance. The small group of revolutionary adventurers who started Fascism were gradually changed into a mass movement of reaction inside which there co-existed many discordant ideas and interests. With great

ease and adroitness, Mussolini deceived every Fascist faction into believing that he supported it, and then he used one faction to curb any other which became too powerful. At one moment he seemed to stand for dynamism and adventure, at another for order and tranquility; at one moment he supported Farinacci and the thugs, at another he sided with the relatively civilized Bottai; alternately he encouraged elitist urban Fascism, then populist rural Fascism; first he backed the unions, and then the industrialists; at first the anticlericals, and then the Pope.

How all these rival interests and motives blended is told in minute detail by the author. The emphasis which he places on the various currents inside Fascism is illuminating, and they must have been difficult to unravel because the lines of demarcation inside Fascism were always shifting. Somehow he has contrived to be fair to everyone, hardly ever giving way to moral disapproval, usually managing to show that there were good reasons for what happened, and almost always managing to convert what was farcical about Fascism into mere irony. The crass brutality of Mussolini and his colleagues is mentioned in passing but never underlined. Indeed, this gives something of a false picture, and it could be argued that Fascism was far more violent and brutal, as well as more corrupt, more inefficient and farcical, than a reader of this book might assume.

In reply to this criticism it is fair to say that the author is less interested in generalizations than in particularities, and he rightly reminds us that the reality of historical cases is often untidy. This is part of the value of such micro-history, since it shows the difficulties of generalization. What emerges from it may be much harder to grasp than the somewhat glib general conclusions we are accustomed to, but it has much more truth.

Peter Nichols presents a masterly portrait of Italy and its people, "who invented the modern State, but have not been able to make one for themselves." His perceptive

and witty observations on national character and social life will be most richly appreciated by readers who already have some acquaintance with the country. But the comprehensiveness of his book commends it to anyone seeking a guide through the complexities of party politics or wishing to understand the workings of the newly constituted regional system.

Mr. Nichols dismisses Fascism as an aberration but nevertheless refers repeatedly to the legacy it has left. Through his treaties with the Vatican—incorporated in the present constitution and endorsed even by the Communists—Mussolini was the instrument of a “great revolution” which the author signalizes as having transformed Italian life since the war. This has been the migration of ten million people from the southern countryside to the industrial north, where they live in the most appalling conditions. These population shifts have made millions of people rootless, while offering no compensating security in exchange: a terrible, unheeded echo of early nineteenth century England.

Underlying this tragedy is corruption as a way of life. It is one of the most depressing features of contemporary Italy. There is also the neglect of the country’s artistic inheritance, the appalling depredations of the environment by unbridled pollution and ruthless property speculation, the often cruel inadequacy of the administration of education, justice, public health, housing and other social services, and callous inaction in the face of natural disasters.

Italy’s economic miracle, which was brought about by the vigor and energy of her people, has accentuated old problems and created new ones. The rapid, insufficiently planned industrialization has fostered social strife, has produced overcrowding, tensions and crime. The government, held in low esteem by a people that for centuries had experienced foreign domination, oppression and neglect, has become fossilized and unable, indeed unwilling, to make changes at a speed commensurate with the progress of the country. The need for re-

form is urgent. But promises of reform by successive governments and politicians courting the electorate remain largely unfulfilled and only add to the contempt in which they are held.

Like most observers who know Italy very well, Mr. Nichols rejects as improbably the threat of a coup from either the extreme Left or extreme Right, and indeed the political value of his book for us is that rarely has the firm control by the Catholic Church of modern Italian political life—a control it denied itself between 1870 and 1946—been demonstrated so clearly. The Christian Democratic Party, in succeeding to the position held first by the Liberal elite and then by the Fascist interregnum, has provided a political organization whose nicely indefinable pragmatism is better suited than either to the harshly realistic elements in the Italian national character. Unhappily it has not provided much that looks like good government.

Evidently the scene has darkened greatly since Luigi Barzini tempered the exuberance of *The Italians* (1964) with the later, sober assessment of the elements of panic and disintegration inside Italy which he wrote for the *New York Review of Books*, and still more since the last substantial account in English on the subject—Elizabeth Wiskemann’s *Italy Since 1945* published only three years ago. Mr. Nichols adumbrates again and again a crisis that is not only profound but has become, like so many crises in the West, primarily a psychological one:

The liberating forces of technical and industrial progress have had the effect of turning the human mind in on itself, constricting its growth and its proper play and excellence, as if some flower about to bloom received a blow and its petals closed and withered.

In short, to the highly intelligent quality of fatalism burnt into the Italian character over two thousand years must now be added the more negative disease of an alienation which can no longer be safely confined

to the bourgeoisie in the stories of Moravia or the films of Antonioni, but is spreading through the squalid tenements of the de-racinated working class. It is a charge of tragic and disorganized destruction which Mr. Nichols makes in *Italia, Italia*: perhaps he buries it a little too deep inside the mass of information, discursiveness and recapitulation which, often usefully, he also provides, but it is there just the same. There is no Western society which can look on these illustrations of divorce between the government and the governed without checking the structure of its own foundations as a precaution. Perhaps that is part of Mr. Nichols' intention, too.

Reviewed by GABRIEL GERSH