

The totalitarian Turn of Folklore Studies in Italy*

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We would like to propose here a short history of folklore studies in Italy during the fascist era. Generally speaking, the history of folklore studies during Fascism tends to be divided into two distinct periods: on one hand, the ‘avant-garde’ folklore, developed mainly during the 1920s, and on the other, the ‘totalitarian’ folklore developed in the following decade¹. The first phase reveals the more modernist and revolutionary aspects of Fascism linked to the idea of a need for renovation, portrayed in terms of a spiritual rebirth of the nation. This idea spread in Italy during the early 20th century in opposition to the decadent spirit represented by the Italian liberal society. The second phase is considered the purely totalitarian phase where fascism is engaged in achieving total power control and faces the need to produce consensus in order to carry out the anthropological transformations necessary to convert Italians into the new fascist man.

The link between folklore and fascism reveals itself clearly through the aforementioned representations and could also be reconstructed following the same dynamics. Let us first present some aspects of Italian avant-garde folklore and then indicate the moment when folklore becomes a clear instrument within the fascist mass politics. We would like to suggest, however, that the complexity of the two orientations, avant-garde and totalitarian, forces us to consider them as *co-present* throughout the whole of the fascist regime, rather than as two successive moments in folklore studies. As pointed out above, even though the history of folklore presents them as two distinct moments, we would like to stress that traces of the avant-garde and totalitarian folklore can be found in both periods.

Before starting to illustrate the characteristics of what could be coined as ‘fascist folklore’ or folklore studies during Fascism, we deem appropriate to mention the period immediately preceding it, as in the first two decades of the 20th century the notion of a ‘modernist folklore’ had already begun to make its way². As demonstrated by the most recent historiography, Modernity was considered in a negative way because it was accused of being at the root of the decline of Italian society, thus allowing the emergence of a series of new political, philosophical and cultural movements that proposed a new modernity based on the spiritual renewal of Italians. Among these we find the idealism of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile; the literary movement that gathered around the magazine *La Voce*; the artistic and intellectual movement known as *Futurism*; or the apparition of socialist and nationalist political parties. The cultural and political climate in Italy is constructed therefore around the notion of ‘renewal’ that does not presuppose a rejection of modernity as such but instead proposes a new turn to modernity, which must aim at ‘awakening the conscience and spirit of the nation’³. The Italian-style of modernity set forth is based therefore on a strong idealistic sense of society and the nation. This ‘renewal’ is not directly opposed to the past in relation to traditions and popular culture, but on the contrary regards them precisely as the path to achieving the renovation of the spirit.

From a theoretical standpoint, the reason why popular traditions gain such an important role in the modernist culture of the time lies in their historical paradigm. Ever since Herder and later the first Romantics, popular traditions have been considered as an instrument for the aesthetic reproduction of

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¹ Cfr. M. Coppola, ‘Paolo Toschi tra Benedetto Croce e Benito Mussolini. Per una storia del folklore italiano durante il fascismo’, in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris. URL Bérose : [article2481.html](https://www.berose.org/article2481.html).

² Cfr. M. Coppola, *Construire l'italianité. Traditions populaires et identité nationale (1800-1932)*, Paris 2021, 157-206.

³ Cfr. E. Gentile, *La Voce e l'età giolittiana*, Milano 1972, 53.

national identity. They manifest the symbolic value of the community, representatives of its history and of its 'originality' in relation to other nations. This allows us to understand what the 'spirit' of the nation meant for the Romantics⁴. Furthermore, this ideal value of popular culture is precisely one of the elements that allows the intellectuals of the early 20th century to see the 'people' as a necessary and vital source that could lead to the nation's effective revival⁵.

It is interesting to note that these same conceptual elements can be found within the Fascist policy on folklore studies, as well as in the theories belonging to some of the main folklorists of the 20th century. Let us provide here two examples.

The first concerns the educational reform of 1923 promoted by the philosopher and minister of Education Giovanni Gentile, one of the first actions carried out by fascism. Its' main innovation is the inclusion of the study of regional culture and dialects within the primary school programs. Folklore is an important part of this new subject and in the textbooks of regional culture are included songs, legends, proverbs, as well as local practices and customs. The idea behind the introduction of regional culture in the curricular program lies in the belief that schools were important instruments of mass education, and therefore, a great laboratory for building national consciousness. Regional culture and folklore should amplify and project student's aesthetic and political feelings towards their homeland, that is the nation⁶. The mastermind behind this theory is Giuseppe Lombardo Radice⁷, pedagogue in charge of the elementary school reform. He developed the concept of 'folk pedagogy' to indicate the function of folklore within the school institution. According to Radice, it serves to connect local popular and national culture, using the same intimacy that students feel for their own local culture and projecting it towards their national culture. The idea behind it is to transmit the "natural" attachment from one's local reality to the nation. It is therefore a question of transforming the small homeland of the region into the great homeland of the Nation, ensuring the latter the same aesthetic faculties that are idealistically attributed to popular culture⁸.

His contemporary, the folklorist Paolo Toschi, also elaborates the idea of using folklore as an element of national revitalization. Toschi is a philologist, educated in Florence and working on popular poetry following the principles of the 'historical method' that characterized Italian studies at the time. In the Tuscan city Toschi came into contact with the representatives of the avant-garde, particularly with Giovanni Papini, founder of the magazine *La Voce* and later an active member of the Futurist movement. Moreover, Toschi is a childhood friend of Francesco Balilla Pratella, the founder of Futurist music. In 1926, together with Papini and other intellectuals, he co-founded the magazine *Gli Arrisicatori*, with the aim of regenerating Italian culture and art. Toschi's avant-gardism is the reason that brings him closer to Fascism and to its revolutionary roots in particular⁹. To present his ideas, he publishes a series of newspaper articles in which he states that fascism and popular traditions reflect the same national spirit and he sets forth the idea that the gathering of popular traditions in a big collection could be useful for both the spiritual awakening of the nation and to increase Italy's prestige. Toschi submits this idea directly to Mussolini but his project will not be accomplished¹⁰. Nonetheless, Toschi pursues his career in the field of folklore and is one of the promoters of the First Congress of Popular Traditions, held in Florence in 1929. In addition, Toschi is the founder, amongst others, of the Italian Committee of Popular Traditions and will later become the director of *Lares*¹¹ magazine.

⁴ Cfr. D. Fabre, 'D'une ethnologie romantique', in *Savoirs romantiques. Une naissance de l'ethnologie*, éd par D. Fabre et J.M. Privat, Nancy 2011, 5-75.

⁵ Cfr. M. Coppola, *Construire l'italianité*, op. cit., 19-66.

⁶ Cfr. M. D'Alessio, *A scuola fra casa e patria. Dialetto e cultura regionale nei libri di testo durante il fascismo*, Lecce 2013, *passim*.

⁷ G. Lombardo Radice (1879-1938), professor of pedagogy at University of Catania.

⁸ Cfr. A. Baraue et M. D'Alessio, "'Dalla piccola alla grande patria". Libri dialettali e almanacchi regionali per la scuola regionale', in *Teseo '900. Editori scolastico-educativi del primo Novecento*, (ed.) G. Chiosso, Milano 2008, XXXI-LIV.

⁹ Cfr. M. Coppola, 'Paolo Toschi', *art. cit.*

¹⁰ Cfr. M. Coppola, *Construire l'italianité*, op. cit., 233-239.

¹¹ Founded after the first congress in 1930.

Let us analyse the aforementioned Congress of Popular Traditions as a key element to represent the complexity of folklore studies at the time. We find within it two clear orientations: the first is the purely theoretical and scientific one, where scholars try to define the field and the methods of folklore studies. The second orientation reflects the fascist and nationalist influences present within it, albeit in limited matters. In regards to the second or explicitly 'political' orientation, the Committee of Popular Traditions still enjoys certain independence by allowing different approaches to coexist within it. We must bear in mind that given that fascist institutions have been involved from the very beginning in the process of organizing Italian folklore studies, scholars' quest to obtain fascist support was also an attempt by them to legitimize their field of study and accelerate the institutionalization process.

However, this institutionalization of the Italian folkloric discipline is very quickly absorbed within Fascism itself. In fact, Fascism sees in popular traditions an opportunity to put into practice its own policy for the masses and, in particular, to seek the consensus of the rural and provincial popular sector. From 1931, the Committee of Popular Traditions became an organ directly dependent of the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* and the magazine *Lares* became an instrument of propaganda for the regime. To explain this change, the director of the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*, Enrico Beretta, informs that the committee «seeks to revive the typical popular demonstrations, fallen in disgrace or neglected for a long time, evoking them in the very spirit of the people. Its program is, in other words, an essentially educational one: and its specific task, assigned to it by Fascism, is to improve and elevate the working class which constitutes the predominant part of the Italian people»¹².

The Committee of Popular Traditions, based in Rome, is therefore no longer only concerned with the compilation and study of Italian folklore, but also becomes a cultural and social promotional body entrusted with organizing various folkloric events, such as folk festivals, the creation of museums of popular traditions, competitions, parades, etc. In general, the committee promotes any activity related to folklore involving the masses¹³. In order to better accomplish its task, the Roman Committee relies on various local committees, often managed by local folklorists, who refer directly to the national one. There is therefore a pyramidal organization that clearly expresses the totalitarian character assumed by the Committee of Popular Traditions¹⁴.

As recent historiography shows, totalitarianism must in fact obtain a broad consensus, especially with regards to the popular classes, in order to fully assert itself. One of the major problems for fascist totalitarianism is precisely being able to bring together the various local communities, often very autonomous from a cultural and political point of view. Through the action of the Fascist National Party, totalitarian politics was partly built on this close relationship between national and provincial politics. The Fascist Party constituted a way of rapid social rise for the middle classes of the Italian province while, at the same time, they were concerned with involving and organizing local culture according to the regime's propaganda¹⁵.

The same occurred with the Committee of Popular Traditions, as it became one of the organs that fascism used to communicate directly with the province. By the 1930s, popular traditions were part of this scheme and this had repercussions in the very way folklorists carried out their research. Fascist propaganda forced folklorists to develop new lines of research consistent with totalitarian ideological needs. To provide some examples we can mention the Fourth congress of popular traditions, held in 1940 in Venice, whose main topic was 'folklore of the Italian sea'. This choice is clearly linked to the regime's decision to consolidate Italy's position as a maritime power, by demonstrating the seafaring character of Italians¹⁶.

¹² E. Beretta, 'Musica, costumi e danze popolari attraverso l'opera nazionale dopolavoro', in *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, Costumi, musica danze e feste popolari italiane*, Roma 1931, 65-66.

¹³ Cfr. S. Cavazza, 'La folkloristica italiana e il fascismo. Il Comitato Nazionale per le Arti Popolari', *La Ricerca Folklorica*, 15, 1987, 109-122.

¹⁴ Cfr. A. D'Amato, 'Giuseppe Cocchiara e Lares. Dal carteggio di Paolo Toschi', *Lares*, 77, 2, 2006, 485-568.

¹⁵ Cfr. V. Cappelli, 'Identità locali e Stato nazionale durante il fascismo', *Meridiana*, n. 32, 1, 1998, 53-62.

¹⁶ Cfr. *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, Atti del IV congresso di arti e tradizioni popolari. Venezia, settembre 1940*, 2 voll., Roma 1942.

However, one should not think that the avant-garde aspect of folklore disappears at this time. It actually constitutes a substantially important part of Fascist folklore itself. If in the twenties folklore studies are more particularly attracted by the avant-garde movements, during the thirties totalitarianism sets in heavily in the dynamics concerning folklorists. However, the avant-garde aspect of folklore remained strong throughout the 1930s when Fascism used popular traditions as a fundamental element to insert the masses, especially the working classes, into the politics of the regime. Therefore, the study of these two aspects of folklore allows us to reconsider the role of folklore within fascism itself. We would therefore like to underline how the relationship between folklore and fascism must be considered on this complex double angle that allows to go beyond a historiographical binary vision that sees folklore situated between tradition and modernity, region and nation, popular and national, as elements in contrast to each other. Instead, it seems more legitimate to think that these elements coexist in the cultural and ideological history of Fascism and represent the regime's attempt to establish a connection between its ideal of modernity and national identity.