MUSSOLINI AND THE EVOLUTION OF FASCISM

I. Purpose and overview of the lecture

A. To explore another "ism"
   1. More than any other ism so far studied, it is a confused and confusing concept
      a) Again, I will suggest that the best way to understand it is to observe its transformations in history—rather than hoping for some airtight, dictionary definition
   2. In the hands of many people, it has had scarcely more meaning than "bad guy", or someone who is not "progressive," or perhaps extremely reactionary and brutal
      a) It notably lacks the degree of programmatic precision of the terms liberalism, conservatism or socialism
      b) Symbolic of that negativism is the original fascist slogan "me ne frego"

B. To gain some sense of its changes, many sides:
   1. Even more than the ideologies we have so far explored, which changed over the 19th century, fascism was in constant, relatively rapid flux
   2. Yet, it is a particularly important ideology, in part because it was original to these years
      a) Even more than communism, it struck many observers as something genuinely new, a new product of a new age
   3. It is, again, best understood by looking at its history, however shifting and bizarre—what it became, not by some abstraction, or something it is "essentially"

C. To take a close look at the early years of the man, Benito Mussolini, who originated the term, fascismo

D. To explore how the term came to be used in ever widening applications
   1. Most importantly, how it came to be associated with Nazism, or National Socialism

E. To explore further the theme of the "age of the masses," of anti-bourgeois, anti-liberal trends in 20th century
1. Was fascism in some sense a “revolt of the masses”? Their ultimate or most genuine expression (rather than communism or socialism)?

II. Mussolini’s early career

A. Part of the confusion that has surrounded fascism has to do with Mussolini’s early career
   1. A key point in defining fascism: He stated on more than one occasion “I am fascism”
   2. Trying to decide, then, what he “was” leads to deciding what fascism was
   3. And again revealing: He changed to an extraordinary degree from 1914 to the end of WWII

B. He began as a man of the extreme left, a revolutionary socialist before 1914
   1. And that past has inevitably colored perceptions of what he later became
      a) Indeed, he only gradually and never entirely renounced that past
   2. There always remained, then, certain strains of "socialism" to Mussolini’s movement, even when the fascist movement did its best to destroy socialism in Italy
      a) Hitler of course called himself a "national socialist," and other fascists have made use of anti-capitalist and vaguely socialist (meaning mostly anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois) themes

C. The nature of Mussolini’s prewar socialism
   1. Mussolini, like Lenin, may be said to have been influenced by anarchism as well as by Marxism
      a) He was much less of an orthodox Marxist than Lenin, and generally cared less about theory
   2. Like Lenin he had a commitment to action, to revolutionary violence, and a distaste for moderates, for compromise and legal niceties
   3. The war underlined their similarities—and their differences
      a) Lenin denounced the moderate socialists for supporting the war
      b) Mussolini denounced his own socialist party for
avoiding a commitment to war

4. Through a gradual process, Mussolini came to agitate in favor of Italy's entry on the side of the Entente
   a) The key point is that he could not bear the policy of passivity of the PSI, of *né aderire né sabotare*
   b) Yet during the war he still considered himself a socialist, even after he had been expelled from the PSI
   c) His first hopes were to bring the working masses over to his variety of patriotic socialism
   d) That was not noticeably different, it should be pointed out, from what socialists in other countries were advocating—though his passion was more notable

D. Significant changes began when he realized that he could not attract the workers
   1. And as he began to attack the Italian socialists—after they had thrown him out of the party—he attracted the attention of other elements of society
      a) That is, he attracted those elements of society that by 1919 were worried about socialism, that were horrified by the prospect that something like what was happening in Russia would happen in Italy
      b) Those parts of society were mostly the property-owning classes, from the petty bourgeoisie to the large landowners
      c) The pro-fascist element was also often religious, fearing the atheism of the left
      d) Conservatives of many stripes applauded when Mussolini's toughs broke up socialist meetings
      e) Indeed, they began to contribute money to his movement, as it began to seem that he was an effective counter-revolutionary force

E. A key point then—and certainly a source of confusion: Mussolini began on the left, and even when a self-declared "fascist," he remained ambiguously left-wing
   1. But he moved to the right, becoming ambiguously right-wing, or reactionary
III. The situation in post-war Italy

A. The peculiar conditions in Italy need to be understood, in order to understand the appeals of fascism, as it began to emerge by 1919 and 1920 (il biennio rosso)

B. Perhaps nowhere else did revolution seem so near, outside of Russia, in those years

C. As in Russia, the discontent was often contradictory
   1. People were angry, but that anger went in many directions
   2. Italians as a whole were angry about the war, filled with resentment about the Paris Peace Conference
   3. Soldiers returning from the front were often filled with resentment against the bourgeois society that had sent them to slaughter and disgrace
      a) But these were by no means all left-wing
      b) Resentments were often directed against civilians, against socialists whom they blamed for Italy's defeats, for pre-war politicians, etc.
   4. At the same time, Italian socialist leaders were continually proclaiming at this time that the revolution was just around the corner, that Italy would copy what had happened in Russia (although Italians knew little about what was in fact happening there)
      a) In many areas peasants were seizing the land
      b) Socialists were elected to office in record numbers in many towns and provinces in the North
      c) And in late 1920 there were massive occupations of the factories in the north
      d) Not only socialists, then, believed that socialists might soon gain power, that a revolution was coming
         (1) property owners may have believed (or feared) it even more
   5. A related, peculiar Italian reality: the nature of the liberal state
      a) In other countries the authorities fought back tenaciously, arresting revolutionaries, putting down
insurrections, etc.

b) But the policy of the Italian leader Giolitti was to give the socialists enough rope to hang themselves, avoiding violent confrontations

6. In one sense this was a shrewd policy (and it had worked for him before the war)
   a) The socialists were not in truth ready to take over, in spite of their constant talk of revolution

7. But Giolitti’s policy had a dangerous repercussion: The property-owning classes felt abandoned, unprotected by the state
   a) And this made them all the more interested in Mussolini, a man who was attacking the liberal state—while also attacking the socialists

IV. Mussolini as "revolutionary"

A. He often claimed to be making a revolution
   1. Yet, the revolution he talked about making finally did not have a lot in common with a socialist revolution, with an attack on private property or a redistribution of wealth
      a) Such is true especially in terms of what he actually did, as contrasted with his rhetoric

B. There was, in other words, a tremendous amount of show, of braggadocio to Mussolini
   1. In that, too, there was a kind of novelty—"politics as theater"
   2. He began to perfect techniques of mass mobilization, of effective propaganda, of promising contradictory things to various elements of society

C. He was of course not wholly original
   1. A number of prewar politicians had begun to explore such techniques, as we have seen
   2. Such was true both on the left and on the right (especially the anti-Semitic, new nationalist movements)
      a) Although what is often overlooked with Mussolini is that he at first *strongly and explicitly rejected* racism, especially anti-Semitism
      b) He had numerous Jewish contacts and advisors, a Jewish mistress, and there were many Jews in the
Italian Fascist movement in its first decade

3. The Bolsheviks were pioneers in terms of mastering the techniques of mass mobilization, after the war
   a) And revealingly Mussolini had admiring things to say about Lenin and Trotsky at first, although later he attacked bolshevism root and branch
   b) He almost certainly studied and copied Bolshevik methods in appealing to the masses—how to use symbol, color, music, slogans, parades, etc.

4. Perhaps most notably he was able to appeal across class boundaries, to tap general, ill-articulated resentments
   a) Many were attracted to him simply because of his energy, his assertiveness, his taste for action
   b) Here was "charisma," then, whatever the confused ideological outlines
   c) Such was true to some degree of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, too, since they were able to appeal to the peasants and even to a small number of traditional Russian nationalists
   d) But Mussolini, and then Hitler, would develop this cross-class appeal, the ability to promise everybody something, to a much greater degree

V. Mussolini's "March on Rome" (1922)

   A. In this bizarre “march,” much about fascism was revealed, at least in retrospect
   B. In its ambiguities, there are in fact some interesting parallels with the ambiguities of the Bolshevik "seizure of power"
      1. In the March on Rome, for example, we see the power of rhetoric, of bluff, of illusion, of misperception of what actually happened
         a) It was not really a "march," and it had little to do with a seizure of power
      2. He was able, moreover, to "take power" without anything like majority support, in a period of confusion and indecision
      3. It was proclaimed to be a victory over liberal parliamentarism, yet in fact for some time Mussolini ruled within the confines of bourgeois legality
C. He gained the support of the monarch to form a government (a crucial step)

D. And at first he relied upon a coalition with other parties (the nationalist right and the popolari), and only gradually moved to a dictatorship

E. He did not change the relations of classes in any significant way (and in this regard his claims to being “revolutionary” were especially hollow)
   1. And although his followers stepped up the intimidation and terrorism of the previous years, there was still a degree of free press, of oppositional political activity
   2. He began to use the word "totalitarian" himself by the mid-1920s, but it really did not correspond to the reality of his rule
      a) It was not anything like what totalitarian rule would become in Germany and Russia, and never would be, really
      b) There remained a number of important areas of independence: the king, the Senate, the military
      c) Perhaps one of the more striking differences: the level of violence was low, compared to Russia or Germany
      d) Hundreds, perhaps a few thousand were killed, similar numbers of political prisoners were taken
      e) Scapegoats were also less central—particularly noteworthy: the lack of anti-Semitism until the late 1930s (and even then it had relatively little popular support)

VI. The spread of fascism

A. Mussolini’s new regime attracted considerable attention
   1. Many sought to imitate him, many openly admired him—even those who were not interested in fascism in their own countries
      a) Often conservatives in democratic countries remarked that finally the "trains run on time" in Italy

B. One of the most important admirers: Adolf Hitler, in the mid-twenties far less well known, and of course in the 1920s far less successful, than Mussolini
1. But he was among those who began to see "fascism" as an international movement, and a voice of the future for all states.

C. Ironically, opponents of fascism may have been more responsible for its fame, or its notoriety, than its admirers, in the beginning at least.

1. Marxists in particular developed influential theories about the meaning of fascism
   a) They interpreted it as a sign of capitalism in distress—a death rattle, which would be followed by a socialist or communist victory

2. It was desperate device used by capitalists to protect themselves against the threat of socialist revolution.

D. But both admirers and opponents contributed to the spread of the word "fascism" by the mid-1920s

1. Indeed, the vague, all-embracing, and finally confusing use of the term today has its roots in the 1920s as well.

E. German theorists in particular began to use the term in a way that suggested fascism = "anything that helped to bolster capitalism"

1. Thus, a "fascist" film would be one that favors class collaboration, or that shows the workers in a bad light.

2. And politicians were called "fascist" or "semi-fascist" if they supported bourgeois democracy rather than socialist revolution.

F. Parallel conditions in other countries

1. Part of the appeal of the Italian model was that conditions in Italy had parallels many other countries, to one degree or another.

2. Elsewhere there was fear of a socialist revolution.

3. Elsewhere there was confusion and disorder.

4. Elsewhere the liberal state was discredited.

5. Elsewhere there were deep resentments about the war, and about the peace settlement.

G. These parallels finally took on their most striking form in Germany

1. However, there were also some very important differences between Italian and German fascists.
2. First of all, the Germans did not usually call themselves "fascists"
   a) They were, rather, called "fascists" by their enemies
   b) They used a number of different terms: "nationalist," "national socialist," "workers' nationalist," etc.
   c) Hitler's movement is finally called the National Socialist German Workers Party
3. The German movement was also decidedly more racist, particularly more anti-Semitic, than the fascists in Italy
   a) "Aryan" or "Nordic" superiority was not a particularly popular notion in Italy
4. The German movement also retained a more socialistic wing, one that continued to try to recruit the working class
   a) But the clearest successes, however, for the German variety of fascism were among the middle and lower-middle classes, as was the case in many if not most countries
   b) They were most obviously motivated by fear of socialism and communism (although also certainly by nationalist anger, racism, hostility to liberalism, fear of modernization, etc.)

VII. Summing up: What is fascism? by mid-1920s

A. It is a movement of noisy and incoherent protest, one much more characterized by "anti" feeling than by a positive program
   1. Hitler would state it most directly: Hatred is the most important emotion in politics
B. It is anti-liberal, anti-socialist, anti-communist; it promises to bring order against the threat of chaos from the left
   1. It grows in reaction to the failures of liberal democracy
   2. In that sense, it is different from the authoritarian regimes in countries where there really wasn’t much of a democratic failure—since there was no democracy
C. It tends to avoid and even mock the other ideologies
   1. At times its leaders even pride themselves in rejecting formal ideologies
      a) They stress "action," mood, non-rational commitments
b) They speak of being "revolutionaries," yet just what their revolution will accomplish remains vague and often remarkably contradictory.

c) They similarly are especially open to tactical changes, to taking advantage of opportunities (cf. bolshevism).

d) Such would above all be the case of the most successful: the nazis.