

The "New Man" in Radical Right Ideology and Practice, 1919-45

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During the interwar period, the figure of the 'New Man' constituted a powerful symbol of the promise and potential of a thorough-going political and anthropological revitalisation of society, which could effectively counteract widely-perceived notions of crisis and decline in the aftermath of the Great War. Although the Communist and Fascist variants of this phenomenon are the most well-known, this edited volume offers significant fresh perspectives on the sheer variety of these visions of renewal, exploring a wide range of transnational case studies both within and beyond Europe. As the editors remark in their concise and purposeful introduction, there exists a pressing need to analyse both the generic and the nationally-specific aspects of this phenomenon, as well as to investigate the opposition between intellectual conceptualisations of the 'New Man' in an idealising or mythical guise, and the ways in which such idealisations were implemented in reality.

To this end, the volume in question aims to transcend previous analyses (largely informed by masculinity studies), offering a genuinely comparative perspective which highlights the importance of transnational fascist entanglements and cross-fertilisation between various radical right regimes and movements, as well as exploring the advantages and limitations of the 'New Man' as a heuristic. The intended scope of the volume is delineated clearly and cogently: firstly, as implied by the book's title, the focus of the contributions encompasses regimes and movements which might not necessarily be labelled 'fascist', but which can broadly be defined as right-wing or authoritarian; Communist versions of the 'New Man' are explicitly excluded. Secondly, the focus remains unabashedly trained upon the 'New Man', as opposed to the 'New Woman' or 'New Person'. Finally, the editors note that a conscious decision was made not to concentrate upon Nazi Germany, but instead to showcase developments in Italy—the original fascist state—and other fascist and authoritarian states (both within Europe and beyond) which have been less frequently considered in recent scholarship.

The volume in its entirety is divided into four sections, each containing three or four chapters: 'Part 1 – Inaugurating the Radical Right "New Man" in Fascist Italy'; 'Part 2 – The New Man in Axis Europe'; 'Part

3 – The New Man in Radical Right Regimes beyond Europe’, and ‘Part 4 – The “New Man” in European Fascist Movements’ (though the ramifications of the distinction between parts two and four are never fully explicated). As always in an edited collection of this type, some of the contributions are more readable, or fit more aptly into the overarching theme, than others.⁽¹⁾ However, the general richness and variety of the contributions is to be welcomed, not least for the ways in which the chapters collectively illuminate broader global trends in right-wing regime-building and social engineering during this period.

The first section, focusing on Italy as a case study, usefully highlights a number of different facets of the ideology and *praxis* of the ‘New Man’ under Fascism. Luca La Rovere starts off with a highly illuminating chapter on ‘Totalitarian Pedagogy and the Italian Youth’, aiming to revise the prevalent view that Mussolini’s plans to indoctrinate young people through school and youth organisations (notably the *Opera Nazionale Balilla / Gioventù Italiana del Littorio*) were fundamentally unsuccessful. La Rovere explores the varied mechanisms employed by the Fascist regime to experiment on those who were considered too young to have yet been corrupted by liberalism and self-interest. These included ‘colonisation’ of the school system and ‘curricular revolution’ (ranging from the ideological distortion of infants’ reading primers to the introduction of Mussolini’s political screeds as secondary-school set texts), as well as the activities of the Fascist youth groups, including summer camps and compulsory premilitary training which forced boys as young as eight to learn how to shoot with miniature rifles. La Rovere suggests that the efficacy of these twin modes of indoctrination is attested to by the enthusiasm with which young Italian men enlisted in the so-called ‘Youth March’ battalions in 1940, as well as the fact that many still continued to fight for fascism even after the Armistice. From this perspective, he argues that the Fascist regime’s capacity to colonise young Italians’ hearts and minds should not be underestimated, whilst simultaneously demonstrating the importance of investigating educational *Alltagsgeschichte* more closely in this context.

The two following chapters, by Francesco Cassata and Fernando Esposito respectively, then go on to analyse further manifestations of the ‘New Man’ in Fascist Italy. Cassata provides an extremely detailed and systematic discussion of the ‘biotypological’ programme initiated by Nicola Pende, one of the ‘race scientists’ involved with the promulgation of the Fascist ‘Race Manifesto’ (*Manifesto degli scienziati razzisti*) in 1938, and the work undertaken by his Biotypological Orthogenetic Institute, founded in Genoa in 1926, to develop tools which the regime could use for the purpose of ‘biological monitoring and improvement of the Italian population’ (p. 46). Here, the ‘New Man’ was no longer merely a theoretical or ideological construct, but an entity which must be striven towards through concrete medical *praxis*, with the promise of maximising the health, fertility, and productivity of the Italian populace at large. Esposito, meanwhile, expounds concisely upon ideas which he previously explored at length in his monograph *Fascism, Aviation and Mythical Modernity* (Basingstoke, 2015; translation of *Mythische Moderne. Aviatik, Faschismus und die Sehnsucht nach Ordnung in Deutschland und Italien*, Munich, 2011). He demonstrates conclusively the ways in which pilots were hailed in Germany and Italy in the post-World-War-I era as symbols of the new age: Knights of the Air or ‘technophilic totem[s]’ (p. 66). This phenomenon reached its apogee in the identification of Mussolini himself as ‘*il primo pilota*’, the principal pilot guiding the state, and the related claim that ‘every aviator is a born fascist’ (p. 72).⁽²⁾

Meanwhile, Part 2 and Part 4 both explore various facets of the ‘New Man’ in European regimes and movements, ranging geographically from Croatia and Romania to the Iberian Peninsula, France, and Britain. While the movements in Eastern Europe seem to have been fundamentally rooted in violent activism, such that the members of the Ustasha militia contrasted the ideology of the brutal, ruthless, self-sacrificial warrior with ‘the selfish inaction of the urban bourgeois bachelor’, mired in the ‘morass’ of society (p. 109)—a stance which had to be toned down during the campaign to create a unified Croatian army in summer 1944—those in Catholic countries, including Spain and Portugal (and even Argentina) followed a more corporatist path. Nevertheless, the variety of possible visions of the ‘New Man’, even within this latter context, may be adduced by comparing Salazar’s traditionalist, non-militarised variant, ‘a God-fearing middle-aged man who was happy with his lot in society’, with the ‘combative Christianity’ of the ‘Spanish Christian Knight’ (pp. 142, 216, 220). According to David Alegre Lorenz’s lucid and compelling account,

this modern-day knight's role was to ride roughshod over all those who were subject to Marxism's 'Sodom and Gomorrah', treating the Spanish Civil War as a latterday crusade or 'purifying bonfire' (p. 217), on which the mettle of his requisite virile virtues could suitably be tempered.⁽³⁾ These case studies from mainland Europe are well complemented by Jeanette Baxter's sensitive and nuanced analysis of the visual politics of British Fascism, which considers a set of portraits of the British Fascists by Wyndham Lewis and the periodical *Fascist Week*, respectively. In particular, her interpretation of the paper's series of profiles, entitled 'Men in Fascism' (1933-34), demonstrates convincingly the ways in which the 'construction and marketing of British Fascist masculinity... aspired to give face to a fascist future' (p. 231).

Perhaps one of the volume's greatest services to scholarship, however, is its inclusion of three chapters showcasing extra-European fascist visions: Alberto Spektorowski's analysis of the Peronist New Argentinian, 'a new type of fascistised Catholic' whose Christian Corporatism was moderated through a form of 'consumerist nationalism' (pp. 157, 162); Aristotle Kallis' exploration of the 'New Man, Brazilian and modern' of the 1930s, 'forged from within the horizon of active miscegenation' through the regime's policy of *branquamento*; and Roy Starrs' biographical study of Masamichi R?yama, a former member of Tokyo Imperial University's 'New Man Society' (*Shinjinkai*), whose consummate capacity for 'political retailoring' brought him full circle, from liberal democrat to fascist ideologue to postwar pacifist (pp. 182, 207).

In conclusion, this volume—especially Joan Tumblety's excellent critique in her essay on 'The Fascist New Man in France, 1914-45'—draws much-needed attention to the sheer multiplicity of incarnations of the 'New Man' during this period. Fascist and right-wing 'New Men' were, as Tumblety convincingly argues, part of a far broader interwar discourse, 'multivalent and highly adaptable' (p. 254), which could bear Catholic or Conservative—as well as specifically radical or authoritarian—connotations; all of these idealised visions of the 'New Man' were positioned along a spectrum 'created out of the component parts of interwar normative masculinity' (p. 263). One can only hope, therefore, that this timely collection of essays will provide a fertile seedbed, ensuring the growth and flourishing of further such truly transnational endeavours in the field of comparative fascist studies.

Notes

1. Most notable in this regard is the chapter by Gregory Maertz, entitled 'Eugenic Art: Hitler's Utopian Aesthetic', which seems scarcely to engage with the 'New Man' *topos* at all (except in its epigraph; the only illustrations are of female figures). The analysis of Nazi aesthetic politics as a whole appears at times overly simplistic (the bibliography is extremely sparse)—or even flawed, as in the case of the author's account of the genesis of the Nazi philhellenist aesthetic, which was, in fact, rooted far more firmly in the tradition of Winckelmann than that of Schiller (cf. pp. 92ff.: 'Schiller and the Greek Ideal'). Ultimately, in this context, one wonders whether more coherence might have been lent to the collection as a whole if the Third Reich had been omitted entirely from the analysis.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For more on this trope, see also Gerald Silk, "'Il Primo Pilota": Mussolini, Fascist Aeronautical Symbolism, and Imperial Rome', in Claudia Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum (eds.), *Donatello among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy* (Ithaca, NY, 2005), pp. 67-81.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. According to the authors of the relevant chapter, entitled 'The "Everyman" of the Portuguese New State during the Fascist Era', the Portuguese 'New Man' was even discouraged from taking part in competitive sports because the Estado Novo considered them responsible for 'foreign deformation', 'moral corruption' and the promotion of rampant individualism (cf. p. 141)—a far cry from the highly-militarised conceptions of the 'New Man' found in many other fascist states.[Back to \(3\)](#)

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/308674>