

Introduction: Fascism and nature

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It is imperative that we create; we, people from this epoch and this generation, because we have the duty to make the face of the Fatherland unknowable both spiritually and materially. In ten years, comrades, Italy will be unrecognizable! This will be because we will have transformed it, we will have made a new one, from the mountains which we will have covered with their green coat, to the fields which will be completely reclaimed . . . (Mussolini 1926)

With his usual emphatic style Benito Mussolini made clear that the Fascist regime had a vision of nature and a project for its transformation, couched as a form of regeneration. While in practice it is difficult to see any difference between these two attitudes, in theory regeneration implied that the regime was not supposed to change nature, but only to re-establish what had been lost. The regeneration of the country and its people concerned both the body and the soul; the land and the spirit of the nation. Reclamation, the key word within Fascist environmental discourse and practices, connected these two concepts of regeneration. By changing the land, the regime aimed at regenerating the Italians. What was the celebration of the rural world over the urban world if not a political narrative blending nature and people? The Fascist reclamation plan left its imprint upon landscapes, but it was also about the people who lived within them. The regime's discourse of human reclamation implied the need to improve not just 'external' nature but also internal nature, people as well as places. As Patrizia Dogliani (1999, 206) has written, areas of reclamation became open-air laboratories where the regime aimed to raise a new race of Italians, forged by the daily struggle with the adversity of nature. In this totalitarian iconography they were the pioneers of a provincial frontier crowned by mosquitoes and flooded with water. While fighting against nature, those people were supposed to become strong and prolific Italian Fascists. In theory the reclamation of the land would lead to the reclamation of people, in body and soul. In reality those poor internal immigrants paid a high price for the Fascist reclamation scheme; according to Frank Snowden (2006, 157–160), although it is impossible to provide statistical data on the death rates in the reclamation colonies, the situation was so serious that even the Fascist officers were forced to address it in their reports (see also Gaspari 2001, 330–331).

The parable of reclamation and its shift from nature to bodies, from marshes to souls, is of great significance for understanding the broader Fascist attitude towards the 'environment'. It shows clearly that the Fascist regime had an interest in nature (and in exercising agency over nature), concerned with transformation in the guise of regeneration far more than nature conservation. The concept of regeneration recalls the capacity of nature to reproduce itself, even in the face of some kind of disturbance. In the Fascist vision, regenerating nature and people

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implied both the return to some pristine origins and the creation of a completely new and human-made future. After all, what was the Fascist empire if not the rebirth of the Roman Empire?

Reclamation mobilised science and memory by appealing to the power of the future and the authority of the past. This biopolitical project aiming at making a new kind of 'Italian' also shaped the ecology of marshlands and mountains. In this respect reclamation is the perfect expression of the Fascist understanding of the environment, with significance far beyond the actual land reclamation schemes actuated by the regime. According to Ruth Ben-Ghiat (2011, 4), the regime tried to pursue at least three different kinds of reclamation schemes: 'the agricultural reclamation (*bonifica agricola*), human reclamation (*bonifica umana*), and cultural reclamation (*bonifica della cultura*)'. Reclamation meant the remaking of nature according to an ideal optimum, the purification of culture on a nationalistic basis, and, as a consequence, the engineering of the new Italian, physically strong and racially pure.

Although the relevance of the reclamation narrative does not leave any doubt about the Fascist interest in the environment, this aspect of the regime's history remains essentially unresearched. This gap is especially astonishing considering the numerous volumes dedicated to the environmental aspects of Nazi politics and culture. Starting in the 1980s, with Anna Bramwell's contentious and rather fragile thesis on the so-called green wing of the Nazi movement, several other studies have been published on the same subject, contributing to a better understanding of the relationship between nature and Nazis (Bramwell 1989; Lekan 2004; Brüggemeier, Cioc and Zeller 2005; Blackbourn 2006; Uekötter 2006). Anna Bramwell's scepticism about Fascist interest in environmental issues, at least in the Italian case, and the underdeveloped condition of Italian environmental history may explain the neglect of this relevant aspect of Mussolini's regime. The idealistic substratum of Fascist cultures, and a strong inclination towards classical studies rather than scientific or natural sciences – after all it was the Fascist Minister of Education who banned natural sciences from Italian schools – have reinforced the perception that environmental concerns were irrelevant during Mussolini's rule.

With this special issue we challenge this perception of irrelevance and contribute to the existing international scholarship on environmental issues in Nazi Germany and other totalitarian regimes. If national parks, ruralism, organisation of leisure activities, imperial policies and narratives, colonisation, autarchic policies, and new urban planning were all parts of Fascist politics and culture, can we actually continue to ignore the ways in which the regime articulated its discourses and practices over nature?

As John McNeill (2001, 329) has suggested, Fascism was indeed interested in nature, but followed its own path. Blending ideas of race, landscape, history, modernity and ruralism, Fascists shaped both the national environment and general ideas about nature. Was it just a matter of propaganda? How serious was the interest of Italian Fascists in the environment? Did they have some kind of 'environmentalist' agenda? In this volume Wilko Graf von Hardenberg offers clear answers to these questions, uncovering the history of the meagre Fascist interest in nature conservation. Although the Mussolini regime did create the first national parks, von Hardenberg shows that they were essentially used for propaganda and soon neglected. Many other parks, proposed or planned, were never opened due to budget constraints that speak more to the lack of interest of the Fascist officials in the matter rather than the financial situation.

Nevertheless, it is not the intention of the authors of this special issue to evaluate the Fascists' green credentials or to judge how much the Fascist regime actually protected nature. Categories such as 'nature' and 'protection' are neither self-evident nor fixed outside the historical context. For instance, planting trees was a 'protective' measure to insure the mountain slopes against slides and the plains against hydrogeological disorder, but generally it also implied the

introduction of alien species. The creation of national parks provided refuge to some species but did not stop the persecution of so-called noxious animals. Focusing only on 'protectionist' policies implies a specific idea of nature as a space radically separated from society. According to this vision the environment can be either preserved or destroyed, leaving no room for the multiple interactions which mobilise cultures, politics and ecologies. For this reason this special issue is mainly focused on the ways in which the Fascist regime envisioned the environment and its relationship with it rather than on its ability or willingness to truly 'protect' nature. Following David Harvey's approach (1993, 25), we argue that every political project is always an ecological project (and vice versa), regardless of the 'environmental' policies perchance implemented.

We wished to have an even more diverse representation of the Fascist environment, including cities – Mussolini dramatically changed the face of several urban centres (Cederna 1979), labour environments (De Luigi, Meyer and Saba 1995) and the agricultural sector, especially given Mussolini's autarchic economic policies (Ruzzenenti 2011). In particular, we regret that this special issue does not include an article on the Fascist *bonifica* (reclamation); we might only say that there are already an impressive number of studies on reclamation (Bevilacqua and Rossi Doria 1984; Barone 1986; Novello 2003; Snowden 2006), while we have tried to cover areas and topics that have been more neglected so far.

We envision this special issue as a first step towards a more comprehensive environmental history of Fascism. As always when a topic is new, it is necessary to start from somewhere, while knowing that much will still be missing.

While interest in Fascist narratives of nature features throughout, this is not a postmodernist issue challenging the existence of nature per se or supporting the irrelevance of non-discursive approaches. Rather, the authors explore the use of nature within Fascist narratives; they research how nature affected narratives and how narratives affected the very object of narration, that is, nature itself. This mutual constituency of narratives and landscapes is the *fil rouge* connecting the articles in this issue. Federico Caprotti and Loredana Polezzi analyse this blend of narratives and landscapes in the Fascist representation and appropriation of African nature. The authors convincingly demonstrate that discourses on colonial nature were embodied in the material transformations imposed by the Fascist regime on the African environment. Caprotti speaks of the imposition of a 'second nature' intended to supersede the 'primitive, sterile and ripe for domination' nature of the colonies. Water pumps, wells and electric and telephone wires were the tangible signs of the new nature filled by technology and modernity. According to Caprotti, technology not only had the power to create a new nature but also to erase an old one; indeed, the Fascist war in Africa was depicted mainly as a war against nature tamed by the technological superiority of Italians. Loredana Polezzi analyses the embodiment of the discursive representations of African nature in the actual practices of colonisation. In her essay it is the pioneer attitude rather than technology that shaped the experience of the Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi in Somaliland. Exoticism and heroism seemed to be intertwined in the Fascist colonial landscape, which included both human and environmental elements. The porosity of the distinction between humans and the environment is also at the core of Armiero's article on Fascist practices and narratives of mountains. The regime employed mountains as a gigantic laboratory for the making of the new Italian; their environment provided the right mould to produce Fascist souls and bodies. Armiero explores how mountain climbing, the celebration of rurality and the memory of the Great War contributed in the construction of both environment and people. Patrizia Dogliani expands Armiero's arguments concerning the Fascist construction of body and nature beyond the politics of mountains, although confirming the special place of alpine activities in the narratives of the regime. Her article offers a comprehensive picture of the Fascist organisation of leisure and the outdoors. According to Dogliani, the Fascist recipe for the

making of the new Italian combined sport and military exercise with a rather mild appreciation of 'nature'. Nevertheless, one of the aims of this special issue is precisely to argue that the engineering of the body, both the individual and the collective body, was indeed a socio-environmental project *per se*.

Environmental history is still struggling to emerge in Italy. Nevertheless, this is not the reason why our special issue does not have a strict disciplinary identity: it has not been a matter of necessity to involve scholars from different backgrounds to compensate for the absence of 'proper' environmental historians. Rather, it is a deliberate attempt to go beyond disciplinary frontiers. One way of building environmental history is through a strong identity policy, patrolling its borders and debating boundaries within a defined group of practitioners. Although I believe that a scholarly community is indeed relevant, it can sometimes lead to a ghetto, especially if it is an expression of a discipline still rather small in terms of numbers and academic power. The risk of being confined to such a ghetto is extremely strong for environmental history. Too often it seems that environmental historians must be confined to their supposed fields of interest, exotic to the mainstream historical discipline. I remember once an Italian colleague who was shocked by the fact that I was studying the First World War. 'I thought you were an environmental historian', he told me, rather disappointed. Of course, this statement implies clear ideas about what nature is and where the borders between 'the natural' and 'the social' lie. A special issue on Fascism and nature such as this one evidently goes in a different direction. The challenge is to *infect* other scholars, encouraging them to include 'the environment' in their understanding of the past, implying, obviously, also a reconsideration of what 'the environment' actually is.

The interest of *Modern Italy* is a good omen showing that it is time to exit the ghetto. After all, isn't it true that according to ecology 'everything is connected'?

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