

ANTÓNIO COSTA PINTO

Edited by



RULING ELITES AND DECISION-MAKING IN FASCIST-ERA DICTATORSHIPS

SOCIAL SCIENCE MONOGRAPHS

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AND DECISION-MAKING
IN FASCIST-ERA
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Mussolini, charisma and decision-making

Didier Musiedlak

The notion of charisma is a useful, although insufficient, instrument for the study of dictatorial regimes and the role of dictators. In fact, charismatic leadership is just one aspect in the bigger puzzle of political decision-making. This is particularly striking in the case of Mussolini. We believe that reducing the issue to a matter of the cult of personality leaves little space for understanding the originality of Mussolini's rule (Overy 2004: 98–131). Very often, the analysis is limited to the exercise of power. According to the pioneering works of Alberto Aquarone and Renzo de Felice, it was Mussolini's charisma that brought him the possibility of building a personal dictatorship (Aquarone 1965; Milza 1999). Recent historiography, mainly represented by Emilio Gentile, emphasises the relationship between the Duce and the revolutionary project (Gentile 2004: 228). This debate is important for the use of the concept of totalitarianism in the Italian case. Understanding decision-making under Mussolini is no easy task due to the overwhelming myth associated with 'Mussolinism'. Indeed, there is a risk of recalling our image of the Fascist period and of being blinded to the actual role played by the dictator in this case (Musiedlak 2005).

The aim of this chapter is to better understand the process of decision-making within the Fascist political system in all its complexity. Mussolini's authority was indeed strictly dependent control of the decision-making apparatus. Before analysing the originality of Mus-

solini's monarchy and its limits, it is both useful and necessary to begin by examining how Mussolini was able to seize the necessary instruments for the creation of the structure of decision-making.

The control of the decision-making apparatus

This issue remained a constant concern for Mussolini for more than 20 years. In fact, it took him until 1943 to implement his subversion strategy. This can be explained by the emergence of several problems, particularly those associated with the preservation of the constitutional and legal framework inherited from the liberal period.

After achieving power, Mussolini had to bargain with pre-existing institutions in order to carry out his so-called legal revolution. On this particular matter he was misunderstood, both by his contemporaries and by historians. The concept of legal revolution meant that the revolution had to be made within the existing institutions and without provoking any clear-cut breach with the past. These institutions allowed for such re-configurations—something Mussolini understood.

At the time Italy was governed according to the Piedmont constitution of 1848. Following the introduction of the Albertine Statute, the constitution was easily modified. The strength of Mussolini lay precisely in his understanding that, as 'master of the executive', he had the power to change institutions, provided that a certain image of continuity was maintained. For these reasons, the seizure of power provoked no reaction. When he was appointed prime minister in 1922, Mussolini obtained full powers in both chambers in November and December, while the House of Savoy remained untouched.

Thus, the only possible way for the new regime to grow was through the collaboration of old and new elites. In his 1941 book, *The dual state*, Ernst Fraenkel elaborated on this perspective ([1941] 1969: 13; Pombeni 1984: 447-9). The task implied the gradual transformation of the ruling class in the context of the 'normative state', operating within the double state under a dictatorial regime. Hence, behind the façade of the traditional state, a new partisan one was

formed to act as a phagocyte of the old structure. However, this programme required time. As in Germany, the Italian state was subject to a continuing revolution, but in this case the system preserved a part of the existing legality until 1943. Not only was the parliamentary system formally preserved, as all the laws were approved by parliament—including the status of Jews in November 1938 (Musiedlak 2003). At the same time, parliament was used to subvert the former legal order, particularly during the period 1925–6, when the regime transformed into an undisguised dictatorship (Soddu 2008: 121–36).

Throughout this process, the success of the Fascist revolution was dependent upon the parliamentary majority, which soon became a central objective. In fact, the absence of a majority in parliament, at least until 1928, became a source of significant fragility and of permanent concern to Mussolini. This constituted a real paradox: the powerful Fascist leader of Italy had to behave as the classic prime minister of a liberal system—in which he had to appeal for votes and fear abstentions—that was held in so much scorn by the Fascists. Mussolini was obliged to defend his bills personally, as a simple deputy, in both houses of parliament. This legal way of achieving full powers (which was obtained from parliament on 17 November 1922) offered him, at least in theory, the possibility of establishing a majority; but such a strategy required the recognition of Mussolini's authority by the Fascist movement.

After obtaining full authority in November 1922, Fascism began to show its divisions. Several representatives took refuge by abstaining, thus condemning Mussolini to a very difficult exercise. As Mussolini said in *Gerarchia* in January 1923, he was forced 'to harmonise the old with the new'.

Mussolini was thus confronted with the passive resistance of the representatives and the senators: after the July 1923 vote on the Acerbo Law; after the 1924 elections with their famous list; and after the declaration of the dictatorship on 3 January 1925. One of the main problems resulting from this situation was control of the vote, which became particularly clear in December 1925 with the vote of the law on the authority granted to the head of government.

However, by 1926, with the vote on the Fascist laws and the expulsion of the secessionist representatives in the Aventine parliament, the regime had restored the control of its majority. Partisan influence among the representative's voters had become stronger, and although the Fascist Party had effectively given up its leadership of the process of decision-making autonomy—which Roberto Farinacci in particular desired—it had strengthened its position within the state, particularly during the Turati's time as party secretary (Gentile 2005: 177; Pombeni 1984: 224). Nevertheless, the structure remained fragile.

In the senate, the situation was even more concerning. At the time of the November 1925 vote, no voting senator was member of the Fascist Party. Moreover, before 1925, the part of the senate that was in favour of the regime did not have the means to make their colleagues vote in the way the regime desired.

Mussolini did not succeed in imposing his candidates until 1928 (when 53.5 per cent of senators were Fascist Party members), a situation that improved further in 1929, when the proportion increased to 70.5 per cent. However, at the beginning of the 1930s, there remained a significant contrast between the two houses of parliament. The lower house, elected in March 1929, is considered to have been in political conformity with the regime, as it included no fewer than 42 federal secretaries. The situation within the upper house was in sharp contrast, however, as the existence of senators for life slowed the pace of the subversion process.

The establishment of an upper house that contained a totalitarian majority was one of Mussolini's main ambitions during the 1930s. The project began in 1932 when the Fascist Party took direct control over the Fascist National Union of the Senate. The strategy was now to produce a qualitative transformation of the senate with the goal of creating a technical council.

To this end, every institution had its own transformation rhythm, according to a specific chronology. This was due to the distinct conflicts and resistance within the different parliamentary bodies. Such a configuration explains the real complexity of constructing the Fascist state. Mussolini also had to obtain the active cooperation of the

Fascist Party if he wished to make a success out of the construction of the New State. To lead his revolutionary policy, Il Duce required the party's active collaboration, which would ensure him control over the institutions, achieving his totalitarian project and rooting the cult of *Il Duce* in the country. Nonetheless, Mussolini was also afraid of any possible strengthening of the party's independence, which could threaten his authority. This became a dilemma that led him to adopt a stop-and-go attitude within the party.

While he attempted to introduce some discipline and limit individual ambitions within the party, he was concerned with defining the boundaries between it and the state. In fact, the party's structure was constantly searching for new territories to be conquered in order to enhance the myth of the New State. Managing the party was not an easy task in 1940 in a country of 20 million people who were controlled by several diverse party organisations. The management of such a complex task required not only specific qualities from its administrators, but also the capacity for political initiative. In effect, everything depended on the personality of the general-secretary and on the support he received from Il Duce. Appointment to senior posts remained within Mussolini's gift. Since 1932, the general-secretary had exclusive control over the party's internal affairs and over the convocation of its national committee.

The party's national council did not stop growing, both as the number of federal secretaries increased with the country's territorial expansion and as the party machine grew increasingly complex. Their number rose from 92 in 1932, to 103 at the height of Starace's leadership in October 1939 and 123 members in 1942.

Due to the complexity of the tasks and the qualities required, the choice of general-secretary was a very delicate affair that would determine the future of the regime. Mussolini's suspicious nature clearly prevented any large-scale reform of the party, which would have enabled it to counterbalance the bureaucratic elites. Unlike the Nazi state, the offensives led by the party in its attempt to renew and spread its influence were far from being encouraged by Il Duce, who viewed it as an obstacle to the consolidation of his authority. This was partic-

ularly clear when, following the defeat by Greece in November 1940, there was a need to transform the party. The party's initiatives caused serious conflicts within the state, culminating in the departure of the most active secretaries (Starace and Serena) and a tendency towards deregulation—particularly during the war.

Mussolini remained suspicious of the party until July 25. This became a real nightmare as he was forced to play a difficult game—which consisted of simultaneously attempting to limit the party's influence while strengthening its structure—in order to ensure the success of the New State. The playing out of this dilemma can be observed through the many changes of general-secretary.

The Fascist system was thus exposed to contradictory influences that were often amplified by conflicts of competence between agents of the state and of the party. Thus, there is an obvious gap between the reality of the state and the myth of its totalitarian nature (Gentile 2004: 245).

Fascist government and monocratic policy

Formally, the unity of decision-making and command was recognised by the 24 December 1925 law concerning the head of government's privileges, which allowed for the implementation of the 'head of government's regime' as a means of strengthening and developing the totalitarian regime.¹ However, in practice the ministerial elite found a way to reserve some autonomy of action by developing their own ministerial regulations and head offices (Cheli 1966). As a result there was an ever-greater gap between the formal and the material constitution of fascism, which Mussolini tried to reduce by developing his myth.

The charismatic dimension constituted the backbone of the 'Fascist edifice' and contributed to towards generating mass support for Il

¹ Article 3 of the law states that 'the head of government, the prime minister, manages and coordinates the work of the ministers, decides on the differences between them, summons the council of ministers and presides over it' (Bonaudi 1936: 407; Fimiani 2001: 116ff).

Duce. The myth offered him effective autonomy and a room for decision-making (Falasca-Zamponi 1997: 56). The construction of the myth was immediately perceived to be one of the main components of the Fascist system. In 1924, Ludwig Bernhard, professor at the university of Berlin, noted 'that the faith in the power of Mussolini's personality' was essential for the Fascist system (Bernhard 1924: 44). For Mussolini, the central problem was no longer how to stop the opposition, but rather how to strengthen and widen his own power. The propaganda office (UP—Ufficio Propaganda) was created for that purpose after the phase of consolidation in 1926 (Cannistraro 1975: 79). The prime minister's press office (USCG—Ufficio di Stampa del Capo del Governo) had been under his direct authority since 1923. The UP became an important financial supporter of the press, and was responsible for influencing the main newspapers. Mussolini met the head of the USGC every day to receive news and pass on instructions, and by the end of the 1920s the personality cult built around the myth of *Il Duce* had been established.

Situated at the heart of the Fascist religion, the figure of *Il Duce* is viewed as the interpreter of the national consciousness and the key element in the Italian totalitarian system—at least until the military difficulties of 1941. At the same time, this charismatic power was exposed to multiple dangers.

The nature of the charismatic power was powerful and unstable at the same time: the 'social capital' had to be continually renewed in order to retain allegiance. It was also necessary to avoid sinking into the adventures of the daily life and getting lost in the routine of traditional existence. The risk of charismatic authority transforming into traditional domination is great for, as Sofsky and Paris note, charisma is the enemy of bureaucracy (1994: 91). By using his power, Mussolini exposed himself to the risk of seeing its charismatic capital decreased. The difficulties in controlling the decision-making apparatus forced him to choose the best way in which to create the authoritarian bureaucratic state. Mussolini's investment in the expansion of a bureaucratic authoritarian state was a way to consolidate his domination. This type of power is the representation of his position as head of

government. The circular of 3 January 1927, which granted prefects authority over the party's provincial federal secretaries, reflected Mussolini's state of mind: he considered himself to be no less than the head of state (De Felice 1968: 345–6; 1981: 57).

Il Duce is an example of a feverish political activism that absorbed him completely. According to his valet, Quinto Navarra, 'his unique and supreme position of chief of state' forced him to submit himself to an exhausting work schedule, '[We could not] get the dictator to stop investigating the most insignificant technical or bureaucratic decisions in the most scrupulous manner' (Navarra 1949: 141). He was a victim of the system he had personally developed by transforming himself into the ultimate holder of rational bureaucratic authority. Everything had to go through him, leading him to devour colossal masses of reports, plans and studies, and to meet and to listen to innumerable technicians, ministers, officers and petitioners of all kind. Moreover, the machine on which he stood was not as successful as the image being projected.² As head of government, Mussolini failed in his attempt to establish either a ministry or an office of the presidency that would have made his parliamentary activities much easier. It is very difficult to understand how the governmental machine carried out his policies as we know nothing about the circuits supplying Il Duce's confidential correspondence (Melis 2008: 102).

Our lack of knowledge about the internal workings of Mussolini's office is aggravated by the many government departments for which he took responsibility. The fact that he held up to eight ministerial portfolios certainly contributed to the myth of *Il Duce* the superman; but this concentration of powers presupposed the existence of an administration capable of preparing the work. As Giuriati reminds us, this practice probably led Mussolini to entrust the actual management of his ministries to the bureaucrats within them (1981: 46–7). This technique of government eventually led to the establishment of

² The position taken by the general-secretary of the presidency on the decision remains unknown. The position was occupied by Alessandro Chiavolini (until 1934), Osvaldo Sebastiani (until 1941) and Nicolo de Cesari (Dogliani 1999: 108–9).

durable links between Mussolini and the administration. These links increased the opportunities for members of the council of state to play more important roles within government departments, which nonetheless slowed the totalitarian project (Melis 2000).

Through the reforms of 30 December 1923, the regime granted greater authority to the council by attributing it the role of administrative supreme court over matters of public employment. This reform in the direction of greater intervention by the council was not translated into the Fascistisation of the institution, mainly because many of the council of state's members had been appointed before Mussolini seized power.

The 1927 purge did not play a significant role in the reorganisation of the group, which was a more technical card than that of the party. Few political figures benefitted by being appointed a member of the quadrumvirate, as much as Michele Bianchi (16 March 1923).³ The appointment in 1929 of Santi Romano, one of the great figures of Italian public law (who was close to Mussolini), enabled the council's activities to be strengthened. Generally speaking, and to paraphrase Melis, the council 'filtered' a large proportion of new legislation, but, as it remained part of the body regulating the distinction between political and administrative activities according to the tradition that had been established at the beginning of the century, it did not innovate. The council of state made no real attempt to contest the new fascist standards, but it did seek to insert them into the old order.

The place occupied by ministers in the decision-making process was limited. It seems that the abolition of the council of state's constitutional role aggravated the attempts to coordinate the members of the ministerial team.⁴ Melis underlines our lack of knowledge about how the Fascist government operated in everyday life, the links between parliamentary bodies or the extent of the ministerial elite's

³ The quadrumvirate were the four leaders of the March on Rome.

⁴ 'The function of ministers can indeed be said to include collaboration, and autonomous activity...but only when decided by the prime minister' (Bonaudi 1936: 407; Merlini 1995: 46).

independence. The only matter of which we are sure is what these ministers say in their memoirs about their relationship with Mussolini. Everything seems to lead to the idea they were thought of as performers who could be dismissed any day, depending on Mussolini's mood. There are several examples of this. In 1923, during a ceremony in Bologna, Giovanni Giuriati was told informally by Paolucci de Carboli he had, without consultation, been appointed ambassador to Brazil; however, he succeeded in pleading his case and made Mussolini change his mind.

These constant changes were followed with increasing disdain by those surrounding Mussolini. He kept a distance between himself and his followers: he made them stand whenever he received them in his office. According to Giuriati, during his final years in office, Mussolini had convinced himself of his own superiority, which led him into ever greater isolation: he believed there was a natural difference between him and those who surrounded him. Giuseppe Bottai, on his return from Ethiopia on 27 August 1936, recalls being received by Mussolini and being frozen by his metallic voice and his physical appearance: 'a real stony statue' (Bottai 1982: 109). In 1943, Tullio Cianetti, the minister for corporations, found Mussolini to be cold and formal. He claims Mussolini sent him 'no word other than that necessary to complete the common business I had presented him in my quality as minister' (Cianetti 1983: 392). Galeazzo Ciano, who held a deep admiration for Mussolini's mastery of affairs during the Munich conference, shared the same bitter reflections as the other ministers concerning Mussolini's solitude, describing him as 'a being without will and, especially, a capricious person who wants to be adulated, flattered and adored' (Ciano 1946: 69).

The skill of the dictator often consists in diminishing those around him by persuading them he knows the contents of their personal files thanks to his personal skills and the efficiency of his sources of information. When Giuriati was minister of public works, he received press cuttings from Mussolini that concerned his ministry, and which had the Duce's personal notes in the margins. According to Giuriati, Mussolini was proud of the fact he read 35 newspapers each day. Later,

Giuriati had the opportunity to confirm Mussolini's abilities when he was party secretary, where he came into contact with Mussolini every day. Mussolini managed to classify news coming from five different sources: the police, the *Carabinieri*, the political police (OVRA—Organizzazione per la Vigilanza e la Repressione dell'Antifascismo), the offices of the militia and the special services of the presidency's departments. What pleased Mussolini most, said Giuriati, was persuading people that 'not only did he conduct the orchestra, but that he also played all the main instruments' (Giuriati 1981: 50). As a result of the withdrawal of their constitutional and political duties, Mussolini's ministers were increasingly restricted to overseeing the management of their own departments (Costamagna 1934: 391). Was the loss of ministerial influence the result of Mussolini's enhanced decision-making abilities?

The exercise of power

The economic crisis of the 1930s led to a profound transformation of the state, which resulted in the greater empowerment of senior civil servants, to the detriment of politics and ideology. This trend seems obvious to the economic ministries (corporations, agriculture, finances). The initiative was taken by the 'parallel administrations' (Gagliardi 2008: 149). The most illustrative example of this is the case of the department of corporations where, as Il Duce was granting the corporations a central role in the revolutionary project, the possibility of their expansion were reduced (Musiedlak, 2009). The change of team took place on 20 July 1932, which resulted in Giuseppe Bottai, the minister of corporations, being removed from the government. Bottai had not participated in the birth of the 'entrepreneur state' (*stato imprenditore*), which had been created as the corporations were being developed (Cianci 1972: 217). He had, therefore, remained a stranger to the management of the new problems concerning the links between credit and industry. After this, Mussolini took personal responsibility for the department of corporations in order to ensure better control of the structure during this very delicate phase.

The absence of governmental coordination with parliament was also a problem (Musiedlak 2003). Even after the creation of Fascist Corporatist Chamber (*Camera dei Fasci e delle Corporazioni*) in 1939, and with an upper house that was controlled by the Fascist Party, Mussolini could not depend on receiving total obedience from the political body. Conflicts between parliament and the executive did not disappear, and consequently they became a threat both to the authority of the regime and to Mussolini.

Disagreements between ministers on the contents of a bill were not uncommon and were often aggravated by the exchanges between the chambers. On 2 July 1940, the corporatist economics and autarchy commission was called to pronounce on a bill. The text of the bill had already been subject to several amendments in the fascist chamber, and the senate commission was ready to give its agreement after some formal alterations. That same day, the minister of finances told the president of the senate that he wished to amend the text because the chamber had opposed the changes. The under-secretary of state for corporations, Tullio Cianetti, pronounced in favour of the version of the text agreed by the chamber, and in the absence of any legal solution, the president of the senate, Salvatore Gatti, decided to reclaim his authority from it. He took advantage of this situation to complain, and suggested that in future it would be necessary to end the phase of discussions between ministers at the moment texts were being proposed by the government.

In 1943, the unity of the government was already in peril. On 9 January 1943, Giacomo Suarso, then president of the senate, wrote to the under-secretary of the presidency of the council to complain about confrontations between ministers, which are 'a reflection of the bad working practices employed by government bodies' and which 'give the impression that the various ministries do not share a common vision' (ASSR 1943). This disorder concerned Mussolini, who repeatedly intervened to emphasise the view that these differences were incompatible with the goal of regime unity. These excesses particularly affected those ministers who were supposed to explain the government's actions. On 16 July 1940, 16 March 1942 and 10 January 1943,

Mussolini repeated the argument, and appealed to the principles of governmental discipline. The ministers were obliged 'to refrain from supporting amendments that introduce policies that are not admitted by the council' without the prior agreement of the government. Despite this call to order, the tendency towards deregulation remained. On 10 January 1943, Mussolini issued a circular expressing his belief of the inadmissibility—within the framework of discussions before the legislative branch and commissions—of members of the government demonstrating different opinions. The central structure of authority was weakening in the face of a larger and more aggressive bureaucracy.

At the beginning of the 1930s, Giovanni Giuriati described the regime's 'expansionist tendency' and its continual search for new territories. The deformation of the Fascist state into an administrative one was the responsibility of Il Duce, who probably considered that option was the best for strengthening his own position. Mussolini had come to this conclusion in March 1941, following the events of January that were nothing other than an attempt by the bureaucracy to manage without the political establishment (De Felice 1981: 63). However, this was becoming progressively harder to manage. Mussolini looked for support from the bureaucratic executives that he had inherited from liberal Italy, as well as from the new bureaucracy that had emerged from public and para-state bodies (Melis 1988). As a consequence, the administration that had been inherited from liberalism, and which had been appropriated by the regime, began to co-exist with the administration that was emerging from the organs of the fascist state.

The political concentration imposed by totalitarian Caesarism required an intensive economic concentration, upon which the efficiency of political decision-making was dependent—especially in the context of the war (Melis 1996: 352). Because of its extraordinary development during this period, the para-state sector, offered Mussolini several intervention possibilities. In 1943, one-third of industry and a large proportion of the banking system and credit institutes were controlled by these 'parallel administrations' (Dor-

magen 2008). The expansion of this sector allowed him to offer high salaries to the most diligent members of the ruling class, enabling him to enhance his personal influence among them. However, generally speaking the disproportionate expansion of the bureaucracy declined because of its slow operational margins and its capacity for decision-making.

Conclusion

Mussolini's authority was established on the basis of a complex system of rivalries that existed between different agencies (political, personal, party, senior administration, traditional and parallel bureaucracies, business, etc.). This system brought the competition into a political market in which Mussolini and the Fascist Party—each with their own infrastructures—controlled access to resources and exchange mechanisms, which determined the quality of the actors (Wintrobe 1998: 141). Mussolini was perfectly aware of this, and he managed it by favouring the most faithful and loyal of groups. At the same time, he had to be vigilant not to dilute his charismatic authority by becoming merely the organisation's leader (Sofsky and Paris 1994: 93): such work required the continuous intensification of his myth. All these operations inevitably led to a process of deregulation that disturbed the decision-making process.

Mussolini was able to control power and decision-making authority by exploiting the myth of *Il Duce* and by having people who were ready to obey his orders. However, he was unable to match his decision-making capacity with efficiency. This was because domination of the system, which was the source of decision-making, took a long time to achieve—long after the initial seizure of power. Mussolini spent years building the structures through which he could impose his domination and thereby strengthen and improve the decision-making process. In fact, because of the existence of the many agencies that formed the regime's structure, the system of domination was never totally regulated. The decision-making process was often absorbed in meaningless debates and was seized by an increasingly intrusive bureaucracy that showed itself largely closed to Mussolini's intentions.

The system was so chaotic that despite Mussolini's attempts to give it structure it gave the impression political decisions were being made without any thought and without being coordinated.

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