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Joshua Arthurs. *Excavating Modernity: The Roman Past in Fascist Italy.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012. Illustrations. 232 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4998-7.

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Excavating a Fascist Future: A New Study of the Fascist Idea of "Romanità"

Joshua Arthurs presents an ambitious argument on the tensions between Rome's burdensome past and Fascism's modernist take on the idea of "*romanità*" (literally: roman-ness) as played out on the Roman landscape, in classicist institutions and in Fascist exhibitions. The main argument of the book is that the idea of *romanità* was central to the political culture of Fascism, that *romanità* was a modernist rather than conservative concept, and that it was also a model for solving anxieties about modernity. Although the originality of these claims is sometimes overstressed, *Excavating Modernity* explores the theme of *romanità* more comprehensively than has been done before while elegantly outlining the tensions between ideas of Rome and their physical as well as symbolic incarnations over time.[1]

Through in-depth micro-historical analyses, Arthurs successfully describes the ways in which the Fascist idea of *romanità* was produced from below as the product of complex negotiations between different social agents working against Rome's other powerful symbolic meanings. During Fascism, an idealized Rome was to be "liberated," either from the physical presence of centuries of papal rule embodied in architecture or from the very corruption of its people. Rome was to be "excavated" to reveal the "new Rome" of the Fascist future, which, Arthurs shows, had to contend as much with the "old Rome" still existing in the present as with shifts in the political present of the regime, most notably, with the Racial Laws of 1938.

The book is divided into five chapters, which partially follow a chronological order. Chapter 1 looks at the "prehistory" of the Fascist idea of Rome. It presents a fascinating description of nineteenth-century ideas of Rome as a utopian site for projecting hopes for the new Italian nation as well as a vehicle for expressing disappointment around the failures of the Risorgimento. In clear and sophisticated language, Arthurs shows how the Fascists negotiated the complex dynamics between modernist condemnations of the capital and its antiquities and the need to connect to visions of the capital as the moral heart of the nation. Arthurs focuses particularly on the March on Rome as a key symbolic moment in which Fascism at once embodied revolutionary usurpation alongside a restoration of the true Roman spirit. He shows how Benito Mussolini's march *against* the capital but also *for* the capital managed at once to contain and to give voice to the remnants of Risorgimento patriotism, futurist anti-*passatismo* (a complex concept, roughly summarized as a rejection of 'pastism,' i.e., an excessive dwelling on the past, or antiquated thinking); elitist modernism; and expansionist imperialism.

Chapter 2 focuses in depth on the Istituto di Studi Romani (Institute for Roman Studies) and its work during the 1920s and 1930s. It discusses the role that the institute played in attempting to create a coherent Fascist discourse on Rome, both in the academy and in relation to the public at large. The institute aimed to bring Roman studies to the forefront of modern Italian culture by encouraging the use of Latin among schoolchildren, organizing large-scale exhibitions, and developing bibliographic projects on Rome, and promoting such activities as creating a colossal photographic archive of Roman monuments. Arthurs brings examples of the institute's conception of an engaged and "virile" scholarship: he describes an "epigraphic census" of northern Italian gravestones, aimed at showing that the Po Valley was Roman; the production of a thirty-volume history of Rome; courses and field trips for the upper bourgeoisie; and radio transmissions and popular booklets distributed through the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (p. 36). One of the institute's most challenging tasks consisted of reconciling the Fascist vision of *romanità* with the history of Roma Sacra (Christian Rome). Rather than privileging Rome's ancient history over the history of the Catholic

Church, or arguing for the church's role as heir to the ancient empire, the institute focused on establishing the concept of *romanità* as central to both ancient and Christian Rome. By insisting on the link between *romanità* and faith, the institute satisfied sections of Catholic opinion threatened by Fascism's anticlerical and antipapal historical revisionism while still asserting a clear supremacy of the new regime over its predecessors.

Chapter 3 looks at Fascist archaeological interventions in the 1920s and 1930s, and considers how the regime used archaeology as a tool for urban modernization. It highlights the imagined construction of a "Roma Nuova" (the new Rome designed by Fascism) set against a "Roma Antica" (Rome of classical antiquity) to be extricated and liberated from the corrupt clutches of an unsanitary "Roma Vecchia" (from the fall of the Roman Empire to 1922). The chapter shows how the transformations of the Roma Nuova were integrated into the cult of Mussolini, in which the city was shown to bend to the will of the Duce, who was renewing the soul of the nation alongside its capital. It convincingly demonstrates how the remains of the Roman past came to challenge the regime's desire to build a monumental city and highlights how much easier it was for the regime to destroy rather than to build. In its effort at linking the present directly to the Roman past, the regime presented an anti-temporal and ahistorical conception of time and history which was played out aggressively in the surgical "regeneration" of the modern city.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Mostra Augustea della Romanità (Augustan Exhibition of "Roman-ness"), which celebrated the bi-millennium of emperor Augustus in 1937, and relates it both to the successful Fascist Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista (Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution) of 1932 and to the Mostra Archeologica (archaeological exhibition) set up during the liberal period in 1911. The chapter highlights some of the continuities with earlier exhibitions set to link the Roman present with the past. It discusses the predictable symbolic links drawn between Augustus and Mussolini and describes the Fascist efforts at producing a modernist version of Rome's triumphal past. Arthurs describes the content of the themes and presentations of the exhibition as "totalitarian" and notes how the replicas and reconstructions of Roman objects that visitors were allowed to handle reflected a modernist curatorial approach (pp. 103-104). Much like in Marla Stone's discussion of the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista, Arthurs confronts the ambiguities in the general public's reception of the exhibition and the methodological difficulties linked to assessing visitor numbers and reception given the mandatory group visits; the visits by military personnel; and the use of *treni popolari* (popular trains), which encouraged visits to such exhibitions in exchange for significant train fare discounts.[2]

Chapter 5 focuses on the crisis that shifts in Fascist foreign policy bring to the idea of *romanità*, particularly relating to racial questions. It highlights the problems involved in reconciling the image of a universal, inclusive, and imperial Rome with ideas of ethnic exclusivism. It also dissects some of the academic debates relating to Germanic tribes, to relations between Rome and Judea, and to the problem of *romanità* as a legal rather than biological concept. As *romanità* comes to be seen as a form of "civilization" in opposition to the supposedly superior Nazi notion of "*Kultur*," it also takes a secondary role in the Fascist propaganda project. The second part of the chapter focuses on the ambivalent relationship that the Republic of Salò had with *romanità* and with Rome itself, and it looks specifically at anti-Allied racist imagery and at the view of the fall of Fascism as symptomatic of the innate failures of the Italian race. From this theme of crisis, Arthurs concludes by focusing on the reassertion of Rome's Catholic character after the war and the reemergence of the dominance of the idea of Roma Sacra over the Fascist reimagined Roma Antica. By looking into the careers of the scholars involved in the Istituto di Studi Romani, Arthurs argues that most of them turned from Fascism to conservative Catholicism and that the institute continued its work, shifting its attention, however, to the importance of Rome during the papal era. Continuity is also found in museum practices, as the new Museo della Civiltà Romana, inaugurated in 1952, maintained many of the features and displays of its Fascist predecessor. The continued presence of the Fascist intervention on the Roman landscape is also discussed, particularly the completion of some of the major urban projects begun during the Fascist era, such as the neighborhood around the EUR (Esposizione Universale Roma, the 1942 world fair, which never took place due to Italy's involvement in the Second World War).

Arthurs ends his work with the claim that "arguably the most enduring legacy of *romanità* stems from the failure of the Fascist project" and that "Fascism's revolutionary attempt to excavate Roman modernity represents not so much the culmination of this trajectory as its bankrupting" since classicism after the Second World War came to be equated with the "excesses of totalitarianism, militarism and imperialism" (p. 155). A whole new chapter of this book could be written examining the renewed construction of a glorious idea of *romanità* by the ultra-right in Silvio Berlusconi's governments over

the past decade and particularly on the uses of Roman spaces in state commemorations organized by the current mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno (such as the celebration of the anniversary of the Roman Republic at the Gianicolo in 2013 or the attempted uses of the Colosseum in Christmas festivities). Some of the most interesting sections of *Excavating Modernity* are those dedicated to the ways in which the city of Rome resisted the efforts of various regimes to transform it into the idealized city they wished it to be. Rome as a symbol of the failures of the Italian state and its political class, as well as of its very people, remains a theme prevalent today in both the discourses of the Northern League and of antipolitical movements, such as Beppe Grillo's Movimento a Cinque Stelle (Five Star Movement). A serious study of the continuities in the images and the rhetoric around Rome's failures would be an important addition to Arthurs's work.

Excavating Modernity is a useful addition to a large academic body of works focused on Fascism and the Roman past. The book's main focus on *romanità* gives it breadth of analysis and depth of focus, although Rome itself often takes Arthurs on tangents that are much more exciting than this primary concern. Although the book is clear and beautifully written, and covers a wide range of topics, it feels at times conspicuously like a PhD dissertation converted into a book (particularly chapters 3 and 4), and it feels constrained by its own methodological confines. That said, it undoubtedly presents a good summary of the highly complex and fascinating transformations of the concept of *romanità* and of shifts and continuities in the social imaginary of Rome over time, making it both an interesting read and a good place to direct students wishing to gain a greater understanding of the construction and invention of the Roman past in Fascist Italy.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Marla Stone, "A Flexible Rome: Fascism and the Cult of Romanità," in *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture 1789-1945*, ed. Catherine Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 205-220; and Flavia Marcello, "Mussolini and the Idealisation of Empire: The Augustan Exhibition of Romanità," *Modern Italy* 16, no. 3 (2011): 223-247.

[2]. Marla Stone, "Staging Fascism: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution," *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no. 2 (1993): 215-243.

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