

**From Machiavellism to the Holocaust**  
**The Ethical-Political Historiography of George L. Mosse**

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“Il saggio non è colui che discrimina,  
è colui che mette insieme i brandelli di luce  
da dovunque provengano”  
(Umberto Eco, *Il pendolo di Foucault*)

## INTRODUCTION

### THE SERPENT AND THE DOVE

“The problem involved is to keep the balance between the Serpent and the Dove, so that neither obliterates the other: for the victory of the Dove can lead to unbridled idealism, and the ignoring of secular realities; while the victory of the serpent means the total acceptance of what the sixteenth century called 'Machiavellism'”<sup>1</sup>  
(George L. Mosse)

“Without the modern state there couldn't have been a holocaust”<sup>2</sup>  
(George L. Mosse)

“L'attrait du nationalisme radical ou des théories de la pureté ethnique, qui conduisent à la purification ethnique, n'est évidemment pas épuisé aujourd'hui. Relire les oeuvres de George Mosse peut être d'un grand intérêt pour comprendre la difficile situation de l'Europe aujourd'hui, issue de la coexistence malaisée entre la tolérance libérale de certains Européens et l'exclusion anti-libérale d'autres, nationalistes ethniques. Aujourd'hui encore, des hommes continuent à mourir en Europe parce que cette contradiction n'est pas résolue. Cette histoire est notre histoire, et George Mosse a fait plus que les autres pour la dire, avec sa manière implacable et dérangeante.”<sup>3</sup>  
(Jay Winter)

“Why write an autobiography?” These words of the historian George L. Mosse, addressed to the future reader but also to himself, open his memoir, which he completed only a few days before his death in January 1999. In a similar fashion, I would raise the question: Why write an intellectual biography of George L. Mosse? His own answer to the question he posed was that “an encounter with my own history might be instructive to myself as to others, illuminating a very personal corner of recent times”.<sup>4</sup> My reason to write his intellectual biography is that I find that an encounter not only

1 George L. Mosse, *The Holy Pretence. A Study in Christianity and the Reason of State from William Perkins to John Winthrop*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1957, 154

2 George Mosse interviewed by The Auckland Star, July 10, 1979

3 Jay Winter, “De l'histoire intellectuelle à l'histoire culturelle: la contribution de George L. Mosse”, *Annales* 2001, 1, Year 56, 181

4 George L. Mosse, *Confronting History. A Memoir*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2000, 4. John Tortorice, Mosse's life partner, said that he “used history almost to understand himself”. Interview with John Tortorice, *The Wisconsin Academic Review*, Summer 2000

with Mosse's history, but also with his historiography can be instructive, and can illuminate far more than a "personal" corner of recent times. This not only because of the great historiographical significance of his works, but also because these addressed problems which are still very much alive and topical today, at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and perhaps will be for the future.

This essay is intended as the first attempt to write an intellectual biography of Mosse, relying not only on his published writings, but also on the unpublished materials which are now at the biographer's disposal. The George L. Mosse Archive at the Memorial Library, University of Madison-Wisconsin, and the George L. Mosse Collection at the Leo Baeck Institute of New York contain unpublished articles, lectures, speaking engagements as well as Mosse's vast correspondence with students, colleagues and friends. These materials, so far never utilized by Mosse's critics with the exception of Emilio Gentile<sup>5</sup>, shed new light on the historian's thought and, when integrated with his published works, offer new and precious insights into the development of his thought. The purpose of this essay is therefore that of drawing a picture of Mosse's historiography from the point of view of its inner development, highlighting the main methodological turns and the thematic shifts, and seeking to link them with the events of his life.

Born in Berlin on September 20, 1918, to a wealthy and influential Jewish family, the life-style Mosse experienced was anything but ordinary. The Mosses had made a name for themselves in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the entrepreneurial skills of Rudolf Mosse (1843-1920), the founder of the *Annoncen-Expedition Rudolf Mosse* (1867), the most important (and pioneering) advertising agency in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany and soon to become the publishing house of several influential newspapers, among which the *Berliner Tageblatt* (1872) and the *Berliner Morgenzeitung* (1889)<sup>6</sup>. As exponents of the German liberal elite, the Mosses embodied the values of liberalism and of Jewish emancipation and, after the Great War, were closely linked to the *Deutsche Demokratische Partei*. Theodor Wolff (1868-1943), the editor-in-chief of the *Berliner Tageblatt* (from 1906 to 1933), was a liberal lined up against any kind of extremism, be it rightist or leftist, and sought to represent democratic values and to defend the newly born Weimar Republic against its opponents.<sup>7</sup> The family had been engaged for decades in the

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5 Emilio Gentile, *Il fascino del persecutore. George L. Mosse e la catastrofe dell'uomo moderno*, Carocci, Roma, 2007. Mosse's correspondence with Professor Renzo De Felice (from the George L. Mosse Collection at the Leo Baeck Institute of New York) has recently been published on an Italian journal: see Donatello Aramini and Giovanni Mario Ceci, "Carteggio George L. Mosse – Renzo De Felice", *Mondo Contemporaneo*, n. 3, 2007, 78-104

6 There is a great deal of publications about Rudolf Mosse, the Mosse family and their newspapers. The most comprehensive work is Elisabeth Kraus, *Die Familie Mosse: deutsch-jüdisches Bürgertum im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Beck, München 1999. Other publications include Fritz Härtsch, *Rudolf Mosse – ein Verleger revolutioniert das Werbegeschäft*, Mosse Adress AG, Zürich 1996; Werner E. Mosse, "Rudolf Mosse and the House of Mosse 1867-1920", in *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, vol. IV, 1959, 237-259; Andreas Halen and Uwe Greve, *Vom Mosse-Verlag zum Mosse-Zentrum*, dbm Media-Verlag, Berlin 1995.

7 On Theodor Wolff, see Gotthart Schwarz, *Theodor Wolff und das "Berliner Tageblatt". Eine liberale Stimme in der deutschen Politik 1906-1933*, Mohr, Tübingen, 1968. For an overall view of the role played by the Jewish community in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, see the three volumes edited by Werner E. Mosse: *Entscheidungsjahr 1932: Zur Judenfrage in der Endphase der Weimarer Republik*, Mohr, Tübingen, 1965; *Deutsches Judentum in Krieg und Revolution 1916-1923*, Mohr, Tübingen, 1971; *Juden im Wilhelminischen Deutschland 1890-1914*, Mohr, Tübingen, 1976. As to the role played by

process of integration and assimilation. Rudolf Mosse had represented the Jewish community of Berlin at the turn of the century and then also the German Jewish Reform Congregation, one the strongest organs of Jewish life that aimed at full assimilation in the German context.

The rise of national socialism put an end to this world, and the whole family emigrated to France in 1933. The young Gerhard, grandson of Rudolf Mosse, saw his life change. Until then, he had been a spoiled and rebellious little boy raised in an opulent and luxurious environment. After primary school, he had been sent to the famous Berlin Mommsen Gymnasium, but his undisciplined nature clashed with the strict discipline required by the school, and his father decided to send him to a well-known boarding school in Salem, on lake Constance. To the young Gerhard boarding school meant, above all, character-building. This was the legacy he brought with himself into exile when, on March 31, 1933, he managed to take the ferry to Switzerland minutes before a law that restricted Jewish emigration took effect. From Switzerland, he moved to England in 1934, where he first attended the Bootham School in York and then, in 1937, entered Cambridge University. Here Gerhard, who had by then become George<sup>8</sup>, decided to study history. In York, he had been fascinated by the reading of George M. Trevelyan's *History of England*, which Leslie Gilbert, his history teacher, had assigned to him: "reading it, I was on the way to find my vocation", Mosse wrote in his memoir.<sup>9</sup> Gilbert may have played a role in Mosse's decision, and yet Mosse himself admits that at the time he was unsure where he should specialize, and chose history also because that was "the course of study my English friends took at Cambridge when they did not know what they really wanted – a 'gentleman's' subject – and I too drifted into it, rather than, at first, regarding it as a firm choice."<sup>10</sup>

Gerhard the "spoiled brat"<sup>11</sup> had become a more disciplined George, and George was on the road to becoming a famous historian. In August 1939 he went to the United States on his father's visa, but he had a British reentry permit, and firmly intended to get back and settle in England, where he felt at home. But the outbreak of the Second World War changed everything, making "extremely risky to take advantage of my reentry permit into England because, as a former German citizen, I could now be considered an enemy alien".<sup>12</sup> Then he had no choice but to remain in the United States, and so he continued his studies at Haverford College, where he meant to major in English literature at first, if

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the Jewish Press, and particularly by the *Berliner Tageblatt* in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Werner Becker's essay, 'Die Rolle der liberalen Presse', in *Deutsches Judentum in Krieg und Revolution*, op. cit., 67-136. For a general survey of the democratic press in Germany (with large room devoted to the Mosse publishing house), see Modris Eksteins, *The Limits of Reason. The German Democratic Press and the Collapse of Weimar Democracy*, Oxford University Press, London 1975

8 As he left Germany, he also changed his last name from Lachmann (his father's) to Mosse (his mother's), thus becoming George Mosse or, better, George L. Mosse, which is the name that appears on his books. *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 97

9 *Ibid.*, 81. Leslie Gilbert was a renowned history teacher who had had, among his pupils, A. J. P. Taylor and Geoffrey Barraclough, historians who achieved (like Mosse) academic distinction.

10 *Ibid.*, 94

11 The expression, referred to his youth in Germany, was used by Mosse himself. George L. Mosse, "Hillel Talk", undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 31; Leo Baeck Institute

12 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 114



only to change it into history, receiving his B.S. diploma in 1941: it was at Haverford that he had been “truly initiated into scholarship as a lifelong preoccupation”.<sup>13</sup> Mosse went to Harvard University, where he received his doctorate in 1946 under the supervision of Professor Charles Howard McIlwain, with a thesis on the idea of sovereignty in early modern England.<sup>14</sup> However, since 1944 he was already lecturing at the University of Iowa, where he would remain until 1956. Here Mosse first lectured within the Army Specialized Training Program<sup>15</sup>, and then, as Associate Professor, he became an expert in early modern history, focussing first on English constitutional history, and then on the period of the Reformation. He made a name for himself as a brilliant teacher, published his first books, and got involved in American political life.<sup>16</sup> The way was definitively paved for his career as a historian.

In 1956, Mosse received a call from the University of Madison-Wisconsin, under the proviso that he specialized in modern European history. Mosse's journey was to reach a conclusion, and Madison was to become his home for the years to come. To be sure, he kept travelling extensively both for research and teaching, and from 1969 to 1985 he also taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he spent a semester a year: though he had found a home, he always felt like an “eternal emigrant”.<sup>17</sup> In Madison, Mosse reached his maturity as a historian. The shift to modern history meant, in his case, a turn to the study of national socialism. He kept publishing books and articles on early modern issues for some years, and yet he shifted his attention toward a subject that was much closer to his interests. As he writes in his memoir, he had by then attained full integration in American society and he surely felt freer to start exploring new fields of research which touched him more closely than those he had been dealing with in the 1940s and 1950s. He himself defines his previous works as

“respectable, indeed core subjects at the time ... That they were also far removed from my own origins may have played an unconscious role as I tried to dive into my new Anglo-Saxon environment. But even at that time I was already looking ahead and starting to investigate National Socialism, a subject which I had avoided, perhaps because it touched me so closely. Nearly two decades had now passed since I had arrived in the United States and there was no more need to immerse myself in a respectable Anglo-Saxon subject in order to distance myself

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13 *Ibid.*, 115

14 George L. Mosse, *The Idea of Sovereignty in England, from Sir Thomas Smith to Sir Edward Coke*, Thesis, Harvard University, 1946. The thesis was published (in a widely revised form) four years later: *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England. From the Reign of Queen Elizabeth to the Petition of Right*, Michigan State College Press, East Lansing, MI, 1950

15 The Army Specialized Training Program was a military training program aimed at training soldiers for occupation duties in Europe.

16 Mosse's most important works from this period are *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England. From the Reign of Queen Elizabeth to the Petition of Right*, op. cit., *The Reformation*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963, *The Holy Pretence. A Study in Christianity and the Reason of State from William Perkins to John Winthrop*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1957, as well as a number of articles on early modern history.

17 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 6. See also the interview with I. Runge and U. Stelbrink, *George Mosse: “Ich bleibe Emigrant”. Gespräche mit George L. Mosse*, Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1991

from my past as an outsider. I have no good explanation for my switch to modern history, which occurred even before my position at Wisconsin locked me in place as a modern historian. Surely my interest in the more recent period had always existed, but my graduate training had been entirely in the earlier periods of European history.”<sup>18</sup>

From then on, Mosse would focus his attention on the study of fascism and national socialism, giving a great contribution to their interpretation through a series of innovative and pathbreaking works. In 1966, he also founded (with Walter Laqueur), the *Journal of Contemporary History*, which was to “become the leading journal published in English in the field of twentieth-century European history”.<sup>19</sup> His contribution, however, has not remained confined to the analysis of fascism. Mosse has revolutionized what was commonly understood as cultural history, widening the scope of the discipline, anticipating many trends that would emerge only in later years, and opening new perspectives on up to then neglected fields of research such as the history of sexuality or of the body. His original approach has been fruitful for an understanding of modern mass movements, but also for that of the functioning of the mechanisms of mass society. Mosse's work, however, meant to go beyond the historiographical scope. Indeed, he regarded the historical profession as more than a detached study of the past: history, in his book, “must needs be present politics”.<sup>20</sup> He believed that politics is a totality which encompasses the whole of man's existence, and therefore it is impossible to be unpolitical, since any act of ours, be it of commission or of omission, has a direct political relevance: hence his “fundamental moral indignation against the aspiration to the apolitical”.<sup>21</sup> This entails that history as well is a totality, and that it is profoundly political. As a consequence, what the historian does must necessarily spring from his own beliefs, ideals and convictions; what motivates him to investigate the past must be some internal relation he has with it. Like Benedetto Croce, whom he greatly admired, Mosse believed that there is always a direct connection between the mind of the historian and his object of study; in the same fashion, he believed with him that a historian's books must be more than plain narratives or explanations of facts. Like Croce's, Mosse's history was intended to be ethical-political, to promote a message, to defend values which were supposed to have political implications.<sup>22</sup> Thus history becomes a faith imbued with a sense of mission. Mosse argued that “historical diagnosis

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18 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 142. Mosse concludes the passage by remarking that in the course on Western Civilization held at Iowa he had “already began to emphasize the fascist experience”. *Ibid.*

19 Stanley Payne, “The Mosse Legacy”, *The Wisconsin Academic Review*, Summer 2000

20 George L. Mosse, “Response by George Mosse”, in *George Mosse – On the Occasion of His Retirement. 17.6.85*, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1986, xxix

21 Seymour Drescher, David Sabeau, Allan Sharlin, “George Mosse and Political Symbolism”, in Seymour Drescher, David Sabeau, Allan Sharlin (ed. by), *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe. Essays in Honor of George L. Mosse*, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, 1982, 3

22 Anson Rabinbach has said that everything Mosse wrote, he wrote with a “political impulse”. Anson Rabinbach, “George L. Mosse 1919-1999: An Appreciation”, *Central European History*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1999, 335

based upon the unrelenting use of the critical mind should be combined with a certain vision”<sup>23</sup>. He himself drew a picture of his own vision as he stated, during a lecture, that “I believe with Romain Rolland that it is the primary duty of the intellectual to keep the torch of freedom alive in an age of iron. The task is not to let that age arrive, and here I think I have illustrated some of the relevance of the course: even if in quite personal terms.”<sup>24</sup> In a 1967 letter to Professor Merle Curti, Mosse expressed his views explicitly, praising his colleague's works and stating that his history was a “history with a purpose, not for its own sake alone”; Curti, he wrote, embraced a “concept of history as the projection of values”, he sought to combine history “with those liberal values which must be ours ... If the present task is to humanize the world or perish than you have pointed history in the right direction and made intellectual history the pioneer in this task.”<sup>25</sup>

### ***The Link Between Life and Work***

The values Mosse embraced, he had learned from his life. He was a historian whose personal experience and whose work intermingled to the point that they cannot be separated without losing sight of the sense, and the significance, of his accomplishments. As a Jew, he was an outsider in Nazi Germany, and yet his peculiarity originated from his being a *double* outsider, as he defined himself in his memoir. Along with his Jewishness, his homosexuality too played a determinant role his in life and in his work. He could not really hide his Jewishness, but he “did not have to parade it in a society which discriminated against Jews”; as to his homosexuality, this had be kept hidden to avoid persecution and exclusion, which would have prevented him from attaining a “respectable position in society or in any profession”. Society's “pressure for conformity – he recalled – could not be resisted”.<sup>26</sup> If it is not surprising that he, like many other German-Jewish émigré historians, turned to the study of national socialism and of the Holocaust making them the core of their work, the fact that he, beyond this, delved deeply into the moral and sexual dimension of Nazism and, more generally, into the workings of modern society, with its processes of stereotyping, inclusion and exclusion, certainly represents an element of great originality. Steven Aschheim, a former student and friend of Mosse's, has written about the “experiential roots” of his studies<sup>27</sup>; Renato Moro has argued that “come sempre, forse, uno dei migliori interpreti del persecutore può essere la vittima”, and Emilio Gentile, stressing the “intertwining of autobiography and historiography” in Mosse, has acutely referred to the “fascination

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23 “Response by George Mosse”, in *George Mosse. On the Occasion of his Retirement*. 17. 6. 85, op. cit., xxx

24 George L. Mosse, “Europe and the Modern World - Final Lecture”, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 33; Leo Baeck Institute.

25 George L. Mosse, draft for a letter to Merle Curti, 16 October 1967, George L. Mosse Archive, Memorial Library, University of Madison-Wisconsin, Box 3, Folder 2

26 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op.cit., 83

27 Steven Aschheim, “George Mosse at 80: A Critical Laudatio”, *The Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 34 (2), 1999, 304

of the persecutor”, an expression which fits the latter's attitude toward national socialism.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Mosse believed empathy to be one of the best tools in the hands of the historian, and made full use of it. He sought to see the world “through the eyes of its faiths”<sup>29</sup>, he thought that “a historian in order to understand the past has to empathize with it, to get under its skin”.<sup>30</sup> He did so fully aware of what the “fascination of the persecutor” meant: as a young boy in Germany, he had run away from home to go to see a Hitler rally, and many years later he still recalled how this had been an “experience”, how he got “carried away” (“mitgerissen”) by the feeling of belonging to a mass of people, and by Hitler's charisma.<sup>31</sup> In Salem, he had found himself immersed in an environment which gave him a savor of nationalism through the linkage of history, literature and the landscape: the school gave him “a first taste of nationalism, which at the time I found congenial; there was a danger that it might provide the belief system I so sadly lacked ... When as a historian much later I wrote about German nationalism, I did have an insight into its truly seductive nature”.<sup>32</sup> In Israel, he admittedly felt drawn to Zionism, and recalled that “when I saw the new Israeli Army or attended the swearing-in of the paratroopers on Masada, my heart beat faster”.<sup>33</sup> Mosse knew that he was far from immune to the appeal of emotions, and it does not surprise that he set irrationality at the centre of his works on mass movements like nationalism or fascism.

Mosse's “double outsiderdom” played a crucial role in his historiography. As a homosexual, if he wanted to be accepted in society and, above all, in the academic world, he had to suppress his personality and he did so sublimating it “into work and fantasy life”.<sup>34</sup> Only since the 1960s, after the sexual revolution, society became progressively more tolerant toward homosexuality, and here his slow “coming out” could begin, to be definitively “accomplished” in the 1980s. Yet this experience obviously left a mark on his personality, he felt “anger over the fact that the strictures of respectability had made my own life so much more difficult.”<sup>35</sup> This “anger” was to be reflected on his historiography when he

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28 Renato Moro, “George L. Mosse, storico dell'irrazionalismo moderno”, in A. Staderini, L. Zani, F. Magni (ed. by), *La grande guerra e il fronte interno. Studi in onore di George Mosse*, Camerino 1998, 36. Emilio Gentile, “A Provisional Dwelling. Origin and Development of the Concept of Fascism in Mosse's Historiography”, in S. Payne, D. Sorkin, J. Tortorice (ed. by), *What History Tells. George L. Mosse and the Culture of Western Europe*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2004, 44-47. The “fascination of the persecutor” is also the title of Gentile's recent book on Mosse, *Il fascino del persecutore. George L. Mosse e la catastrofe dell'uomo moderno*, op. cit.

29 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op.cit., 178

30 *Ibid.*, 53. For example, as he was researching on the German Youth Movement in the early 1960s, he had to spend a month at a youth hostel, and he commented: “that should really give me the feel of the youth movement”. George L. Mosse, letter to Phil (full name is missing), 8 June 1961, George L. Mosse Archive, Memorial Library, University of Madison-Wisconsin, Box 4, Folder 7

31 George L. Mosse, “*Ich bleibe Emigrant*”. *Gespräche mit George L. Mosse*, op. cit., 77

32 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op.cit., 70. Mosse never tired to repeat that the landscape of Salem always remained his landscape.

33 *Ibid.*, 191

34 *Ibid.*, 197

35 *Ibid.*, 180. Mosse had a quite opposite attitude toward Germany: he never felt any kind of resentment toward his country of origin, unlike other emigré German-Jewish historians (the difference in attitude between Mosse and, for example, Peter Gay is telling. See Peter Gay's memoir, *My German Question. Growing Up in Nazi Berlin*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1998).

turned, in the 1970s and 1980s, to the study of racism, bourgeois morality and sexuality, thus becoming a historian of that very respectability that had so much affected his life. He did so, however, not through an indiscriminate attack on bourgeois society and values but, rather, through serious and well-documented historical analysis, tilling a ground that had been plowed by the thought of the Frankfurt School, and opening new and often unorthodox perspectives on the history of fascism and, more extensively, of modern western society. His most controversial statement has been that the new man of national socialism was the ideal bourgeois, an assertion that at first glance seems to fit his “anger”, but whose complex origins require careful examination.

### ***The Devil's Advocate***

Mosse considered his “double outsiderdom” as a privileged point of observation, as an opportunity rather than a handicap. He felt that, from that perspective, he could look at society from without, while at the same time he could observe it from within, being himself a member of it who had attained integration through respectability. His criticism of bourgeois society was simply meant to be constructive: as he himself said, he liked to “break taboos” to “get people to think”, and “not in the practice of daily life”.<sup>36</sup> He was convinced that the task of the historian is also that of unmasking the myths people live by, and he often sought to accomplish this task adopting provocation as a tool. Many who have written on Mosse's work have highlighted this important aspect. It has been pointed out how Mosse could make “apparently outrageous assertions”, thereby inviting the criticism of colleagues and students<sup>37</sup> or how he loved to make “irreverent judgements ... both playful and serious”<sup>38</sup>. Jeffrey Herf has defined him a “provocateur” stating that he “offered one provocation after another to the conventions of the discipline”, and observing how his history was never “politically correct”.<sup>39</sup> George Mosse the historian always retained the personality of the mischievous young Gerhard who, confronted with the Soviet Foreign Minister Georgy Chicherin at a formal reception in the luxurious Berlin house of his family, noticed that he was wearing a tuxedo and asked him in his “usual loud voice how a Communist could possibly wear such a bourgeois garment”.<sup>40</sup> Interviewed in the late 1970s to speak

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36 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op.cit., 181

37 Sterling Fishman, “GLM: An Appreciation”, in *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe. Essays in Honor of George L. Mosse*, op. cit., 279

38 Anson Rabinbach, “George L. Mosse 1919-1999: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 331

39 Jeffrey Herf, “The Historian as Provocateur: George Mosse's Accomplishment and Legacy”. The essay can be found on the Internet website of the Yad Vashem Institute ([www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org)). The paper version of the article was published in *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 29, 2001, 7-27. Emilio Gentile has defined Mosse an “agent provocateur in the historiography of fascism”, due to the “subversive” character of his works, which shattered common interpretations of the time. Emilio Gentile in “A Provisional Dwelling. Origin and Development of the Concept of Fascism in Mosse's Historiography”, op. cit., 52

40 Mosse himself recalls this episode in his autobiography. *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 40. The episode is also stressed by Herf in “The Historian as Provocateur: George Mosse's Accomplishment and Legacy” as characteristic of Mosse's personality.

about Mosse, Robert Nye colorfully recalled how he, “if an audience [had] a certain point of view ... adjust[ed] his lecture to antagonize their feelings”, thus inspiring students to search for the correct answer in an attempt to support their original conclusion, arousing “in people their interests in a subject by challenging certain set assumptions”. Mosse was, according to Nye, an “intellectual devil's advocate”.<sup>41</sup>

With such an attitude, Mosse has shattered many common assumptions about fascism and the bourgeois society we live in to this day. If the fascist threat, the main object of his studies, now seems (at least historically) over in western liberal democracies, its “psychological base”, he believed, is still with us. His view of human nature, as we shall see, relied much on psychological and anthropological categories, and was based on the assumption that the mechanisms of the human psyche do not change in time, and that primitive as well as modern man share a “similarity of human wishes and aspirations, reactions and frustrations”.<sup>42</sup> From these premises, he investigated modern history making use of the categories of myth and symbol, intended as reflecting man's constant need to transcend reality and to objectify his perceptions through visual means of communication. Any society, he argued, needs cohesion in order to function, and myths and symbols can provide it. He believed irrationalism to be an inextricable part of human nature: as Herf recalls, “in often successful efforts to provoke, stimulate, and entertain his audience, he would say something like, 'you all think these ideas are so preposterous. Well, don't you know that preposterous ideas are very important. Or are you so naive as to think that history is made only by nice, logical Kantian ethics?’”<sup>43</sup> Mosse became, it has been observed, a historian of modern irrationalism and this because he, in the effort to grasp the appeal of national socialism, focussed on the historical relevance of irrational myths and of ideologies that sprang not from the “high” thought of first-rate intellectuals, but rather from that of often obscure second- or third-rate thinkers who were much closer to popular piety and feelings. The example of the Enlightenment was, in his opinion, telling, since it represented the inadequacy of rational, intellectualist philosophy to be in tune with the moods of the masses, more often than not sensitive to irrational impulses: as Carl Gustav Jung wrote (and Mosse quoted him), “where the masses are in movement, the archetypes begin”.<sup>44</sup>

From these psychological and anthropological foundations, Mosse dissected the mechanisms of modern mass society. He did so focussing specifically on the aesthetic and the moral dimension, reading the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a “visual age” where society's need for cohesion is expressed through the construction of stereotypes that draw boundaries between the normal and the abnormal, the moral and the immoral. Society self-defines itself, and in the process it creates a type that

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41 Robert Nye interviewed by Lauren Fairchild for *The Oklahoma Daily*, 6 November 1979

42 George L. Mosse, “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, *American Historical Review*, LXXV, December 1969, 451

43 “The Historian as Provocateur: George Mosse's Accomplishment and Legacy”, op. cit.

44 George L. Mosse, “What is fascism?”, lecture, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, seminar held at Stanford University in 1963. The transcript of the seminar, completed in 1964, has never been published.

corresponds to the accepted values and morality, and an anti-type that represent its antithesis. Bourgeois respectability and the science of race contributed, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the creation of these stereotypes by providing aesthetic and moral values that were to become criteria for discrimination. Their eventual alliance with nationalism and fascism paved the ground for the extermination of outsiders like Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies and the mentally ill. The Holocaust was the point where all the threads weaved in Mosse's work eventually merged.

### ***Mosse the Scholar***

Mosse's approach, that clearly reflects the influence of his own outsiderdom on his historiography, has shed much light on the cultural prehistory of the Final Solution. Moreover, preoccupations such as those with the workings of modern society merged with his other major concern, that with the liberty, dignity and rights of the individual when confronted with the political necessities of the State. As a victim of totalitarianism, he was fully aware of the dangers inherent in the depersonalization of man as that sought by fascism or communism in the name of a state ethics, or of an ideology, which substituted itself for individual rights and freedoms, imposing conformism over the free, critical mind, and thus annihilating liberty. Mosse expressed his preoccupations through his writings, addressing problems rather than chronologies, and infusing them with a moral and pedagogical intent which was intended to go beyond the strict scope of historical analysis. His work was always linked to current problems, and its whole body is a passionate defence of liberty and the critical mind as against authoritarianism and conformism. As a renowned lecturer, he also sought to spread his message through countless speeches and lectures, many of which delivered outside the academia. Sterling Fishman has effectively described Mosse's style of teaching:

“he brought with him a booming voice with dramatic modulation, clear, slightly accented diction, memorable descriptions, powerful phrasing, and the ability to make transcendent ideas comprehensible and personal. If George had chosen to be an evangelist and used his oratorical gifts for converting the faithless, he could have conducted a successful cross-country crusade – although it is hard to picture him in that role. George did not practice demagoguery with his students, but he has always been able to reach his most passive hearers. Without employing oversimplifications he has been able to make the ideas of even Calvin or Hegel exciting and personally meaningful.”<sup>45</sup>

Paul Breines too, another former student of Mosse's in the 1960s, has vividly pictured his style and

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45 “GLM: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 281

personality from the lectern:

“George's lecturing style was not merely dramatic; it was intensely engaged with the students present. Characteristic gestures included gripping the lectern with both hands, arms extended, posture erect, as if to channel the intellectual and moral passion inside him; leaving the lectern to pace slowly back and forth as he spoke, then returning to it, leaning forward over it as he peered out intently at his listeners. At such a moment, he might have been saying something of the following sort: *yes, you should realize, you students radicals especially, that you can learn a great deal from John Calvin. For he understood what you so often forget – that real social change doesn't come from what you love to call militancy and certainly not from theory, to which some of you are addicted, but from the two things you lack* (and here he would apparently become stern): *organization*, he would say, then pause, shifting to a provocatively satisfied grin, *and a sense of the symbolic in politics*. Astonishing combinations of erudition and political-moral challenges, George's lectures, as countless students have said, were events.”<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, Mosse believed that “the best results are achieved if the student has some personal or at least internal relationship to his historical work”<sup>47</sup>, and always tried to arouse one's interest seeking to find and stimulate this relationship. His works, as he would say, were always written to stimulate some debate, to “pose issues that are morally significant and intellectually interesting”.<sup>48</sup>

Addressing the question “is fascism alive?” in the early 1970s, he said that fascism does not represent a threat to western society anymore: the enemy is, rather, conservatism, the establishment that wants to preserve itself without giving up freedom and parliamentarism, and by so doing it seeks conformity through suppression: then the real question is “is it dangerous to see in non conformity and long hair something that has to be suppressed?” People, Mosse said, seek law and order, freedom and the preservation of the status quo: “this is the future”. There is a great danger in this, Mosse warned, since “everyone depends for his comforts and livelihood on the working of an integrated and complex system”, and the individual has become a “plaything of complex society ... That is partly what the revolt of youth is about, that is partly what law and order is about: to keep this system intact. That is why individualism, an essential basis of freedom, is in some danger.” Law, order and the technocrats have become the new Gods and, he concluded, thought there will be no fascism anymore, “freedom

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46 Paul Breines, “Finding Oneself in History and Vice Versa: Remarks on ‘George’s Voice’”, in *German Politics and Society*, Issue 57, Vol. 18, No. 4, Winter 2000, 9-10

47 George L. Mosse, “Response by George Mosse”, in *George Mosse. On the Occasion of his Retirement*. 17. 6. 85, op. cit., xxviii. In his memoir, Mosse wrote: “I have always felt that history, in order to be absorbed, must be shown to have relevance to the students' lives, that it is more than just a good story of wars, adventures, and kings”. *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 197

48 Jeffrey Herf, “The Historian as Provocateur: George Mosse’s Accomplishment and Legacy”, op. cit.



will suffer once more”.<sup>49</sup> Mosse's preoccupation with the danger inherent in society's self-definition, with conformism, with the balance between the rights of the individual and national security, or with the relationship between ethics and politics had him tackle recurrent problems that are still at issue today.<sup>50</sup> His moral and historiographical legacy can therefore be of great value insofar as it can provide cultural tools of historical analysis which can offer deep insights into the workings of modern society and politics.<sup>51</sup>

Mosse's passionate defence of cultural history has helped restate its importance, at the same time laying a bridge between it and other varieties of history (social, political, economic) as well as other disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, art and literature. Though he often complained of monocausal approaches to history that interpret it from the point of view only of political, social or economic structures, and about the little open-mindedness of historians who disregard the adoption of anthropological categories or the application of the study of art and literature to the historical discipline, he never felt the need to build an apparatus intended as a methodological backbone to his works.<sup>52</sup> At the Stanford seminary on fascism, held in 1963, when faced by pressing criticism about his supposed lack of a theoretical apparatus, or failure to use precise definitions, Mosse commented: “I'm still troubled by these academic abstractions, power structures, social structures and so on. What I was interested in is to see why people went along, actually and in fact.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, he had always showed little patience with rigorous and disciplined scholarship, which did not suit his “more theoretical and adventurous bent of mind”<sup>54</sup>: he openly declared to have patience only for those matters which fascinated him, and gratefully recalled how his intellectual curiosity had been first awakened as his English teacher at Bootham School let the class teach himself, without imposing that strict discipline that had caused Mosse so many troubles at the Mommsen Gymnasium in Berlin.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, he had

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49 George L. Mosse, “Is Fascism Alive? - Australian Broadcasting Corporation”, 1973, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 47; Leo Baeck Institute.

50 For the persistence of respectability in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Mosse's observations in George L. Mosse, “Il declino della morale”, *Prometeo*, 14, no. 53, 1996, 6-13

51 For example, Mosse's historiographical approach could be, in my opinion, much useful for an analysis of today's politics. On the one hand, in addressing the shattered balance, in parliamentary democracies, between individual rights and issues of national security in times of crisis, as it is undoubtedly the case after September 11, 2001. On the other, in offering a key to the understanding of society's continuous creation of enemy stereotypes, and its need for conformity. An examination of popular cultural artefacts in this regard could provide the historian of this age with useful insights into the making of public opinion and its consequent political relevance. See, for example, the extremely fortunate TV series *24* which, following the fictitious adventures of an American counter-terrorist unit, implicitly renders extreme, violent measures such as torture “acceptable” and “reasonable” if implemented in the name of national security. Another interesting example is the recent, equally controversial Zack Snyder's film *300* (2007), a fictionalized retelling of the battle of the Thermopylae which confronts masculine, honourable and heroic Greek soldiers with effeminate and lascivious Persians.

52 One exception is his article “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, op. cit., whose importance is analyzed in Chapter II

53 “Fascism Once More”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

54 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 120

55 Mosse recalled his experience at the Mommsen Gymnasium: “there I came into immediate conflict with its strict discipline, but what brought this schooling to an end after only one year was my encounter with the Latin irregular verb. The classics were still the core of the curriculum, but grammar had taken over what was once regarded as classical

hardly been a particularly brilliant student, as he himself pointed out: once he had become a professor at Iowa, he recalled, "I could teach and I could write books, skills for which no one who had met me in Germany or England would have given me credit. As my former headmistress put it when I visited her in Germany after the war, 'How come you are a professor when you were such a dreadful student?'".<sup>56</sup> Such anecdotes shed much light on his approach to history: he was never keen on disciplined scholarship, he rather preferred "to see the bigger picture"<sup>57</sup>, to find the hidden connections, laying much importance on intuition, which surely accounts for the innovative, original books he wrote, but also for the many imprecisions they may contain. Walter Laqueur has written: "he was neither a saint nor a perfectionist. His spelling was uncertain in all languages ... and he had the disdain of a grand seigneur vis-à-vis dates in history. In a memoir about his parents he had written that his father had invited Edith Piaf to perform in Berlin in 1919. I pointed out that this seemed unlikely since Piaf was five years old at the time. Did he mean perhaps Yvette Guilbert or Mistinguett? Yes, of course, he said, but did it really matter?"<sup>58</sup>

### ***Pioneering Cultural History***

Much has been written on George Mosse, and yet no attempt has been made, to my knowledge, to write an intellectual biography that seeks to offer a wide and organic perspective on his work, focussing on its inner development from his earliest writings on the early modern age to the more recent studies on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>59</sup> As it has been observed, there is a deep continuity between these two phases of his historiography, which Mosse himself termed "continuity of interests". The same moral fervor, the same preoccupations link these two diverse periods of his academic career, and yet the continuity is also methodological, insofar as Mosse's view of history as a dialectic process based on the interaction of myth and reality (between ideas and the concrete historical framework) remained a constant in his work, along with the belief that there is no reality outside history, and that all history is contemporary history.

However, his historiography underwent, over the years, important methodological turns and thematic shifts. The most evident shift in the object of study is that from early modern to modern

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learning, confirming the victory of the philologist over the humanist. Learning these verbs by heart took more discipline than I could muster. I promptly flunked, and would have had to repeat the whole year over again". *Ibid.*, 50

56 *Ibid.*, 149

57 *Ibid.*, 115

58 Walter Laqueur, "Foreward" to *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., xi

59 There is large number of analytical articles, focussed either on particular aspects of Mosse's work, or on its more general significance (for a list, see the Bibliography). The only vast analysis in form of a book is Emilio Gentile's recent *Il fascino del persecutore. George L. Mosse e la catastrofe dell'uomo moderno*, op. cit., which is admittedly not an intellectual biography but rather an attempt to "ricomporre, in una sequenza analitica, la genesi e lo sviluppo della sua interpretazione del fascismo e della catastrofe dell'uomo moderno come manifestazione di 'forze tenebrose e potenti che minacciano di sommergere, e hanno in tempi recentissimi sommerso l'umanità europea'". *Ibid.*, 13

history, which occurred as Mosse moved to the University of Wisconsin in the mid-1950s. Yet there have been more shifts that divide these two main periods. As to the early modern, Mosse passed from the study of English constitutional history to religious issues at the time of the Reformation. As to the modern, he began investigating the cultural roots of national socialism in the 1960s, then in the 1970s he focussed on a more European perspective, analyzing mass politics and contributing to the formulation of a general theory of fascism. In those very years, he also began his investigation of the history of racism, only to move on, in the 1980s, to the history of sexuality, of the First World War, and to Jewish history. These shifts went hand in hand with two methodological turns: if his earliest works dealt with an almost traditional history of first-rate-thinkers' ideas, in the second half of the 1950s he adopted a different approach, turning his interest to popular culture and ideology, where the study of popular literature became of primary importance for the historian. The “fruit” of this approach was the pathbreaking book *The Crisis of German Ideology. Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (1964), a study on Volkish ideology in pre-Nazi Germany<sup>60</sup>. Then, in the 1960s, the major turn occurred: he progressively came to consider not only written means of expression such as literature, but also visual ones such as architecture and physical stereotypes, including into his methodology anthropological categories and the analysis of the social function of myths and symbols. This “anthropological and visual turn” laid the bases for his most original and fruitful works, notably *The Nationalization of the Masses* (1975), *Toward the Final Solution* (1978), *Nationalism and Sexuality* (1985), *Fallen Soldiers* (1990) and *The Image of Man* (1996). He coined the term “new politics” to define the new liturgical style of mass politics born at the time of the French Revolution; he set the Holocaust at the centre of European culture, helping to unmask its links with Enlightenment rationalism; he then highlighted the connections between bourgeois respectability, sexuality and nationalism (and, extensively, fascism), opening new and controversial vistas on the history of fascism; he eventually analyzed the Great War and the process of brutalization of life and politics it brought about, seeing in the “myth of the war experience” and in the cult of the fallen soldiers a further point of contact between nationalism and Christianity, after having already interpreted nationalism and fascism as religious phenomena, putting his knowledge of early modern religious issues at the service of his understanding of modern politics.

### ***Machiavellism and the Holocaust***

Many of these aspects have been dealt with and analyzed by his critics, though no attempt has been made at unifying them into an organic work (with the exception of Emilio Gentile in his *Il fascismo*

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<sup>60</sup> *The Crisis of German Ideology. Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*, Howard Fertig, New York, 1964 (From now on, I will quote from the 1998 edition of the book by the same publisher)

*del persecutore*). Yet there are other aspects that have received little or no attention, and to give them the due importance can help shed further light on Mosse's thought and work. The roots of the “anthropological and visual turn”, the development of Mosse's concept of “myth” or his interpretation of the Enlightenment have only recently received serious consideration, and yet not much stress has been put on the influence played by Mosse's “rediscovery” of the German-Jewish Weimar intellectual heritage in this regard. Similar observations can be made about the crucial role of the 1960s in his intellectual biography:<sup>61</sup> not only did the student movement affect his view of mass politics: it also drew him near to the thought of this Weimar intellectuals and to that of the Frankfurt School, which were to affect his methodology and his critique of bourgeois society. Moreover, the 1960s saw Mosse's establishing closer ties to the state of Israel, which brought a growing emotive and intellectual involvement that was to have an influence on his views about fascism, which he eventually came to regard as a form of nationalism. Indeed, his ever stronger ties to Israel and Jewish culture set nationalism at the centre of his reflections, and this had a twofold effect: on the one hand, to see fascism as a “nationalist revolution” provided him with the “missing link”, with what he held to be the key to its proper understanding.<sup>62</sup> On the other, it initiated a series of considerations about the positive potential of that very ideology Mosse had attacked in all his writings; now he came to consider nationalism as an “opportunity” as long as it became patriotism, that is, nationalism imbued with cosmopolitan and humanist values: the humanization of nationalism became his “mission”. At the same time, the encounter with the thought of early Zionists had him further reflect on the problem of the balance between reason and irrationalism, enriching his historiographical perspectives and leading him to elaborate an own casuistry, inspired by those very Divines he had written about in his *The Holy Pretence* (1957). This book, too often neglected and yet central to his intellectual biography, dealt with the assimilation of the idea of reason of state into the Christian framework of ethics in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Just as the Casuists had attempted to find a balance between the Serpent and the Dove, between Machiavellism and Christian ethics, Mosse advocated the necessity to reconcile rationalism and irrationalism, thus recognizing the necessity of man's irrational impulses for modern politics. Reason alone cannot fulfill man's religious strivings, so an address to the emotions is needed: the “new politics”, which Mosse identified with fascist politics, became then necessary for the survival of parliamentary democracy, provided that it remained “emotion tempered by reason”.<sup>63</sup>

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61 The critic who has mostly stressed the importance of the 1960s for Mosse, stressing in particular the link with his interpretation of respectability, has been Paul Breines. See Paul Breines, “Finding Oneself in History and Vice Versa: Remarks on ‘George’s Voice’”, op. cit.

62 George L. Mosse, “Fascism as a Nationalist Movement: The Missing Link”, undated; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 7; folder 21; Leo Baeck Institute. Given the themes and the categories Mosse uses in this article, it can be said that it, in all probability, dates back to the 1980s

63 George L. Mosse, “Nationhood and Diaspora”, speech, 1980, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 27; Leo Baeck Institute. The occasion for this speech was the inauguration of the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, established in 1980 in Cape Town, South Africa

If the 1960s were crucial in broadening the scope of Mosse's historiography and of his personal interests, the 1950s set the tone for that “continuity of interests” which would inform his whole work. His writings on Renaissance Europe, though apparently detached from his biography, rested on two pillars that would support all his subsequent writings. The first was the already mentioned preoccupation with the liberty of the individual as confronted with the State; the second was the question of political morality. Both themes sprang from Mosse's concern with the reception of the thought of Machiavelli in Europe. On the one hand, the idea of reason of state laid the bases for the construction of the modern state; on the other, it gave birth to a new, separate morality, a state ethics which was different from those traditional Christian values that had informed medieval political life and that remained eventually confined to the private sphere of existence. If the first of these two tenets has often been connected with Mosse's subsequent interest in totalitarianism, which he regarded as the “stretching of the old idea of *raison d'état*”<sup>64</sup>, the connection of the second with his other central interest, the Holocaust, has never been highlighted. And yet it was the “fateful divorce of ethics from politics”<sup>65</sup> caused by the emergence of the modern state that, in Mosse's interpretation, paved the ground for the “double standard of morality”<sup>66</sup>, public and private, which lay at the roots of that Nazi “split personality”<sup>67</sup> that would eventually concur in making the Final Solution possible. Perpetrators responded to bourgeois morality in private life, and in the public sphere either to racist ideology, or to that cultural code that had been created since the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the process of self-definition of society, and that had brought to the depersonalization of the outsider: “what the Commandant of Auschwitz was murdering were types which lacked all individuality to him. Murder, in these circumstances, was depersonalized and completely remote from that Aryan life whose ethics coincided with those of the bourgeoisie.”<sup>68</sup> Machiavelli, in Mosse's interpretation, represented the beginning of a new politics, of a “conscious acceptance of politics as a struggle for power in which almost all means are justified” to reach the end goal, the good of the commonwealth.<sup>69</sup> Speaking of the age of the Renaissance, Mosse said that it was “at that point where modern politics first [began] to intrude upon the moral sphere”, where the public started its invasion of the private that was to culminate in the triumph of public morality with nationalism and fascism, where morality was directed by the state.<sup>70</sup>

The Holocaust can thus be depicted as the triumph of the Serpent over the Dove, the point of

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64 George L. Mosse, “The Problem of National Socialist Morality”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

65 “Puritanism and Reason of State in Old and New England”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, Vol. IX, No. 1, January 1952, 71

66 *Ibid.*, 68

67 *The Culture of Western Europe. The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. An Introduction*, Rand Mc Nally & Company, Chicago, 1961, 358

68 *Ibid.*, 361

69 George L. Mosse, Early Modern History Course, 1969. I thank John Tortorice for having supplied me with the summaries and transcripts of these lectures.

70 George L. Mosse, “Warburg College Lecture”, 1965, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 20; Leo Baeck Institute.

arrival of Mosse's inquiry into his own past, which was so tightly connected to the heart of twentieth-century European history. Obviously Mosse never drew a direct line between the reception of the thought of Machiavelli and the "Jewish catastrophe" of his time, neither did he see any inevitability, or predestination, in European history that could make one envisage its apex of violence and brutality at the hands of the Nazis: concrete, historical causes brought Germany into the hands of Hitler. And yet Mosse's intellectual biography can be read as an attempt to comprehend that long and winding imaginary road that led from Machiavellism to totalitarianism, from Machiavellism to the Holocaust.

## CHAPTER I

### FROM MACHIAVELLISM TO TOTALITARIANISM

“I’ve always believed one should be interested in problems and not  
chronology, and so the problems I have worked on - the problem of the  
relationship between reason and irrationalism, the problem of  
Reason of State - which occupied most of my work in the earlier centuries,  
aren’t so far removed from the problems I worked on later.”<sup>71</sup>  
(George L. Mosse)

“My work in early modern history set forth some themes which were followed up later  
in my work on fascism and National Socialism and which have influenced  
most of my writings on a wide variety of subjects.”<sup>72</sup>  
(George L. Mosse)

“We are writing on a very old tradition and this ends up in totalitarianism,  
the stretching of the old idea of *raison d'état*.”<sup>73</sup>  
(George L. Mosse)

Had Mosse's family not escaped Germany in 1933, he would have been, in all probability, a victim of twentieth-century totalitarianism. His whole life spent as an “eternal emigrant”, a refugee from the atrocities of the Third Reich, inevitably left a deep mark on Mosse the man, but also on Mosse the historian. His life as a refugee from totalitarianism, his involvement in the anti-fascist movement in the 1930s, his belief in Liberalism, his constant struggle “against the encroachments of absolute power upon the liberties of the subject”<sup>74</sup> characterize the indissoluble link between his life and his work. Glancing through the titles of his vast bibliography, his concern with totalitarianism in its fascist version seems to dominate his writings from the late 1950s onward, that is, since he began publishing his first studies on the subjects he was not to abandon through the rest of his long life: German antisemitism, national socialism and fascism. His career as an early-modern historian, from his

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71 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1978 (first published in Italy as *Intervista sul Nazismo*, Roma-Bari: Laterza 1977), 26-27

72 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 175

73 George L. Mosse, “The Problem of National Socialist Morality”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

74 George L. Mosse, “Notes on the Marginalia of Sir Edward Coke at Holkham”, unpublished article, 1950, George L. Mosse Archive, Memorial Library, University of Madison-Wisconsin, Box 6, Folder 68

1946 doctoral dissertation to the mid-1960s, seems to be far removed from the events which animated his life, to the point that a colleague of his at Iowa University asked him how he could be so interesting while his books were so dull.<sup>75</sup> However, such a view of his work would be misleading. Mosse believed, like Benedetto Croce whose thought has been greatly influential for him, that all of history is contemporary history, that history is linked to the historian's interest in the life of the present: such a view implied that the problems Mosse dealt with in his works were always closely related to his personal experiences and convictions. Since these hardly changed over the years, one can rightly agree with the historian when he speaks of a “continuity of interests”<sup>76</sup> which informs his writings over the decades. This “continuity” is partly methodological and partly thematic. It is methodological in that it is based upon a dialectic vision of history which will never change. It is thematic, because two guiding concerns ran through the whole of his work: that with the relationship between the liberty of the individual and the power of the State, and the related question of the relationship between ethics and politics. The crucial methodological changes which occurred in Mosse's historiography in the 1950s and 1960s never affected this continuity, which can therefore be regarded as the central tenet of his work.

The epitome of Mosse's continuity of interests is, in my opinion, the idea of Reason of State. David Warren Sabean, in his essay on Mosse's *The Holy Pretence* (1957), refers to the book as a work “which George clearly saw as central to his intellectual biography”.<sup>77</sup> Sabean recalls Mosse sending him a copy of the book and writing on the jacket “I (but hardly anyone else) consider it one of my most important books”.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, most reviewers of Mosse have completely neglected the significance of this work. *The Holy Pretence* deals with the assimilation of the idea of Reason of State (in Machiavelli's formulation) within the Christian framework of ethics in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and represents the flowering of many years of reflection over what Mosse called “the most modern of problems”<sup>79</sup>, that is the question of religion and political morality, which he regarded as “a central one in our Civilization”<sup>80</sup>. Moreover, the idea of Reason of State implies the problem of power and the State, and is therefore directly related to the relationship between the individual and the State, thus acting as a common denominator for both thematic guidelines of Mosse's continuity of interests.

In 1963, Mosse defined totalitarianism as the “stretching of the old idea of *raison d'état*”.<sup>81</sup>

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75 George L. Mosse, “Response by George Mosse”, in *George Mosse. On the Occasion of his Retirement*, 17. 6. 85, op. cit., xxviii-xxix

76 George L. Mosse, *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 28

77 David Warren Sabean, “George Mosse and *The Holy Pretence*”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 15. Mosse's book is *The Holy Pretence. A Study in Christianity and the Reason of State from William Perkins to John Winthrop*, op. cit.

78 “George Mosse and *The Holy Pretence*”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 15

79 George L. Mosse, “The Pragmatism of the Freshman History Course”, *The Social Studies for Teachers and Administrators*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 8, December 1957, 290

80 George L. Mosse, “They Worked for Hitler: the Problem of the German non-Nazi Collaborationists”, undated speech (between 1946 and 1952); George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 44; Leo Baeck Institute.

81 “The Problem of National Socialist Morality”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.



Here lies the connection between Machiavellism and totalitarianism. Mosse, deeply influenced by the thought of the great German historian Friedrich Meinecke, shared his preoccupied views on reason of state<sup>82</sup>. Meinecke wrote his *Machiavellism. The Doctrine of Raison d'Etat and Its Place in Modern History* in the shadow of the First World War (the book was published in 1924), with the catastrophe caused by European nationalism before his eyes.<sup>83</sup> In his view, power and reason of state are needed by every community in order to survive: taken in itself, power is not an evil force, rather, it is a necessity. However, he who holds it can easily abuse of it and trespass the limits of morals and of right: here the politics of power degenerates into excess, the irrational suffocates the rational. The problem involved in the doctrine of reason of state, that is, the fragility of the balance between politics and morals, was highlighted by the Great War, and Meinecke could claim to have followed, in his book, the main stages of the sinister development leading from Machiavellism to nationalism.<sup>84</sup> It can be said that Mosse followed a somewhat similar route, in a certain way extending this thesis chronologically beyond the 1920s, concluding that the process laid in motion by Machiavelli's ideas (or, perhaps better, by "Machiavellism as Europe came to understand it"<sup>85</sup>) had laid the bases for the totalitarian State of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Reason of State can be compared to a Pandora's box which, once opened, unleashes powerful and uncontrollable forces which characterize the development of European civilization from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards (i.e. of all modernity in its wider meaning). European history, Mosse said in a lecture, can be regarded as the history of the progressive limitation of freedom.<sup>86</sup>

Mosse's personal experience with totalitarianism influenced also his political life. Both in England and in America, he actively participated in politics, first as an anti-fascist at the time of the Spanish Civil War, then as an American citizen committed to the preservation of liberal, individual rights against the mounting wave of McCarthyism. These commitments are crucial for the understanding of the political implications of his works, which center on the preservation of individual freedom and rights and address the problem Machiavelli posed about how a good man can survive in an evil world. Mosse was aware of the potential contradiction posed by reason of state: how to reconcile national security and individual freedom? He advocated the finding of a balance between the two, just as the Casuists he had studied in *The Holy Pretence* had attempted to do with regard to the relation between "the dictates of faith and the necessities of practical policies".<sup>87</sup> The problem was even more urgent as Machiavellian doctrines gave birth to a new ethics irradiating from the state, an

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82 Mosse mentions Meinecke as having influenced him "with his idea of power and Reason of State", *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 28

83 The original title was *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte*, München-Berlin 1924

84 *Ibid.* ("Von Machiavellismus zum Nationalismus, könnte man das Thema dieser ganzen sinistren Entwicklung nennen, deren ältere Hauptetappen aufzuhellen unsere Absicht war")

85 *The Holy Pretence*, op. cit., 15

86 George L. Mosse, "Europe and the Modern World", lectures, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 33; Leo Baeck Institute.

87 George L. Mosse, "The Pragmatism of the Freshman History Course", op. cit., 290

ethics that tended to justify arbitrary actions against the rights guaranteed by law.

Mosse's early modern works then lay two fundamental tenets which inform his whole life and his historiography. Two phases of this stage can be singled out, each of them addressing one of these tenets: the first includes the years between 1946 (Mosse's doctoral dissertation) and 1950 (*The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*), when Mosse, still under the influence of Charles Howard McIlwain (his *Doktorvater*), writes about English constitutional history, facing the problem of sovereignty and its relation to the liberty of the individual; the second can be set between 1950 and 1957 (*The Holy Pretence*), when he enters the question of religion and political morality. Mosse's involvement in politics underlies the whole process.

### ***At the Edge of Catastrophe: George Mosse and Politics***

As early as in 1940, Mosse wrote that “democratic insecurity brings conditions to such a point that we will grovel before any commanding power of the will. That this assumption is true, was proved in Germany in 1933”.<sup>88</sup> The shadow of national socialism brooded over democracy: Mosse's past in Germany and his present in America stand before each other in this passage. In his autobiography, Mosse refers to two feelings which pervaded his life at the time: his “feel for America”,<sup>89</sup> and his “fear of authority”, that “inherent fear of those who are supposed to watch and rule over us” which was “the fruit of my earlier education ... the worst legacy of my German education”.<sup>90</sup> He had personally experienced the frailty of parliamentary democracy on the one hand, and had been consequently drawn to anti-fascism on the other. If he had found himself studying absolutism (and history in general) almost by chance, there is little doubt that the way he approached the subject was intensely derived from personal experience. He came to see the United States as a bulwark of liberalism, as a secure refuge against totalitarianism in the search for integration into his new environment.

The contrast between totalitarianism and liberalism is fully reflected by Mosse's works of this period in the guise of a fight between the rising absolutist state and the defenders of individual rights in the early modern age. Introducing a course at Iowa University in 1946, he asserted that he intended to narrow it down “to one central theme. The growth of the State and the individual's relation to the State”.<sup>91</sup> On another occasion, speaking about Friedrich Meinecke's book on reason of state, he said

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88 George L. Mosse, “The Significance of Nietzsche's Proposed Ethic of Masters”, unpublished paper, 1940, George L. Mosse Archive, Memorial Library, University of Madison-Wisconsin, Box 5, Folder 6

89 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 149

90 *Ibid.*, 111

91 George L. Mosse, lecture notes for the Cultural History Course, 1946-47, George L. Mosse Archive, Memorial Library, University of Madison-Wisconsin, Box 5, Folder 8

that political power is the “chief unity in history”.<sup>92</sup> The problem of power and the state was stressed in all his early modern works of the late 1940s through the analysis of the idea of sovereignty.<sup>93</sup> These works must be examined against the background of Mosse's political activity since the 1930s, and of his commitment to liberalism: “the fate of liberalism is one constant theme in my work, tying the earlier period of my interests to my preoccupation with modern history”.<sup>94</sup>

Mosse's political awakening originated in the Spanish Civil War, which “aroused our passions and engaged our emotions, determining our political attitudes for a long time to come”.<sup>95</sup> The period spent in York and Cambridge saw an active involvement in the antifascist movement, this meaning, in the English context, in a liberalism leaning toward socialism, a kind of social democracy which aimed at preserving “liberal ideas of freedom and parliamentary government”.<sup>96</sup> This is the time when Mosse comes near to Harold Laski, who had, he says, a “great influence on my own thought”; combining intellectualism and active political involvement, attempting to balance Marxism and Liberalism, Laski became “a role model for both me and many others in the movement”.<sup>97</sup> In the 1930s, Mosse says, “one seemed to live at the edge of catastrophe”.<sup>98</sup> This feeling could be well espoused with Laski's distinction between “quiet times” and “periods of rapid social change”, often quoted by Mosse in his early works.<sup>99</sup> Giving various lectures and speeches at Iowa City in the years between 1946 and 1952, Mosse argued that fear and insecurity challenge liberty<sup>100</sup>, and considered learning a fundamental tool for facing this fear: “learning means understanding, and such an understanding in turn means dignity and a rational attitude in times of adversity.”<sup>101</sup> In an article on Thomas Hobbes published in 1946, Mosse wrote that Sir Mathew Hale, the “greatest of the Common Lawyers of the time” (with whom

92 George L. Mosse, *Historicismus*, notes, undated, George L. Mosse Archive, Memorial Library, University of Madison-Wisconsin, Box 6, Folder 38

93 From Mosse's doctoral dissertation, *The Idea of Sovereignty in England, from Sir Thomas Smith to Sir Edward Coke*, Thesis, cit., to its published version, *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England. From the Reign of Queen Elizabeth to the Petition of Right*, op. cit. Between 1946 and 1950, Mosse wrote essentially about English constitutional history (see the titles of his publications in the bibliography).

94 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 175

95 *Ibid.*, 101

96 *Ibid.*, 105. Mosse defined himself a “left-liberal”, *ibid.*, 197

97 *Ibid.*, 107. Anson Rabinbach writes: “although he himself remained dedicated to liberalism, George became something of a socialist and an admirer of the British intellectual Harold Laski”. Anson Rabinbach, “George Mosse and the Culture of Antifascism”, *German Politics and Society*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Winter 2000, 31

98 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 100

99 Mosse refers to a passage of Laski taken from his *Parliamentary Government in England*, New York 1938: “legally we have no fundamental rights in Great Britain; we trust for their protection to the ordinary constitutional machinery of the state. And in quiet times, we need not doubt that such protection is ample for all necessary purposes. The problem lies in the fact that in periods of rapid social change the substance of what appears fundamental to one sort of opinion does not appear to be fundamental to another.” The passage is first cited by Mosse in George L. Mosse, *The Idea of Sovereignty in England, from Sir Thomas Smith to Sir Edward Coke*, Thesis, op. cit., 237-8; it is then kept in its entirety in *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, op. cit., 178-9.

100 George L. Mosse, “What Price Freedom?”, speech given at High School Commencements, undated (between 1946 and 1952), George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 44; Leo Baeck Institute

101 George L. Mosse, “Hillel Talk”, speech given at Hillel, the Iowa State's Jewish Student Organization, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 45; Leo Baeck Institute. The speech seems to have been delivered twenty-six years after World War II; indeed, many themes are present that will not appear in Mosse's work until the early 1960s.

Mosse, as we shall see, sympathized), accused Hobbes of “basing his rejection of the Common Law on the necessity for emergency powers in stormy times”.<sup>102</sup> The problem raised by the Common Lawyers is an absolute problem: “truly, in times of revolution all existing institutions are on trial. It seemed as if the battle for the preservation of the Common Law did not end with the Long Parliament and its victory. Criticism of the kind which Hobbes put forward was apparently dangerous enough to arouse an English Chief Justice to action. Their controversy amply demonstrates the divorce between legal practice and political theory.”<sup>103</sup>

Living “at the edge of catastrophe”, experiencing “stormy times” must have left such a deep mark on the historian that when he turned to history and politics he did so with an eye constantly kept on the dangers faced by individual freedom at such times. This feeling did not leave Mosse, and was to endure in all his writings. The weakness of liberal, parliamentary governments when faced with a crisis was a leitmotif in his beliefs just as his concern with individual freedom. When he moved to the United States and started teaching at Iowa University, his political views remained oriented in the same direction. This is the period of his strongest political engagement, he gave numerous “didactic” speeches about freedom, which he also defined “motivational” speeches<sup>104</sup>, and became directly involved in American politics, even taking up an active role in the 1948 Presidential campaign.

Governments, said Mosse in a 1945 address to a Club, must meet the needs of the people, they must not be imposed: “Liberalism, with the good will of all the world, will not last if it comes in on bayonets. No government which does not come in by the free consent of the people will last very long.”<sup>105</sup> Mosse criticized President Eisenhower and the NATO rearmament program, which he saw as dangerous to German democracy: “the next president should have a foreign policy which recognizes that military might cannot solve the foreign problem”, Mosse said in 1952<sup>106</sup>, and laid greater emphasis on education rather than on militarization, insisting that Germany be disarmed<sup>107</sup>. Ideas of liberty had to be exported to Europe, he asserted,<sup>108</sup> but, he insisted, this had to be done through education. As he worked as visiting expert on behalf of the United States High Commission in Germany in the early 1950s, he was supposed to lecture in order to inform the Germans about American foreign policy and teaching in the United States; in his opinion, Germans had to be aware of what American reality and

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102 George L. Mosse, “Thomas Hobbes: Jurisprudence at the Cross-Roads,” in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XV, 4, July 1946, 350-51

103 *Ibid.*, 354

104 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 146. Mosse's speeches shed additional light on his thought and beliefs. His unpublished speaking engagements are very important in that they complete what he expressed in his historical works; moreover, they allowed him to speak, as it were, more freely, outside the scope of academic criteria, and to express his personal opinions directly.

105 Reported by the *Daily Iowan*, May 10, 1945

106 Reported by the *Daily Iowan*, March 6, 1952

107 Reported by the *Daily Iowan*, March 4, 1952, and March 1, 1955; also, some years later, by the *Wisconsin State Journal*, March 14, 1959

108 Reported by the *Marshalltown Times*, March 30, 1950

policies were before they got rearmed, in order to have them understand democracy.<sup>109</sup> According to Mosse, ignorance was the cause of anti-US feeling.<sup>110</sup>

In February 1948 Mosse gave a speech on Liberalism, complaining that “Liberalism is no longer a valid credo in all its facets. It has split into so many vague aspects that anyone today can claim to be a liberal”.<sup>111</sup> And yet a few years later, at the Iowa Conference on Individual Freedom held by the University Christian Church at Des Moines in March 1955, he asserted that democracy needs true liberals, and that a balance has to be found between national security and individual freedom.<sup>112</sup> An even stronger belief in liberalism is held by Mosse in another speech given in the same period, where he emphatically concludes:

“our ideal of human rights is not inimical to social and economic reforms. Armed with this true Liberalism let us stand before the world, convinced of the righteousness of our cause as were the Puritans of old; say with Blake's hymn that we will build Jerusalem on our green and pleasant land, and unashamedly invite all to imitation. Thus armed we are better prepared to meet those who oppose our ideals than with ten atom bombs which all can make. Our ideals are, once again, on trial. Here is a challenge fit to overcome the doubts of our generation.”<sup>113</sup>

At the time of McCarthyism, Mosse spoke against the Thomas Committee on un-American activities in that it was against the liberty of conscience.<sup>114</sup> Freedom and Liberalism constitute the main topic of most of his speeches during these years, and the opposition to McCarthyism remains constant through the years. In 1948 Mosse was vice chairman of the presidential campaign of Henry Wallace with the Progressive Party, the third party candidate against Harry Truman and Thomas Dewey<sup>115</sup>. Mosse explains his decision arguing that it “took time to shake a pro-Soviet stance that had begun with the antifascist movement and continued during the war”, though saying that “today [at the time when he wrote his autobiography] I know that Truman's policies were correct”.<sup>116</sup> What motivated Mosse at

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109 Reported by the Des Moines Sunday Register, September 26, 1954

110 Reported by the Press Citizen of Iowa City, February 6, 1952, and by the Daily Iowan, February 12, 1952

111 Reported by the Daily Iowan, February 25, 1948

112 Reported by the Daily Iowan, March 31, 1955, and by the Des Moines Tribune, March 30, 1955

113 “What Price Freedom?”, cit.

114 Reported by the Daily Iowan, November 24, 1947. Mosse also joined an informal seminar on Marxism, running the risk of compromising his position at Iowa University when participants of the seminar were denounced to the Un-American Activities Committee. In *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 121

115 Wallace stood for civil liberties against segregation, advocated full voting rights for blacks and a stronger social system. He was critical of Truman's policies and very close to pro-Soviet positions, and was often accused of being too sympathetic with the Communists. His campaign ended with a complete failure even in Iowa, his own State.

116 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 147. Mosse said in an interview: “in my youth in America, I was very Marxist”. Interview with Laura Smail, 1982, University of Wisconsin-Madison Archives – Oral History Project, Interview #227. I thank John Tortorice for having supplied me with a transcript of this interview.

most was the opposition to radicalism and extremism, and in 1952 he even spoke for the Republican party, since he was impressed by Senator Taft and his stance for civil liberties against the hysteria of McCarthyism.<sup>117</sup> Mosse clung to a left-liberal position, rejecting the radicalism both of the right and of the left.

### ***Sir Edward Coke and the Fate of Liberalism: A Fighter in a Lost Cause?***

Greatly influential for Mosse's earliest work was his doctoral adviser, Charles Howard McIlwain. Mosse defined him “the greatest teacher that I've ever known”, recognizing his intellectual debt on various occasions.<sup>118</sup> McIlwain, as Johann Sommerville writes, “came to believe that states are ultimately governed either by force or by law. The rights of individuals and minorities, he claimed, can only be safeguarded where law rules, for any person or group who is above the law can trample on everyone's freedoms and reduce people to the position of slaves. Freedom can be preserved only if government is subjected to constitutional laws that it cannot change”.<sup>119</sup> In his interpretation of the English Civil War, McIlwain argued that in the end the parliament “opposed royal sovereignty not with constitutional law but with parliamentary sovereignty”.<sup>120</sup> McIlwain also said that an Austinian theory of sovereignty had inspired Mussolini and undermined the Weimar Constitution.<sup>121</sup> “In McIlwain's scheme of things, the history of seventeenth-century England was of vital importance, for there the pernicious idea of sovereignty had first taken root”.<sup>122</sup> The influence of his advisor is clearly visible in Mosse's work. Sommerville says that Mosse adopted a “calmer and more detached tone” when suggesting that the Austinian doctrine of sovereignty had led to Hitler<sup>123</sup>, and yet he often implied a connection between the two. He was, after all, a victim of the Hitler regime and was to become ever more involved in the analysis of its intellectual background.

*The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, Mosse's first book, was published in 1950. The book dealt with the “emergence of the modern idea of sovereignty”, focussing on the role of law, which “must

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117 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 147; and George L. Mosse, *Ich Bleibe Emigrant*, op. cit., 42

118 In the introduction to *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England* Mosse wrote: “this work was originally undertaken at the suggestion of Professor Charles H. McIlwain of Harvard University. Those who are familiar with the writings and teachings of this great scholar will recognize how greatly I have relied upon the contributions which he has made to the understanding of English political theory”, *ibid.*, v; then, in a previous article, he wrote that “C. H. McIlwain's discussion of Parliamentary Supremacy and his mention of Bodin's influence in this regard ... has served as the inspiration for this paper”, George L. Mosse, “The Influence Of Jean Bodin's République On English Political Thought”, *Medievalia et Humanistica*, V, 1948, 73

119 Johann Sommerville, “George Mosse's Early Modern Scholarship”, in *What History Tells. George L. Mosse and the Culture of Western Europe*, op. cit., 28

120 *Ibid.*, 29

121 “The 'best present-day representative' of Austinianism, he [McIlwain] concluded, 'is Herr Hitler'.” *Ibid.*, 29

122 *Ibid.*

123 *Ibid.*

stand in the centre of any discussion of the historical evolution of the idea of sovereignty in England”.<sup>124</sup> This evolution implies the gradual passage from the ‘law of nature’ (or ‘common law’) to the ‘law of reason’. It is a shift from the medieval ideal to a modern one, from the law of God to the law of man. The English “common law” is seen by Mosse as a guarantee of the rights of the individual, and therefore as a limitation and a bulwark against the omnipotent authority of a sovereign body, be it the King or the Parliament. “The law of reason as a succession to the law of nature took on the aspect of a higher law which, while still being above the sovereign power, yet was able to upset tradition, allowing new concepts to assert themselves with a hitherto undreamt of impunity.”<sup>125</sup> The subsequent influence of the Roman law “again furthered the emergence of the Austinian concept of sovereignty.”<sup>126</sup> Civil law comes then to be gradually identified with “the maxims of absolutism”, and “the common law of England ... could no longer function as a bar to absolute power.”<sup>127</sup> This leads us to what I hold to be the underlying importance of this book in the general context of an analysis of Mosse’s work. Here emerge the themes of liberty and liberalism:

“... those who sought to stem the tide toward sovereignty tried to rally behind the common law as the best remaining shield to protect the liberty of the individual. In an age when both the King and the Parliament were engaged in a struggle for power, an age which tended to disregard the traditional view of the ‘body politic, knit together’, common lawyers like Sir Edward Coke sought to protect liberty against both extremes. Perhaps here we can see the dawn of a modern liberalism which, like the common lawyers in an age of competition for sovereignty, tries to preserve a middle way which is supported as a guarantee of individual liberty against popular and extremist ideologies. Like many modern liberals, the common lawyers thought of ‘rights’ in legal rather than in economic or social terms. A right was guaranteed by the common law against all powers and was to them vastly different from a privilege granted as a boon by a sovereign. The development which we are discussing will take us from a society of rights to a society of privileges. What emerges is omniscient power.”<sup>128</sup>

The interest Mosse takes in individual rights as contrasted by absolutism is, as we stated above, one of the ever-recurring problems which he will examine up to the modern age. Mosse made full use of Croce’s assertion that all history is contemporary history; his own concern with liberty in an age

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124 *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, op. cit., 2

125 *Ibid.*, 4

126 *Ibid.*

127 *Ibid.*, 5

128 *Ibid.*, 5-6

dominated by the totalitarian systems is brought back to the seventeenth century, when absolutism was in the making and widely discussed by political theoreticians.

Speaking of the leading theoreticians of sovereignty in the early modern age, Mosse wrote in his doctoral thesis that “they were well on the road to a *Machtstaat*”.<sup>129</sup> In the introduction to *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, he argues that “in a world where the boundary lines between the rights of individuals and the power of the state are ever in dispute, the development of the idea of sovereignty takes on great significance”.<sup>130</sup> These statements make the problem living matter, and reveal Mosse's personal involvement in the subject. In the book, he warns of the danger inherent in the concept of sovereignty, in that it implies a “direct invasion of the people's rights”,<sup>131</sup> and turns to the thought of Chief Justice Sir Edward Coke (1552-1634), whom he saw as a defender of individual rights against absolute power. Though criticizing Mosse's attempt “to apply the lesson of his study to modern politics”, Richard Schlatter, a reviewer of the book, wrote that “Chief Justice Coke is the hero of his story”.<sup>132</sup> The latter assertion is, in my opinion, absolutely true. Mosse had spent much time studying the lawyer's works, and had made research at Coke's private library in the summer of 1949. In an unpublished article he wrote on the subject, he held that “Coke has come down to us in history as the opponent of the 'Divine Right of Kings', as the lawyer who took his stand upon the Common Law of England against the encroachments of absolute power upon the liberties of the subject”.<sup>133</sup> In a lecture, he praised “Coke's noble effort to stem the tide of absolutism in England”<sup>134</sup>. Coke figures as the man guiding the defenders of the common law which, contrasting the emerging law of reason based upon human authority, act as a bulwark of the liberties of the individual<sup>135</sup>. Law seen as a check on arbitrary power, according to Coke, was the “perfection of reason”<sup>136</sup>, being reason “legal reason”, a thing for lawyers, in opposition to Hobbes's idea that reason comes from the sovereign.<sup>137</sup> According to the Common Lawyers, law has to do with practical experience and not abstract theory, neither can it be put in the arbitrary hands of a sovereign. Mosse mentions another Common Lawyer, Sir Matthew Hale, who accused Hobbes of “basing his rejection of the Common Law on the necessity for emergency powers in stormy times”.<sup>138</sup> The preservation of the liberty of the individual against all arbitrary power stands at the centre of Mosse's book, and Coke is compared to modern liberals: “fundamentally Coke

129 George L. Mosse, *The Idea of Sovereignty in England, from Sir Thomas Smith to Sir Edward Coke*, Thesis, op. cit., 27

130 *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, op. cit., 1. Mosse also adds that “the principle of individual rights as contrasted with privileges granted by authority is still at issue in our modern world”, *ibid.*, 7

131 *Ibid.*, 51

132 Richard Schlatter, review of *Struggle*, *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, Jahrgang 42, Heft 1, 1951

133 “Notes on the Marginalia of Sir Edward Coke at Holkham”, cit.

134 George L. Mosse, “A Re-Examination of the Liberties of Englishmen”, lecture, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 45; Leo Baeck Institute.

135 This view was also held by McIlwain. See George L. Mosse, “Change and Continuity in the Tudor Constitution”, *Speculum*, XXII, 1, January 1947, pp. 18-28

136 *The Idea of Sovereignty in England, from Sir Thomas Smith to Sir Edward Coke*, Thesis, op. cit., 188-9

137 George L. Mosse, “Thomas Hobbes: Jurisprudence at the Cross-Roads”, op. cit.

138 *Ibid.*, 351



was in the position of our modern liberals: constantly on the defensive, he had to maintain the middle road between the two new doctrines, both of which were challenging the liberties of Englishmen.”<sup>139</sup> The 16<sup>th</sup> century saw “the dawn of modern liberalism which ... tries to preserve a middle way which is supported as a guarantee of individual liberty against popular and extremist ideologies”.<sup>140</sup> The conclusions drawn by the book are discomfoting. Mosse quotes the already mentioned passage from Harold Laski: “legally we have no fundamental rights in Great Britain; we trust for their protection to the ordinary constitutional machinery of the state. And in quiet times, we need not doubt that such protection is ample for all necessary purposes. The problem lies in the fact that in periods of rapid social change the substance of what appears fundamental to one sort of opinion does not appear to be fundamental to another”. He then comments that

“this was just what the common lawyers wanted to avoid. That is why they emphasized the 'certainty' of the law. That is why Sir Mathew Hale preferred a certain law, however imperfect, to any kind of arbitrary government. Would they have relished a Parliament whose only external check was resistance by force? Would they have accepted the uncertain pressure of public opinion as a substitute for a certain law? And yet parliamentary sovereignty, without Bodin's *droit*, was the outcome of this competition for sovereignty.”<sup>141</sup>

Mosse's pessimistic attitude, surely influenced by the events of his life, paves the ground for the comparison of Coke with modern liberals: Coke is a “martyr for the liberal cause”<sup>142</sup>, who “in public life he was above all a fighter, albeit in a lost cause”.<sup>143</sup> Indeed, it was Hobbes who would be “the voice of the future”.<sup>144</sup>

### ***The New Leviathan***

Richard Schlatter, reviewing *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, wrote that “the logical conclusion [of the book] would seem to be that England is governed despotically” in contrast to the

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139 *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, op. cit., 172

140 *Ibid.*, 5

141 *The Idea of Sovereignty in England, from Sir Thomas Smith to Sir Edward Coke*, Thesis, op. cit., 237-8. In *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, the published version of the thesis, Mosse will add: “in spite of the failure of the royalist quest for sovereignty the absolute state emerged”; op. cit., 179

142 George L. Mosse, Speech given at the Des Moines Conference on Individual Freedom, 1955, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 44; Leo Baeck Institute.

143 *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, op. cit., 172

144 “A Re-Examination of the Liberties of Englishmen”, cit.

United States.<sup>145</sup> Though such an argument may be excessive, there is evidence in Mosse's work that points in that direction, in so far as he contrasted American right with the English, coming to the conclusion that in New England the covenant theory and the tradition of the Charter "pointed towards greater freedom and individualism".<sup>146</sup> Legal reason as intended by the common lawyers becomes, according to Mosse, the citadel of American constitutionalism.<sup>147</sup> He believed that Coke's ideal had been applied in the New World rather than in England, thus making the American constitution "in truth ... a medieval document", and the United States the real heir of the English medieval past.<sup>148</sup> Indeed, as we have seen, Mosse felt very comfortable in American society and was rapidly integrating. In the speech "What Price Freedom", he reveals his newly felt sense of belonging, and speaks of "our" foreign policy" as well as of "our Constitution".<sup>149</sup> Other reviewers of *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England* understood better what lay beneath the surface of the book (although without linking it to Mosse's life, of which they may have known little or nothing). Franklin L. Baumer wrote that "Mr Mosse tells us an important story, and he tells it well. It is the story of the emergence of the modern state. Implicit in this story is the gradual secularization of political thought"<sup>150</sup>; J. Hurstfield got closer to the heart of the matter as he argued that the book is a "fascinating one. It displays the progressive destruction of the safeguards of the individual before the emergence of the supreme authority of the state".<sup>151</sup> Mosse held the problem of the balance between freedom and national security to be a constant and crucial factor in history.<sup>152</sup> From Hobbes onwards, he held, the "longing for peace and security would make people submit themselves voluntarily to such absolute sovereign".<sup>153</sup> Speaking on the subject "Does history have any meaning?", Mosse wondered if we can "use the historical connections to cure present ills", and concluded that the historian can be a diagnostician more than a prophet, and that "we failed to analyze or do anything to mitigate the conditions which brought about a Hitler."<sup>154</sup>

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145 Richard Schlatter, review of *Struggle*, op. cit.

146 George L. Mosse, "Puritanism and Reason of State in Old and New England", op. cit., 78

147 *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, op. cit., 179. Mosse concludes that "Sir Edward Coke's concept of legal reason, while failing to halt the struggle for sovereignty in England, was, through the concept of judicial review, to provide the citadel of American constitutionalism."

148 "A Re-Examination of the Liberties of Englishmen", cit.

149 "What Price Freedom?", cit. Recalling his gradual Americanization, Mosse writes in his memoir referring to the mid-1940s: "I was not yet fully American and, as a matter of fact, still often thought of the United States as 'they', however much I continued to admire some American characteristics. What was refreshing at the time was precisely the absence of the stifling nationalism which I had found in Europe", *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 125. A comparison between this passage and the one quoted above reveals how quickly Mosse had integrated into American society in the late 1940s.

150 Franklin L. Baumer, review of *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, *American Historical Review*, June 1957, 869

151 J. Hurstfield, review of *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, in *History*, New Series, Vol. XXXIX, Nos. 135 & 136, February and June 1954, 150

152 Speech given at the Des Moines Conference on Individual Freedom, cit.

153 *Ibid.*

154 George L. Mosse, "Does History have any Meaning?", speech held at the Newman Club, 1946, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 44; Leo Baeck Institute.

In most of Mosse's speeches in these years such a preoccupation emerges, and this is, in turn, linked with the fear that, when scared and insecure, people would “retreat behind the protective skirts of the State: a putting down of all opinion which might bring about any kind of change”.<sup>155</sup> Fascism and National Socialism, Mosse says, fed on this insecurity which challenges liberty and paves the way for an increase of the power of government and an “endangering of individual liberty”: “insecurity and fear of the future bring nations closer to the police state”.<sup>156</sup> Mosse's antibourgeois élan, which originated in the 1930s when he joined the antifascist movement and fiercely opposed the establishment and its appeasement policy surely made him critical of bourgeois conformity. In the above quoted paper on Nietzsche, written in 1940, he showed an admiration for the idea of the superman and the related hatred for bourgeois *Gemütlichkeit*. Mosse held that the superman is not a concrete possibility, it is rather a protest against mediocrity.<sup>157</sup> Hence his opposition to any kind of “putting down all opinion”, to any attempt at dissolving one's individuality and submit to a higher authority. The new nation states, the process of centralization, the police state, all these, in Mosse's view, along with the Reformation and its liturgical uniformity went into the direction of absolutism: “in Germany, the Hitlerian state Church seemed really to succeed in summing up four centuries of concessions to power in the name of the uniformity of a *Landesherrlicher Kirche*”.<sup>158</sup>

In his “Chapel Talks”, delivered in 1954 and strongly religious in tone (though Mosse was not religious at all<sup>159</sup>), Mosse wrote: “how often have we come near to sacrificing some of our hard gained political freedom to the winds of an aroused public opinion or to the lure of political expediency. Let us beware of forced conformity: it is the road to the loss of our freedom before God. For to be a free man is to acknowledge differences: every man's conscience is equal in the sight of the Lord”.<sup>160</sup> The talk's subject was persecution and liberty: Mosse told his audience (clearly referring to the fate of the European Jews) that modern persecution is the “new Leviathan”, thus confirming once more the monolithic nature of his whole work, and advocated freedom of conscience against the all engulfing State; one must “keep alight the flame of liberty”.<sup>161</sup> He then mentions the example of Hermann Maas, the Protestant Minister who helped many Jews flee from Nazi Germany and was eventually sent to a forced-labor camp, stating that we must make “no compromise at any price with those who would destroy man's conscience and man's liberty”.<sup>162</sup> Freedom of conscience in a religious sense will lead to

155 “What Price Freedom?”, cit.

156 *Ibid.*

157 “The Significance of Nietzsche's Proposed Ethic of Masters”, op. cit.

158 George L. Mosse (in collaboration with David Hecht), “Liturgical Uniformity and Absolutism in the Sixteenth Century,” in *Anglican Theological Review*, XXIX, 3, July 1947, 165

159 A listener even thought that Mosse was a reverend and a “wonderful preacher”. The letter, quoted also by Emilio Gentile (*Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 155) can be found in the section George L. Mosse, “Chapel Talks”, 1954, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 19; Leo Baeck Institute.

160 *Ibid.*

161 *Ibid.*

162 *Ibid.*

freedom of man, but here comes, continues Mosse, a great problem, that of the “relation of freedom of Conscience to the modern state”: the struggle for freedom of conscience has become “a struggle for all our freedoms”, then “let us rededicate ourselves to the preservation of our religious and civil Liberties: for one cannot stand without the other”.<sup>163</sup> With the example of Nazi Germany and of the people's democracies in the East before his eyes, Mosse says: “where the Kings of a bygone era had left off, the modern state took over. Like a hungry dragon he sought to swallow up man entire: body and soul ... The modern state not only has lacked humility but has also tended to become a law in itself: to create a separate morality through which all arbitrary actions can be justified”.<sup>164</sup>

### ***The Serpent and the Dove: The Question of Political Morality***

The problem of the “separate morality” leads to the second phase of Mosse's production, which sees a shift in interests which adds a new dimension to his work. Since the early 1950s Mosse becomes increasingly interested in the the problem of reason of state, which poses the question of religion and political morality, which Mosse defines “the most modern of problems”.<sup>165</sup> The cardinal book of this period is *The Holy Pretence*, published in 1957.<sup>166</sup> Machiavelli stands at the centre of this very work, and extensively of all Mosse's historiography, given the link between Machiavellism and totalitarianism. There is little doubt that *The Holy Pretence*, which sums up years of reflection over the problem of political morality, is one of Mosse's most important books. A quote of Machiavelli's serves as inspiration: “a man who wants only to do good must perish among so many who do evil”.<sup>167</sup> This problem raises the question of political morality, of the relationship between ethics and reason of state. Commenting on *The Holy Pretence*, Robert Weltsch wrote to Mosse: “I am not an expert on Puritan theology, so your book interested me more from a general point of view as I think the problem is a perpetual one and very topical today”.<sup>168</sup> Machiavellism lies, in Mosse's interpretation, at the core of modernity in that it leads to the “fateful divorce of ethics from politics”: Machiavelli “supplied the inspiration for this double standard of morality”, which opposed public and private morals and “endowed the state with a moral personality of its own”.<sup>169</sup>

*The Holy Pretence*, a study in the history of ideas, has as its purpose the examination of “the

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<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> George L. Mosse, “The Pragmatism of the Freshman History Course”, op. cit., 290

<sup>166</sup> George L. Mosse, *The Holy Pretence*, op. cit.

<sup>167</sup> George L. Mosse, “Christianity and Politics”, speech, undated (though in all probability dating back to the early 1950s), George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 20; Leo Baeck Institute.

<sup>168</sup> Robert Weltsch, letter to Mosse, 18 April 1958, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 14; folder 29; Leo Baeck Institute.

<sup>169</sup> George L. Mosse, “Puritanism and Reason of State in Old and New England,” op. cit., 71 and 68

relationship between the Christian ethic and the idea of reason of state in the thought of important Divines".<sup>170</sup> And yet "perhaps the crux of the relationship between 'Machiavellian' ideas and the Reformation lies not in the thought of this or that reformer, or even in the direct influence upon them by Machiavelli himself, but rather in the general tension between religious presuppositions and political realities".<sup>171</sup> The scope of the book is deliberately wider than it may appear, and goes much farther than the age of the Reformation. If in the preface Mosse claims that the book finds its inspiration in the problem posed by Benedetto Croce, who "called for examination of the points of contact between the new Renaissance political thought and the apparently contradictory ideas of the Reformation"<sup>172</sup>, the book is even more inspired by Croce's belief that all history is contemporary history, to which Mosse would have surely subscribed. While dealing with the question of the relation between ethics and politics, Mosse often refers to modern examples, stressing the "continuity of interests" on the one hand, and confirming the autobiographical nature of his work on the other. Reason of state, Mosse claimed in 1955, is a "constant and continuing historical problem", and he found Bismarck to be an excellent example of this.<sup>173</sup> Yet totalitarianism was always there in a stronger fashion, and Mosse referred to the ethical goal of the state under fascism while speaking of Christianity and reason of state.<sup>174</sup> In another speaking engagement delivered during Eisenhower's presidency (between 1953 and 1961), Mosse said that "the theme of relating Christianity to politics has today once more come to the public notice".<sup>175</sup> Here he is directly referring to the political situation of the time, to America's opposition to the Soviet block. When Eisenhower was asked "how can we achieve the reconciliation in Christian spirit with enemy countries", he replied in a fashion Mosse defines as "significant": "the President's answer was significant on the whole problem of Christianity and politics: We must not forget that man's nature is dual: part of it selfish, greedy and ignoble. Thus we must keep armed. He ended with the popular saying: 'keep your head in the clouds and your feet on the ground'."<sup>176</sup> Mosse speaks of the sixteenth-century idea that "the stone must be joined to St. John's Gospel", he speaks of

170 *The Holy Pretence*, op. cit., 9. The most important Divines whose thought Mosse analyzes are William Perkins, William Ames and John Winthrop. Reason of state and the word "policy" are so defined by Mosse: the former "is essentially a systematization of the belief in the superiority of the state over all private rights and privileges. It was first widely used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in order to rationalize the ruthless employment of political power. 'Reason of State' furnished a principle of political action, a law of motion, to the state, based upon the rational faith that the state is the highest of all goods ... This belief in the overriding interests of the state finds a supplementary expression in the word 'policy', which, according to Machiavellian usage, denotes an expedient but wicked action for the preservation of the state. ... 'Policy' might thus be said to be the concrete application of the idea of 'reason of state'." In "Puritanism and Reason of State in Old and New England," op. cit., 68

171 *The Holy Pretence*, op. cit., 5

172 *Ibid.* Mosse refers to Croce's *Grundlagen der Politik*. In an article on Machiavelli's assimilation in English thought, Mosse wrote that Croce "thought that the assimilation of Machiavelli's ideas in the West might contain valuable clues as to how such contact had been accomplished". "The Assimilation Of Machiavelli in English Thought: The Casuistry Of William Perkins And William Ames", *Huntington Library Quarterly*, XVII (August 1954), 315

173 George L. Mosse, "The Christian Statesman", *The History of the Ideas News Letter*, Vol. I, No. 2, March 1955, 4

174 George L. Mosse, "Christianity and Reason of State", undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 21; Leo Baeck Institute.

175 "Christianity and Politics", cit.

176 *Ibid.*

an age when “the subtlety of the Serpent instructs the Innocence of the Dove, the Innocence of the Dove corrects the subtlety of the Serpent”, and relates it to modern problems, thus revealing the ambitious nature of his 1957 work.<sup>177</sup>

Following Mosse's approach to the subject since 1946, it appears that his preoccupation with this problem was latently present from the beginning. Introducing a course on cultural history in 1946 he said that Machiavelli “was only leading to a new ethic”<sup>178</sup>; in his doctoral thesis and in *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England* he spent some time discussing the nature of reason of state. Yet the problem seems, at this stage, to lie at the margins of his preoccupation with constitutional history and the relationship between the individual and the state. The new phase begins in the early 1950s. In the article on Puritanism and reason of state (1952) Mosse directly introduces the question of Machiavelli's double standard of morality, pointing to the “fateful divorce of ethics from politics”<sup>179</sup> and eventually mentioning Sir Edward Coke, whose idea of “policy” for “reason of state [in opposition to Bacon or Winthrop] ... did not serve to excuse the unjust and arbitrary actions of the Magistrates”.<sup>180</sup> His following works will focus ever more firmly on the relation between politics and morality, between reality and religious presuppositions. Casuistry is the tool Mosse uses to unearth this relation.

Croce and Meinecke held Christian ethics and reason of state to be opposite and contrasting principles. Mosse, by contrast, thought that this dualism had to be overcome, and that the two “systems of values” were not necessarily against each other. *The Holy Pretence* is, in this perspective, an attempt to establish a “positive relationship” between the two.<sup>181</sup> He studies the problem from the point of view of Christian ethics, and does this through the analysis of casuistry: “the study of casuistry, or the adjustment of the general Christian framework of ethics to meet new situations and dangers, can furnish a fruitful approach to the problem of how far 'Machiavellian' ideas penetrated the thought of Western Christianity.”<sup>182</sup>

Mosse believed that the European rationalistic attitude did not derive only from the natural sciences and the Enlightenment: “such a point of view tends to ignore the greater realism toward nature and politics which developed within the Christian theological framework itself.”<sup>183</sup> Religion itself elaborated a rationality of its own, which ran parallel to that of science and secular philosophy. This process began when religion had to face the problems posed by the new ideas of the Renaissance, and

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177 *Ibid.*

178 Lecture notes for the Cultural History Course, 1946-47, cit.

179 “Puritanism and Reason of State in Old and New England”, op. cit.

180 *Ibid.*, 76

181 *The Holy Pretence*, op. cit., 9

182 “The Assimilation of Machiavelli in English Thought: The Casuistry of William Perkins and William Ames”, op. cit., 315

183 George L. Mosse, “The Importance of Jacques Saurin in the History of Casuistry and the Enlightenment,” in *Church History*, XXV, 3, September 1956, 195

tried to solve it through Casuistry. Mosse's concern seems to be focussed on the relationship between practical life and faith, in other words, on being realistic. This is once again connected with his experience with Nazi Germany, probably even with the little realism his family, and many other people in Germany, showed when confronted with National Socialism, which they underestimated. Indeed, Mosse mentions the Church in Germany, which “was to learn the bitter lesson that faith itself had to come to grips with the reality of the State or to see its principles vanish from the land. The 'practical Divinity' of the Puritans had anticipated this realization.”<sup>184</sup> The Casuists had elaborated a “rationalization of the use of reason of state” which implied its assimilation into the Christian framework of ethics.<sup>185</sup>

Mosse's attitude towards the Casuists may seem ambivalent. In his early writings on the subject, he connects them with the emergence of that modern political morality that led to the divorce of ethics from politics. In other words, reason of state was coopted by some Puritans and “harnessed ... to their Christian purpose.”<sup>186</sup> Puritans did not disapprove of the use of policy: “rather, they deplored the divorce of 'policy' and 'reason of state' from a Christian purpose”.<sup>187</sup> Here various seventeenth-century Puritans are directly associated with the development of the absolute state in the West: Mosse quotes John Winthrop when he says that “the care of the public must oversway all private respects”.<sup>188</sup> In the historian's opinion, other Puritans adopted this double standard of political morality, “thus giving added impetus to the fateful divorce of ethics from politics”.<sup>189</sup> Casuistry had made Renaissance political thought respectable by preparing the soil for its theoretical acceptance in England.<sup>190</sup>

Yet, as he have seen, Mosse praised the Puritans' “practical Divinity” for having realized that a greater realism in life is necessary. Over the years, he will blame many Weimar left intellectuals for not having attempted to do what these Casuists had sought to accomplish centuries before.<sup>191</sup> David Warren Sabean, discussing the continuity of Mosse's work, argues that *The Holy Pretence* is very important because it is an expression of some of the historian's later preoccupations.<sup>192</sup> Among these there is, according to Sabean,

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184 George L. Mosse, “Puritan Political Thought and the ‘Cases of Conscience’,” in *Church History*, XXIII, 2, June 1954, 117

185 “Christianity and Reason of State”, cit.

186 “Puritanism and Reason of State in Old and New England”, op. cit., 69

187 *Ibid.*, 70

188 *Ibid.*, 76

189 *Ibid.*, 71

190 “The Assimilation of Machiavelli in English Thought: The Casuistry of William Perkins and William Ames”, op. cit., 326

191 See Renato Moro, “George L. Mosse, storico dell'irrazionalismo moderno”, op. cit., 29; and Seymour Drescher, David Sabean, Allan Sharlin, “George Mosse and Political Symbolism”, in *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe. Essays in Honor of George L. Mosse*, op. cit., 1. This topic will be extensively dealt with in Chapter VII.

192 “George Mosse and *The Holy Pretence*”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 19

“a lifelong concern with finding a balance between contesting forces. George always thought that life's realities possessed powerful demands for people and that finding an ethical balance was crucial for living a moral life. He found unsatisfactory both the life of unexamined power and the life of the virgin moralist, unsullied by immersion in practical affairs. *The Holy Pretence* was an attempt to look at how a series of political thinkers and actors negotiated Christian morality and the practical exigencies of seventeenth-century state politics ... Mosse condemned a series of writers for failing to assimilate political thought within a Christian framework, and he admired the casuists who at least made the attempt. The people he most admired were those who did not skirt the issue and did not reject the concept of reason of state.”<sup>193</sup>

Sabeen then quotes from the conclusion of Mosse's book, which goes back to Machiavelli's question and deserves to be cited fully, in that it clearly explains Mosse's ideas about the need to find a balance between two “dangerous” but “necessary” principles, thus erasing the apparent ambivalence of his attitude towards the Casuists:

“as long as tensions between religious presuppositions and the realities of life exist, such casuistic thought will always have great relevance in attempting to adjust the Christian tradition to various forms of worldly wisdom and secular necessities. The problem involved is to keep the balance between the Serpent and the Dove, so that neither obliterates the other: for the victory of the Dove can lead to unbridled idealism, and the ignoring of secular realities; while the victory of the Serpent means the total acceptance of what the sixteenth century called 'Machiavellism'. How well most of the Casuists in this study kept the balance is open to question. Prudence<sup>194</sup> as we saw did, in many cases, become 'policy' under a different name. Reason of state was tied to God as the chief end, but here again the religious element seems at times to provide no more than a disguise for the secular concept. It must be stressed once again that the endeavour to combine the Serpent and the Dove does not imply hypocrisy. Rather these attempts raise the problem of what can be the Christian answer to the survival of a good man in an evil world.”<sup>195</sup>

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193 *Ibid.*, 19-20

194 “Prudence” being the Christian word for “policy”, that is, policy oriented towards a Christian goal.

195 *The Holy Pretence*, op. cit., 154



### ***From Machiavellism to National Socialism***

Mosse moved to Madison in 1956 “with the proviso that [he] specialize in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”<sup>196</sup>, and his first publications in the field came out since 1957, although he kept writing and lecturing on early modern history for some years well into the 1960s. The turn to modern issues meant a turn to the study of the origins of national socialism in the first place. In a lecture, Mosse summarizes the path we have followed:

“with the beginning of the 19th century we reach the height of optimism and liberty: classical liberalism believed in the unity of Western Civilization, not through theology or science – but through free trade and the worship of liberty. Yet if we reached the height of ideas of unity and freedom, there were already portents in existence of a quite different nature. The Nation State had risen in power and strength. The 16th and 17th centuries saw the acceptance of ideas of absolutism and of reason of state. Here Freedom was limited by the interests of the state. Here the Nation tended to become a good in itself above the unity of Western Civilization and ideas of liberty. To this the 19th century added 'cultural Nationalism'. The State now becomes not merely a political entity but a 'way of life': a doctrine of superiority of one Nation over all others.”<sup>197</sup>

This passage, which echoes Meinecke's thought, leads to nationalism, a phenomenon to which Mosse turned his attention in the second half of the 1950s, especially in its German version. His first writings on modern history were all concerned with the roots of national socialism and German antisemitism: in 1957 he published “The Image of the Jew in German Popular Culture: Felix Dahn and Gustav Freytag”; one year later, “Culture, Civilization and German Antisemitism”; in 1961 “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism” appeared.<sup>198</sup> Mosse was delving into German cultural nationalism in search for the roots of the Holocaust and of the appeal of Nazism. The road leading from Machiavellism to totalitarianism has now come full circle. In the introduction to one of his major works on German nationalism and national socialism, published in 1975, Mosse wrote that

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196 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 27

197 George L. Mosse, “Europe and the Modern World”, cit..

198 George L. Mosse, “The Image of the Jew in German Popular Culture: Felix Dahn and Gustav Freytag”, in *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, II, London 1957; “Culture, Civilization and German Antisemitism”, in *Judaism*, vol. VII, n. 3, Summer 1958; “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism”, in *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. XXII, n. 1, January-March 1961.

“this book is the result of a longstanding preoccupation with the dignity of the individual and its challengers, so successful during long periods of our century in stripping man of control over his destiny. Many years ago I attempted to trace how a system of moral values, Christianity, was eroded through contact with political reality during the seventeenth century. The triumph of reason of state seemed to me then to lead into a *realpolitik* which answered Machiavelli’s eternal question of how a good man could survive in an evil world. But while I still believe that the seventeenth century was an important turning point in the absorption of Christian theology by *realpolitik*, the nineteenth century with the development of mass movements and mass politics seemed to transform the political process itself into a drama which further diminished the individual whose conscious actions might change the course of his own destiny.”<sup>199</sup>

Mosse's “continuity of interests” centred, in the last resort, on the “dignity of the individual”, which had been endangered, in his view, first by the rise of absolutism and then by totalitarianism, of which Mosse explored the fascist side.

The shift from early modern to modern history was not confined solely to the object of Mosse's studies: rather, it went hand in hand with major innovations in methodology which affected both his studies on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European culture, and his most recent interests. In the second half of the 1950s, Mosse felt the need to investigate ideas not only in the realm of high culture, but also in that of popular culture. In order to do this, he saw the analysis of popular literature as the best tool at the historian's disposal. This led him toward a new phase of his historiography, which was to blossom in his works on modern history, especially in those on national socialism. However, such an approach to the history of ideas and their political implications was to entail a new series of problems. The search for the solution to these problems eventually led Mosse to create an innovative and pathbreaking kind of cultural history destined to put forward a revolutionary interpretation of the fascist phenomenon.

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199 George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1975, vii

## CHAPTER II

### BEYOND THE HISTORY OF INTELLECTUALS

“If you find a whole body of literature, regardless of who wrote it,  
which has a certain point of view about peasants,  
which certainly changes the peasant images, then it is relevant.”<sup>200</sup>  
(George L. Mosse)

“The historian confronting problems raised by mass culture and mass politics  
needs new approaches in order to capture the structure of the popular mind.  
The anthropologists’ use of myth and symbol can provide  
useful ways to penetrate the modern as well as the primitive mind.”<sup>201</sup>

Mosse gave his first contribution to the historiography of national socialism in 1957, in an article about the image of the Jew in German popular culture.<sup>202</sup> Here Mosse, inspired by the work of his former colleague at Iowa University, William Aydelotte, advocated the importance of analysing popular literature: “the attitudes and preconceptions literature reveals – attitudes which, though they may be trivial in themselves, yet to the extent that they are widely shared, underlie and motivate basic historical changes”.<sup>203</sup> Mosse's work is best known for his cultural approach to the study of fascism, an approach based on the utilization of anthropological and aesthetic categories. However, it took Mosse many years before he elaborated such a kind of cultural history. His very first works, from the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, were still written along canons of traditional history of ideas: he examined the thought of important thinkers, be they political theoreticians or theologians, and followed the development and the interaction of their ideas. Then, since the mid-1950s, he became interested in the so-called “low culture”, that is, popular culture, and examined it through popular literature. According to Shulamit Volkov, this was a mere widening of the scope of history of ideas, and “not a complete turnabout”.<sup>204</sup> If this was not a complete turnabout, it was surely an important step in the

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200 “The Peasant and the Ideology”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

201 George L. Mosse, letter to the AHR, 1969, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 8; folder 2; Leo Baeck Institute.

202 “The Image of the Jew in German Popular Culture: Felix Dahn and Gustav Freytag”, op. cit.

203 William O. Aydelotte, “The England of Marx and Mills as Reflected in Fiction”, Schuyler and Ausubel (ed. by), *The Making of English History*, New York 1952, 512. The passage is quoted in “The Image of the Jew in German Popular Culture: Felix Dahn and Gustav Freytag”, op. cit., 218-9

204 Shulamit Volkov, “German Jewish History. Back To Bildung and Culture?”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 225

historiography of national socialism when Mosse applied his new tools of historical investigation first to the study of the origins of German antisemitism, and then to those of national socialist ideology.<sup>205</sup> In Mosse's mind, the analysis of popular culture and the centrality of ideology in the historical process were closely tied: their synthesis came about in 1964, with the publication of his first major work on national socialism, *The Crisis of German Ideology. The Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*.<sup>206</sup> The book offered a vast analysis of German Volkish culture, from the age of the Napoleonic Wars to the eve of the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. This was done also through the analysis of second-rate literature, as attention was been given to the thought of minor, often obscure thinkers and novelists. Mosse held that ideas are important only when they become institutionalized, that is, diffused among people through the educational system, through associations or political parties and organizations. The prehistory of national socialist ideology was analysed against the background of modernity, and the ideological factor was set at centre of Mosse's interpretation of national socialism, which was eventually defined an “anti-Jewish revolution”.<sup>207</sup>

Mosse's turn to popular culture was a first step toward a new kind of cultural history, the second being a major shift which occurred in the 1960s, and which went beyond the usage of written sources toward an analysis of the aesthetic self-representation of mass movements based on the anthropological categories of myth and symbol. The second turn, which I will call the “anthropological and visual turn”, moved then from the history of intellectuals to the history of the masses. Mosse says in his memoir that it is in the Iowa period that he turned to “what is sometimes called a history of mentalities, or, rather, ... a kind of cultural history which I tried to make my own, dealing with perceptions, myths, and symbols and their popular appeal.”<sup>208</sup> Here the historian fuses the two passages: to be sure, his interest in symbols and perceptions will come only later than the Iowa period, but it is true that many elements which will later converge into his “anthropological and visual turn” of the late 1960s first emerge here with great force.

But what brought Mosse to the study of popular feelings? Apart from the inspiration from the work of Aydelotte, openly referred to by Mosse, there is little documentary evidence and then the answer must necessarily be tentative. On the one hand, Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages* was surely a source of inspiration for Mosse, who greatly admired the book and often mentioned it in his lectures and writings. “Changes in Religious Thought” (completed in 1959) stressed the “need for hope”, the “longing for a better world” and the “release from daily misery” which informed popular feeling and piety in the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>209</sup>: all these were themes dear to Huizinga, and Mosse will integrate them into

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205 “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism”, op. cit.

206 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit.

207 *Ibid.*, 294ff

208 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op.cit., 136

209 George L. Mosse, “Changes in Religious Thought,” in *The New Cambridge Modern History*, Vol. IV, *The Decline of Spain and*

his interpretation of the modern age.<sup>210</sup> On the other hand, there is Mosse's interest in the Baroque, which culminated in various visits to Rome (especially in the 1950s) where he studied at the Vatican Library. Mosse was deeply impressed by *Roma triumphans*' "delight in grandiose religious ceremonies and in liturgical color and form. The dramatic element in popular piety ... was in tune with this impetus".<sup>211</sup> Last but not least, at Iowa City Mosse did not confine himself to history: most of his friends were colleagues from the departments of fine arts and literature, and he actively attended cultural events which included participants from different disciplines. He cites the Writer's Workshop, and above all the Humanities Society, which he also presided over. The Society "furthered a broadening of one's outlook", and probably made Mosse more familiar with interdisciplinarity, favouring his bent towards literature.<sup>212</sup>

All these themes lie at the origins of the "anthropological and visual turn". However, there is a factor which draws a demarcation line between the two turns: as Mosse shifted his interest to modern history, he had to face the problem of mass society. The slow diffusion of mass literacy, the growing involvement of the masses into politics, the birth of mass movements required new tools of historical investigation which the study of popular literature could no more provide. This all the more as Mosse had set as his goal the study of national socialism, a mass movement in a modern mass society. The driving question which animated him was why millions of Germans had felt drawn to national socialist ideas: the problem of consensus was that which interested him most. Mosse tried to give an answer in his early-1960s works, but found himself stuck in an interpretation which read the Nazi regime as basing itself both on consensus on the one hand, and on mass manipulation, propaganda, and terror on the other. He did not fully discard the view of Nazism, and fascism in general, as being eventually dominated by its nihilistic streak, which seemed to contradict the genuine belief in ideology which Mosse was advocating. At this stage, in the mid-1960s, Mosse would gradually reject the concept of nihilism, and focus on the liturgical aspects of fascism, identifying it with a religious movement which captured people's consensus through a deep sense of participation based on traditional myths and symbols. His view of fascism as a religion was surely linked to his earlier interest in religious phenomena, and he saw a continuity between his work on the Reformation and that on more recent

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*the Thirty Years War, 1609-48/59*, Edited by J.P. Cooper, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970, 173 and 195

210 A comparison between Mosse and Huizinga, and an extensive analysis of the influence of the latter over the former, is made in Chapter III. Here suffice it to say that, to be sure, Mosse's focus was rather different from that of Huizinga, in that Mosse pointed to the study of popular, millenarian and prophetic ideas rather than to the art and writings of the courts. This distinction is hinted at by Mosse himself in an unpublished article, George L. Mosse, "The Cultural Historian and Popular Culture", 1967, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 7; folder 6 and 7; Leo Baeck Institute.

211 "Changes in Religious Thought", op. cit., 183

212 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 132. Mosse mentions also Mary Ann Holmes, a professor of art history at Iowa University, whose lectures, real "cultural events", he attended. "When I learned about modern art my eyes were opened to a new world, one I had not even considered before". *Ibid.*, 130. Such an influence has surely made Mosse sensitive to aesthetics; moreover, the 1950s saw the diffusion of pop art in the United States, a kind of art which looked at popular culture. That this may have had any influence on Mosse remains no more than a hypothesis.

history, based on his familiarity with “theological thought as well as religious practices”: he brought “this knowledge to bear upon the secularization of modern and contemporary politics”. As he stated in his memoir, “it was not such a big step from Christian belief systems, especially in the baroque period, to modern civic religions such as nationalism in its various forms – including fascism – which have occupied me for many decades”.<sup>213</sup>

The “anthropological and visual turn” occurred during the years between 1964 and 1969, and constituted the methodological background of the passage from a cultural history based on written sources, which culminated in *The Crisis of German Ideology* (1964), to a cultural history of the masses as performed in *The Nationalization of the Masses* (1975). The latter is a study on what Mosse calls the “new politics”, that is, the new political style born of the French Revolution, a style based on mass festivals and mass meetings where symbols are employed, and myths activated. Of paramount importance is also the setting where these festivals take place, and therefore the book is largely concerned with cultic spaces, national monuments and architecture. Anthropology and aesthetics merge into this work: fascism is now, in his view, the equivalent of a religion. The consensus relies on a genuine belief in ideology, but this belief is kindled by a fully developed liturgy which integrates the masses into the nation through this new political style. *The Crisis of German Ideology*, based on written sources, stressed the ideological dimension national socialism. *The Nationalization of the Masses*, with its focus on the aesthetic means of self-representation, paved the way for an wider interpretation of fascism that was not confined to the specific ideological content, which highlighted the differences among various fascisms; rather, it found a unifying element, a common denominator among them, thus opening a door leading to the elaboration of a general theory of fascism (which will occupy Mosse in the 1970s).

### ***The Turn to Popular Culture***

In 1964 Mosse published an article significantly entitled “Puritanism Reconsidered”. Here he criticized his own *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, stressing the ideological connections between Puritanism and the English Revolution:

“historians have seen this revolution as caused either by a breakdown of the constitutional machinery or by a struggle for power within the ruling classes of England. I myself once saw the revolution's prime cause as a struggle over a new and modern definition of power and sovereignty. Such point of view needs severe modification. The Revolution was not just a

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213 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 178

struggle for power within certain important vested interests and not just a matter which concerned a few hundred members of Parliament.”<sup>214</sup>

This article is, on the methodological level, very important, as it highlights the shift to that new kind of history Mosse had embraced in the late 1950s. Mosse says that ideas are of crucial importance, and that Puritanism has to be studied as an ideology, as “a system of ideas which had to be taken seriously”.<sup>215</sup> Puritanism is seen as a positive ideology: from this point of view, “a whole new historical perspective was illuminated”<sup>216</sup>, and Mosse says that “it still seems to me that a vigorous and systematic ideology stands at the beginning of American history”.<sup>217</sup>

This shift from ideas (like sovereignty or reason of state) to ideologies takes place over the years, and there is no real line of demarcation. The year 1957 can be taken as a watershed, though the process has obviously a longer story. In 1957, when *The Holy Pretence* was printed, Mosse wrote an article on teaching history to freshman. A comparison between this article and a similar one he had published in 1949 can shed some light on this methodological shift. As Sommerville writes comparing the two articles, “by 1957, Mosse had come to attach greater importance to theories, metaphysics, and ideologies in the teaching of history to freshmen”.<sup>218</sup> Indeed, Mosse's conviction in 1949 was that facts and chronology, that is, the framework, are the first thing a freshman must learn. Reality must prevail over metaphysics, ideologies and philosophy come later.<sup>219</sup>

In 1957, his views have shifted, and he claims that things as the meaning of history should be at least discussed. He laments that only pragmatic history is taught in the United States: “it is surprising to what extent our Freshmen history texts have been influenced by the contention that what moves history is the political and socio-economic surroundings in which the struggle for life has its setting. What this has meant is failure to deal with abstract thought and political rationalizations. Almost none of our texts show any realizations that ideas can be weapons ... how men rationalize their actions often determines what actions they take”.<sup>220</sup> Mentioning nationalism, he writes that it is a “mood” rather than “something that can be analyzed through political or economic factors alone”, and makes the example of the German nineteenth-century novelist Gustav Freytag: to read his works makes nationalism clearer than a chronological or external account of its development.<sup>221</sup> This article shows clearly the new

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214 George L. Mosse, “Puritanism Reconsidered”, in *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, LV, 1, 1964, 44

215 *Ibid.*, 37

216 *Ibid.*, 38

217 *Ibid.*, 41

218 “George Mosse's Early Modern Scholarship”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 27

219 George L. Mosse, “Freshman History: Reality or Metaphysics?”, *The Social Studies for Teachers and Administrators*, Vol. XL, No. 3, March 1949

220 George L. Mosse, “The Pragmatism of the Freshman History Course”, *The Social Studies for Teachers and Administrators*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 8, December 1957, 289

221 *Ibid.*, 290

direction the historian was taking, including the turn to the study of popular literature and culture which was to characterize some of his most important works in the following years.

Yet no definite line can be drawn in the sand: in 1949 Mosse emphasized the importance of reading to freshmen extracts from philosophers to see “how men rationalize the changing features of our civilization ... to understand the continuity and development of history”.<sup>222</sup> However, this attitude of Mosse's seems to be strictly linked with the practical interest in active political life which characterized his life in those years rather than with historical methodology: indeed, the goal, Mosse continued, is to enable the student “to make intelligent political choices in our society”, students must have an understanding of their society: the “education of the citizen” is the goal.<sup>223</sup>

Mosse had taught cultural history since his arrival at Iowa University. In his 1946 course, for example, he defined cultural history “a rather new thing” which can be traced back to Jacob Burckhardt whose book (Mosse refers to *The Civilization of the Renaissance*) is the “first book of 'cultural' history properly so-called”.<sup>224</sup> Mosse said that “cultural history” is a “generic term” which “includes all aspects of life”, though the course will be “narrowed down to one central theme. The growth of the State and the individual's relation to the State”; yet he stressed repeatedly the importance of the social framework, which is crucial, and spent much time during the course to explain it, though devoting great attention also to political thinkers<sup>225</sup>. Mosse's cultural history, as well as his books written between the late 1940s and the early 1950s, already deal with ideas, but they are confined to the thought of important thinkers like Hobbes, Machiavelli or Bodin.

If between 1950 and 1957 he focusses on the question of religion and political morality, the shift from the thought of political and religious thinkers to the study of popular literature takes place in the second half of the 1950s. Popular culture appears in his books and articles since the late 1950s, including “Changes in Religious Thought”<sup>226</sup>, published in 1970 but, according to Johann Sommerville, completed in 1959.<sup>227</sup> However, Mosse did not write much about theory in his books. His unpublished speeches contain much more useful information in this regard, but unfortunately most of them are undated, which makes it difficult to assess when exactly this change took place, and how theoretical elaboration and historical research interacted. In a speech delivered at the Hillel Organization, Mosse said that so many people had voted for Hitler because they thought that ideology was just a façade: “here was a mistake typical of our time: underestimation of ideology. Most people in our age living

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222 “Freshman History: Reality or Metaphysics?”, op. cit. 101

223 *Ibid.*

224 Lecture notes for the Cultural History Course, 1946-47, cit.

225 In another course, held between 1950 and 1956, Mosse will extend his explanation of cultural history including art and music: “you cannot understand the 16. and 17. [centuries] without dealing with the Baroque style and all it implies”, George L. Mosse, Old Lectures, 1950-1956, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 33; Leo Baeck Institute.

226 George L. Mosse, “Changes in Religious Thought”, op. cit.

227 “George Mosse's Early Modern Scholarship”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 26



pragmatically oriented lives find it difficult to believe in ideological commitment but they find it easy to believe that men want power ... It is an obsession with desirability of power for its own sake which blinded men to the real object of NS [National Socialism]. And which made possible what has been called with some justice this 'silent revolution'. We must not make this mistake again”<sup>228</sup>

A very important document is an undated speech entitled “Literature and History”.<sup>229</sup> The curators of the Leo Baeck Archive, where the document is kept, include it among others written between 1946 and 1952, though adding a question mark. In this case, given the themes and categories Mosse deals with, I think that the speech was given later than then. Mosse laments that there is no satisfactory book of cultural history for the modern period (like Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages*), and asks “why then do we have no such attempts for the last two centuries of our history?”<sup>230</sup> The sociologists' “types”, Mosse continues, are too removed from reality, too idle, they miss the element of “flux”, of “motion”. Mosse then suggests a starting point: “the extensive use of literature”. Literature not intended as source material on which psychological judgements must be passed, but “to put it briefly it can be used as a source for 'attitudes' towards problems ... not for historical events, but for the 'history of opinion'.”<sup>231</sup> Mosse speaks not of the greatest authors, but of the “most 'popular'”; his interest is in “the writer's sensitivity to his status in society”. The best approach is, he says, to

“get at some of the attitudes in popular culture ... to take a mass of popular literature – novels which were, as far as we can tell – widely read, and to analyze these as the totality of material. Analyze it how? Here I think that the sociological concept of the stereotype or 'image' can be most useful. Concretely the questions I would ask of such a body of material is what is the author's image of the 'commercial classes', of the 'working classes', of the 'Jew'. It is in reality taking the concepts of 'types' and treating it as fluid ... In this way we can, I think, get at popular attitudes, and at popular culture. For it is the stereotype, the image (as Huizinga calls it in his chapter on religious thought crystallizing into images) which tends to dominate popular thought and popular feeling which becomes obvious in social and economic crisis, but which is ever present in that substrata of popular thinking at which the cultural historian tries to get. For cultural history tends to consist in a series of images and stereotypes which, in this way, find their reflection in literature. Not literature as the product of the individual artist, but literature as the product of many artists, considered as a whole. In this way we might yet get cultural history written.”<sup>232</sup>

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228 “Hillel Talk”, cit.

229 George L. Mosse, “Literature and History”, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 44; Leo Baeck Institute.

230 *Ibid.*

231 *Ibid.*

232 *Ibid.*

In “What Price Freedom” Mosse said that fear and insecurity challenge liberty, and this is mirrored in modern novels.<sup>233</sup> In his 1964 article on Puritanism he wrote that “the next step is to go down among the sects”, after learned men, theologians, system builders.<sup>234</sup> It can be said that Mosse's work undergoes a real turn to popular culture in these years. He becomes convinced that popular piety, whose ideas bear a great similarity with those of the radical sects, must not be ignored by historians: “only recently have historians paid attention to this radicalism as a movement which made explicit through its ideal of community the hopes and desires of elements of the population too often ignored by historians.”<sup>235</sup> Including himself among these historians who had neglected such aspects,<sup>236</sup> he identifies the center of Puritan radicalism in the role of revolutionary cells, and invites to delve more deeply into their ideology.

In 1967, when Mosse was already in the middle of his major methodological turn, he felt the need to restate the importance of popular literature, writing an article entitled “The Cultural Historian and Popular Literature”.<sup>237</sup> Here he stated that “the history of readers rather than of authors must occupy our attention ... Whatever their purpose, the books which they wrote attained mass circulation and this very fact must lead the historian to search for the common denominator of this literature and its enduring appeal.”<sup>238</sup> Mosse lamented that cultural history “has tended to become the history of the elites”, and now criticized Huizinga's approach:

“while Huizinga centres his analysis upon the fossilization of fifteenth-century religious life into symbolism and superstition, taking his examples from the lives of the great, among the masses of people themselves, millenarian and prophetic ideas often produced the opposite results. The constant peasant uprisings, great and small, are filled with religious thought stimulating dynamic social myths. Rather than the art and writing of the courts, the heresy trials and official inquiries into peasant and urban unrest can furnish us with essential evidence as to the turns and twists of

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233 “What Price Freedom?”, cit.

234 “Puritanism Reconsidered”, op. cit., 47

235 *Ibid.*, 44. Popular piety is defined by Mosse in *Europe in the Sixteenth Century*: “popular piety is the phrase best suited to describe those forms and modes of expression which were shared by a majority of the population at a time when man's consciousness of themselves and their world moved within a Christian, if not always orthodox context. Popular piety represents the hopes and aspirations of the multitude whose religious awareness tends to be immediate and naïve. The practices of popular piety functioned as dynamic social myths, reaffirming community and kinship ties, reconciling man to God and seeking to secure divine aid for the problems of human existence.” H. G. Koenigsberger, G. L. Mosse, *Europe in the Sixteenth Century*, Longman, London and New York 1968, 130. “This piety consisted of folks beliefs and customs which, though of Christian inspiration, threatened to bypass the Church and its dogma.” *Ibid.*, 135

236 See the above quoted passage from “Puritanism Reconsidered” op. cit., note 120

237 The article was never published. A version of it, along with the correspondence with Howard Fertig, whom Mosse wanted as editor of the article, is in “The Cultural Historian and Popular Literature”, cit.

238 *Ibid.*

the primitive mind which dominated among the peoples of Europe.”<sup>239</sup>

However, in the modern period, in the age of the masses where people become ever less illiterate, “a different method is needed in order to penetrate the popular mind”: there is the analysis of popular literature based, on the one hand, on sales figures: “if we can find out why people liked an immensely popular work we may have opened a door to an understanding of their cast of mind.”<sup>240</sup> On the other hand, that based on the importance of those “utopian longings” which emerge “strongly from the reading of such popular literature”. All this, Mosse says, “cannot but entail political and social consequences ... the very repetitiveness of theme and content reveals a great deal about the popular cast of mind, and allows us to draw some concrete conclusions about the political importance which one can attach to such investigations.”<sup>241</sup> This approach, which Mosse had adopted in his earliest writings on national socialism, could “answer the question of why so many people (and not only the Germans) accepted so easily the racial and rightist ideals which triumphed between the wars.”<sup>242</sup>

In this 1967 article, Mosse had summed up the new views he had embraced since the early 1950s. The study of popular literature and the importance laid on ideologies as concrete historical factors converged into *The Crisis of German Ideology*. The way had been paved by the three above-quoted articles published between 1957 and 1961.<sup>243</sup> In these writings, Mosse had emphasized the inadequacy of political, social or economic history to understand historical phenomena, and stressed the importance of the “popular imagination”<sup>244</sup>, posing the problem of investigating the intellectual foundations of German antisemitism through the study of popular literature.<sup>245</sup> In the article on the mystical origins of national socialism, Mosse said that despite thirty years of research, the intellectual origins of the Nazi movement were still unexplored territory: it was therefore necessary to investigate it as an ideology: “this is necessary because historians have ignored this stream of thought as too *outré* to be taken seriously ... Yet such ideas made a deep impression upon a whole nation. Historians who have dismissed these aspects of romanticism and mysticism have failed to grasp an essential and important ingredient of modern German history”.<sup>246</sup> Thus the question of ideology was linked to popular

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<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.* Mosse also adds: “what people read may not have influenced them directly, but the constant repetition of the same themes in works read by the millions must be considered of some importance in the formation of human attitudes. It may never be possible to measure successfully the concrete political effects of the course and direction of popular literature. However, as one door into the state of the popular mind an examination such as we have undertaken does lead to some conclusions, however hypothetical.” *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> “The Image of the Jew in German Popular Culture: Felix Dahn and Gustav Freytag”, op. cit., “Culture, Civilization and German Antisemitism”, op. cit., “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism”, op. cit.

<sup>244</sup> “The Image of the Jew in German Popular Culture: Felix Dahn and Gustav Freytag”, op. cit.

<sup>245</sup> “Culture, Civilization and German Antisemitism”, op. cit.

<sup>246</sup> “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism”, op. cit., 81. Mosse had stressed similar ideas in a 1959 speech, “History as the Teacher of Life?”, 1959, George L. Mosse Archive, Memorial Library, University of Madison-Wisconsin, Box 6, Folder 7

literature and culture: ideology was important not in the abstract but, rather, insofar as it penetrated the popular mind. Applied to national socialism, this approach helped Mosse explain the roots of an event which had so closely touched upon his life, and whose legacy still preoccupied him.

### *A Ghost Come Alive*

Germany was, in the early 1960s, still a source of worries and fears for Mosse. Following the desecration of the Cologne synagogue (December 1959), Mosse published an article which reflected his preoccupations with the German situation. The article was significantly entitled “A Ghost Come Alive”, and rested on the question of what lay beneath the event.<sup>247</sup> The answer was discomfiting: Mosse lamented the fact that people who had been involved in National Socialism had been recycled at high levels in the Federal Republic (like Hans Globke and Theodor Oberländer), but his greatest concern lay in the cultural influence that political forces oriented towards antisemitism could have. Such parties (as Oberländer's Gesamtdeutscher Block/Bund der Heimatvertriebenen und Entrechteten) were politically little influential but, Mosse said, the general mood they helped create and the many former Nazis who voted were potentially dangerous.<sup>248</sup> Mosse warned against historical revisionism, mentioning Ernst von Salomon's *Der Fragebogen*<sup>249</sup>, and pointed his finger at the ignorance of Nazi crimes in German education, as well as at the antisemitism, still so widespread in stereotypes. Mosse concluded maintaining the hard-line stance against German rearmament.

In fact, these years saw a growing concern with “the appeal of Nazi culture”, a topic Mosse dealt with more than once in the course of the decade.<sup>250</sup> Mosse became increasingly intrigued by the reasons that led so many people to support the Hitler regime. He had already expressed this concern in an unpublished paper of the late 1950s, where he defined National Socialism as “a regime with a mass following, ... a twentieth century totalitarianism which is based upon mass enthusiasm and mass support”.<sup>251</sup> This definition already bore the seeds of a picture of National Socialism which

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247 George L. Mosse, “A Ghost Come Alive”, *The Progressive*, June 20, 1960

248 The Gesamtdeutscher Block/Bund der Heimatvertriebenen und Entrechteten (All-German Bloc/League of Expellees and Disenfranchised), originally founded in 1950, was represented in the *Bundestag* only for a few years during the 1950s and was part of Konrad Adenauer's coalition government. The League was the party of the expellees from former German territories in the East, and espoused anti-communism and pangermanism.

249 Ernst von Salomon's *Fragebogen*, published in 1951, harshly criticized American denazification policies in Germany after 1945 by ironically replying to the questions posed in the questionnaire (*Fragebogen*) the Allies issued to investigate the activities of former or suspected Nazis under the Hitler regime.

250 At least three speeches by that title were given by Mosse between 1966 and 1970. Reported by *The Bucknellian*, April 14, 1966, and by *The South Bend Tribune*, December 1, 1967. The speech was then also given at the Initiation Banquet of the Phi Alpha Theta at Marquette on December 3, 1970 (the text presented on this last occasion is “The Appeal of Nazi Culture”, 1970; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 6; Leo Baeck Institute)

251 George L. Mosse, “National Socialism and Germany Today”, undated; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 20; Leo Baeck Institute. The paper, though undated, can be chronologically located in the years following 1955, in that Mosse refers to the “silent reception, at this very moment, of the play about the *Diary of Anne Frank*”, which had been first performed in Broadway precisely in 1955.

regarded it as a regime based on a certain degree of mass consensus, thus rejecting current interpretations of the time which saw in it only an expression of brutal force, repression and propaganda. *The Crisis of German Ideology* was born out of this double concern with the past on the one hand, and with the present on the other. In the introduction of the book, Mosse wrote:

“nor is our story necessarily over and done with. Volkish ideas are still with us, beneath the surface, ready to be used in those extreme crisis which mankind constantly manufactures for itself. In the United States, for example, extremist groups who want to segregate Negro from white at all costs embrace the Volkish ideology, fusing anti-Negro with anti-Jewish sentiment. They hope to penetrate the right in the United States as the Volkish groups penetrated the right in Germany. Quite consciously they steal much of their material from German sources, thus helping to keep them alive in a new environment. Moreover, isolated Volkish groups continue to exist in Germany itself. These attitudes are easier to instill than to erase from the national ethos. Yet it is said that all of these are small fringe groups who have no chance of coming to power. History, it is said, does not repeat itself. However, in the history of the Volkish movement it was never the actual size of the Volkish groups which counted, but rather the institutions they infected and the mood that they spread and maintained until the time was ripe. This is also worth remembering, however low the fires may be burning at a given time. We can only hope, but not predict, that nowhere in the world will the Volkish ideology again serve as a solution to a crisis in human thought and politics; that it did so in modern Germany has been catastrophic for Germans and non-Germans alike.”<sup>252</sup>

### ***The Problem of Consensus***

Mosse's primary urge to study fascism was linked to the problem of consensus. *The Crisis of German Ideology*, as we have said, was based on the question “Why did millions of Germans respond to the Volkish call?”. Such a question makes it apparent what was Mosse's attitude from the start toward the problem: he did not conceive of national socialism as a movement which relied exclusively on violence, terror and propaganda. The “appeal” of Nazism was the problem which informed all his writings on the subject with no exception, and the search for an explanation lies at the roots of his major historiographical turn, that from ideology to liturgy.

In the late 1950s Nazism was, in Mosse's interpretation, a regime “based upon mass enthusiasm and mass support”<sup>253</sup>. His first “modern” articles, which he published between 1957 and 1961, hold the

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252 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 9-10

253 George L. Mosse, “National Socialism and Germany Today”, cit.

same belief. They analyze the diffusion in German popular literature of the Jewish stereotype, that “image of the Jew” which was “widely shared” among the population because of such literature<sup>254</sup>; “the image of the Jew which had formed in many German minds goes far to explain the surrender to National Socialism's anti-Semitism by even the more respectable elements of the population. This theme is part of an intellectual history that has not yet been written”<sup>255</sup>; Volkish ideas, Mosse wrote in 1961, “made a deep impression upon a whole nation”<sup>256</sup>. As Mosse approached fascism and national socialism directly for the first time, in his 1961 book on the culture of modern Europe, he expressed his belief with no hesitation, clearly stating that “there can be little doubt about the popularity of fascism, especially in the beginning”: fascism had come to power legally in both Italy and Germany, Mosse observes, and was overthrown only because of a lost war.<sup>257</sup> Mosse goes on stating that the fascist myth provided the people with a “sense of commitment and belonging which destroyed that alienation from society which many men had felt so deeply. [This] was no small part of fascism's attraction”<sup>258</sup>. National socialist rituals, as well as theories of conspiracy (notably against the Jews, like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*) “gave an added attraction to the movement and ... provided simple explanations to the complex problems of the present ... The men and women who joined in the movement and believed in its ideology were not criminals in any usual meaning of the word, for the question arises: Why did apparently normal and even intelligent people become believers?”<sup>259</sup> The answer lied, according to Mosse, in tradition: National Socialism relied upon a consolidated cultural tradition which was shared by many Germans, and here in 1961 Mosse pointed at his forthcoming effort (the exploration of Volkish ideology): “that it [the Nazi regime] was a kind of summation and a continuation of an older cultural atmosphere should be given the heaviest weight”<sup>260</sup>. As a matter of fact, Mosse himself had stated that one reason why he wrote *The Crisis of German Ideology* “was a conviction that you cannot have any successful myth without historical preparation ... I tried, then, to show the roots of this myth, which was then actualized under national socialism”<sup>261</sup>; he firmly believed that in order to activate a myth, a tradition is needed, since “there has to be a tradition in order for anything to happen later.”<sup>262</sup> The need for security, he argued, is basic to the conservatism of popular culture, which is easily scared by something that appears new and unknown.<sup>263</sup>

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254 “The Image of the Jew in German Popular Culture: Felix Dahn and Gustav Freytag”, op. cit.

255 “Culture, Civilization and German Antisemitism”, op. cit., 34

256 “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism”, op. cit., 81

257 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 343

258 *Ibid.*, 347

259 *Ibid.*, 368

260 *Ibid.*, 371

261 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 32

262 *Ibid.*, 36. “Traditionalism is built into every popular faith”, Mosse wrote in *The Nationalization of the Masses*, op. cit., 72

263 “Europe and the Modern World”, lectures, cit.

## *Between Consensus and Propaganda*

At the seminary on fascism held at Stanford University in the autumn of 1963, Mosse clearly stated that he meant to deal with the interpretation of fascism “from the ideological point of view”.<sup>264</sup> To interpret national socialism from the point of view of ideology, and to consider the latter seriously, implies a belief in the genuine consensus to the fascist regimes. Yet it took Mosse some time to definitively discard the term “propaganda”, whose usage was inherent in a concept he had at first widely used and later partly rejected, that of “totalitarianism”. From the late 1950s up to the mid-1960s, propaganda and consensus cohabit in Mosse's interpretation of fascism, thus creating a contradictory tension which will be solved only through the second methodological turn and the consequent view of fascism as a religion.

This cohabitation is best exemplified by a passage from *The Culture of Western Europe*: Mussolini, Mosse says, was “obsessed with the power of propaganda which could recall the people to their true nature, educating them in a submission to the fascist system”; fascist propaganda had a “skill in manipulating mass meetings. Fascist meetings were religious rites in which allegiance to the myth was reaffirmed in a spectacular visual manner. Its images were direct and powerful ... Fascism acted out its ideology through dramas in which all the devoted participated and renewed their fervor. One is reminded of Jünger's contention that only in the mass could man find security in this chaotic age. These fascist rites symbolized this security in the name of a higher ideal which was clearly visible to all.”<sup>265</sup> Here Mosse combines propaganda and manipulation with the religious character of fascist meetings, which gives them appeal; yet such rites are “manipulated”, they are artificial, they are a form of “propaganda” which “sprang from a basically irrational view of human nature”<sup>266</sup>. Mass meetings, Mosse continues, are “central to fascism”, they combine sentiment and action, and the leader “must understand the importance of the myth; he must know how to manipulate the longings of the people.”<sup>267</sup> Myth is therefore a tool used by the leader to control and discipline the masses, but at the same time these masses do believe in the myth, and rituals “gave an added *attraction* to the movement”<sup>268</sup>. To be sure, this contradiction between propaganda and consensus in Mosse's view eventually leaned, at least in 1961, toward propaganda: “fascism has been called government through propaganda, and with some justice if by propaganda we mean the objectification of ideology”<sup>269</sup>: the

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264 George L. Mosse, “What is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

265 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 348

266 *Ibid.*

267 *Ibid.*, 348-9. Mussolini and Hitler, Mosse says, were “showmen”, they “were expert creators of powerful myths”, Mosse wrote, though in some contradiction with his belief in the necessity of tradition and of its genuineness. *Ibid.*, 350

268 *Ibid.*, 368 [my italics]

269 *Ibid.*, 350

“objectification of ideology” Mosse refers to are mass meetings. As to now, manipulation has the upper hand. Even the religious content of these meetings is, according to Mosse, manipulated: in their “propaganda”, National Socialists *exploit* the terminology of religion “for a better understanding among the people”<sup>270</sup>. Fascist cultural accomplishments were “restricted to the organization and manipulation of masses of the population”<sup>271</sup>.

At the Stanford seminar Mosse affirmed that propaganda was only a means to implement an idea, to organize the masses: here Hitler was in full accordance with Sorel and Pareto. Hitler's propaganda was animated by what Mosse calls “ideological pragmatism”<sup>272</sup>: this concept stems from a view which regards the *Führer* as a “cynic who became a master politician. Yet he always believed in the essential ideology ... His political maneuvering, even the German-Soviet alliance, was a tactical decision which, in the end, was meant not to hinder but to further the triumph of a fully worked-out ideology.”<sup>273</sup> Yet this vision did apply exclusively to the leader, and not to the masses. This was Mosse's view in the early 1960s: the historian was torn between two concepts, that of propaganda and that of consensus, which could not be satisfactorily espoused. His cultural interpretation of fascism suffered from the contradiction inherent in the view of all fascism, of all totalitarian systems as resting on ideology “based upon a technique of terror”.<sup>274</sup>

### ***A Revolution of Nihilism?***

Emilio Gentile has hypothesized that Mosse, in 1966,

“si sia trovato di fronte ad una serie di problemi, che lo indussero a dubitare del suo modo di studiare e interpretare la dimensione ideologica del fascismo. Egli aveva svincolato il concetto di ideologia dalla sua identificazione con il razionalismo teorico, dando importanza storica all'irrazionalismo di correnti di pensiero che la storiografia tradizionale aveva considerato appartenenti ad una sfera ‘subintellettuale’, indegna di seria considerazione, tuttavia, la sua analisi era rimasta comunque limitata alle forme di espressione verbale dell'ideologia, studiata fino ad allora esclusivamente attraverso le formulazioni degli intellettuali. In tal modo, però, egli dovette rendersi conto che un aspetto cospicuo e importante del fascismo, cioè il suo apparato rituale e simbolico, le cerimonie di massa e la rappresentazione dell'ideologia attraverso l'estetica piuttosto che la teoria, rimanevano ai margini della sua interpretazione culturale.”<sup>275</sup>

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270 *Ibid.*, 363

271 *Ibid.*, 365

272 George L. Mosse, “Adolf Hitler”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

273 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 366

274 *Ibid.*, 371

275 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 83



Gentile then quotes from the introduction to the 1981 edition of *The Crisis of German Ideology*, where Mosse admits that in 1964 he had not yet realized the importance of symbols and political liturgies in the age of mass politics. Gentile adds that

“certamente Mosse non aveva ignorato questo aspetto nei suoi precedenti scritti sul fascismo, ma aveva interpretato i riti, i simboli, le cerimonie di massa come strumenti machiavellici del potere, come tecniche di dominio usate dai governanti per sedurre e controllare le masse. In questo modo, Mosse aveva utilizzato concetti come ‘manipolazione’, ‘propaganda’, ‘tecnica di potere’, che erano tipici della storiografia pragmatica, da lui sempre criticata. Su di essi, inoltre, si fondavano le interpretazioni del fascismo come ‘rivoluzione del nichilismo’, che egli contestava vivacemente, perché impedivano di comprendere la vera natura del fascismo come sistema di potere ispirato e condizionato da un genuino sistema di credenze, e riducevano il ruolo dell’ideologia ad un mero strumento usato dai capi per manipolare le masse ... Mosse dovette rendersi conto di questa contraddizione e, nello sforzo di superarla, cominciò a modificare, quasi impercettibilmente, il suo approccio culturale, spostando l’attenzione dalle idee degli intellettuali alle forme rituali e simboliche, e quindi estetiche, che riguardavano le masse coinvolte nel processo di attuazione della rivoluzione fascista.”<sup>276</sup>

According to Gentile, Mosse solves the problem by separating irrationalism from nihilism, and attributing to irrationalism a rationality of its own “costituita dalla logica inerente alle forme attraverso le quali esso si esprimeva e si concretizzava come movimento politico”.<sup>277</sup> To Gentile, “questa formula è stata l’embrione dal quale si è sviluppata la seconda fase della storiografia di Mosse sul fascismo, la fase più originale e feconda”.<sup>278</sup> This formula derived from Mosse's own knowledge of religious phenomena. Indeed, as Mosse wrote in the Conclusion to *The Crisis of German Ideology*,

“Georges Sorel had said disparagingly that intellectuals never know what to do with the phenomenon of religion in history. They could not deny its historical importance, nor could they explain it. He held that men are motivated by irrational myths whose truth or falsehood is

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<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-84

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 84. Gentile quotes, as support to his theory, a passage from *The Crisis of German Ideology*: “the irrational is made concrete through rational acts within the terms of its own ideological framework. These rational acts are implemented by a political pragmatism as well as by the use of modern technology. But always the ideology provides the basic presuppositions and the eventual goal. For the enemy is powerful and will not shirk from the fight.”. *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 84

<sup>278</sup> *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 84

irrelevant to their appeal. It is hardly surprising to find that Sorel was a great source or inspiration for the fascists. But even the most irrational religion, to become effective, must express itself through outward forms. To move masses of men it must objectify itself. In the end the outward forms may become so important that they determine the content of the faith. That is what happened in Germany, both through the way in which the ideology was objectified and through the dominant role that the leader came to occupy. Moreover, the ideas of discipline and organization which Hitler stressed in place of 'fanaticism' not only led to a more effective objectification of the ideology but also provided the basis for an awesome political effectiveness. The so-called eternal verities of nature, Volk, and race were channeled toward definite objects, consciously directed by the leadership.”<sup>279</sup>

Mosse's utilization of anthropological tools was already perceptible, as Gentile notes, in 1966, in the article on the genesis of fascism and in the book on Nazi culture: rituals, symbols and celebrations played an essential role in the taming of the fascist revolution.<sup>280</sup> Since 1966, according to Gentile, Mosse's focus shifts from ideology to liturgy, and this implies two factors: the first is the new balance in the relation between faith and pragmatism, as Mosse slowly abandons the conviction that myths and symbols are solely a tool for manipulating the masses. The second factor is the definition of fascism as a religion: fascism, from a movement with analogies with religion, becomes itself *a religion*. Mosse's divorcing nihilism from irrationalism entails a view of fascism as a religion, paving the ground for the turn to liturgy, which will definitively solve the problem of nihilism and that of propaganda.

The evolution of Mosse's approach to nihilism deserves to be analyzed in detail, following Gentile's insights. In *The Culture of Western Europe*, the bases are laid for the relationship of nihilism with ideology. Speaking of Italian fascism, Mosse writes that Mussolini held myth to be necessary in order to transform reality: “ideology was a primary consideration in fascism ... That was why Mussolini was anxious to integrate activism and ideology; no nation could be transformed on the basis of Ernst Jünger's nihilism.” Ideology, here identified with myth, provides the goal: myth as “a faith”, as “a passion”, is what fascism is built upon. Fascism relies not only on activism (which Mosse identifies with nihilism), but also on “a myth which mystically fused the individual and the nation through the party”: in this way people get a “sense of commitment and belonging which destroyed that alienation from

279 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 316-317. The passage is also quoted in Gentile, *Il fascismo del persecutore*, op.cit., 85

280 The original English title of the article Gentile refers to is George L. Mosse, “The Genesis of Fascism”, *The Journal of Contemporary History*, I, 1966. Quoted in *Il fascismo del persecutore*, op. cit., 85. The book on Nazi culture is George L. Mosse, *Nazi Culture. Intellectual, Cultural and Social life in the Third Reich*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1966. However, already in *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), as it will be shown, there emerge anthropological themes. Also Roger Griffin has noted how the 1966 article on the genesis of fascism stressed the liturgical elements. In Griffin, “Withstanding the Rush of Time. The Prescience of Mosse's Anthropological View of Fascism”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 115

society which many men had felt so deeply. It was no small part of fascism's attraction."<sup>281</sup> If the nation has to be transformed, nihilism (activism) is of little use, in that a clear myth is needed, a myth which can provide a goal and a sense of belonging. Though Italian fascism, Mosse says, had at the very beginning a "pragmatic base" and an "ideological vagueness", it slowly acquired its worked-out ideology which managed to combine nationalism and activism.<sup>282</sup> However, in the end, ideology is brushed aside by Mussolini's megalomania, by his cult of leadership; Hitler himself becomes a messiah. In Mosse's interpretation, nihilism eventually seems to win over ideology: the "nihilistic streak in fascism", the "struggle for the sake of struggling – action for action's sake", becomes at times "manifest".<sup>283</sup> Such a view can be held, Mosse explains, for both Italian fascism and national socialism: they share "some of the same emphasis upon action for action's sake".<sup>284</sup> Despite the great ideological differences between the two movements and Germany's more explicit and pervasive ideology, in this country as well nihilism, in the end, triumphs over neoromanticism. The final result of national socialist ideology is Himmler's apocalyptic vision of a supernational state ruled by a race of Aryan supermen.<sup>285</sup> The principal direction of Nazi ideology is, according to Mosse, "toward a certain kind of nihilism which became a naked urge for power. The elements of this nihilism had always been there", in cynicism: the term "socialist" in the party title is "a ruse to get votes", the party's nationalism in the end proves "phony", and "eventually the racial element completely swamped even the nationalist element ... Hitler himself was a cynic who became a master politician. Yet he always believed in the essential ideology ... His political maneuvering, even the German-Soviet alliance, was a tactical decision which, in the end, was meant not to hinder but to further the triumph of a fully worked-out ideology. Yet by 1938 Alfred Rosenberg could write that 'the sectarian triumphs over the idea'. He was correct." Rosenberg refers, Mosse says, to Himmler and the SS, "activists who put a quest for power ahead of any dogmatism".<sup>286</sup> The SS "represented the development of the ideology toward doctrines of power and toward the creation of a race of supernatural leaders"; "to be sure", the idea of the super race which triumphed over nationalism "made useful propaganda".<sup>287</sup>

Here in 1961 Mosse appears to be uncertain as to the weight to attribute to nihilism. He says that, in the end, nihilism had the upper hand in both Italian and German fascism, but at the same time he is concerned with affirming the sincerity of ideology, and the appeal of the religious element for the masses which accounted for the "popularity of fascism".<sup>288</sup> Confronting Rauschning's interpretation of

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281 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 346-7

282 *Ibid.*, 344

283 *Ibid.*, 351-2

284 *Ibid.*, 357

285 *Ibid.*, 358

286 *Ibid.*, 365-6

287 *Ibid.*, 367

288 *Ibid.*, 343

national socialism as a “revolution of nihilism”<sup>289</sup>, Mosse says that “fascism's ideology went beyond pure activism itself, however”; and nevertheless Rauschning

“was correct in using the term nihilism to describe that transformation of values which fascism accomplished. The ethical norms of society were no longer related to intrinsic standards or to eternal verities. Instead, duty to the fascist state and to its leader became the criterion of moral behavior. Where ethics had once been linked to Christian ideas, however vaguely defined, now they were linked to the fascist ideology of struggle and history.”<sup>290</sup>

The term nihilism can therefore be applied to fascism, Mosse says, as long as one refers to the new morality it created, which put ideology between the individual and his ethical and moral standards. We find here two diverse and partly contradictory views of nihilism: on the one hand, nihilism is identified with activism, with struggle for struggle's sake, and is therefore opposed to ideology, which is supposed to provide the myth, the goal which mindless activism could not offer. On the other, nihilism becomes part of Mosse's interpretation insofar as it describes the transformation of values brought by fascism. Yet fascist ideology is regarded as the “ideology of struggle and history”, thus revealing its dual nature, torn between activism per se and belief in the goal to be accomplished, between nihilism and “positive” values. According to this scheme, if nihilism won over ideology, it eventually espoused it to transform values and provide a goal.

### ***From Nihilism to Liturgy***

*The Crisis of German Ideology* marks the first step Mosse took toward the discarding of the concept of nihilism. He states that national socialism was not a naked struggle for power; rather, it was “far from being purely nihilistic”, in that it had a “positive ideology” which the book carefully analyzes. All western fascisms “moved from the rejection of reality to a glorification of ideology.”<sup>291</sup> There is in this book no hint at the final triumph of nihilism over ideology which characterized *The Culture of Western Europe*, published only three years earlier: the eventual supremacy of the nihilistic streak is thus considerably blunted. Moreover, the first hint at the word “liturgy” is made in this very book where Mosse says that the Volkish world view “was itself objectified in the form of a new religion with its own mysticism and its own liturgical rites.”<sup>292</sup>

By the time Mosse wrote the article “Fascism and the Intellectuals”, issued in 1968, nihilism had

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289 Hermann Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism, Warning to the West*, Alliance Book Corporation, New York, 1939

290 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 352

291 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 312-3

292 *Ibid.*, 312

been finally discarded, and he could write that “such a 'revolution of nihilism' could not be expected to capture the true enthusiasms and dreams of men”.<sup>293</sup> In both his article “The Genesis of Fascism” and his book on Nazi Culture (1966), the word “nihilism” is replaced by a stress on the religious character of fascism and its liturgy, even though hints at “propaganda” and “manipulation” still occasionally emerge. Along with nihilism, these two other concepts will gradually disappear from the scene.

The years between 1964 and the early 1970s marked Mosse's shift from ideology to liturgy through the anthropological and visual turn. This turn originated in the historian's efforts at understanding the roots of fascist consensus, a comprehension which nihilism, propaganda and manipulation could not help explain. At the Stanford seminar, Mosse already insisted on the fact that fascists wanted to revolutionize “the soul”; he then added: “I'm not saying they didn't want power. Everybody wants power”, and yet he did not yield to the idea that fascism was merely a quest for power.<sup>294</sup> Mosse saw fascism as having an “ideological sincerity”, even though he reconducted it to Hitler's “ideological pragmatism”.<sup>295</sup> The confusion inherent in the cohabitation of propaganda and consensus must not, however, distract attention from the key question Mosse posed at the opening of the seminar, the question about why so many people made national socialism their intellectual commitment.<sup>296</sup> Fascism, Mosse said, has an “appeal”, and its ideology must not be dismissed as a “hodgepodge”.<sup>297</sup> Concluding the session, Mosse asked “Why did the ideology appeal? To whom did it appeal? What groups did it appeal to?”<sup>298</sup> In order to answer, the content of ideology must be grasped. At that time, Mosse was fully immersed in the completing of *The Crisis of German Ideology*.

Speaking of Renzo De Felice's troublesome reception in Italy after the publication of the *Intervista sul fascismo* (1975), Mosse defended his Italian colleague, admiring him because “he does what a good historian ought to do: he robs us of illusions and confronts us with historical reality”: what De Felice says about consensus, Mosse goes on, is painful and we would prefer not to hear it, but it's true, and it stands for Germany too.<sup>299</sup> A few years later, he praised the Frankfurt School's effort at rediscovering Ernst Bloch's *The Heritage of Our Times* (1935): its “central thesis [was] that the volkish utopia in Germany was a romantic anti-capitalism and not merely an instrument of deception.”<sup>300</sup> The idea of propaganda had been dropped: as Mosse said in a 1994 interview,

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293 George L. Mosse, “Fascism and the Intellectuals”, in S. J. Woolf (ed. by), *The Nature of Fascism*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 1968, 205

294 “What is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

295 “Adolf Hitler”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

296 “What is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

297 *Ibid.*

298 *Ibid.*

299 George L. Mosse, “Fascism as History”, lecture, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 9; Leo Baeck Institute. The lecture was surely given shortly after 1975.

300 George L. Mosse, “Fascism and Consensus”, lecture, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 8; Leo Baeck Institute. The lecture was given in the late 1970s, in that there is a reference to a 1977 article by Anson Rabinbach, “Unclaimed Heritage: Ernst Bloch's Heritage of Our Times and the Theory of Fascism”, *New German Critique*, No. 11 (Spring, 1977), pp. 5-21

“voilà encore un mot que je voudrais voire éliminé à tout jamais des travaux des historiens. Je vous assure que si ce qu’on appelle la ‘propagande de Goebbels’ avait seulement été de la ‘propagande’, elle n’aurait pas si bien fonctionné. J’avais commencé à travailler sur cette question pour *The Crisis of German Ideology*. J’en ai d’ailleurs la confirmation plus tard lors des conversations que j’ai pu avoir avec Speer. Jamais sans me rencontres avec Speer, je n’aurais pu écrire *The Nationalization of the Masses*.”<sup>301</sup>

In 1966 the anthropological and visual turn was already in the making, and far from being completed. Indeed, in *Nazi Culture* he wrote that the “nationalization of the masses” in Germany centered on Hitler's view that will and power are needed to win the hearts of the masses.<sup>302</sup> Such an assertion still relies, to some extent, on the concept of “ideological pragmatism” formulated at Stanford three years before. To note the difference between this stance and the 1975 concept of “nationalization of the masses”, which was linked with the “new politics” and its fully liturgical character, is to point right to the core of the anthropological and visual turn and its significance. In the 1966 book, Nazi culture was certainly not something imposed upon people, it was widely shared<sup>303</sup> and met an “enthusiastic reception”, being it “built upon popular taste and prejudices”.<sup>304</sup> However, “these documents [those collected in the book] convey an idea of how 'mass consciousness' can be created and manipulated in a nation. Hitler and his fellow leaders genuinely believed in their world view, but they also sought quite consciously to induce the population to share this belief”; Goebbels was an “expert manipulator of mass opinion ... Yet it would all have come to naught if the world view itself had not reflected already existing prejudices among the people.”<sup>305</sup> In this work Mosse combines the two sides of the coin: “such a movement must be highly organized in order to capture power in the nation, but this organization must, in turn, be securely rooted in the world view. Propaganda was therefore of the highest importance, though the word 'propaganda' itself can be misleading. Hitler never thought you could sell National Socialism as one sells toothpaste or cigarettes; a much more sophisticated theory was involved.”<sup>306</sup> The theory Mosse refers to is a clear sign of a changing perspective. He refers to Sorel's concept of myth as “the strongest belief held by a group”, and to Le Bon's “conservatism of crowds”, when explaining how Hitler “took the basic nationalism of the German tradition and the longing for

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301 Interview with George Mosse, “Du Baroque au Nazisme: une histoire religieuse de la politique”, *European Review of History-Revue européenne d'Histoire*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1994, 250. The interviewers were Bruno Cabanes (Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris), Christopher M. Clark (St. Catharine's College, Cambridge) and D.L.L. Parry (Hertford College, Oxford)

302 *Nazi Culture. Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich*, op. cit., xx

303 *Ibid.*, xxii

304 *Ibid.*, xxix

305 *Ibid.*, xl

306 *Ibid.*, xxiii

the stable personal relationships of olden times, and built upon them as the strongest belief of the group.”<sup>307</sup> Industrialism has created mass society, which alienates the individual from his society as well as from his rational nature; Hitler felt “in the camp of Sorel and Le Bon ... The use of basically irrational prejudices and predilections helped to bring about the acceptance of the Germanic world view which was Hitler's solution for ending the modern alienation of man.”<sup>308</sup> Mass meetings are, according to Hitler, necessary to create mass suggestion; such meetings, which appeal to the irrationality of human nature, “were liturgical rites”.<sup>309</sup>

Here liturgy comes to the fore, marking a decisive step toward the interpretation of fascism as a religion: “national socialism was a religion; the depth of the ideology, the liturgy, the element of hope, all helped to give the movement the character of a new faith.”<sup>310</sup>

### ***The Religion of Fascism***

In the 1966 article on the genesis of fascism, Mosse laid a particular weight on the appeal of national socialism: “the appeal must be made to this irrational conservatism [Mosse refers here to Le Bon] and it must be combined with the 'magic' influence of mass suggestion through a leader. In this way mass man can be harnessed to a political mass movement, his tendency toward chaos can be curbed, and he can be redirected into positive action”.<sup>311</sup> If in 1961 he saw Nazi ideology as “based upon a technique of terror”<sup>312</sup>, in 1975 he could assert that “the accusation that through propaganda the Nazis attempted to erect a terrorist world of illusions can be upheld only in part. No one would deny the presence of terror, but enough evidence has accumulated to account for the genuine popularity of Nazi literature and art which did not need the stimulus of terrorism to become effective. This is true for the Nazi political style as well; it was popular because it was built upon a familiar and congenial tradition.”<sup>313</sup> In 1977, he claimed that mass terror was not a common trait in fascism, that it came only later, that in the beginning there was adherence to the movement.<sup>314</sup> Finally, in 1979 he wrote

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307 *Ibid.*, xxiii-xxiv

308 *Ibid.*, xxiv-xxv

309 *Ibid.*, xxv

310 *Ibid.*, xxxi

311 “The Genesis of Fascism”, op. cit., 16

312 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 371

313 *The Nationalization of the Masses*, op. cit., 11

314 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 78-9. The concentration camps system, Mosse said, was not fully established before 1937; the first two years of national socialism in power met with a “general enthusiasm”. *Ibid.*, 53. William Shirer, who had worked as a correspondent from Nazi Germany, recalled some years later: “it was at this time, in the late summer of 1934, that I came to live and work in the Third Reich. There was much that impressed, puzzled and troubled a foreign observer about the new Germany. The overwhelming majority of Germans did not seem to mind that their personal freedom had been taken away, that so much of their culture had been destroyed and replaced with a mindless barbarism ... In the background, to be sure, there lurked the terror of the gestapo and the fear of the concentration camp ... Yet the Nazi terror in the early years affected the lives of relatively few Germans and a newly arrived observer was somewhat surprised to see that the people of this country did not seem to feel that they were being cowed and held down by an unscrupulous and brutal dictatorship. On the contrary, they

that the idea of propaganda implied a “misunderstanding of the fascist cults and their essentially organic and religious nature”.<sup>315</sup>

The outcome of the anthropological and visual turn, as we have said, was the concept of “new politics”. Here Mosse had completed the transition to liturgy, thus definitively focussing on the religious nature of fascism, and confirming a trend which had always been latent in his works. In the 1961 book on European culture, he had compared mass meetings to “religious rites” with a dramatic nature: “fascist meetings were religious rites in which allegiance to the myth was reaffirmed in a spectacular visual manner. Its images were direct and powerful ... Fascism acted out its ideology through dramas in which all the devoted participated and renewed their fervor.”<sup>316</sup> Mosse speaks of “rites”, “devoted”, “fervor”; he then says that *rituals* gave attraction to the movement, and when he poses the crucial question about consensus he puts it in this way: “why did apparently normal and even intelligent people become *believers*?”<sup>317</sup>

At the Stanford seminary, Mosse referred to Hitler's conviction that “the greatness of an idea ... lies in the *religious fanaticism* with which it triumphs through *intolerance* against all that is different – convinced as it is of its own righteousness”<sup>318</sup>; in the opening session of the seminar, he had stated that fascism is “essentially a religious movement” in that it tries to revolutionize man's mind, his soul.<sup>319</sup> The very problem of the ethics of fascism, to which Mosse devoted so much attention, has a religious flavor; what he will call “permissible exception”<sup>320</sup> reminds one of the Christian concept of “just war”.<sup>321</sup> Concluding *The Crisis of German Ideology*, Mosse stated that “National Socialism, the whole Volkish movement, was analogous to a religion, and the movement acted as if belief in the faith would grant the disillusioned a comfort and a sense of belonging which society could never provide.”<sup>322</sup> Yet here Mosse feels the need to tackle the problem of irrationalism: here begins, as Gentile has observed, the separation of nihilism and irrationalism. After having said that national socialism is analogous to a religion, Mosse goes on specifying that

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supported it with genuine enthusiasm. Somehow it imbued them with a new hope and a new confidence and an astonishing faith in the future of their country.” William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich. A History of Nazi Germany*, Fawcett Crest, New York 1960, 320. Mosse had reviewed Shirer's book, criticizing it since it merely provided a narrative of the events, completely neglecting the prehistory of the Nazi movement and the “deeper significance” of the history of the Third Reich. Mosse's review is in *The Progressive*, December 1960.

315 George L. Mosse, “Introduction: Towards a General Theory of Fascism”, in Mosse (ed. by), *International Fascism, New Thoughts and New Approaches*, Sage Publications, London and Beverly Hills 1979, 1

316 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 348

317 *Ibid.*, 368 [my italics]

318 “The Problem of National Socialist Morality”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit. [my italics]

319 “What is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

320 “The Problem of National Socialist Morality”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

321 In the interview with Ledeen Mosse referred to the “idea of total war which you already have in World War I: the enemy must be killed, and to kill the enemy is a good act. *The church blesses it, in fact.*” *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 74 [my italics]

322 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 316



“yet the movement was not wholly centered upon the outpouring of the longings of the soul, as Jung would have us believe. The ideology was formalized. The archetypes were not allowed free play. And as the ideology was tamed, it came to express itself through an internal logic of its own which took on concrete, outward forms ... Even the most irrational religion, to become effective, must express itself through outward forms. To move masses of men it must objectify itself. In the end the outward forms may become so important that they determine the content of the faith. This is what happened in Germany, both through the way in which the ideology was objectified and through the dominant role that the leader came to occupy. Moreover, the ideas of discipline and organization which Hitler stressed in place of 'fanaticism' not only led to a more effective objectification of ideology but also provided the bases for an awesome political effectiveness. The so-called eternal verities of nature, Volk and race were channeled toward definite objects, consciously directed by the leadership. The irrational is made concrete through rational acts within the terms of its own ideological framework. These rational acts are implemented by a political pragmatism as well as by the use of modern technology. But always the ideology provides the basic presuppositions and the eventual goal.”<sup>323</sup>

The religious character of fascism had therefore been always latent in Mosse's interpretation. Activism, as we have seen, was “tamed”. This taming occurred through “the emphasis upon nationalism, racism, and the longing for a restoration of traditional morality”, but also through the “cult element”, which focussed the attention (through the leader) to the “eternal verities” of ideology.<sup>324</sup> Now the verities of ideology, upon which state ethics is built, are “eternal”, and this is stressed by the “liturgical element” with its “endless repetition of slogans, choruses, and symbols. These are the techniques which went into the taming of the revolution and which made fascism ... a new religion with rites long familiar in traditional religious observance.”<sup>325</sup> If in Mosse's previous interpretation nihilism transformed values detaching the ethics of society from “eternal verities” linked to Christian ideas, now liturgy furthers the “eternal verities” of fascist ideology. Fascism is now a “new religion”, “fascist mass meetings seemed something new, but in reality contained predominantly traditional elements in technique as well as in the ideology”<sup>326</sup>; as Mosse will write thirty years later, “traditional Christianity was the most important inspiration for the rites and liturgy of fascism.”<sup>327</sup> The adoption of the concept of liturgy, and the view of ideology as religious truth, has marked the end of nihilism intended as transformation of values.

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323 *Ibid.*, 316-317

324 “The Genesis of Fascism”, op. cit., 16-17

325 *Ibid.*, 17

326 *Ibid.*, 17

327 George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution. Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, Howard Fertig, New York, 1999, xii

We have already seen that also in *Nazi Culture* Mosse said that “national socialism *was* a religion”<sup>328</sup>. Now, in 1966, fascism is not “*essentially* a religious movement”, it is not “*analogous* to a religion”: fascism *is* a religion. This interpretive revolution, hinted at in previous writings, now becomes manifest and fully mature, entailing the definitive discarding of the concepts of nihilism, propaganda and manipulation. When asked by Ledeen if fascism is a religious phenomenon, Mosse replied that “any phenomenon of our civilization is in a sense a Christian phenomenon because Christianity is what people know. Any political theology grows quite naturally out of Christian theology.”<sup>329</sup> This is a conviction which will be strengthened over the years. In 1979 Mosse asserted that “the fascist revolutions built upon a deep bedrock of popular piety and, especially in Germany, a millenarianism which was apt to come to the fore in times of crisis. The myths and symbols of nationalism were superimposed upon those of Christianity – not only in the rhythms of public rites and ceremonies ... - but also in the appeal to apocalyptic and millenarian thought.”<sup>330</sup> In an unpublished lecture Mosse gave around 1993, he could praise Emilio Gentile's *Il culto del littorio*<sup>331</sup> as the first “comprehensive analysis of fascism as a civic religion”: now fascism is a “civic religion” a “faith”.<sup>332</sup> In 1999, Mosse lamented that “in the past many failed to discuss fascism as a civic religion, and that, for example, in was only in the 1990s that Emilio Gentile gave us the first and masterful analysis of Italian fascism's sacralization of politics.”<sup>333</sup>

### ***Beyond the History of Intellectuals***

The study of popular literature had provided Mosse with a useful tool for investigating the roots of consensus, and yet such an approach did not solve the problem inherent in the cohabitation, in his interpretation, of consensus and propaganda. The turn to liturgy, which entailed the discarding of nihilism and the view of fascism as a religion, and eventually culminated in the concept of the “new politics”, offered the historian the key he was looking for in order to open the door to what he held to be the fullest understanding of fascism. Mosse progressively expanded his conception of the historical discipline: after having included literature, he adopted categories taken from anthropology, combining

328 *Nazi Culture. Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich*, op. cit., xxxi [my italics]

329 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 36

330 “Introduction: Towards a General Theory of Fascism”, op. cit., 9. In this work, Mosse refers to the “puritanism of national socialism” (*Ibid.*, 18), a theme he had already touched upon in 1961 when he wrote that “fascist movements tended to be prudish”, and that “to this prudishness Hitler added a sexual puritanism”. *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 352

331 Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1993

332 George L. Mosse, “Fascinating Fascism”, lecture, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 7; Leo Baeck Institute. The lecture was given soon after the publication of Gentile's *Il culto del littorio* (1993).

333 *The Fascist Revolution*, op. cit., xiii

them with a particular attention for aesthetics: this enabled him to gain a wider perspective on the religious nature of mass movements.

In February 1969 Professor R. K. Webb, managing editor of the *American Historical Review*, asked Mosse to write a joint review of three books on the history of anthropology: “what I have in mind is a long, reflective review essay, approaching the subject not from an anthropological standpoint ... but judged as contribution to the history of ideas.”<sup>334</sup> The result was an article on methodology (Mosse hardly ever published anything on methodology), which stressed the importance of anthropology for historians<sup>335</sup>. So the abstract:

“The historian confronting problems raised by mass culture and mass politics needs new approaches in order to capture the structure of the popular mind. The anthropologists’ use of myth and symbol can provide useful ways to penetrate the modern as well as the primitive mind. However, a purely technoenvironmental approach ignores the importance of human consciousness and psychological factors in the formation of human attitudes. Claude Lévi-Strauss comes closest to posing the problem which confronts historians of mass phenomena through stressing the interplay between psychological attitudes and social functions. Though anthropologists assume the possibility of establishing orderly laws of behavior, historians in attempting to clarify irrational acts also impose a rationality upon the irrational.”<sup>336</sup>

This review article was turned by Mosse into a programmatic manifesto in which the historian fully embraces the anthropological method as based on the study of myths and symbols, and on the assumption that the nature of man remains substantially unchanged over the centuries.

Mosse begins with an observation on the work of Arthur Lovejoy: he has made history of ideas history of intellectuals, which Mosse finds useful, but “the time has come to go beyond the study of such elitist groups to a more thorough investigation of popular practices and sentiments. In an age of mass politics and mass culture, the intellectual historian needs new approaches that take into account those popular notions that have played such a cardinal role in the evolution of man and society.”<sup>337</sup> Mosse does not refer to the study of a “boring catalogue of curious notions”, leisure time or “pursuit

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334 R. K. Webb, letter to Mosse, 7 February 1969, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 8; folder 2; Leo Baeck Institute. The three books, all of them published in 1968, are: George Stocking, *Race, Culture and Evolution. Essays on the History of Anthropology*; Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory. A History of Theories of Culture*; Wilhelm E. Mühlmann, *Geschichte der Anthropologie*.

335 George L. Mosse, “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, op. cit.

336 George L. Mosse, letter to the AHR, 1969, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 8; folder 2; Leo Baeck Institute.

337 “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, op. cit., 447

of pleasure, excitement, and beauty”: the subject “must attempt to fathom the minds of the majority of men at a given historical time in order to understand the nature and force of popular beliefs and predilections as expressed in politics and culture.”<sup>338</sup>

Mosse then turns to the sociology of knowledge which, according to him, is useful in that it links individuals to their social groups, which determine them, but the discipline “assumes that men are the product of their social position and as a result has great difficulty in assimilating twentieth-century discoveries concerning the importance of men’s unconscious drives and aspirations. The assumption of man’s rationality underlies both the ‘sociology of knowledge’ and Lovejoy’s progression in the history of ideas. In the analysis of popular culture or mass politics, the irrational seems to predominate, and the historian needs different tools to capture the structure of the popular mind. Here anthropology can be of great help, for not only have anthropologists concerned themselves with the analysis of folkways and community customs, but their use of myths and symbols can provide useful ways to penetrate the mind of modern as well as primitive man.”<sup>339</sup> Mosse, drawing from twentieth-century psychology and anthropology, asserts that mass politics and popular culture are basically irrational; rational tools does not suffice to grasp the essence of modern politics.<sup>340</sup> Moreover, he asserts that the method of analysis of myths and symbols as practiced by anthropologists can be used by historians of modern politics: this means to assume that the primitive mind and the modern one are fundamentally the same. The nature of man is a constant in time<sup>341</sup>. However, Mosse adds that

“historians must also hesitate before they draw such close connections between primitive and modern man, but this connection does not have to consist in the similarity of the actual contents of myths and symbols. It may, rather, consist in the similarity of human wishes and aspirations, reactions and frustrations. The myths and symbols that modern mass movements use in order to manipulate their followers badly need historical investigation *as* myths and symbols. Throughout the centuries these myths and symbols have a sameness that cannot be ignored. Studies of popular literature have brought this to light. Totalitarian movements (and indeed most modern mass movements) ‘imposed’ themselves upon their people by using familiar and basic myths and

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338 *Ibid.*, 447

339 *Ibid.*, 448

340 Roger Griffin has written that anthropologists had reconstructed the “inner lives of people”, their belief systems and worldviews, “to the point of providing rational accounts of their social behavior, no matter how irrational it seemed to an untrained Western or ethnocentric eye”. “Withstanding the Rush of Time. The Prescience of Mosse’s Anthropological View of Fascism”, *op. cit.*, 111-2

341 This reminds us of Jacob Burckhardt, greatly admired by Mosse, when he wrote that “noi consideriamo ciò che si ripete, che è costante e tipico, come qualcosa che trova risonanze in noi ed è per noi comprensibile”, and “il nostro punto di partenza sta in quell’unico centro permanente, e per noi possibile, ossia l’uomo che patisce, che anela, che agisce, l’uomo qual è, qual è sempre stato e sempre sarà: per questo le nostre considerazioni saranno, in un certo qual modo, patologiche.” Jacob Burckhardt, *Considerazioni sulla storia universale*, Mondadori, Milano, 1990, 7

symbols. These found expression within the literature of the movement and in its liturgy as well, in festivals, mass meetings, and symbolic representations such as national monuments. Here indeed the great manifestations of society originate at the level of the unconscious, as Lévi-Strauss believes. Conscious and unconscious wishes, desires and frustrations are manipulated in order to produce adherence to the political movement. Historians have only arrived at the threshold of such investigations. They are important without denying the essential role played by the social and political situation. Without the right conditions, the appeal of the proper myths and symbols cannot be activated in a meaningful manner. But historical analyses of the myths and symbols used by such movements are essential, and neither the history of ideas nor the sociology of knowledge will suffice any longer for the intellectual historian. Anthropology can be helpful; at least one must be familiar with its methods.”<sup>342</sup>

Concluding the article, Mosse asserted that the intellectual historian had the “necessity of fathoming the complexity of the human mind in its interplay with the other factors that make up historical reality. He must draw general conclusions as to how the unconscious mind penetrates reality. It is here that the existence of myths and symbols can provide an entering wedge and keep him from sliding into an idealistic or materialistic posture. This presents an approach that can no longer be ignored if intellectual history is to advance beyond the history of intellectuals.”<sup>343</sup>

Mass politics and its liturgy, psychology and anthropology are linked in this important essay. One more quote completes the picture: discussing Lévi-Strauss’ statement that ‘myth is language’, Mosse suggests that it be “broadened to take in *visual* means of communication as well”<sup>344</sup>. The basic principles of what we might call the “anthropological and visual turn” appear here in their entirety. Gentile states that the article “concludeva la transizione di Mosse dalla ideologia alla liturgia e apriva una nuova prospettiva ... che ebbe come centro di riferimento principale i riti e i simboli della politica di massa.”<sup>345</sup> According to Griffin, the essay is a “pretext for articulating his debt to such theorists as Ernst Cassirer and Claude Lévi-Strauss in coming to realize the value of anthropology to historians ... This review crystallized Mosse's maturation from intellectual history and history of ideas to an anthropologically informed historiography (or rather a historiography informed by a certain *idea* of anthropology and certainly not by a rigorous anthropological school of thought or theory).”<sup>346</sup>

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342 “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, op. cit., 451-2. It must be noted that the concept of manipulation still appears, though in a radically different context. Though he discarded the concept of propaganda, Mosse never denied that myths and symbols might also be used to manipulate, despite the huge emphasis he came to lay on the sincerity of consensus.

343 *Ibid.*, 452

344 *Ibid.*, 451 [my italics]

345 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 91

346 “Withstanding the Rush of Time. The Prescience of Mosse's Anthropological View of Fascism”, op. cit., 116

“History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements” (1969) can be regarded as a turning point in Mosse’s historiography. However, if the main stages of this turn have been analysed, it is still necessary to analyse and understand its roots, which are as diverse as strongly connected in the historian's mind: Mosse elaborated a personal idea of myth based on various influences, integrating it with aesthetic criteria derived, in turn, from other influences. All this occurred during the turbulent 1960s, as the student movement reached its climax. Mosse's understanding of mass movements cannot be separated from the intellectual, social and historical context which surrounded him in those years.

## CHAPTER III

### THE ROOTS OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND VISUAL TURN

“A historian who places so much emphasis on myth and its expression  
in the political liturgy of a new political community  
is giving historiography an anthropological orientation.”<sup>347</sup>  
(Roger Griffin)

“I am historian and not an anthropologist,  
and came to the use of anthropological ideas and their importance for modern history,  
through a historical problem rather than through anthropological background.”<sup>348</sup>  
(George L. Mosse)

“It is beyond the power of philosophy to destroy the political myths.  
A myth is in a sense invulnerable. It is impervious to rational arguments;  
it cannot be refuted by syllogisms. But philosophy can do us another important service.  
It can make us understand the adversary. In order to fight an enemy you must know him.  
That is one of the first principles of a sound strategy. To know him means  
not only to know his defects and weaknesses; it means to know his strength.  
All of us have been liable to underrate this strength. When we first heard of the political myths  
we found them so absurd and incongruous, so fantastic and ludicrous  
that we could hardly be prevailed upon to take them seriously. By now it has become clear to all of us  
that this was a great mistake. We should not commit the same error a second time.  
We should carefully study the origin, the structure, the methods, and the technique of the political myths.  
We should see the adversary face to face in order to know how to combat him.”<sup>349</sup>  
(Ernst Cassirer)

The “anthropological and visual turn” originates both from problems raised by Mosse's historical research, and from concrete events of his life. This shift to liturgy occurs in a decade, the 1960s, which must be regarded as a central one in Mosse's historiography and in his life. These years mark a turning point on several levels, which constantly overlap and affect each other. Emilio Gentile

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347 Roger Griffin, “Withstanding the Rush of Time. The Prescience of Mosse's Anthropological View of Fascism”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 111

348 George L. Mosse, “Mass Politics and the Political Liturgy of Nationalism”, unpublished notes, undated; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 10; Leo Baeck Institute

349 Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1946, 296

has spoken of a “circular connection” between research, methodology and theoretical elaboration in Mosse’s historiography<sup>350</sup>, one element influencing each other in a dynamic fashion. In this context, Mosse’s biography enters the connection and affects it drastically. Though much has been written on his “anthropological” history, few historians writing on Mosse focussed on how he actually came to such an approach.<sup>351</sup>

The anthropological and visual turn was not solely the outcome of problems posed by Mosse’s analysis of fascism, though these played a major role. Its roots lie, on the one hand, in Mosse’s previous preoccupation with popular culture and the role of ideology in the historical process, which had first urged him to elaborate a definition of culture which relied to a certain extent on anthropology. On the other hand, his reflections on the relationship between rationalism and irrationalism, already present in his early works<sup>352</sup>, were given new impetus by his encounter with the thought of those German-Jewish intellectuals to whom he belonged, though he had been so far hardly conscious of it. In this context, the student movement was a key element in the methodological turn on two levels. First, as Emilio Gentile has written,

“la rivolta studentesca fu certamente un esempio concreto e attuale di ‘nuova politica’, la formazione di un nuovo stile politico antagonista, che tuttavia aveva alle spalle una lunga tradizione culturale e politica americana di miti, riti e simboli civici. A me pare che vi sia un legame, tutt’altro che meramente cronologico, fra la rivolta studentesca, la pubblicazione dell’articolo sui rapporti fra storia, antropologia e movimenti di massa, e le ricerche e le riflessioni sulla ‘nuova politica’, che iniziarono attraverso la riflessione sulla ricerca di una ‘terza via’ fra il materialismo marxista e quello capitalista, di cui anche gli studenti in rivolta degli anni sessanta, secondo Mosse, erano in cerca.”<sup>353</sup>

Second, the students, in their search for this “third way”, turned to the thought of intellectuals like Herbert Marcuse and other philosophers of the Frankfurt School who, in Mosse’s view, were the heirs of a German-Jewish tradition which reached its height at the time of the Weimar republic. The students’ great interest in the period of Weimar drew Mosse’s attention to its intellectual life. In Mosse’s

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350 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 69

351 Notably Roger Griffin, “Withstanding the Rush of Time. The Prescience of Mosse’s Anthropological View of Fascism”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., and Emilio Gentile, *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit.

352 Mosse advocated the necessity to maintain a “rational attitude in times of adversity”, “Hillel Talk”, cit. He then claimed that European rationalism derived also from religion’s attempt to elaborate a rationality of its own, “The Importance of Jacques Saurin in the History of Casuistry and the Enlightenment”, op. cit. Eventually he wrote on the Casuists’ attempt to rationalize the use of reason of state, assimilating it into the Christian framework of ethics, thus leading to a greater realism in life, “Christianity and Reason of State”, op. cit.

353 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 96



scheme of things, Weimar intellectuals like Stefan Zweig, Hermann Cohen, Aby Warburg or Ernst Cassirer (just to mention a few), in their commitment to the use of critical reason, a heritage of the enlightenment tradition of *Bildung*, and in their blind belief in liberal values, had underestimated the power of irrationalism, thus failing to grasp the appeal of national socialism. However, some of them (like Warburg and Cassirer) had turned their attention to the study of myths, thus making an attempt to investigate the irrational rationally. Mosse's work on myth is, in a sense, a continuation of their attempt, a profession of faith to their legacy.<sup>354</sup>

To sum it up, in the 1960s different factors interact: a) Mosse's search for an explanation of fascism's consensus; b) his shift to modern history, which entailed the necessity to elaborate new historiographical tools for grasping the essence of mass politics; c) his adoption of anthropological categories, first in his definition of cultural history, and then in the inclusion of the study of myths and symbols into his historiography; d) the experience of the student movement; e) the encounter with the thought of the German-Jewish intellectual tradition, also furthered by Mosse's strengthening ties to Israel; f) last but not least, the influence of aesthetics, derived from Mosse's interest in the Baroque, from his admiration for the work of Johann Huizinga, but also from the work of Thomas Nipperdey and the conversations with Albert Speer. All these factors, once combined in Mosse's eclectic mind, gave birth to the most important methodological turn of his historiography. In the early 1970s, he coined the concept of “new politics”, upon which he based his pathbreaking book *The Nationalization of the Masses* (1975). From this moment onward, the aesthetic dimension of politics will remain the thread binding together all his works, and leading him to open new perspectives on the history of racism, sexuality, respectability and the First World War.

The development in Mosse's historiography is well exemplified by his reworking of *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961)<sup>355</sup>. This is, in my opinion, a good example, because of at least three reasons: first, it is Mosse's first book on modern history, and then the best point of observation when looking for changes and evolutions in his historical thought; second, because it deals with basically all the major themes of his later works; third, because it is one of the few books that Mosse significantly revised, first in 1974 and then in 1988. A comparison between the two editions which are more distant in time (1961 and 1988) can be of significance: while whole chapters of the book remain substantially

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354 The relationship between Mosse and the thought of these German-Jewish intellectuals is analyzed in Chapter VII. In this context, suffice it to show the relevance they had for Mosse's methodological turn.

355 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit. The book originated from Mosse's lectures on modern European cultural history, and is a vast synthesis of the main movements of thought, philosophies, and ideologies in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (romanticism, nationalism, racism, liberalism, Marxism, conservatism, psychoanalysis, existentialism, fascism). The thesis underlying this work is that European culture ended up in the “abasement of individualism” brought about by totalitarianism. This originated from the decline of liberalism and the progressive “escape from reality” caused by the “search for roots ... in the age of the Industrial Revolution” which, furthered by the romantic thrust to transcend reality, was to lead into totalitarianism. This study is based on the definition of culture as “a state or habit of mind which is apt to become a way of life intimately linked to the challenges and dilemmas of contemporary society”, *ibid.*, 2

unchanged<sup>356</sup>, a brand new one, entitled “The Changing Pace of Life”<sup>357</sup>, is present in the 1988 edition. This chapter is an excellent summary of about thirty years of the historian’s reflection and rethinking on the modern age, and fills in the “gaps” of the first edition, making the picture complete and summing up Mosse’s final interpretation of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This interpretation revolves around two events: the Industrial revolution, and the French revolution. The Industrial Revolution is the first turning point: industrialization and urbanization bring about a sensation of chaos, of “confusing change”<sup>358</sup>:

“the changes brought by industrialism pervaded individuals’ daily lives in a continuous manner and forced confrontation with a new reality as the traditional way of life was being transformed. This kind of confrontation had a special importance for cultural history because it meant an adjustment of human consciousness – an adjustment not just to the new and episodic but to changes which seemed here to stay and which could not be supported or opposed ... Changes in daily life had to be confronted and dealt with – the new speed of time, the problems of urban living, the destruction of nature – everything that was once immutable and fixed for all time now seemed in motion.”<sup>359</sup>

The new technologies at the end of the nineteenth century “promised to abolish space and accelerate time ... Such technologies demanded a new awareness of change which seemed fraught with immediate or potential danger to the cohesion of society”<sup>360</sup>. The second turning point is the French Revolution. The XIX century sees the birth of the age of mass politics, of a “new kind of politics”<sup>361</sup>, of that “new politics” which Mosse extensively analyzes in *The Nationalization of the Masses*. Politics becomes a drama where people are the participating actors; this “mobilization of the masses” “had first been encouraged by the French Revolution”<sup>362</sup>. The crowd slowly becomes a disciplined mass in need for leadership, and then the First World War offers the possibility for “mass action through ... participation in battle”<sup>363</sup>.

The “new politics” and the Great War are going to become part and parcel of the fascist experience; however, what at this stage needs to be pointed out is that Mosse links together in these pages several recurrent themes of his works from the 1970s onward, all of them eventually merging into his interpretation of fascism. Man’s confrontation with modernity is the background against which

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356 One important exception is the chapter on fascism, extensively analysed by Emilio Gentile in “A Provisional Dwelling. Origin and Development of the Concept of Fascism in Mosse’s Historiography”, in *What History Tells. George L. Mosse and the Culture of Western Europe*, op. cit.

357 *The Culture of Western Europe. The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Westview Press, Boulder and London, 1988, 11-27

358 *Ibid.*, 12

359 *Ibid.*, 13-4

360 *Ibid.*, 14

361 *Ibid.*, 12

362 *Ibid.*,

363 *Ibid.*, 13

romanticism, nationalism, respectability, racism, sexuality and the perception and stereotyping of the outsiders are to be pictured.

In the 1961 edition of *The Culture of Western Europe* many of these themes were missing. One difference lies in the adoption of Mosse's new interpretive category, that of the "new politics". In the 1988 edition of the book, moreover, Mosse often refers to the importance of beauty and aesthetics in governing large masses of people, thus adding a new element which was missing in the first edition.<sup>364</sup> Moreover, it is interesting to note how differently anthropology was used in 1961 and 1988. In 1961, Mosse referred to Stuart Hughes' 1958 *Consciousness and Society. The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930*, a book he held in high esteem.<sup>365</sup> The historian "must deal with popular ideas and practices, with folklore and community sentiment. Stuart Hughes cites with approval the term, 'retrospective cultural anthropology', which describes such efforts", Mosse wrote, and asserted that in the modern period the historian disposes of many "literary artifacts ... upon which to base such 'anthropological efforts'".<sup>366</sup> However, Hughes's approach was based upon those ideas which inspired the governing elites: this is "reasonable", Mosse said, and

"yet it would be mistaken to center this study entirely upon an analysis of the thought of certain important and creative men and women whose ideas, at one period of history, influenced the rulers of men. We have defined cultural history as a habit of mind, and such a habit draws upon a much greater variety of influences. For cultural development does involve an interaction between intellectuals conscious of what they were about and of the general mood of their times. Liberalism is a good illustration of this. Thought the ideology was elaborated by certain thinkers, liberal thought in general reflected a mood on the part of the bourgeoisie; the moral part of liberalism inspired a European middle-class morality ... This interaction seems to us at the root of European cultural development. It requires a method of analysis about which we must be explicit."<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> *The Culture of Western Europe* (1988), op. cit., 66-67. To be sure, in the 1961 edition Mosse inserted photos of buildings and mass meetings, but his elaborations on the importance of liturgy and architecture came only later, after the methodological turn was completed. As it often happens with Mosse, themes which come to the fore of his interpretation at one stage were already present before in his work, yet implicitly, and not given the weight they would receive later, after long periods of reflection and research, after a particular event of his life or an intellectual influence. The acquaintance with the work of Nipperdey, or that with Albert Speer, are two typical examples of this.

<sup>365</sup> H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society. The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930*, New York 1958. Mosse had reviewed the book in 1959: George L. Mosse, "Retreat from Reality", in *The Progressive*, July 1959

<sup>366</sup> *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 3

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4. Indeed, Hughes referred to three ways of approaching intellectual history: the first deals with "popular ideas and practices – with the whole of the vast realm of folklore and community sentiments", where historians "proceed in much the same fashion in which anthropologists approach the study of 'primitive' culture": such efforts have been labeled "retrospective cultural anthropology". The second is "the kind of history that Croce called ethical-political – the study of the activities of ruling minorities and of the rival minorities striving to supplant them". The third is "the history of the enunciation and development of the ideas that eventually will inspire such governing élites." By his own admission, Hughes' study fell into the third category, which he regarded as the "*via regia* of intellectual history". *Consciousness and Society. The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930*, op. cit., 9-10

Intellectuals, Mosse explains, interact with the mood of their time, then the ideologies they create are “linked to the concrete challenges and dilemmas of society; otherwise they would be nothing more than a catalogue of curious and irrelevant notions”.<sup>368</sup> Thus Mosse declared that he intends to dwell also upon the ideas of “second- or third-rate minds” which “serve the historian better than the geniuses”, and this includes the utilization of literature and art as historical tools.<sup>369</sup> The picture of anthropology which emerges here is in line with the kind of cultural history, largely based upon the analysis of literature, Mosse had embraced in the late 1950s. By 1969 (“History, Anthropology and Mass Movements”), we find a totally different concept in Mosse's work: now anthropology includes myths and symbols, and these are linked to mass movements and their liturgy. “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements” can be regarded as a turning point in Mosse's historiography. Yet it is still necessary to analyse and understand the roots of this turn, which are as diverse as strongly connected in the historian's mind: Mosse elaborated an own concept of myth based on various influences, and he integrated this idea of myth with aesthetic criteria derived, in turn, from other influences. All this occurred during the turbulent 1960s, as the student movement reached its climax. The following paragraphs deal with these aspects: the “anthropological turn”, the “visual turn”, and the effect the student unrest had on Mosse's understanding of mass movements.

### ***The “Anthropological Turn”: The Idea of Myth***

Mosse's usage of the term “myth” needs clarification: unlike he did with “culture”, he never gave a formal definition in his published works. This in spite of the fact that “myth” is an ever-recurrent category in his work since the early 1960s. In the interview on Nazism, he cites Huizinga as having influenced him through “his idea of myth”, and adds that “the longer I work the more I become convinced that the idea of myth is a very important one, not just for anthropologists but also for historians. The historian's function must be to understand the myths that people live by because these myths very often have a tenuous link to reality, though they are placed within reality.”<sup>370</sup> If Mosse hints at the flight from reality into the kingdom of dreams Huizinga refers to in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, “myth” is, intuitively, the same as “dream”.<sup>371</sup> Mosse was characteristic for being imprecise whenever it came to terminology and definitions, and this could be explained by his eclecticism, and by

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368 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 4

369 *Ibid.*

370 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 29

371 C. G. Jung asserted that “myths are dreamlike structures”. C.G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation. An Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1967 (ed. or. 1952, revised edition of the 1912 original work), 24

the “general nature”, as James Wald has called it<sup>372</sup>, of his history: Mosse looked for the broad vision and did not make any attempts to be systematic, or to provide the reader with precise definitions. However, an analysis of his writings which includes also those which have not been published sheds much light on his concept of myth, delivering a picture that goes far beyond his assertion that it had been Huizinga's concept to influence him. The truth is much more complex, and once again, it addresses the evolution of Mosse's historiography as well as his personal life.

In a general sense, it could be said that what Mosse meant by myth was the dialectical counterpart of “objective reality”. In 1963, he asserted that, to him, myth meant the same thing as “metaphysics”<sup>373</sup>; this is substantially what he meant, some years later, when he asserted that “there is a dialectic between myth and reality, and ... all of history must be viewed in a dynamic and dialectical fashion.”<sup>374</sup> Myth, as Mosse understands it, remains intuitively connected with man's perceptions, beliefs, hopes and aspirations as opposed to reality. By reality, Mosse means the social and economic forces: “we realize after all, through the important schools of social history, that the dialectic is, in fact, between myth and social forces. I would say between myth and what Marx called objective reality, that is social, political, and economic forces.”<sup>375</sup> Myth is therefore an inextricable part of the historical process.<sup>376</sup> Such a view, however correct, explains little about the evolution of the concept of myth in Mosse, and neglects important aspects of his work and of his life: this very fact calls for further analysis.

Mosse's concept of myth went through two phases, both linked to the problem of irrationalism: a) in the early 1960s he relied on the fascist idea of myth, basing the concept on the thought of Georges Sorel, and infusing it with Jungian psychology; such a view was still torn between manipulation and consensus. b) Since the middle of the decade, under the influence of a German-Jewish intellectual tradition of the 1920s to which he felt deeply drawn, and of his encounter with anthropology and the thought of Claude Lévi-Strauss, he further expanded the discussion on rationalism and irrationalism. These two views were not in contradiction: rather, they integrated each other, and could be fused into a concept that was linked to Mosse's personal and intellectual experience.

### *Georges Sorel*

At the Stanford seminary, elaborating on his idea of myth, Mosse asserted: “what I do is more

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372 James Wald, “Cultural History and Symbols”, review of *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe*, in *New German Critique*, N. 37, Winter 1986, 181

373 George L. Mosse, “Conservatism”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

374 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 29-30. This general view of myth did not change over the years; the continuity of Mosse's theory of history is discussed in Chapter IX

375 *Ibid.*, 29-30

376 Mosse's dialectic view of history is discussed in Chapter IX

Sorelian than Lovejoy ... This is an approach to the history of ideas which denies the intrinsic values of ideas”.<sup>377</sup> On another occasion he explained: “there is one thing more I want to answer: the confusion about the term ‘myth’. Can be used: 1. In Sorel’s sense as the activation of the subconscious for some action. This is the modern propaganda (fascist) use of it. 2. or as denoting an absence of reality: this is the use vs society of Youth Movement and of many who revolted against this society from the fin de siècle on.”<sup>378</sup> If in the second definition we find a more general idea of myth, the first corresponds to the concept Mosse adopted in the beginning. This concept is directly linked to propaganda and manipulation. Mussolini, according to Mosse, believed that “myth is a faith, it is a passion”, and that it is necessary in order to transform reality, since activism alone is not enough. The task was to translate the fascist myth into reality.<sup>379</sup> Myth appealed to the irrational in man, and it had to be created and manipulated in order to win the masses: “the intuition involved in the construction of an organic state was thought of as the ability to use and create ‘myths’ fusing government with the irrational mainsprings of human actions”.<sup>380</sup> According to Sorel, Mosse said, ideology has to be based upon man’s irrational feelings, and that is what myth does: “human beings acted upon illogical premises; therefore the creation of a ‘myth’ will stimulate their will for action”.<sup>381</sup> The conservatism of crowds preached by Sorel and Le Bon, as it was understood by fascism, needed to be addressed: “the appeal must be made to this irrational conservatism and it must be combined with the ‘magic’ influence of mass suggestion through a leader. In this way mass man can be harnessed to a political mass movement, his tendency toward chaos can be curbed, and he can be redirected into positive action.”<sup>382</sup>

Mosse had abundantly drawn from Sorel’s concept of myth insofar as it was intended as the “activation of the subconscious for some action”. As Mosse defined myth in 1966 as “an image which can inspire men” which “must have some element of truth in it, but it is twisted into a vision that conforms to the desired ideal”<sup>383</sup>, he was very close to Sorel. In the introduction to his *Reflections on Violence*, Sorel had asserted that

“in the course of this study one thing has always been present in my mind, which seemed to me so evident that I did not think it worth while to lay much stress on it – that men who are participating in a great social movement always *picture* their coming action as a battle in which their cause is certain to triumph. These constructions, *knowledge of which is so important for historians*,

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377 “Fascism Once More”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

378 George L. Mosse, *European Culture Since 1870 - Old Lectures - Not Used*, undated; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 20; folder 14; Leo Baeck Institute.

379 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 346

380 *Ibid.*, 344

381 *Ibid.*

382 “The Genesis of Fascism”, op. cit., 16

383 George L. Mosse, *Nazi Culture. Intellectual, Cultural and Social life in the Third Reich*, op. cit., 93

I propose to call *myths*; the syndicalist ‘general strike’ and Marx’s catastrophic revolution are such myths. As remarkable examples of such myths, I have given those which were constructed by primitive Christianity, by the Reformation, by the Revolution and by the followers of Mazzini. I now wish to show that we should not attempt to analyze such groups of *images* in the way that we analyze a thing into its elements, but that they must be taken *as a whole, as historical forces*, and that we should be especially careful not to make any comparison between accomplished fact and the *picture people had formed for themselves before action*.<sup>384</sup>

This passage reflects an idea of myth that goes beyond intellectual explanation, and yet it is a concrete historical force; Mosse's dialectical poles, myth and reality, can be easily fit this distinction between “accomplished facts” and the “picture people had formed for themselves”, that is, the “perception” of reality which was to be a pillar in Mosse's historiography.<sup>385</sup> Sorel had chosen to employ the term myth in order to “refuse any discussion whatever with the people who wish to submit the idea of general strike to a detailed criticism”, in that he had “always tried to escape the influence of that intellectualist philosophy” which seemed to him “a great hindrance to the historian who allows himself to be dominated by it”.<sup>386</sup> The intellectualist philosophy, according to Sorel, finds itself unable to explain irrational phenomena, and “religions constitute a very troublesome problem for the intellectualists, for they can neither regard them as being without historical importance nor can they explain them.”<sup>387</sup> In the last resort, irrational forces are “the forces which really move men ... we may conclude that the intellectualist philosophy is entirely unable to explain the great movements of history.”<sup>388</sup> This view of human nature is the same as Mosse's, who criticized those historians who interpret history as a rational process and through rational categories, presupposing the exclusive rationality of the human mind. Moreover, Sorel thought of myth in relation with the masses: the power of myth, of irrationality, is best evident when working in a group of people: “a myth cannot be refuted, since it is, at bottom, identical with the convictions of a group, being the expression of these convictions in the language of movement; and it is, in consequence, unanalyzable into parts which could be placed on the plane of historical descriptions.”<sup>389</sup>

Mosse methodological turn was a shift to the history of the masses, and implied that fascism was a religion, another conviction Sorel expressed clearly, though referring to his revolutionary Socialism:

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384 Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, Collier Books, New York 1961 (ed. or. 1908), 41-42 [my italics]

385 For Mosse's “history of perceptions” see Chapter IX

386 *Reflections on Violence*, op. cit., 43

387 *Ibid.*, 44

388 *Ibid.*, 45

389 *Ibid.*, 50

“people who are living in this world of ‘myths’, are secure from all refutation; this has led many to assert that Socialism is a kind of religion. For a long time people have been struck by the fact that religious convictions are unaffected by criticism, and from that they have concluded that anything which claims to be beyond science must be a religion ... Consequently, a new analogy has been discovered between religion and the revolutionary Socialism which aims at the apprenticeship, preparation, and even reconstruction of the individual, - a gigantic task. But Bergson has taught us that it is not only religion which occupies the profounder regions of our mental life; revolutionary myths have their place there equally with religion.”<sup>390</sup>

Both religion and socialism aim at the “reconstruction of the individual”: this concept is only too close to the view Mosse was elaborating in those very years, that of fascism as a “revolution of the soul”, which aimed at the creation of a “new man”; in fact, Mosse considered fascism as analogous to a religion, a conviction which grew in strength over the years, eventually climaxing in the definition of fascism as a religion.<sup>391</sup>

Mosse evidently laid a great importance on Sorel’s idea of myth, which provided him with new insights into the fascist mind, and also into mass psychology. Myths, on the other hand, occupy the “profounder regions of our mental life”. At the Stanford seminary, Mosse explicitly connected ideology (which he used, in that context, as synonymous of myth) and psychology: “it is essential to define the ‘myth’ (in the Sorelian sense) by which men live, but why men adopt this myth must be answered from the concrete circumstances of historical development. Here the answer does lie on the social and economic level. But, once more, this also is not enough, for men were and are confronted with not one choice but with several choices. At this point ideological conditioning does enter, as well as psychology, and the two go together.”<sup>392</sup>

*Carl Gustav Jung, Psychology and the Unconscious*

In “History, Anthropology and Mass Movements” Mosse wrote of the importance of assimilating “twentieth-century discoveries concerning the importance of men’s unconscious drives and

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390 *Ibid.*, 52

391 “What is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

392 “Fascism once More”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.



aspirations”<sup>393</sup>, and stated that a century of psychological research cannot be ignored.<sup>394</sup> Sigmund Freud had participated in the fin-de-siècle revolt against materialism through the “rediscovery of the unconscious”.<sup>395</sup> To Mosse, Freud remained a rationalist to the last, always trying to keep irrationality under control by directing sexual energy toward cultural creativity, thus fusing his discoveries with the dominant morality of his time.<sup>396</sup> Freud’s disciple, Carl Gustav Jung, brushed against the grain, and “moved in the direction of the neoromantic and irrational movements of his time”.<sup>397</sup> He came ideologically close to National Socialism and racialism; according to Mosse, “Jung may have fulfilled a service to psychoanalysis by repulsing the scientific determinism of Freud. In doing so, however, he upset the balance in favour of a racial mysticism which, in turn, derived some scientific respectability through its incorporation in his psychoanalytical theories.”<sup>398</sup> Here Mosse appreciates Jung’s repulsion of determinism, and yet harshly criticizes him for having lost the necessary balance between rationalism and irrationalism. And yet, despite all criticism, Mosse drew much from Jung’s psychoanalytical concept of the unconscious, much more than he was willing to admit.

When discussing the personality of Adolf Hitler at the Stanford seminary, Professor Milorad Drachkovich, a historian of Marxism, told Mosse that, since he was entering fields that go beyond rational explanation, he should have relied on psychoanalysis; Mosse replied: “Yes, I think so. Obviously there is this whole problem of charisma ... I think perhaps Carl Gustav Jung came closest to it, but I hate to admit this in public, because of his involvement with national socialism”.<sup>399</sup> Mosse’s attitude toward Jung was obviously characterized by prudence, but there is little doubt that he relied very much on his thought. Explaining his “theory of human nature” during another session of the seminar, Mosse stated:

“I believe that the important thing about peoples’ attitudes are the kind of images people form of reality. I don’t think these images necessarily have a direct tie with reality, though reality must always be a part of them ... However, I’m not a Jungian, because this would lead you eventually straight into the acceptance of National Socialism, as it did with Jung after all. I don’t put as content of the myth the same things as Jung did. But perhaps I can say that’s there a great deal of truth to Jung. I think that more than anybody else Jung had a sense of what National Socialism was all about. I think for an intellectual historian Jung is fruitful to operate with, but within very

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393 “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, op. cit., 448

394 *Ibid.*, 450

395 The expression is used by Stuart Hughes, and quoted by Mosse in *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 263

396 See the chapter “Freud and Psychoanalysis”, in *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 263-276

397 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 270

398 *Ibid.*, 272

399 “Adolf Hitler”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

definite limits. But the main idea is that you live in a world of images that you've made yourself, that have some tie with reality, but which can also escape it. And especially I think in a tight situation these images become aggravated into a kind of wish fulfilment, into a flight from reality, a flight into metaphysics.”<sup>400</sup>

Despite his reticence, Mosse clearly asserted that “more than anybody else Jung had a sense of what National Socialism was all about”. If he never mentioned Jung among the thinkers who had influenced him, this is explained by “his involvement with nationalism socialism”. Mosse's informal recognition of his debt is further supported by the presence of numerous heavily underlined volumes of Jung's works in his private library in Madison.

As a matter of fact, Jung's analysis of myth has much in common with Mosse's.<sup>401</sup> Jung wrote in the Preface to the fourth Swiss edition of *Symbols of Transformation* (1950):

“hardly had I finished the manuscript when it struck me what it means to live with a myth, and what it means to live without one. Myth, says a Church Father, is ‘what is believed always, everywhere, by everybody’; hence the man who thinks he can live without myth, or outside it, is an exception. He is like one uprooted, having no true link either with the past, or with the ancestral life which continues within him, or yet with contemporary human society. He does not live inside a house like other men, does not eat and drink like other men, but lives a life of his own, sunk in a subjective mania of his own devising, which he believes to be the newly discovered truth.”<sup>402</sup>

We find here the idea of rootedness, so important to Mosse, as well as the link established by myth with the past and with ancestral life; the uprooted person “does not live inside a house”, and this sounds much like Mosse's assertion that “any liturgy must provide a fully-furnished home”.<sup>403</sup> Jung stressed also the role of irrationalism in history (in the foreword to the third German edition, 1937):

“scientific and medical knowledge is in no sense sufficient to grasp the nature of the soul, nor does the psychiatric understanding of pathological processes help to integrate them into the

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400 “Conservatism”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

401 Mosse quoted a passage from Jung's Wotan: “where the masses are in movement, the archetypes begin”. “What is fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

402 *Symbols of Transformation. An Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia*, op. cit., xxiv

403 George L. Mosse, “Mass Politics and the Political Liturgy of Nationalism”, in Eugene Kamenka (ed. by), *Nationalism. The Nature and Evolution of an Idea*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1973, 51

totality of the psyche. Similarly, mere rationalization is not an adequate instrument. History teaches us over and over again that, contrary to rational expectation, irrational factors play the largest, indeed the decisive, role in all processes of psychic transformation.”<sup>404</sup>

Moreover, Jung opposed Thinking in words to Thinking in images, a feature which Mosse found in the liturgical aspects of the new politics, and therefore in nationalism: the self-representation of the nation “has been more often visual and oral than solely through the written word.”<sup>405</sup> The aesthetic dimension of myth as well is stressed by Jung: “the activity of the early classical mind was in the highest degree artistic: the goal of its interest does not seem to have been how to understand the real world as objectively and accurately as possible, but how to adapt it aesthetically to subjective fantasies and expectations ... Thus there arose a picture of the universe which was completely removed from reality, but which corresponded exactly to man’s subjective fantasies ... The same kind of thinking is exhibited in dreams”<sup>406</sup>. Jung observed myth related both to the individual and to the masses: “only a very few individuals succeed in throwing off mythology in epochs of exceptional intellectual exuberance - the masses never.”<sup>407</sup> He believed in universal and ever-renewed thoughts of mankind, in a nature which does not change in time (“there is an identity of fundamental human conflicts which is independent of time and place”<sup>408</sup>). Men feel a need for mythology, and there is a connection between primitive and modern man:

“primitive methods are just as effective under primitive conditions as machine guns or the radio are under modern conditions. Our religions and political ideologies are methods of salvation and propitiation which can be compared with primitive ideas of magic, and where such ‘collective representations’ are lacking their place is immediately taken by all sorts of private idiocies and idiosyncrasies, manias, phobias, and daemonism whose primitivity leaves nothing to be desired, not to speak of the psychic epidemics of our time before which the witch-hunts of the sixteenth century pale by comparison.”<sup>409</sup>

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404 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit.,

405 George L. Mosse, *Confronting the Nation. Jewish and Western Nationalism*, Brandeis University Press, Hanover & London, 1993, 2

406 *Symbols of Transformation. An Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia*, op. cit., 21 Mosse often associated dream to myth, using the two terms interchangeably.

407 *Ibid.*, 25

408 *Ibid.*, 4. In “History, Anthropology and Mass Movements”, Mosse had written that myths and symbols, throughout the centuries, “have a sameness that cannot be ignored”. *Ibid.*, 451

409 *Symbols of Transformation. An Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia*, op. cit., 156

The idea of rootedness, the role of irrationalism, “thinking in words” as opposed to “thinking in images”, the aesthetic dimension of myth, the relationship of the masses with myth, the persistency of human nature: all these are themes which Mosse and Jung share, and which shed further light on how much the former relied on the latter's psychology in his attempt at understanding the historical events he analysed. However, since the mid-1960s Mosse built much upon this base, focussing ever more on the relationship between rationality and irrationality in myth and history. He fused a concept of myth derived from Sorel and Jung with an anthropological one, and eventually set the result of this fusion into a wider context, involving his own, and up to then neglected German-Jewish intellectual heritage, into a discussion about myth which he saw as the continuation of a German-Jewish dialogue which had been interrupted by the Holocaust.

*Claude Lévi-Strauss, the Masses and Irrationality*

In “History, Anthropology and Mass Movements” Mosse discussed also the ideas of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, highlighting their importance on a methodological level. Lévi-Strauss had posited

“an interplay between psychological attitudes and social functions. The great manifestations of society originate at the level of unconscious existence. Many historians will recognize the truth of his assertion that there is bound to be a discrepancy between the working of the human mind and empirical reality ... Empirical data are necessary for Lévi-Strauss, but by themselves they cannot provide an explanation of causes. The human mind imposes form upon content, and therefore it is the structure of the human mind that must concern us.”<sup>410</sup>

Lévi-Strauss, according to Mosse, came closer to posing the problem of popular and mass movements than other anthropologists, though not pointing directly at it. The French anthropologist had, Mosse said, recognized the “necessity of investigating the relationship between the unconscious working of man’s mind and the reality of the social system”, and believed that “language may indeed be a useful bridge between the mind and the system”, asserting that “myth is language”.<sup>411</sup> And yet, according to Mosse, the assertion that “myth is language” “must be broadened to take in visual means of communication as well.”<sup>412</sup> This is the link that the “verbal” approach to mass movements misses: the aesthetic factor is the key for their understanding. The “visual” element of the methodological turn is

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410 “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, op. cit., 451

411 *Ibid.*

412 *Ibid.*

affirmed by Mosse side by side with the centrality of myth. In an important passage of *The Nationalization of the Masses*, mentioning Lévi-Strauss, Mosse wrote:

“anthropology can be useful here; in a sense, national monuments were the totem poles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Claude Lévi-Strauss was no doubt correct when he asserted that the great manifestations of society originate at the level of the unconscious existence. Men do form such manifestations – which are themselves only a further, though physical, abstraction of an idea – into a system which explains the world and promises to solve its dilemmas. Form is imposed upon and informs content. Myth and symbol become an explanation for social life, a fact which functionally does not, however, rob life itself of importance. The ‘objective reality’, as Marx would have called it, provides the setting and defines the limitations within which myth and symbol can operate ... In spite of the changing content, the form and the basic presuppositions [remain] intact: the longing for a healthy and happy world, and for a true community exemplified by the aesthetics of politics in which all could join. What Lévi-Strauss calls the ‘cosmic rhythm’, which possesses mankind from the earliest times onward, we would define in a more pedestrian manner as the desire for permanence and fixed reference points in a changing world.”<sup>413</sup>

Lévi-Strauss turned to linguistics to penetrate the human mind. This, to Mosse, assumes “a rational mental structure and through linguistic analysis seeks to clarify it”; but for the French anthropologist (always according to Mosse) human emotions can never become causes. “Historians may be disturbed by his presuppositions of human rationality that underlie his explanation of the meaning of myth and symbol, but since they must make sense out of the often irrational acts of men, they must form them into an explainable pattern and frequently assume a rationality even for the irrational.”<sup>414</sup> Stanley Payne, in his major work on fascism, wrote that “any inquiry into fascism has to grapple with the fundamental problem which George L. Mosse once described as attempting to analyse the irrational through rational study. The goal is not to rationalize the irrational but to elucidate the historical problems and contradictions involved.”<sup>415</sup> Mosse believed that any historical analysis needs a certain degree of rationalization, though one must be aware that life does not work in that way. As he once told his students in a lecture, “the historian’s task is a terrible one: to make the irrational rational”, to make the behavior of people and perceptions rational, but he then realizes that he’s falsifying, “because everything is really a totality”; and yet he says that he cannot transform the class into a church. But “unless we become a church ourselves, there is no way for a historian to start with the

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413 *The Nationalization of the Masses*, op. cit., 451-2

414 “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, op. cit., 451

415 Stanley Payne, *A History Of Fascism. 1914-45*, UCL Press, London, 1995, xiii

totality. We have to start quite differently than Pascal, we have to start and we order things logically for you ... though we know very well that life doesn't quite work that way and that therefore we are in a certain way falsifying things"; what historians do is a "personal evaluation of individual perceptions in a historical framework, perceptions which do not work according to Voltaire, but more, I think, according to Pascal if the truth must be told, or more according to popular piety"<sup>416</sup>. Though disagreeing with rationalistic views of human nature, Mosse realizes that reason is the only tool which can be used to "order" history and explain it. After all, Mosse says, "I'm an Enlightenment man myself."<sup>417</sup>

### *Mosse, Myth and the German-Jewish Heritage*

The problem of the relationship between rationalism and irrationalism is ever-recurring in Mosse's thought. Psychological discoveries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had revealed an unconscious, irrational world which the rational mind cannot fully penetrate. There is no doubt that Mosse heavily relied on this idea, attributing to the mythical, irrational side a crucial role in the historical process. The dialectical balance between myth and reality is, in his eyes, at the heart of history, where rationality and irrationality confront each other in an eternal fight. For Mosse, reason is the indispensable tool man needs to defend himself against the excesses of irrationality, but it must not be forgotten that irrationality exists, and that it is the easiest way out for many people in times of crisis.

The shadow of national socialism and Mosse's fear of critical times in history merge into his interpretation of myth. However, there is one further factor which requires attention. Roger Griffin, emphasizing the "crucial role played by myth as a casual factor in the historical process" in Mosse, has suggested that

"another factor in his intellectual makeup helped Mosse to achieve his sophisticated understanding of the centrality of myths and beliefs to the dynamic of fascism ... the hallmark of a peculiarly Jewish brand of scholarship. A number of interwar Jewish intellectuals approached the crisis of culture of the time and the rise of Nazism that it brought about with a blend of icy skepticism and warm-blooded fascination, an ability to see through the dense shrouds of

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416 In "European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870", Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., Lecture 02

417 In "European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870", Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., Lecture 05. Jung wrote in this regard: "although we, with our rationalism, think we can block this source of fear by pointing to its unreality, it nevertheless remains one of those psychic realities whose irrational nature cannot be exorcized by rational argument." *Symbols of Transformation. An Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia*, op. cit., 156

mythology spun by Nazism yet give due weight to the power it derived from appearing to satisfy the very psychological and mystic longings it helped foment. I have in mind such figures as Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, and particularly Ernst Bloch. Bloch's *The Heritage of Our Time* comprehensively demystifies what he sees as the revolutionary facade of Nazism, while *The Principle of Hope* offers an exhaustive exploration of how millenarian anxieties and utopian fantasies persist in the political motivation and aspirations of contemporary human beings, no matter how secularized and 'Westernized' their conscious minds. It is tempting to speculate that such an approach is second nature to those brought up to have a deep empathy and intimacy with the Jewish religious and mystic tradition yet who are excluded from full participation in it by a secular intellect steeped in Enlightenment rationalism.”<sup>418</sup>

In the 1960s the students' interest for Weimar intellectuals drew Mosse's attention on them.<sup>419</sup> Moreover, in those very years he was establishing an ever closer link with Israel. If the students felt drawn to these intellectuals' ideals of democracy, individuality and socialism, and based their critique of society on these (as well as on the thought of the Frankfurt School), Mosse detected more implications in these ideals, which at the same time made him increasingly aware of the German-Jewish background he came from.<sup>420</sup> According to him, the students and these intellectuals shared the same disregard for objective reality, and turned to abstract philosophy and instant utopia. Stefan Zweig, Hermann Cohen, Ernst Bloch, Aby Warburg or Ernst Cassirer, all of them German Jews, recognized the irrational forces in human history and fought against them; however, they were linked to a rationalist and humanistic tradition of thought, which had them brush irrationalism aside and misunderstand national socialism.

In a 1980 speech, Mosse said that scholarship faces a problem, that is,

“it has to operate with the instruments of rationality into a so largely irrational world, it has to recapture the irrational rationally and thus it is in danger of getting it wrong. This was a problem for those Jewish scholars who in the Germany of the 1920s faced the ever longer shadow of National Socialism. Coming out of that tradition of emancipation which stressed rationality, they

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418 “Withstanding the Rush of Time. The Prescience of Mosse's Anthropological View of Fascism”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 114. Renato Moro has argued that another German-Jewish historian may have influenced Mosse: Ernst Kantorowicz. With his interest in political mysticism, political theology and the sacrality of power, he had seen in European history a continuity, based upon its Christian foundations, that linked the middle ages (of which he was a specialist) to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kantorowicz, like Mosse, turned his attention to the irrational, religious character of modern “political religions”. Moro hypothesizes that Mosse may have been inspired by his older colleague, whom he had met at the beginning of his career. See Renato Moro, “George L. Mosse, storico dell'irrazionalismo moderno”, op. cit., 34-35

419 “The End is not Yet: A Personal Memoir of the German-Jewish Legacy in America”, op. cit., 199-200

420 A comprehensive discussion of Mosse's relation to these ideals in in Chapter VII

sought to exorcise the threat of the irrational. Thus they began to investigate myths and symbols, the visual which seemed to excite the irrational imagination ... If irrational symbols and myths could be understood then the rational mind could analyze them, and in this way exorcise the irrational”<sup>421</sup>

And yet, by doing so, they gave “new impetus” to “art history, cultural history, and philosophy”.<sup>422</sup> Ernst Cassirer, Mosse says, had tried to do for philosophy what Warburg had attempted for art history: “the imprisonment of irrational activity within a rational critique of culture”.<sup>423</sup> Such an attitude saw in culture an effective antidote against myth, but this belief in reason blinded them to the power of the mythical forces inherent in national socialism. Even Cassirer's *The Myth Of The State*, Mosse said, was imprisoned in “his bias toward *Bildung*.”<sup>424</sup> To be sure, in that work Cassirer fully recognized his previous underestimation of mythical power, and wrote:

“when we first heard of the political myths we found them so absurd and incongruous, so fantastic and ludicrous that we could hardly be prevailed upon to take them seriously. By now it has become clear to all of us that this was a great mistake. We should not commit the same error a second time. We should carefully study the origin, the structure, the methods, and the technique of the political myths.”<sup>425</sup>

In spite of his critique, Mosse felt that his idea of myth was close to Cassirer's, and asserted that “the preoccupation with myths and symbols in *The Myth of the State* comes tantalizingly close to an analysis of modern mass politics”, and yet its political implications were never explored.<sup>426</sup> In “History, Anthropology and Mass Movements” Mosse discussed Cassirer, who had studied philosophical systems, but he

“applied his insight ... to a kind of intellectual history that he conceived as a series of philosophical systems; he was not primarily concerned with popular culture or mass movements. Yet his conception of how men mediate between their own minds and reality is useful at all levels

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421 George L. Mosse, “Nationhood and Diaspora”, cit.

422 George L. Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati, 1985, 54

423 *Ibid.*, 53

424 *Ibid.* 54

425 *The Myth of the State*, op. cit., 296

426 *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, op. cit., 54



of historical analysis. Myths and symbols can be analyzed historically because the human mind works within definable categories of cognition. Cassirer shared with anthropologists the presupposition that all freedom of action is checked by the recognition of certain objective, inner limitations upon the reaches of the human mind. This assumption becomes all important when one uses myth and symbol for an understanding of the human mind and the society within which it has to work.”<sup>427</sup>

Cassirer had highlighted the irrationality of national socialism and of modern society in general, claiming that “the preponderance of mythical thought over rational thought in some of our modern political systems is obvious ... in man’s practical and social life the defeat of rational thought seems to be complete and irrevocable”<sup>428</sup> Cassirer had been among the first to emphasize the connection between the centrality of rites for man’s psychic life and national socialism. Mosse, in *The Nationalization of the Masses*, stressed in a similar fashion the importance of myths and rites for the human psyche. Cassirer also pointed at man’s need for community: in primitive belief, there is a “deep and ardent desire of the individuals to identify themselves with the life of the community and with the life of nature. This desire is satisfied by the religious rites. Here the individuals are melted into one shape – into an indistinguishable whole”<sup>429</sup>; but he then asserts that since human nature remains constant in time, “this description of the role of magic and mythology in primitive society applies equally well to highly advanced stages of man’s political life”<sup>430</sup>, a belief very close to Mosse’s, and to that of the anthropological science. Another similarity between the thought of these two scholars is the interest in times of crisis: to Cassirer, myth reaches its full force “when man has to face an unusual and dangerous situation.”<sup>431</sup> Magic and mythology occur if a pursuit is dangerous and its issues uncertain: “if reason has failed us, there remains always the *ultima ratio*, the power of the miraculous and mysterious”<sup>432</sup>; “in all critical moments of man’s social life, the rational forces that resist the rise of the old mythical conceptions are no longer sure of themselves. In these moments the time for myths has

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427 “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, op. cit., 448

428 Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, op. cit., 3

429 *Ibid.*, 38

430 *Ibid.*, 279

431 *Ibid.*, 278. Cassirer cites Malinowski when he said that magic “appears only if man is confronted with a task that seems to be far beyond his natural powers”. Malinowski, in *Die Dynamik des Kulturwandels*, wrote also that “der Glaube an Zauberei ist immer ein Symptom sozialer Spannungen und politischer oder wirtschaftlicher Unterdrückung. Wir brauchen nur die augenblickliche Lage in Europa betrachten, um zu sehen, wie die Sündenbockpsychologie zu Einstellungen und Handlungen führt, die ihrem Wesen nach mit Hexenverfolgungen nahe verwandt sind: die Judenverfolgungen in Deutschland, die Verfolgung von Spionen und Trotzkisten in Russland, von Liberalen und Antifaschisten in Italien. Eine solche psychologische Einstellung ist allgemein menschlich und dauerhaft. Ich meine damit die Neigung, Schuld und Hass auf bestimmte genau ungrenzte Gruppen zu häufen, und zwar für Misstände, für die man sonst das ganze Gemeinwesen, seine Regierung, Schicksalsfügungen oder andere Faktoren verantwortlich machen müsste, gegen die man nicht direkt ankämpfen kann.” Bronislaw Malinowski, *Die Dynamik des Kulturwandels*, Wien-Stuttgart, Humboldt-Verlag, 1951, 190 (ed. or. 1946)

432 *The Myth of the State*, op. cit., 279

come again.”<sup>433</sup> This irrationalist attitude is reflected also on the ways of communicating: Mosse said that, in Hitler’s speeches, form was more important than content; Cassirer writes that in modern political myths we find “not only a transvaluation of all our ethical values but also a transformation of human speech. The magic word takes precedence of the semantic word.”<sup>434</sup> Both intellectuals shared a pessimistic attitude toward man, certainly conditioned by the events of their age. “If man were simply to follow his natural instincts he would not strive for freedom; he would rather choose dependence ... here the totalitarian state and the political myths step in.”<sup>435</sup>

Mosse had also quoted Ernst Bloch’s works, and especially *The Principle of Hope*. Discussing the importance of literature in history, Mosse had referred to the “utopian longings” which “emerge strongly from the reading of such popular literature”: these longings are, says Mosse, what Ernst Bloch called the “principle of hope”.<sup>436</sup> Mosse continues: the “eternal questions of who we are? where are we going? what can we expect? trouble men and women at every level of life, but among the mass of men they assume a crucial importance”; he then quotes from Bloch’s Preface to his major work *The Principle of Hope*: “many men merely possess a feeling of confusion. The floor beneath them trembles, they do not now why and from what cause. This state of being is filled with anxiety, and if it becomes more clearly defined, it is filled with fear.”<sup>437</sup> The conclusions Mosse reaches are that “popular literature which sold in the millions counters anxiety and fear through utopia. This utopia, in turn, instilled in the public mind a vision of man and society which cannot but entail political and social consequences.”<sup>438</sup>

Griffin notes how Mosse had avoided seeing his intellectual career tarnished by forces of ultra-nationalism, as it had happened to Jung or to Mircea Eliade, and yet we have seen how much importance Mosse gave to Jung’s ideas; moreover, he had widely read Eliade’s works on myth<sup>439</sup>, and a reference to the Rumanian intellectual can be found in the draft for a paper Mosse had prepared on the liturgy of mass movements. Mosse refers “to the work of Mircea Eliade who has analysed the human consciousness of time cycles in mythically oriented thought. He has found that the ‘myth of the eternal return’ was central to the existential awareness of man as we find it, for example, in Nietzsche. The ever recurring and regular cycle of liturgical rites fits in with this analysis whether it is connected to Christianity or to such a secularized religion.”<sup>440</sup> In *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1945), Eliade had

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433 *Ibid.*, 280

434 *Ibid.*, 283

435 *Ibid.*, 288. This is the “escape from freedom” Erich Fromm analyzed in his classical study by the same title, published in 1941.

436 George L. Mosse, “The Cultural Historian and Popular Literature”, cit.

437 *Ibid.*

438 *Ibid.*

439 Many of Eliade’s books can be found in Mosse’s private library.

440 George L. Mosse, “The European Right as a Mass Movement: Some Hypotheses”, paper, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 2, Leo Baeck Institute. The paper was written in all probability in the early 1970s, when preparing *The Nationalization of the Masses*.

theorized that the linear (historical) conception of time causes anxiety in modern man, while traditional societies were not affected by this anxiety because their conception of cyclical time were constantly rejuvenated by rituals which allowed them to enter mythical time<sup>441</sup>. In Mosse's interpretation of modern history, myth is man's refuge from the fears and uncertainties of modernity: there seems to be little doubt that Mosse felt very close to such a concept of the function of myth.

### *An Eclectic Approach to Myth*

Mosse's approach to myth was eclectic, in that it drew from the most diverse sources and trends from anthropology, mythology and philosophy. He contested Freud's excess of rationalism on the one hand, and Jung's excess of irrationality on the other. He partly agreed with Lévi-Strauss's structuralist ideas about myth, but at the same time drew much from Cassirer, a functionalist, analyzing the social function of myth. Following his historicist attitude, he made an attempt at *comprehending* why people believe in myth; at the same time, he tried to study it rationally, in order to *explain* why this happens. Fully aware of the power of irrationality, he tried to grasp it through rational study. He went right to the heart of the problem posed by historicism, the problem concerned with the two different attitudes of *Erklären* and *Verstehen*.<sup>442</sup> He sought to combine both: on the one hand, he tried to comprehend; on the other, he tried to explain rationally the results of the sympathetic comprehension of the human mind. Through his dialectical approach, Mosse sought to find the balance between *mythos* and *logos*. His aim was to warn people against the dangers inherent in irrationalistic approaches to life, though he was fully aware that they are inextricable part of human nature.

Despite the many similarities between the thought of Mosse and the authors analysed in this paragraph, it must not be forgotten that Mosse's own understanding of myth, though often relying on their theories, was not coincident with any of them.<sup>443</sup> Mosse used the concept of myth mainly in the general sense of "counterpart of objective reality", but he also discussed the concept within the framework established by those intellectuals who had inspired him. In a note for a lecture on fascism, he referred to the German, and German-Jewish tradition of thought about myth, mentioning also the leading Zionist Martin Buber. The note reads: "working definition really given by Buber who took it from Bonus (i.e. German tradition): eternal function of the soul through which concrete events grasped by the senses were interpreted by the soul and the divine and the absolute". But Mosse also

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441 Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History; The Myth of the Eternal Return*, New York, Harper, 1959

442 For Mosse's relation to Historicism, see Chapter IX

443 With regard to the theories of Cassirer and Lévi-Strauss as discussed by Mosse in "History, Anthropology and Mass Movements", Emilio Gentile has written about Mosse's "utilizzazione molto personale" of such theories. *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 89

mentions other sources which we had already met: notably Cassirer and his myth as a “human emotion turned into an image”; and Huizinga, who believed that “having attributed a real existence to an idea the mind wants to see it alive and can effect this only by personalizing it”, and that “the mere presence of a visible image of things holy sufficed to establish their truth”.<sup>444</sup> Mosse utilized the concept of myth to better understand mass movements and their liturgy. Yet this shift to the masses was not only linked to the adoption of an anthropological attitude: other influences played their role. The “anthropological turn” goes hand in hand with the “visual turn”.

### ***The “Visual Turn”: Architecture and the Baroque***

It can be said that Mosse's historical production from the 1970s onwards is a history of the political dimension of aesthetics. If *The Nationalization of the Masses* (1975) largely deals with national festivals in an anthropological fashion, national monuments receive the same attention in that they provide the necessary setting for such mass rituals. *Towards the Final Solution* (1978), his book on racism in Europe, is an analysis of the moral and aesthetic dimension in the creation of racial stereotypes. Mosse will gradually focus with growing insistence on the aesthetic dimension of fascist movements, and his last book is significantly entitled *The Image of Man* (1996).

In the first edition of *The Culture of Western Europe* the aesthetic dimension of politics is not particularly stressed, and yet it is present. As it is typical in Mosse, later aspects of his work are already present in earlier writings, but their role remains secondary, and only later they receive greater emphasis, due to a methodological turn (as it is the case with aesthetics or myth) or to social influences (as with sexuality), or even to a combination of both (as with the attack on bourgeois society). Mass meetings and architecture are an excellent example of this. In 1961 Mosse conceived of mass meetings as “central to fascism”, and yet they were mainly an instrument of manipulation of the masses.<sup>445</sup> As far as fascist architecture is concerned, he mentioned its classic themes, the desire for order it expressed, and the function that broad streets had for mass meetings.<sup>446</sup> Moreover, this first edition of *The Culture of Western Europe* was enriched by numerous plates, some of which representing examples of Nazi mass meetings and fascist architecture. However, architecture remained, Mosse writes, always secondary to the “exploitation of the dramatic” in mass meetings.<sup>447</sup> The dramatic element of such meetings was to become one of the central themes of Mosse's studies of the “new politics”. He wrote that the “new style of politics” was “based upon a secularized theology and its liturgy; democracy meant participation

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444 George L. Mosse, “European Fascism – Lectures – Not Used”, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 41; Leo Baeck Institute.

445 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 348

446 *Ibid.*, 349

447 *Ibid.*

in the drama which grew from these foundations”, and spoke of a “liturgical drama”.<sup>448</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the “development of mass movements and mass politics seemed to transform the political process itself into a drama” which is not just a *mis-en-scène*: it is “the core of the new politics”.<sup>449</sup>

In Mosse’s notes for an address on “Nationalism and Patriotism”<sup>450</sup>, delivered in 1963, there is an interesting remark written by Mosse as a reminder: with reference to the symbolism of mass meetings, one should “always show pictures when teaching it”.<sup>451</sup> He also writes that “one conservative characterized these meetings as ‘American style publicity’. He had missed the whole point.”<sup>452</sup> The psychological and anthropological importance of aesthetics is not simply “publicity”: it is integral part of the “nationalization of the masses”. In the 1988 edition of *The Culture of Western Europe*, aesthetics find its place in the chapter on nationalism. The analysis of national monuments and mass festivals (*The Nationalization of the Masses*, 1975) and that of racism (*Towards the Final Solution*, 1978) had enriched the historian’s perspective, and are evident in the paragraph he adds:

“these ideas were representative of the nation’s self-image, a symbol of eternity – a world of order and harmony. It was on this *concept of beauty* that the national ‘ideal type’ was based all over Europe ... Racial thought based many of its judgments upon a *concept of beauty* which had become part of the self-representation of the nation: in stone and mortar through national monuments or through the *outward appearance of the ideal citizen*. Nationalism presented itself through a world of myth and symbol in which the people could participate: singing, folk dancing, forming processions, or strengthening their body through gymnastics. Public festivals which accompanied the rise of nationalism used the symbols we have discussed and encouraged popular participation. All over Europe nationalism captured masses of people, the more so as the beginning of nationalism coincided with the beginning of mass politics. People longed for a *beautiful* and healthy world where order reigned and which exemplified the continuity of history among chaotic change of industrializing Europe. The myths and symbols of nationalism fulfilled this longing.”<sup>453</sup>

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448 “Mass Politics and the Political Liturgy of Nationalism”, op. cit., 39-40

449 *The Nationalization of the Masses*, op. cit., vii and 46. Other references to the dramatic aspect of liturgy are scattered all over the book: see, for example pages 2, 8 and 9. Sorel and Cassirer as well had mentioned the dramatic elements, respectively of the general strike and of rites. See *Reflections on Violence*, op.cit., 122-3, and *The Myth of the State*, op. cit., 28. As early as in 1964, Mosse had hinted at the theatrical, dramatic character of the Volkish *Weltanschauung*, yet without further developing this aspect until the 1970s. *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 80-81

450 George L. Mosse, “Nationalism and Patriotism”, address to the meeting on “The Teaching of Patriotism”, Institute for Social Studies Teachers at Wisconsin State College, 18 April 1963; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 23; Leo Baeck Institute.

451 *Ibid.*

452 *Ibid.*

453 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1988), op. cit., 66-67 [my italics]

Winckelmann's ideal of beauty and antiquity as "quiet restfulness" had been espoused by modern nationalism and racism, and had become even normative within bourgeois morality and respectability.

Johann Huizinga too played a role in Mosse's predisposition towards aesthetics, as Mosse himself acknowledged quoting him often in his works. Writing of man's flight from reality in times of crisis, Huizinga posed the question about how this search for desire for a better life could practically affect affect life. The answer was: "esso traduce le forme della vita in opere d'arte. Ma non esprime il suo sogno di bellezza soltanto nelle opere d'arte propriamente dette; esso vuole nobilitare la vita stessa con la bellezza e riempie anche la vita sociale di belle forme e di giuoco."<sup>454</sup> Although this phenomenon was, in the XIV century, diffused mainly among the aristocracy, it was "diffuso pure fra i ceti inferiori della società, lo prova il fatto che proprio la piccola borghesia, più di ogni altra classe (ad eccezione delle corti), ha conservato fino ad oggi quelle forme."<sup>455</sup> Aesthetics, as well as manners and morals (the "belle forme" of social life), fulfill an all-important function on the path to the world of dreams: they make life beautiful, lifting man from reality to dream. Aesthetics (through art and monuments), and morality (through bourgeois respectability) are the main themes of Mosse's works since the 1970s. According to Huizinga, "per la fede ordinaria delle masse la presenza d'un'immagine visibile rendeva completamente superflua la dimostrazione intellettuale della verità di una cosa"<sup>456</sup>; moreover, "la politica si proietta nella immaginazione del popolo attraverso alcune figure fisse e semplici"<sup>457</sup>. Images are "i libri degli ignoranti"<sup>458</sup>, they show the common, simple man who cannot read, what he is supposed to believe. In his history of racism, Mosse writes that the "stress on the visual, in turn, made it easy for people to understand the thrust of the ideology"<sup>459</sup>. A quote from *The Waning of the Middle Ages* is often mentioned in Mosse's writings: "having attributed a real existence to an idea the mind wants to see it alive and can effect this only by personalizing it".<sup>460</sup>

Unlike in the case of myth, it seems less difficult to reconstruct the origins of Mosse's deep interest in the aesthetics of politics, which stems, like that in anthropology, from the necessity to find new ways of understanding mass movements such as fascism and nationalism. In the above quoted "Nationalism and Patriotism" there are already signs of an interest in visual means of symbolization, but the real and decisive turn occurs later in the decade. Mosse had always been deeply fascinated with the Baroque style, which surrounded his youth at Salem and kept intriguing him in the 1950s, when he

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454 Johann Huizinga, *Autunno del Medioevo*, Rizzoli, Firenze, 1987 (originally published in 1919 in the Netherlands), 47

455 *Ibid.*, 57

456 *Ibid.*, 226

457 *Ibid.*, 13

458 *Ibid.*, 227

459 George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution. A History of European Racism*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1985, 233 (original edition, 1978)

460 The quote can be found in "The Poet and the Exercise of Political Power: Gabriele d'Annunzio", *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, XXII, 1973, 33; and in *Toward the Final Solution*, op. cit. 233, but also in Mosse's lectures: see, for example "European Fascism – Lectures – Not Used", cit.

frequently travelled to Rome to study that architecture. Two more influences were to play a decisive role: that of Thomas Nipperdey, and above all the curious acquaintance with Albert Speer, Hitler's favourite architect: the latter was of fundamental importance for Mosse in the late 1960s, and was determinant in influencing his views on mass movements.<sup>461</sup>

### *The Baroque and Mass Movements*

In the 1977 interview on Nazism, Mosse stated that “my lasting interest in the Baroque as art and casuistry, was directly related to my later understanding of fascism as a visually oriented ideology and way of life.”<sup>462</sup> In the same interview he also said: “let us talk about the baroque and modern mass politics. The baroque is full of myth, theater, and symbols which carry you away from the reality of this world. But the very success of the Jesuits was that while carrying you away from this world they really integrated you into their political system. Now this approach is not unique. You have the same thing later in Richard Wagner who believed that his operas would strengthen certain myths by which people live so that through their myths they could enter into existing reality and then transform that reality according to the myths.”<sup>463</sup> Writing of the “new politics”, Mosse stated in 1975 that “here we are close to the theatrical and dramatic tradition of the Baroque as exemplified by the Baroque churches, though this tradition was rejected by nineteenth-century nationalists as frivolous. For the beauty which unified politics could not be playful; it had to symbolize order, hierarchy, and the restoration of a ‘world made whole again’.”<sup>464</sup> Hitler’s speeches, the focal point of Nazi meetings, “integrated themselves with the total setting and the liturgical rhythm much in the same way as famous preachers functioned in the churches of the Baroque.”<sup>465</sup> Mosse had spent some time in the 1950s in Rome studying the Baroque. In his view, it seems to have much in common, visually and psychologically speaking, with modern mass movements and the “new politics”. In a 1994 interview, Mosse, talking of the importance of Christian rituals for political practices, asserted to have been one of the first to have studied National Socialism, racism and nationalism as civic religions; “en réalité, cette imbrication de la politique et de la religion m’intéresse depuis longtemps, depuis mes tout premiers travaux sur le Baroque. Rappelez-vous, Hitler comme Mussolini ont grandi dans des cadres baroques...”<sup>466</sup> Asked what the Baroque concretely is, Mosse replied that it is

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461 Albert Speer (1905-1981), architect and later Minister of Armaments and War in the Nazi regime (1942-1945), was tried at Nuremberg and spent twenty years in prison, being released in 1966.

462 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 36-37

463 *Ibid.*, 29-31

464 *The Nationalization of the Masses*, op. cit., 9

465 *Ibid.*, 200

466 “Du Baroque au Nazisme: une histoire religieuse de la politique”, op. cit., 250

“une expérience de l’espace, de l’utilisation de l’espace. J’ai étudié à plusieurs reprises la manière dont les nazis, à Munich par exemple, attachaient une grande attention autant aux bâtiments entourant un espace central qu’à l’espace lui-même. On retrouve le même travail dans l’architecture baroque, qui a pour ambition de contrôler des foules, de susciter certaines émotions, de motiver certaines ferveurs...”<sup>467</sup>

In a course, probably given in the 1950s, the Baroque was the expression of an “effort at ‘sensuous propaganda’”, of an “appeal to the senses rather than to the heart”.<sup>468</sup> In 1994, Mosse was asked whether one may speak of “propaganda” as to this Baroque style, and he replied:

“voilà encore un mot que je voudrais voire éliminé à tout jamais des travaux des historiens. Je vous assure que si ce qu’on appelle la ‘propagande de Goebbels’ avait seulement été de la ‘propagande’, elle n’aurait pas si bien fonctionné. J’avais commencé à travailler sur cette question pour *The Crisis of German Ideology*. J’en ai d’ailleurs la confirmation plus tard lors des conversations que j’ai pu avoir avec Speer. Jamais sans me rencontres avec Speer, je n’aurais pu écrire *The Nationalization of the Masses*.”<sup>469</sup>

Mosse stated that he had been interested in the connection between religion and politics since a long time; Speer might have suggested to him the connection between the Baroque utilization of space, and that of modern nationalism and fascism. In his memoir, Speer writes about Hitler: “in fondo, ciò che lo attirava veramente era il neo-barocco”<sup>470</sup>; then, speaking of the new Chancellery in Berlin, Speer says that it was an “orgia di architettura rappresentativa, un ‘trionfo dell’effetto’, come quello dell’arte barocca.”<sup>471</sup> Reviewing Speer’s diaries, Mosse wrote that “Hitler, after all, had grown up in the Austria of the Baroque, and though he despised this art form as too frivolous, still, the future dictator must be analogous to the priest at the altar of a baroque church deriving his authority from the ritual and the theatrical *mise en scène* regardless of individual qualities.”<sup>472</sup>

Yet Mosse’s interest in the Baroque had already assumed a definite shape well before reading, or meeting, Albert Speer. Sterling Fishman colourfully recalls:

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467 *Ibid.*, 250

468 George L. Mosse, “Renaissance and Reformation”, lectures, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 47; Leo Baeck Institute. These lectures were given after 1953, and in all probability in the 1950s.

469 *Ibid.*, 250

470 Albert Speer, *Memorie del Terzo Reich*, Mondadori, Milano, 1971. The original German edition, *Erinnerungen*, was first published in 1969. Speer too was to be immensely influential on Mosse, as will be shown below, 59

471 *Ibid.*, 141

472 George L. Mosse, *Albert Speer’s Hitler*. Review of *Spandau: the Secret Diaries*. “Quadrant”, October 1976, 53-4



“from the outset of his career George evinced a keen interest in the cultural symbols which mediate between abstract beliefs and popular piety. This has proved to be his most enduring historical concern. As a reformation scholar, he became quickly fascinated with the baroque period because of its dramatic symbolic elements – the canonization and cult of St. Theresa, the sculpture of Bernini, and especially the highly theatrical baroque church. I recall a trip to Mexico with George and Dick Soloway in 1956, when George was in search of expressions of the baroque. Struck by the inevitable intestinal plight of North American travellers, we took refuge in the small town of Zamora. Undaunted, George attended mass twice each day in the local baroque church. Our unscheduled stop permitted him to study religious rituals which several centuries had not altered. The local Indians must have marvelled at the piety of this round-faced, bespectacled ‘gringo’. A few years later, when George turned his full attention to the study of modern mass movements, his work was informed by his study of baroque religious rites. However broad the chronological spectrum of his interests, strong threads of continuity run through his works. He has demonstrated that, although the prevailing ideological systems may change, popular piety with all its rites and rituals persists. George has shown how the cultural symbols of popular beliefs blur the distinction between religious and secular beliefs.”<sup>473</sup>

Mosse’s private library in Madison witnesses this deep interest in the baroque: many volumes on the subject can be found, mostly editions of the late 1950s. An examination of some of these books is interesting, since it can be asserted with a certain degree of certainty that Mosse must have read them in those years. Victor L. Tapié, in *Baroque et Classicisme* (1957), criticizes Benedetto Croce’s liberal and rationalistic attitude toward the baroque style; the whole passage of the book is underlined.<sup>474</sup> Mosse goes on underlining many passages on the building instructions of Jesuit churches; particularly, he seems interested in vast choirs, favourable acoustics, and good lightning (Speer’s *forte*). “Là encore, un procédé de théâtre venait au service d’une idée religieuse”<sup>475</sup>: the theatrical is put at the service of an idea, just like *The Nationalization of the Masses* would later explain. Mosse seems also interested in the cult of the saints and its connection with popular piety, and mentions man’s need to feel protected; the Renaissance, according to Tapié, hasn’t been able to provide *infinity*, while the alliance between the Church and the baroque satisfied that need.<sup>476</sup> Mosse then underlines a sentence dealing with “la

473 “GLM: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 278-9

474 Victor L. Tapié, *Baroque et Classicisme*, Plon, 1957

475 *Ibid.*, 107

476 Mosse was also convinced that “the Enlightenment was not sufficiently aware of man’s need of a faith, of a belief in a stable and eternal force impervious to ever-changing external realities”: his view of the Enlightenment and the Renaissance highlighted the contrast between their rationalistic sides and their incapacity of satisfying man’s inborn, irrational need for a “slice of eternity” (to use an expression dear to Mosse). *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 8

nécessité du culte des images”.<sup>477</sup> The function of images is stressed also in an underlined passage of another book:

“by sanctioning the veneration of images and by its emphasis upon transubstantiation the Council, in effect, gave the pious the confidence in sensory experience and offered a means of reducing the anxiety in mannerist consciousness, relaxing the tension between the body and soul. For Baroque piety and art are able to consolidate and fulfill experience at the level of the flesh, and they do so ardently, triumphantly, unthinkingly. If the image is sufficiently powerful, if the physical sensation is adequately enriched, the crisis in mannerist consciousness can be resolved in the external material world, and by the ‘visible signs of religion and piety’”.<sup>478</sup>

Baroque architecture’s ability of dealing with large numbers of people is underlined, for example, in Giulio Carlo Argan’s *L’architettura barocca in Italia*.<sup>479</sup> In a lecture from the late 1950s, Mosse spoke of the “delirious participation of the masses of the population in the visual arts”, and focussed on Baroque architecture and its churches, which were centred on the space for preaching; moreover, the classical idea of beauty was utilized to serve Christian purposes.<sup>480</sup> We will find such themes in *The Nationalization of the Masses*, where classical beauty was adopted in service to the cause of the Nation in the secular religion of Nationalism.

Beyond this clear influence of his ideas on the Baroque, Mosse himself was deeply fascinated by it:

“the buildings of Salem, mostly constructed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were decorated in the style of the South German baroque ... There were many churches and houses nearby constructed and decorated in the South German baroque style, and it is from these surroundings that I had acquired a lifelong love of that style; indeed, in the 1950s I often led friends on a tour of the South German baroque, specifically in its Lake Constance setting.”<sup>481</sup>

Once more, we find that in Mosse life and work are closely connected. The Salem years, to which Mosse frequently returned in the last years of his life,<sup>482</sup> must have left an imprint that it took the

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477 *Baroque et Classicisme*, op. cit., 295

478 Wylie Sypher, *Four Stages of Renaissance Style. Transformations in Art and Literature 1400-1700*, Anchor Books Original, New York, 1955, 187

479 Giulio Carlo Argan *L’architettura barocca in Italia*, Garzanti, Milano, 1957

480 George L. Mosse, “Renaissance and Reformation”, lectures, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 46; Leo Baeck Institute. The lecture from which I have quoted should date back to the late 1950s, in that Mosse mentions his “just published” book *The Holy Pretence*, which was printed in 1957.

481 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 54

482 Conversation with John Tortorice, March 2007

historian many years to fully realize what they had meant. The influences of Nipperdey and Speer activated what was, in Mosse, a well-rooted predisposition.

*Thomas Nipperdey*

In 1969, Mosse had already gone beyond the study of popular literature, and felt the need to widen the scope of his analysis. This, as we have seen, implied the study of liturgy, but also of “festivals, mass meetings, and the symbolic representations such as national monuments”: this is the place where “the great manifestations of society originate at the level of the unconscious”<sup>483</sup>. Mentioning national monuments, Mosse refers to “the pioneer study by Thomas Nipperdey”<sup>484</sup>. In *The Nationalization of the Masses*, Mosse says that “the historian Thomas Nipperdey has described national monuments as the self-representations of a democratically controlled nation, objectifying the ideals for which the nation is supposed to stand.”<sup>485</sup> Nipperdey’s article, published in 1968, had a considerable influence on Mosse, and might have been decisive in turning the historian’s attention to the political implications of architecture. As we have seen, Mosse had hinted at fascist architecture as early as in 1961, but the theme remained marginal in his work. Reading Nipperdey’s article, he must have found a confirmation to the aesthetic turn he was already conceiving, to the inclination for the visual he had always had. National monuments will become integral part of the “nationalization of the masses” and the “new politics”, and it is also possible that the new perspective had Mosse read Albert Speer’s *Erinnerungen*, published in 1969, with different eyes<sup>486</sup>.

In 1993 a commemorative volume in honor of Thomas Nipperdey (he had passed away a year earlier) was published, edited by Wolfgang Hardtwig and Harm-Hinrich Brandt<sup>487</sup>. In the introduction, the editors praise Nipperdey for his researches on the political symbolism of the national state and political ideas in the age of the bourgeoisie. They write: “er arbeitete mit an der Aufwertung der Sozialgeschichte und betrieb doch auch Ideengeschichte, erweitert und vertieft zu einer Sozialgeschichte der Ideen”; Nipperdey had partaken in the “Erweiterung der Geschichtswissenschaft durch eine historische Anthropologie. Zwei Themenbereiche waren ihm besonders wichtig, er hielt an ihnen fest und lenkte das forschende Verstehen gerade auf diesen Feldern in neue Bahnen, als der Hauptstrom des Forschungsbetriebs sich weitgehend von ihnen abwandte oder sie zur quantité

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483 “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, op. cit., 452

484 *Ibid.*, 452, note 7. The reference is to Thomas Nipperdey, “Nationalidee und Nationaldenkmal in Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert“, *Historische Zeitschrift*, CCVI, June 1968, pp. 529-585

485 *The Nationalization of the Masses*, op. cit. 47

486 *Memorie del Terzo Reich*, op. cit.

487 Wolfgang Hardtwig and Harm-Hinrich Brandt (ed. by), *Deutschlands Weg in die Moderne. Politik, Gesellschaft und Kultur im 19. Jahrhundert*, Beck, München, 1993. Many of the collaborators were historians who had an interest in cultural history: Fritz Stern, Peter Gay, Shulamit Volkov, Hermann Lübke, Carl E. Schorske, and Mosse.

négligeable erklärte: die Kultur, gerade auch die Hochkultur, die Künste – und die Religion.”<sup>488</sup> In his contribution to the volume, “Deutscher Patriotismus und Jüdischer Nationalismus”, Mosse writes that “Thomas Nipperdey hat in seinen Arbeiten über den Nationalismus die Vielschichtigkeit des modernen Nationalismus betont”<sup>489</sup>. Indeed, Nipperdey’s article must have influenced Mosse to a considerable extent:

“die Beschäftigung mit den Symbolen, in denen ein politischer, religiöser, kultureller historischer Bewusstseinzustand anschaulich geworden ist, oder mit den Objektivationen solchen Bewusstseins in der Kunst ist für den Historiker älterer Zeiten seit langem selbstverständlich geworden; für den Historiker, der sich mit der Neuzeit, spätestens mit der Zeit seit der französischen Revolution befasst, ist sie es bisher nicht gewesen; weil es nicht an schriftlichen Quellen mangelte, gab es keinen Zwang, der zur Erschließung solcher neuen Quellengruppen führte; weil es im 19. Jh. keinen alle Lebensbereiche bestimmenden ‚Stil‘ gibt, mag der Aussagewert von künstlerischen Symbolen zweifelhaft erschienen sein. Im folgenden wird der Versuch gemacht, durch eine Analyse der Nationaldenkmäler Aufschlüsse über die Struktur von Nationalbewegung und Nationalidee zu gewinnen; dabei werden freilich nicht nur die Denkmäler selbst, sondern die Fülle der Äußerungen der ‚Denkmalsbewegungen‘ vorliegen, an denen jeweils eine Vielzahl unterschiedlicher Gruppen – Stifter, Geldgeber, Planer, Künstler, Juroren, Kritiker, Propagandisten, die ‚Öffentlichkeit‘ und das ‚Volk‘ bei den Denkmalsfesten – beteiligt ist, die den Gedanken des Denkmals hervorbringen, mitformen oder ihm Resonanz verleihen. Die vergleichende Geschichte der Denkmäler und ihrer verschiedenen Formen kann darum ein Beitrag zur Sozialgeschichte der nationalen Idee werden. Zum anderen: weil die Denkmäler objektiv gewordene Äußerungen von Ideen sind, Werke, die aus der Menge konkurrierender Vorschläge und einer Vielzahl von Entscheidungen hervorgehen, und Produkte, die ihrem Wesen nach einen besonderen Anspruch und eine besondere Art von Öffentlichkeit und von Dauer besitzen. In der ‚Objektivität‘ der Denkmäler kommen zumal Momente zum Vorschein, die in den literarischen Explikationen des nationalen Bewusstseins nicht oder nur verstellt zu finden sind.”<sup>490</sup>

Moreover, Nipperdey writes of “making an idea visible”<sup>491</sup> (an idea which we have already found in

488 *Ibid.*, 8. In his *Deutsche Geschichte*, Nipperdey furthers an approach which takes cultural history in consideration, in opposition to the historical methods of the *Neue Sozialgeschichte*.

489 George L. Mosse, “Deutscher Patriotismus und Jüdischer Nationalismus”, in *Deutschlands Weg in die Moderne. Politik, Gesellschaft und Kultur im 19. Jahrhundert*, op. cit., 161

490 “Nationalidee und Nationaldenkmal in Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert“, op. cit., 529-30

491 *Ibid.*, 532

Huizinga, and which inspired Mosse), and goes on distinguishing different types (or ideal types) of national monuments. These are connected with the idea of a national cult, and monuments had cultic traits in their form; the tendency was that of “elevating mythically” the people or the events represented by the monuments.<sup>492</sup>

### *Albert Speer*

If Nipperdey added a new dimension to Mosse’s concept of nationalism, Albert Speer offered the historian a unique chance to see national socialism as it really saw itself. Though Mosse’s interest for the visual dimension was already latent since the 1950s, the anthropological turn with its emphasis on symbols, and Nipperdey’s work on national monuments were of decisive importance. Mosse’s reception of Huizinga is telling in this regard: one of the first times Mosse quoted Huizinga’s remark that “having attributed a real existence to an idea the mind wants to see it alive and can effect this only by personalizing it”, was in 1973<sup>493</sup>, while other aspects of Huizinga’s thought, not related to aesthetics, were already present in *The Culture of Western Europe*.

In 1969 Mosse was receptive enough to aesthetics to fully appreciate Speer’s diaries. Writing about the projects for the dome of the Auditorium in Berlin, Speer wrote:

“nonostante l’atteggiamento negativo del Führer nei confronti delle concezioni mistiche di Himmler e di Rosenberg, l’Auditorio era, in fondo, un luogo di culto, destinato ad acquisire nel corso dei secoli, per la venerazione e la tradizione di cui sarebbe andato rivestendosi, un significato non diverso da quello che la basilica di San Pietro in Roma ha per il mondo cattolico. Senza un simile sottofondo culturale, non si sarebbe né compreso né giustificato tanto dispendio per questo faro del mondo nazionalsocialista.”<sup>494</sup>

In the Spandau Diaries, Speer asserted that “das Industrieprodukt [ist] nicht denkmalsfähig. Um wirklichen Eindruck und nicht nur den von Hitler (oder den Russen) gesuchten äußeren Effekt zu machen, bedarf ein Monument der mythischen Qualität. Die Technik ist immer gegen den Mythos.”<sup>495</sup>

According to Mosse, Speer’s work

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492 *Ibid.*, 583

493 “The Poet and the Exercise of Political Power: Gabriele d’Annunzio”, op. cit. 233

494 *Memorie del Terzo Reich*, op. cit., 206

495 Albert Speer, *Spandauer Tagebücher*, Verlag Ullstein GmbH, Frankfurt-Berlin-Wien, 1975, 280. Mosse underlined this passage in his copy of the book.

“seems to have an authentic quality which is missing from most of the others Nazi autobiographies. His work is devoid of pleas for forgiveness, for he has publicly admitted his moral failings long ago. But more to the point, Speer’s autobiographical works do not concentrate upon isolated accounts of events or mere personal fate. His focus is always upon Adolf Hitler, even when he is writing about Albert Speer ... ‘For Hitler his sense of political mission and his architecture were indivisible’. This sentence from Speer’s autobiography, *Inside the Third Reich* sums up the essence of his message: the Third Reich was a government whose Führer perceived politics in visual and aesthetic terms. The *Spandau Diaries* repeat the message: people, Hitler was fond of saying, need illusions even apart from the theatre and the cinema: they need to be lifted out of the dreariness of daily life. Speer was the man who did the ‘lifting’.”<sup>496</sup>

Speer’s view of national socialism is crucial, according to Mosse, if the historian wants to understand the Third Reich: since “all modern mass movements are apt to be visually oriented”<sup>497</sup>, and liturgy fulfills the psychological needs of the people, “the historian has to recapture their enthusiasm as they felt it at the time and not to impose his own abstract categories upon it thirty years later”; ideas of class, social grouping and conventional politics explain little, and “most historians have put the cart before the horse, and here Speer proved an invaluable corrective.”<sup>498</sup>

When Speer was released after his twenty-year imprisonment, Mosse contacted him, as he did with other former Nazis, since he was convinced that the best way to understand national socialism was to see it as it saw itself. The encounter with Speer was to prove of great importance for Mosse’s work, and their acquaintance became very close, they exchanged letters for over six years, and often met in the first half of the 1970s. They came to respect each other a great deal, which emerges clearly from their correspondence.<sup>499</sup> Mosse found Speer a fascinating character, who could offer the historian unique insights into the Third Reich. Moreover, he was the only survivor of Hitler’s closest collaborators. When Martin Krygier, review editor for *Quadrant*, an Australian review, asked Mosse if he wanted to review the *Spandau Diaries*<sup>500</sup>, Mosse replied: “how could I resist such an appeal?”<sup>501</sup> In a long Interview at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Mosse said:

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496 *Albert Speer’s Hitler*. op. cit., 53

497 *Ibid.*, 54

498 *Ibid.*, 55

499 Correspondence with Albert Speer, 1971-1977, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 39; folder 36; Leo Baeck Institute. Sending Mosse a copy of his *Spandau Diaries*, Speer wrote: “Professor George L. Mosse, mit allen guten Wünschen, in Freundschaft. Albert Speer”. The book is in Mosse’s private library in Madison.

500 “Eugene [Kamenka, in all probability] suggested, in view of your great interest in Speer, that you might consider reviewing it for us”, Martin Krygier, letter to George L. Mosse, 30 April 1976, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 12; folder 25; Leo Baeck Institute

501 George L. Mosse, letter to Martin Krygier, 13 May 1976, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 12; folder 25; Leo Baeck Institute

"I knew Speer quite well. I talked a lot with Speer ... When I first met Speer he was very suspicious of course. I said, look I'm not interested in your morals. That's between you and God. I've come to ask you technical questions. I asked him why did you use this lighting at the Nuremburg Rally. For the effect, for the crowds. With that he saw these were questions he could answer, technical questions. Then we went from technical to other things and it worked I think very well ... I got everything out of him. He always picked me up in Munich. You noticed -this went over about five six years- he always picked me up in Munich in a car which had a Wankel motor-that was the alternative to our engine, our motor engine that he developed in the war. Off we went, and the embarrassing thing, the only embarrassing thing was whenever I ate with him in public people came up and wanted his autograph. Whenever, they must have thought I too was a Nazi. The other interesting thing about is was it's quite true, it gave me insights into other things. For example, whenever he talked about Hitler negatively, his eyes lit up. Hitler must have had a tremendous charisma because this man even, you know, denying everything, thinking everything was dreadful now, his eyes lit up when he talked about Hitler. Oh, I learned a lot from him. I never wrote about him. I wrote about him once in an Australian paper because I didn't want him to see it particularly. [Question: What did he teach you about Hitler, except for the army?] Everything that's in his excellent memoirs, but in a kind of different way. I mean Hitler's attitude towards women is remarkable. He never knew Speer was married and Speer was married with eight children or something like that. He's not only married, he's really married. Hitler never knew it. He never asked. He never knew it. You learn little tidbits like that."<sup>502</sup>

Speer too respected and appreciated Mosse and his work. One day, to Mosse's delight, Speer told him that he was the only historian who had ever understood what National Socialism really was.<sup>503</sup> Indeed, Speer held Mosse's work in great esteem, and suggested that Mosse publish in Germany one single volume with *The Crisis of German Ideology*, *Nazi Culture* and *The Nationalization of the Masses*.<sup>504</sup> Mosse wrote the latter discussing it constantly with Speer and indeed, in the introduction, wrote that "I learned a great deal from Diplom Ing. Albert Speer, who on several occasions took the time to answer a myriad of questions and who read the manuscript of this book, keeping me from making several errors ... Albert Speer was an important link between the earlier history of the political liturgy in Germany and its use by National Socialism which he so largely directed."<sup>505</sup> Speer appreciated the book, saying that it was important to analyze the *Hintergründe* of Hitler's period in order to understand National

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502 Interview with George Mosse, March 13, 1995, RG-50.030\*0310, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview has been conducted by Joan Ringelheim.

503 Conversation with Stanley Payne, October 2005.

504 Albert Speer, letter to Mosse, 11 July 1973, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 39; folder 36; Leo Baeck Institute

505 *The Nationalization of the Masses*, op. cit., viii

Socialism properly,<sup>506</sup> and Mosse wished he could have met Speer when writing *The Crisis of German Ideology*, which would have made the book a better one.<sup>507</sup>

The “aesthetic turn” was now almost complete. Mosse's inborn attraction to aesthetics had been kindled and stimulated by the encounters with Nipperdey and Speer, which, in a sense, “activated” his previous knowledge and fascination for Baroque architecture. These “discoveries” could be easily espoused with the thought of those anthropologists and scholars who had focussed on rituals and symbols. This period of intense intellectual excitement for Mosse had as its background the student movement of the 1960s which he had to confront.

### ***With the Students in the 1960s***

The importance the student movement of the 1960s had for Mosse's work has only seldom received the attention it deserves. Mosse's relationship with the New Left cannot be depicted in black or white, it is rather a complex attitude which includes emotive involvement as well as sharp criticism. Recalling those years, Mosse said that “die 68er Ereignisse waren sehr einflussreich, auf mich sicherlich auch, denn ich habe da an meiner Universität auch eine gewisse Rolle gespielt. Aber nicht die eines Anführers der Revolution, sie war mehr die ... einer Wespe unter der Haut der Revolution. Die mit Fragen sticht und fordert: Denkt darüber nach. So ähnlich, wie eben ein Lehrer verfahren sollte. Und so haben sie mich respektiert.”<sup>508</sup> Paul Breines writes that “active in the reform wing of the Wisconsin Democratic party, Mosse appeared a political liberal, and like many such academics at the time, he possessed the prerequisites for standing fast against radicalism. But it was the specificity of George Mosse's person and career with which he responded, in critical sympathy and rare intellectual engagement, to the emergent student Left of the 1960s. His lectures became, as the decade progressed, part of the dramaturgy of the student movement. His lectures were more often that not directed *against* the Left – which meant that he took us seriously and that he had little patience with the claim that teaching must be neutral, devoid of values.”<sup>509</sup> Mosse was never on the Left, Breines says, but “nevertheless linked to us ... He was there, not only to debate and challenge – which he did with gusto - but also to share. To share in what? In camaraderie. George Mosse's deeper, if more narrow, links to the Left developed through his private rather than his public figure ... [Mosse] “in his own way,

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506 Albert Speer, letter to Mosse, 9 April 1973, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 39; folder 36; Leo Baeck Institute

507 Mosse, letter to Speer, 8 March 1973, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 39; folder 36; Leo Baeck Institute. In the above quoted 1981 edition of the book, Mosse had admitted that at the time he had not yet realized the importance of symbols and political liturgies.

508 *Ich bleibe Emigrant*, op. cit., 62

509 Paul Breines, “The Mosse Milieu”, in Paul Buhle (ed. by) *History and the New Left. Madison, Wisconsin, 1950-1970*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1990, 249



contributed greatly to the tradition of 'Marxism of the heart'".<sup>510</sup>

Though Mosse remained "generally remote from the activities of the campus Left"<sup>511</sup>, he gave a contribution on the theoretical level, that is, from the lectern. He played an active role as a reformer insofar as he demanded more freedoms and rights for the so-called outsiders, and supported greater sexual tolerance.<sup>512</sup> However, his role remained that of the professor who confronts and stimulates the students on an intellectual level. Addressing senior students in January 1960, he emphasized the importance of values and the dangers inherent in an excess of pragmatism, which would only lead to relativism. Puritans conquered the wilderness, said Mosse, because "they had a vision of the good society of the future and did not believe that all values were relative to the present. It was a vigorous belief in permanent values to be achieved that made them conquer the dangers which surrounded them. They were neither relativists nor pragmatists"<sup>513</sup>. Relativism, Mosse warned, could lead to totalitarianism: "in Germany an ideology built upon contempt for facts, on sheer irrationalism, took over from a regime which was pragmatic, relativist and unable to produce the kind of rival idealism of which I have spoken."<sup>514</sup> Irrationalists become the majority when a society is in crisis, "especially if the society is devoid of ideas", and ideals must be based upon facts. Students should enter public life and attempt to change society from within; yet "it will not be easy – there is the tempter who will ask you to adjust unquestioningly to 'what is', to admire power and prestige for its own sake, to ignore facts which may hurt. To him you must give a clear 'no' – he is the Mephistopheles of modern society"<sup>515</sup>. Students who leave university, concluded Mosse, "must join us all the more closely. No longer as students but as fellow soldiers in this good fight."<sup>516</sup>

Mosse's attitude towards the New Left changed considerably over the 1960s. Discussing the topic many years later, he described its "transition from thinking to mindless activity"<sup>517</sup>. In the beginning, Mosse said, students were hungry for theory; he recalls that "the first stage was a terribly exciting period from the point of view of teaching. The students read a great deal, they took their history seriously, and they were eager for intellectual discussion. I have never witnessed their kind of intellectual excitement on campus before or since."<sup>518</sup> And yet, after the 1967 Dow Chemical Company

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510 *Ibid.*, 249 and 250

511 Paul Breines, "With George Mosse in the 1960s", in *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe*, op. cit., 291

512 Mosse was in the Crow Committee, which helped restructure the relationship between the university and the students. As he said, "We liberalized the sexual rules: there wouldn't be anything like there is today if we hadn't done that, yes? We liberalized, of course, completely changed the punishment, I mean the discipline, completely." Interview with Laura Smail, cit.

513 George L. Mosse, "Commencement Address", 1960, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 23; Leo Baeck Institute

514 *Ibid.*

515 *Ibid.*

516 *Ibid.*

517 George L. Mosse, "New Left Intellectuals/ New Left Politics", in *History and the New Left. Madison, Wisconsin, 1950-1970*, op. cit., 235

518 *Ibid.*, 238

demonstrations<sup>519</sup>, a movement which had begun by supporting thinking and theoretical reflection turned to a “mindlessly violent activism”, “it completely lacked a theory of movement-building worthy of the name”.<sup>520</sup> The movement failed, according to Mosse, because it had no clarity in goals and tactics, while “the revolution that succeeds must combine theory and practice”<sup>521</sup>. Mosse asks

“why do intellectuals have such a hard time understanding the goals, rituals, and symbols that, when clarified and applied, make social change possible? It is no different today from 1967, or from the time of those French and Russian events. Clear goals, expressed through easily understood symbols and controlled movements of people, and with powerful oratory – this is what changes a crowd into a movement with changes and continuity ... The American intellectuals who teach and put out magazines about social change are basically readers. Often they are not visually oriented enough to appreciate the need of popular, compelling symbols to convey values and information. They may have no grasp of popular images as a clear language to translate Marx or Marcuse or other theory into compelling symbols ... In Madison, perhaps the visit of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, [1967] or the torchlight parade to the Wisconsin capitol, or the mass demonstration against Defense Secretary Melvin Laird were a beginning. But in America it all bogs down in speeches, speeches and speeches. And then perhaps convulsive violence. From this combination, no successful mass movement can be created.”<sup>522</sup>

It is clear from this passage the legacy the student movement left Mosse: it drew his attention to the functioning of mass movements, to their myths and symbols, to the necessity of organization. In a 1969 lecture Mosse asserted the need for tactics, leadership and discipline in a successful mass movement, and added that “these considerations have in many ways dominated my attitudes towards the events of this year”. The movement had been too emotional, with little political sense, without reason and sense of degree. Organization on a broad front is needed, Mosse said, as well as patience.

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519 The demonstrations took place against this company, which was the supplier of napalm of the American Army engaged in the Vietnam war. For Mosse's attitude towards the demonstrations, see also Paul Breines, “With George Mosse in the 1960s”, op. cit., 297. Breines analyzes Mosse's solidarity with student activism, though emphasizing his complex relation with the movement. On the occasion of the sit-in to block the Dow Corporation, Mosse gave speeches on the students' behalf, though warning against the radicalization of the movement. In this regard, see the articles published in “The Daily Cardinal” on October 10 and 20, 1967, and on November 21, 1967. Mosse's attitude, which was already critical, changed drastically after the Sterling Hall Bombing in Madison (August 1970), when a university researcher was accidentally killed by a bomb set off by activists as a protest against the University's connections with the US Army (conversation with Anson Rabinbach, March 2007).

520 “New Left Intellectuals/ New Left Politics”, op. cit., 234

521 *Ibid.*, 237

522 *Ibid.*, 237-8. In a 1982 interview, Mosse said referring to the student movement: “I myself was in a peculiar position because as a historian of the mass movement I never took the whole thing very seriously. I looked at it from outside because I knew it was only a game, in a way. I mean, as Governor Knowles said, they're not going to revolutionize the state of Wisconsin; that was clear”; and in another passage, “I didn't take it seriously; I was conservative”, then adding that he looked at it as a historian, unlike other professors who became too involved; “I looked at it as an historical episode, because it was clear that ... it would blow over”. Interview with Laura Smail, cit.

Objective reality has to be understood: then a social analysis of the situation is necessary, along with tactics and leadership. German left-wing intellectuals during the Weimar years believed in absolutes, they had no contact with reality, and therefore they failed. Mosse concluded by quoting the example of Thomas Mann who joined the SPD “in order to do something concrete about stopping the Nazis”: the SPD had a choice at least, unlike left-wing intellectuals who had no chance.<sup>523</sup> In another 1969 course, Mosse teased the students and said: “Oh boy, if I joined you, I could begin a movement... but what I would do would probably be more like a fascist movement”.<sup>524</sup>

Anson Rabinbach recalls his first encounter with Mosse, in 1967: Mosse was

“arguing intensely with a group of students who were planning to sit in to block the Dow Chemical Company campus recruiter in the Fall (Dow was chosen because the company was manufacturing napalm). As it happens, they were discussing Lenin’s theory of the vanguard, which according to the students, plainly justified a militant action opposed by the majority. ‘Lenin,’ George pronounced brusquely, ‘is *passé*. You should read Georges Sorel because you are all Sorelians’.”<sup>525</sup>

As we have seen above, Sorel's idea of myth merged with Mosse's own perception, and he readily applied such a perception to the events which were taking place around him. Student unrest undoubtedly left a mark upon Mosse. In a letter to Professor R. K. Webb in February 1969, he wrote: “I am not sure if you could read my scribble on the postcard I sent yesterday. You must excuse this – the presence of National Guard and protestors does produce a certain disorientation”.<sup>526</sup> In a 1994 interview Mosse was asked about what he had learned from his students in the 1960s. He replied:

“vous avez raison d’évoquer les années soixante, car j’y ai appris en fait beaucoup de choses sur les foules, sur les mouvements de masse. C’est à ce moment-là que je me suis spécialisé sur le nazisme. Initialement, je travaillais en histoire religieuse, sur la Réforme. Dans les années soixante donc, enseignant à l’université de Madison, dans le Wisconsin, je faisais des cours en histoire des idées, avec des auditoires importants. Ce type de cours avait du succès à l’époque. Et puis, les étudiants aimaient toutes les idées qui venaient d’Allemagne ... Mes cours se prolongeaient souvent en conversations, à la cafétéria. J’ai demandé à plusieurs reprises à mes étudiants pourquoi ils occupaient les locaux, pourquoi ils faisaient des *sit-in*. Et ils me répondaient que

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523 George L. Mosse, “Final Lecture”, 1969, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 35; Leo Baeck Institute

524 George L. Mosse, Early Modern History Course, 1969, cit.

525 Anson Rabinbach, “George L. Mosse 1919-1999: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 331

526 George L. Mosse, letter to R. K. Webb, 15 February 1969, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 8; folder 2; Leo Baeck Institute. It was Webb who had asked Mosse to write the review article which eventually became “History, Anthropology and Mass Movements”.

c'était leur première expérience d'action collective. Vivre quelque chose en commun, partager une expérience, voilà ce qu'ils retenaient dans l'immédiat, et c'est un sentiment que j'ai retrouvé par exemple dans mes travaux sur la première guerre mondiale. D'une certaine manière, mes étudiants de Madison dans les années soixante n'étaient pas très loin des anciens combattants de *Fallen Soldiers*. Par ailleurs, je les interrogeais sur le sens des marches organisées vers le Capitole, le centre politique de l'Etat du Wisconsin, à Madison. Je leur disais qu'ils auraient pu se contenter d'occuper l'Université. Une chose était sûre: jamais le Gouverneur ne les recevrait. Mais alors ils me répondaient que ces marches donnaient le sentiment de participer à quelque chose. En fin de compte, je crois que ces années 1960-68 ont été les meilleurs pour mon enseignement. J'ai beaucoup appris au contact de mes étudiants, grâce à leur vivacité d'esprit."<sup>527</sup>

Mosse supported the students in their demonstrations against the Vietnam War as well as the Civil Rights Movement, but he criticized their turn to violence and their activism without well established ideals<sup>528</sup>. He considered the danger of totalitarian attitudes as real, and insisted on dialogue and freedom of expression as the only means to come to terms with the growing student unrest. But he criticized also the American university system, stating that the university was becoming "as absolutistic as the students".<sup>529</sup> In a 1967 article he wrote that "for such youth not only the plight of the Negro, the war in Vietnam, but also the functioning of the university seems to demonstrate the gap between ideal and practice which they want to close"<sup>530</sup>. Students looked, according to Mosse, for a new ideal community, but they were unsure about which road to take; they must be allowed freedom of expression in order to avoid the risk of frustration and totalitarian attitudes, because students might be driven "into the arms of a ruthless leadership which deflects the idealism towards a drive for power"<sup>531</sup>.

In another lecture, Mosse focussed on the "problem of individual self fulfilment as over against the mass": this search leads to frustration, the rapidly expanding University entails a loss of individuality, people become part of an ever growing crowd.<sup>532</sup> The civil rights movement (with which he deeply sympathized) was, Mosse said, an expression of the student reaction; the revolt against the

527 "Du Baroque au Nazisme: une histoire religieuse de la politique", op. cit., 248-9

528 In this regard, see "The Daily Cardinal", November 15, 1966. "I tried to sort of mediate between the students and the faculty because I had good friends among the radical students. And they certainly had a point ... But again, my main thrust was, why not mediate? I mean, if the students are confrontational, the faculty doesn't have to be confrontational, because the thing will blow over, you know. And anyhow, let's see what good we can make come out of it. Let's take the opportunity, yes? And don't forget, I'd been very much involved in the nonviolent part, you know, the first part of the sixties ... in the more intellectual part of left-wing activity. I had been involved. But when the intellectual part of left-wing activity was over, then, of course, the violence, yes: how to cope with it?" Interview with Laura Smail, cit.

529 Quoted in David Maraniss, *They Marched Into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967*, Simon and Shuster Paperbacks, New York 2003, 439

530 George L. Mosse, "Free Speech and the University", *Madison Select*, May 1967

531 *Ibid.*

532 George L. Mosse, Unidentified Lectures - To Students, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 11; Leo Baeck Institute. These lectures, though most of them are undated, were undoubtedly delivered during the 1960s, in that they bear references to the events of the time.

establishment was “a moral one”, opposed to the use of force in foreign policy and to naked power. We believe, the historian continued, in morality (and in the dignity of the individual), but we do not apply it to foreign policy. This relationship is a crucial problem, and the answer has to be moral, then in tune with the young generation's revolt.<sup>533</sup> Yet “such a moral revolt can, I think, easily leave the firm soil of reality ... We do not want to destroy this moral fervor. It is, after all, what has made a higher life than that of the apes possible – it is this which does give man his dignity beyond the jungle from which it springs.”<sup>534</sup>

Mosse was aware of the danger inherent in a moral revolt which could “easily leave the firm soil of reality”: national socialism had been, in his interpretation, such a revolt, but it was not alone. In 1970, *Germans and Jews. The Right, the Left, and the Search for a 'Third Force' in Pre-Nazi Germany* was published.<sup>535</sup> The book collected a series of articles Mosse had written since the late 1950s, enriched by an introduction which linked them together through the concept of the “third force”, defined a “problem in man's existence”<sup>536</sup>: “we shall be dealing with the attempt to solve the problem of the modern age by creating a force that could eliminate the unpalatably capitalist and materialist present.”<sup>537</sup> Such an attempt to create an alternative society outside capitalism or Marxism involved people from the most diverse backgrounds, be they fascists or left intellectuals. They “proposed solutions to a dilemma that all men of this century were forced to confront. The existential dilemma of modern man has often been described in very general terms: the quest for identity in a world in which the ‘vulgar rationalization of life’ threatens to swamp the individual personality, and the advances of technology as well as the progress of urbanization and industrialization produce a feeling of alienation.”<sup>538</sup> The anti-bourgeois élan these men shared led them to reject bourgeois society and materialism “on behalf of an idealistic commitment that stood above and beyond present reality ... All men long for a *point d'appui*, a point of support for their inner drives, and an escape from chaos. These men and women found this in a ‘third force’ that would transform society, ... they came to believe in a utopia.”<sup>539</sup> The “third force” provided, according to Mosse, a “retreat into ideology.”<sup>540</sup>

What is the connection between the “third force”, nationalism, fascism, left-wing intellectuals in the pre-Nazi years and the student movement in the 1960s? The search for a “third force”, Mosse said,

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533 *Ibid.*

534 *Ibid.*

535 George L. Mosse, *Germans and Jews. The Right, the Left, and the Search for a 'Third Force' in Pre-Nazi Germany*, Orbach&Chambers, London, 1971 (first edition 1970)

536 *Ibid.*, 3

537 *Ibid.* The articles collected in the book are “Culture, Civilization and German Anti-Semitism”, “The Image of the Jew in German Popular Culture: Felix Dahn and Gustav Freytag”, “The Influence of the Volkish Idea on German Jewry”, “The Corporate State and the Conservative Revolution in Weimar Germany”, “Fascism and the Intellectuals”, “Left-Wing Intellectuals in the Weimar Republic”.

538 *Ibid.*, 4

539 *Ibid.*, 5-6

540 *Ibid.*, 7

“has not been concluded. Fascism can still provide an ideology”,<sup>541</sup> and the dilemma of the left-wing intellectuals “has continued in the West [and ] ... is especially acute in the United States.”<sup>542</sup> Mosse, sticking to his principle that history must be based on problems and not chronology, and that it is always contemporary, brings the problems he dealt with historically to bear on the present situation of America in the 1960s. The students had turned to Weimar left-wing intellectuals in their search for identity and values, yet they needed to realize, Mosse wrote, that the unbridled idealism of this “third force” was at the same time an “opportunity” and a “danger”.<sup>543</sup> Many Weimar intellectuals had refused to come to terms with mass politics, misunderstanding its dangerousness and plunging into an idealism totally detached from reality, thus becoming unable to contrast national socialism. Similarly, many intellectuals of the New Left got mired in a utopianism which had no contact with reality; its inability to propose concrete solutions could easily end up in indiscriminate violent revolt.

Mosse's reflections on the “third force” in the 1960s were inspired by the student movement. On the one hand, it drew his attention to that German-Jewish intellectual tradition which was to enter his reflections on myth; on the other, it taught Mosse much about mass movements, about the need for a collective experience which could give life a new meaning. The search for a “third force” in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had led either to an elitist, unbridled idealism, or to the adoption of a new sense of democratic participation in political life which expressed itself through the “new politics”. The student movement embodied both these tensions. If the first opened a door to the rediscovery of Mosse's German-Jewish identity, the second opened that to the analysis of the “new politics”.

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541 *Ibid.*, 32

542 *Ibid.*, 32

543 *Ibid.*, 32-3

## CHAPTER IV

### THE MISSING LINK: THE NATIONALIST REVOLUTION

“The frequent contention that fascist culture diverged from the mainstream of European culture cannot be upheld.

On the contrary, it absorbed most of what had proved to have the greatest mass appeal in the past.”<sup>544</sup>

(George L. Mosse)

“The traditional nationalist myths and slogans, the use of the nationalist liturgy, the constant and unrelenting appeals to national solidarity and greatness informed all of fascism, and should have made nationalism's importance obvious – perhaps too obvious to many historians of the movement who have not bothered to analyze nationalism itself as a belief-system.”

(George L. Mosse)<sup>545</sup>

The 1970s saw Mosse's new methodological approach finally applied. If his works from the previous decade focussed mainly on National Socialism and fascism, his “new discoveries”<sup>546</sup> open a new scenario which brings the historian to reconsider his views on fascism. The search for an answer to the enigma of consensus culminated in a drastic change of Mosse's point of view: in order to understand fascism, nationalism becomes the privileged observatory. Mosse's works since the 1970s will mainly deal with nationalism. The “anthropological and visual turn” entailed therefore a turn to the study of nationalism, and the new interpretive category was that of the “new politics”. The “new politics” was a European phenomenon whose style had affected political movements all over the continent: this new concept meant for Mosse a growing concern for the elaboration of a general theory of fascism, which occupied him during the 1970s, progressively detaching him from his book on the crisis of German ideology, still somewhat related to the idea of *Sonderweg*. The 1970s then saw also Mosse's greatest effort at elaborating a general theory of fascism, at the same time that he was becoming ever more convinced that fascism was a part of European nationalism, a view inspired by the new politics' close association with the latter, and by its Europe-wide diffusion. As Jeffrey Herf has written,

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544 “Introduction: Towards a General Theory of Fascism”, op. cit., 25

545 *The Fascist Revolution. Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, op. cit., xiii

546 The term is used by Mosse himself in the Acknowledgments to *The Nationalization of the Masses*, op. cit., viii

“in his later books on nationalism, respectability, and sexuality, as well as in a 1989 essay on ‘Fascism and the French Revolution’, Mosse continued to move away from a focus on Germany’s *Sonderweg* and toward a more pessimistic, darker, and more all-encompassing inclusion of Europe’s traditions. He took issue with those who restricted the concept of revolution to its Communist variant and chided historians who refused to acknowledge the revolutionary, mass-mobilizing dynamics of fascism and Nazism. While aware, that ‘the overt attitude of National Socialists toward the French Revolution was one of hatred’, he questioned the traditional view that Germany produced Nazism in part because it had been untouched by the ideals of the French Revolution and missed the influence of the Enlightenment. Instead he argued that: nationalism provided the link between the French Revolution and fascism: the nationalization of the masses was a common bond between the French and fascist revolutions... the instruments of self-representation and the need for popular representation were common to both. Moreover, all fascisms shared the utopianism which was said to have inspired the masses during the French Revolution: the longing to create a new man or a new nation. The democratic nationalism that emerged from the French Revolution “which fought against the *ancien régime* for a more meaningful national unity was perhaps the most important single link between the French Revolution and fascism.”<sup>547</sup>

Herf goes right to the heart of the anthropological and visual turn's consequences: its ripest fruit, the concept of “new politics”, directs Mosse's in two directions. On the one hand, toward an ever closer association of fascism and the French Revolution: Mosse had pointed to the revolutionary nature of fascism since the early 1960s, and now could expand his reflections, adding new elements which strengthened and enriched his view of fascism as a revolution. On the other, given the centrality the “new politics” assumed in Mosse's interpretation of fascist politics (and of modern politics as well), its close relation to nationalism came to imply that the latter too became ever more central to fascism. This happened while Mosse's connections to Israel were growing tighter, and his intellectual involvement with Zionism urged him to reflect on nationalism in a different, more committed way.

### ***The “New Politics”***

The making of *The Nationalization of the Masses* in the early 1970s was a laboratory Mosse used for elaborating his concept of the “new politics”. In 1971 he published an article by the title “Caesarism, Circuses and Monuments”, where he critically connected the concept of Caesarism with that of a new kind of politics, born of the French Revolution, which entailed a rule of the masses as

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<sup>547</sup> Jeffrey Herf, “The Historian as Provocateur: George Mosse’s Accomplishment and Legacy”, op. cit.



opposed to the rule of representatives.<sup>548</sup> Historians, Mosse said, overemphasizing the role of the political leaders as well as of terror and oppression over the masses of the population, had neglected the mass nature of the new politics and its liturgy, that is, the problem of consensus in modern politics. “In reality”, Mosse wrote, “a secular religion mediated between people and leaders, providing at the same time the instrument of social control over the masses.”<sup>549</sup> Anticipating the themes of *The Nationalization of the Masses*, he wrote of the function of public festivals and national monuments in disciplining the masses (quoting again the work of Thomas Nipperdey), as well as of the myths and symbols of the new political liturgy. “Caesarism, Circuses and Monuments” is the first implementation of a new historical methodology.

In the next few years, Mosse will refine his interpretation on several occasions. In the summer of 1972 Mosse held in Australia several lectures and seminars on nationalism, national socialism and mass movements. Among the drafts for a public lecture delivered during that period, there is a note which Mosse probably used to introduce his “new discoveries”:

“I am historian and not an anthropologist, and came to the use of anthropological ideas and their importance for modern history, through a historical problem rather than through anthropological background. As I talk about symbols and liturgy now, in the 19. and 20. centuries, I leave it to you to connect them to an anthropological past. The similarities are startling: the National Monument is, in a way, the totem pole of modern nationalism. There is a basic similarity, I think, in what I will talk about and what you are concerned with and how Huizinga described the intellectual atmosphere of the 15. century: ‘having attributed a real existence to an idea the mind wants to see it alive, and can effect this only by personalizing it.’ Myth and symbol become an explanation for social life and the eternal desire of man for permanent and fixed reference points in the world – not only in the far past but also in the 19. and 20. centuries. Nationalism served to capture these longings and present itself in such a guise. But nationalism began, if you like, precisely at the chronological time of the birth of modern European mass movements in the first decades of the 19. century.”<sup>550</sup>

In this passage nationalism and what Mosse will soon term “new politics” are linked; the study of nationalism becomes the crucial factor for the understanding of national socialism. National socialism is “the climax of this development [the new style of politics], but it cannot be understood apart from the long history of nationalism as a mass movement, based upon the shaping of the crowd into a

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548 George L. Mosse, “Caesarism, Circuses and Monuments”, in *The Journal of Contemporary History*, 6 (2), 1971, 167-182

549 *Ibid.*, 170

550 George L. Mosse, “Mass Politics and the Political Liturgy of Nationalism”, cit.

congregation.”<sup>551</sup> Mosse further applied anthropological methods in “Mass Politics and the Political Liturgy of Nationalism” (1972) and in *The Nationalization of the Masses* (1975), two studies on nationalism, which becomes the essential tool for understanding fascism.

In Mosse's interpretation, nationalism and the rise of mass politics join hands during the XIX century in Germany: frustrations with the outcome of the wars of liberation<sup>552</sup> coincide with the beginning of modern mass politics; “nationalism became the principal movement involving the people in the politics of their time”<sup>553</sup>. Nationalism is linked to the “democratic impulse of the century”; this link “led to the creation of a new kind of politics taking on liturgical form”<sup>554</sup>. The “new politics”, which Mosse “discovers” and analyses through anthropological categories, is indissolubly linked to nationalism. The “new style of politics” was “based upon a secularized theology and its liturgy; democracy meant participation in the drama which grew from these foundations. Such a theology determined the self-representation of the nation, the way in which people objectified their general will.”<sup>555</sup> As we have seen, National Socialism was the climax of this development which “cannot be understood apart from the long history of nationalism as a mass movement”<sup>556</sup>. In this article, Mosse asserts that many historians say that we must

“show less concern about culture and more about the economic aims of individual groups and the actual achievements and demands of nationalism. But the reality of nationalism, as it presented itself to most people and drew them into participation, was not economic nor defined through practical demands. Instead nationalism expressed itself through a new style of politics closely linked to a political theology.”<sup>557</sup>

People reared in the traditions of liberal or socialist thought, Mosse said, find this difficult to understand, they search for a logical political system and “forget that men have been captured more often by theology than by the canons of classical political thought”; the “liturgical drama ... stood

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551 George L. Mosse, “Mass Politics and the Political Liturgy of Nationalism”, op. cit., 39

552 The reference is to the German wars of liberation against Napoleon.

553 *Ibid.*

554 *Ibid.* How the democratic nature of radical nationalism and also of fascism is to be understood, Mosse makes clear: “the new politics can be called democratic in the ancient use of that word. People had a sense of direct participation in political action through their role in various rites, including processions and mass meetings. However, in reality they were kept passive, responding to the leader or leadership, never taking the initiative themselves. The word ‘totalitarian democracy’ is correctly applied here ... This was certainly irrational though it had its own logic, in the sense that nationalism seemed the best solution for the travails of modernity and peoples’ own self-interest.” “Fascism as a Nationalist Movement: The Missing Link”, cit.

555 “Mass Politics and the Political Liturgy of Nationalism”, op. cit., 39

556 *Ibid.*, 39

557 *Ibid.*, 40

outside any sustained social, political or economic analysis”<sup>558</sup>. The religious essence of the “new politics” is evident in the function of patriotic festivals, which “borrowed the liturgical rhythm of Protestantism”<sup>559</sup>: hymns, confessions of faith, sermons, dialogues between the speaker and the participants, the ideal of a community of faith, all these elements were taken from the religious tradition. The “new politics” is not exclusively a nationalist or right-wing (D’Annunzio<sup>560</sup> or Mussolini) phenomenon: the workers’ movement as well as Theodor Herzl’s Sionism advocate the need of political liturgy: May Day parades are an example of this, and so is the state of Israel, according to Mosse: “it may well be significant that today Israel, rather than the European nations, remains involved with such symbols and myths. Here also a binding force had to be created in a new nation, and the Zionist leaders brought the liturgy with them from central and eastern Europe”<sup>561</sup>.

“Any liturgy must provide a fully-furnished home and cannot be instituted on a partial basis; the world must not only be explained but a healthy world must take the place of the dilemma of modernity. That had been the appeal of Christianity for centuries, and it also had to provide the appeal for a political liturgy if it was to be successful.”<sup>562</sup> In such a process, aesthetics plays a role, since “the ideal of beauty would end man’s alienation and reconcile him to the chaotic world ... the function of beauty was to produce a healthy world beyond the confines of rational consciousness”<sup>563</sup>.

However, the “new politics” is more than a part of nationalism, or of the political style of the Third Reich: Mosse came to see “this political liturgy operating as an integral part of modern mass society ... what we have discussed is not merely a part of nationalism but indeed has in some sense become the political style of mass politics and mass democracy.”<sup>564</sup> In *The Nationalization of the Masses* Mosse said that the book was an analysis of “one wellspring of modern politics”, and that his method of historiographical analysis could be applied to other nations.<sup>565</sup> Indeed, the “discovery” of the “new politics” drew Mosse from a mainly German perspective to a wider context which referred to the whole of modern Europe: “what we call the fascist style was in reality the climax of a ‘new politics’ based upon the emerging eighteenth-century idea of popular sovereignty.”<sup>566</sup> The idea of the “general will” gives the idea of popular sovereignty precision; the general will becomes a “secular religion, the people worshipping themselves and the new politics sought to guide and formalize this worship”<sup>567</sup>. Yet with

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558 *Ibid.*, 40

559 *Ibid.*, 41

560 In 1973, Mosse published another important article which analyzed the experiment in the implementation of the “new politics” in Fiume attempted by Gabriele D’Annunzio, and its significance for the fascist movement in Italy. George L. Mosse, “The Poet and the Exercise of Political Power: Gabriele D’Annunzio”, op. cit.

561 *Ibid.*, 54

562 *Ibid.*, 51

563 *Ibid.*, 51

564 *Ibid.*, 54

565 *The Nationalization of the Masses*, op. cit., vii

566 *Ibid.*, 1

567 *Ibid.*, 2

the emergence of national consciousness, this worship becomes the worship of a nation, and nationalism becomes a secular religion. This happens through the use of national myths and symbols and the “development of a liturgy which would enable the people themselves to participate in such worship”<sup>568</sup>.

“The new politics attempted to draw the people into active participation in the national mystique through rites and festivals, myths and symbols which gave a concrete expression to the general will. The chaotic crowd of the ‘people’ became a mass movement which shared a belief in popular unity through a national mystique. The new politics provided an objectification of the general will; it transformed political action into a drama supposedly shared by the people themselves.”<sup>569</sup>

Mosse laid great emphasis on the dramatic element of the “new politics”: “the idea of the new politics was to transform political action into a drama”<sup>570</sup>; this was compared to the spirit of the Baroque and its theatrical and dramatic tradition, exemplified by Baroque churches. The religiosity of politics stands at the centre of Mosse's interpretation. The “longing to escape from the consequences of industrialization”, the “atomization of traditional world views”, the “destruction of traditional and personal bonds” penetrate the consciousness of “a large element of the population”; myths “stood outside the present flow of history”, myths meant to “make the world whole again”, to “restore a sense of community to the fragmented nation”<sup>571</sup>. Quoting Huizinga, Mosse explains the “longing for myth” and symbols, and their aesthetic function:

“if, in that bygone age [the XV century], ‘the mere presence of a visible image of things holy sufficed to establish their truth’, this would remain the appeal of modern German national symbolism as well. Such myths had ties with religious and Christian world views, but they became secularized both through the heathen past to which they referred and through the instant happiness they promised to those who accepted them. These myths did not stand in isolation, but were made operative through the use of symbols. Symbols were visible, concrete objectifications of the myths in which people could participate.”<sup>572</sup>

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568 *Ibid.*, 2

569 *Ibid.*, 2

570 *Ibid.*, 8

571 *Ibid.*, 6

572 *Ibid.*, 6-7. In a later passage, Mosse associates symbols and myths with tradition, which is necessary for the functioning of the former: “such symbols have a constancy in form and appearance which defies any experimentation; traditionalism is built into every popular faith”, *Ibid.*, 72

Symbols are the “objectification of popular myths”; symbols “give a people their identity”<sup>573</sup>. They played an important role in Christianity, and then, in a secularized form, in German nationalism. Public festivals had become cultic rites during the French Revolution, and the tradition was preserved by the new political style. Architecture plays a role: national monuments “anchor the national myths and symbols in the consciousness of the people”; they are more than a political device: there are artistic presuppositions, an aesthetic “essential to the unity of the symbolism”<sup>574</sup>. The religious essence of nationalism and fascism brushes away the concept of propaganda in a definitive way:

“Fascist and National Socialist political ... cannot be judged in terms of traditional political theory. It has little in common with rational, logically constructed systems such as those of Hegel or Marx. This fact has bothered many commentators who have looked at fascist political thought and condemned its vagueness and ambiguities. But the fascists themselves described their political thought as an ‘attitude’ rather than a system; it was, in fact, a theology which provided the framework for national worship. As such, its rites and liturgies were central, an integral part of a political theory which was not dependent on the appeal of the written word. Nazi and other fascist leaders stressed the spoken word, but even here, speeches fulfilled a liturgical function rather than presenting a didactic exposition of the ideology. The spoken word itself was integrated into the cultic rites, and what was actually said was, in the end, of less importance than the setting and the rites which surrounded such speeches ... To term such dissemination ‘propaganda’ is singularly inappropriate here, for it denotes something artificially created, attempting to capture the minds of men by means of deliberate ‘selling’ techniques. This is to misunderstand the organic development of the Nazi cult and its essentially religious nature ... The accusation that through propaganda the Nazis attempted to erect a terrorist world of illusions can be upheld only in part. No one would deny the presence of terror, but enough evidence has accumulated to account for the genuine popularity of Nazi literature and art which did not need the stimulus of terrorism to become effective. This is true for the Nazi political style as well; it was popular because it was built upon a familiar and congenial tradition.”<sup>575</sup>

National socialism had only perfected a style which had a long history behind it. All the elements of the anthropological and visual turn emerge, from the Baroque to the function of myth, from Huizinga's influence to the role of architecture and aesthetics. These factors affected Mosse's interpretation of

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<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-11

fascism, enriching its understanding as a revolutionary movement, and at the same time leading him to reconsider the peculiarity of German fascism.

### ***The Building Blocks of a General Theory: Fascism as Revolution***

“I do not believe in a long-time German Sonderweg which is more peculiar than the special characteristics of any nation ... If there was a German Sonderweg which led the nation into the arms of the radical right, it started here [after the Great War]: the aftermath of the economic, social and political crises of defeated Germany.”<sup>576</sup> At first glance it could be said that these words, spoken in the late 1980s, would have probably not been used by Mosse in the early 1960s. When he began his analysis of national socialism, he emphasized German antisemitism as “part of German intellectual history”, as an outcome of the German differentiation of culture and civilization, which was, in his opinion, “one of the clues to the Jewish tragedy of our times”.<sup>577</sup> The revolt against positivism, which stemmed from romantic and mystical ideas, in Germany took a “special turn”.<sup>578</sup> This attitude Mosse had culminated in *The Crisis of German Ideology*. In this book, Mosse undoubtedly saw Germany as having followed an at least peculiar path: “what differentiated the Germany of this period from other nations was a profound mood, a peculiar view of man and society which seems alien and even demonic to the Western intellect”<sup>579</sup>. Yet when Mosse, some thirty years later, wrote a new introduction to his work, he felt the need to specify: “that the soil had been prepared for Volkish thought is not meant to provide an argument for a German *Sonderweg*, that there existed a peculiarly and uniquely German and anti-western nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism ... This book was never meant to support the thesis formulated after the Second World War in which Germany was the fount of all evil from Luther to Hitler, or lend credence to the belief that the Holocaust was a German catastrophe just waiting to happen.”<sup>580</sup> Given the general planning of the book, its references to Germany's peculiarity and its exclusive focus on the German case, one would be tempted to say that this work responds, if certainly not to a “Luther to Hitler” thesis, at least to an inclination toward a “German uniqueness” interpretation.<sup>581</sup> However, the book's conclusion sheds additional light on the problem. Here Mosse combines Germany's peculiarity with the embryo of a “general theory” of fascism: Mosse speaks of the “profound difference between

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576 George L. Mosse, “Nationalism and War”, notes for a seminar, undated; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 24; Leo Baeck Institute. In this paper, Mosse deals mainly with the *Historikerstreit*, so it has not been written prior to the late 1980s.

577 “Culture, Civilization and German Antisemitism”, op cit., 60

578 “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism”, op. cit., 81

579 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 1

580 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., vi-vii

581 Jürgen Kocka has included Mosse's *The Crisis of German Ideology* among those books which are inclined toward a *Sonderweg* theory. Jürgen Kocka, “German History Before Hitler: The Debate about the German *Sonderweg*”, in *The Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 23, Number 1, January 1988, 3-16

German fascism and the others of western Europe”, and says that “though fascism had spread throughout Europe, the German variety came to be unique”<sup>582</sup>. By doing so, he implies that there is a European fascism: to affirm the “uniqueness” of the German movement “is not to deny that all fascisms had certain features in common”<sup>583</sup>.

At the Stanford seminary, though insisting on his belief that the growth of *völkisch* ideology had separated Germany from the West<sup>584</sup>, Mosse posed the question about why national socialism enjoyed such a wide consensus, and he asserted that “such questions can only be meaningfully answered within the framework of the whole of the fascist movement, if only to see where and how Germany differed.”<sup>585</sup> Jürgen Kocka has written:

“the *Sonderweg* thesis may help to explain why there were so few barriers against the fascist or totalitarian challenge in Germany. But the *Sonderweg* thesis is much weaker in explaining fascism as such and what happened after 1933. National Socialism was part of a European phenomenon, an aspect of a more general challenge to liberal democracy in the inter-war period. Many aspects of National Socialism were new, and transcended the old German *Sonderweg* – which has finally come to an end, due to the catastrophe which it helped to bring about.”<sup>586</sup>

Indeed, if *The Crisis of German Ideology* had provided an answer to the problem of consensus, Mosse was not fully satisfied and, through the anthropological and visual turn, elaborated the concept of “new politics” which added further evidence to the existence of a well-rooted consensus. The “new politics” and its liturgical essence helped Mosse to further set fascism in a European context. The more Mosse distanced himself from the peculiarity of the German path (yet without ever downplaying it) the more he could move toward the elaboration of a general theory of fascism, an effort he had already sustained in his previous writings.

In *The Culture of Western Europe* Mosse sketched the traits of a fascism which had a common European background. In the chapter on fascism in Italy, Mosse depicts this background, stressing the longing for an organic state in a continuing romantic era which backed the revolt against logic and reason at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The new romanticism expressed the search for a new form of government based on the idea of direct participation in the state, animated by the belief that parliamentary democracy atomizes the individual. The concept of an organic state, the theories of elite,

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582 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 313 and 315. The “profound difference is represented, Mosse writes, by that uniquely German “ideological commitment” which made antisemitism a “primary concern” in that country. *Ibid.*, 314

583 *Ibid.*, 312

584 George L. Mosse, “Fascism Once More”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

585 “What is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

586 “German History Before Hitler: The Debate about the German *Sonderweg*”, op. cit., 13

the cult of leadership, all these are European ideas which will feed fascist ideology.<sup>587</sup> Mosse clearly speaks of “diverse manifestations” of fascism, including Italy, Germany, Austria, Portugal and Spain: all these share a “similar base in a common redefinition of freedom. Freedom meant not individual liberty but a mystical union with the whole.”<sup>588</sup> Fascism, Mosse says, considers ideology seriously; in Italy this ideology combines nationalism and activism, syndicalism and corporatism. A “positive emphasis could be discerned”: the view of fascism as an anti-movement without a positive ideology is rejected from the start.<sup>589</sup> Fascism is “a revolution in ideology”, and if it differed from country to country, this was because of a “different ideological base”.<sup>590</sup> Spain, Austria and Portugal, for example, “differed in that content given the soul of the people which expressed itself through the organic state in the 'intuition' of the leader. The state religion of these nations was Catholicism.”<sup>591</sup> Italy was catholic too, but in Italy Catholicism had been weakened by the anticlericalism of national unification. In Spain, Austria and Portugal Catholicism and nationalism are fused; moreover, the corporate basis is derived not from syndicalism but through Catholic social theory. The “clerical fascism” of Austria and Portugal has a different kind of morality than, for example, Italy. This because Catholicism does not allow the transformation of values, it contains no dynamism, since the dynamic is “diverted into religious worship”.<sup>592</sup> Despite these differences, Mosse insists that there were “shared presuppositions with fascism in general”.<sup>593</sup>

National socialism and Italian fascism shared “a common world view. Both rejected what they called the bourgeois system of values and substituted for it a belief in the organic state, as well as action and struggle”: nihilism too, according to Mosse, is part of the general fascist character.<sup>594</sup> The rejection of the bourgeois system implied the “contempt for representative government”, and an “urge for strong leadership” and authoritarianism.<sup>595</sup> Though national socialist explicit ideology with its ideas of race and exasperated neoromanticism drew a line between Germany and other nations, it seems clear that Mosse believed in a form of European fascism from the start. At the Stanford seminar, he made an attempt to find a working definition. Though the seminar was centered on German national socialism, much room for general debate was left. In order to understand the roots of consensus in Germany, Mosse said, one must consider “the framework of the whole of the fascist movement, if only to see where and how Germany differed”.<sup>596</sup> Fascism is the second great revolutionary movement

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587 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 341-343

588 *Ibid.*, 344

589 *Ibid.*, 345

590 *Ibid.*, 353-354

591 *Ibid.*, 354

592 *Ibid.*, 355. The moral values shared by all of fascism are, Mosse says, traditional ones: family, work, and duty, the search for order and stability.

593 *Ibid.*, 356

594 *Ibid.*, 357

595 *Ibid.*, 358

596 “What is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.



of the century, and it is a “serious movement of a revolutionary nature”, an “ideological kind of revolution” with “ideological sincerity”<sup>597</sup>: as a consequence, Mosse rejects views of fascism as a mere quest for power or, as Nolte had just claimed<sup>598</sup>, as an anti-movement. Mosse makes his approach clear from the start: “we will deal with this from the ideological point of view”.<sup>599</sup> Such an approach implies a focus on the “general atmosphere” rather than on the “quest for precursors” like Fichte or Robespierre, in line with Mosse's cultural history. According to him, fascist ideology subordinates logic to feeling, but this does not mean that a “rational analysis” is not possible: “if we penetrate into it, it will become apparent that even this emphasis on feeling has a dialectic, a logic, built into it which did make it a coherent world view. But we cannot measure it with a measuring rod taken from the eighteenth century or even our supposed American belief in rationalism. Otherwise, like Shirer, we will call it a hodgepodge, and never understand its appeal”.<sup>600</sup>

Fascism is a “Europe-wide movement” whose ideology is not mere rhetoric, it is a “flight into ideology, an irrational ideology”<sup>601</sup> which defines man through aesthetic and spiritual criteria: beauty and ugliness trace the contours of the stereotype; fascism is the “ideal bourgeois revolution, a revolution in ideology and not in social or economic fact”.<sup>602</sup> These considerations were condensed by Mosse in a first definition: fascism was

“a general European movement. It was a revolutionary movement which has its immediate origins in the rejection of the materialism of the fin de siècle. Because it centered its revolt against this, it turned toward the aesthetic, romantic, literary, the 'myth', rather than towards the concrete and practical means of change. It became a displaced revolution, an anti-bourgeois revolution, which the bourgeoisie could fully accept. It came to objectify itself through the search for new forces of organization (I have mentioned the Bund) and ideals of beauty which became stereotypes ... It combined the Nietzschean ecstasy with its taming.”<sup>603</sup>

Mosse immediately feels the need to formulate a second definition:

“I would say that fascism, fully blown, is a mass movement, a mass movement which organized the proletariat ... in a mass form, as an explicitly revolutionary movement. But a revolution which

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597 *Ibid.*

598 Nolte considered fascism as anti-bourgeois, anti-marxist and anti-modern; Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism*, op. cit.; Nolte will subsequently regard National Socialism as mainly an anti-marxist movement: Ernst Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus*, Frankfurt: Proyläen, 1987

599 “What is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

600 *Ibid.*

601 *Ibid.*

602 *Ibid.*

603 *Ibid.*

does not mean to and does not change the existing class or social structure.”<sup>604</sup>

The bases Mosse laid at Stanford will substantially remain unchanged over the years. In *The Crisis of German Ideology*, he insists on the revolutionary nature of fascism and on the “common elements” shared by “various fascisms”, “deriving from a commonly felt need to transcend a banal bourgeois world”: the youth revolt against conventions, against materialism, the need for a sense of belonging are such elements.<sup>605</sup> All of fascism share the “flight from reality”, all of fascism “spurned existing social and economic systems in favor of an irrational world view which sought both individuality and belonging at a new level. This irrational world view was itself objectified in the form of a new religion with its own mysticism and its own liturgical rites.”<sup>606</sup> In “The Genesis of Fascism”, Mosse will keep the basic tenets posed three years earlier, from the concept of fascism as a revolution to its “European-wide importance”:

“if we want to get closer to the essence of the fascist revolution we must analyze it on a European-wide scale, taking into account important variations, but first trying to establish what these movements had in common. Fascism lacked a common founder, but all over Europe it sprang out of a common set of problems and proposed a common solution to them.”<sup>607</sup>

Fascism originates from the attack on positivism and liberalism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from the spirit of rebellion against the bourgeois age, in order to “recapture the whole man” atomized and alienated by society.<sup>608</sup> Fascism is a movement of youth, it expresses the longing for a new sense of community and furthers the ideal of a corporate state. Asserting the “primacy of ideology”, fascism is a “revolution of the spirit” which holds an organic view of the world, it takes in the whole man to end alienation.<sup>609</sup> Such a “view of man and his place in the world” implies a “fundamental redefinition of politics”, which is regarded as an “attitude towards life”.<sup>610</sup>

This interpretation of fascism draws a separating line between fascist and reactionary regimes: the latter lack fundamental traits of fascism such as activism, the revolutionary element, the centrality of mass meetings and the emphasis on total culture<sup>611</sup>. Various fascisms, Mosse repeats, have also

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<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>605</sup> *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 312

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, 312. “All these western fascisms [the Falange, Degrelle in Belgium, Déat in France] exhibited a flight from reality into the realm of an emotional and mystical ideology. They were all part of the 'displaced revolution' which moved from the rejection of reality to a glorification of ideology”. *Ibid.*, 313

<sup>607</sup> “The Genesis of Fascism”, op. cit., 14

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

<sup>609</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

<sup>610</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>611</sup> In 1961, Mosse had included Franco's Spain among fascist regime. Two years later, at Stanford, Franco's regime and the fascist Falange are clearly separated.

important differences. German antisemitism, for example, separates that country from Italy or Spain but not from Eastern European fascisms. However, to grasp the importance of the positive ideology is of the essence:

“the fascist revolution cannot be understood if we see it merely in negative terms or judge it entirely by the dominance which national-socialism achieved over it by the late 1930s. For millions it did satisfy a deeply felt need for activism combined with identification, it seemed to embody their vision of a classless society. The acceptance of the irrational seemed to give man roots within his inner self, while at the same time making him a member of a spontaneous not artificial community. Bourgeois youth streamed into its ranks because to them it seemed to offer a positive solution to the problems of industrial and urban society.”<sup>612</sup>

The 1970s are the years which see Mosse's greatest effort at posing the “building blocks” of a general theory of fascism. In the interview on Nazism, he basically pinches the same strings: “I think there is a fascism in general, but I think this fascism must be discussed within the national context”, Mosse says.<sup>613</sup> He then stresses the search for a “revolution of the spirit” and the related need to establish “hierarchies of function rather than on status”,<sup>614</sup> all of fascism looks at the same time backwards to the national past and forward to a new race, a new man, supporting national values as well as middle-class values; all of fascism is a mass movement which springs from ideas of community and leadership; all fascisms have an element of poetry, a “myth of creativity as over against liberalism and positivism”.<sup>615</sup> They worship youth and have a stereotype of the ideal man based on war and beauty, with the promise to end alienation stressing work and productivity. The presence, or non presence, of racism in fascism does not obliterate its common traits, Mosse says. All fascism is a revolution of the Right, an attitude towards life, it regards itself as a myth. Fascism seeks to provide man with a “fully furnished home” where politics is viewed as a totality which combines politics and aesthetics.<sup>616</sup>

In 1979, Mosse writes a long essay elaborating on a “general theory” of fascism. Mosse's purpose is to highlight some “common assumptions” based on the presupposition that “any general theory of fascism must be no more than a hypothesis which fits most of the facts”.<sup>617</sup> His is an attempt to bring together some of the principal “building blocks for such a general theory – there seem to be

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<sup>612</sup> *Ibid.*, 25

<sup>613</sup> *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 86

<sup>614</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87

<sup>615</sup> *Ibid.*, 89

<sup>616</sup> *Ibid.*, 113

<sup>617</sup> “Introduction: Towards a General Theory of Fascism”, op. cit., 1

enough of them to construct at least a provisional dwelling”.<sup>618</sup> Mosse rejects the category of totalitarianism and the connected idea of propaganda, which implies a “misunderstanding of the fascist cults and their essentially organic and religious nature”.<sup>619</sup> Fascism did not rule through terror: rather, “it was built upon a fragile consensus”.<sup>620</sup> As we have seen, the religious nature of fascism is the trait Mosse now stresses at most: the fascist revolutions “built upon a deep bedrock of popular piety” and rested on the “appeal to apocalyptic and millenarian thought”.<sup>621</sup> The language of Nazi leaders “grew out of Christianity; it was, after all, a language of faith ... The whole vocabulary of blood and soil was filled with Christian liturgical and religious meaning”.<sup>622</sup> Millenarianism was widespread and cross-class in Europe, and “this background was vital for the cross-class appeal of national socialism, and perhaps, despite a different emphasis, for Italian fascism as well: the 'new man', for whom all fascism yearned, was certainly easily integrated into such popular piety as it became transformed into political thought”.<sup>623</sup> Mosse insists on fascist culture and ideology, on the “fascist myth”: the latter “was a scavenger which attempted to annex all that had appealed to people in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century past: romanticism, liberalism and socialism, as well as Darwinism, and modern technology. Too little attention has been paid to this scavenging; it has been subsumed under the so-called eclecticism of fascism. But in reality all these fragments of the past were integrated into a coherent attitude towards life through the basic fascist nationalist myth”.<sup>624</sup> The scavenging nature of fascism, the absorption of European cultural trends, locates fascism into the heart of European culture: “the frequent contention that fascist culture diverged from the mainstream of European culture cannot be upheld. On the contrary, it absorbed most of what had proved to have the greatest mass appeal in the past”.<sup>625</sup>

On these premises, Mosse singles out various common traits of fascism: its revolutionary nature, the emphasis on youth and the war experience, the centrality of the concept of community, the fascist “new man”. These elements, shared by all of fascism, allow for a definition of fascism which is not very far, at least in its basic traits, from the one he gave at Stanford sixteen years earlier:

“the building blocks for a general theory of fascism now seem to lie before us. Fascism was everywhere an 'attitude towards life', based upon a national mystique which might vary from nation to nation. It was also a revolution attempting to find a 'Third Way' between Marxism and capitalism, but still seeking to escape concrete economic and social change by a retreat into ideology: the 'revolution of the spirit' of which Mussolini spoke; or Hitler's 'German revolution'.

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618 *Ibid.*

619 *Ibid.*, 3

620 *Ibid.*

621 *Ibid.*, 9

622 *Ibid.*

623 *Ibid.*

624 *Ibid.*, 20

625 *Ibid.*, 25

However, it encouraged activism, the fight against the existing order of things.”<sup>626</sup>

Despite the methodological turn and the transition from ideology to liturgy, which revolutionized Mosse's interpretation of fascism, when he provided a definition of fascism in 1979 he stressed the same central element he had stressed in 1963: that fascism must be seen as a revolutionary movement which furthers a cultural revolution and not one in social or economic terms.

Fascism seen as a revolutionary movement can be considered the main tenet of Mosse's interpretation. The revolutionary soul of fascism survives all methodological changes over the decades, flowering in the title of Mosse's last book, *The Fascist Revolution*. In 1961, Mosse asked how revolutionary fascism was: noticing that it meant to leave class structure intact, he concluded that fascism was mainly “a revolution in ideology”.<sup>627</sup> This idea was strengthened at the Stanford seminar: here fascism is an “ideological kind of revolution”, it is an “ideal bourgeois revolution, a revolution in ideology and not in social or economic fact”; hence Mosse's concept of fascism as a “displaced revolution”, a revolution which did not turn towards the concrete and practical means of change and was therefore an “anti-bourgeois revolution which the bourgeoisie could fully accept.”<sup>628</sup> In the last resort, fascism was a “revolution of the soul, they were revolutionizing the soul ... to create a new mind, a new man”.<sup>629</sup>

In *The Crisis of German Ideology*, Mosse keeps his views, though with a focus on Germany: “the Nazi revolution was the 'ideal' bourgeois revolution: it was a 'revolution of the soul' which actually threatened none of the vested economic interests of the middle class”.<sup>630</sup> Yet a new facet makes its first appearance in this book, and it is the contention that national socialism was an “anti-Jewish revolution”, which distinguished it from other forms of fascism.<sup>631</sup> In his subsequent writings, Mosse went on stressing his previous views about the revolutionary essence of fascism, which was a “revolution of the spirit” which “thought of itself in cultural, not economic terms”; in the West, it was primarily a bourgeois revolution.<sup>632</sup> In the interview on Nazism, Mosse speaks of a “revolution of the spirit”<sup>633</sup> and, at least in Germany, of a “middle-class revolution”; “for Mussolini, I am not sure”, adds Mosse, while in France it was more intellectually oriented.<sup>634</sup> In any case, Mosse says, all fascism was a “revolution of the Right”<sup>635</sup>, an idea he will confirm in 1999 by defining it as a “right-wing

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<sup>626</sup> *Ibid.*, 36

<sup>627</sup> *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 353

<sup>628</sup> “What is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

<sup>629</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>630</sup> *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 7

<sup>631</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 and 294-311. Thus the revolution was displaced against the Jews.

<sup>632</sup> “The Genesis of Fascism”, op. cit., 14, 19 and 22

<sup>633</sup> *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 86

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid.*, 95

<sup>635</sup> *Ibid.*, 99

revolution”.<sup>636</sup> Such a view derives, Mosse writes, from the interpretation of fascism based on a cultural point of view: not only the left is revolutionary once revolution “is defined as the forceful reordering of society in the light of a projected utopia”.<sup>637</sup>

### ***Fascism as a Nationalist Movement: The Missing Link***

The Italian historian Renzo De Felice suggested in 1969 that, for the analysis of fascism, “l’elemento che maggiormente andrebbe studiato a fondo e poi graduato per quel che riguarda la sua incidenza è certamente costituito dal nazionalismo”.<sup>638</sup> From the early 1970s onward, nationalism will move to the centre of Mosse's interpretation of fascism. His other new themes, from racism to respectability, from sexuality to the “myth of the war experience”, will turn around nationalism, adding new facets and opening new perspectives, yet without modifying his new conception: fascism “must be seen as nationalism reaching its climax.”<sup>639</sup> In the 1960s, national socialism was still “a ghost come alive”<sup>640</sup>, and some of the basic attitudes behind Hitler's world view were “still with us”.<sup>641</sup> This preoccupied view was not to last. If fascism, though historically over, could retain its “psychological base”<sup>642</sup>, Germany had eventually become, in Mosse's view, immune from Nazism, and the neo-Nazis of the 1990s did not represent a threat of any kind: “i neonazisti ... non hanno la più pallida idea di cosa sia stato il nazionalsocialismo”, Mosse said in an interview, all they have is a cult of violence linked with a nationalism exasperated by massive immigration. Neo-Nazis are not a problem of public order, they are unorganized and Germany has democratic antibodies by now, Mosse said.<sup>643</sup>

Yet if the shadow cast by the fascist experience gradually became less threatening to Mosse, nationalism came to represent a new source of worries for the historian. Nationalism not only remains, it is “growing in strength”, it is “still the principal integrative force among peoples and nations”, Mosse wrote in 1979.<sup>644</sup> Referring to the 1990s, Mosse said that television had individualized the belief system

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636 *The Fascist Revolution. Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, op. cit., xi

637 *Ibid.*, xii

638 Renzo De Felice, *Le interpretazioni del fascismo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1996 (first published in 1969), 23

639 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 182

640 “A Ghost Come Alive”, op. cit. See Chapter II

641 *Nazi Culture. Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich*, op. cit., xli. Mosse writes: “that some of its basic attitudes are still with us should give pause for thought ... This ideology appeals to a basic need for an organic community, for historical continuity, and for the shelter of a firm and established morality. A revolution of the spirit is for many men more tempting than one which brings about social or economic changes and which might lead to chaos instead of cementing order. Nazism exemplifies the dangers which can lurk behind this façade of conservatism, a modern conservatism which is vulnerable to extreme views even if it rejects them.” *Ibid.*

642 Fascism's “psychological base” consists, according to Mosse, in the longing for community, in ideological intolerance, in the desire to destroy the enemy. “Fascism as History”, cit.

643 George L. Mosse, “Il dibattito sul neonazismo”, *Nuova Antologia*, Vol. 569, Fasc. 2186, April-June 1993, 17-18

644 “Introduction: Towards a General Theory of Fascism”, op. cit., 37-38. Mosse kept this view in the 1999 revised version of this article, “Toward a General Theory of Fascism”, in *The Fascist Revolution. Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, op. cit., 44

of nationalism, thus scattering its message; “and yet I would argue that the direct appeal to peoples' perceptions and hopes could be activated again, but not in times without a serious crisis of parliamentary government. The alliance [of nationalism] with liberalism means that the belief-system, though present and used, has been individualized and not used as a call to mass action.”<sup>645</sup> Here nationalism, though inactive, is “present and used”; in this speech, however, Mosse was mainly referring to the United States: in 1999, he wrote that “a renewed interest in nationalism as collective self-understanding through a belief system has surfaced only recently, nearly half a century since the end of the Second World War, in the midst of clear signs that nationalism in Europe was alive and well – not merely a patriotism ... but the integral nationalism which had found its climax in fascism”.<sup>646</sup> In the 1997 preface of *The Crisis of German Ideology*, Mosse wrote that the book focussed “upon German nationalism at its most extreme”, and that “while Volkish thought is no immediate threat in today's Germany, it is latent in all modern nationalism”.<sup>647</sup>

Mosse's constant being on guard against the emotional fragility of the masses is the background to his changing perspectives about the relationship between nationalism and fascism in his interpretation. Moreover, his increasing commitment to Israel since the beginning of the 1970s posed him before the problem of Jewish nationalism. Mosse, though fully aware of the dangers of nationalism, was urged to further reflect on it by his Jewish identity and by his commitment to Zionism. It is not a mere coincidence that his focus on nationalism went hand in hand with his growing awareness of his identity as a Jew, and he devoted much work to Zionism in the attempt at finding a balance between extremist nationalism as it had manifested itself in Europe and a humane patriotism which he saw as reflected in the thought of early Zionists. However, the realities of Palestine pushed Israel toward the adoption of an ever more aggressive nationalism which further drew Mosse's attention to the problem.<sup>648</sup>

Mosse's analysis of nationalism covers all the years he devoted to the study of modern history, starting as early as in the late 1950s. In 1957, he defined nationalism as a “mood” rather than “something that can be analysed through political or economic factors alone”; nationalism is a “mode of thought” and, in order to grasp its nature, literature, political thought and even art “provide some of the principal aids to understanding”.<sup>649</sup> “There is no one ‘nationalism’; there are instead a variety of ‘nationalisms’”<sup>650</sup>, Mosse wrote in 1961, and the nationalism he analyzed is what he called *integral* or

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645 George L. Mosse, “Concepts of Democracy: The Liberal Inheritance and the National Socialist Public Sphere”, unpublished speech, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 14; Leo Baeck Institute. The paper, though undated, dates back not later than to 1996, in that Mosse refers to Stuart Ewen's *PR!: A Social History of Spin*, published in New York in that year.

646 *The Fascist Revolution. Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, op. cit., xii. Here Mosse may be referring to the Yugoslavian wars.

647 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., v and x

648 For an extensive discussion on nationalism, Zionism and Mosse's Jewish identity, see Chapter VII

649 “The Pragmatism of the Freshman History Course”, op. cit., 290

650 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), 55

*radical nationalism*, that which was to degenerate into fascism and the Holocaust<sup>651</sup>. Yet this degeneration is not the outcome of the sole nationalist ideology; it is rather the by-product of its alliance with other ideologies, value systems and cultural currents which stemmed out of the period enclosed between the Enlightenment and the Napoleonic wars. Neoclassicism with its emphasis on aesthetics, romanticism, racism and bourgeois respectability contributed to the evolution of nationalism, shaping its contours and directing it toward its radicalization. Addressing a meeting on patriotism in April 1963, Mosse asserted that “nationalism has always been with us in our history and it will always be with us in the future”, though it “has changed many times”.<sup>652</sup> In both *The Culture of Western Europe* and in the address on “Nationalism and Patriotism” nationalism originates from romanticism, the French and the industrial revolution. Modern nationalism is, in part, a reaction to the industrial revolution, an attempt to go back to nature, to the peasant, to the genuine: it is a “flight from reality” in search for roots.<sup>653</sup> Though a national consciousness had always existed (be it loyalty to a king, or to a dynasty), “the French Revolution gave weight to trends already present. It viewed the nation as the totality of its inhabitants which were not linked to any particular ruling power.”<sup>654</sup> Good examples for this are the symbolism of the national flag, or Rousseau’s concept of the general will, which is transformed into reality; “this again fitted in with the romantic drive to comprehend the totality of life. What happened was that national consciousness came to be detached from one particular manifestation of the nation, like the king, and instead comprised the nation as a totality, even as an abstract idea. Since men need symbols, national consciousness was represented by the flag and the national anthem.”<sup>655</sup> But even more than the French Revolution, it is romanticism which will bring nationalism to its extreme consequences.

In Germany, romantic idealism transforms the nation into a “cultural fact and this opposed to the fact of civilization”<sup>656</sup>; “national consciousness became both more romantic and exclusive as well as more aggressive in the name of a solitary, absolute dominance. Toward the end of the century, both racial ideas and a romantic revival were to strengthen this trend.”<sup>657</sup> The result was that “cultural nationalism in Germany became racial nationalism”, and this “was to lead directly into national socialism”<sup>658</sup>.

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651 To be sure, according to the changing contexts Mosse attributed many adjectives other than “integral”. So this kind of nationalism can be defined as “cultural”, “romantic”, “racial”, “irrational”, “right-wing” or even “unjust”. However, Mosse generally refers to that right-wing nationalism which, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, became radicalized and, after the First World War, laid an important part of the ideological basis of the fascist movements.

652 George L. Mosse, “Nationalism and Patriotism”, cit.

653 “Nationalism and Patriotism”, cit.

654 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 54

655 *Ibid.*, 54

656 “Nationalism and Patriotism”, cit.

657 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 57

658 *Ibid.*, 69. Mosse also writes “In Europe the climax of this cultural nationalism came only with the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century”, *Ibid.*, 57



Mosse points to the psychological aspect of nationalism: the frustration felt by the masses which were excluded from political life; “but such psychological analysis of nationalism can also move much beyond any class-centered consideration of this movement. Nationalism could be, and indeed was, an outlet for the frustrations of all elements of the population whose ambitions and wishes were thwarted.”<sup>659</sup> “It must never be forgotten that the vision of a better life was a part of all nationalisms ... Nationalism was a modern road to a better destiny ... The irrational and exaggerated nationalist outbursts of the mid-twentieth century give evidence that nationalism is a means of self-identification and belonging.”<sup>660</sup>

When Mosse discards nihilism and turns to a view of fascism as a religion, he does so through the study of nationalism, which becomes the hinge around which fascism rotates. Nationalism, connected with the rise of mass movements and mass politics, takes on “the form of a secular religion”.<sup>661</sup> In a lecture, Mosse speaks of nationalism as “a total attitude toward life”: nationalism is “not systematic thought but instead embraced emotionalism and order, passion and restraint”.<sup>662</sup> Nationalism is here described “as a religion” with its “hymns, flags, responsas, liturgical spaces, altars”.<sup>663</sup> Moreover, the anthropological and visual turn shifted Mosse's views from an interpretation of nationalism as springing from romanticism to a quite different one which links nationalism with the French Revolution. Since nationalism is viewed as the base of fascism, the latter becomes associated with the French Revolution, thus significantly widening the historian's perspective and further locating fascism into the heart of European culture.

Mosse's early works on modern history gave nationalism a significantly different importance. In 1961 he had claimed that nationalism was of the essence for fascism, and yet, in Germany, the party's nationalism in the end proved “phony”: “eventually the racial element completely swamped even the nationalist element”.<sup>664</sup> In 1985, this idea is overturned: now “racism was a heightened nationalism.”<sup>665</sup> At the Stanford seminary, Mosse claimed that “for all fascism, nationalism provided the basic appeal”<sup>666</sup>, and yet in the 1966 article on the genesis of fascism, nationalism is hardly mentioned. Since the early 1970s, Mosse's view changes. In a speech given for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, he said that there can be no fascism without nationalism<sup>667</sup>; in the 1976 interview on Nazism, he

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659 *Ibid.*, 71. We shall see as Mosse will add to the economic and psychological dimension one which will provide a cultural definition of the middle classes.

660 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 83

661 *The Nationalization of the Masses*, op. cit., 5

662 George L. Mosse, “Nationalism”, notes for a lecture, undated; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 22; Leo Baeck Institute. The themes Mosse deals with, from the importance of symbols to that of respectability, locate this notes around the late 1970s or early 1980s.

663 *Ibid.*

664 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 366

665 George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality. Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1988, 133 (original edition, Howard Fertig, New York, 1985)

666 “Fascism Once More”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

667 George L. Mosse, “Is Fascism Alive?”, cit.

asserted that there could be no fascism in America, due to the absence of an integral nationalism<sup>668</sup>. In his long 1979 essay on the general theory of fascism, Mosse held that fascism became ever more nationalist, and spoke of the “fascist nationalist myth”, concluding with the assertion that “in the last resort, all fascisms were nationalisms”.<sup>669</sup>

In a 1981 article, Mosse wrote that “fascism was an integral part of modern nationalism in the age of mass politics”, a view which was not to change.<sup>670</sup> In spite of the fact that Mosse did not publish anything specific on fascism after the 1970s, it can be said, in my opinion, that his interpretation underwent a modification, including fascism into the wider context of nationalism. Moreover, although he did not publish new specific works on fascism, he wrote one all the same, which never went to print. It is an article whose title is telling: “Fascism as a Nationalist Movement: The Missing Link”.<sup>671</sup> As Mosse conceives of fascism as a “nationalist movement”, he has found the “missing link”: he has found the way to understand fascism as a mass movement.

“That the politics of fascism could be a new kind of politics, a product of the modern age, which existed side by side with social or economic change has been ignored – not only preventing a true understanding of modern fascism but also beyond this, of some of the political imperatives of the modern age. Moreover, the political culture of fascism was an expression of modern nationalism, itself a movement which grew up with the French and the Industrial revolutions addressing the problems of the modern age. Just as historians have neglected after the Second World War to deepen their understanding of modern nationalism, so they have brushed aside the new kind of politics. A political culture based on myths and symbols, expressing itself through liturgical actions seemed a mis-en-scene not to be taken seriously as politics. Juan Linz has written, quite rightly, that nationalism has provided the central appeal of fascism, but with it went a mode of political expression which was to prove effective in the crisis of the inter-war years. ... Though fascists perfected this political liturgy and made most effective use of it – they did not create it anew. They built upon those liturgies nationalism had developed over the last century and a half. ... Whatever the differences in detail or intensity, fascism built upon modern nationalism, not just in theory but also in political practice.”<sup>672</sup>

Mosse goes even further, and maintains that, as far as fascism is concerned, “nationalism was always

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668 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 127

669 “Introduction: Towards a General Theory of Fascism”, op. cit., 7, 20 and 31

670 George L. Mosse, “Retreat to the Status Quo”, *Society*, XVIII, 4, May-June 1981, 39. In 1980, Mosse collected some of his previous essays on fascism, preceded by a new introduction which focussed almost entirely on the centrality of nationalism. George L. Mosse, *Masses and Men. Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality*, Howard Fertig, New York, 1980

671 George L. Mosse, “Fascism as a Nationalist Movement: The Missing Link”, cit.

672 *Ibid.*

the decisive factor”, and speaks of a “general definition of fascism as the child of European nationalism”.<sup>673</sup> Nationalism had been the first movement able to mobilize the masses, and it was “perhaps the first modern secular movement which aimed to dominate every aspect of life, to envelope the totality of existence.”<sup>674</sup> In the 1990s, fascism is an expression of the “danger inherent in all nationalism”<sup>675</sup>. Adopting Emilio Gentile's definition of the new fascist man as a “warrior crusader in the service of a faith”, Mosse adds: “that faith was the civic religion of nationalism”.<sup>676</sup> Fascism “must be seen as nationalism reaching its climax”, Mosse wrote in his autobiography, where he also defined fascism as a form of nationalism.<sup>677</sup> In his last work, *The Fascist Revolution* (1999), he wrote an introduction which repeatedly insists on his last conviction. He writes of the “crucial” and “neglected” aspects of fascism, “above all that of fascism seen as an integral element of European nationalism”<sup>678</sup>; fascism is “a system of belief based upon heightened nationalism”.<sup>679</sup> Nationalism, Mosse holds, has “found its climax in fascism”<sup>680</sup>. In the last resort, nationalism was the “bed rock” upon which all fascist movements were built: “finally, fascism must be understood as a nationalist revolution”.<sup>681</sup>

### ***Toward New Perspectives***

The “anthropological and visual turn” has now come full circle. The concept of “new politics” is the final result of many years of intellectual travail and marks the end of a transition. Defining this new political style, Mosse has made full use of the intellectual armamentarium I have described in this chapter, and has found an answer to the question about why millions of Germans did respond to the Volkish call. Yet this long road took another turn which opened new scenarios to the historian, paving the way for a “new season” of his historiography. His perspective of fascism had shifted toward the study of nationalism, and the concept of “new politics” had widened the scope of his analysis, with the result of shifting the historian's focus from Germany to Europe. The “new politics” was a European phenomenon whose style had affected political movements all over the continent. Such a view had consequences for Mosse's interpretation of fascism, but this was not the only result of the turn. Once again, life and work interacted in the 1970s and 1980s, orienting Mosse towards new themes and

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673 *Ibid.*

674 *Ibid.*

675 George L. Mosse, *Confronting the Nation. Jewish and Western Nationalism*, Brandeis University Press, Hanover & London, 1993, 5

676 George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996, 156

677 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 182 and 178

678 *The Fascist Revolution. Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, op. cit., xi

679 *Ibid.*

680 *Ibid.*, xii

681 *Ibid.*, xi

interests. The 1960s sexual revolution had made society more tolerant toward homosexuality, an attitude which was furthered by the following decade. This meant, for Mosse, the opportunity to investigate subjects which had been so far considered taboo, and to slowly “come out”. At the same time, the students in the 1960s had given another contribution to Mosse's intellectual development, introducing him to the thought of the Frankfurt School: the influence of the School made itself felt on the historian. The outcome was a change of perspective in his view of the Enlightenment and of bourgeois society and values. Mosse started investigating racism and bourgeois respectability, and investigation which would lead him to the conclusion that the Holocaust's roots lay deep inside of European society, and that bourgeois values became part of nationalist and fascist ideology to the point that he once asserted that the new man of national socialism was the “ideal bourgeois”. These were the years of Mosse's coming out as “double outsider”: both a Jew and a homosexual, he criticized Western society and its values from within, attacking that “underside of the Enlightenment” which had called, in his interpretation, for racial classification and sexual repression.<sup>682</sup> Racism and sexuality are the themes Mosse deals with in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Armed with his newly acquired anthropological arsenal, he made full use of it in order to delve into the dark side of Western society.

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682 This is how Mosse came to define the Enlightenment's contribution to the creation of stereotypes and to racism. The expression “underside of the Enlightenment” can be found, for example, in Mosse's lectures on “European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870”, Lectures given for The University of the Air, Fall 1982, The University of Wisconsin-Madison.

## CHAPTER V

### THE DARK SIDE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

“Don't take a haughty attitude: what I am talking about  
is alive, not just past but the present.”<sup>683</sup>  
(George L. Mosse)

“Il significato politico della sessualità  
è stato forse il campo più nuovo che Mosse ha aperto  
alla storia antropologica dell'uomo moderno”<sup>684</sup>  
(Emilio Gentile)

“Non vogliamo sentir parlare di reazioni chimiche, né di trasfusioni,  
delle forme del cranio o di profili ariani. Tutto ciò finirà  
per degenerare nell'eccesso, per produrre cavilli, e per dischiudere all'intelletto  
la porta di ingresso di un regno di valori che esso può soltanto distruggere  
ma che non saprà mai comprendere.”<sup>685</sup>  
(Ernst Jünger)

If the driving question which lay beneath the anthropological and visual turn was “why did millions of Germans respond to the Volkish call?”, the most recent season of Mosse's historiography (since the 1970s) is informed by the related concern for the origins of the extermination of the European Jews: “how could this come to pass?”<sup>686</sup> The two questions are obviously linked, the second widening the scope of the first and stemming from Mosse's 1964 definition of National Socialism as an “anti-Jewish revolution”.<sup>687</sup> Life and work interact once again, and now they do so in a more incisive manner. Totalitarianism had touched him closely, and yet racism and respectability, the “new” themes he will directly deal with from the late 1970s onwards, had done so to an even greater extent, in that they went right to the heart of his identity, of his being a “double outsider”. Mosse had not only been a

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683 Mosse to his students during a seminar held in Israel. The subject was the history of antisemitism, with a focus on the stereotypes, symbols and myths of racism. George L. Mosse, “History of Anti-Semitism”, notes for a seminar, 1978, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 35; Leo Baeck Institute.

684 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 140

685 Ernst Jünger, “Il sangue” in *Standarte*, 29 aprile 1926, from Ernst Jünger, *Scritti politici e di guerra*, Vol.II (1926-1928), Libreria Editrice Goriziana, Gorizia, 2004, 46

686 *Toward the Final Solution*, op. cit., xxv

687 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit.

victim of totalitarianism in the 1930s, when he was forced to emigrate: he had also been an outsider in the American and, more generally, western society of his days, a homosexual who dared not speak his name if not running the risk of losing the integration it had taken him so many years to attain. After having consolidated his footholds in the academia, and after the sexual revolution, he finally felt more comfortable and could allow his identity to emerge. This coincided, not by chance, with his growing interest in the Holocaust or, perhaps better, in racism and the creation of the outsider's stereotype during the 19<sup>th</sup> century which had led to the Final Solution. Such an interest, which had been latent in his works since the late 1950s,<sup>688</sup> will entail a significant turnover in Mosse's interpretation of National Socialism.

The centrality of the Holocaust in his work is repeatedly confirmed by Mosse himself. In his autobiography, he writes:

“the Holocaust was never very far from my mind; I could easily have perished with my fellow Jews. I suppose that I am a member of the Holocaust generation and have constantly tried to understand an event too monstrous to contemplate. All my studies in the history of racism and volkish thought, and also those dealing with outsiderdom and stereotypes, though sometimes not directly related to the Holocaust, have tried to find the answer to how it could have happened; finding an explanation has been vital not only for the understanding of modern history, but also for my own peace of mind. This is a question my generation had to face, and eventually I felt that I had come closer to an understanding of the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon. We have to live with an undertone of horror in spite of the sort of advances that made it so much easier for me to accept my own nature.”<sup>689</sup>

Other passages in the book as well confirm the deep connection between his work and personal experience as a Jew: “the Holocaust is a constant presence for any Jew writing about European history in modern times, and especially for someone like myself who had barely escaped the prison of the Third Reich with its gas chambers. Though I have written only one book which deals with the Holocaust itself, it is a latent presence in many of my other writings.”<sup>690</sup>

Yet being Jew was one side of the coin, and the study of the Holocaust meant, for Mosse, more than an analysis of antisemitism. As a “double outsider”, his gayness came to play a role, entailing the historian's debut in the field of the history of sexuality. It can be said that the main tenets of Mosse's historiography in this phase are diversity and the stereotype. The figure of the outsider stands at the

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688 See “The Image of the Jew in German Popular Culture: Felix Dahn and Gustav Freytag”, op. cit.

689 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 219

690 *Ibid.*, 185

centre, embodying both. Concern with outsiderdom, Mosse said speaking of his work, “continued to determine much of its content, especially within the last decades. Here the personal enters in a more decisive manner, for while I have addressed outsiderdom in general I have also been concerned with the specific minority groups of which I have been a member.”<sup>691</sup> Diversity and the stereotype entail the problem of normalcy in society, a problem Mosse dealt with in a sort of paradoxical fashion: on the one hand, he had spent decades looking for integration into society through respectability; on the other, he claimed, though years later, to be happy to be an outsider, to “have rarely encountered the temptation of normalcy”.<sup>692</sup> He considered being an outsider a huge vantage point to look at the workings of society from within, but with a different, more detached eye.

The Holocaust and the values of western society become then linked in Mosse's view. The profound mingling of his life and his work brought about an interpretation not only of the Final Solution, but of the whole of European society, an interpretation which has shattered common and radicated beliefs in the rationality of western society and civilization. The study of racism is the first tool Mosse uses to investigate the process of the creation of the outsider. The history of racism, as Mosse will conclude, “seems closer to the center than to the fringes of twentieth-century European history. It was the Nazis who perpetrated the deed, but men and women everywhere believed in the distinction between races”.<sup>693</sup> The Holocaust, according to the historian, is “built into our society and attitudes towards life. Nothing in European history is a stranger to the Holocaust”.<sup>694</sup> This is an idea Mosse had clear in mind:

“the story of racism is not pleasant to tell, and that is perhaps why it has been told so rarely in the fullness it deserves: not as the history of an aberration of European thought or as scattered moments of madness, but as an integral part of the European experience. It is a fact that most of our textbooks pay scarce attention to this phenomenon so central to modern times perhaps because it is too painful for historians to concede that here myth became reality in the face of those supposedly provable facts which are still the staple of the historical profession. The Holocaust, after all, gets short shrift even in respectable accounts of Nazi rule ... In this case to understand is not to pardon. Indeed, it is simply a step toward contemplating evil which, neither unique nor banal, demonstrates how the longing of man for a happy and healthy world can be

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691 *Ibid.*, 178-179

692 George L. Mosse, “Political Awakening: Berlin, Exile, and Anti-Fascist Movement”, speech given at the University of Kentucky, 1998, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 38; Leo Baeck Institute. To be sure, Mosse's attitude had, at times, been ambivalent; in his memoir, he recalls how he found heterosexuals' “normality” “attractive”. *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 118

693 *Toward the Final Solution*, op. cit., xxv

694 “Response by George L. Mosse”, in *George Mosse – On the Occasion of His Retirement*, 17.6.85, op. cit., xxxi. “Reading the history of racism correctly means also pondering the history of Europe with which it is so closely intertwined”, *Toward the Final Solution*, op. cit., 236

turned to an end never contemplated at the beginning, but nonetheless inherent within the particular myth.”<sup>695</sup>

In a lecture entitled “The Holocaust and Modern Manners and Morals” Mosse said:

“the Holocaust is often treated as unique, a static event, and yet we shall never realize its full dimensions unless we treat it as part of the historical process. If we do so it should make us reconsider some of the basic values of our society which we take as given but which are created through history ... Today I want to be concerned with a factor not usually considered, put in its most general sense: the Holocaust as integrating what society thought respectable, as building upon the ideas of normalcy and abnormalcy which informed norms of behaviour, and which had become personalized through the stereotypes of respectability.”<sup>696</sup>

The Holocaust as an “integral part of European society”, and the reconsideration of “some of the basic values of our society” represent the two main tenets of Mosse's interpretation of the Jewish catastrophe. By the late 1970s he had fully elaborated his interpretation of the Final Solution, including it into the heart of European society just as he had done with fascism and the “new politics”. The Holocaust cannot be understood, Mosse said, if analysed as an aberration which had little to do with European culture and was exclusively linked with Nazi Germany. Such an interpretation, which Mosse's books have convincingly validated, culminated in the much debated 1976 assertion that the new man of national socialism was the “ideal bourgeois”.

If anthropology was by now part and parcel of Mosse's historiography, the historian will, in the 1970s and 1980s, shift his focus on one single side of the “anthropological and visual turn”, that is, the visual dimension, coming to consider the modern age a “visual age”. Yet now it is not architecture or public festivals which capture Mosse's attention: we will now be concerned with the usage of aesthetic criteria in the building of the racial stereotype.<sup>697</sup> Aesthetics finds at this point a companion: morality, which is examined through the category of “respectability”. The link between aesthetics and morality characterizes this stage of Mosse's historical production. If the early 1970s had seen the elaboration of the interpretive concept of the “new politics”, which first involved (in Mosse's scheme of things) the

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695 *Toward the Final Solution*, op. cit., xxviii-xxix

696 George L. Mosse, “The Holocaust and Modern Manners and Morals”, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 36; Leo Baeck Institute.

697 In “The Image of the Jew in German Popular Culture: Felix Dahn and Gustav Freytag”, op. cit. (1957) Mosse had relied on popular literature in order to picture the Jewish stereotype; now he turns from written to visual sources. To be sure, as it is typical of Mosse, aesthetic criteria in the definition of stereotypes had already been hinted at in early writings, but never given a central role in his work. See, for example, the associations made between racial stereotypes and standards of Greek beauty in “Culture, Civilization and German Anti-Semitism”, op. cit., 59, at the Stanford seminary, in the session “What Is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit., and in *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 85



French Revolution in the totalitarian drift of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this was only one step, though, on the methodological level, the most significant, in the evolution of the historian's intellectual biography. Once he had found the key to the understanding of the appeal of National Socialism, the quest of the extermination of the European Jews moved to the centre of his research, and the decades following the publication of *The Nationalization of the Masses* are almost entirely focussed on this problem. Here the decisive factor is the development of Mosse's interpretation of the Enlightenment.

If up to the early 1960s Mosse saw national socialism as mainly a degeneration of romantic trends, the new man of Nazism becomes, in the 1970s, the “ideal bourgeois”, born of the degeneration not only of romanticism, but also of Enlightenment values. Yet the path between the two interpretations is not so smooth whatsoever: it is rather the outcome of a personal and intellectual travail which was present from the beginning of the historian's career, a preoccupation which crosses, in some way or another, all his works. The analysis of the Enlightenment and that of racism, respectability and sexuality intertwine, they go hand in hand and cannot be separated. To study the development of Mosse's interpretation of the Enlightenment helps to shed light on the roots of this new stage in his historiography, and is a crucial passage in any biography of the historian which deserves to be given systematic attention.

Mosse's focus will rest, in this period, on what he called the “paradox of the Enlightenment”, which lies in the coexistence of toleration and conformity.<sup>698</sup> Modern antisemitism represents, in Mosse's interpretation, the “failure of the Enlightenment”.<sup>699</sup> This view originates in the historian's preoccupation with totalitarianism and fascism, which had captured his attention since the 1940s, and yet it could not have been possible prior to the 1970s. On the one hand, Mosse's understanding of fascism, as we have seen, had come to involve the masses only in the 1960s, which had brought about the search for new interpretive tools, a process that culminated in the anthropological and visual turn. The anthropological and visual categories will allow him to analyze the stereotyping of the outsider, which is the core of his interpretation of racism. On the other hand, a series of personal, social and intellectual events which occurred between the 1960s and the 1970s made it possible for the historian an investigation into themes which were, up to then, not considered objects of serious and respectable study. Among these events, the sexual revolution which made Mosse's “coming out” possible, and the role played once again by the students, who brought Mosse closer to the philosophy of the Frankfurt School. No more in need to immerse himself into “respectable” subjects and themes, and socially allowed a greater freedom, Mosse could turn to new aspects of National Socialism, opening a “new

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698 George L. Mosse, “Modern Anti-Semitism: Failure of the Enlightenment”, lecture, undated; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 15; Leo Baeck Institute. This lecture probably dates back to the late 1970s or 1980s.

699 *Ibid.*

season” in his historiography.<sup>700</sup>

Yet, as we have said, the road leading from a “positive” view of the Enlightenment to a much more critical one is winding, and it is difficult to assess with any certainty how much of Mosse's later interpretation was already present in the former. However, there is no doubt that the thought of the Frankfurt School left a mark on the historian, as did the changing social context. Yet the roots of the Nazi as the “ideal bourgeois” are deep, and their closer examination unearths themes which will not flourish prior to the 1970s. The analysis of this intellectual path must begin with Mosse's critique of bourgeois society and with his interpretation of the Enlightenment. The result of his changed attitude towards these two is the view of racism and the Holocaust he elaborated in *Toward the Final Solution* (1978). The last step is the inclusion of sexuality within politics, a process which culminates in his 1985 *Nationalism and Sexuality*, thus completing Mosse's “coming out” as an outsider, the prime cause of his exploration of the dark side of the Enlightenment.

### ***The “Dialectic of the Enlightenment”***

Speaking of his relationship with the students during the 1960s, Mosse said: “ce sont eux par exemple qui m’ont fait mieux connaître l’école de Francfort, que je tiens toujours pour essentielle.”<sup>701</sup> Jeffrey Herf writes quite rightly:

“in response to the revival of interest in the Frankfurt School’s critical theory among the new left in the University of Wisconsin at Madison in the 1960s, Mosse applied the arguments of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to his cultural history. He no longer juxtaposed enlightenment and counter-enlightenment but, instead, implicated the new sciences of the Enlightenment, such as anthropology, as contributors to a new science of race. To be sure, the familiar scoundrels, Houston Stewart Chamberlain or Arthur de Gobineau, make their appearance in the text [*Toward the Final Solution*]. Yet in contrast to the juxtaposition of the good enlightenment and the bad counter-enlightenment of *The Crisis of German Ideology*, Mosse drew attention to Dutch and French anatomists who measured facial angles and gave conventional standards of beauty the seal of scientific approval.”<sup>702</sup>

The Frankfurt School finds its place in Mosse’s 1988 edition of *The Culture of Western Europe*: “perhaps these renewals of Marxist theory were one of the chief Jewish contributions to modern times, and the

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700 The expression is used in Gentile's *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 116

701 “Du Baroque au Nazisme: une histoire religieuse de la politique”, op. cit., 249

702 “The Historian as Provocateur: George Mosse’s Accomplishment and Legacy”, op. cit.

most original, for these theories influenced the 1960s' student revolts in the United States and in all of Europe as well. They were an attempt to give Marxism a human face."<sup>703</sup> In fact, an analysis of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* reveals many important similarities with Mosse's view of it. The most important are the connection between Enlightenment and racism, the usage of the category of "abstraction", the concept of "outsider" and that of the "anxiety" of modern civilization.

The Frankfurt School provided many critical tools for a deeper understanding of capitalist society, and criticized it from within. "In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant."<sup>704</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer regarded the persecution of the Jews as integral part of "enlightened" society: "not merely the ideal but the practical tendency to self-destruction has always been characteristic of rationalism, and not only in the stage in which it appears undisguised. In this sense we offer the main lines of a philosophical prehistory of anti-Semitism. Its 'irrationalism' is deduced from the nature of the dominant *ratio* itself, and the world which corresponds to its image."<sup>705</sup> A chapter of the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* is entitled "Elements of anti-Semitism: the Limits of the Enlightenment"; the authors state that

"today race has become the self-assertion of the bourgeois individual integrated within a barbaric collective. The harmony of society which the liberal Jews believed in turned against them in the form of the harmony of a national community. They thought that anti-Semitism would distort that order which in reality cannot exist without distorting men. The persecution of the Jews, like any other form of persecution, is inseparable from that system of order."<sup>706</sup>

Racism is therefore set in a wider context, right at the heart of capitalist society. This society needs order against fear and anxiety: "Enlightenment is mythic fear turned radical ... Nothing at all may remain outside, because the mere idea of outsidership is the very source of fear"<sup>707</sup>; the "outsider", whoever does not abide by the norms of established society (conformity), becomes the enemy for the child of modern civilization, whose "anxiety is none other than the fear of social deviation"<sup>708</sup>. Mosse saw the "darker side of the Enlightenment" in its depersonalizing attitude caused by its abstract theories; depersonalization produced, in the long run, racial classification. Adorno and Horkheimer

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<sup>703</sup> *The Culture of Western Europe* (1988), op. cit., 387

<sup>704</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, Verso, London and New York, 1997 (originally published in German in 1944), 3

<sup>705</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii

<sup>706</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-70

<sup>707</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>708</sup> *Ibid.*, 14. As to society's self-definition, and its concept of "normality", it is possible that Mosse was influenced by the work of Erich Fromm, another member of the Frankfurt School. See in particular Fromm's *The Sane Society*, Rinehart and Co., Inc., New York 1955.

define “abstraction” the “tool of Enlightenment”<sup>709</sup>, criticizing its tendency to classify and to dominate nature. “Enlightenment is totalitarian”, it “is totalitarian as any system”<sup>710</sup>, and it devaluates the individual; it is also myth, and “the prime cause of the retreat from enlightenment into mythology is not to be sought so much in the nationalist, pagan and other modern mythologies manufactured precisely in order to contrive such a reversal, but in the Enlightenment itself when paralysed by the fear of truth.”<sup>711</sup>

If totalitarianism and the persecution of European Jews are results of the Enlightenment, then “the Enlightenment *must examine itself*, if men are not to be wholly betrayed”<sup>712</sup>. The Frankfurt School “set itself the task of defining the relationship between reason and brutality”<sup>713</sup>; the universalization of knowledge is only apparently a liberation of the masses: as it becomes unfreedom, the Enlightenment manifests its dual character. “The return to barbarism resulted from the Enlightenment’s failure ever effectively to abandon the mythological”, held the exponents of the Frankfurt School, who saw in the Nazis the “corollary brutality of the Enlightenment”: the Holocaust was no mere accident.<sup>714</sup>

Mosse considered the thought of the Frankfurt School “essential”. Indeed, his interpretation of the Enlightenment has surely been influenced by the School, to which he had been drawn by the students. Though his attitude towards the students was not always a sympathetic one<sup>715</sup>, the 1960s with their turmoils changed society, allowing Mosse to slowly “come out” and not to hide his sexuality anymore. As we have said, his “coming out” and his critique of the Enlightenment go hand in hand.

### ***The Failure of the Enlightenment***

Recalling his political awakening in the 1930s, Mosse said to have faced fascism at the time “out of an enlightenment philosophy”.<sup>716</sup> Forty years later, he will consider fascism, and particularly the Holocaust, as partly stemming from that very philosophy. While the motives beneath such an interpretive turnover have been analysed in the previous paragraphs, it now remains to depict the evolution in his interpretation of enlightenment ideology.

In 1977 Mosse argued:

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709 *Ibid.*, 13

710 *Ibid.*, 6 and 24

711 *Ibid.*, xiii-xiv

712 *Ibid.*, xv

713 George Friedman, *The Political Philosophy of the Frankfurt School*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1981, 14.

Mosse reviewed Friedman’s book, and while praising parts of it, harshly criticized others. The review can be found in *Clio* 12:2, 1983, 186-190

714 *The Political Philosophy of the Frankfurt School*, op. cit., 134-35

715 For the relationship between Mosse and the student movement see Chapter III

716 “Political Awakening: Berlin, Exile, and Anti-Fascist Movement”, cit.

“about the Enlightenment I think there are two points of view possible, both of which are actually correct. There is the view of Peter Gay which looks at the Enlightenment from within. What the philosophers actually wanted was the predominance of the critical mind. From that point of view, they were in no way the ancestors of authoritarianism. But there is the other side, what I call the darker side of the Enlightenment (which in addition to Talmon, also the Germans of the so-called Frankfurt School, Horkheimer and Adorno pointed out) – namely the Enlightenment as depersonalization because of its abstract theories, its intellectualism. This depersonalization became in fact a forerunner of modern positivism, producing the first racial classification. That is another side of the Enlightenment. But this side called for Rousseau’s patriotic ceremony, a certain romanticism, and a certain attempt to personalize the depersonalized. We can look at all of fascism as an attempt to personalize the abstract. That is in my opinion the connection with the French Revolution and the Enlightenment.”<sup>717</sup>

The first connection which meets the eye is that between Enlightenment and totalitarianism. This connection is, and this must be stressed, not a direct one: it is indeed between Jacobinism and the “totalitarian democracy”. In a lecture given in the mid-1950s, Mosse, referring to the Jacobine terror, said that this was a model for totalitarian democracy, but “questa democrazia totalitaria non era un rifiuto dell’individualismo del XVIII secolo ma piuttosto il risultato di un atteggiamento troppo perfezionista verso questi valori”; man as a “rational animal” stood at the center, and “doveva essere ricondotto ad un denominatore comune. Tutte le differenze regionali o di gruppo dovevano essere eliminate, così come dovevano essere eliminati tutti i privilegi e le ineguaglianze. Bisognava immergersi in una massa comune di individui razionali.”<sup>718</sup> Up to the 1960s the only connection was this one; the most extreme phases of the French Revolution were linked, following Talmon’s idea of “totalitarian democracy”, with XX century totalitarianism. Yet this extremism was only “un atteggiamento troppo perfezionista” towards Enlightenment individualism: Mosse’s was no harsh critical remark.

However, Mosse, as a historian of religious practices, was aware of the psychological function of faith;

“the Enlightenment was not sufficiently aware of man’s need of a faith, of a belief in a stable and eternal force impervious to ever-changing external realities, a force which would lead man toward a better and fuller life. Christianity had fulfilled this need and one could not simply pronounce it dead, as some of the *philosophes* did, without allowing for the need which it had

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<sup>717</sup> *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 94-5

<sup>718</sup> This passage is quoted in Gentile, *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 44

filled.”<sup>719</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s Mosse's view of the Enlightenment was substantially a positive one.<sup>720</sup> He himself was committed to the ideals of liberalism and to reason, and his family had believed in the values of the Enlightenment (toleration, freedom, equality) which had started the process of assimilation and emancipation of European Jews. Commenting on *The Culture of Western Europe*, a reviewer asserted that “the link between freedom and reason is the link he [Mosse] is most anxious to sustain”.<sup>721</sup> However, in 1958 Mosse blamed the Enlightenment because it “had not fundamentally improved the popular image of the Jew; indeed, it had materially contributed to the creation of the stereotype.”<sup>722</sup> Here again there emerge ideas which were surely present, and yet not fully developed at a given time, but which will come to the surface later in Mosse's work. Mosse's view of the Enlightenment is one of these. In his lectures, he formulated his views organically. His unpublished lectures from the 1980s vividly testify to the evolution of his ideas if compared, for example, to the ideological plant of *The Culture of Western Europe*, published twenty years earlier.

Mosse's analysis in these lectures begins with the quest for security which dominated the XIX and XX centuries:

“this is the truth of modern history: that we intend to sublimate the real uncertainties, the real catastrophes, in liturgy, in certainties like the nation, like nationalism, and religion; that we grasp for certainties in an uncertain world, and that that in that sense determines what will be successful in popular culture, unsuccessful, and that determines what will be successful in politics, and unsuccessful in politics as well; and that determines of course the rise of the greatest political force of modern times, nationalism, and that determines the rise of the other greatest force of modern times, respectability, which comes out of the evangelical movement, the shame of your bodies, the shame of sexuality, and the classification of people into normal and abnormal. That is part of wanting security, and it only arises in the XVIII century.”<sup>723</sup>

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719 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 8. The Enlightenment, according to Mosse, “had separated religion and life”. George L. Mosse, “Enlightenment to Romanticism”, lecture notes, undated; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 37; Leo Baeck Institute

720 Robert Weltsch of the Leo Baeck Institute commented *The Culture of Western Europe* in a letter to Mosse, and wrote: “One also feels how you cherish rationalism and individual liberty”. Robert Weltsch, letter to Mosse, 30 July 1962; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 14; folder 10; Leo Baeck Institute

721 Asa Briggs, review of *The Culture of Western Europe*, *The Teacher*, June 7, 1963

722 “Culture, Civilization and German Anti-Semitism”, op. cit. The passage is quoted from that very article published in *Germans and Jews. The Right, the Left, and the Search for a 'Third Force' in Pre-Nazi Germany*, op. cit., 43-44. This passage is also given attention in Gentile's *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 131

723 “European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870”, Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., lecture 03

The age of mass politics and mass culture, of the nation and the people, is also the age of abstraction. Yet man cannot live by abstractions, and therefore the abstract must be made concrete. As we have seen, this happens through myths and symbols. The national stereotype is such a symbol, and a by-product of the Enlightenment with its mania for classification. Speaking of his “history of perceptions”, Mosse says: “if what makes people think, if what determines people’s action is their perceptions, then the perceptions of people are now largely guided by myths and symbols and classification.”<sup>724</sup> The “changing pace of life” causes anxiety, and the integration into myths and symbols can help overcoming it. The three main units to be considered, according to Mosse, when studying the modern age are the rise of the people (world of abstraction and depersonalization), the new idea of time, and the attack on Christianity.

The Enlightenment substitutes nature for Christianity. Modern European history begins not only with the French Revolution and the industrial revolution: it begins also with the Enlightenment and the religious revival (Pietism and Evangelicism). Yet here emerges Mosse’s ever-recurring conviction that the common man needs security and totality, not intellectualism. Thus there is a difference between popular culture and the culture of the intellectuals: the first applies to the religious revival, the second to the Enlightenment. For this reason the Enlightenment won’t touch people’s lives. Christianity had been a guiding force to resort to in order to make life meaningful: liturgy had been fundamental, on the popular level, because it had cut things down to a manageable size. On the popular level, there is the need for immediate symbols, for personalization, the quest for a personalized world; there is no understanding of intellectual systems, God has to be personal and not abstract. The Enlightenment, whose great change has been “impersonality”<sup>725</sup>, called liturgy superstition and rejected it; this is, according to Mosse, the reason why the Enlightenment did never succeed on the popular level. The Enlightenment influenced intellectuals, not popular culture and piety: the change came from above, and popular culture remained stuck in underdevelopment, at least until the 1880s when culture became more widespread. Popular culture was therefore touched by the religious reformation and not by the Enlightenment: great men reject security and a secure religion; the average man wants nothing more than being amused, he doesn’t want to hear that he is a reed, a drop in the universe.

And yet the Enlightenment, despite defending reason and the critical mind, still needed authority, and found it in the classics and in the natural law. Both provided certainty and immutability; one become a principle of beauty, the other of science. So the Enlightenment was a liberating movement and a new tyranny at the same time: this is its dialectical aspect. Yet even the classics and natural law are impersonal authorities. No movement survives in history that does not appeal to authority or certainty, and that does not personalize these certainty in myths and symbols: you cannot

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724 “European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870”, Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., lecture 01

725 “European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870”, Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., lecture 02

be a Nietzschean man or woman, says Mosse, and adds: “I love certainties, I’m no different, I live by certainties. I personalize everything”.<sup>726</sup> In this fashion the Enlightenment needed to personalize an impersonal universe; since the personality of man could not substitute impersonal authorities, he grasped for clear distinctions, for respectabilities and ideas of outward beauty. The Enlightenment itself ended up with its new myths and symbols, which he substituted for those it had sought to destroy.

The Enlightenment wields what Mosse calls a “double-edged sword”: on the one hand, there is the autonomy of man, symbolized by Nathan and Emile; on the other, the “underside of the Enlightenment”: the penchant for classification, which goes with mathematics and the new science of anthropology, and then the penchant for conformity; it is a “kind of dialectic”: man is autonomous, but at the same time there is a trend toward conformity. “There are no contradictions in history. Everything is in a dialectical relationship”.<sup>727</sup> Two things, says Mosse, start as part of Enlightenment: liberalism and racism. Here Mosse sees a dialectical relationship in what seems an inherent contradiction: Enlightenment is the age of toleration (emancipation of the Jews, slavery abolished), but others are re-enslaved, above all blacks, compared to children by the new sciences, above all anthropology. “A unanimous virtue can be quite repressive”.<sup>728</sup> The idea of repression had been probably taken by Mosse from Horkheimer and Adorno: in another lecture, he used their concept of “repressive equalitarianism” as referred to the Enlightenment’s abstraction, typology, and depersonalization.<sup>729</sup> In another note, he praises them for their critique as he writes “‘underside of the Enlightenment’ long overlooked (Adorno and Horkheimer)”.<sup>730</sup>

At the end of the 1970s, indeed, Mosse connects the Enlightenment with racism. Some notes for a lecture or a paper bear the title “Modern Anti-semitism: Failure of the Enlightenment?”<sup>731</sup>. The answer seems to be positive. The Enlightenment, with its ideals of toleration, individualism and most of all de-Christianization, brought about the emancipation of the Jews, who will remain loyal to these ideals. “Yet this basis of the process of assimilation was flawed from the beginning. The Enlightenment emancipated the individual Jew and left the stereotype of Judaism intact.”<sup>732</sup> The “mania for the classification of nature and people” was a serious cause of weakness; here lies what Mosse calls the “paradox” of the Enlightenment, its mingling of toleration and conformity. The Enlightenment “facilitated the construction of a new type of ‘outsider’ who is at the heart of modern anti-semitism

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726 “European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870”, Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., lecture 03

727 “European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870”, Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., lecture 05

728 *Ibid.*

729 George L. Mosse, “European Culture 1815-1870 - Enlightenment and Pietism”, notes for a course, undated; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 20; folder 3; Leo Baeck Institute. The course probably dates back to the late 1970s or 1980s.

730 George L. Mosse, “Modern Anti-Semitism: Failure of the Enlightenment”, cit.

731 *Ibid.*

732 *Ibid.*



and what Harold Nicholson called the ‘onslaught of respectability’ was to enter into this creation”<sup>733</sup>.

The Enlightenment, Mosse says, failed twice. On the one hand, “inasmuch as it contributed to such nationalism”, where “such nationalism” is that (radical) nationalism which fed on racism, that nationalism “which was eventually to exploit fully the underside of the Enlightenment”. Aesthetics and classification are to be held responsible for having contributed to the creation of those stereotypes which stand at the center of modern antisemitism: “for in the mass society which was being born people looked and did not read – reached out for tangible symbols”<sup>734</sup>. Therefore one can speak of the “failure of Enl[ightenment] inasmuch as it contributed to such nationalism ... But we cannot leave it there: Enlightenment had another conformity inherent as well: manners and morals. Respectability not born in Enl[ightenment] but supported. Clear divisions again encouraged by classification, by stereotypes”.<sup>735</sup> Respectability, the “cement of society”, and nationalism will lead to the Final Solution; but they are, in turn, linked by Mosse with the Enlightenment: the distinction between it and nationalism is, in the end, “not so sharp, one fed into another”<sup>736</sup>. Nationalism used the conformities of the Enlightenment for its own ends, and became the “chief enemy of the Jews because it did not remain patriotism ... [The] Jew as outsider could now become the insider with age of emancipation but at the same time outsiderdom was ever more clearly defined and took in the whole person”.<sup>737</sup>

### ***Toward the Final Solution***

In Mosse's scheme of things, nationalism, racism and respectability merge into National Socialism. Nationalism and racism had been connected to it from the start. Respectability finds its way more cautiously. If the interpretation of nationalism and fascism underwent significant changes with the anthropological and visual turn, the same can be said with regard to racism, an ideology which has always been, though latently, present in this analysis, and which now deserves further and direct attention in its development. Racism comes to represent the main contribution of the Enlightenment to the Holocaust, and this happens through science and aesthetics. The anthropological and visual turn comes about also as a result of Mosse's changing attitude towards the Enlightenment. Mosse wrote in his memoir:

“I began writing *The Nationalization of the Masses* in 1972 while teaching in Jerusalem and living in

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<sup>733</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>734</sup> *Ibid.* This passage reflects Mosse's methodological turn, from the history of intellectuals to a cultural history which made full use of aesthetic criteria.

<sup>735</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>736</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>737</sup> *Ibid.*

the apartment of the historian Jacob Talmon, surrounded by the works of Rousseau and of the leaders of the French Revolution. Here the importance of myth, symbol, and the acting out of a political liturgy was brought home to me, especially by Rousseau.”<sup>738</sup>

*The Nationalization of the Masses* can be regarded as a first step of the critique of the Enlightenment. Further steps were yet to be taken, and here the study of racism has been of great importance. Mosse’s main focus when analysing European racism is placed on two categories of outsiders: the Jews, and the homosexuals. His “double outsiderdom” is the lens through which Mosse observes European history.

Racism, in Mosse's interpretation, was first of all a European phenomenon, and not exclusively linked to modern totalitarianism, neither was it a mere German peculiarity, and neither “was it associated with nationalism in a necessary or inevitable relationship. In fact, racial thought did not become important until after nationalism took on its modern aspect. Even the cultural nationalism of Germany was not originally racially-oriented.”<sup>739</sup> Racism, like nationalism, “provided an answer to the many problems of the industrial age.”<sup>740</sup> What were its origins, according to Mosse? One was the romantic vision of history: “the search for national origins in a distant and mythical past provided a cohesive element to the developmental aspects of racial ideas. Such visions of history became linked to a view of life which stressed the mystical and the occult.”<sup>741</sup> But racism “also built upon the [19th] century’s desire for scientific verification.”<sup>742</sup> Seventeenth-century anthropology and philology, largely concerned with the classification of data, gave a first impetus, as did phrenology. Racism reasoned in the abstract terms of “type”. Yet romanticism tended to lay ever more importance on the inward characteristics of the race: racism was “an emotional presupposition”, and “the scientific approach joined with the contemporary romantic ideology of the true inward spirit or ‘sentiment’”.<sup>743</sup> The strength of racism, to Mosse, derived from not being linked to any particular party of class: “racial thought was spread into the national consciousness of Europe ... through the introduction into the popular mind of certain images which were spread through literature and, to a certain extent, by demagogues ... What emerged from this imagery were certain stereotypes of peoples which determined the reaction of others toward them.”<sup>744</sup>

This view of racism dates back to 1961. Once again, a comparison between the 1961 and the 1988 edition of *The Culture of Western Europe* is telling. In 1988 Mosse defines racism as

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<sup>738</sup> *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 178

<sup>739</sup> *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 73

<sup>740</sup> *Ibid.*, 74

<sup>741</sup> *Ibid.*, 74

<sup>742</sup> *Ibid.*, 74

<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-6

<sup>744</sup> *Ibid.*, 83

“a world view which relates to all of human behavior and character to the so-called race to which the individual or the group is said to belong. The importance of racism in modern times derives from the fact that it became a *secular religion* based upon science and history. ... From the second half of the nineteenth century and the end of the *First World War* racism increased in intensity and assumed a more clearly defined direction. Between the world wars it became linked to European political *mass movements* like national socialism and was able to put its theories into practice over much of the continent. Racism provides a total view of the world which besides science and history also encompasses *aesthetics and morality*.”<sup>745</sup>

A number of new elements appear: racism as a secular religion, the role of mass movements, aesthetics, morality, and the First World War. “The crucial new aspect of racism after the war was its growth as a mass movement ... National Socialism introduced a cycle of new national festivals to celebrate the mythical racial past, sun symbolism, and those martyrs who had died for the movement. As a mass movement racism annexed the traditional Christian liturgy for its own purposes.”<sup>746</sup> As we have seen, the adoption of aesthetic criteria was linked to anthropology and the analysis of the rediscovery of Greek beauty. But it is morality which comes to play a central role: liberty and freedom, says Mosse, “were not denied at the beginning of racism, instead they were given racial roots ... Love of freedom was associated with moral qualities, for whether German or Celt the virtues which the ancestors exemplified were precisely those cherished by the middle classes in nineteenth-century Europe: manliness, honesty, hard work, and family life.”<sup>747</sup> In 1961 bourgeois morality were absent from Mosse’s analysis of racism; in 1988, it has come to the center of his interpretation. This shift is best exemplified in Mosse’s book on the history of racism, *Toward the Final Solution* (1978)<sup>748</sup>.

Racism, in the 1985 Prologue to the second edition of the book, is defined as a “fully blown system of thought, an ideology like Conservatism, Liberalism or Socialism, with its own peculiar structure and its mode of discourse.”<sup>749</sup> That racism stems from the Enlightenment Mosse says once again:

“to find the origins of racism in the eighteenth century has filled many readers of this book with both wonder and consternation. The Enlightenment, after all, was supposed to have torn down

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<sup>745</sup> *The Culture of Western Europe* (1988), op. cit., 85-6 [my italics]

<sup>746</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-8

<sup>747</sup> *Ibid.*, 87

<sup>748</sup> *Toward the Final Solution*, op. cit.

<sup>749</sup> *Ibid.*, ix

the old superstitions which had denied men and women control over their lives. ... The Enlightenment marked a crucial stage in the history of liberty, but to the history of racism ... it made a different sort of contribution. ... The Enlightenment tended to fit all human beings into the same mold – not only by its fondness for classification and its idealization of classical beauty, but also through its assumption that all of humankind shared its goals and that its moral order was part of the natural order and thus set for all time and place. This was the ‘underside of the Enlightenment’ that limited the ‘science of freedom’. ... The moral order was reflected in the aesthetic values which men had been taught to embrace ... The result of such an aesthetic definition of the moral order was a visual message, not theory hidden in weighty books which most people could not read, but ideas and ideals which could be readily apprehended, and were therefore attuned to the coming age of the masses. ... Racism was a visual ideology based upon stereotypes. ... But in addition racism, as an emotion-laden ideology, took advantage of the reaction that set in against Enlightenment. Many factors came together in the making of modern racism: the underside of the Enlightenment was a crucial one and so were those movements like romanticism and modern nationalism which had their proper beginning in the age of the French Revolution.”<sup>750</sup>

When the book was published in 1978, Mosse had not yet fully formulated his theory which involved bourgeois respectability in the perpetration of Nazi crimes. Though he had already asserted in 1976 that the Nazi was the ideal bourgeois, the proper analysis of respectability comes about only in the early 1980s, and culminates with *Nationalism and Sexuality* (1985). In the Prologue we are analyzing, Mosse makes this clear:

“racism presumed a social cohesion which nationalism or bourgeois society could provide, and it singled out those who were rejected by society as inherently different or dangerous. ... Racism took advantage of nationalism as an immutable force in a chaotic world [but it also] rushed to the support of respectability – those manners and morals which were thought to symbolize the cohesion and define the status of bourgeois society. Respectability both defined bourgeois society and protected the status quo in a society constantly endangered by the accelerating pace of social, economic, and cultural change. Respectability provided security through fixed social norms. However diverse it may have been in composition – from small merchants to the higher rungs of the civil service – the middle class used respectability as a weapon against the so-called loose life

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<sup>750</sup> *Ibid.*, xi-xii

of the aristocracy and the lower classes. By the end of the nineteenth century at the latest, however, respectability as a way of life had spread throughout society: a state to which almost everyone aspired. The results of the alliance between racism and respectability are analyzed fully in the body of the book, but one aspect of this alliance – the association between racism and sexuality – deserves more extensive discussion than I was able to give it when the book was written.”<sup>751</sup>

Sexuality will become the theme of *Nationalism and Sexuality* (1985) and of Mosse’s last book, *The Image of Man* (1996)<sup>752</sup>. As far as racism is concerned, the control over the passions becomes a key element of respectability, and of the singling out of the outsiders like Jews, homosexuals, the insane and habitual criminals. “Medical theory of the nineteenth century in dealing with human sexuality made an all-important contribution to what was considered normal and to the stereotyping of the outsider ... Medical theory gave scientific sanction to a subjective stereotype – a gift which racism would gratefully accept. Health was to be associated with the superior race which could control its sexual passions and which prized so-called manly behavior, while inferior races were considered sick and infectious.”<sup>753</sup>

War and revolution play also a role in Mosse’s interpretation of racism. If in *Fallen Soldiers*<sup>754</sup> he will analyze the contribution given by the myth of the war experience to nationalism, in *Toward the Final Solution* the perspective is fixed on racism. The importance of the First World War is a theme which only gradually gains importance in his interpretation of the XX century. Still in the mid-1980s, Mosse had not yet extensively dealt with the subject: though considering the effects of the war as essential to his interpretation, he was aware that he had devoted little space to it in his work. He considered this a serious weakness in his interpretation and meant to rectify the situation.<sup>755</sup> Yet in 1978 he studied the effects of the war on racism:

“it was the war and its aftermath that would transform the theory into practice ... The attitudes springing from the war itself, and from the postwar chaos, as well as from the revolutions of 1918-1920, all set the stage for the future. In general, the war encouraged longings for camaraderie, activism, and heroism within the nationalistic mystique. Nationalism was

<sup>751</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii-xiv. In 1978 Mosse wrote that racism “made alliance with all those virtues that the modern age praised so much. Racism picked out such qualities as cleanliness, honesty, moral earnestness, hard work, and family life – virtues which during the nineteenth century came to symbolize the ideals of the middle class.” *Ibid.*, 234

<sup>752</sup> George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, op. cit.

<sup>753</sup> *Toward the Final Solution*, op. cit., xvi-xvii

<sup>754</sup> George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990

<sup>755</sup> Mosse said this in a personal interview with Sandra Gereau, who wrote an MA thesis on him. See Sandra Gereau, “*Myth as Reality*”: George L. Mosse and the Cultural Interpretation of Nazism, MA Thesis, The University of New Brunswick, 1986, unpublished, 72

strengthened whatever its traditions or aims ... Finally, the fact of mass death added to the consequences of the war a certain brutalization of the European conscience, which also pointed to the future. None of these results of the war were necessarily racist; but all of them would be subject to racist penetration once the time was ripe ... The warriors who symbolized camaraderie and the heroic reflected these virtues in their outward appearance as well. The First World War strengthened the stereotype whose growth we have analyzed ever since the eighteenth century.”<sup>756</sup>

One last factor which strengthened racism after 1918 was, to Mosse, psychology, but “not the psychology of Sigmund Freud but, for example, that associated with Carl Gustav Jung ... Jung’s psychology tended to slide off into a mystical symbolism and his emphasis upon unchangeable archetypes which were created by history and religion easily took on racial connotations.”<sup>757</sup>

Racism has survived the Second World War, and Mosse’s conclusion is “a conclusion that does not conclude”.<sup>758</sup> South Africa with its apartheid, and the United States, are two examples. “Le ansie della vita moderna hanno fatto rivivere un’ideologia da molti ritenuta morta ma che, in realtà, era solo assopita sotto la superficie ... Comunque, nessun movimento razzista di massa è emerso dopo la seconda guerra mondiale. È piuttosto la sopravvivenza del razzismo come religione secolare e visione del mondo, al di fuori di qualsiasi immediata cornice politica, che è in discussione.”<sup>759</sup> Perhaps racism, says Mosse, is only waiting for an epoch of crisis in order to re-emerge, and hints at the problem of immigration.

“Cionondimeno, è in genere considerato sconveniente esprimere pubblicamente opinioni razziste. La moralità della classe media, che era stata sua alleata in passato, ha respinto il razzismo dopo l’esperienza nazista. Rimane però il fatto che gli atteggiamenti umani non mutano tanto rapidamente e che una visione del mondo è più facile conservarla anziché gettarla nel mucchio di rifiuti della storia. ... Chi può escludere che, ove tali valori (per es. la moralità o la nazionalità) siano in pericolo, il razzismo si erga ancora una volta a loro protettore? Né può destare meraviglia che neppure gli orrori che il razzismo ha scatenato sull’umanità abbiano distrutto gli atteggiamenti da esso creati: la verità è che un movimento di tale potenza e influenza lascia la sua impronta sulla storia per molte generazioni.”<sup>760</sup>

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<sup>756</sup> *Toward the Final Solution*, op. cit., 171-73

<sup>757</sup> *Toward the Final Solution*, op. cit. The “concept of the race soul or racial memories was to attain respectability in the psychology of Carl Gustav Jung”, wrote Mosse in 1961. *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 89

<sup>758</sup> *Toward the Final Solution*, op. cit., 236

<sup>759</sup> George L. Mosse, “Razzismo”, *Enciclopedia del Novecento*, Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma, 1980, 1062

<sup>760</sup> *Ibid.*, 1062

If in the 1950s and 1960s Mosse's main concern seemed to be the dangers of totalitarianism, the 1970s and 1980s show a growing fear of the power that ideologies like nationalism, racism and respectability still have on society. Mosse's gradual "coming out" makes itself increasingly felt, modifying the scope of his preoccupations and eventually shifting his focus on the two sides of his outsiderdom. It is in this context that the problem of sexuality becomes the object of a controversial and pathbreaking book.

### ***The History of Sexuality***

"The history of sexuality is the most recent attempt to recover a forgotten history ... writing about the history of sexuality means overcoming some taboos deeply ingrained in our society."<sup>761</sup> These words summarize what Mosse had in mind when he began working on sexuality and respectability. He meant to go beyond preconceptions, to "break taboos, ... to get people to think".<sup>762</sup> As we have seen, this attempt had a marked autobiographical character. Kim Steakley, a friend of Mosse's, "rightly called [*Nationalism and Sexuality*] my coming-out book"<sup>763</sup>, Mosse recalled in his memoir. The book, another correspondent writes in a letter to Mosse, "comes out of deep concerns and addresses those winds of history that have blown you out upon your course, your life."<sup>764</sup> Indeed, Mosse openly admitted that, saying that "my preoccupation with the history of respectability ... was driven by a sense of discovery and of my own situation as a double outsider."<sup>765</sup>

On a methodological level, *Nationalism and Sexuality* has been a certainly controversial, but generally appreciated book.<sup>766</sup> Arthur Mitzman notes how Mosse interprets "the social-sexual meaning of symbols like Germania, Britannia, Queen Luise and Marianne", and praises "the connections Mosse makes between social, sexual and political matters" defining them as "unique and highly important for the understanding of the modern age".<sup>767</sup> Steven Aschheim, Renato Moro and Emilio Gentile note how Mosse emphasizes the collective dimension and the political implications of sexuality, grasping the significance of the historian's effort.<sup>768</sup>

*Nationalism and Sexuality* is the result of a long research which had occupied Mosse for many

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<sup>761</sup> George L. Mosse, "Introduction" to the "Sexuality in History" issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 17, N. 2, April 1982, 219

<sup>762</sup> *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 180

<sup>763</sup> *Ibid.*, 180

<sup>764</sup> Unsigned letter to Mosse, 4 November 1988, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 15; folder 2; Leo Baeck Institute.

<sup>765</sup> *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 180

<sup>766</sup> A collection of reviews of and reactions to the book can be found in the George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 15; folder 1 and 2; Leo Baeck Institute.

<sup>767</sup> Arthur Mitzman, "Fascism and Anti-Sex", *Stichtung Theoretische Geschiedenis*, 12 (1986), 341 and 343

<sup>768</sup> Steven Aschheim, "George Mosse – The Man and the Work", in *George Mosse – On the Occasion of His Retirement*, 17.6.85, op. cit., xv; Renato Moro, "George L. Mosse, storico dell'irrazionalismo moderno", 33; *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 140

years.<sup>769</sup> An analysis of the book sheds light not only on the crucial role sexuality came to play in Mosse's interpretation of modernity, but also on how the historian connected it with his other main concerns like nationalism, which had by then become central in his view of fascism, and aesthetics, one of the building rocks of his works since the anthropological and visual turn.

“This book is concerned with perceptions of sexuality, but also with the state and the nation. It seeks to trace the relationship between nationalism, the most powerful ideology of modern times, and respectability, a term indicating ‘decent and correct’ manners and morals, as well as the proper attitude toward sexuality. The respectabilities we now take for granted, the manners, morals, and sexual attitudes normative in Europe ever since the emergence of modern society, have a history in which nationalism played a crucial role. Ideals that we may regard as immutable were novel some two hundred years ago, and just as modern nationalism emerged in the eighteenth century, so the ideal of respectability and its definition of sexuality fell into place at the same time.”<sup>770</sup>

Mosse seeks to examine trends of society which are present-day issues, because this can help realize “where we stand, how we got there, and how we might change”; he analyzes what he holds to be “the most important norms that have informed our society: ideals of manliness ... and their effect on the place of women; and insiders who accepted the norms, as compared to the outsiders, those considered abnormal or diseased.”<sup>771</sup> Aesthetics plays also a role:

“within the developing framework of nationalism and respectability, sexuality will be our special concern because it is basic to human behavior and preoccupied the moral concern of respectability. But it also informed aesthetic sensibilities ... Throughout the following pages we seek to show how concepts of sexuality haunted bourgeois society and nationalism, to be acknowledged yet curbed, deflected from the physical onto an ideal stereotype of male and female beauty.”<sup>772</sup>

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769 The special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History* on “Sexuality in History”, op. cit., published in 1982, included an article of Mosse's by the title “Nationalism and Respectability: Normal and Abnormal Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century”. Moreover, some previous and later unpublished seminars and lectures of Mosse's on the subject can be found in the Leo Baeck Archive, notably a “Sexuality Course” held in Jerusalem in 1984, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 21; folder 26; Leo Baeck Institute; and a “Sexuality Seminar” held in 1987-88, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 21; folder 27; Leo Baeck Institute. Their content does not modify the basic interpretation offered in the book *Nationalism and Sexuality*.

770 *Nationalism and Sexuality. Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, op. cit., 1

771 *Ibid.*, 1-2

772 *Ibid.*, 2



Manners and morals, according to Mosse, “are part of the historical process”: they are relative values, products of the historical development, and not universal laws.<sup>773</sup> The end of the eighteenth century is the starting point of bourgeois respectability, and then National Socialism “provided the climax to the alliance of nationalism and respectability”.<sup>774</sup> Yet Mosse’s considerations have a wider scope, and include the whole of modern society which needs a “cement”, common values to share to maintain order: “control over sexuality [is] vital to the concept of respectability, indeed, to the very existence of bourgeois society.” Sexuality represents Mosse’s key to the understanding of this society: one must better assess the functioning of sexuality in society, and the role played by nationalism in the development and maintenance of bourgeois respectability.

Protestantism of XVIII and early XIX saw a return to moral fervor: this was a dynamic appeal to the middle classes, and they managed to change the moral climate in England and Protestant Germany. Moderation and control over the passions fitted their lifestyle. The wars against the French Revolution were waged on behalf of patriotism and morality, and this “determined the direction of the new national self-consciousness”.<sup>775</sup> The Enlightenment itself drew a sharp line between virtue and vice, normal and abnormal behavior. Respectability is then placed in a wider context: in the XIX century, respectability “was to serve the needs of a class seeking stability amid changed it had itself initiated”; the fears generated by industrialization brought about the “need to keep control in a nervous age, to find firm structures for a bewildering world”. Hence the search for a “slice of eternity”: “the nineteenth-century struggle to control sex – beyond those controls already attempted by the various churches – was part of a larger effort to cope with the ever more obvious results of industrialization and political upheaval”. Society, says Mosse, needs an ideal to inform the controllers: physicians, educators, and the police. It is then that nationalism enters the scene: “it absorbed and sanctioned middle-class manners and morals and played a crucial part in spreading respectability to all classes of the population”. “Nationalism helped respectability to meet all challenges to its dominance”: before 1914, the greatest challenge had been “the revolt of the younger bourgeois generation ... The crucial role of nationalism in helping to meet and redirect such challenges is one of the main reasons why the manners and morals which triumphed at the beginning of the nineteenth century have endured so long ... However flexible, nationalism hardly wavered in its advocacy of respectability.” Nationalism helped control sexuality and provided the means to tame changing sexual attitudes into respectability; “in addition, it assumed a sexual dimension of its own, coming to advocate a stereotype of supposedly

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<sup>773</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>774</sup> *Ibid.*, 2

<sup>775</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

‘passionless’ beauty for both men and women.”<sup>776</sup>

The religious revival of the late eighteenth century and the Enlightenment are the two reference points for respectability, as well as they were for racism and for nationalism. “The Enlightenment and the science of medicine sharpened the distinction between vice and virtue, insider and outsider, which the religious revival had also encouraged”; the Religious revival put renewed emphasis on masculinity, while manliness comes to mean “freedom from sexual passion, the sublimation of sensuality into leadership of society and the nation.”<sup>777</sup> Vice and virtue became a matter of health and sickness, and distinction between normal and abnormal came to be basic to modern respectability; “to a large extent the physician took over from the clergy as the keeper of normalcy.” “Nationalism adopted this ideal of manliness and built its national stereotypes around it.”<sup>778</sup> “Above all, manliness was based upon the Greek revival which accompanied and complemented the onslaught of respectability and the rise of modern nationalism.”<sup>779</sup>

Mosse furthers his interpretation of the nineteenth century as an “ever more visually centered age”:

“such national symbols were part of the urge to see and touch, to participate in a reality that was becoming ever more complex and bewildering. The visual self-representation of the nation was just as important as the much cited literature of nationalism ... The nation preprotected the ideal of beauty from the lower passions and helped transform it into a symbol of self-control and purity. The national stereotype and the middle-class stereotype were identical ... Nationalism and respectability assigned everyone his place in life, man and woman, normal and abnormal, native and foreigner; any confusion between these categories threatened chaos and loss of control.”<sup>780</sup>

The woman and the family are two tenets of respectability: the woman is idealized as the guardian of morality, of public and private order. She exemplifies virtue, thus playing a passive role of guardian, protector, and mother.<sup>781</sup> The family represents a place where one can retreat from the pressures of the outside world. The family supports respectability from below, the nation from above.

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<sup>776</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10

<sup>777</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. Sexual “intoxication” is not only unmanly, it is also “antisocial”, and a “danger to the security of the state”, *Ibid.*, 10-11

<sup>778</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>779</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

<sup>780</sup> *Ibid.*, 16. “We are entering an ever more visually oriented age, exemplified not only by national symbols but also by the effects of sciences like physiognomy and anthropology with their classifications of men according to ideals of classical beauty.” *Ibid.*, 77

<sup>781</sup> “Woman as a national symbol was the guardian of the continuity and immutability of the nation, the embodiment of its respectability”, *Ibid.*, 18

The ideal of manliness is connected to the glorification of the community of men, unwed males are symbols of the nation. This ideal is basic both to the self-definition of bourgeois society and to the national ideology. Manliness safeguards the existing order against the perils of modernity, and symbolizes the nation's spiritual and material vitality.<sup>782</sup>

Outsiders, on the other hand, are progressively better defined: "the gap between normality and abnormality grew ever more immense".<sup>783</sup> The medical analysis of homosexuality drew a clear boundary between normal and abnormal sexuality: in doing so, medicine did justify the criminalizing of homosexuality. "The ugly counter-image of the nervous, unstable homosexual and masturbator, whose physiognomy was ever more sharply delineated thanks to medical science's attribution of moral and aesthetic values, became an important symbol of the threat to nationalism and respectability posed by the rapid changes of modern age."<sup>784</sup> The fear of modernity becomes fear of the big city (home to the outsiders), that destroy man's rootedness and leads to alienation. Darwinism and the concept of degeneration then "sharped public attitudes toward the abnormal that had existed for over a century."<sup>785</sup>

In a passage which could well be autobiographical, Mosse writes: "those outsiders who tried to win acceptance by finding some way toward social norms can provide us with a mirror image of society as its would-be imitators saw it, heightened and sharpened by their striving toward respectability. Not all outsiders wanted to become insiders, but those who made the attempt can deepen our understanding of the meaning of manliness for both nationalism and bourgeois society."<sup>786</sup> Jews tried to escape the stereotype of outsiders and enter society, embracing its norms. The first homosexual journal in Germany, *Der Eigene* (*The Personalist*), published between 1896 and 1931, used racism to gain respectability. This is, Mosse says, just one example of how hard many homosexuals tried to be manly and accepted. But this helped little, they came to hate what they were, and this testifies "the pressure society put on those who differed from the accepted norms."<sup>787</sup>

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782 The ideal of masculinity "dominated most European countries, inculcated by education, strengthened by the constant fear that the weakening of sex roles might destroy the ordered society of the middle classes." *Ibid.*, 86

783 *Ibid.*, 29

784 *Ibid.*, 31

785 *Ibid.*, 36

786 *Ibid.*, 40

787 *Ibid.*, 43. Speaking of the "repression involved in the maintenance of respectability", Mosse wrote: "I might have overstressed this aspect of nationalism and respectability by failing to suppress sufficiently my anger over the fact that the strictures of respectability had made my own life so much more difficult." *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 180. In *Nationalism and Sexuality* Mosse also mentions Michel Foucault's work on the history of sexuality: "Michel Foucault maintained that the greater freedom of discourse about sexuality in the nineteenth century meant that the era was less obsessed with repressing sexuality than had been thought. From the latter part of the nineteenth century there was certainly more frank talk about sexuality than ever before, and what was considered abnormal penetrated closer to the surface of society. But Foucault's conclusion would have been rejected by those contemporaries who were more often than not frustrated in their fight to wring even a few concessions from society. Furthermore, as we shall see, even feminists, homosexuals, and lesbians proclaimed adherence to the basic norms and stereotypes of respectability, wanting only to bend the bars of their cage, not to unhinge them." *Nationalism and Sexuality. Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, op. cit., 21-22. Despite many common concerns over an outsiderdom they both shared (and its relation to the object of their studies), there is no hint at a possible influence of Foucault's thought on the work of Mosse.

The German Youth Movements and the decadents challenged respectability at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The challenge of youth was the worst for bourgeois society: it was not brought about by outsiders, but by the élite of a generation, the children of the middle classes. And yet “the wall between normal and abnormal was destined to remain standing; but it was to be severely shaken and the gate would never again be securely locked.”<sup>788</sup>

A particular place in *Nationalism and Respectability* is occupied by the history of friendship.<sup>789</sup> Here a theme dear to Mosse is involved once again: the preoccupation with the liberty of the individual:

“the changing concepts of friendship can tell us much about the course of personal relationships and their connection with nationalism and respectability. The interplay between friendship and nationalism in particular serves to demonstrate just how much space the individual retained within society and the state for the appropriation of his own free choice and self-expression.”<sup>790</sup>

The history of friendship, as Mosse puts it, cannot be separated from that of sexuality: “the ways in which men and women related to one another, how men related to men, and women to women, not only served to define their sexuality but was subject once again to the pressures of nationalism and respectability.”<sup>791</sup> During the Enlightenment individualism and autonomy of personal relationships were respected. Nationalism and respectability restrict this autonomy: “standards must be set and fulfilled”, there is no free choice about friends and sexuality; “Alfred Cobban has told us that as the nation came to encompass both culture and politics, it became the sole proprietor of human rights, and the individual and his rights began to fade away.”<sup>792</sup> And

“yet the Enlightenment was apt to undermine its own ideals of friendship and individuality. The dispute as to whether men should direct their loyalties and their sense of belonging to small or larger groups was important in preparing the way for the eventual domination of nationalism and respectability over autonomous personal relationships – a domination that would succeed in controlling and redirecting many human passions, including men’s sexuality. ... [But] “forces other than the Enlightenment, despite its paradoxical attitude, were instrumental in assuring the victory

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788 *Nationalism and Sexuality. Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, op. cit., 47

789 By the middle of the 1990s, Mosse was considering writing a book on friendship, a “vital element among respectability’s ideals”. Paul Breines, “Finding Oneself in History and Vice Versa: Remarks on ‘George’s Voice’”, op. cit.

790 *Nationalism and Sexuality. Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, op. cit., 65

791 *Ibid.*, 66

792 *Ibid.*, 66. Cobban’s book, which Mosse refers to, is *In Search of Humanity* (London 1960)

of the nation over the citizen and his freedom to choose country and friends.”<sup>793</sup>

Pietism, the wars of national liberation, the demands of mass politics, and the beginnings of industrialization all contributed to the radicalization of nationalism.

The “onslaught of respectability” felt the “need to separate friendship from sexuality, indeed, from individuality.”<sup>794</sup> At this stage Mosse, with a very autobiographical flourish, associates sexuality and individuality, showing with renewed strength how his “coming out” was linked with his historiographical production. “Individuality was projected from man onto the nation”: the exercise of free will “was thus gradually transferred from the individual to the nation.”<sup>795</sup> Jahn and Arndt, with their ideal of *Bund*, attempted to replace the cult of masculinity for that of friendship: “the national stereotype, its ideal of male beauty, while restraining the passions, simultaneously symbolized an aggressive masculinity – the evolution of the ideal of the *Bund* from friendship to nationalism.”<sup>796</sup>

This is part of what Mosse calls the “new morality”.<sup>797</sup> Not everyone of course is affected, says Mosse, but “nationalism in absorbing the ideal of friendship was able to strengthen itself, to collaborate still more effectively with bourgeois society in order to support ideas of respectability, to control a ‘nervous’ age and to contain sexual passions.”<sup>798</sup>

The trauma of the First World War will recharge these currents: nationalism strengthens its cult of youth, the sense of male beauty, and camaraderie: in short, its stereotype of manliness. War is “an invitation to manliness”.<sup>799</sup> “So the war reaffirmed and strengthened the alliance between nationalism and respectability ... The bourgeois order held; indeed, its survival was never in doubt.”<sup>800</sup> National Socialism is the culmination of this process:

“the German political right called upon racism to shore up a crumbling respectability and at the same time to prepare the nation to revenge defeat. Racism had a long history behind it in which France, rather than Germany, had hitherto played the leading role. But now racism forged ahead in Germany as part of the mass politics practiced by ‘respectable’ nationalist political parties as well as by the extreme political right. This was the essence of of Germany’s ‘special path’ to recovery from defeat and the dangers of the postwar world. As such, the relation between racism

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793 *Nationalism and Sexuality. Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, op. cit., 70-1

794 *Ibid.*, 75

795 *Ibid.*, 77-8

796 *Ibid.*, 79

797 *Ibid.*, 79

798 *Ibid.*, 80

799 *Ibid.*, 114

800 *Ibid.*, 129-30

and sexuality was another, more extreme attempt to divide the normal from the abnormal, to define the nature of the outsider and insider clearly and decisively according to the entire spectrum of moral and physical qualities so often encountered in this book. The alliance between nationalism and respectability now moved toward its culmination as an alliance between nationalism, racism, and respectability.”<sup>801</sup>

Racism, which we have already discussed, gains in this book a new dimension, and even a new definition. Racism strengthens both the historical and the visual<sup>802</sup> thrust of nationalism; “*racism was a heightened nationalism ...* As a form of heightened nationalism, racism supported bourgeois respectability. It emphasized the distinction between vice and virtue, the necessity of a clear line between the normal and the abnormal according to the rules society laid down. This racism was at its height in the years between the two world wars, but it had made its influence felt ever since the middle of the nineteenth century.”<sup>803</sup> The association between racism and sexuality is “immediate and direct”, racism brings to a climax tendencies that had been inherent in the alliance between nationalism and respectability.<sup>804</sup>

The conclusion to *Nationalism and Respectability* is another “conclusion that does not conclude”. “Respectability still determines the manners and morals of society; the history which has filled these pages is still with us.”<sup>805</sup> Nationalism today (in 1985 or, more generally, after the Second World War) has no important role in upholding respectability, and “yet the stereotypes remain.” Even the concept of manliness is “still very much with us”. Perhaps the traditional image of the woman is giving away. But “above all, attitudes toward the human body have not really changed” (for example, the shame of nudity). This past “relates to everyone’s experience of the present.”<sup>806</sup> Mosse concludes by stressing the importance of respectability for fascism:

“the role nationalism and respectability played in the rise of fascism has often been forgotten. It is not easy to confront when such factors have determined so much of our own behavior. Respectability, in particular, has become part of the presupposition upon which most people base their lives.”<sup>807</sup>

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801 *Ibid.*, 132

802 Mosse defines racism “a visually centered ideology”. *Ibid.*, 134

803 *Ibid.*, 133 [my italics]

804 *Ibid.*, 133

805 *Ibid.*, 181

806 *Ibid.*, 181

807 *Ibid.*, 191

It must not be forgotten, says Mosse, that “society needs cohesion – without it, not only dictatorships but parliamentary governments cannot function.”<sup>808</sup>

“On balance, the ideal of manliness served the right better than the left, by stressing hierarchy as well as equality, pointing the way toward personal and national regeneration, and using evocative pre-industrial symbols.” The left, mostly pacifist and cosmopolitan, accepted “wholeheartedly the ideal of respectability that still served to define bourgeois society”. Bolshevism saw a brief period of experimentation, then it “became the very model of respectability with a fervor worthy of the European right.”<sup>809</sup>

Mosse concludes, again with an autobiographical nuance: “what began as bourgeois morality in the eighteenth century, in the end became everyone’s morality. Was the price exacted for this morality too high? That depends upon how the conflict between society’s felt need for cohesion and tolerance of the outsider can be resolved. Like Germania, respectability seems securely enthroned, however new her garments, permitting some latitude of sexual expression provided that it does not endanger her power and dominance.”<sup>810</sup>

The last paragraph of the book implies the historian's acceptance of the necessity of respectability as a factor of social cohesion: “in conclusion we must emphasize what has been implicit throughout this discussion: respectability provided society with an essential cohesion that was as important in the perceptions of man and women as any economic or political interests.”<sup>811</sup> Mosse believed that ideologies like respectability are important, if not “essential for the cohesion and functioning of society itself”, and asserted the “necessary function of respectability”<sup>812</sup>; the same could be said of nationalism or, rather, patriotism<sup>813</sup>. Yet the historian spent his life studying the inherent, potential hazards of such ideologies, seeking to demonstrate how dangerous even apparently innocuous ideas can be. In the end, Mosse says, “I came to believe that the existence of outsiderdom was built into modern society as a prerequisite for its continued existence and the self-esteem of its insiders. The insider and the outsider are linked; one cannot exist without the other, just as there can be no ideal type without its antitype.”<sup>814</sup>

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808 *Ibid.*, 191. “While I recognized its repressive aspect, using reason rather than emotion I also realized that respectability ... was essential for the cohesion and functioning of society itself. ... I came to believe that the existence of outsiderdom was built into modern society as a prerequisite for its continued existence and the self-esteem of its insiders. The insider and the outsider are linked; one cannot exist without the other.” *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 180-1

809 *Nationalism and Sexuality. Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, op. cit., 130

810 *Ibid.*, 191

811 *Ibid.*

812 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 180-1

813 See for example George L. Mosse, “Can Nationalism be Saved? About Zionism, Rightful and Unjust Nationalism”, The 1995 Annual Chaim Weizmann Lecture in the Humanities, lecture delivered on November 29, 1995

814 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 181

## ***“George's Voice”***

Paul Breines has defined Mosse's analysis of respectability “one of the central and most challenging dimensions of [his] work as a historian”.<sup>815</sup> In his original and insightful essay, Breines focuses on the question of Mosse's voice and its connection with his work and his identity as an outsider. Mosse's “displaying a manly voice” is directly related to his historiographical evolution: “it was not only exile as a Jew, but also respectability and its stereotypes of heterosexual masculinity, which incised themselves into George's vocal cords ... George's is the voice of a man who has turned his wounds at respectability's hands into a critical standpoint on modern western history, a standpoint that redefines that history, making the history of modern Europe into a history of respectability. For me, George's voice is that history's critical self-reflection”.<sup>816</sup> Focussing on the 1960s, Breines connects Mosse and the student movement in that they both shared an experience, the “unraveling” of respectability; this process saw Mosse's voice change, “it expanded ... and it did so in connection with the emergence in this country and elsewhere of two exemplary rebellions against respectability, the movements on behalf of Jewish and homosexual self-affirmation ... My main point, then, is that, in the 1960s, George embraced and integrated into his voice two dimensions of his life – the Jewish and gay dimensions – that respectability had ensured would be difficult to embrace and integrate. This development issued in his great works of the 1970s through the 1990s”.<sup>817</sup>

This interpretation confirms and integrates the link between life and work which characterizes Mosse's writings. This chapter has sought to show how the shift to respectability and sexuality has occurred, and how this was connected with Mosse's changing views about the Enlightenment. The 1960s, one of the main characters of the anthropological and visual turn, emerge again here, confirming the thesis that they represent the crucial period in the development of Mosse's historiography. They oriented the historian both toward the liturgy of mass movements and toward that unraveling of respectability, two directions which indissolubly mark Mosse's mature season as a historian.

So far we have gone through Mosse's interpretation of the Enlightenment and its relation to his works on racism, respectability and sexuality. However, his attitude toward bourgeois values directly affected his work on fascism as well, leading to an interpretation which has been widely discussed and has undergone much criticism. Mosse's subversive assertion that the new, ideal man of national

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815 “Finding Oneself in History and Vice Versa: Remarks on ‘George’s Voice’”, op. cit., 4

816 *Ibid.*, 11

817 *Ibid.*, 12-14



socialism was the “ideal bourgeois” seems to be the logical conclusion of his critique of bourgeois society, and yet his interpretation is not so straightforward whatsoever. Rather, its complexity and its firm place into the structure of Mosse's interpretation of modernity in its amplest meaning (that is, since the Renaissance) require further and separate analysis.

## CHAPTER VI

### FROM MACHIAVELLISM TO THE HOLOCAUST

“As a matter of fact, the new man of national socialism was the ideal bourgeois”<sup>818</sup>

(George L. Mosse)

“The emphasis on action was supposed to distinguish the new man  
from the bourgeois, associated in the fascist mind  
with passivity, cynicism, and decadence.”<sup>819</sup>

(George L. Mosse)

“Questo paesaggio faceva piazza pulita di tutto quello  
che non era assolutamente necessario, non ammetteva alcun lusso, neppure  
in fatto di sentimenti. Il suo senso era tutto contenuto nella prestazione concreta.

Perciò esso produsse però, tra i sacrifici e i pericoli,  
anche una stirpe di uomini per i quali la battaglia  
non rappresentava più un'eccezione, bensì una ferrea abitudine.”<sup>820</sup>

(Ernst Jünger)

It might appear, at first glance, that Mosse's critique of bourgeois society comes about only in the 1970s. Steven Aschheim wrote in 1999, referring to Mosse's *Nationalism and Sexuality*,

“these works represent the fruits of Mosse's long-developing, critical reassessment of the role of the bourgeoisie and its all-pervasive ethic. As Arthur Mitzman has incisively observed, in *The Crisis of German Ideology* Mosse enunciated the prevailing liberal conventional wisdom that nazism represented the pure, irrational antithesis of rational, liberal bourgeois modernity. Over the course of time, his view of the role of the bourgeoisie and its worldview has been almost inverted: at least in some of its guises that class is now seen not so much as the mirror opposite, the victim of nazi ideology, but rather as an essential expression of it.”<sup>821</sup>

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818 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 43

819 *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, op. cit., 162

820 Ernst Jünger, “La guerra come esperienza esteriore”, in *Die Standarte*, 27 settembre 1925, from Ernst Jünger, *Scritti politici e di guerra* Vol.I (1919-1925), Libreria Editrice Goriziana, Gorizia, 2003, 105-106

821 Steven Aschheim, “George Mosse at 80: A Critical Laudatio”, op. cit., 303. Aschheim's reference is to Arthur Mitzman, “Fascism and Anti-Sex”, op. cit.

However, this “critical reassessment”, this inversion of the view of the role of the bourgeoisie, needs to be toned down to a certain extent. Aschheim himself had referred to Mosse's thesis in 1986 in less radical terms. Always with reference to the same book, he had written that “this work is certain to be controversial. In it Mosse has highlighted a thesis which also appears in previous works but which is now given systematic treatment and dominant emphasis.”<sup>822</sup> Emilio Gentile gets directly to the point when he writes that “Mosse aveva già accennato nei primi scritti sul nazionalsocialismo e sul fascismo alla sua interpretazione di questi movimenti come realizzazione della moralità borghese ... nel corso degli anni ottanta, questa interpretazione fu approfondita e sviluppata nelle ricerche sulla sessualità e sulla rispettabilità.”<sup>823</sup>

Indeed, there is little doubt that the changed social environment, the influence of the Frankfurt School as well as personal reasons brought Mosse to an open and systematic analysis of new themes like respectability, or to burden bourgeois values and culture with responsibility for the Holocaust. But a closer look at Mosse's works reveals a slightly different picture. Mosse wrote in his memoir that

“my omission of homosexuals from my early work on National Socialism had deep psychological rather than historical roots. I was by that time fully conscious of my sexuality, but homosexuality could not be mentioned, and certainly not admitted, without paying the steep price of being driven out of one's profession (especially as a teacher) and expelled from normative society. Any success, any attempts at assimilation, at overcoming exile and statelessness, would have been in vain.”<sup>824</sup>

We have seen how even his initial interest for early modern history could be circumscribed, up to a point, to his search for respectability, which he could abandon only once he had reached a steady position in the academia. Despite this, Mosse's works on fascism published in the 1960s conceal many a clue that shows how deep the roots of the Nazi as the ideal bourgeois are.<sup>825</sup> Mosse recalls that “homosexuals were present indirectly, however, in *The Culture of Western Europe* when I wrote about the German poet Stefan George ... I would be more explicit in 1964 in *The Crisis of German Ideology*, where I was the first, as far as I know, to forge a link between male Eros, the German Youth Movement, and Volkish thought ... I did not discuss homosexuality for its own sake; at that time it was not considered to have a history of its own which deserved to become a part of the general history I was addressing. This attitude changed by the time I wrote *Nationalism and Sexuality*.”<sup>826</sup> In this passage from his

822 Steven Aschheim, “George Mosse – The Man and the Work”, op. cit., xv

823 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 139

824 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 179

825 In the above quoted essay on Nietzsche, Mosse had already expressed his hatred for bourgeois *Gemütlichkeit* as early as in 1940. “The Significance of Nietzsche's Proposed Ethic of Masters”, cit.

826 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 179-180

autobiography Mosse hints at the presence of homosexuality in his early works on modern history, yet without mentioning directly respectability, which he later connected to the problem of “sexual outsiders”. However, there is more in this regard than Mosse said in his writings of the 1960s: here Mosse connected the middle classes to that radicalization of nationalism which would eventually lead to National Socialism. In 1961 he wrote:

“the ideal of integration with the *Volke* put forward a view of the state which was to have fateful consequences for the future ... there was no place for the foreigner or for any class of the population which might disturb the rootedness of the *Volke*. Ironically, despite the concern over the disturbing element of the middle classes, it was precisely these classes which provided the setting for the ideology of integration. The romantic impetus in Germany was accompanied by an important regrouping of the social framework in which cultural activity had its setting.”<sup>827</sup>

The nineteenth century sees a broadening of the social context for intellectual activity: “the framework was everywhere becoming nonaristocratic and centered upon the middle classes.”<sup>828</sup> Romanticism “condemned ... bourgeois ways of life”<sup>829</sup>, and yet it was these middle classes which “provided the setting for the ideology of integration”. The idea of “integration” relates directly, in Mosse’s work, to the problem of identity and self-definition of society<sup>830</sup>; respectability, the main focus of his books since the 1980s, is mentioned here, for the first time, in 1961: “both the Christian and the national facets of the romantic movement stressed the element of integration or romantic unity. In doing so they restricted the romantic ideal of freedom and the romantic revolt against conventions. The movement was tamed into either a Christian or a national *respectability*”<sup>831</sup>. Mosse, in this book, does not elaborate much on this concept of “national respectability”, but he nonetheless establishes a link, a connection between bourgeois respectability and the Holocaust for the first time, asserting that respectability and genocide could coexist in a “split personality”<sup>832</sup>. In these early 1960s, Mosse seems to be very much interested in the relationship between morality and murder, and discusses it in *The Culture of Western Europe*, at the Stanford seminary and in *The Crisis of German Ideology*. In the latter, he

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827 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 47

828 *Ibid.*, 50

829 *Ibid.*, 26

830 Integration into society brings about a stronger sense of identity and belonging. The need for social cohesion sacrifices, however, part of the individual's liberty. “The fate of outsiders”, wrote Mosse, “is part of the essential working of our society”, that very society which created the image of the outsider, “the shape which he took in people's minds.” *Confronting History*, op. cit., 179. The outsider is a creation, said Mosse in a lecture, though an inevitable one since society needs not only respectability as a source of cohesion, but also the creation of an enemy, of a counter-type to oppose to the type, the latter representing the ideal, moral man who embodies the positive features of the ideal, respectable bourgeois. George L. Mosse, “Outsider”, lecture, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 34; Leo Baeck Institute

831 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 50-1 [my italics]

832 *Ibid.*, 358

writes that “bourgeois respectability and traditionalism were successfully woven into the ideological fabric of the Nazis, who, upon assuming power, took to championing the Volkish concepts of rootedness, puritan morality, and bourgeois tastes, ethics, and values.”<sup>833</sup> The revolution is anti-bourgeois insofar as it is directed against the Jews, thus protecting the values of the middle-classes.<sup>834</sup> In a 1966 article, he wrote that “the Nazis substituted racism for religion, but, once more, the morality was that shared with the rest of the bourgeoisie.”<sup>835</sup> Then, in 1977, he asserted that “as a matter of fact, the new man of national socialism was the ideal bourgeois.”<sup>836</sup>

It cannot therefore be said that Mosse came to his most controversial interpretation after having elaborated the critique of the Enlightenment, or that he drastically reassessed the role of the bourgeoisie and its ethics. His condition of “double outsider” must have made him fully aware from the start of the mechanisms of bourgeois conformity and of the dangers of its radicalization. However, the change in the attitude toward the Enlightenment and the bourgeois society will imply a systematic and explicit analysis of the connection between them and the murder of the European Jews. Mosse had gradually gained confidence in a changing society, had radicalized his interpretation and had eventually come to place bourgeois respectability from the fringe to the very center of his work<sup>837</sup>. The result is that the critique of bourgeois morality, from the mid-1970s onwards, becomes the main line crossing *Toward the Final Solution*, *Nationalism and Sexuality* and, one could say, his whole work.

However, Mosse's statement that “the new man of national socialism was the ideal bourgeois” must be taken with a pinch of salt, and not be interpreted literally. Such an attitude would indeed lead to a misunderstanding of the complexity and the evolution of Mosse's interpretation. To be sure, speaking of the “repression involved in the maintenance of respectability” he himself admitted: “I might have overstressed this aspect of nationalism and respectability by failing to suppress sufficiently my anger over the fact that the strictures of respectability had made my own life so much more difficult”<sup>838</sup>; and yet he never meant to say that bourgeois morality in itself was murderous. Rather, he was fully aware that the ideal man of national socialism was far from being a perfect bourgeois, and his 1977 assertion, surely dictated in part by his “anger”, must be seen in the context of those very years when his critique of bourgeois society was at its height. In the same interview where he made such a claim, he spoke of “corrupted” bourgeois values, and since the 1980s he moved toward a conscious distinction between these and the new fascist man. Moreover, it must be kept in mind that Mosse was

833 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 309

834 *Ibid.*, 309-310

835 “The Genesis of Fascism”, op. cit., 19

836 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 43. “National socialism and racism annexed every middle-class virtue which was under siege in modern times – honest work, cleanliness, loyalty, a neat appearance.”

837 Mosse writes in his memoir: “my preoccupation with the history of respectability ... was driven by a sense of discovering respectability as an all-important historical factor which historians had somehow taken for granted. It had not been considered respectable to be a Jew in the past, and certainly homosexuality is on the edge of respectability (always ready to fall off) even today.” *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 180

838 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 180

incline to provocation, and that he often relished making provocative statements simply “to get people to think” and “not in the practice of daily life”.<sup>839</sup> Thus his shocking assertion must be analyzed both within the context in which he made it, and within the more general picture of his nature of agent provocateur. Before entering any discussion about Mosse's most controversial theory, it must be made clear what he meant by *bourgeoise*, and how he viewed respectability and its function in society. *Nationalism and Sexuality* is the book which connects nationalism and sexuality through bourgeois respectability: “the book seeks an understanding of how such themes functioned to shape society's attitudes toward the human body and its sexuality.”<sup>840</sup> Mosse's concern is not with private lives, but with public attitudes. “The terms ‘middle classes’ and ‘bourgeoisie’ used throughout this book are troublesome in that they refer to diverse groups of the population, from retail merchants to academics and high civil servants. Yet these terms will take on sharper contours through the integrative function which respectability served as against those who did not fit in with society's behavioral norms.”<sup>841</sup> What does Mosse mean by “middle classes”? He uses the terms “middle classes” and “bourgeoisie” rather interchangeably, but he generally refers to the “petite bourgeoisie”. His definition is, however, a cultural one:

“the middle classes can only be partially defined by their economic activity and even by their hostility to the aristocracy and the lower classes alike. For side by side with their economic activity it was above all the ideal of respectability which came to characterize their style of life. Through respectability, they sought to maintain their status and self-respect against both the lower classes and the aristocracy. They perceived their way of life, based as it was upon frugality, devotion to duty, and restraint of the passions, as superior to that of the ‘lazy’ lower classes and the profligate aristocracy. Thus, the definition of the bourgeoisie used in this book arises out of the growth of respectability itself, which in interaction with their economic dynamic, their fears and hopes, created a lifestyle that first became largely their own and eventually that of all settled and ordered society.”<sup>842</sup>

Respectability, the “cement of society”<sup>843</sup>, a cultural factor, characterizes the middle classes, before

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839 *Ibid.*, 181

840 *Nationalism and Sexuality. Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, op. cit., ix

841 *Ibid.*, x

842 *Ibid.*, 4-5. The economic interests of the rising bourgeoisie were linked with the interests of the nation, and yet a distinction has to be drawn, that between the “*haute finance*, the patriciate of the middle classes”, and the “lower bourgeoisie”: the former “were never to lose their cosmopolitan orientation”; the latter were those “who had most to gain by the tangible benefits ... national ties might confer upon them.” *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 70-71

843 “Modern Anti-Semitism: Failure of the Enlightenment”, cit.

spreading to the whole of society: “what began as bourgeois morality in the eighteenth century, in the end became everyone’s morality”<sup>844</sup>; “to be sure, respectability eventually spread throughout Europe; a bourgeois movement at first, it soon encompassed all classes of the population.”<sup>845</sup> And what are these “middle-class ideals” to which Mosse refers?

“Let me define what I mean by middle-class ideals. There is no doubt that the turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century saw a great change in the moral tone of society; Harold Nicholson has characterized this change as the ‘onslaught of respectability’. It meant that a new emphasis was put upon the gospel of work, sexual shame and restraint, moderation in everything, together with renewed stress upon the importance of the family. I call this middle-class morality because it was that class which at first carried it against the unbought grace of life of the aristocracy, though it soon became a generally accepted morality. Not only the middle class but workers and the aristocracy became decent in the modern sense.”<sup>846</sup>

All this converges, in Mosse's view, into fascism. If in the 1960s such an interpretation was hinted at and never fully performed, bourgeois respectability progressively moved toward the centre of Mosse's concept of fascism, and particularly of national socialism. This shift, as many other important events in Mosse's historiography, has its roots in the 1960s: on the one hand, the influence of the Frankfurt school and the sexual revolution played a role in his critique of bourgeois society; on the other, the discarding of nihilism implied by the turn to liturgy directly affected his views on the “new man” and the values it embodied. Moreover, the studies on racism, respectability and the impact of the First World War also affected to a considerable extent Mosse's interpretation of the “new man” and his bourgeois features.

The Holocaust stood always at the centre of Mosse's thoughts. All his works on the modern age touch upon it, and the books on respectability and the new man are no exceptions. However, the connection between the Holocaust and Mosse's whole work is even deeper. The Final Solution is the place where his two ever-recurrent concerns merge: first, it has been the extreme peak of man's depersonalization, the place where the dignity of the individual had been crushed in the most brutal way; second, it has been the extreme consequence of the “faithful divorce of ethics from politics”. These two themes are linked to the emergence of the modern state and its possible consequences. The

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844 *Nationalism and Sexuality. Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, op. cit., 191

845 *Ibid.*, 2. However, Mosse admits that as far as the lower classes are concerned, we have little evidence of how respectability affected them. However, it seems to the historian that socialism in Britain and Europe has supported respectability. *Ibid.*, 184

846 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 44

problem of the state and the question of political morality, the two tenets of Mosse's early modern scholarship, converge in his view of the Holocaust. The road leading from Machiavellism to totalitarianism is thus extended in its ethic dimension, and ends up in the extermination of the European Jews: Mosse's 1954 statement that modern persecution is the "new Leviathan" finds now a deeper meaning in the general context of his historiography.

### ***Machiavellism, Nihilism and the Holocaust***

At the Stanford seminar, Mosse had defined totalitarianism as "the stretching of the old ideas of *raison d'état*".<sup>847</sup> It is not coincidental that he mentioned Reason of State when speaking about Nazi morality: in his works on early modern history, Mosse had addressed the question of political morality, considering it "the most modern of problems". The road leading from Machiavellism to totalitarianism has been analyzed above<sup>848</sup>, and yet it is now necessary to elaborate on it again, if only to draw attention once more to the continuity of Mosse's work. The moral dimension, inherent both in his convictions about the task of the historian<sup>849</sup> and in the object of his studies, comes repeatedly to the surface when one sets as his purpose a unitary and organic analysis of his work. The problem of morality is one red line crossing his early modern work, but it is also the core of all his subsequent studies on fascism, nationalism, racism, and respectability. Mosse's assertion that the ideal man of national socialism was the ideal bourgeois has probably been the aspect of his work which has been subject to the most lively and serious criticism, and since this criticism goes right to the heart of his whole historical work, it is important to focus on it, in the attempt to gain a wider perspective on the problem, a perspective not only confined to his modern works but, rather, a general one on his whole historiography.

As we have seen, Mosse's early view of fascism saw it torn between manipulation and consensus: in Emilio Gentile's words, Mosse "aveva interpretato i riti, i simboli, le cerimonie di massa essenzialmente come strumenti machiavellici del potere, come tecniche di dominio usate dai governanti per sedurre e controllare le masse".<sup>850</sup> Indeed, Mosse regarded totalitarianism as one possibility inherent in the idea of Reason of State: Machiavelli's ethics was the beginning of a new ethics, linked with modern materialism, where the State substitutes God and becomes a new source of virtue. This forces one to "choose between the State as a thing of morality, or the good of the individual"<sup>851</sup>. Mosse was concerned with the dignity of the individual and his rights, and feared the adoption of emergency powers by the State since these are necessarily arbitrary and threaten to annihilate these rights which are

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847 "The Problem of National Socialist Morality", in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

848 See Chapter I

849 This aspect of Mosse's work is dealt with in Chapter IX

850 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 83-84

851 George L. Mosse, lecture notes for the Cultural History Course, 1946-47, George L. Mosse Archive, Memorial Library, University of Madison-Wisconsin, cit.



the only guarantee of an individual before the omniscient State. Mosse often mentioned such themes in the 1950s, connecting his studies in the field of early modern history with his preoccupations about totalitarianism.

Thus the relationship between ethics and reason of state, raised in the early modern context of the growth of absolutism, was apt to be transferred to the new field of studies Mosse was about to enter once he moved to Madison. Machiavellism lies at the core of modernity, Mosse wrote in 1952, in that it leads to the “fateful divorce of ethics from politics”: Machiavelli “supplied the inspiration for this double standard of morality”, which confronted public and private morals and “endowed the state with a moral personality of its own”.<sup>852</sup>

What is the connection of all this with the theory of the Nazi as the ideal bourgeois? Mosse himself provided the answer in the previously quoted passage in which he said that Rauschning's concept of the “revolution of nihilism” was valid as far as it referred to the “transformation of values which fascism accomplished. The ethical norms of society were no longer related to intrinsic standards or to eternal verities. Instead, duty to the fascist state and to its leader became the criterion of moral behaviour. Where ethics had once been linked to Christian ideas, however vaguely defined, now they were linked to the fascist ideology of struggle and history.”<sup>853</sup> This very important passage lays the basis for Mosse's theory of the Nazi as the “ideal bourgeois”, which is therefore linked with Mosse's interpretation of Machiavellism: Machiavelli's ethics implies a State as the source of a new morality which is not linked to Christian values, but to material ones; the fascist state is the expression of nihilistic values embodied in the nihilistic streak present in fascism.

Since the nihilism inherent in fascism loosens the ethics of society from eternal values, the new morality which is thus created implies a faith in the leader and the state, in the dominant ideology (in the German case, Volkish ideology). Fascism was, in Mosse's interpretation, a movement of the bourgeois youth oriented toward a critique of bourgeois values and society: it was not a revolution “in social or economic fact”, but rather a “revolution in ideology” and thus an “ideal bourgeois revolution”, in that it left class structure intact; fascism was, according to Mosse, “an anti-bourgeois revolution which the bourgeoisie could fully accept”.<sup>854</sup> Fascists agitated “against bourgeois morality”, Mosse wrote, and “yet this transformation of values did not penetrate the realm of personal morality. Here fascist movements tended to be prudish, to accentuate plain living as a part of the concept of the democratic leader. To this prudishness Hitler added a sexual puritanism which was not found in Mussolini.”<sup>855</sup> At this stage, Mosse fully separates private from public morality in fascism, and this has a direct bearing on the problem of the Nazi as the “ideal bourgeois”, but also on the related topic of the

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852 George L. Mosse, “Puritanism and Reason of State in Old and New England,” op. cit., 71 and 68

853 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 352

854 George L. Mosse, “What is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

855 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 352

Final Solution and of how it had been possible to put it into practice. "Fascism retained a bourgeois morality in personal relationships but abandoned it in the dominant public ethic to which private ethic had, in the last resort, to be subordinate."<sup>856</sup> Public ethic is therefore a result of that "transformation of values" inherent in fascism's nihilism, while private ethic rests on "bourgeois morality". To understand this dichotomy is basic to the understanding of Mosse's interpretation of the Holocaust.

Here the question of fascist dynamism and its taming must be addressed. Since fascism was, Mosse held, dialectically torn between activism (informed by nihilism) and bourgeois morality, during the struggle for political power this activism could be allowed free play. Yet once the fascist state has been established, the activism needs to be tamed on the one hand, and directed toward new targets on the other. This is how Mosse explains, for example, the slaughter of the SA in 1934: a leash had to be put to their social impetus, their restless activism, their doubtful morality. Thus activism is tamed inside the State, or the nation, and unleashed on the outside: "fascism was committed to an internal order based upon its complete dominance and an international disorder which would enable the dynamic to expand once the system had been established at home."<sup>857</sup> Hence the "paradoxical result" of the transformation of bourgeois values brought about by nihilism: on the one hand, family life and rootedness are retained; on the other, "bourgeois values as a whole were rejected in the struggle for domination": Nazism has a "split personality ... But this seemingly fantastic moral contradiction was really part of the movement's ideology. Bourgeois respectability and genocide could be fused into one, for neoromanticism was accompanied by the 'Revolution of Nihilism'."<sup>858</sup> This is not to say that the Final Solution is the outcome of the diffusion of bourgeois values: on the contrary, nihilism had separated the public ethic it pervaded from the private ethic where bourgeois values dominated.

At the Stanford seminary, Mosse devoted a whole session to the "problem of national socialist morality".<sup>859</sup> Here he associated such values as honesty, probity, work, family life with traditional bourgeois morality, and contrasted them with national socialist morality: the concept of "struggle" is alien to bourgeois morality, Mosse says, and so is instinct, that racial instinct against the enemy which national socialism had substituted for conscience (being conscience a bourgeois feature, Mosse says).<sup>860</sup> Violence, an anti-bourgeois value, can be applied against the enemy: "the race and its morality could only survive, and so could the nation, if towards the enemy this morality did not apply."<sup>861</sup> Here Mosse draws a parallel with Christian ethics, thus providing a further example of the "continuity of interests" and of his concern with "problems" which informs his historiography: the question of Nazi "split

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<sup>856</sup> *Ibid.*, 353

<sup>857</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>858</sup> *Ibid.*, 358

<sup>859</sup> George L. Mosse, "The Problem of National Socialist Morality", in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

<sup>860</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>861</sup> *Ibid.*

personality” is a “very ancient problem in our civilization, that of the permissible exception”.<sup>862</sup> Reason of State is such an example, Mosse says implicitly hinting at Christian casuistry, but in national socialism two new factors crop up: first, the contrast between mass murder and the Aryan bourgeois morality. For the Nazis, the contrast is mitigated by technology, which “depersonalized the act of murder, just as the murdered had already been depersonalized into stereotypes.” Second, the disbelief typical of our civilization that such a thing could happen, and Eichmann or Höss were labeled as “criminals”, and national socialism as “a movement of criminals taking off from the shaken morality of the Free Corps. The point is, of course, that their morality was not in daily life a criminal morality, but a common bourgeois morality, and that this raises the question of the relation of such a morality to exceptional situations. The Nazis built upon a western tradition and pushed it to the extent of a double morality: towards enemy and towards the friend.”<sup>863</sup>

“All the völkisch ideology was intensely bourgeois on the moral level”, and yet the ideology of race is that part of the morality that “allows for the 'exception'”.<sup>864</sup> When confronted with the opinion that brutalization has nothing to do with bourgeois morality, that this is a “new morality”, Mosse replied that “this means the widening of the exception, the struggle with the enemy, the execution of orders. I don't think they were brutalized in their private lives”: perpetrators are “new men” when they kill; at home, they retain a traditional morality.<sup>865</sup> There were, Mosse continues, two kinds of people involved in the Final Solution: those with a split personality, and the SS who has “sloughed off the bourgeois morality. These are the minority, these are just emerging”; Himmler belongs to the latter but at the same time he shares the most traditional völkisch ideas.<sup>866</sup> This leads Mosse to assert that “before 1939, and I'm quite sure about that, it was emigration of Jews which was wanted by many Nazis, though perhaps never by Hitler himself.”<sup>867</sup> At the end of the session, Mosse significantly feels the need to specify that “I was not condemning bourgeois morality ... But I think the point is again how much exception was allowed ... I don't call this attitude bourgeois morality but the exception.”<sup>868</sup>

At Stanford Mosse hinted at the depersonalization through technology and stereotypes. The analysis of stereotypes, as we have seen, will become one of Mosse's main concerns since the late 1970s, and yet he was already sensitive to the problem. In 1961 he referred to the Aryan ideal type and to the importance of its outward appearance through which an ideology can become “tangible”; the “type”, Mosse said, was confronted with and opposed to the individual<sup>869</sup>: “what the Commandant of

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862 *Ibid.*

863 *Ibid.*

864 *Ibid.*

865 *Ibid.*

866 *Ibid.*

867 *Ibid.* In the interview on Nazism, Mosse said that the Final Solution was in accordance with Hitler's taste, not at all with the taste of the German public, and not even of many SS. *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 75

868 “The Problem of National Socialist Morality”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

869 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 360. Neoromanticism, with its longing for an organic state, had furthered

Auschwitz was murdering were types which lacked all individuality to him. Murder, in these circumstances, was depersonalized and completely remote from that Aryan life whose ethics coincided with those of the bourgeoisie.”<sup>870</sup> This passage clearly separates bourgeois morality from murder: the latter is absolutely non-bourgeois, it derives instead from the logic of the “permissible exception” and from that depersonalization furthered by racism (through the creation of “types”) and by technology. As a consequence,

“bureaucrats, who considered themselves ethical men, could sign extermination orders without qualms ... Many officials signed death orders who were not rabid National Socialists and who may not even have shared many of the propositions of the ideology. Here is evidenced that interplay between consciously-formulated ideology and the mood of the times which is so important in cultural history. The new romanticism and racism had penetrated Germany so deeply as to constitute a mood and an atmosphere. Racial typology was therefore not a new thing but simply a heightening of a mood shared by many who could not have foreseen its ultimate consequences. The same was true for the longing for authority now crystallized into a specific leadership idea. Many bureaucrats signed mass extermination orders simply because the leader demanded it.”<sup>871</sup>

*The Culture of Western Europe* was written as a warning against totalitarianism and as a passionate defence of the dignity of the individual. The chapter on national socialism is an outstanding example of Mosse's beliefs and ideas. “Individualism was easily sacrificed for the sake of security and for the feeling ... that life was worth living again”: this climaxed in the national socialist “destruction of individuality”; the concentration camp was the final tool for depersonalization.<sup>872</sup> The Final Solution is “the most frightening phenomenon of this century. Multitudes of men digging their own graves .... without resistance .... they docilely went to their graves because they had been utterly robbed of their individuality, they had been systematically turned into obedient robots. Surely, here is the climax of that decline of liberty in our times which has been discussed so much in these pages. This is the ultimate price paid for viewing the individual as an integral part of larger, irrational cosmic forces”.<sup>873</sup>

Nihilism, transforming values, had created a new morality which informed that public ethic where bourgeois morality was absent, that public ethic where violence and struggle were allowed if turned against the enemy by the logic of the “exception”. The Final Solution is therefore, in Mosse's

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depersonalization and conformity within the community, Mosse writes in 1961 (*Ibid.*, 353). Years later he will highlight the other side of the coin, and blame conformity on the Enlightenment (see Chapter V)

870 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 361. Men like Rudolf Höss exemplify the “danger of thinking about people in 'types'”: “as a consequence, among men like Höss, morality was something not intrinsic to all men but only to Aryans.” *Ibid.*, 374. This depersonalization of the outsider, Mosse argues, did not occur in Italian fascism.

871 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 361-2

872 *Ibid.*, 371-2

873 *Ibid.*, 373

interpretation, a by-product of the nihilistic streak of national socialism which had its origins in the stretching of Machiavelli's ethics. It is symptomatic that Mosse had written, many years before, that "the relations between National Socialism and the doctrines of Machiavelli are very close".<sup>874</sup>

### ***Respectability and the Holocaust***

The view of fascism as a religion, and the subsequent discarding of the concept of nihilism in the transition from ideology to liturgy have a direct impact on Mosse's theory of the Nazi as the ideal bourgeois. This connection deserves to be given full attention. Up to the mid-1960s, Mosse had linked the Final Solution to nihilism: the transformation of values the latter had brought about gave birth to the "double morality", to the "split personality"; thus perpetrators responded to bourgeois morality in private life, and to a nihilistic state ethics in the process of extermination. Bourgeois morality has therefore nothing to do with the Holocaust: it is the "exception" which made it possible, and this exception was a product of nihilism.

Now one question arises: once Mosse discards nihilism, how does he deal with the problem of the Final Solution? In the late 1960s and early 1970s Mosse did not tackle the question anymore. He was then concerned with his works on the "new politics", and it is only with the turn to the exploration of the "dark side of the Enlightenment" that the theme emerges again, and when it does, bourgeois morality is burdened with much greater responsibility. Then the answer lies, in my opinion, in the increasing weight Mosse sets upon bourgeois morality. In 1968, in the very article in which he definitively rejected the "revolution of nihilism" theory, Mosse asserted that the fascist revolution "got mired in the very middle-class values which it was supposed to fight": no spiritual revolution was implemented, no new man was created.<sup>875</sup> At the Stanford seminary, Mosse had asserted that perpetrators are "new men" when they kill<sup>876</sup>; five years later, he says that fascism did not manage to create these "new men". In his early view, the "new men" had a "new morality" which stemmed from nihilism, but now that nihilism has been rejected, the "new morality" can only originate from "the very middle-class values which [fascism] was supposed to fight." But is this really a "new" morality? Or is it rather a degeneration of an old one? In the interview on Nazism, Mosse singled out three prototypes of the new national socialist man: the old mythical Aryan (the model, Mosse says, shared by "the vast majority of the Nazis"), the SS man who was yet to be bred, and the ideal bourgeois from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was Hitler's option. Mosse claims that "national socialism and racism annexed every middle-class virtue which was under siege in modern times – honest work, cleanliness, loyalty and a

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874 "The Significance of Nietzsche's Proposed Ethic of Masters", cit.

875 "Fascism and the Intellectuals", op. cit., 225

876 "The Problem of National Socialist Morality", in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

neat appearance ... As a matter of fact, the ideal man of national socialism was the ideal bourgeois, and only in rhetoric did he have a connection with the ancient Aryan.”<sup>877</sup> Mosse believed that bourgeois morality had become “everyone's morality”, and this seems to fit in perfectly in his works from the mid-1970s onwards. How responsible were then bourgeois values for the Final Solution? As a matter of fact, middle-class values participated in the singling out of the outsider, and so did bourgeois respectability, as Mosse made clear in *Toward the Final Solution*, in *Nationalism and Sexuality* and in *The Image of Man*.<sup>878</sup> Yet “those people who actively participated in the final solution, and whose feelings we shall never know, were victims or products of the *corrosion* and *corruption* of middle-class values through national socialism.”<sup>879</sup> Mass murder is therefore not anymore the product of a nihilistic attitude opposite to bourgeois values, but rather the result of the “corrosion” and “corruption” of such values. Mosse's statement that “I was not condemning bourgeois morality”<sup>880</sup> has been considerably disfigured through the transition from nihilism to liturgy (the “anthropological and visual turn”) and the “discovery” of the “dark side of the Enlightenment”. Yet such a view would be, in my my opinion, an oversimplification: Mosse's theory about the link between bourgeois morality and the Holocaust is much more complex.

Mosse's interpretation has undergone severe criticism, especially by Emilio Gentile. According to him, one problem

“arises from the definition of fascism as an 'anti-bourgeois bourgeois revolution' and from the characterization of the new fascist man as the ideal type of bourgeois respectability. In his latest writings Mosse had gone so far as to assert a substantial identity between bourgeois respectability and fascism, an identity that historically, in my opinion, stood in sharp contrast to the very essence of fascism, with its culture, with its concept of man, of politics, of the national community, and of the totalitarian state. To say that fascism represented the ideal bourgeois revolution because it based its morality on the values of honesty, probity, diligence, and respectability – values that were the products of bourgeois morality – is tantamount to inserting conservatism, liberalism, and democracy in the genealogy of fascism. If we consider this genealogical descent with regard to Nazi racism and the genocide of the Jews, I share the critical objections raised by Steven Aschheim when he commented on 'the most startling of all Mosse's theses: Nazism as the incarnation, the most extreme defender of bourgeois respectability', pointing out that bourgeois respectability, 'while often illiberal, was seldom genocidal; and it is

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877 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 42-43

878 If in the early 1960s the “type” was a creation of racist doctrines, from the 1970s onward the singling out of the outsider is the result of the alliance between racism and bourgeois respectability.

879 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 73 [my italics]

880 “The Problem of National Socialist Morality”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

surely in the processes of corruption and radicalization that such a transformation was engendered'. To define fascism as an 'anti-bourgeois bourgeois revolution' and to state, at the same time, that the fascist revolution was the ideal bourgeois revolution amounts to making one part of the receding definition irrelevant and removing one of its essential components, because one ends up ignoring the congeniality of anti-bourgeois polemic in fascism's fundamental attitudes that belonged to the essence of its origins and of its militaristic and collectivistic nature and made ultimately incompatible, despite the ambiguity of occasional compromises, with the bourgeois respectability of liberalism and conservatism and with the ideals and the values of morality that were prevalent in the democratic and liberal Western bourgeoisie. The identification of fascist respectability with bourgeois respectability underestimates the role the anti-bourgeois spirit played in fascism ... Fascism did share with the bourgeoisie some notions of morality and respectability, yet we must keep in mind that, beyond the consonance between bourgeois morality and fascist morality, there still lies a substantial difference between *respectability in civilian clothes* and *respectability in uniform*, and we must keep in mind that the latter, rather than the former, was the ideal of fascist morality. The new man of fascism was not the incarnation of traditional 'respectability in civilian clothes', which was the ideal of the individualist and liberal bourgeoisie, but of the new 'respectability in uniform' of the collectively organized man who was raised according to the principles of a militarist and belligerent morality which was the antithesis of everything that was typical of the 'respectability in civilian clothes' of the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois culture did not identify its sense of belonging and of respectability with military style, whereas 'respectability in uniform' represented for fascism an ideal of communitarian life explicitly and polemically anti-bourgeois, because with it fascism intended to combat and annihilate the claim that bourgeois civilization ensured a private dimension in familial and social existence, quite separate from and autonomous vis-à-vis politics.”<sup>881</sup>

I think that the assertion that Mosse ended up “ignoring the congeniality of anti-bourgeois polemic in fascism's fundamental attitudes” deserves to be discussed in depth. As early as in 1961, Mosse had laid a considerable stress on the anti-bourgeois components of fascism. Fascists agitate “against bourgeois morality”<sup>882</sup>, he wrote, and he confirmed this conviction in 1977, in the same interview where he depicted the new man of national socialism as the “ideal bourgeois”: here fascism is a “revolt of youth

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881 Emilio Gentile, “A Provisional Dwelling. Origin and Development of the Concept of Fascism in Mosse's Historiography”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 100-102. See also Gentile's “L'uomo nuovo' del fascismo. Riflessioni su un esperimento totalitario di rivoluzione antropologica”, in Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*. Laterza, Roma-Bari 2002, 235-264

882 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 352

against the bourgeois in the name of the bourgeois”.<sup>883</sup> Moreover, even in his writings of the 1980s and 1990s, when Mosse's linkage of bourgeois respectability and mass murder was at its most extreme, he did not fully identify fascist respectability with bourgeois respectability, seeing a “substantial identity between bourgeois respectability and fascism”. An example from his 1996 *The Image of Man* can be telling in this regard. Highlighting the influence of the Great War in exalting the “warrior elements of masculinity” which informed the “new fascist man”, Mosse clearly says that “the emphasis on action was supposed to distinguish the new man from the bourgeois, associated in the fascist mind with passivity cynicism, and decadence”.<sup>884</sup> Here Mosse stresses the anti-bourgeois élan of fascism, separating fascist respectability from bourgeois respectability. Concluding the chapter, Mosse states this idea with conviction:

“the new fascist or National Socialist man, then, was not so new after all. Most of his basic traits were shared with normative masculinity, but he extended them, giving them an aggressive and uncompromising cast as an essential tool in the struggle for dominance. There is, surely, a world of difference between the clean-cut Englishman, the all-American boy, and the ideal member of the SS. Yet all shared essentially the same masculine stereotype with its virtues, strength, and aesthetic appeal, whether it was restrained, nonviolent, and even compassionate, or uncompromising, ready to do battle by all means at hand. Fascism, and especially National Socialism, demonstrated the awesome possibilities inherent in modern masculinity when it was stripped down to its warlike functions.”<sup>885</sup>

The new man of fascism and the traditional (liberal) ideal bourgeois share the same stereotype, but there is “a world of difference” between them, there is no identity between the two in Mosse's mind. From this perspective, it seems to me that Mosse was aware of the “substantial difference between *respectability in civilian clothes* and *respectability in uniform*”, and that “the latter, rather than the former, was the ideal of fascist morality”. Mosse ended up stressing the “warlike” side of the new man: here his views underwent a significant change.<sup>886</sup>

Mosse's concept of the Nazi as the ideal bourgeois was not static: it developed, it evolved over the course of time and must be therefore analyzed in its dynamism. Three main nuances can be singled out: a) up to 1966, when Mosse still took into consideration the nihilistic streak of fascism; b) from 1966 to the late 1970s, a phase of transition which begins with the shift from nihilism to religion and

883 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 66

884 *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, op cit., 162

885 *Ibid.*, 180

886 Lorenzo Benadusi has hinted at fascism's difficulties at creating its “new man” according to the ideal of “respectability in uniform”, arguing that this was due, at least in part, “proprio al forte radicamento della rispettabilità borghese”. Lorenzo Benadusi, *Il nemico dell'uomo nuovo. L'omosessualità nell'esperimento totalitario fascista*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2005, 410



ends with the assertion that the new national socialist man was the “ideal bourgeois”; c) from the early 1980s onward, when Mosse revises, deepens and blunts this formulation. In the first phase, Mosse connected the Final Solution with nihilism: the transformation of values the latter furthered created a state ethics which had nothing to do with bourgeois values and allowed for mass murder. With the rejection of nihilism, only bourgeois morality seemed to be left to explain extermination. Thus Mosse must have found himself in a dilemma: he did not mean to directly blame bourgeois values, but since he had done away with nihilism, he needed a new, coherent explanation for the understanding of the Final Solution. In 1968 he wrote that the fascist revolution “got mired in the very middle-class values which it was supposed to fight”<sup>887</sup>; then nine years later, after having neglected the issue for almost a decade, he dealt with it again in the 1977 interview, where he stated that the ideal man of national socialism was the ideal bourgeois, but at the same time stressed the anti-bourgeois nature of fascism. This cohabitation of bourgeois and anti-bourgeois values was the sign of a new interpretation: the Final Solution was not the outcome of a nihilistic ethics, but rather the result of the corrosion and corruption of bourgeois values, which allowed for that “double morality”, for that “split personality” that Mosse had mentioned in the early 1960s, yet freed from nihilism and connected with a series of new themes and considerations.<sup>888</sup>

Indeed, this new attitude ran parallel with the new fields of study which interested Mosse at most in the late 1970s and 1980s, particularly the history of racism, of respectability and of the Great War. I believe that the mingling of these new interests had an impact on the “ideal bourgeois” assertion Mosse had made in 1977; what came out is, in my opinion, a view which is fairly close to Gentile's distinction between *respectability in civilian clothes* and *respectability in uniform*. In 1996 Mosse wrote:

“manliness could emphasize fair play or chivalry, and even Italian fascism did not go in for mass murder. It was racism that pushed National Socialism over the edge, it was the race war that led to the extermination of those whom Hitler had always seen as the principal enemies of the German people. Fascism heightened the warrior qualities of masculinity; racism brutalized them and transformed theory and rhetoric into reality.”<sup>889</sup>

We find here racism, which Mosse analyzed in depth in the late 1970s, as the key element which pushes

887 “Fascism and the Intellectuals”, op. cit., 225

888 This corruption was entailed in the logic of the “permissible exception”: as Igor Golostock has written about the claim that the ideal Nazi was the “ideal bourgeois”, “this would indeed have been so but for the fact that under totalitarianism these universal values had acquired a new meaning: devotion meant blind faith in the Führer, optimism meant a thoughtless, uncritical attitude to the present, a readiness to make sacrifices meant murder of betrayal, love meant hatred, honor meant informing. The *exceptional* was put forward as the normal and typical. The 'new man' thus had many faces and was omnipresent ... If one is to say that he was the 'ideal bourgeois', then one must add 'of the new type'”. This passage, taken from Igor Golomstock's *Totalitarian Art*, New York 1990, is cited in Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-1945*, op. cit., 198-200 [my italics]

889 *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, op cit., 180

national socialism to the extreme. The “warrior qualities” of masculinity had, in turn, been furthered by the First World War, the historian's main focus during the 1980s and early 1990s. Bourgeois respectability, on the other hand, did not lead directly to mass murder: it surely helped to create the outsider stereotype, to draw a line between “normal” and “abnormal”, it provided nationalism and fascism with a “cement” which gave society cohesion, but bourgeois respectability was not fascist respectability. The statement Mosse had made in the mid-1970s, that the Nazi was the ideal bourgeois, has been overcome through the investigation of new fields of study, and the formulation of the Nazi as the “ideal bourgeois” is, significantly, not to be found anymore in Mosse's writings.

In my opinion, Mosse's interpretation is not in discordance with Gentile's clear distinction between *respectability in civilian clothes* and *respectability in uniform*. “The First World War posed a new challenge to respectability – Mosse wrote in 1982 – To be sure, the so-called generation of 1914, those who rushed to volunteer, articulated their concern for moral purity as opposed to the wanton decadence of bourgeois society. The danger to respectability came from the reinvigorated cult of youth and beauty ... but it came from another direction as well – from the peculiar nature of the war itself”<sup>890</sup>. The war, Mosse says, helped create a new feeling of community expressed through the *Männerbund*: its members

“demanded a continual struggle for power and showed a certain indifference to the demands of respectability ... Fascism based itself on the continuity of the war into peacetime and presented itself as a community of men ... The quest for continued war in peacetime waged by such a new race of men might easily leave respectability a casualty on the battlefield. Fascism, in reaching for power, had to be on its guard. It needed these former front-line soldiers in order to wage civil war against parliamentary government, and it sought to represent their ideals and aspirations. But it was also dependent to an ever greater extent upon the support of the bourgeoisie, who wanted to see a restoration of order and morality. The more so as Italian fascism and National Socialism came to emphasize their role as political and parliamentary parties.”<sup>891</sup>

Thus fascism in both Italy and Germany shared the “basic need to maintain respectability” as well as “the need to tame the putschist mentality, the rough and ready manners of squadristas or storm troopers, which helped to initiate these fascist movements”.<sup>892</sup> Once the struggle for power had ended, “any ambivalence about the predominance of bourgeois morality” had ended too.<sup>893</sup> Respectability comes then, in Mosse's interpretation, to represent the taming element in opposition to the dynamism

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890 *Nationalism and Sexuality. Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, op. cit., 154

891 *Ibid.*, 154-155

892 *Ibid.*, 157

893 *Ibid.*, 159

of nationalism and racism: this fact implied an ambiguity which was “based upon the Nazi wish to be dynamic and virile but also respectable, to attack the bourgeoisie for their formlessness and hypocrisy while nevertheless maintaining bourgeois values.”<sup>894</sup> Racism and nationalism, Mosse concludes, were not inevitably connected with respectability, yet they used it to their own purposes. However, “it would be wrong to judge respectability simply by the use racism or fascism made of it. One must not assess a system of thought and behavior solely by its abuses.”<sup>895</sup> What Mosse is referring to, in connection with racism and fascism, is not respectability itself, but rather its “abuse”. This means that if an association is to be made, as far as Mosse's interpretation of the Final Solution is concerned, this association is not directly that with bourgeois respectability, but that with its “corrosion”, with its “corruption”, with its “abuse”.

### ***The “New Man” Between Myth and Reality***

The picture I have drawn is further enriched by Mosse's writings and lectures on the “new man”, a theme which occupied him ever more in the 1980s and 1990s. Here the connection between this “new man” and “respectability in uniform” is strong, and his distance from the “ideal bourgeois” grows somewhat bigger. Mosse's study of the First World War and its consequences on society is a vital element for his understanding of the fascist “new man”. In 1990, *Fallen Soldiers* was published.<sup>896</sup> The book deals with the “myth of the war experience”, it is an analysis of the political impact of the mass death experienced during the war, which drastically changed man's attitudes toward death itself. This process led to the brutalization of nationalism and racism, opening a new phase in their histories where violence could become a means to any end. The “myth” of the war numbed its reality, it transcended and transfigured it, war and violence became associated with sacrifice in the name of a higher cause: the “cult of the fallen soldier” is now the central element of the civic religion of nationalism. The period of the French Revolution is once again crucial: it is here that a new kind of soldier, linked to the nation and ready to sacrifice for it, is born.<sup>897</sup>

Now the war awakens great expectations among the youth, offering the possibility to manifest one's virility, and consolidating the ideas of comradeship and community.<sup>898</sup> A revolution aimed at the creation of a “new man” who was supposed to stand against bourgeois society seemed at hand. The brutalization of life and politics brought about by the war rendered violence against the enemy

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<sup>894</sup> *Ibid.*, 180

<sup>895</sup> *Ibid.*, 191

<sup>896</sup> George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, op. cit.

<sup>897</sup> To Mosse, the Napoleonic wars lie at the core of the relationship between the origins of nationalism and brutalization: this relation is a “basic question about the consequences of national identity.” “Nationalism and War”, cit.

<sup>898</sup> The war had played a vital role in deepening the sense of community. This aspect is analyzed by Mosse in his “The Community in the Thought of Nationalism, Fascism, and the Radical Right”, in *Confronting the Nation. Jewish and Western Nationalism*, op. cit. 49

acceptable, numbing the reality of death and leading to the dehumanization of the enemy. It was the Great War, Mosse had argued as early as in 1975, that led to Holocaust morality.<sup>899</sup> Indeed, years later, he stressed once again, and more organically, the link between war and the Final Solution: the slaughter of 1914-1918 had brought to many numbing before mass death, brutalization, an enhanced sense of camaraderie and an exasperation of the concept of masculinity, as well as a total lack of compassion at the service of one's cause.<sup>900</sup>

All this has a direct relevance for the question of “respectability in civilian clothes” and “respectability in uniform”. The war had enhanced the ideal of manliness as well as its militarization: these were strongly anti-bourgeois values which entered into the idea of the fascist new man. The fascist ideal of manliness, Mosse holds, was “built upon the Great War”, and wartime camaraderie “was for all of fascism the paradigm of society and the state”.<sup>901</sup> Mussolini's new man “lived in a state of permanent war”, which was exemplified by the “constant wearing of uniforms”, the continuous marches, the emphasis put on physical exercise, on camaraderie and on discipline: the “warrior elements of masculinity” were central to fascism.<sup>902</sup> The “new man” is a soldier whose idea has been forged during the Napoleonic Wars, and the Great War has only hardened the stereotype. Ideas of force, violence, aggressiveness, battle, decisiveness, lack of compromise inform this man who is a “fighter and warrior”<sup>903</sup>. He speaks a “soldierly language”<sup>904</sup>, and appears preferably in military uniform and in action: the Duce as warrior reveals the “true nature of the 'new Italian'”.<sup>905</sup>

Such a view of the “new man” takes in full consideration its anti-bourgeois elements. The emphasis on action, Mosse wrote, “was supposed to distinguish the new man from the bourgeois”: there is a constant tension between manliness and bourgeois respectability.<sup>906</sup> The new man, be it the ideal of the right or of the left, or even the “new Jew” envisaged by Zionism, is “gegen das Etablierte, ... das sogenannte Bürgerliche”<sup>907</sup>: he is opposed to bourgeois complacency, self-satisfaction, he rejects the lifestyle of settled society and the weakness of bourgeois family life.<sup>908</sup> However, all this remained confined to the ideal and never became reality: the “new man” was never created, in spite of the efforts made by fascism, national socialism or communism to breed him. Indeed, Mosse spoke of

899 Reported by “The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle”, 9 October 1975

900 George L. Mosse, “L'Olocausto, la morte e la memoria della guerra”, in *La grande guerra e il fronte interno. Studi in onore di George Mosse*, op.cit., 9-19

901 *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, op cit., 155 and 158

902 *Ibid.*, 160-2. For Mosse's view of the “new man”, see particularly George L. Mosse, “Die Idee des 'neuen Mannes' in modernen revolutionären Bewegungen”, *Mitteilungen der Magnus-Hirschfeld-Gesellschaft*, Nr. 14, December 1989; “New Man”, lecture given at Cornell University, 1994-1995, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 27; Leo Baeck Institute; “New Man”, undated lecture, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 29; Leo Baeck Institute; *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, op cit., 155-181

903 “New Man”, lecture given at Cornell University, cit.

904 “New Man”, lecture, cit.

905 “New Man”, lecture given at Cornell University, cit.

906 *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, op cit., 162-167

907 “Die Idee des 'neuen Mannes' in modernen revolutionären Bewegungen”, op. cit., 9

908 “New Man”, lecture given at Cornell University, cit.

the “development inherent in the idea of the 'new man' ... but in reality the role of the 'new man' endowed with all the proper middle class virtues remained predominant – and even in fascism he did not follow the image of the nietzschean superman”.<sup>909</sup> Mosse drew a distinction between the new man of the bourgeoisie and the revolutionary (fascist, nationalist or communist) new man, basing it on the concept of manliness. The former corresponded to the liberal model, according to which manliness meant bodily health, good looks, hardness and sexual purity. In England, Mosse said, rules like chivalry, fair play or the protection of the weak counted: the nationalist new man broke them instead. In Germany, in spite of some exceptions, the new man had “sharper edges” than his English counterpart.<sup>910</sup> Mosse was aware of the distinction between “respectability in civilian clothes” and “respectability in uniform”, and he underlined the great difference that ran between the bourgeois and the fascist image of manliness: “any extreme – he said – had no place in bourgeois society”.<sup>911</sup> A distinction must be drawn between public and private life: in private life, the image of the true man did “not concentrate upon war or aggression”: the bourgeois adopts

“the heroic laundered for middle-class use ... Obviously many of the bourgeoisie accepted the 'new man' in their private life as revolutionary movements saw him, but it is more likely that in practice masculinity became centered on looks and health restraining the basic idea of dominance and sharpness which were only latently present. This is, I think, a matter of emphasis, of adjustment to the necessities of middle-class life such as the family which the 'new man' as representative of a movement or nation had spurned or consigned to a minor place in his life.”<sup>912</sup>

Thus the ideal remained unfulfilled, and this happened because bourgeois respectability tamed the new man's dynamism, which threatened to undermine bourgeois morals. The morality of the new man then became “nothing else but the bourgeois morality”<sup>913</sup>, and Mosse could speak of the “embourgeoisement of the 'new man'”. However, though respectability tamed the new man's warlike qualities, this “embourgeoisement” remained a “complex process”: hard features of masculinity were indeed retained, but this happened only in public life, and when the enemy was involved.<sup>914</sup> Mosse believed in “modern society's apparent need for an enemy”: this entailed a clear distinction between the private and the public sphere. Traditional, liberal bourgeois morality applied to the former, while the latter was easily corrupted in that process of self-definition of society Mosse had focussed on in his works on the social dimension of sexuality and respectability. Indeed, Mosse said, masculinity

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909 *Ibid.*

910 *Ibid.*, particularly the lecture by the title “New Man, New Woman, and the Bourgeoisie”

911 *Ibid.*

912 *Ibid.*

913 “New Man”, lecture, cit.

914 “New Man”, lecture given at Cornell University, cit.

sharpened before the enemy, and yet these are “figments of the imagination, flights of fancy, while in reality the masculine image seemed to have lost some of its contours as it ceased to be representative of movements or nations and became part of daily life.” Thus the “hard side” of masculinity was retained only in the public sphere (movements or nations) and not in the private one (daily life).<sup>915</sup>

### ***Concluding Remarks: The “Ideal Bourgeois” Reconsidered***

The picture of the “new man” as drawn by Mosse since the late 1980s is considerably in contrast with his previous assertion about the “ideal bourgeois”. Now the “new man” is profoundly anti-bourgeois, but since the fascist revolution “got mired in the very middle-class values which it was supposed to fight”, this new man was never created, and bourgeois respectability had the upper hand on him. However, things change when man is confronted with exceptional situations: here the dialectic inherent in the cohabitation of bourgeois and anti-bourgeois values in fascism fully emerges. The Final Solution becomes the stage where the Nazi “split personality” plays its part. If in the 1960s Mosse opposed the “bourgeois side” to the “nihilistic side” of this personality, now the dichotomy is between the bourgeois side and its corruption: society's need for cohesion and the Great War had stretched respectability to the extremes, disfiguring its original traits and transforming it into a *respectability in uniform*. Once again, the individual has been crushed by the needs of larger entities: from the necessities of the State to those of society. However, here Italian fascism and national socialism took two different paths, since Italy had no Holocaust. Mosse focussed mainly on Germany, though his analysis of the “new man” included his Italian version; yet the most striking contrast was that between bourgeois respectability and mass murder.

As Steven Aschheim has written, Mosse's picture of Nazism as the

“most extreme defender of bourgeois morality ... is far removed from Rauschning's nazi nihilists breaking all limits in a kind of Nietzschean ecstasy, or Thomas Mann's covenant with the demonic, or Ernst Nolte's portrayal of nazism as the ultimate naturalistic revolt against bourgeois transcendence. Mosse's nazi is a corrupted middle-class man intent on cleansing his world and preserving it against what he perceives to be anti-bourgeois forces of degeneration. The so-called euthanasia programme against the handicapped, the insane, and the criminal; the persecution and murder of homosexuals, gypsies, and communists; and the 'final solution' – all represent not so

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<sup>915</sup> “New Man”, lecture, cit. On this bases, I do not share Gentile's criticism that Mosse would have neglected the fact that *respectability in uniform* was incompatible with the private dimension of bourgeois culture. Instead, Mosse drew a clear distinction between the private and the public dimension of respectability, differentiating their concepts of manliness and their attitudes toward respectability. For Gentile's argument, see “L'uomo nuovo' del fascismo. Riflessioni su un esperimento totalitario di rivoluzione antropologica”, op. cit., 239

much a challenge to or the antithesis of the bourgeois experience but, rather, an extreme, corrupted version of it.”<sup>916</sup>

Aschheim defines Mosse's thesis about the “potentially murderous” nature of bourgeois morality as containing a “suggestive insight”, yet he calls for “more detailed discussion” since “bourgeois *Sittlichkeit*, after all, while often illiberal, was seldom genocidal and it is surely in the processes of corruption and radicalization that such a transformation was engendered.”<sup>917</sup> Racism too, Aschheim continues, is not necessarily murderous and the German variant ought to be carefully examined. Then he writes that

“knowledge of perpetrator motivation is, of course, always very much a speculative affair, but it seems to me that, at some, however remote, level of consciousness the conceivers and perpetrators of the Holocaust and associated atrocities were aware of the transgressive, taboo-breaking – that is, the highly 'unbourgeois' – nature of their acts. The analysis of these corrupting and transformative processes, these transgressive impulses, would, I believe, bring out the dual moment within nazism itself: the combination of bourgeois and radical anti-bourgeois elements (Mosse himself brilliantly demonstrated these in *The Crisis of German Ideology*). Precisely in the combination of and tension between these elements, in the fusion of the conventional and the extraordinary, could nazism transcend middle-class morality at the same time that it embodied it. Whatever future research will bring, however, Mosse has performed a valuable service in alerting us to these important middle-class dimensions of the nazi experience.”<sup>918</sup>

According to Aschheim, Mosse “has demonstrated that such stifling discourses of normative conformity are also potentially murderous”.<sup>919</sup> The “dual moment” within Nazism Aschheim refers to corresponds to Mosse's concept of “double morality”, of the “Nazi split personality”. If Mosse did not properly identify murder and bourgeois respectability he surely saw a robust connection between the two, although he was fully aware that bourgeois respectability and fascist respectability did not coincide. From this perspective, national socialism did not draw a distinctive line between respectability in civilian clothes and respectability in uniform: rather, it dialectically embodied both in the “double standard of morality” of what Mosse called “Nazi split personality”.

One can consider Mosse's interpretation of the “bourgeois side of the Holocaust” either as a seriously meant conviction or as a series of assertions embodying a considerable degree of conscious

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916 “George Mosse at 80: A Critical Laudatio”, op. cit, 304-305

917 *Ibid.*, 305

918 *Ibid.*, 305-306

919 *Ibid.*, 306

provocation. Aschheim notices that if Mosse, in *Nationalism and Sexuality*, had adopted a critical attitude toward bourgeois respectability,

“the last paragraph of that book hinted at the profundity of the dilemma, at the conviction that 'respectability' was, indeed, built into the very structure of our societies. 'What began as bourgeois morality in the eighteenth century', Mosse concluded, 'in the end became everyone's morality'. That being so, Mosse has defined his task as producing a critical recognition – not a fundamental subversion – of this reality. As he puts it, 'I like to provoke, to break taboos – but purely theoretically ... to get people to think, not in the practice of daily life'. Once in conversation he perplexedly wondered if it were at all possible to imagine a world, a society, run along lines qualitatively different from those enshrined in this normative bourgeois morality. After a short silence, he concluded, sadly but firmly, that it was not.”<sup>920</sup>

Aschheim's reflections and personal recollections seem to gather evidence which points at the “provocation thesis”. Had Mosse believed that “everyone's morality”, that is, bourgeois morality, was genocidal, he would not have changed the conclusion to “Toward a General Theory of Fascism” in its 1999 revised version, writing that in the exclusion of outsiders at the hands of normative society “fascism trod on familiar ground with, in case of Germany, one all important difference: in the quest for utopia the asocials were to be killed, exterminated, a procedure which settled, respectable society rejected. Indeed, the Nazis felt that the extermination process had to be kept a dark secret.”<sup>921</sup> Like *The Holy Pretence*, all his books, on the other hand, had been written “also to stimulate some debate”<sup>922</sup>, and I think that *Toward the Final Solution*, *Nationalism and Sexuality* and *The Image of Man* were no exceptions to this rule.

However, the criticisms of Mosse's connection of mass murder and bourgeois morality highlight an important feature of his work: he usually opened new scenarios, offered new insights into neglected fields of study, but the pioneering and provoking nature of his works left him off guard when confronted with systematic analysis of the phenomena he was analyzing.<sup>923</sup> As far as the distinction between respectability in uniform and respectability in civilian clothes is concerned, for example, Mosse never took the trouble to specify, to draw a distinctive line in an explicit manner. Rather, he did so implicitly. He could make a strong assertion about the Nazi as the ideal bourgeois, and then blunt it without feeling the need to get back to it and analyze its implications or its nuances. One

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920 *Ibid.* The quote of Mosse's cited by Aschheim is taken from *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit.

921 *The Fascist Revolution*, op. cit., 43

922 George L. Mosse, letter to Professor Daniel J. Boorstin, 21 November 1958, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 14; folder 29; Leo Baeck Institute.

923 In this regard, see Saul Friedländer's observations in his “Mosse's Influence on the Historiography of the Holocaust”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 134-147



can argue about whether he was simply provoking, or expressing his firm convictions, or if the truth lies somewhere in the middle; here I have given just one possible interpretation, however convincing I may find it. Yet what counts is, in the end, what has been the contribution Mosse has given to our understanding of national socialism and the Final Solution. The importance of the role played by bourgeois values in this regard has been highlighted as a distinctive contribution by most of his critics (including Emilio Gentile who, despite some disagreements, highly appreciated Mosse's insights). As Robert Nye has written, Mosse's "pioneering use of race and sexuality as categories that permitted the national community to define itself in the process of identifying racial and sexual 'others' has been widely taken up by historians and anthropologists of nationalism, sexuality, and gender and by students of both imperial and postcolonial societies".<sup>924</sup>

Concluding these reflections on the link Mosse established between the Nazi double standard of morality and mass murder, it is necessary to touch briefly upon the problem of the "normality" of the executioners. Rabid racists like Himmler were the minority: indeed, the Final Solution had to remain a "dark secret". Yet Himmler himself saw no contradiction between murder and decency, though he was aware that most people would not have understood: "to have stuck it out and, apart from exceptions caused by human weakness, to have remained decent, that is what has made us hard. This is a page of glory in our history which has never been written, and is never to be written."<sup>925</sup> Many, if not most of the people who carried out the executions were "ordinary people", as Christopher Browning has shown<sup>926</sup>, and even some of the planners were not monsters, as Hannah Arendt held in her book on the Eichmann trial.<sup>927</sup> Hitler himself was no deviant, Mosse said: he was "normal".<sup>928</sup>

However, Mosse did not agree with Arendt when she defined Eichmann's evil as "banal": "his evil was not 'banal', but instead he denied evil altogether in the Christian meaning of the term as it applied to the enemy"<sup>929</sup>. Years later, Mosse explained better what he meant:

"I think this isn't the banality of evil as Hannah Arendt calls it. It's difficult to think of another title, but it is in a way an evil threatening the twentieth century pushed to its extreme. I think there is nothing banal about it. I don't think people like Höss thought of it as banal. They

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924 Robert Nye, "Mosse, Masculinity, and the History of Sexuality", in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 197-8

925 Heinrich Himmler quoted in Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, The Viking Press, New York 1963, 92

926 Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York, Harper Collins, 1992. Browning's analysis is, however, circumscribed to a limited battalion, and a wider historical perspective in this field is yet to come.

927 *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, op. cit. Arendt writes: "the murderers were not sadists or killers by nature; on the contrary, a systematic effort was made to weed out all those who derived physical pleasure from what they did"; "the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal." *Ibid.*, 93 and 253

928 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 67

929 "The Problem of National Socialist Morality", in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

thought – as in Himmler's famous speech – we've seen all these corpses and we still remain strong. They also thought of it as an extreme situation. So I think Hannah Arendt was not right in calling it the banality of evil, but certainly she was quite right in pointing out that these SS were not what are commonly called monsters. With one part of their being they were good neighbors, good wives, good husbands.”<sup>930</sup>

The Jews, on the other hand, cannot be blamed – Mosse says - for not having opposed enough resistance, as Arendt claimed when she criticized the role of the *Judenräte*: according to Mosse, most Jews came from a liberal background, and they could not understand what was going on, and here Arendt failed, because the Jews who collaborated with the Nazis (those of the *Judenräte*) were prisoners of a myth, they were liberals who shared a liberal morality and could not believe what was happening, if they ever understood it at all<sup>931</sup>, “so I do not think you can fault the Jews. I mean the Jews were caught up in their myth, as Eichmann was caught up in his myth, and Hitler in his, and these would never meet ... The story of Anne Frank is really the story of a lasting middle-class myth in an extreme situation”.<sup>932</sup>

If the Jews could not believe what was happening, this was also because national socialism had, in the beginning, preserved a “respectable” façade, showing its real face only later. The fact that most Nazis were “normal” people surely did not help the Jews (and all other outsiders like homosexuals or Gypsies) understand the danger they were in. Mosse vividly remembered his own family's misjudgment of Hitler, who was not taken seriously, and this must have helped him understand the victim's psychology as far as the perception of the Nazis was concerned. Mosse's critique of bourgeois society was set within definite limits. His work was not an indiscriminate attack against that respectability which had made him a refugee and an outsider. Rather, it was a warning to the dangers that such respectability, when pushed to the extreme in a situation of crisis, can bring. His life has been a constant effort at learning from the experience of his generation, and at transmitting this learning through his writings and his lectures. His “mission” was to transmit his concern with the dignity of individual, a concern closely tied to his own life as a “double outsider”. If the history of respectability, sexuality and the Holocaust “reconciled” him with one side of this outsiderdom, the study of Jewish history served to approach, expand and develop the other side of his identity.

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930 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 74

931 “The Problem of National Socialist Morality”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

932 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 76

## CHAPTER VII

### THE “MISSION OF JUDAISM”

“My journey to Jerusalem began in slow motion, picked up steam,  
and soon became one of the most meaningful involvements of my life.  
This does not mean that I approved of the Israeli government and its policies;  
I was a supporter of 'peace now' from the very beginning.  
But when the state was in mortal danger I rallied to its defence.”<sup>933</sup>  
(George L. Mosse)

“If we do not succeed in giving nationalism a human face,  
a future historian might write what Edward Gibbon wrote  
about the fall of the Roman Empire: that at its height  
moderation prevailed and citizens had respect for each other's beliefs,  
but that it fell through intolerant zeal and military despotism.”<sup>934</sup>  
(George L. Mosse)

Giving a speech at a Jewish organization, Mosse once said that, if he hadn't been a Jew in Germany at the time of Hitler, his life would have been totally different, and he would have just remained a “spoiled brat”. Thus he felt, he admitted, “perversely a kind of gratitude” for his Jewishness.<sup>935</sup> However, there is much more he felt about that. His Jewish identity marked not only his personal life, but had a momentous impact on his scholarship as well: as he wrote, his experience in Jerusalem was a “milestone in my personal and intellectual growth”<sup>936</sup>. As we have seen, the anthropological and visual turn which gave his cultural history its peculiar, pathbreaking trait had deep roots in the intellectual tradition where he belonged, that of the German-Jewish intellectuals; moreover, his view of fascism as a form of heightened nationalism (another outcome of the methodological turn) is necessarily indebted also to his involvement in Israeli cultural and political life. Once again, the 1960s come to the fore as the decade which most affected Mosse's scholarship and his mature life: it is here that he, inspired by his restless students, began his voyage into that Jewish universe he was still, though almost unconsciously, part of.

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<sup>933</sup> *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 200

<sup>934</sup> George L. Mosse, “Friendship and Nationhood: About the Promise and Failure of German Nationalism”, *The Journal of Contemporary History* 17 (2), 1982, 365

<sup>935</sup> George L. Mosse, “Hillel Talk”, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 31; Leo Baeck Institute

<sup>936</sup> *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 186

Mosse's first works on the Jews came about early, that is, in the late 1950s, but they were studies in German history. Even his definition of national socialism as an “anti-Jewish revolution” had little to do with Judaism itself. It was in the 1970s that he began investigating his own roots. His own family had been, in Berlin, part of the German-Jewish elite. This elite was traditionally liberal-oriented and fond of culture and art; as Mosse said, “the last voice of liberalism, tolerance, and pluralism in Germany is to be found in Jewish newspapers and writings in the Third Reich”.<sup>937</sup> Yet these liberals failed to grasp the essence of mass politics and irrationality: their idealism was too detached from political realities, their attachment to culture and *Bildung* blinded them to the reality of political necessities. His father – Mosse recalled – did not take Hitler seriously, believing that he belonged to the comic supplement of the newspaper.<sup>938</sup> He was imprisoned in his “Enlightenment worldview”, and tried to fight irrationality logically, an attitude shared by “many, perhaps most Jews of his standing”.<sup>939</sup> With such an example before his eyes, Mosse searched for a way to combine the values he belonged to with the necessities of reason of state. Here Casuistry came to the aid: just as the Divines of Mosse's early works had attempted to do, so should men and women of today: the goal is the finding of a balance between ideals and reality. This implied, in Mosse's case, the realization that the “new politics” was needed as a framework for furthering humanistic values. The experience in Jerusalem, in forcing Mosse to confront his own emotions before Jewish nationalism, pushed him toward the search for a balance between reason and irrationality, thus advocating a “new Casuistry” which adopted those liturgical elements of politics which Mosse had so far regarded as the main enemies of the dignity of the individual. Emotion “tempered by reason”<sup>940</sup> was the recipe Mosse suggested in order to accomplish the task of humanizing nationalism as well as an ever more inhumane world: this was, in his eyes, the “true mission of Judaism”<sup>941</sup>.

### ***George Mosse, Zionism and the Reality of Israel***

One day, when the Mosse family still lived in Berlin, the young Gerhard expressed the wish to become a rabbi. His father had the chauffeur take him to that part of Berlin where the non-assimilated Jews from eastern Europe lived and then asked him if he wanted to become like them. Gerhard, rather scared, replied that he did not, “of course”.<sup>942</sup> The assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie in Germany lived by Enlightenment ideas and values. Mosse's father considered everything which was irrational, including religion, a “humbug”, “without substance, nothing but smoke and mirrors”, and to him orthodox Jews

937 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 50

938 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 41

939 *Ibid.*, 42

940 “Nationhood and Diaspora”, cit.

941 *Ibid.*

942 *Ich bleibe Emigrant*, op. cit., 25

wearing prayer shawls had something of the Middle Ages about them.<sup>943</sup> Such an environment could hardly be affected by Zionist ideals: the members of the German-Jewish bourgeoisie conceived of themselves, as Mosse has put it, as both German Jews and Jews in Germany, without seeing any contradiction in that.<sup>944</sup> “I did not even know about the existence of Zionism until I had left Germany”, Mosse wrote in his memoir, and such a “lack of interest was typical for the vast majority of German Jews; indeed, my family remained hostile toward Zionism all of their lives ... I myself never doubted that I was German.”<sup>945</sup> And even though, as 1933 approached, Mosse slowly became more aware of his Jewishness, this “did not mean that I felt myself any less German”.<sup>946</sup>

During the Second World War, when Mosse was already in the United States, he held anti-Zionist speeches, motivated by the belief that England had to be helped win the war, while the Jews in Palestine were becoming increasingly hostile toward the British who were, at the time, trying to contain Jewish immigration in the area. “I was no Zionist, in any case, but instead thought that planting a Jewish colony in Palestine was asking for trouble”, Mosse recalled.<sup>947</sup> However, he admitted, he felt “happy that such a refuge exist”, which was a “sign of refugee mentality”, though he had even supported settlement in Ethiopia.<sup>948</sup> In 1947, when an agreement was reached under the aegis of the newly born United Nations about the division of Palestine into two states (one Jewish and one Arab), Mosse fiercely opposed this solution. In his opinion, the split would have had the only effect of balkanizing the area: the two states would not have remained “static”, Arabs and Jews would “want to expand into each other”, and would call for help to America and Russia, thus creating a situation very much similar to that in the Balkans at the time. The only way out, Mosse said, would be a unified Arab-Jewish state under the trusteeship of the United Nations.<sup>949</sup> Thus Mosse had by then accepted the idea of a Jewish settlement in Palestine, and now leaned toward a bi-national solution of the problem. Though he was no Zionist in 1948, he supported the Jewish State out of an emotional involvement affected by the shadow of the Holocaust and by the fact that seeing Jews fighting was an “experience” to him.<sup>950</sup>

In 1951, Mosse made his first trip to Israel, and was deeply impressed. From then onward, his attitude would change. In spite of the fact that he leads his deep involvement with Israel back to the 1960s and 1970s, he had already stated in the early 1950s that the newly born state of Israel represented

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943 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 27 and 42

944 *Ich bleibe Emigrant*, op. cit., 24. “My family, like most other Jewish families, considered themselves German without giving it another thought”, *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 43

945 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 43-44

946 *Ibid.*, 44

947 *Ibid.*, 187. To be sure, Mosse had attended as a spectator the Zionist Congress of 1935 at Basel, driven by the continuous difficulties and humiliations of his refugee life, of his being stateless. However, he was at the time too engaged in socialist antifascism to turn to Zionism, he recalled. “Response by George L. Mosse”, op. cit., xxvi

948 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 188

949 Mosse's speech at the Hillel Foundation. Reported by *The Daily Iowan*, 14 November 1947

950 Interview with *The Daily Cardinal*, 30 October 1972

a new model of individualistic socialism which could be compared to the Yugoslavian one in its difference from and opposition to the soviet system. Both countries embodied a new, enthusiastic form of nationalism which represented the hope for a different society. The kibbutz experience was a symbol for this, and Mosse contrasted it with Israel's party politics which sought to suffocate it in the name of reason of state. "Israel is here to stay, another new man has arrived to take his place in our civilization".<sup>951</sup>

In the early 1960s Mosse began his series of ever more frequent trips to Israel, first meeting members of German Jewish circles in order to gain new insights about the German Right and German nationalism (he was working at the *Crisis* book), and then establishing his first links with the Hebrew University. He became acquainted with Jewish intellectuals like Gershom Scholem and Jacob Talmon, and he was later introduced to a group of South African Habonim (the members of a Zionist youth movement) who introduced him to a Zionism "whose idealism – still strong and untainted – I found most attractive".<sup>952</sup> From the 1970s onwards, he began teaching the history of antisemitism and racism at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry as visiting professor, and in 1979 he became holder of the Koebner Chair in German history at the Hebrew University. Over the 1970s he lectured at "several of the educational institutions which trained young Zionist leaders"<sup>953</sup> This meant a deepening of his commitment to Zionism: his lectures were not propagandistic (these institutions were already Zionist), they were intended, as he put it, "to give some historical depth to this commitment".<sup>954</sup> However, his relationship to the Jewish state remained always "ambivalent"<sup>955</sup>. In a 1972 interview he stated that

"I still don't know whether I'm a Zionist or not – the word really has no meaning for me ... I became involved in Israel under the influence of my own studies and scholarly work. I came to the conclusion that it was vital for the Jews to have a homeland, largely because of past history, it is for that reason that I got involved. But I got involved much later than in 1948 after my study and work on Jewish history had led me to that conclusion."<sup>956</sup>

Then, in the early 1990s, he still claimed to be a Zionist "mit vielen Fragezeichen", since Zionism was torn between a humanistic patriotism with its intellectual origins in the thought of western European Jews, and a chauvinistic nationalism which came from east European Jews and whose outstanding

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951 George L. Mosse, "Israel", Iowa Lecture, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 46; Leo Baeck Institute. This lecture was given after Mosse's trip to Israel, which took place in 1951, and before Mosse left Iowa for Madison University in 1955.

952 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 189

953 Mosse refers to organizations as Habonim, Young Judaea, World Union of Jewish Students, to which he had been introduced by Steven Aschheim, a leading Habonim educator

954 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 192

955 *Ibid.*, 197

956 Interview with The Daily Cardinal, 30 October 1972

incarnation had been, in Mosse's eyes, Menachem Begin.<sup>957</sup>

Mosse's relationship to Israel was not based upon religion or upon a mystical love for the land, as he recalls in his memoir: "rather, a secular awareness of the Jewish fate in our century determined my basic attitude toward Israel, but beyond that also a love for the 'new Jew' and what he had accomplished. This love was stimulated by my awareness of the undesirable Jewish stereotype which has accompanied the Jews in modern times, and which most Jews in the diaspora (including myself) had internalized. This stereotype the Zionists had set out to abolish".<sup>958</sup> Mosse felt joy when seeing "sturdy", "self-confident" Jews, and was aware that such a feeling came out of a Jewish stereotype he had internalized: "I knew full well that this 'new Jew' represented a normalization, as assimilation to general middle-class ideals and stereotypes which otherwise I professed to dislike. But I could not help myself; faced with Zionist ideal my reason and my historical knowledge were overcome".<sup>959</sup>

To be sure, despite all the attraction Mosse felt toward Israel, he was also rather critical of her policies. In 1972 he stated in an interview:

"I think that it has to be a peace without much annexation. I believe that in the twentieth century it is not feasible for one nation to annex populated areas of another nation. Nor do I approve of one nation putting colonies of itself into populated areas of another. I believe also, quite strongly, that such a peace has to take the security of Israel into consideration. But I believe, as many people in Israel believe, that this security can be assured without any annexation."<sup>960</sup>

Long-term occupation, he continued, corrupts also the occupant in the long run, leading to a moral corrosion which is bound to endanger the Jewish State. Mosse did not express himself on the legitimacy of Israel: she now exists, this is a matter of fact and nothing can be done, he said, and went on asserting the necessity of a critical stance before Israel: American support for Israel is "institutionalized", "almost an article of faith", he lamented. "Critical support" is needed, since uncritical support is not helpful, and American Jews should understand this and back that part of the

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957 *Ich bleibe Emigrant*, op. cit., 115. Menachem Begin (1913-1992) was the leader of the Irgun, a militant Zionist group which operated in Palestine in the years before 1948. The group endorsed the use of force and violence to ensure the Jewish state, and was a political predecessor of the Likud party which in 1977, under the guide of Begin, won the political elections in Israel after a long period of Labour Party government.

958 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 190

959 *Ibid.* The stereotype Mosse had internalized was, in his own words, that of the "puny, weak, and ugly Jew", so he felt admiration for the "new Jew" he saw in Israel: "well built young Jews who carried their ethnicity openly and proudly without any of the mental contortions to which I was accustomed. Their looks and their normality seemed stunning in contrast to what I considered European Jewry". *Ibid.*, 198-199. See also other telling passages of the Memoir, especially pp. 124-125

960 Interview with *The Daily Cardinal*, 30 October 1972. Here Mosse expressed his favor to the Rogers Plan, which foresaw Israel's withdrawal from the areas occupied during the 1967 war (above all the West Bank and the Gaza strip) and the mutual recognition of the involved states' sovereignty and independence. The plan met with Israel's opposition and never became effective.

Israeli left which stands for peace as against the “status quo” party, the Likud.<sup>961</sup> A blind support for Israel's military and economic positions would only harm the country, he insisted in 1974<sup>962</sup> and in another long interview with *The Capital Times* he gave in 1979: “criticizing a country constructively is the higher form of patriotism”, Mosse concluded.<sup>963</sup> Here Mosse held fast to his belief in a federal solution, claiming that in the Palestinian case the principle of self-determination would be impossible and a Palestinian state would only make things worse and endanger Israel. And yet he drew a distinction between Israel's government and the people, lamenting the fact that the lively critical debate in the country was neglected by the foreign media, and claiming that the American Jewish community should have pressed for a Jewish-Arab dialogue instead of taking an uncritical stance which entailed a tacit support for Menachem's Begin policies, which Mosse opposed along with Golda Meir's, who should have solved the problem of the West Bank giving it back to Palestinians in some way: this had been, Mosse said, a “missed opportunity”.<sup>964</sup> However, Mosse's lasting opposition was that to the Likud party: “I oppose the Begin government”, he stated in 1980<sup>965</sup>, and in 1996 he expressed his preoccupation for Benjamin Netanyahu's electoral victory.<sup>966</sup> Mosse's commitment to the federal solution of the conflict would last into the 1990s, along with his conviction that power as well as the occupied land had to be given back to the Palestinians. Not to do this, he said in 1980, would destroy Israel ethically, morally and politically.<sup>967</sup> He remained, after all, “all for Peres' scenario of a federation between Palestine, Israel and Jordan”.<sup>968</sup>

### ***The Rediscovery of a German-Jewish Tradition***

Mosse's relationship to Zionism and, extensively, to Jewish culture has a long history and does not lend itself to a monocausal interpretive key. Shulamit Volkov has written that Mosse had a “great deal of circumspection” approaching the study of Jewish history: though Jews were “clearly on his mind” already in the 1960s, “he still kept his distance”: indeed, Mosse's first writings which touched

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961 *Ibid.*. Two years later Mosse defined the Likud party Israel's “greatest danger”. Reported by *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, 26 December 1974

962 Reported by *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, 26 December 1974

963 Reported by *The Capital Times*, 27 August 1979

964 *Ibid.* Golda Meir (1898-1978), first with the Mapai leftist party and then with the Israeli Labor Party, was Prime Minister of Israel from 1969 to 1974.

965 Reported by *The Argus* (Capetown), 1<sup>st</sup> August 1980. Begin's policies were, according to Mosse, based on hate (reported by *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 1982); he had been elected by Jews coming from Arab countries who hated Arabs, Mosse said, hinting at the persecutions these Jews had experienced there (reported by *The Capital Times*, 27 August 1979). Mosse also considered himself an “outspoken foe” of Begin's Lebanon policy: even though he approved of the annexation of southern Lebanon for security reasons, he denied its usefulness in combating the PLO, which could have regrouped anywhere else.

966 Reported by *The Capital Times*, 30 May 1996. Netanyahu (b. 1949) has been Prime Minister with the Likud Party from 1996 to 1999.

967 Reported by *The Argus* (Capetown), 1<sup>st</sup> August 1980

968 Reported by *The Capital Times*, 30 May 1996. Mosse refers to Shimon Peres (b. 1923), a left-wing Israeli politician, twice Prime Minister of Israel and then President since 2007.



upon the Jews were “still within the boundaries of German history”, and only gradually he started to deal with Jewish life itself, fundamentally since the 1970s.<sup>969</sup> Yet Volkov, in his article, does not investigate the reasons which led Mosse to the study of Jewish history. These reasons are the key to the understanding of Mosse's relationship with Jewish culture, and shed light on his political views as well. After all, his interest in Judaism was, by his own admission, animated by “political concerns”.<sup>970</sup> Such concerns are reflected on two levels: on the one hand, on the American political and social scene in the 1960s; on the other, on Israeli politics and nationalism.

Mosse tells us that it was young Americans who brought him closer to his roots: his family tradition, as we have seen, had been linked to what Mosse considered the “mission of Judaism”, that is, it promoted the idea of *Bildung* as self-cultivation as well as cosmopolitanism and rational attitudes toward life. This ideal of *Bildung* belonged to the German tradition, and when Mosse left Germany for England and, later, the United States, he immersed himself in another environment where he did not need to take an interest in this cultural heritage: in America, Mosse says, *Bildung* was an instrument of isolation rather than of integration as it had been the case in Germany during the age of Jewish emancipation (from the late 18<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> century), and at that point of his life he was in desperate need for integration.<sup>971</sup> The American New Left in the 1960s, attacking the dominant system of thought, awakened Mosse's “own consciousness to the lasting importance of the German-Jewish intellectual tradition”: these students in search for meaning in life became interested in that German-Jewish legacy which had expressed itself in the thought of left-wing Weimar intellectuals and had continued its impetus through the teachings of the Frankfurt School.<sup>972</sup> Intellectuals as Georg Lukàcs, Herbert Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer turned to Marxism, and they did so not toward its orthodox version, as embodied by the Soviet ideology, but rather in search for a left-wing identity which was the climax of the German-Jewish tradition of the Weimar years. This tradition emphasized the “ideal of a common humanity based upon *Bildung* and the Enlightenment as essential for the autonomy of the individual”.<sup>973</sup>

In 1985, Mosse published a book by the title *German Jews Beyond Judaism*.<sup>974</sup> In his autobiography, he has defined this work “my most personal book, almost a confession of faith”.<sup>975</sup> If his studies on fascism and nationalism represent the “dark side of my writings ... I have nevertheless been interested in what I consider the points of redemption of the human spirit, even if I did not discuss them in as

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969 Shulamit Volkov, “German Jewish History. Back To Bildung and Culture?”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 225

970 George L. Mosse, “The End is not Yet: A Personal Memoir of the German-Jewish Legacy in America”, *American Jewish Archives*, 40, no. 2, 1988, 200

971 *Ibid.*, 197

972 *Ibid.*, 198

973 *Ibid.*, 199

974 George L. Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, op. cit.

975 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 184

many articles and books”.<sup>976</sup> Mosse explains in his memoir his attempt to “recall above all the liberal and Enlightenment spirit which had given German Jewry a positive role within the constantly narrowing nationalistic universe”<sup>977</sup>; moreover, he also turned his attention to Marxism, not in its Bolshevik version, but in its connections with humanism, according to his

“dream of marrying socialism to liberalism; Marxist humanism substituted the power of reason for the violence of the class struggle, and put the autonomy of man into the center of socialism – man who was the end and must never become a means. Marxist humanism based itself on the Enlightenment ... Interest in this type of humanism revived in the 1960s as a result of books by Erich Fromm and the rediscovery of the thought of unconventional Socialists like Gustav Landauer. This was a humanistic instead of a Bolshevik Marx, one that was based on Kant rather than on Hegel.”<sup>978</sup>

In *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, however, Mosse does not only deal with left-wing intellectuals like Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle, Kurt Eisner, or Lukàcs, Adorno, Horckheimer, Walter Benjamin and Marcuse. Their attempt to give Marxism a human face, to make use of the critical mind in order to preserve the dignity of the individual belongs, according to Mosse, to a vaster, thought unconscious, attempt to preserve a heritage which “contained much of what was best and most noble in German culture ... it was the German-Jewish *Bildungsbürgertum* which, more than any other single group, preserved Germany's better self across dictatorship war, holocaust, and defeat”.<sup>979</sup> Here socialists were not alone: Mosse's book deals, as Jost Hermand has written, with four groups of German-Jewish intellectuals: apart from these socialists, there were popular writers as Stefan Zweig, Emil Ludwig and Berthold Auerbach; scholars as Sigmund Freud, Hermann Cohen, Aby Warburg or Ernst Cassirer; Zionists as Martin Buber, Robert Weltsch, Hans Kohn and Hugo Bergmann.<sup>980</sup> All these German-Jewish intellectuals believed in the individual as opposed to the mass, in the “critical use of reason”, in cosmopolitan views based upon humanistic values derived from Enlightenment ideas: extending a phrase Mosse used with regard to Socialist humanists, they shared a “categorical imperative centered upon man's dignity and his ability to control his own destiny”<sup>981</sup>. The underlying principle, common to all of them, was the belief in *Bildung*, the German ideal of self-cultivation to which Mosse has devoted

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976 *Ibid.*, 182

977 *Ibid.*

978 *Ibid.*, 183

979 *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, op. cit., 81-82

980 Jost Hermand, “German Jews Beyond Judaism: The Gerhard/Israel/George L. Mosse Case”, in Klaus Berghan (ed. by), *The German-Jewish Dialogue Reconsidered. A Symposium in Honor of George L. Mosse*, Peter Lang, New York, 1996, 242

981 George L. Mosse, “The Heritage of Socialist Humanism”, in Robert Boyers (ed. by), *The Legacy of the German Refugee Intellectuals*, Schoken, New York, 1972, 124. The article originally appeared in *Salmagundi*, Fall 1969/Winter 1970

numerous articles, lectures, as well as this very book.<sup>982</sup> As Anson Rabinbach has observed, Mosse himself “embodied the *Bildung* – cultivation – that was second nature to those thinkers and scholars who had been forced to flee Germany”<sup>983</sup>; Hermand, writing that “most German Jews had ... sworn allegiance to reason and self-cultivation, i.e., had seen themselves as adherents of the German Enlightenment”, defines the four categories of intellectuals cited above and says that “nothing is easier than to apply this thesis to George Mosse himself. He too is a popular writer in the best sense of the world, a German-Jewish scholar and *Bildungsbürger*, a cosmopolitan-minded left intellectual, as well as a Zionist committed to a humanistic, i.e., nonreligious universalism ... he has incorporated himself into this so lovingly portrayed tradition of German humanism”.<sup>984</sup>

This tradition, however, has been tainted in Germany, and Mosse had experienced this directly: “the concept of *Bildung* had meant to me simply the usual humanist education which in Germany conferred social status. But as I studied the origins of this concept I found it was far removed from the rote learning and strict obedience to rules laid down by teachers as I had experienced them during my brief time at a humanist Mommsen Gymnasium in Berlin”; indeed, according to Mosse, Germans have eventually co-opted *Bildung* to belief systems, “thus precluding an emphasis on individualism and open-endedness”.<sup>985</sup> It was German Jews who preserved that tradition which had characterized their emancipation at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: at the end of that century, while they were clinging fast to that ideal, nationalism in Germany was pushing toward a nationalization of *Bildung* which tended to exclude non-Germans from it. The same thing happened with that middle-class ideals based on respectability which Jews in Germany embraced in search for integration, and which was to be turned against them.<sup>986</sup> Most German Jews had turned to liberal ideals which had their bases in *Bildung* and the Enlightenment. Even Socialists as Kurt Eisner, Georg Lukàcs or those of the Frankfurt School, though rejecting capitalist society, embraced ideals which lay at the basis of liberalism, Mosse wrote, expressing his admiration for an intellectual as Carlo Rosselli who, showing a great realism, had claimed that the spirit of capitalism can be upheld only in a socialist society.<sup>987</sup>

Such ideas and ideals had fascinated American students in the 1960s. Herbert Marcuse had been

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982 *Bildung* is, Mosse says, “the shaping of one's self in order to become a harmonious, fully formed personality”, it entails rationality and a “continuous quest for knowledge”; above all, it is an “educational principle”. George L. Mosse, “Central European Intellectuals in Palestine”, *Judaism*, Issue 178, Vol. 45, No. 2, Spring 1996, 138. On this ideals, Mosse has written “Jewish Emancipation between *Bildung* and *Respectability*”, in Jehuda Reinharz and Walter Schatzberg (ed. by), *The Jewish Response to German Culture: From the Enlightenment to the Second World War*, University Press of New England, Hanover 1985; *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, op. cit.; “Das deutsch-jüdische Bildungsbürgertum”, in Reinhart Kosselleck (ed. by), *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert*, Teil II, Ernst Klett, Stuttgart, 1990; “The Universal Meaning of the Concept of *Bildung*”, *Zmanin* 16, No 61, 1997-1998.

983 Anson Rabinbach, “George L. Mosse 1919-1999: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 333

984 “German Jews Beyond Judaism: The Gerhard/Israel/George L. Mosse Case”, op. cit., 242-3

985 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 184

986 “Jewish Emancipation between *Bildung* and *Respectability*”, op. cit.

987 George L. Mosse, “German Jews and Liberalism in Retrospect”, in *Year Book XXXII*, Leo Baeck Institute, London 1987.

crucial in transmitting them, Mosse held: his *One-Dimensional Man*<sup>988</sup> laid the bases for a humanist foundation of socialism in its critique of a modern mass culture which brings alienation, coopting the critical mind through an established system of cultural domination. Only the “outsider” (students or members of the intelligentsia), from his vantage point outside the system, can rescue the individual through critical reason which, Mosse says, is based on *Bildung*.<sup>989</sup> Indeed, Mosse continues, Marcuse and the other philosophers of the Frankfurt School, though attacking liberalism (and the Enlightenment) and embracing a form of socialism, shared the ideological roots of the former in adopting the intellectual concepts of the German-Jewish tradition of *Bildung* and Enlightenment values and simply bringing this tradition at the service of socialism.<sup>990</sup> These intellectuals were part, in Mosse's view, of that German-Jewish tradition which had flourished in Weimar culture, one great object of interest for the students in the 1960s. However, these students did not realize the link with such heritage, and neither did they catch the connections with liberalism rather than those with Marxism, Mosse says. Nevertheless “the students made me think about the implications of this tradition, but political concerns led me to undertake this task.”<sup>991</sup> What were these political concerns? The answer lies in Mosse's ever growing involvement in Israeli cultural life and politics. In Jerusalem he had met with much debate about nationalism with a human face, which had played with the idea of a binational solution for the Jewish question in Palestine, and expressed itself in the peace movement. This led Mosse to think that “perhaps there was a certain German-Jewish tradition at work, which, if it could be rediscovered and articulated, might yet help to rehumanize modern nationalism”<sup>992</sup>. This was to become one of Mosse's main concerns over the decades to come, growing in importance and ever more absorbing the historian in what he considered the “mission of Judaism” but, extensively, of all humanity, and therefore of his life as well.

### ***Between Nationalism and Patriotism***

Mosse thought of Israel “in terms of nationalism”<sup>993</sup>: however, such an attitude could easily lead to a paradox. As he stated in a 1979 interview, “I think that all nationalism is bad. All my books are written against nationalism”, and yet in same interview he also claimed that “criticizing a country constructively is the higher form of patriotism”.<sup>994</sup> The great prosecutor of nationalism and

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988 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Beacon Press, Boston 1964

989 *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, op. cit., 62-63

990 *Ibid.* It is worth remembering here the influence that Harold Laski's attempt to balance Marxism and Liberalism had on Mosse, which has been mentioned in Chapter I.

991 “The End is not Yet: A Personal Memoir of the German-Jewish Legacy in America”, op. cit., 199-200. The “task” Mosse refers to is the writing of *German Jews Beyond Judaism*.

992 *Ibid.*, 200

993 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 200

994 Interview with The Capital Times, 27 August 1979

irrationalism, when faced with his own emotions toward Israel, found himself at a crossroad: how was he supposed to consider Israel's own nationalism? Did he have to condemn it as he had done with all other forms of this ideology? The answer can be found in the words he chose in that interview: he condemned nationalism, but he favorably considered patriotism. What was the difference between the two concepts? Here lies the importance the Israeli experience had in his historiography. As we have seen when we have analyzed the changing focus on nationalism in his interpretation of fascism, his concern with nationalism grew exponentially since the 1970s: this was also the result of his emotional and intellectual commitment to the state of Israel.

Addressing the meeting “The Teaching of Patriotism” in 1963, Mosse had spoken only about the dangers inherent in nationalism, only about its dark side.<sup>995</sup> Less than two decades later, he defined nationalism as both “a problem and an opportunity”<sup>996</sup>: now a more optimistic élan seems to motivate Mosse who, in the same years, asserted that “nationalism will not vanish; it fulfils legitimate hopes for community, for a richer life. Rather than calling for its abolition we should recall its potential, the hopes it once held in the midst of ever latent ideas of domination and assertions of superiority”.<sup>997</sup> In November 1995 Mosse delivered a lecture in Tel Aviv which, as he himself said, “expressed my own credo, a guarded optimism about nationalism”<sup>998</sup>: here Mosse observes that “nationalism is still very much alive ... [it] has remained largely intact, providing as it had done since its beginning, a congenial and well defined ideal of community.”<sup>999</sup> He then speaks of the attempt of a group of committed Zionists to create a “humanist nationalism ... to reconcile their deeply held nationalist commitment with their individualism, cosmopolitanism and pride in an open mind”<sup>1000</sup>: this humanist nationalism was based on the same ideals we have already met, and Mosse is referring to those Zionists he mentioned in *German Jews Beyond Judaism* and to all those who founded (in 1925) or joined the Brit Shalom (Covenant of Peace), a group of Jewish intellectuals dedicated to the creation of a bi-national Jewish-Arab state in Palestine. Most of its supporters came from central Europe, such as Arthur Ruppin, Hugo Bergman, Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, and Hans Kohn. These intellectuals sought to draw a line between a rightful and an unjust nationalism, in search for a community of all peoples, of all nations, defined by the inner moral nature of their members rather than by borders:

“nationalism based upon *Bildung* was not dependent upon power, but upon a shared culture, a shared fate and shared memories. Here nationalism is not a finished or self-contained product,

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995 George L. Mosse, “Nationalism and Patriotism”, cit. However, in 1961 he had stressed the liberal nature of English patriotism: *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), 61

996 George L. Mosse, “Nationhood and Diaspora”, cit.

997 George L. Mosse, “Friendship and Nationhood: About the Promise and Failure of German Nationalism”, op. cit., 352

998 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 201

999 “Can Nationalism be Saved? About Zionism, Rightful and Unjust Nationalism”, op cit., 7

1000 *Ibid.*, 7-8

instead national identity is considered an integral part of individual self-knowledge and self-development open to outside influences: after all, as Robert Weltsch put it, Jews had eagerly lapped up all the spiritual values which Europe had to offer (and Europe in this case meant Germany), while the symbiosis between the German liberal spirit and Jewish memory was among the most fruitful.”<sup>1001</sup>

This is the basis from which Central European Zionists attempt to help shape Zionism; here “there was no room for an aggressive nationalism in this mixture of classical liberalism, *Bildung* and – one must add – the recognition that Palestine was already inhabited, and that a Jewish national home, as they saw it, could only be built with the cooperation of two peoples.”<sup>1002</sup> Their nationalism is above all a cultural movement, and this lies at the roots of its failure: they dream the impossible, that is, to avoid force in an already occupied territory, and that the presence of the Arabs will offer the opportunity to show that coexistence is possible. “Their humanist nationalism proved impractical in the midst of a continuing war for survival and independence”, Mosse sadly states.<sup>1003</sup> Indeed, as the state of Israel was established, which did not occur as they had wished, their disappointment led some of them to leave the country, while others decided to stay and continue to fight for their ideals or, like Buber, remained in a kind of inner exile. These men, according to Mosse, were optimistic about the potential of man, and quite idealistic; this meant that they remained too detached from reality: “we are dealing, after all, with the existence of a powerful civic religion which unlike many traditional religions does not seem to have lost its political force. And if we study the thought of the men just mentioned, and are impressed by their lack of realism, then this itself might in the end prove to be their real strength: for men must dream before they can act.”<sup>1004</sup>

This lecture, significantly entitled “Can Nationalism be Saved?”, addressed the “promise of nationalism and not its negative implications”<sup>1005</sup>: it dealt with nationalism’s own dialectic between patriotism and chauvinism, that is, the core of the paradox Mosse found himself in. The solution lay at hand:

“to be sure, I advocated a Jewishness beyond Judaism, where I defined nationalism as patriotism, as a sense of solidarity, not as devotion to the land or geographical boundaries ... And yet, there was always a certain pull toward realism, to the feeling that if one did not belong to a strong

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1001 *Ibid.*, 16

1002 *Ibid.*, 17

1003 *Ibid.*, 20

1004 *Ibid.*, 24

1005 *Ibid.*, 8

nation one could slide back into the statelessness I had experienced. Thus, an emotional engagement always threatened that liberalism to which I tried to remain faithful. Such personal contradictions proved easier to bridge once I discovered the difference between nationalism and patriotism: patriotism could be cosmopolitan and opposed to aggression and domination, but nationalism usually left death and destruction in its wake.”<sup>1006</sup>

At a theoretical level, Mosse had found his solution to the paradox through the distinction between patriotism and nationalism: being nationalism impossible to eradicate, the task of the intellectual was that of giving it a human face. Mosse was continuing the tradition he described in his works. When he was writing about the “central European intellectuals in Palestine”, he was writing about himself. He like Buber, Kohn, Weltsch, Scholem or Bergman was in search for a nationalism which “meant a certain moral and ethical posture rather than a territorial demand”, which was based on the reform of the individual rather than on a belief system imposed from above.<sup>1007</sup> Zionism, for Mosse and his muses, must be above all “an educational enterprise” where *Bildung* and the university must occupy a central place: the aggressiveness of neo-romantic nationalism must be neutralized by liberalism and devotion to scholarship.<sup>1008</sup> After all, the Brit Shalom had had a considerable influence on the Hebrew University in Jerusalem where Mosse came to lecture, and Mosse had met many, and made friends with some of the intellectuals he referred to in his writings, from Buber to Scholem to Kohn. To them, the university had a definite aim, that of changing “the national conscience of the homeland in which they lived”<sup>1009</sup>: their task was that of humanizing nationalism, their liberalism, Mosse says, meant putting the individual at the center of nationalism, which could be reconciled with Enlightenment values; theirs was a “serious and conscious attempt to solve the dilemma of a nationalist commitment while at the same time retaining a belief in cosmopolitanism, liberalism, and compromise”.<sup>1010</sup>

This effort at preserving the humanistic component of nationalism inevitably met with a “growing disillusionment with Zionist reality”.<sup>1011</sup> A nation state has its needs, it necessitates reason of state to maintain itself, which cannot be exclusively done on utopian bases, and here, in excessive utopianism, lies the weakness of these intellectuals. Mosse was fully aware of this, since he had turned also to the study of the other side of Zionism. In 1967 he had written an article on the “influence of the Volkish idea on German Jewry”, showing how a small though significant part of the latter had been

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1006 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 191. Mosse had admitted an intellectual debt with a “school of German historians led by Rudolf Vierhaus, who had researched the beginnings of nationalism” before it turned towards ideas of superiority and aggression. *Ibid.* 182

1007 George L. Mosse, “Central European Intellectuals in Palestine”, *Judaism*, Issue 178, Vol. 45, No. 2, Spring 1996, 136

1008 *Ibid.*, 137-139

1009 *Ibid.*, 140

1010 *Ibid.*, 142

1011 *Ibid.*, 141

affected by ideals of community, *Bund*, of the “new man”.<sup>1012</sup> Mosse's attention to the thought of Max Nordau, a famous 19th-century Zionist leader, is telling in this regard. Nordau embodied the fear of modernity: he saw in nervousness and restlessness a threat to healthy, bourgeois life. Nordau, according to Mosse, had “internalized the Jewish stereotype” of the age: he criticized Jews who corresponded to that stereotype which bourgeois society had made its own.<sup>1013</sup> Thus he elaborated his ideal of a “new Jew” in opposition to those “decadent” Jews who were city-dwellers, over-refined and intellectual. The “new Jew” was supposed to embody manliness and discipline, he had to have a beautiful body combined with middle-class moral qualities; however, physical qualities had to predominate, and Nordau stressed the importance of work, activism, productivity and gymnastic, thus adopting a middle-class ideal of masculinity based on respectability and Greek beauty. This “muscle Jew” was needed for the survival of the Jewish people, for their regeneration.<sup>1014</sup> However, Mosse stressed Nordau's liberalism. His “new Jew” was adapted to liberal ends in the name of individual rights; his nationalism was based on altruism, it did not entail exclusiveness or hostility against other nations: “he not only exemplified the hopes and fears of the bourgeoisie of his time, but also, through his liberalism, attempted to humanize both nationalism and modern masculinity”.<sup>1015</sup>

And yet this stereotype of the “new Jew”, along with the “Volkish” traits of some Jewish nationalism, were part of that danger Mosse believed to be inherent in all nationalism. The liberal component of Nordau's thought became irrelevant, Mosse wrote, among the members of that Zionist Revisionist Movement which Begin's Irgun and the Likud Party referred to. Here the military values were glorified, the struggle for survival was everything.<sup>1016</sup> In the 1920s, Mosse said in a lecture, the Zionist hero could still be a mixture of ethical socialism and the practical need for defense, but after the founding of the State “the triumph of the tough Jews was a logical consequence of statehood under the circumstances, of the longing for normalization”, it was a “matter of physical security” much less, if at all, concerned with humane values which ever fewer people in Israel still thought worth fighting for.<sup>1017</sup> Even though the tradition of humanistic nationalism remained alive in Israel, the perpetual struggle the country had found itself in since its foundation in 1948 inevitably led to a corrosion of that heritage. Moreover, while people in Israel underwent this constant tensions, the Jews

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1012 George L. Mosse, “The Influence of the Volkish Idea on German Jewry”, Max Kreutzberger (ed. by), *Studies of the Leo Baeck Institute*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., New York 1967

1013 George L. Mosse, “Max Nordau, Liberalism and the New Jew”, *The Journal of Contemporary History* 27 (4), 1992, 567

1014 *Ibid.* See also Mosse's “Max Nordau and his Degeneration”, introduction to the 1968 edition of Nordau's book *Degeneration*, originally published in 1892. Mosse analyzed this “new Jew” in various articles and lectures, comparing him to the new man of fascism and of Bolshevism. See George L. Mosse, “Die Idee des 'neuen Mannes' in modernen revolutionären Bewegungen”, *Mitteilungen der Magnus-Hirschfeld-Gesellschaft*, Nr. 14, December 1989; and Mosse's “Cornell Lectures” on the “New Man”, 1994-1995, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 27; Leo Baeck Institute.

1015 “Max Nordau, Liberalism and the New Jew”, op. cit., 579

1016 *Ibid.*, 575

1017 George L. Mosse, “Zionist Nationalism”, undated lecture, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 27; Leo Baeck Institute.



of the diaspora (and here Mosse refers mainly to those American Jews he belonged to) could keep their commitment to nationalism with a human face intact. This has led, according to Mosse, to “two conflicting Jewish traditions: the liberal and indeed even socialist heritage of Jews in the diaspora, and the ever more rightward course of the Israel government, policies of occupation, deportation etc which seem difficult to face coming out of the diaspora traditions, to realize that Israel is not just Kibbutzs, or bravery, or a state with a special ethical dimension”.<sup>1018</sup> Jewish patriotism, originally designed to be different from chauvinism, was under siege. Referring to the early Zionism to which Mosse felt so close, he asserted that it was “remarkable that it held through three wars” without totally degenerating into an aggressive, exclusive ideology. Realism, he continued, is obviously necessary, but this should be “tempered” by early Zionist cosmopolitan ideals: to revive the good sides of nationalism is “a worthy mission for all people today”.<sup>1019</sup> Here Mosse was expressing a deeply felt concern and not claiming that this was the only possible solution. Rather, he was expressing a hope fraught with doubts: “returning Zionism to the realm of humane nationalism would certainly bridge the growing gap with American Jews but does it constitute recipe for survival?”<sup>1020</sup>

Mosse had also studied Zionism following the new perspectives which he was opening in his historiography, particularly Zionism as a civic religion, and this despite his harsh critique of nationalism as a civil religion. Both Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, and Martin Buber viewed Zionism as a civic religion with its national symbols and rites, flags, monuments and songs.<sup>1021</sup> However, Mosse says, their nationalism was centered on an “inner revival”, it did not call for battle but, rather, it was an educational process through which individual Jews could recapture their dignity as human beings. Buber and others saw national unity “as a prerequisite for a larger unity between peoples, between humanity and all living creatures, between God and the world”. Then the creation of the civil religion of Zionism went hand in hand with a certain cosmopolitanism, like the old liberal nationalism.<sup>1022</sup>

The First World War had its effect on Zionism. Vladimir Jabotinsky, the founder of the Zionist revisionist movement in 1923, focussed on a sovereign state which should have been exclusively Jewish. His Zionism was infused with paramilitary spirit and discipline, and he came close, Mosse says, to a form of chauvinism, thus representing an exception on the Zionist scenario before 1948, which remained fundamentally oriented toward cosmopolitanism and liberalism. Nevertheless, despite this humanistic side, “the iconography of Zionist nationalism did not differ markedly from that of other nations”, displaying a full apparatus of symbols.<sup>1023</sup> Modern integral nationalism was always latent even

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1018 George L. Mosse, “Nationalism”, lecture, 1988, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 25; Leo Baeck Institute.

1019 *Ibid.*

1020 George L. Mosse, “Two states of Mind”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 25 December 1988

1021 George L. Mosse, “The Jews and the Civic Religion of Nationalism”, in Jehuda Reinharz and George L. Mosse (ed. by), *The Impact of Western Nationalisms*, Sage Publications, London-Newbury Park-New Delhi, 1992, 322

1022 *Ibid.*, 323

1023 *Ibid.*, 325

in this liberal-oriented nationalism, as Nordau's stereotype of the “new Jew” demonstrated. Yet in Israel uniformity never won over individualism: her national monuments transmit no “aggressiveness, glorification of the nation or hero-worship”: no tendency was at work to render war acceptable as in Europe.<sup>1024</sup> National war cemeteries in Israel allow for individual decorations, thus combining individualism with the cult of the fallen soldiers. The fact that Israel, after three wars and the constant danger she lives in, is still witness to a debate between patriotism and chauvinism makes the strength of the liberal, humanistic origins of her nationalism all the more evident, Mosse concludes.<sup>1025</sup>

### *The “True Mission of Judaism”*

If the German-Jewish symbiosis in Germany was brushed away by the Holocaust, it met with success in the United States in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Mosse arrived there in 1939, the situation was fairly different. Many universities had Jewish quotas, and Mosse's application to the graduate school at Columbia University was rejected “quite overtly because the Jewish quota was full”.<sup>1026</sup> Anti-Semite prejudices were rather widespread in the United States, but nonetheless Mosse managed to become “the first Jew ever to teach history in two important American state universities”<sup>1027</sup>. Then the 1960s and the civil rights movements, which Mosse fully supported, initiated a change which was to lead to complete integration, a “change which I call the triumph of assimilation in the United States”, as Mosse said during a lecture at Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America in 1992.<sup>1028</sup> In America and in western Europe, Mosse said in another speech, the Jewish-gentile symbiosis has been fully accomplished.<sup>1029</sup> However, the attainment of integration raised a problem which Mosse addressed on several occasions: what can be the future of Zionism after the triumph of assimilation?<sup>1030</sup> German Jews in exile had supported a legacy based on humanitarianism, cosmopolitanism and *Bildung*, but this tradition was in danger of extinction.<sup>1031</sup> Here lies, in Mosse's opinion, the importance of Jewish studies at universities and even in high school programmes, he claimed<sup>1032</sup>: the preservation of the German-Jewish legacy became one of his main concerns since the 1970s. The “ideas of liberalism, of ethical socialism are among the noblest our civilization has to

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1024 *Ibid.*, 326

1025 *Ibid.*, 327

1026 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 119

1027 *Ibid.*, 95

1028 George L. Mosse, “Hadassah Lecture”, 1992, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 28; Leo Baeck Institute

1029 George L. Mosse, “The End of an Epoch? The Leo Baeck Institute after the War”, speech, 1995, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 35; Leo Baeck Institute

1030 George L. Mosse, “The Meaning of Zionism in 1897 and its Future Today”, speech, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 8; folder 32; Leo Baeck Institute

1031 “The End is not Yet: A Personal Memoir of the German-Jewish Legacy in America”, op. cit., 200

1032 “Hadassah Lecture”, cit.

offer”, they represent “a tradition of which we can be proud”, he said in the opening speech for the inauguration of the Kaplan Center for Jewish Studies and Research in Cape Town.<sup>1033</sup> The Jews who transmit these ideas are the “custodians” of a German tradition (“die Wächter einer deutschen Tradition”)<sup>1034</sup>, a tradition which, according to Mosse, “contained much of what was best and most noble in German culture”.<sup>1035</sup>

Jewish identity could not be based exclusively on the Holocaust, Mosse lamented in 1982: on the contrary, it must be “self-affirmative”, it must have a positive side. Therefore he opposed the creation of more museums of the Holocaust, and criticized Menachem Begin who used it “obscenely”, as a “metaphor for everything”<sup>1036</sup>. Zionism, Mosse explained giving a speech, is about solidarity. Therefore Jewish history must be taught not only in negative (persecution, antisemitism, Holocaust) but also in its positive aspects, so that the history of Zionism can teach solidarity among future generations.<sup>1037</sup> Thus the importance of Jewish studies becomes crucial for Mosse. In fact, he encouraged and furthered the creation of a Center for Jewish Studies in Madison, which eventually became reality in 1991. After having pioneered courses in Jewish history at Madison University since the 1970s, he worked at an “Interdisciplinary Program in Jewish Studies” in the late 1980s, a program “through which students can explore their heritage and their present situation in society”.<sup>1038</sup>

In his classes, Mosse had tried to play a role for Jewish students, stressing the humanistic potential of Jewish identity and the enlightenment tradition: this approach might have been a little old fashioned, Mosse recalled, but “perhaps that gave the students the glimpse of a kind of Jewish commitment beyond religion and present-day nationalism”.<sup>1039</sup> Mosse praised Hillel's commitment to Jewishness as an “outlook upon the world which is not static but a constant process”, and emphasized the need for a “crusade for modern Jewish history” before the threat posed by neonazism and antisemitism.<sup>1040</sup> In 1981, commemorating the figure of rabbi Manfred Swarsensky, a survivor of the

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1033 “Nationhood and Diaspora”, cit.

1034 George L. Mosse, “Gedanken zum deutsch-jüdischen Dialog”, in *Chronik der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich 1982/83*, Munich, Munich University, 1982/83, 58

1035 *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, op. cit., 81. Indeed, Mosse left a very large contribution to the University of Wisconsin in his will, most of which intended to further Jewish studies, and the Mosse Exchange Program in History, which calls for the exchange of Madison and Jerusalem students and faculty.

1036 Reported by The Jewish Chronicle, October 1982. Mosse had also lamented what he called the “embourgeoisement of the Holocaust”, that is, its trivialization through the endless repetition of photos. This caused, in his opinion, a numbing effect similar to that the Great War had on attitudes toward mass death. The “reality of death” is thus “not faced but transcended”, he argued. George L. Mosse, “The Embourgeoisement of the Holocaust”, Brandeis Lecture, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 12; Leo Baeck Institute. In this regard, see also his “Holocaust Lectures”, 1981-1982, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 38; Leo Baeck Institute.

1037 “The Meaning of Zionism in 1897 and its Future Today”, cit.

1038 George L. Mosse, “An Interdisciplinary Program in Jewish Studies (Draft for Discussion)”, January 1989, George L. Mosse Archive, Memorial Library, University of Madison-Wisconsin, Box 3, Folder 5. Some papers and correspondence relative to Mosse's engagement in the establishment of Jewish studies at the University of Madison-Wisconsin are in the George L. Mosse Archive, Memorial Library, University of Madison-Wisconsin, Box 3, Folders 4 to 9.

1039 George L. Mosse, “Hillel Talk”, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 31; Leo Baeck Institute

1040 *Ibid.*

concentration camps who had moved to Madison after the Second World War, and who had preached for tolerance between different faiths, remembered the example the rabbi gave through his life and his “desperate task to humanize our only too inhuman society”. The ethical imperative in our society, as embodied by the teachings of Swarsensky, was derived from Judaism and its love for the dignity of the individual, the acceptance of diversity, and the love of humanity. The end was the building of “a more human world where all men could realize their potential”.<sup>1041</sup> Inaugurating the Kaplan Center for Jewish Studies, Mosse had said:

“I have suggested that the tradition of diaspora, a tradition of which we can be proud, be joined to a nationalism which sought to create a living people devoted to their own personal and national growth with the aim to serve the unity of all mankind. I have suggested that this may not be as vague as it sounds, but exemplified by Israel's own history of restraint which I hope and pray will not have ended ... there must be emotional involvement with the community, but if it is not tempered by reason, by an intellectual commitment and the awareness of humanity as a whole, it will not really last. Euphoria must be overcome or tempered by the intellect. And that must in some sort of manner be based upon historical knowledge ... without learning modern Jewish history one will be lost, for Jews are children of assimilation. I would go further: that our own history is illuminating for any ethnic minority.”<sup>1042</sup>

The Kaplan Center, Mosse wished, would become an example of scholarship to further what he calls the “true mission of Judaism.”<sup>1043</sup> The German-Jewish tradition could still play a role in modern society, Mosse wrote in 1988: as an attitude toward life, it could and should be a “prism through which to view and humanize society”.<sup>1044</sup>

The German-Jewish intellectuals whom Mosse took as a constructive example put forward laudable ideals, but these ideals were, by Mosse's own admission, “impractical”. And yet these ideals were also useful, “for men must dream before they can act”.<sup>1045</sup> In many of his speeches to Jewish organizations, Mosse stressed the element of hope and dream, and repeated the above sentence on several occasions. In this regard Mosse, reflecting on the German-Jewish dialogue, quoted Ernst Bloch: “der Optimismus, der in diesem Dialog steckte, scheint uns heute utopisch zu sein, aber trotzdem ist doch etwas an Ernst Blochs Theorie, dass ohne Utopia kein Fortschritt möglich ist. Und dieses Utopia

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1041 George L. Mosse, “Manfred Swarsensky”, commemorative speech, November 1981, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 41; Leo Baeck Institute

1042 “Nationhood and Diaspora”, cit.

1043 *Ibid.*

1044 “The End is not Yet: A Personal Memoir of the German-Jewish Legacy in America”, op. cit., 201

1045 “The End of an Epoch? The Leo Baeck Institute after the War”, cit.

war eine menschliche Alternative zur Moderne, daher sein Weiterleben.”<sup>1046</sup> In spite of his deeply felt sympathy with these intellectuals, Mosse realized that their lack of realism was the reason for their failure, first during the Weimar republic, and then in Israel, where chauvinistic nationalism was slowly prevailing over the kind of patriotism Mosse advocated. It is easy to hope without a state, he said: after its foundations, these hopes become utopias.<sup>1047</sup> As he stated in 1988, he was aware of the “needs of a nation state”, of the fact that it must “maintain itself”, a conviction he had expressed on numerous occasions when speaking of Israel's necessity to defend herself.<sup>1048</sup> What solution could be found to solve this dilemma? Here the continuity of interests in Mosse's work emerges one more time, now offering a solution. “There must be a balance in life”, Mosse stated in 1980: utopia is unrealistic before reason of state.<sup>1049</sup> The work of the Casuists Mosse had studied in *The Holy Pretence* comes now to the aid. German-Jewish intellectuals had failed to find the necessary balance between utopia and reality, and to make the same mistake again would mean to lose their heritage, which Mosse clung himself to. So the solution was the finding of a balance, in other words, a “new casuistry” transposed into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Utopia and reality confronted now each other dressed as patriotism and nationalism. Mosse's “journey to Jerusalem”, confronting him with his own emotions, made it easier for him to accept and recognize the necessity of nationalism. He then admitted that emotional involvement with the community was essential, but it had to be tempered by reason.<sup>1050</sup> Lecturing in Tel Aviv, he underlined that rationalism alone cannot be meaningful if not accompanied by emotions, something liberalism and socialism had not understood and therefore they had failed. The necessary cohesion must therefore be based upon a political liturgy.<sup>1051</sup> If in 1975 the “nationalization of the masses” was seen as threatening the dignity of the individual, now festivals, symbols and chants are held to be necessary. If it is not possible to eradicate nationalism, this must become patriotism, not as an abstract ideal but, rather, in combination with a practical and necessary political liturgy which, in turn, must always be “tempered by reason”.

The Jerusalem experience forced Mosse to confront his own emotions and to question his rationalistic principles when he faced his deep feelings for Jewish nationalism. As he wrote in his memoir,

“my view that European nationalism had been and was the greatest enemy of the Jews never changed, and yet when I saw the new Israeli Army or attended the swearing-in of the

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1046 George L. Mosse, “Gedanken zum deutsch-jüdischen Dialog”, op. cit., 57

1047 “The Meaning of Zionism in 1897 and its Future Today”, cit.

1048 “Two states of Mind”, cit.

1049 “Nationhood and Diaspora”, cit.

1050 *Ibid.*

1051 George L. Mosse, “Tel Aviv Lecture”, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 6; Leo Baeck Institute

paratroopers on Masada, my heart beat faster. I knew the danger of being captured by images and liturgy and had written often enough about their use in manipulating people, but I myself was far from immune to the irrational forces which as a historian I deplored – especially when it came to that group which I regarded as my own.”<sup>1052</sup>

However, in his classes he kept destroying myths, which had Scholem accuse him of not loving the Jewish people enough. Mosse replied that he could love only individuals, thus clinging to the spirit of the Enlightenment: he felt a “sense of belonging, close to love even when I taught the lasting importance of rationality and of the Enlightenment”.<sup>1053</sup> To be sure, he tried to keep a distance, and considered his ignorance of the Hebrew language a handicap, but also “one way to keep from being swallowed up by my new environment, to keep a distance between myself and Zionism – to preserve the rational against the strong pull of emotion”.<sup>1054</sup>

### ***George Mosse and Jewish History***

How was Mosse's work on Jewish history received in Israel? According to Steven Aschheim, the fact that Mosse did not “ghettoize” Jewish history but, rather, included it into wider perspectives, shocked Israeli conservative historians and their “prevailing ethnocentric bias that Jewish history by definition followed its own unique narrative and immanent laws”.<sup>1055</sup> Mosse's idea that the German-Jewish heritage is that of *Bildung*, that Jewishness is synonymous with German culture was, to traditionalists, “profoundly shocking, even subversive” and yet, Aschheim says, “it was a sentiment that was remarkably prevalent within large circles of liberal German Jewry.”<sup>1056</sup> Mosse had been accused of writing from the perspective of the wealthy, assimilated German-Jewish elite, and thought this is partly true, Mosse dissented and radically departed “from the constricting 'normalcy' and 'respectability' of his background”.<sup>1057</sup> Whatever the criticisms he received, the fact remains that Mosse's approach was highly innovative, it helped make new connections, it offered “productive insights within the field of Jewish history” and “it crucially shifted and deepened our perspectives on German and European developments by uncovering the often crucial (positive as well as negative) roles that Jews – either in fact or in stereotypical fantasy – played within post-emancipation and post-Enlightenment society”.<sup>1058</sup> Referring to Mosse's works on the relationship between German Jews and middle-class values, on how

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1052 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 191

1053 *Ibid.*

1054 *Ibid.*, 192-3

1055 Steven Aschheim, “George Mosse and Jewish History”, *German Politics and Society*, Issue 57, Vol. 18, No. 4, Winter 2000, 46

1056 *Ibid.*, 51

1057 *Ibid.*, 46

1058 *Ibid.*, 47

Jews in Europe had internalized Christian symbols (as the cross in war cemeteries), on how they were affected by Volkish ideas, Aschheim states that Mosse “defined the connections in mischievously unorthodox, yet illuminating ways”.<sup>1059</sup>

However, Mosse's deep personal involvement had its downsides as well. Shulamit Volkov has stressed the

“undisguised note of apologetics in Mosse's writing about the Jews. Despite the tale of his youth as a rebel, despite his distance from his immediate family, despite his sharp, critical mind, Mosse was attached to the world he had lost. He never ceased to seek the Jews' dignified and admirable sides. He never ceased to try to exonerate them of explicit and often implicit reproach. Jewish right-wing tendencies, according to Mosse, never went as far as those of their German counterparts.”<sup>1060</sup>

Mosse's writings on Jewish nationalism, Volkov continues, are “the most striking example” of this attitude: in the 1990s, Mosse was “even willing to transpose this claim onto the Israeli scene. Unlike some former supporters and later critics of Zionism, Mosse's strong ties to Israel made him uphold even *its* human, enlightened face – a most unusual stance in this day and age, indeed.”<sup>1061</sup> According to this criticism, Mosse was torn about Jewish nationalism, and ended up making every Zionist into a liberal, and every liberal into a Zionist.<sup>1062</sup> Aschheim has criticized Mosse's oversimplification of Jewish culture in Germany: in fact many Jews, even in Weimar, were attracted to less rational and morally elevated aspects of German culture. Scholem, Benjamin and Ernst Bloch had questioned the *Bildung* tradition just like Jünger, Spengler or Heidegger had done.<sup>1063</sup> Nevertheless, Aschheim's critique of Mosse is based, he tells us, upon the “vital Mossean premise” that Jewish self-definition is “embedded within the wider cultures of which they are a part”, thus recognizing Mosse's contribution.<sup>1064</sup> As to the problem of Mosse's Zionism, Aschheim provides an insightful picture of the former's insistence upon the difference between Zionism and integral nationalism:

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1059 *Ibid.*, 49. Mosse's works in question are “The Secularization of Jewish Theology”, in *Masses and Men*, op. cit.; “Jewish Emancipation between *Bildung* and *Respectability*”, op. cit.; “The Jews and the German War Experience, 1914-1918”, in “The Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture”, n. 21, Leo Baeck Institute, New York 1977; “The Influence of the Volkish Idea on German Jewry”, op. cit.

1060 Shulamit Volkov, “German Jewish History. Back To *Bildung* and Culture?”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 226. However, Anson Rabinbach has claimed that Mosse had no reverential attitude to *Bildung*, since he was fully aware that it had led to a lack of realism in politics, that it had “imprisoned German Jews in their own moral, aesthetic, and intellectual glass house”. Anson Rabinbach, “George L. Mosse 1919-1999: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 333-4

1061 “German Jewish History. Back To *Bildung* and Culture?”, 227

1062 *Ibid.*, 234

1063 “George Mosse and Jewish History”, op.cit., 52. Aschheim refers to his own book *Culture and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with National Socialism and Other Crises*, New York 1996

1064 “George Mosse and Jewish History”, op.cit., 52

“I sometimes would playfully nudge him to go beyond these assertions and examine in his scholarship – as apart from private conversation or journalistic comment – some of the darker faces of Jewish nationalism but this (perhaps given his status as a refugee and his first-hand experience of Nazism) he was always loathe to do. With all of George's delight in outraging his listeners and readers, here, I think, was a threshold he would not cross.”<sup>1065</sup>

Yet Mosse's Zionist affirmation, Aschheim continues, may “have had as one of its sources a (largely unstated) appreciation of the need for force and collective self-defence in a very imperfect, uncultured world”, a kind of “corrective” to the utopianism of the *Bildung* intellectuals.<sup>1066</sup>

Mosse had found in Zionism a harbor, and yet he tried to reconcile his feeling with a pragmatic attitude. His attempt at humanizing ideologies has set, Aschheim says, before us the task “to reassert the positive potentials of community, to overcome the tendency towards restrictiveness and move towards the ideal of the expansion of human possibilities. His Jewish as well as general history sought to make us aware of the dangers inherent in conformity and homogenization and to alert us to the primacy of humanization and solidarity over domination and superiority”.<sup>1067</sup> In the last resort, Jerusalem did not mean for Mosse mere research interest or search for identity: it combined and embodied both in an inextricable manner, fusing his life with his work perhaps even more than it had been the case with the study of national socialism. The rediscovery of his Jewish identity gave his work, and his life, a new purpose and a renovated strength in his faith in the mission of the historian. In his own words,

“Jerusalem served as a Praktikum, as an example of a present and immediate application of the problems inherent in nationalism and Jewish identity. For me, truth has always been what history tells us, and so whatever the contemporary state of affairs, I gave it at once a historical dimension. Nevertheless, it was certainly a sign of my commitment, in spite of myself, that I cared so deeply and, like the early Zionists, wanted to hold the Jewish state to a higher standard of conduct than other nations.”<sup>1068</sup>

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1065 *Ibid.*, 54

1066 *Ibid.*

1067 *Ibid.*, 56

1068 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 202



## CHAPTER VIII

### FASCISM BETWEEN INTERPRETATION AND SELF-REPRESENTATION

“I believe we can speak without exaggeration  
of a 'Mosse revolution' in the historiography of fascism.”<sup>1069</sup>  
(Emilio Gentile)

“Combattere l'irrazionalismo non vuol dire in sede storica negarlo  
e ridurne gli effetti ad una malattia della quale  
più che darne una spiegazione si condanna l'esistenza.”<sup>1070</sup>  
(Renzo De Felice)

“The cultural interpretation of fascism opens up a means to penetrate  
fascist self-understanding, and such empathy is crucial in order to grasp  
how people saw the movement, something which cannot be ignored  
or evaluated merely in retrospect.”<sup>1071</sup>  
(George L. Mosse)

Mosse's contribution to the history of the interpretations of fascism has been widely praised as well as deeply influential. Emilio Gentile has written of a “Mosse revolution in the historiography of fascism, a revolution consisting first of all in the novelty of his method of analysis [Mosse's cultural approach]”.<sup>1072</sup> Stanley Payne has defined Mosse a “pathbreaker in fascist studies”.<sup>1073</sup> Renzo De Felice, republishing in 1983 his *Le interpretazioni del fascismo* (1969), openly admits his intellectual debt toward Mosse.<sup>1074</sup> Mosse's influence on De Felice, the leading scholar of Italian fascism, is telling as far as the impact of the German historian's work is concerned. In the above quoted 1983 preface, De Felice

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1069 “A Provisional Dwelling. Origin and Development of the Concept of Fascism in Mosse's Historiography”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 43

1070 Renzo De Felice, *Le interpretazioni del fascismo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1996, xxiii

1071 *The Fascist Revolution. Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, op. cit., xi

1072 “A Provisional Dwelling. Origin and Development of the Concept of Fascism in Mosse's Historiography”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 43

1073 Opening dedication in Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-1945*, London, UCL Press, 1995

1074 Renzo De Felice, opening dedication to *Le interpretazioni del fascismo*, op. cit. The relationship between Mosse and De Felice has been dealt with by Emilio Gentile, “Renzo e George, anti-antifascisti”, in “Il Sole 24 Ore”, 14 May 2006; *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit.; *Renzo De Felice. Lo storico e il personaggio*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2003. See also the interesting article by Donatello Aramini, “George L. Mosse e gli storici italiani: il problema della 'nazionalizzazione delle masse’”, in *Mondo Contemporaneo*, n. 2, 2007, 129-159. Aramini, together with Giovanni Mario Ceci, has also edited the correspondence between Mosse and De Felice, thus publishing it for the first time: see their “Carteggio George L. Mosse – Renzo De Felice”, *Mondo Contemporaneo*, n. 3, 2007, 78-104

mentions Mosse's "fundamental contributions" to the understanding of the fascist phenomenon:

"per non dire poi del posto centrale che oggi nel dibattito scientifico sul fascismo, tanto come fenomeno sovranazionale, quanto come momento nella storia italiana, e sulle sue interpretazioni dovrebbero necessariamente avere studiosi quali Juan J. Linz, Gino Germani e soprattutto George L. Mosse e, su un altro piano, più particolare, 'nazionale' per così dire, Zeev Sternhell (per la Francia) ed Emilio Gentile (per l'Italia). I loro contributi più significativi, stimolanti e, nel caso di Mosse, addirittura fondamentali sono successivi alla stesura di questo libro ... Parlare oggi di un 'fenomeno fascista' come se ne parlava ancora una decina di anni orsono è infatti ormai impossibile, a meno di non optare per una visione, se non ancora demonologica, certo ancora largamente ideologico-politica e che non tiene conto alcuno di tutto quel complesso di fenomeni che costituiscono la sostanza culturale (in senso proprio e soprattutto antropologico) della società di massa."<sup>1075</sup>

De Felice's new preface is an open praise of the "Mosse revolution". The Italian historian fully embraces Mosse's belief that fascist culture ought to be understood "nel senso antropologico", thus seeing fascism as an "atteggiamento mentale ... un atteggiamento verso la vita".<sup>1076</sup> The modernity of fascism, De Felice writes, lies in the way it has "intuito le enormi potenzialità del potere mitico in una situazione di crisi di transizione e le ha utilizzate in funzione del suo potere politico di massa": this helps explain the problem of consensus, and historians have only recently realized this, De Felice says.<sup>1077</sup> The Preface ends with what could be considered a profession of faith in Mosse's contribution, and deserves to be cited in its full length:

"siamo convinti che vi è ancora molto da ricercare, documentare, ricostruire riguardo sia al fascismo italiano sia agli altri. Per gli storici c'è in questa direzione un gran lavoro ancora da fare. Detto questo, siamo però altrettanto convinti che, per un verso, nell'ultimo decennio soprattutto, in sede internazionale gli studi sul fascismo hanno fatto grandi progressi e che le suggestioni più produttive sono venute da quelli di Mosse e di quegli studiosi che si sono messi sulla strada da lui indicata e che, per un altro verso, il dibattito sul fascismo è però giunto a un punto che per essere definitivamente superato ha bisogno non solo e non tanto di nuove ricerche, di nuova documentazione, di nuove ricostruzioni del tipo di quelle che gli hanno permesso di fare i progressi che ha fatto, ma soprattutto di trarre culturalmente le conseguenze di quanto è stato sin

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1075 *Le interpretazioni del fascismo*, op. cit., ix-x

1076 *Ibid.*, xviii-xix

1077 *Ibid.*, xxi. De Felice mentions also the general neglect of Cassirer's work on myth.

qui acquisito. Se non si riuscirà a fare questo ‘salto culturale’ rimarremo in una posizione di stallo ... Se si ritengono giusti i più recenti indirizzi delineatesi a livello internazionale [Mosse, Germani, Sternhell, Linz], è giunto il momento di non limitarsi a studiare il fascismo come un’espressione della società di massa e in particolare della sua ‘cultura’, ma di farlo mettendo da parte – come Mosse insegna – tutti gli schemi, non solo quelli marxisti ... ma anche quelli liberal-democratici, anch’essi insufficienti alla bisogna, e utilizzando, oltre alle usuali, nuove categorie culturali più idonee ad affrontare e capire le realtà della società di massa. Dicendo questo ci riferiamo in particolare alla necessità di mettere da parte anche gli apriorismi che discendono dalla nostra formazione culturale razionalistica. Combattere l’irrazionalismo non vuol dire in sede storica negarlo e ridurne gli effetti ad una malattia della quale più che darne una spiegazione si condanna l’esistenza. Ancor prima di Mosse, Huizinga, Bloch, in un certo senso Praz ..., hanno dimostrato come si può e si deve fare storia anche di ciò che a noi appare assurdo. Nei grandi fenomeni di massa del nostro secolo, come il fascismo, vi sono aspetti per noi altrettanto assurdi di quelli studiati da questi autori. Compito dello storico è studiarli e capirli, senza negare a priori a buona fede e l’impegno di chi ne fu partecipe solo perché essi ci appaiono assurdi e aberranti, manifestazioni, per la nostra *forma mentis*, spiegabili solo con la perversione, l’illusione, l’ipocrisia, l’opportunismo, nel migliore dei casi, il terrore poliziesco. Ciò che a noi appare assurdo, aberrante, culturalmente irrilevante, antistorico può essere (ed è, in molti casi, ciò che avvenne nel fascismo) una realtà per uomini che agiscono in base ad essa. Se vogliamo fare un lavoro veramente storico dobbiamo, in un primo momento, liberarci dai condizionamenti dei nostri metri di giudizio, delle nostre categorie valutative e dobbiamo sforzarci di capire questa realtà e i ‘valori’ che masse di uomini trovano in essa. Solo dopo averla capita potremo razionalizzarla secondo le nostre categorie e i nostri valori.

Il lavoro degli storici si è concentrato sin ad ora essenzialmente sugli aspetti sociali e politici del fascismo e, qualche volta, sul rapporto che lega questi due aspetti a quello istituzionale. Molti e importanti risultati sono stati conseguiti. Tutta una serie di problemi rimasta tuttavia pressoché irrisolta. Ciò che è stato troppo trascurato è stato l’aspetto culturale (soprattutto in senso antropologico). È venuto così a mancare l’elemento veramente unificante di quegli aspetti, la loro cornice, che faceva di tanti uomini comuni dei fascisti. Realtà diverse, fenomeni diversi, necessitano da parte degli storici che vogliono comprenderli di saper far ricorso anche a categorie culturali diverse dalle proprie ... L’aspetto culturale del fascismo è un campo di studi ancora in larga misura vergine e non facile da studiare data la difficoltà oggettiva e soggettiva di individuarne le fonti, i documenti, i meccanismi interni.”<sup>1078</sup>

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1078 *Ibid.*, xxii-xxv

The high esteem in which the Italian historian held his German colleague's work was reciprocated. Both historians shared similar views on fascism, particularly those centering on the problem of consensus. What De Felice had said about consensus, asserted Mosse in a lecture, is painful but it's true: De Felice goes beyond illusions and "confronts us with historical reality".<sup>1079</sup> If Italy has such difficulties at accepting this views, it is because of its anti-fascist traditions and because Italy has not had Auschwitz. "Professor De Felice – Mosse concludes - has taught us to understand fascism as a historical phenomenon, and painful though this may be, to understand is not to forgive. The contrary is true: to understand fascism without fear or favour means to be the anti-fascist of 1975."<sup>1080</sup>

Mosse's great influence is best exemplified in one of the major (and surely the most comprehensive) recent works on fascism, Stanley Payne's *A History of Fascism*.<sup>1081</sup> Payne formulates a "typological description of fascism" based on three categories: "ideologies and goals, the fascist negations, and also special common features of style and organization".<sup>1082</sup> Apart from the centrality of the ideological factor, Mosse's deep impact on the historiography of fascism is evident in the third category, which includes elements Mosse had been among the first to stress, from the aesthetic character of political liturgy to the stress on the masculine principle, from the organic view of society to the exaltation of youth.<sup>1083</sup> Payne devotes a whole paragraph to Mosse's interpretation of fascism "as a new form of cultural revolution", defined as "one of the clearest, most forceful, and most cogent interpretations".<sup>1084</sup>

### ***The Fear of Ideology***

Mosse's interpretation of fascism "from the point of view of ideology" has indeed been revolutionary. Up to the early 1960s, such an approach went against the grain of most scholarship.<sup>1085</sup> Renato Moro, discussing Mosse's relation to Historicism, writes that

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1079 "Fascism as History", cit. Mosse fully agreed also with De Felice's view that fascism, though historically over, retained its "psychological base".

1080 *Ibid.*

1081 *A History of Fascism 1914-1945*, op cit.

1082 *Ibid.*, 6

1083 *Ibid.*, 7

1084 *Ibid.*, 450-1

1085 There is no room here to provide a summary of the history of interpretations of fascism. In this regard, see De Felice's *Le interpretazioni del fascismo*, op. cit., or Payne's more up-to-date *A History of Fascism 1914-1945*, op cit., which includes a vast bibliography and hints to the most comprehensive studies of interpretations and anthologies (*Ibid.*, 442 note 1)

“nella grande tradizione della *Kulturgeschichte*, dominata da una impostazione storicista, ... ci si è sempre limitati all'analisi del pensiero 'alto', formalizzato, astratto; si è guardato ai vertici teorici e intellettuali del pensiero umano. E questa attenzione privilegiata al mondo delle *élites* è stata del resto fortemente presente anche nella tradizione più tipicamente anglosassone della '*history of ideas*' – si pensi a Lovejoy. Nell'un caso come nell'altro, dunque, le idee rimanevano sempre come qualche cosa che nasceva in modo autonomo e 'dall'alto' nel processo storico. Con gli studi di Mosse ... non ci si limita al mondo delle idee astratte e razionali, né l'oggetto della ricerca storica è confinato al mondo ristretto *dell'intelligenza*. Piuttosto, Mosse ci conduce sul terreno, di gran lunga più vasto, della cultura popolare, 'dove – come è stato notato – la diffusione di miti e ideologie, di simboli e di stereotipi – spesso assai lontani dal mondo della ricerca intellettuale distaccata o della contemplazione razionale – diviene di importanza primaria.’”<sup>1086</sup>

Writing in 1952 on American historiography, Mosse complained that most liberal historians did not understand theology, and that the theory of history was generally neglected by American historians. The typical European interest in theory and ideas was considered too un-American to be taken seriously, and only after the immigration of German historians to the United States things had begun to change.<sup>1087</sup> In 1957, he claimed that “it is surprising to what extent our Freshmen history texts have been influenced by the contention that what moves history is the political and socio-economic surroundings in which the struggle for life has its setting. What this has meant is failure to deal with abstract thought and political rationalizations. Almost none of our texts show any realizations that ideas can be weapons ... How men rationalize their actions often determines what actions they take.”<sup>1088</sup> Unlike in Europe, where “the question of religion and political morality ... is currently occupying some of the best minds”, Americans, driven by their “fear of ideologies”, tended to discard ideas, thus misunderstanding their own past and identity.<sup>1089</sup> Mosse recalls that “one of my early efforts was to interest American historians (who were very deficient in theory at that time) in the idea of Reason of State which was an important reality in American political thought, and which had even infected American Puritans. The only article written in appreciation of this effort of mine to bring Meinecke to bear on English and American Puritan theology is by an Italian historian – Professor Giorgio Spini. It is very typical that it should be a European who understood what I did rather than an American.”<sup>1090</sup>

1086 “George L. Mosse, storico dell'irrazionalismo moderno”, op. cit., 23

1087 Mosse cites Olschki, Kristeller, Holborn, Kantorowicz, Kohn among others. George L. Mosse, “Die Amerikanische Geschichtsschreibung – Ein Überblick”, *Die Welt als Geschichte*, 12, 1952, 264-273

1088 “The Pragmatism of the Freshman History Course”, op. cit., 289

1089 *Ibid.*, 290. An exception was, according to Mosse, the interest in the Enlightenment and its philosophy of freedom: for freedom has “practical validity” in the United States. “What opportunities we are missing! Just to mention one, for centuries thinkers were concerned to find a synthesis between the dictates of faith and the necessities of practical policies. That was something Luther, Calvin and the Puritans were deeply concerned about and yet it is still the most modern of problems.” *Ibid.*

1090 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 28. Mosse had written in 1953 that “in our

The focus on the “ideological side of history” can be considered a contribution Mosse gave, along with other historians (most of them emigrants from Europe), to the understanding of the fascist phenomenon in American historiography. “I still think – Mosse wrote in a letter – that once the theory has been worked out, the effect on practice is the next item – but that, to me, does not mean that 'theory' per se cannot be interesting or even helpful in determining the motivation of men to some extent.”<sup>1091</sup>

At the Stanford seminary on fascism, Mosse held his views in an intellectually hostile environment. At one point, confronted with increasing criticism, he said: “I’m glad you have shot down – somebody asked me whether I felt like the Christian among the lions, and I don’t know how they felt”, and yet he appreciated what the discussions had brought to him, terming them as “fruitful”.<sup>1092</sup> As Mosse said “I just don’t think you can explain the policy without the ideology which such men came to accept”, Paul Baran, a Marxist professor of economics, replied: “I say we can. You say we can’t”; the dispute ended with Mosse’s bitter statement, “we’re necessarily deadlocked”.<sup>1093</sup>

Mosse’s purpose, as we have said, was to analyze fascism from the ideological point of view. Yet the fact that fascism was, in his view, a “flight into ideology, an irrational ideology”, did not preclude the possibility of rational analysis: “if we penetrate into it, it will become apparent that even this emphasis on feeling has a dialectic, a logic, built into it which did make it a coherent world view. But we cannot measure it with a measuring rod taken from the eighteenth century or even our supposed American belief in rationalism. Otherwise, like Shirer, we will call it a hodgepodge, and never understand its appeal.”<sup>1094</sup> “It is important to grasp this from the inside”: fascism, Mosse said, cannot be understood from traditional points of view taken from our own political organization<sup>1095</sup>. He went on explaining his views: “the last controversy which is fundamental in historiography, I should think, is what part economic changes really played in the fall of the Weimar Republic. Because those who believe in the primacy of formal politics and in economic change as being predominant will also then have a view of the German future which is that if you change political structure, that if there are different economic conditions, then the kind of ideology we have talked about will vanish and good times will appear. Obviously I do not hold this opinion.”<sup>1096</sup> All the premises about völkisch ideology,

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more pragmatic age this seems difficult to understand, but the key role of what we now call ideology for men of the sixteenth century can not be underrated.” *The Reformation*, op. cit., 8. In his memoir, he claimed that “from the beginning [I] tried to apply to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English history theoretical concepts which came from my German background and my quite un-English interest in theory”. *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 116

1091 George L. Mosse, unpublished letter to Dr. Chrimes, 23 September 1951; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 15; folder 15; Leo Baeck Institute.

1092 “What is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

1093 “The Peasant and the Ideology”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

1094 “What is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit. Mosse refers here to William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich. A History of Nazi Germany*, op. cit.

1095 “What is Fascism?”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

1096 “Conservatism”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

Mosse continued during another session of the seminar, “are presuppositions which you have to accept emotionally, intuitively, irrationally.”<sup>1097</sup>

Mosse held fast to this approach in his writings. As early as in 1961, he wrote: “in spite of nearly thirty years of research the intellectual origins of National Socialism are still shrouded in a darkness as impenetrable as the mystical ideologies present at its beginnings ... Today we are forced to realize that a more complex cultural development gave its impress to that movement long before it crystallized into a political party.”<sup>1098</sup> Mosse said that despite thirty years of research, the intellectual origins of the Nazi movement were still unexplored territory: it is therefore necessary to investigate it as an ideology: “this is necessary because historians have ignored this stream of thought as too *outré* to be taken seriously ... Yet such ideas made a deep impression upon a whole nation. Historians who have dismissed these aspects of romanticism and mysticism have failed to grasp an essential and important ingredient of modern German history.”<sup>1099</sup> In *The Crisis of German Ideology*, Mosse insisted that ideas must be given “serious consideration”, that Volkish culture does not belong to subintellectual history<sup>1100</sup>; national socialism was not a naked struggle for power, and neither was its ideology “apolitical”: “this type of thinking is only apolitical if 'politics' is restricted to a description of traditional forms of activity and belief”; such a view bears the “danger of applying stereotyped concepts to a case which is so clearly not part of the general pattern.”<sup>1101</sup> In 1966, Mosse restated the primacy of ideology in fascism, which implied a “fundamental redefinition of politics”.<sup>1102</sup> In the interview on Nazism, he criticized liberal interpretations of fascism on the basis that they ignore mass politics, since they look at fascism from the perspective of parliamentary government<sup>1103</sup>: fascism regards itself as a myth as against classical political theory, and that is why Anglo-Saxon scholars “have such a difficult time discussing it. They're always looking for logical, consistent political theory.”<sup>1104</sup>

National socialist culture cannot be rejected as demoniac irrationalism, said Mosse in a speech<sup>1105</sup>: in the last resort, as he explained in 1975, social, economic and political history are crucial for the understanding of history, but liturgy is as crucial as them, and “whether a liturgy can be regarded as still more basic than social forces depends upon our view of human nature. A belief in man's inherent goodness and rationality, for instance, would view the new politics as mere propaganda and manipulation.”<sup>1106</sup> Generically referring to the Liberals and to the Social Democrats, Mosse said

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1097 “Adolf Hitler”, in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

1098 “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism”, op. cit., 81

1099 *Ibid.*

1100 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op.cit., 1

1101 *Ibid.*, 2

1102 “The Genesis of Fascism”, op. cit., 19

1103 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 50-51

1104 *Ibid.*, 108

1105 “The Appeal of Nazi Culture”, cit.

1106 *The Nationalization of the Masses*, op. cit., 214

that “the critical reason which informed their pages was opposed to all myths, speculations and dreams ... The individual must be able to fuse with the masses, to find shelter and a goal to strive for, not to be left hanging in the wind, as liberalism would have it”<sup>1107</sup>; he insisted that “scholarship dealing with fascism has suffered through the application of a concept of political thought which modelled on the ancients' belief that true politics must be constructed in a reasonable manner: an emotional belief system does not constitute a legitimate political theory. That is why you will find in so many books fascism described as eclectic, lacking system of ideas (Franz Neumann) – once again fascism seen from a liberal viewpoint, not from its own ... Such an approach can never understand how fascism could rule by consensus and enthuse so many respectable citizens”.<sup>1108</sup> The same reproach is directed against Marxist historians, who do not understand the appeal of national socialism through their economic approach.<sup>1109</sup> In the drafts for the introduction to *The Fascist Revolution*, Mosse repeated that approaches like Franz Neumann's excluded the ideological factor because they saw fascism as “incompatible with any rational political philosophy”: Neumann was a man of the enlightenment and a rationalist, he was optimistic about the good and rational nature of the people and so failed to grasp the essence of fascism.<sup>1110</sup> The misunderstanding of fascism, in Mosse's opinion, lay in the “optimism about the good and rational nature of 'the people'”, a “heritage of the enlightenment which had long ago informed so-called progressive political thought.”<sup>1111</sup> In his last work, however, Mosse praised the “great advances in our understanding of fascism” made by scholarship mentioning, as an example, Emilio Gentile's *Il culto del littorio*. To be sure, Mosse comments that “the principal difficulty any historian of fascism has to overcome is indeed daunting: how to analyze the irrational rationally is no easy task”.<sup>1112</sup>

In the early 1960s, when Mosse began his analysis of fascism, little or no attention had been paid by historians to the ideological dimension (one exception was Fritz Stern's *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (1963), which dealt with the cultural origins of national socialist ideology, yet without attempting an interpretation of fascism<sup>1113</sup>). Ernst Nolte, in his *Three Faces of Fascism* (1963), examined fascism from a new perspective, considering it a “metapolitical phenomenon” with an own ideology

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1107 “Concepts of Democracy: The Liberal Inheritance and the National Socialist Public Sphere”, cit.

1108 *Ibid.*

1109 “Fascism and Consensus”, cit.

1110 George L. Mosse, “Fascism as a Cultural Movement”, drafts, undated (1990s), George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 11; Leo Baeck Institute (the paper is a draft of the introduction to *The Fascist Revolution*, op. cit.). The reference to Neumann is to his *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933 - 1944*, Harper, New York, 1944

1111 *The Fascist Revolution*, op. cit., ix

1112 *Ibid.*, ix and xiii

1113 Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair. A Study in the Rise of Germanic Ideology*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1961. Stern's work focussed on the thought of Paul de Lagarde, Julius Langbehn and Moeller van den Bruck. There is also a little known, and very interesting book by Jean Neurohr (*Der Mythos vom dritten Reich. Zur Geistesgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus*, Cotta, Stuttgart, 1957), a book that deals with national socialism from the point of view of myth and ideology. Neurohr writes of the “theology of nationalism”, and faces the question of the “new man”, all themes which captured Mosse's attention. A copy of the book is in Mosse's private library, though it is not possible to know if it influenced him, and if so, to what extent, since he never quoted it in his works.



which affected social and political realities.<sup>1114</sup> Nolte interpreted fascism as a resistance to “transcendence”, being transcendence both “practical” (manifesting itself in material, technological, social progress: in short, he saw fascism as a resistance to modernity) and “theoretical” (meaning man's urge for the divine, the infinite, the religious). This work tackled fascism from the perspective of the history of ideas, and fuelled a debate upon the possibility of a general concept of fascism. Mosse reviewed Nolte's book, and praised the German historian's effort.<sup>1115</sup> Yet Mosse criticized Nolte's inclusion of the Action Française among fascist movements, and his reduction of fascism as anti-Marxism. Moreover, he disagreed on the view of fascism as a form of resistance to transcendence: he believed that “fascism worked with a transcendence of its own”.<sup>1116</sup> This view is in line with Mosse's belief that fascism longed for myth, that it had a religious nature, that it sought to transcend the alienating reality of modernity to immerse man into a mythical dimension. In his book on the crisis on German ideology, Mosse had depicted the Volk as “idealized and transcendent”, as seeking a way out of modernity “beyond contemporary reality”.<sup>1117</sup> As Roger Griffin has noticed, “while Nolte was developing his theory of fascism as 'resistance to transcendence', Mosse was investigating the fascist impulse toward transcendence.”<sup>1118</sup> However, despite all criticism, Mosse was aware of the importance of Nolte's work, and stated that “Nolte's effort is to be praised; a confrontation with his book can, at times, be a stimulating and exciting experience”.<sup>1119</sup>

### ***Mosse and the Category of “Totalitarianism”***

The works of Mosse and Nolte helped open new perspectives and debates, and did so at a time when a general theory of fascism or the stress on ideological sincerity were largely neglected. Today, the landscape has changed, and such issues are at the centre of most historiographical works on fascism. At the time, in the 1950s and 1960s, another category had a considerable influence: that of totalitarianism. Mosse's attitude toward the interpretive category of totalitarianism is ambivalent. On the one hand, he made use of it; on the other, he rejected it in its political implications (the liberal usage of it in the Cold War context) and in its lack of ideological differentiation between fascism and

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1114 Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, Chicago and San Francisco, 1966, 429 (original edition, *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche*, Munich 1963)

1115 George L. Mosse, “E. Nolte on *Three Faces of Fascism*”, in *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, October-December 1966, 621-625. “Nolte's book is an important attempt to arrive at a comprehensive view of the fascist movement and to link it to the age on which it exerted such a profound influence”, *ibid.*, 621

1116 *Ibid.*, 623

1117 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 15. According to Mosse, *Volk* “signified the union of a group of people with a transcendental 'essence'”, *ibid.*, 4

1118 “Withstanding the Rush of Time. The Prescience of Mosse's Anthropological View of Fascism”, op. cit., 122. Griffin quotes also from Mosse, “Fascism and the Intellectuals”, op. cit., 215, where it is stated that fascist intellectuals attempted to build a system of absolute values which “transcended reality”. Stanley Payne too has criticized Nolte's interpretation: see his *A History of Fascism 1914-1945*, op. cit., 9

1119 “E. Nolte on *Three Faces of Fascism*”, op. cit., 625

Marxism.<sup>1120</sup> In *The Culture of Western Europe* and in some previous writings and speeches, Mosse adopted the term totalitarianism in describing the erosion of the individual's dignity brought about by fascism and communism, connecting it not to the Enlightenment as Talmon would have it with his concept of “totalitarian democracy”, but rather to the romantic and neo-romantic aspiration to the totality of life. In an unpublished lecture, Mosse identified totalitarianism with opposition to parliamentary government driven by a “hunger for wholeness”, by the longing for community.<sup>1121</sup> In Gentile's words, *The Culture of Western Europe* “è un libro sulle origini e il trionfo del totalitarismo nella versione fascista e nazionalsocialista”.<sup>1122</sup>

However, in the course of the years Mosse became more critical toward the concept of totalitarianism. In a speech, he asserted that anti-parliamentarism cannot be brushed off as caesarism or totalitarianism.<sup>1123</sup> In the the interview on Nazism, he stated that “I am opposed to the word totalitarianism because it seems to me an untrue generalization, or to put it better, it is a typical generalization from a liberal point of view ... This point of view uses totalitarianism as a general catch phrase for anything that is antiliberal.”<sup>1124</sup> Totalitarianism is “a typical Cold War phrase”, he said, thus criticizing Hannah Arendt's view, even though he appreciated her work on the origins of totalitarianism because of its fertile suggestions about the necessity of investigating fascism as a mass movement: “I do not have priority in that”, Mosse concluded.<sup>1125</sup> After the anthropological and visual turn and the adoption of the category of “new politics”, Mosse's views had changed as far as the origins of totalitarianism were concerned. Now he saw a more direct connection between the French revolution and fascism, and his rejection of words like propaganda, manipulation and terror had an impact on his concept of totalitarianism as well. At this stage, despite the importance this concept had had for him, he distanced himself from it ever further. In 1982 he could assert that

“the fear of mass politics has informed the use of the concept of totalitarianism ever since Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Such a fear has blocked consideration of the new politics as more than just a means of manipulating the masses for the purposes of keeping the dictator in power. The contention of Montesquieu that tyranny depends upon the isolation of the tyrant from his subjects was accepted by Hannah Arendt and her successors. The very

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1120 A deep and thorough analysis of Mosse's relation with the category of totalitarianism is in Emilio Gentile, *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 41-56

1121 George L. Mosse, “Totalitarianism”, lecture, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 8; Leo Baeck Institute

1122 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 51

1123 George L. Mosse, “Anti-Democratic Thought and the Rise of National Socialism”, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 3; Leo Baeck Institute. Though undated, the speech is likely to have been given not before the 1970s, since Mosse refers to the concept of Caesarism, which he first hinted at in the early 1970s.

1124 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 77

1125 *Ibid.*, 78. A few years later, Mosse insisted again on the dangers of the category of totalitarianism; “Introduction: Towards a General Theory of Fascism”, op. cit., 2

opposite prevails in modern times. The dictator must reflect the wishes and hopes of his people and must share their attitude towards life. The dictator and the people do not confront each other. Instead, the new political style mediates between them, taking the place parliament occupies in the liberal state. Through rites and festivals, myths and symbols, the people are drawn into active participation. To millions this was the true democracy and the use of the pejorative term 'totalitarianism' merely serves to obscure this fact.”<sup>1126</sup>

If in his previous interpretation the totalitarian system had replaced parliamentarism, now the latter has been replaced by the new politics. The methodological turn was instrumental in shifting his views, and his “discovery” of the “darker side” of the Enlightenment had paved the ground for a more thorough critique of the heritage of the French Revolution. However, other factors interplayed in forming Mosse's view of fascism. On the one hand, methodological shifts played a role: the shift from ideas to ideologies set the latter at the centre of his interpretation, and the turn to liturgy affected the concept of totalitarianism; on the other, the very nature of his historiography, that “granitical foundation” which lay at the base of his methodological “continuity of interests”, provided Mosse's basic approach to the understanding of fascism, thus informing the nucleus of his interpretation.

### ***The World Through the Eyes of Its Faiths***

In order to grasp the appeal of fascism and its popular genuineness, Mosse made full use of empathy. He kept claiming that the historian has to “to see the world through the eyes of its actors and its institutions”<sup>1127</sup>: “the cultural interpretation of fascism opens up a means to penetrate fascist self-understanding, and such empathy is crucial in order to grasp how people saw the movement, something which cannot be ignored or evaluated merely in retrospect.”<sup>1128</sup> Mosse adopted wholeheartedly such an approach, and he did so to the extent that his interpretation of fascism relies on fascist terminology. Politics is an “attitude towards life”, as Bottai said<sup>1129</sup>; the same can be said with regard to culture (such a definition of culture as “attitude toward life” is the leitmotif of *The Culture of Western Europe*): “National Socialists called 'culture' a 'basic attitude towards life' which included all facets of human endeavour”<sup>1130</sup>. National socialism, in Mosse's interpretation, upheld the primacy of culture basing

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1126 George L. Mosse, “Political Style and political Theory – Totalitarian Democracy Revisited”, Yehoshua Arieli and Nathan Rotenstreich (ed. by), *Totalitarian Democracy and After*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1984, 169. This article originates from a 1982 colloquium on the work of Jacob Talmon

1127 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 53

1128 *The Fascist Revolution. Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, op. cit., xi. For a further discussion of Mosse's usage of “empathy”, see Chapter IX

1129 “The Genesis of Fascism”, op. cit., 19

1130 “The Appeal of Nazi Culture”, cit.

itself upon the German concept of culture (as opposed to civilization<sup>1131</sup>) which put forward an organic view of the world which was supposed to take in the whole man, thus drastically redefining politics. In spite of his firm belief in the dignity of the individual and its destruction at the hands of totalitarianism, Mosse could assert that fascism was not anti-individualistic: to state this would ignore “the longing for a true community” which all fascism shared, a community where the individual could truly fulfil himself.<sup>1132</sup> “Cultural expressions of the true community moved to the forefront as symbols of the new society”<sup>1133</sup>: to understand the primacy of culture in fascism allows the historian to grasp the essence of fascism's cultural revolution, of Hitler's “revolution of the spirit”<sup>1134</sup>: Hitler's definition is a definition Mosse will make his own, as well as the concept of the “nationalization of the masses”. Such appropriation of fascist terms and concepts is also reflected in Mosse's view of man, of human nature: indeed, the fascist view of man, Mosse writes, is “both irrational and conservative”<sup>1135</sup>; and so is Mosse's. Indeed, he regarded man, as we have seen, as vulnerable in front of the irrational appeal of myth, and at the same time reliant on tradition in the search for fixed reference points in an ever more rapidly changing world.

A similar parallel can be drawn with regard to the concept of “democracy”: Mosse separates being antiparliamentarian from being antidemocratic: fascism had a democratic nature, it fed on the neoromantic search for new forms of government which implied a direct participation in the state, which was viewed as an organic state.<sup>1136</sup> The leader, in turn, “represented an alternative form of government to that of representative democracy which seemed futile to these men. The leader was envisaged as a democratic leader, a *primus inter pares*, rather than as one raised high above the people as a king or emperor.”<sup>1137</sup> Such ideas are part of that tradition of “popular democracy” which, Mosse tells us, was long established.<sup>1138</sup> Apart from the neoromantic tradition with its organicism, this democratic concept originated from the tradition of the French Revolution and of Jacobinism, and received further impetus from the submission to authority implicated in pietism and evangelism<sup>1139</sup>. To understand that apparently anti-democratic movements like fascism were instead looking for a truer form of democracy means to gain a “fresh view upon the anti-parliamentary alternatives”, alternatives which, “longing for increased democracy”, envisaged a “collectivist society which was anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois, but yet was opposed to Marxism”. Mosse is referring here to the search for the “third way”, to the creation of a community within which the individual can “fully affirm his true worth”.<sup>1140</sup>

1131 “Culture, Civilization and German Antisemitism”, op. cit.

1132 “Introduction: Towards a General Theory of Fascism”, op. cit., 30

1133 “The Genesis of Fascism”, op. cit., 19

1134 *Nazi Culture. Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich*, op. cit., xxvi

1135 “The Genesis of Fascism”, op. cit., 16

1136 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 341-343

1137 *Ibid.*, 362

1138 “Introduction: Towards a General Theory of Fascism”, op. cit., 3

1139 “Political Style and political Theory – Totalitarian Democracy Revisited”, op. cit.

1140 “Anti-Democratic Thought and the Rise of National Socialism”, cit.

In another paper from the late 1990s, Mosse insists that democracy cannot be understood only in its “representative” facet, that of parliamentary government: there is “another idea of democracy which has moved millions”, which originates in the popular sovereignty of the Jacobins Talmon analyzed in his study on “totalitarian democracy” and, ultimately, in Rousseau's dream of “the people governing themselves”, not mediated by representative governments, but by “games, festivals, ceremonials, communal mass action which we may call symbolic, but which were real enough to many people”.<sup>1141</sup> This is the concept of democracy which, according to Mosse, dominates the fascist and the Bolshevik revolutions of 20th century. Fascism and national socialism, Mosse says, were “not antidemocratic movements but those which built upon a different definition of democracy which which also had a long and distinguished history behind it. Words are important, and the monopolizing of the concept of democracy by one of its strands falsifies history and puts us in danger of repeating the same mistake apparently built into our liberal heritage. Here fascism and Bolshevism are not dead but can still serve to teach us a lesson.”<sup>1142</sup>

As Mosse comes to interpret fascism as a form of heightened nationalism, the self-representation of the nation becomes all-important. Here the democratic ideal is espoused to that of community, which Mosse, once again, reads through the eyes of the movements that fostered it. In “The Community in the Thought of Nationalism, Fascism, and the Radical Right” <sup>1143</sup>, Mosse sums up his interpretation:

“the longing for community has been one of the driving forces of the modern nation. The more the world was demythologized, the more men longed for shelter. The greater the belief in man as all-powerful, using reason to dominate the universe, the greater the longing for a community based upon shared emotions and camaraderie. Modern ideals of community derived from the deprivations implicit in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment: they were a reaction to a universe where man's superiority lay in their knowledge, and where knowledge led to man's domination over nature and politics but left him naked and unprotected. Unending vistas stretched before the human mind; the prospect of infinity left man frightened and lonely ... To be sure, romanticism provided an outlet for the emotions that was to prove of enduring popularity, but the romantic chaos of feeling had to be tamed through emphasis on order. Men's passions had to be controlled without recourse to cold reason. The presupposition that men wanted the romantic poetry of life without abandoning the ordered society, that they wanted to express their individuality and yet

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1141 George L. Mosse, “Concepts of Democracy: The Liberal Inheritance and the National Socialist Public Sphere”, cit.

1142 *Ibid.*

1143 George L. Mosse, “The Community in the Thought of Nationalism, Fascism, and the Radical Right”, in *Confronting the Nation. Jewish and Western Nationalism*, op. cit., 41-59

live among comrades, is basic to an understanding of the rightist ideal of community.”<sup>1144</sup>

Nationalism reconciles the need for emotion and order, individualism and community: “dreams and longings were channeled toward national goals, led by a dictated leadership. This community was not abstract but personalized through camaraderie, through its liturgy and its symbols.” Flags, anthems and monuments “helped to make concrete the abstract ideas of the nation or people.” Nationalism was the first effective movement to posit a comprehensive ideal of community. “The nationalist ideal of community was developed fully during the last decades of the nineteenth century, when the radical right took it over.”<sup>1145</sup> The ideal of community as expressed by the *Bund* provided a strong and democratic ideal of leadership, where leaders and followers shared common roots and myths; here political parties are considered divisive. “The *Bund* as expressing the national community became part and parcel of the fascist ideal.”<sup>1146</sup> The integrating element of this community is provided by nationalism:

“from the very beginning this nationalist mystique had based its ideal upon a shared culture: the myths and symbols of the national past. Political frustration led to an emphasis upon culture that enabled intellectuals, writers, publicists, and artists to extend such ideals of community into the mythical past, to posit the existence of a collective unconscious that would serve to strengthen the ties binding the individual to the nation ... It was to be the strength of the rightist community that it absorbed so many different ideals of the nineteenth century: racism, middle-class morality, the vigor and protest of youth, ideas of law and order, as well as concepts of democratic leadership. Yet all of these were in the final resort based upon nationalism, on the appeal to the emotions rather than reason, on the longing for camaraderie, and on an activism that took up ideas of masculine beauty and vigor.”<sup>1147</sup>

World War I enhanced and strengthened the ideals of community of the radical left and right. But at the end the war benefited the right rather than the left, “for it was the ideal of the nation that informed the war experience”; war played a vital part in deepening this sense of community.<sup>1148</sup>

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1144 *Ibid.*, 41-2

1145 *Ibid.*, 42-3

1146 *Ibid.*, 47

1147 *Ibid.*, 48-9

1148 *Ibid.*, 49

“All the factors that had furthered the radical right’s ideal community still existed after World War II: the loneliness of man in an ever more depersonalized world was not arrested ... Clearly, defeat in war had shown the tenuous nature of the rightist and nationalist ideal of community. The radical right did not, after all, answer the problems of modernity. In the end the nationalism of the radical right had compounded, not resolved, the dilemma of community in the modern age.”<sup>1149</sup>

Empathy as a historical tool implied the usage of a fascist terminology. To see the world “through the eyes of its faiths”<sup>1150</sup>, Mosse's attitude, led him to empathize with them to such a point that he considered their very terminology, which he found in their very literature, apt for describing them historically. Emilio Gentile has criticized “Mosse's tendency to make use of the cultural dimension for his definition of his concept of fascism, which leads him to identify fascism with its self-representation and its political style ... I do not believe that in the elaboration of a general theory of fascism the primacy of ideology is to be preferred to the primacy of the economy or the social structure”.<sup>1151</sup> Mosse himself, as Gentile observes, had criticized those historians who tried to look for a single key to interpret fascism, “but to pretend to extract only from the cultural dimension the blocks for building a general theory of fascism” is nothing less than another “single key” for interpretation.<sup>1152</sup> According to Gentile, ideology, myth and culture cannot be separated from history, organization and institutions if one wants to elaborate a general theory of fascism:

“the irrationality of fascist culture was politically effective not only because it fascinated the masses with myths, symbols and rites but because it was joined to the rationality of the organization and the institution. Without the rationality of the organization and the institution, without being a party and a regime, without becoming the ideology of a modern state, fascism would have probably remained an ideology at the margins of politics and history, confined to the fields of intellectual snobbery.”<sup>1153</sup>

I believe that Mosse consciously limited his analysis to the cultural aspects of fascism, yet without disregarding to stress the importance of concrete historical factors or of rational elements as

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1149 *Ibid.*, 58-9

1150 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op.cit., 178

1151 “A Provisional Dwelling. Origin and Development of the Concept of Fascism in Mosse's Historiography”, op. cit., 103. Gentile makes clear in this passage that he, as the author of “several books on fascist ideology and culture that have drawn their inspiration from Mosse's work ... cannot be accused of being an adversary of the cultural approach or of underestimating the importance of ideology in fascism”. *Ibid.*

1152 *Ibid.*

1153 *Ibid.*, 103-104

organization or the role of institutions.<sup>1154</sup> At the Stanford seminary, he held that Hitler's ideological pragmatism was pragmatic in the sense that he believed in ideas only as long as they were put into practice, that is, through the *organization* of the masses according to the theories of Le Bon and Pareto.<sup>1155</sup> In *The Crisis of German Ideology*, Mosse showed how Volkish ideas became institutionalized, and that this was the means which allowed for their success.<sup>1156</sup> Such ideas were firmly rooted in Mosse: reviewing some books in those very years, he stated that “the importance of an ideology is how it was institutionalized”<sup>1157</sup>, and on another occasion he lamented the neglect of the “institutionalization of ideas. Surely the transmission of ideas becomes a more effective force in society when such ideas are embodied in social or educational institutions.”<sup>1158</sup> As we have already seen, but it is useful to cite the passage again, Mosse was convinced that, in the case of national socialism, the ideology was formalized, it was tamed,

“it came to express itself through an internal logic of its own which took concrete, outward forms ... Even the most irrational religion, to become effective, must express itself through outward forms. To move masses of men it must objectify itself. In the end the outward forms may become so important that they determine the content of the faith. That is what happened in Germany, both through the way in which the ideology was objectified and through the dominant role that the leader came to occupy. Moreover, the ideas of discipline and organization which Hitler stressed in place of 'fanaticism' not only led to a more effective objectification of the ideology but also provided the basis for an awesome political effectiveness. The so-called eternal verities of nature, Volk, and race were channeled toward definite objects, consciously directed by the leadership. The irrational is made concrete through rational acts within the terms of its own ideological framework. These rational acts are implemented by a political pragmatism as well as by the use of modern technology.”<sup>1159</sup>

1154 For example, in *The Nationalization of the Masses* Mosse, rejecting monocausal interpretations of fascism, wrote: “again, we are not claiming that the Third Reich could have succeeded without tangible results in ending unemployment and in foreign policy. The liturgy is one crucial factors among others”. *The Nationalization of the Masses. Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*, op. cit., 214-215. Mosse's stress on the “concrete side of history” is highlighted in Chapter IX, in the paragraph “The Dialectic of History”.

1155 “Hitler”, cit. It was exactly the NSDAP's organization that distinguished it from other Volkish parties, which remained elitist and refused mass politics. Mosse also stressed in a lecture how Hitler's *Mein Kampf* was divided into two halves, one dealing with ideology, and the other with organization, which is needed to rule in the age of the masses. In the same lecture Mosse, speaking about Adolf Eichmann, asserted that he symbolized “the product of the confluence of myth and organization”. “Europe and the Modern World”, lecture notes, cit. In *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., v, Mosse wrote that many of the Volkish prophets were individualists “who never united with the like-minded to form an effective political organization, and Adolf Hitler despised them for this very reason”.

1156 See in particular Part II of *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., “The Institutionalization of Ideology, 1873-1918”, 149-236. What counts, Mosse wrote in 1961, is the “institutionalizing of a cultural atmosphere”, “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism”, op. cit., 96

1157 George L. Mosse, review of W. M. Simon, *European Positivism in the Nineteenth Century. An Essay in Intellectual History*, 1963.

1158 George L. Mosse, review of *Ideas in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Philip P. Wiener and Aaron Noland, 1962

1159 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 316-317. In a speech delivered in 1970, Mosse mentioned this passage again in



Thus the organization was rational: it sprang from an irrational belief, but in order to be politically successful it needs to be rationally, concretely organized in a movement, a concept Mosse will insist upon in *The Nationalization of the Masses*. The rationality of the irrational manifests itself in the systematization of an ideology, or in the organisation of a political movement through a fully-developed liturgy. “Sorel's myth - said Mosse - was the overt rationalization of the deepest feeling of the group”<sup>1160</sup>: myth itself, the irrational side of the dialectic myth-reality, can be a rationalization. Nationalism as an ideology is also a rationalization which integrates and organizes the masses: the nationalization of the masses is, in a way, their rationalization. In the interview on Nazism, he stated that “liturgy and ritual would not have succeeded without organization at the base”.<sup>1161</sup>

From these premises, I claim that Mosse managed to find some kind of balance between ideology and economic and social structure, despite the undeniable fact that he entirely focussed his attention on the former, which was being neglected by most historians of fascism when he began his studies in the field. However, I also believe that this does not contradict Gentile's critical assertion: indeed, when Mosse set his “building blocks” for a general theory of fascism, he did so relying almost exclusively on fascist self-representation, thus setting most of the weight on the cultural dimension, an attitude Mosse must have slowly become aware of, if in his memoir he wrote that “perhaps I have seen the world too much through the eyes of its faiths, but then the times in which I have lived have been dominated by belief systems, by an almost fanatical devotion to civic religions, and there are few credible signs that this will change.”<sup>1162</sup>

Gentile has also argued that Mosse “almost entirely left out” of his concept of fascism the “militarization of politics” and the “sacralization of politics”.<sup>1163</sup> In this case as in the former, I think that such factors were, though to different degrees, present in Mosse's mind. Since the late 1970s, Mosse came to stress the importance of the Great War for fascism (and, more generally, for the whole of European society) with increasing conviction.<sup>1164</sup> This led him to reconsider, as we have seen, his

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similar terms: “The irrational is made concrete through rational acts within the terms of its own ideological framework. If this were not so, no political movement based upon irrational premises could exist or succeed. But this also means that in cultural terms it is, at times, possible to detach the rational from the irrational and to ignore the latter, especially if there exists a predisposition to accept the goals of such a movement. This was certainly the case in the relationship of many Germans towards National Socialism.” In “The Appeal of Nazi Culture”, cit.

1160 “The Genesis of Fascism”, op. cit., 15

1161 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 63

1162 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op.cit., 178

1163 “A Provisional Dwelling. Origin and Development of the Concept of Fascism in Mosse's Historiography”, op. cit., 102

1164 The list of Mosse's publications in this regard is telling: since 1978, he wrote almost twenty articles concerning the Great War, plus a book (*Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, op. cit.). Moreover, he gave numerous speeches and lectures on the subject: in particular, see “Facing Mass Death, The Trench Generation and the Myth of the War Experience”, 1988-1989, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 6; Leo Baeck Institute; “The First World War and the Flight from Reason”, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 17; “The Myth of the War Experience”, 1986-1987, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 17; Leo Baeck Institute. In all these writings and lectures, Mosse focusses on the impact of the war on society and politics, highlighting

views on the “new man” which was supposed to provide the model for fascist society. Indeed, this ideal man should have had warlike qualities, he should have marched in uniform, and should have embodied the “warrior elements of masculinity”.<sup>1165</sup> This implied that wartime camaraderie “was for all of fascism the paradigm of society and the state”.<sup>1166</sup> Such a view surely entails, to an extent, a “militarization of politics” in fascism, and sets this as “the paradigm” of fascist society. From this perspective, it can be said that this aspect was only partially left out: it must not be forgotten that Mosse turned to the social and cultural effects of the First World War rather late, and published his first book on the subject only in 1990. Moreover, in his typical fashion, he hardly ever systematized his “discoveries”, and it is therefore not surprising that, despite having laid such emphasis on the war and its influence on fascism, he moved on to the analysis of new themes (such as the study of masculinity) without lingering on previous ones.

The problem with the “sacralization of politics” is very much alike. Mosse highly appreciated Emilio Gentile's *Il culto del littorio*, indeed a study on the “sacralization of politics”, and in his memoir he even espoused this concept to his *The Nationalization of the Masses*<sup>1167</sup>, which is rather a study on the aestheticization of politics. However, the concept of “sacred” underlines Mosse's whole work on the “new politics”. Thomas Nipperdey, in the article that had so strongly influenced Mosse's interest in the role of national monuments, had tackled the problem of the relation between Christianity and nationalism in the XIX century.<sup>1168</sup> In this context, he wrote about the “Sakralisierung der Nation”, the “sacralization of the nation”. Mosse had never used the term “sacralization” before writing his memoir, that is, before reading Gentile's *Il culto del littorio*, where the concept was adopted to describe the character of fascist politics; yet he had read Nipperdey's article, and perhaps this may have strengthened his conviction that the “new politics” had a sacred character, and that nationalism was a secular religion. As a matter of fact, the sacred dimension in Mosse's writings on the “new politics” is made explicit. “Mass Politics and the Political Liturgy of Nationalism” is full of references to the sacredness of symbols like the flame or the tree, and of the cultic space used for festivals. In *The Nationalization of the Masses* Mosse says that the “sacred” symbolizes the “urge ... to transform the political into the religious”: “public buildings must induce reverence and lift man out of the ordinary course of his life”; then the Nazis tried to win the “monopoly of the sacred” as against the Church.<sup>1169</sup> In the 1961 edition of *The Culture of Western Europe*, the word “sacred” does not appear, while in its subsequent editions,

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the brutalization and the numbing before mass death it brought about.

1165 *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, op cit., 162

1166 *Ibid.*, 158

1167 Mosse wrote that *The Nationalization of the Masses* “dealt with the *sacralization* of politics: the Nazi political liturgy and its consequences”. *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 177 [my italics]. Emilio Gentile, quoting this very passage, observes that “la trama concettuale di *La Nazionalizzazione delle masse* in realtà non era la sacralizzazione della politica (termine allora sconosciuto a Mosse) ma era l'idea della ‘nuova politica’.” *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 93

1168 “Nationalidee und Nationaldenkmal in Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert“, op. cit.

1169 *The Nationalization of the Masses*, op. cit., 50 and 80

following the “anthropological and visual turn”, it is used in added paragraphs. In his 1982 lectures on European cultural and intellectual history, he said that modern man, in order to cope with unpalatable things, has a “tendency toward sacredness”, he makes things sacred, that is, he *sacralizes* them.<sup>1170</sup>

Such considerations shed a slightly different light on Mosse's relation to the “sacralization of politics”, the fact remaining that his focus was mainly on the aesthetics of politics rather than on its sacralization. The latter remained at the margins of his interpretation (the term “sacralization of politics”, after all, was first employed by Gentile himself in 1993), and yet this is, in my opinion, a typical example of Mosse's peculiarity of anticipating themes without elaborating them, though they were latent in his interpretation. In the 1999 introduction to *The Fascist Revolution* (a collection of essays), Mosse's first published work specifically dealing with fascism since the late 1970s, he mentions Gentile's book as “the first masterful analysis of Italian fascism's sacralization of politics”, and argues that “fascism was born in the aftermath of the First World War, and everywhere it claimed to continue the war experience into peacetime, with its male camaraderie and its emphasis upon struggle and triumph”.<sup>1171</sup> The “militarization of politics” and the “sacralization of politics” were eventually integrated into Mosse's idea of fascism, but they remained at the margins of his interpretation. In a similar fashion, if Mosse surely stressed the importance of the “concrete side” of history, it is true, as many critics have pointed out, that he almost entirely focussed on the study of ideas and culture, and his definition of the fascist phenomenon has remained, in the last resort, a cultural one based on its self-representation.

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1170 “European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870”, Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., lecture 01

1171 *The Fascist Revolution. Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, op. cit., xiii and xvi

## CHAPTER IX

### THE GRANITIC FOUNDATION OF A FAITH

“I personally think that the historian can show you  
the problems which impeded Utopia rather than the way to Utopia.”<sup>1172</sup>

(George L. Mosse)

“The past is, in a sense, 'present politics’”<sup>1173</sup>

(George L. Mosse)

“Culture in our case must not be narrowly defined as a history of ideas,  
or as confined to popular culture, but instead understood as dealing with life  
seen as a whole – a totality, as indeed the fascist movement  
sought to define itself. Cultural history centers above all upon the perceptions  
of men and women, and how these are shaped and enlisted in politics  
at a particular place and time.”<sup>1174</sup>

(George L. Mosse)

“What was [Mosse's] method? It concerns ... how he deals with culture,  
with culture as a systematic way of perception and a set of powerful symbols.  
Culture, to get back to another central concern, was always linked to the political,  
and his interest lay in describing 'habits of mind' that establish ways of living  
that in turn inform political reality.”<sup>1175</sup>

(David Warren Sabean)

Mosse's work underwent two methodological turns and two grand thematic shifts. He first moved on from an almost traditional history of ideas to an analysis of popular literature which entailed a cultural history that characterized his works in the late 1950s and early 1960s; then the anthropological and visual turn oriented his attention to the dimension of the history of the masses, thus including in its scope myths and symbols, but also the political meaning and function of the visual arts and of the human body. Thematically, the first shift was that from early modern history to modern

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1172 George L. Mosse, “Europe and the Modern World” - Final Lecture, 1969, cit.

1173 *Ibid.*

1174 *The Fascist Revolution. Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, op. cit., xi

1175 “George Mosse and *The Holy Pretence*”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 18

issues; the second was that leading from analyses of nationalism, fascism and national socialism to their connections with racism, respectability, the Great War, and the history of Judaism and antisemitism. Despite these significant changes, there remained marked elements of continuity in his work. His conception of history and the historical profession remained substantially unchanged over the decades. The “granitic foundation” he posed at the onset of his career was never to undergo drastic changes, and remained untouched. Moreover, the continuity is to be found also in the problems Mosse posed, as his early modern concern with individual dignity and freedom, or that with the question of political morality, was passed on to his most recent studies on the modern era.

This chapter is an analysis of Mosse's conception of history. Mosse hardly expressed himself directly about theory in his books: as David W. Sabeian points out, “I have always perceived a strong theoretical substructure to Mosse's historical practice, although it was one that he did not usually make explicit. There was no particular concept that he underlined so as to call attention to an innovation, nor was there any extended theoretical apparatus ... There was no overarching 'theory' here but rather a myriad of theoretical points and analytical critiques pushing their way into and opening up spaces in the plot he was constructing.”<sup>1176</sup> However, if Mosse's books are scarcely filled with explicit historical theory, his unpublished lectures and speeches are rich in theoretical elaboration. They shed light on what history meant for him, on its meaning, function and goals. The same assertions he made in the 1950s remain valid into the 1990s as far as the view of history is concerned. Here lies the methodological side of the continuity of interests and beliefs in his work, a continuity which has sometimes been questioned but whose existence, in my opinion, cannot be challenged.

The methodological side of Mosse's “granitic foundation” was laid not later than the 1950s, and rests on a European frame of mind stemming from the influence of Historicism. The thought of Croce and Hegel lies at the base of his conception of history in terms of the totality and contemporaneity of history, and of dialectic. Reason stands at the center in its ever recurring conflict with irrationalism. Steven Aschheim has defined Mosse “*the* historian of modern irrationalism”<sup>1177</sup>, thus highlighting the complexity entailed by his attempt to study the irrational through rational means. Mosse, though having immersed himself into the irrational psychology of his persecutors, did so with a rational attitude, loyal to his liberal heritage. Despite his harsh criticism of the Enlightenment and bourgeois society, he held fast to the belief that they represent the best possibility in terms of freedom and individualism. The defence of reason represents one more element of the continuity of interests: Mosse remained, after all, an “Enlightenment man”.<sup>1178</sup>

Mosse came to the study of history almost by chance, and yet he found in history his faith, his

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<sup>1176</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

<sup>1177</sup> “George Mosse – The Man and the Work”, op. cit., xi

<sup>1178</sup> “European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870”, Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., Lecture 05

religion: “that I consider history itself as a faith seems astounding, since I became a historian almost by accident ... And yet looking at my choice in retrospect, more basic and at the time hardly conscious motives must have pushed me towards the serious study of history. I had, after all, myself been a plaything of historical forces, forces which drove me into exile and made me confront antisemitism as well ... History for me took the place of religion, with the advantage that history is open-ended and not exclusive”.<sup>1179</sup>

“Does history have any meaning?”, asked Mosse in a speech given in 1946.<sup>1180</sup> “Through the medium of historical studies we learn about our social, moral and intellectual origins. And these origins determine our condition of life as much as the very cells which physical sciences seek to study”, he answered.<sup>1181</sup> Connections between distant historical events are hard to see, continues Mosse, yet there are many. And the next question is “can we use the historical connections to cure present ills? Here is the crux of the matter”.<sup>1182</sup> But since every historian and every period has his own interpretation, the historian can be a diagnostician more than a prophet. “We failed to analyze or do anything to mitigate the conditions which brought about a Hitler”, Mosse said: since we cannot cure any present ill without an analysis of how it came about, to analyze the “essential analytical relationship between past and present” becomes therefore necessary.<sup>1183</sup> Mosse concluded: “no one has a right to be ignorant about his social, moral and intellectual origins. They determine your life and your future more than even your business or profession ... No one can isolate himself from society – not even on a small island ... and on the other hand any attempt to cure will be impossible without a diagnosis – unless you are to follow the first leader who has one, however patently opposed to the facts.”<sup>1184</sup> On another occasion, Mosse posed the question “what is the use of history?” The answer, in his view, “lies in the continuation from the past to the present: in the fact that our Civilization has grown out of a process of historical evolution ... We live close to our history: not only in invoking, let us say, the Founding Fathers, for political purposes, but in a much more profound sense. Namely in the shaping of our thoughts and actions. Because we live in a civilization whose essence is its historical mindedness, we must know its history in order to understand it.”<sup>1185</sup>

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1179 *Confronting History. A memoir*, op. cit., 172

1180 George L. Mosse, speech delivered at the Newman Club, 1946, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 44; Leo Baeck Institute.

1181 *Ibid.*

1182 *Ibid.*

1183 *Ibid.*

1184 *Ibid.* In a lecture, Mosse mentioned “another problem of which we must be always aware: men, even you and me, are apt to think in slogans: Marxism, democracy etc. These all have connotations for us which may have not much to do with the reality of things ... We must get beneath the slogans in which men think.” George L. Mosse, “Europe and the Modern World”, lecture notes, 1956/75, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 29; Leo Baeck Institute. The task of history is “to confront your [emotional] commitment with the world in its historical dimension. Confront: for it does introduce a sense of limitation, of possibilities rather than absolutes: this is not pessimism but a guideline to success. All change must be built upon realities, and not a blind Utopianism.” Europe and the Modern World - Final Lecture, cit.

1185 George L. Mosse, European Culture – Old Lectures, undated; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder

“Mosse never ceased to remind us that the writing of history is a political endeavor. By this, of course, he did not mean that it should be crudely partisan, but rather, that it should derive from our convictions, that it should help us to understand the world in which we live.”<sup>1186</sup> History has, according to Mosse, a profound political meaning: “scholarship must never be sterile, it must entail an intellectual and social commitment and must ask itself constantly about its contribution to the outer world ... What you will do with your scholarship is indeed relevant for our common future, its failure, or as we hope, its eventual success.”<sup>1187</sup> In a speech on scholarship given at a Jewish organization, he asserted that “the persecution of learning and the persecution of the Jews went hand in hand ... A Jew who rejects scholarship therefore put himself on the side of those who have persecuted his people as well as the freedom of thought and inquiry ... As my generation has experienced: the understanding through learning of the nature and the problems of our world will, in a turbulent age, give us a stability of mind which neither commercial nor social success can give us in the long run”<sup>1188</sup>. As Emilio Gentile writes, “Mosse era convinto ... che la conoscenza storica non deve essere fine a se stessa, ma contribuire alla formazione di una coscienza civica dell'uomo moderno, per metterlo nelle condizioni di saper far fronte alla seduzione dei miti, degli stereotipi, della demagogia.”<sup>1189</sup> Introducing a course, Mosse said that

“la storia è il germe dell'azione intelligente come cittadini della nostra comunità e di una comunità internazionale. Perché ciò è importante? Semplicemente perché non ci sono più isole dei mari del Sud dove potersi ritirare ... Siamo tutti animali politici. Ma non siamo liberi di fare quel che ci piace, non possiamo fare a modo nostro. Né come nazione né come individui. La storia è il germe e lo sprono per un'azione intelligente proprio perché ci aiuta a comprendere i limiti entro i quali agiamo ... Noi dobbiamo conoscere i limiti e le tradizioni che hanno formato la civiltà occidentale per poter agire in modo intelligente come animali politici. Nessuna nazione può sfuggire alla propria storia e alla propria tradizione. Noi dobbiamo conoscere questa storia, non perché non ci siano stati cambiamenti, ma perché se non conosciamo la natura di questi cambiamenti, andremo alla deriva senza speranza. Dobbiamo imparare a pensare storicamente, in profondità ... Per comprendere ciò che muove il mondo, dovete pensare in modo storico. Noi dobbiamo conoscere la storia per conoscere il contesto nel quale agire, e dobbiamo imparare a pensare in termini storici per comprendere la civiltà in cui viviamo. C'è anche un aspetto puramente pratico in ciò. È importante per voi avere una profonda conoscenza e comprensione del mondo perché siete costantemente circondati dal fuoco di sbarramento della propaganda. La

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40; Leo Baeck Institute.

1186 James Wald, “Cultural History and Symbols”, op. cit., 183

1187 George L. Mosse, Phi Eta Sigma Speech, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 11; Leo Baeck Institute

1188 “Hillel Talk”, cit.

1189 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 185

prima metà del ventesimo secolo può essere chiamata l'era dei demagoghi. Se ripetete qualcosa per molto tempo, deve essere vera. Il risultato è il desiderio di soluzioni semplici per problemi complessi.”<sup>1190</sup>

With the totalitarian experience before his eyes, Mosse warned against the danger of an emotional drift toward demagogy. Knowledge is the tool to resist against such temptations. People should keep a rational attitude, and the task of the historian is to provide them with the necessary intellectual weapons. The preservation of freedom, both intellectual and political, is Mosse's main concern. Freedom is, in his eyes, the goal of education which, in turn, is crucial for preserving freedom:

“firstly, if you are informed and know why and for what reason men in the past have embraced ideas inimical to our concept of freedom and if you have a knowledge of the development of our civilization you will know how to preserve that freedom and you will no longer be misinformed easily or be afraid of the future. You will not fall prey of popular hysterias which are so dangerous to our way of life. Secondly, if you know about the development and needs of other peoples of the world you will be able to make your own judgements and not abdicate your rights in this respect to far away experts or to an almighty state.”<sup>1191</sup>

This knowledge is our price for freedom: “freedom for what? Freedom to be well informed individuals who will not be swayed by passion but be guided by secure knowledge, who will not abdicate their rights and judgements to any almighty state.”<sup>1192</sup> History, being part of education, is therefore connected with the necessity of preserving one's individual rights, one's freedom: history according to Mosse is crucial for living one's own life in the present. In the late 1960s, Mosse told his students: “I think that we can all agree that in the late 1960s the battle is, once again, focused against the destruction of individual freedom from the aroused Right ... I believe with Romain Rolland that it is the primary duty of the intellectual to keep the torch of freedom alive in an age of iron. The task is not to let that age arrive, and here I think I have illustrated some of the relevance of the course: even if in quite personal terms.”<sup>1193</sup> Indeed, Mosse considered his profession as one that must be pervaded by a “sense of mission” which should communicate itself also to the students.<sup>1194</sup>

What emerges here is a conception of history which is not merely theoretical. History is not an

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1190 Quoted in *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 185. The document is George L. Mosse, “European Cultural History. Old Lectures”, undated; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 38; Leo Baeck Institute.

1191 George L. Mosse, “Freedom for What?”, speech given to students who are being graduated, 1946-52, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 44; Leo Baeck Institute

1192 *Ibid.*

1193 Europe and the Modern World - Final Lecture, cit.

1194 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 138



exercise of the mind, it must have concrete applications. To be informed is a duty, and no one can pretend to live outside history, since it pervades our whole lives. Mosse believed that thinking cannot be separated from doing, thus posing the problem of choices: “as historians we cannot be too interested in testing systems by abstract criteria. The problem is always: why did men take this kind of choice and not another? ... Choices are our problem. Here human attitudes are what counts and these attitudes are formed by images men have of themselves.”<sup>1195</sup> History is made by man, and man has choices, Mosse tells his students in another lecture: “the problem is why they take the choices they do?”<sup>1196</sup>

The link between “thinking” and “doing” represents a cardinal element of Mosse's theory of history, an element which recalls the thought of Benedetto Croce. According to the latter, “un'insistenza particolare è messa [in questo volume] sul rapporto tra storiografia e azione pratica ... perché veramente complicato e delicato è il processo dialettico onde il pensiero storico nasce da un travaglio di passione pratica, lo trascende liberandosene nel puro giudizio del vero, e, mercé di questo giudizio, quella passione si converte in risolutezza di azione.”<sup>1197</sup> Croce's ethical-political history too implied a direct connection between thinking and doing (*La storia come pensiero e come azione*): Croce asserted that “la conoscenza storica sorge dall'azione, ossia dal bisogno di schiarire e nuovamente determinare gli ideali dell'azione oscurati e confusi, e che, col pensare l'accaduto, rende possibile la loro nuova determinazione e prepara alla nuova azione. Dall'ampiezza della visione storica, nella quale di volta in volta la mente, ripigliando coscienza del tutto, s'innalza al Dio vivente, dallo slancio dell'anima nell'aspirazione e nell'intima preghiera, si trapassa all'azione pratica.”<sup>1198</sup>

Culture and education must make man aware of his historical environment on the one hand, and prepare him for action on the other. As he told his audience during a lecture, “I hope that you also realize a little bit the importance of knowing about things which are neither immediately practical in the sense of offering a monetary return – or contemporary in the sense of dealing only with the here and now. Such knowledge as we have been able to give you is the very minimum necessary that you can partake in forming the future, to help by intelligent political action to solve problems which, unless they are solved, will transform our Civilization into a Civilization in which most of us would not care to live”.<sup>1199</sup>

Mosse's history is therefore deeply political in its content and implications. He wanted to write a history essentially political, or perhaps better, as Galasso observes, “una storia che servisse

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1195 George L. Mosse, *European Culture 1600 to 1800*, lecture notes, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 41; Leo Baeck Institute.

1196 “Europe and the Modern World”, cit. “The task of the historian is to explain the variety of choices made by the actors on the stage of the past”, George L. Mosse, “The 'Non-Political' Youth Movement”, draft for a review, 1960-1969, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 11; folder 17; Leo Baeck Institute.

1197 Benedetto Croce, *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1943, vii

1198 *Ibid.*, 174

1199 George L. Mosse, “Old Lectures”, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 18; folder 32; Leo Baeck Institute.

essenzialmente all'analisi e alla comprensione di una grande vicenda politica e per la quale antropologia e scienze sociali sono strumenti, non fini disciplinari della ricerca e della rappresentazione.”<sup>1200</sup> As to Mosse's understanding of politics, it has been noted that, in his view,

“politics is more than the formal political process. It is even more of behaviour of men in institutions related to the state, in cultural, economic, and military organizations. In everyday life, all human interaction is thoroughly permeated with political implication. Methodologically, this view makes Mosse skeptical of analyses of political action that content themselves with the in-and-out trays of a foreign ministry or statistical studies of parliamentary and election votes. Morally, just as Christianity views sin as composed of acts of omission as well as of commission, so it is impossible to be unpolitical. Each person is answerable for the political effects of his/her actions, whether participating directly in the formal polity or attempting to ignore or flee such involvement. Mosse dismisses as self-delusion the ideological cocoon which many a *Bildungsbürger* constructed to wait out the future, while avoiding contact with the perpetual dirty, compromising, often humiliating business of politics. His powerful pedagogical talent barely conceals a fundamental moral indignation against the aspiration to the apolitical.”<sup>1201</sup>

The comparison with Christian ethics is telling in that it highlights one important aspect of Mosse's view of politics, that is, its moral élan which is so close to Croce's ethical-political historiography. This remained from the very beginning a distinctive trait of his work and personality, one part of what may be called his “continuity of intents” which ran parallel to the “continuity of interests”.

### ***The “Continuity of Interests”***

Mosse wrote in 1955 that “the tension between Christianity and reason of state was to be a constant and continuing historical problem; and the relationship between these ideas which was constructed at the beginning of the Nation state may well have lasted into modern times”.<sup>1202</sup> Some

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1200 “Il Novecento di George L. Mosse e le sue origini”, op. cit., 63

1201 Seymour Drescher, David Sabean, Allan Sharlin, “George Mosse and Political Symbolism”, in *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe. Essays in Honor of George L. Mosse*, op. cit., 3

1202 “The Christian Statesman”, op. cit., 4. In 1999 Mosse will argue that “while my historical research has concentrated upon various modern belief systems, it would undoubtedly be correct to see here a continuity between my work on the Reformation and that on more recent history. I was familiar with theological thought as well as religious practices and could bring this knowledge to bear upon the secularization of modern and contemporary politics. It was not such a big step from Christian belief systems, especially in the Baroque period, to modern civic religions such as nationalism in its various forms – including fascism – which have occupied me for many decades. Perhaps I have seen the world too much through the eyes of its faiths, but then the time in which I lived have been dominated by belief systems, by an almost fanatical devotion to civic religion, and there are few credible signs that this will change.” *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 178

twenty years later, he confirmed his belief, and stated in an interview

“I must stress again that the problems that I wrote about - the viability of Christianity and how it absorbed ideas of Reason of State and policy - is an eternal problem which doesn't really vary that much from century to century. The theology I worked on was above all concerned with popular piety, and popular piety and modern ideology are not so far removed from each other. Finally, my really passionate interest during the late fifties on which I worked in Rome at the Vatican library - the baroque - is directly relevant to modern mass movements, their theatricality, and all that goes with it. So I wouldn't say that there is a major break. I would say that there is a continuity of interest.”<sup>1203</sup>

In his 1999 memoir, the same idea is repeated: “my work in early modern history set forth some themes which were followed up later in my work on fascism and National Socialism and which have influenced most of my writings on a wide variety of subjects ... This is how I see my work, how it falls into place in my own mind.”<sup>1204</sup>

Beyond the relationship between Christianity and reason of state, the “fate of Liberalism” is another recurring concern, and so is the preoccupation with the dignity of the individual.<sup>1205</sup> These themes link the two parts of Mosse's work (early modern and modern), passing over all methodological and thematic changes, which will never affect the basic problems Mosse examined; rather, the turns and changes helped find better answers to these problems, offering new perspectives and viewpoints.

However, the continuity of interests is not only thematic: it is also methodological. The dialectical relationship between ideas and reality, between myth and objective reality characterizes all Mosse's writings. Renato Moro notes how Mosse's interest appears “sempre fondamentalmente focalizzato sul meccanismo attraverso il quale i miti che, a suo avviso, regolano così di frequente la vita della gente, acquistano rilevanza politica e penetrano nella realtà.”<sup>1206</sup> Such a point of view encounters the disagreement of Giuseppe Galasso: according to him, there is no such continuity, in that modern irrationalism is too different from that of popular piety; moreover, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century dialectics (focussed on the relation between high and low society, between religion and politics, between innovation and tradition) cannot be compared, according to him, to modern dialectics, based on the dualism between the rational and the irrational. Galasso sees a methodological turn in Mosse's category of the irrational: in the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

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1203 *Nazism. A Historical And Comparative Analysis Of National Socialism*, op. cit., 27-28

1204 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 175

1205 “The fate of liberalism is one constant theme in my work, tying the earlier period of my interests to my preoccupation with modern history.” *Ibid.*

1206 “George L. Mosse, storico dell'irrazionalismo moderno”, op. cit., 27

“non si trattava dell’irrazionale che forma una componente coesistente di ogni realtà storica e umana. Non ci si riferiva ai cosiddetti ‘fattori inconsci’ che in una società determinano l’articolazione di una ‘cultura’ in particolari tendenze e propensioni e, quindi, l’adesione o la resistenza alle sollecitazioni di ogni ordine derivanti dall’esperienza del presente e condizionano, in ultima analisi, gli atteggiamenti e i processi creativi o conservatori del pensare e dell’agire. Si trattava, ora, di un irrazionale, che, al di là di una tale parte teorica, giocava quella di un agente storico protagonista debordante dai quadri della dialettica sociale e culturale in cui l’irrazionalità ha la sua fisiologica presenza. Non si trattava, insomma, di una variazione quantitativa [...], bensì dell’irrazionale quale fattore costituito dalle spinte etnico-culturali e dalla domanda di identità e di sicurezza derivanti dal mondo dei movimenti nazionali e dall’affermazione dell’economia e della società industriale: un fattore inedito nell’Europa moderna.”<sup>1207</sup>

I think that such an observation, however subtle, does not fully apply to Mosse. In his intuitive nature, Mosse would have connected the two diverse kinds of irrational which Galasso separates without seeing any contradiction. Mosse simply looked at the *mechanisms* of the interplay between myth (in the most extensive usage of the term) and objective reality, he was concerned with the function and evolution of the myths people live by, with the all-human need to transcend reality through irrational attitudes: here lies the continuity he sees in his work, and not in an accurate definition of rationality and irrationality which would not have suited his way of thinking. From this perspective, one can speak of “continuity of interests” in Mosse.

David Warren Sabean notes such continuities in Mosse's “lifelong concern with finding an ethical balance between contesting forces”, being this balance necessary in order to safeguard the dignity of the individual.<sup>1208</sup> Mosse's “commitment to humanistic – or perhaps better, humane – values” is seen by Sabean as another continuity in Mosse's work.<sup>1209</sup> These continuities express a single concern Mosse had, a concern which may be seen as the fundamental tenet, the thread connecting his whole work. He expressed this as follows:

“if we look over the total span of modern history to me some problems do come stand out from the date. It led by interwar years to totalitarianism in most of the West; it meant that more people than ever before were alienated from their society and sought a way out from their dilemmas – a way out which, in the end, meant escape into some sort of authority or authoritarianism. We shall

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1207 “Il Novecento di George L. Mosse e le sue origini”, op cit., 44-45

1208 “George Mosse and *The Holy Pretence*”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 19

1209 *Ibid.*

deal with the counter current of all this, that of liberalism and individualism ... How come that modern history in Europe, instead of leading, as the Enlightenment of the 18. century had hoped, to the dignity and freedom of the individual man to an acceptance of Man's depersonalization? These are some of the problems which will go through my head as I interpret this history for you.”<sup>1210</sup>

In the introduction to one of his most important books, Mosse wrote:

“this book is the result of a longstanding preoccupation with the dignity of the individual and its challengers, so successful during long periods of our century in stripping man of control over his destiny. Many years ago I attempted to trace how a system of moral values, Christianity, was eroded through contact with political reality during the seventeenth century. The triumph of reason of state seemed to me then to lead into a realpolitik which answered Machiavelli's eternal question of how a good man could survive in an evil world. But while I still believe that the seventeenth century was an important turning point in the absorption of Christian theology by realpolitik, the nineteenth century with the development of mass movements and mass politics seemed to transform the political process itself into a drama which further diminished the individual whose conscious actions might change the course of his own destiny.”<sup>1211</sup>

Such a preoccupation already emerged in Mosse's writings on the early modern age. *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England* already displayed, as we have seen, “the progressive destruction of the safeguards of the individual before the emergence of the supreme authority of the state”<sup>1212</sup>; in *The Culture of Western Europe*, the chapter on German fascism was entitled “National Socialism and the Depersonalization of Man”<sup>1213</sup>, and the whole book was concerned with how totalitarianism had been possible.

Man's depersonalization had been furthered, in Mosse's view, by the Enlightenment penchant for conformity. We have seen how Mosse considered the Enlightenment to have failed on the popular level because of its excess of abstraction and theory. Common people, said Mosse in a lecture, need immediate symbols, they need to personalize, they strive for a personalized world: their Gods have to be personal and not mere abstractions.<sup>1214</sup> The medieval “Golden Chain of Being”, Mosse continued,

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1210 “Europe and the Modern World”, cit. “The important work of the prolific cultural historian George L. Mosse on the cultural and intellectual history of nationalism, racism and fascism was in the service of a defence of the dignity of the individual”, Steven Grosby, “Cultural History, Nationalism and the Dignity of the Individual: the work of George L. Mosse”, *Nations and Nationalism* 6 (2) 2000, 275

1211 *The Nationalization of the Masses*, op. cit., vii

1212 J.Hurstfield, review of *The Struggle for Sovereignty in England*, History, op. cit., 150

1213 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 357-376

1214 “European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870”, Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., lecture 02

provided man with a hierarchy of authority, it set him in a context where everyone had its place. Here God is present, there are statues people can touch, God becomes personal; Voltaire's God instead is a clockmaker who is depersonalized, Enlightenment natural laws are abstractions, they can be grasped though reason, but the man who is not learned cannot grasp reason, but only the irrational, Mosse said.<sup>1215</sup> No movement survives in history that does not appeal to authority or certainty, and that does not personalize these certainty in myths and symbols. You cannot be a nietzschean man or woman, he goes on: "I love certainties, I'm no different, I live by certainties. I personalize everything."<sup>1216</sup>

The quest for personalization finds a relief in Romanticism: "man wanted rest, to reassert his personality against what seemed indeed incomprehensible new forces which confronted him. He seemed imprisoned, stuck, helpless. This is the vital appeal of romanticism and it continues until today because men, in this sense, never got unstuck from the system."<sup>1217</sup> Nationalism fulfils the same need, it is "one heightened response [to] the search for a warm community, for the nest."<sup>1218</sup> The need for personalization is a vital ingredient of the "new politics": as Emilio Gentile states, "questo procedimento di personalizzazione e di concretizzazione del mito attraverso il simbolo, secondo Mosse, era alla base della 'nuova politica' del nazionalismo e, successivamente, del fascismo, ed era tipica di un'epoca di masse, attratte molto più dalle immagini visualmente rappresentate che dalla parola scritta."<sup>1219</sup> Mosse's uneasiness with the masses, or with mass culture, was a problem which he did not see exclusively linked with his studies: in 1956, he mentioned "the problem of preserving individuality in ever greater mass education."<sup>1220</sup>

The problem of depersonalization and of personalizing has an apparent paradoxical nature: Mosse saw in totalitarianism the climax of the deprivation of man's personality, his individuality, and yet he read the new politics, which lay at the base of totalitarianism, as a "personalizing" agent. The apparent contradiction is solved if one realizes that "personalizing", though a normal, human attitude that affects almost everyone, can bring to depersonalization when stretched to excess. Just like respectability is the "necessary" cement of society, or patriotism is vital for a group's own identity, their degenerations bear the seeds of great dangers to man's freedom and individuality. The finding of a

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1215 *Ibid.*

1216 "European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870", Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., lecture 03. This reminds of that quote of Huizinga's Mosse often cited: "having once attributed a real existence to an idea, the mind wants to see it alive and can effect this only by personalizing it". The "visible", the "tangible", noted Mosse in the drafts for a lecture, is "holy". George L. Mosse, "European Culture 1815-1970 – Enlightenment and Pietism", lecture notes, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 20; folder 3; Leo Baeck Institute. In *Masses and Man*, Mosse wrote about Huizinga's research "sui simboli in quanto personalizzazioni e concretizzazioni necessarie di idee astratte"; such an approach, said Mosse, was still valid, "anche se la paura della dittatura che le ispirava sembra essere passata in Occidente. Dopo la seconda guerra mondiale il liberalismo rinacque una volta ancora ... e la libertà individuale tornò a battersi contro l'uomo massa." *L'uomo e le masse*, op. cit., 18-19

1217 George L. Mosse, *European Culture 1815-1970 – Enlightenment and Pietism*, cit.

1218 George L. Mosse, "Enlightenment to Romanticism", cit.

1219 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit, 95

1220 George L. Mosse, "A Challenge", *Forum of Phi Eta Sigma*, Vol. XXVI, January 1956, 22

balance remained Mosse's philosophy of life.

The problem of the depersonalization of man is one recurring theme in Mosse's continuity of interests, probably the real red line crossing his work. Mosse's history was not a narrative history: it was an organic history centred on problems whose validity remained, according to the historian, constant in time. Mosse stated in 1976 that

“I’ve always believed one should be interested in problems and not chronology, and so the problems I have worked on - the problem of the relationship between reason and irrationalism, the problem of Reason of State - which occupied most of my work in the earlier centuries, aren’t so far removed from the problems I worked on later.”<sup>1221</sup>

In his courses, he elaborated on the subject:

“there is a difference between history considered as the explanation of causes of human events and history considered as narrative only of events – as you have it in most of the kind of books of history the layman reads. I do not deny the fascination of stories of bygone days, when Kings, Emperors and Popes moved about in regal procession, when men seemed to be men and women very much the unfortunate creatures of their sex. But history has a deeper meaning than this. It is a manner of explanation of the condition of life itself. Analysis is thus as important as narrative ... everything on this world had an explainable cause, a cause explainable usually chiefly by its history. Even if some of you may not want to go so far as to say “what man is only history tells”. It is analysis based upon data which makes up history ... The 'Why' is all important and you must keep it constantly in mind. The narrative of history is an essential framework, a tool, but by itself it explains nothing.”<sup>1222</sup>

Mosse did not, however, underestimate the importance of the historical framework: though his history was about how myths and symbols mediate between man and his world, all this “takes place within history – chronology. That is why you must not only know the problems but also the chronology, when what happened.”<sup>1223</sup>

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1221 *Nazism. A Historical And Comparative Analysis Of National Socialism*, op. cit., 26-27. In another interview given many years later, Mosse said with regard to his way of writing history: “Keine Systematik! Ach, ich habe mich nie für Chronologie oder Perioden interessiert, sondern immer für Probleme. Deren Ursachen, deren Folgen. Ich habe nie diese totale Spezialisierung mitgemacht.” *Ich Bleibe Emigrant*, op. cit., 62

1222 “Europe and the Modern World”, cit.

1223 *European Culture 1815-1970 – Enlightenment and Pietism*, cit.

## *The Dialectic of History*

In his search for constant problems and issues which could be found and analysed looking for historical continuities, Mosse implied the constancy of human nature in time. We have seen how he faced the problem by assuming an anthropological and psychological attitude when he introduced the category of myth into his methodology.<sup>1224</sup> Mosse saw in the dialectical relationship between myth and reality a constant element in history: “we must say at the very beginning: what we are concerned with is the interplay between myth and reality, people's perception which leads to their action and the reality with which they interact. Thus we must avoid single causes ... Only in this way can we come close to historical reality.”<sup>1225</sup>

Mosse's idea of history does not undergo substantial changes over the years as far as its central tenet is concerned: the concept of the totality of history is indissolubly linked with the nature of history which, in Mosse's view, is dialectical. In the interview with Michael Ledeen, Mosse included the historian George Lichtheim among those who had been determinant in influencing his thought, stating that he had introduced him to the thought of Hegel in the late 1950s, and saying that “there is a dialectic between myth and reality, and ... all of history must be viewed in a dynamic and dialectical fashion. I consider myself a Hegelian.”<sup>1226</sup> This statement, crucial for the understanding of Mosse's conception of history, cannot be confined to his late approach to Hegel, since it is clear that he believed history to have a dialectical nature even before the late 1950s. In the book *The Reformation*, printed in 1953, he wrote that “rapid changes in history usually come about when the gulf between what is and what should be, between outward reality and the human condition, becomes painfully apparent.”<sup>1227</sup> We are facing here a vision of history which involves a dialectical interaction between

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1224 See Chapter III, particularly the part on myth.

1225 “Europe and the Modern World”, cit.

1226 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 29-30. When asked by Ledeen to provide an example of how this dialectic works, Mosse replied: “let us take Hitler, who is, after all, the subject of our talk. Hitler's myths were very strong, but Hitler's success was due to the fact that while his myth - of race, and let us say of the occult, in which he also believed - was detached from reality and gave him his goal, he also had a very strong sense of the objective reality, that is to say he had a profound sense of the political and social forces of his day, of political timing and tactics, and this made reaching the goal possible. Myth and reality worked together in a dialectical fashion. They were interrelated until, with a dictator like Hitler - and here I am saying nothing new - myth eventually won out over the objective forces. At the end he moved troops around that didn't exist, he gave commands that weren't executed, he retired ever more into his dream world, his world of myth and symbol. But to be successful there has to be an interaction. Let me give you another example. Let us talk about the baroque and modern mass politics. The baroque is full of myth, theatre, and symbols which carry you away from the reality of this world. But the very success of the Jesuits was that while carrying you away from this world they really integrated you into their political system. Now this approach is not unique. You have the same thing later in Richard Wagner who believed that his operas would strengthen certain myths by which people live so that through their myths they could enter into existing reality and then transform that reality according to the myths.” *Ibid.*, 29-31.

1227 George L. Mosse, *The Reformation*, op. cit., 1. Another significant passage is to be found in “The Assimilation Of



myth and reality, and this interaction is the engine which moves history. In the above quoted interview, Mosse goes into further detail, explaining that “we realize after all, through the important schools of social history, that the dialectic is, in fact, between myth and social forces. I would say between myth and what Marx called objective reality, that is social, political, and economic forces.”<sup>1228</sup>

The interplay between myth and reality brings the problem of the “concrete side” of history to the fore. Mosse had said that

“the basic myths and reality rhythm of history does have important continuities which we should remember without forgetting the cataclysmic changes we have witnessed [the French Revolution, the events of 1848, the Russian Revolution, the First World War] ... these explosions come surely when the difference between what is and what should be becomes too great: when new forces pushing to the fore can no longer wait ... but even so all these cataclysms seem to order themselves into society, into tradition, ... and that is why tradition is so important. That is why we see a continuing unity.”<sup>1229</sup>

The “rhythm of history”, Mosse said in another lecture, is represented by “utopia and its obstacles”: “reality sets the framework and cannot be ignored”, reality “always stands in the way”.<sup>1230</sup>

The importance of this concrete side of history must never be forgotten when analysing Mosse's work. Though he has devoted all of his works to one side of this dialectic, this does not mean that he considered history to depend exclusively on the cultural factor. There is a balance between myth and reality, they constantly interact and one cannot do without the other. Referring to Mosse's transition from the history of ideas to the history of ideologies, Johann Sommerville says:

“although Mosse's interests shifted from the late 1950s, some themes are constant in his work on the modern and early modern eras. One is the stress on the need for solid empirical foundations as the basis for interpretation. A second is an emphasis on the importance of ideas in shaping historical action and on the irreducibility of ideas to social, political or economic substructures ...

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Machiavelli in English Thought: The Casuistry Of William Perkins And William Ames”, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, XVII (August 1954): “perhaps the crux of the assimilation of Machiavellian ideas lies not in the thought of this or that reformer, but in the general tension between religious presuppositions and political realities.” *Ibid.*, 315. The “hegelian” character of Mosse's earliest works has been highlighted particularly by Jay Winter, “De l'histoire intellectuelle à l'histoire culturelle: la contribution de George L. Mosse”, op. cit., 178

1228 *Nazism. A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism*, op. cit., 29-30

1229 Europe and the Modern World - Final Lecture, cit.

1230 George L. Mosse, “Europe and the Modern World”, lecture notes, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 29; Leo Baeck Institute. Mosse held that ideological affinities and mental habits are as important as social, economic history, which are “by no means negligible historical factors”. Europe and the Modern World – Final Lecture, cit.

By 1957, Mosse had come to attach rather greater importance to theories, metaphysics, and ideologies in the teaching of history to freshmen. He had not changed his mind about the need for historians to ground their conclusions on facts and to try to be objective ... But he had come to believe that ideologies have in the past been of the utmost consequence in shaping action. And he had become convinced that a cardinal error of most American history textbooks was that they paid little or no attention to ideas.”<sup>1231</sup>

Mosse never lost sight of the necessary balance between ideas and reality. Reviewing *The Culture of Western Europe*, Albert Gendebien said that Mosse's definition of culture “embraces more than economic and social realities. It includes 'movements of thought ... which have developed out of certain historical situations ... It is these movements of thought developing from and in turn influencing European historical development that are the subject of the work.”<sup>1232</sup> Mosse himself in his memoir links the study of problems with the necessary knowledge of the historical framework: “I believe that historical narrative must provide the framework within which problems of interest can be addressed. I have always been grateful that my teachers in England, and the rigorous examinations I had to pass, gave me such a precise framework. Theory cut loose from its concrete context becomes a mere game, an amusement of no particular relevance.”<sup>1233</sup> Indeed, his works are rich in observations about the importance of what we may call the “concrete side” of the dialectics between myth and reality. As he reminded his students, “all these mediations, longings, angsts, take place within history – chronology. That is why you must not only know the problems but also the chronology, when what happened”, for social and political events are important “as limitations within which man moves.”<sup>1234</sup>

Concrete events are the basis within which ideas ought to be understood. Mosse referred to the “crucial social, economic and political events”<sup>1235</sup>, and all his books are firmly grounded on these crucial social, economic and political events which interact with ideas: “every cultural movement, however much it thinks of itself as separated from the troubled world, *affects it and is affected by it*”.<sup>1236</sup> We have seen the importance of the French and the industrial revolution for Mosse's interpretation of modern history, and the periodization of his analysis of the “new politics” responds to the same necessity (German wars of liberation, 1848, German unification, First World War)<sup>1237</sup>. In 1961, Mosse wrote that

1231 “The Modern Contexts of George Mosse's Early Modern Scholarship”, op. cit., 26-27

1232 Albert W. Gendebien, review of *The Culture of Western Europe*, *The Historian. A Journal of History*, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, May 1962

1233 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 174

1234 George L. Mosse, “European Culture 1815-1870 - Enlightenment and Pietism”, lectures, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 20; folder 3; Leo Baeck Institute.

1235 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1988), op. cit., 27

1236 *Ibid.*, 46

1237 “Myth and symbol became an explanation for social life, a fact which functionally does not, however, rob life itself of importance. The ‘objective reality’, as Marx would have called it, provides the setting and defines the limitations within which myth and symbol can operate. The actual political situation of Germany was in fact crucial in determining the

“Romanticism would be unimaginable without the thought of the eighteenth century and the political events of the age of the French Revolution; Marxism could not be envisaged apart from the Industrial Revolution, and existentialism aside from the First World War and the crisis of European thought which followed it. Though all of this may seem obvious, it needs restatement; cultural history has so often been discussed outside of a proper historical framework.”<sup>1238</sup>

Ideology, Mosse said, “is never isolated from the problems faced by an age; it is rather a response to them.”<sup>1239</sup> In “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements” he felt the need to state this again, asserting that conscious and unconscious wishes, desires and frustrations “are important without denying the essential role played by the social and political situation. Without the right conditions, the appeal of the proper myths and symbols cannot be activated in a meaningful manner.”<sup>1240</sup> In 1973, he claimed that “the reality of nationalism, as it presented itself to most people and drew them into participation, was not economic nor defined through practical demands. Instead nationalism expressed itself through a new style of politics closely linked to a political theology”, lamenting the fact that people reared in the traditions of liberal or socialist thought find this difficult to understand, because they search for a logical political system and “forget that men have been captured more often by theology than by the canons of classical political thought”; the “liturgical drama ... stood outside any sustained social, political or economic analysis”.<sup>1241</sup> And yet he soon felt the need to precise that not all nationalists were captured by this theology, and that “objective conditions” must be kept in mind: “certain social, economic and political conditions were necessary in order to activate this cult and to make it effective”.<sup>1242</sup> In *The Nationalization of the Masses* he made clear that his interpretation, which set liturgy and the “new politics” at the centre of his view of national socialism, was not monocausal: “again, we are not claiming that the Third Reich could have succeeded without tangible results in ending unemployment and in foreign policy. The liturgy is one crucial factors among others”.<sup>1243</sup>

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content of myth and symbol and its linkage to nationalism. The workers’ movement, while accepting much of the form of the new politics and even some of the nationalism involved, infused it with concepts of freedom which were directly relevant to the condition of the proletariat.” *The Nationalization of the Masses. Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*, op. cit., 210-211

1238 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 3

1239 *Ibid.*, 5

1240 “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, op. cit., 452

1241 “Mass Politics and the Political Liturgy of Nationalism”, op. cit., 40

1242 *Ibid.*, 53

1243 *The Nationalization of the Masses. Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*, op. cit., 214-215

### *Culture, Popular Piety and Ideology*

Mosse's history could be defined a "cultural history", or a history with "an anthropological orientation"<sup>1244</sup>, or it can be said that he had a "social conception of the history of culture"<sup>1245</sup>. However, Mosse himself gave it a definition that fits in perfectly with its nature when he defined his history a "history of perceptions". Before analyzing this concept, some preliminary considerations on the concepts of culture and ideology may be useful. In 1961 Mosse defined culture as "a state or habit of mind which is apt to become a way of life intimately linked to the challenges and dilemmas of contemporary society"<sup>1246</sup>, a definition which already bore the seeds of an anthropological idea of culture.<sup>1247</sup> Mosse's work, from the 1950s onwards, highlights the importance of habits, or attitudes, of mind. In *The Reformation* (1953) he spoke of "cultural attitudes, indeed attitudes towards life itself", and twenty years later, in the interview on Nazism, he saw fascism, intended as a cultural phenomenon, as an "attitude of mind, an attitude towards life".<sup>1248</sup>

Mosse's 1961 definition of culture is an expression of what he hold to be history's dialectical nature. A "habit of mind" becomes a "way of life": idea and reality are "intimately linked" in a dialectical interplay. Mosse continues: "cultural development does involve an interaction of ideas between intellectuals conscious of what they were about and the general mood of their times ... This interaction seems to us at the root of European cultural development."<sup>1249</sup> In the 1988 edition of the book, Mosse elaborates on this "general mood", saying that

"it consists of reactions to the complexities of daily life as well as of images of a better future. Such hopes and reactions can be expressed by political or social action ... But the more urbanized and industrialized society became, the more people tended to solidify their world through familiar myths and symbols. Christianity had fulfilled the function of providing such myths and symbols for many centuries, but since the eighteenth century, at least, they began to be secularized –

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1244 Roger Griffin, "Withstanding the Rush of Time. The Prescience of Mosse's Anthropological View of Fascism", op. cit., 111

1245 Giuseppe Galasso, "Il Novecento di George L. Mosse e le sue origini", op. cit., 49-50

1246 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 2

1247 Here is a common definition of the word "culture": "L'insieme degli atteggiamenti verso la realtà, ossia i modi tipici di pensare e di agire, compartecipati dai membri di una comunità socialmente organizzata e territorialmente delimitata. ... La lenta o tardiva acquisizione in alcune lingue europee del significante *cultura*, inteso appunto quale insieme di abiti di comportamento e dunque di contenuti mentali regolativi del comportamento sociale, ha trovato corrispondenza nel lento contributo della scienza che ha per oggetto la cultura, vale a dire l'antropologia culturale." "Cultura", *Dizionario di storiografia*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano, 1996

1248 *The Reformation*, op. cit., 112; *Nazism. A Historical And Comparative Analysis Of National Socialism*, op. cit., 108.

1249 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 3-4

transposed upon a society which was becoming a mass society and upon politics which was becoming mass politics.”<sup>1250</sup>

The hope for a better future, a cultural factor, affects reality through action. Hence the importance of ideas for the historical process. In this context, the concepts of ideology and popular piety need to be introduced, in that they link the two halves of Mosse's work, the Baroque to mass movements, giving it its basic unity through the “continuity of interests”. We have seen how Mosse considered popular piety to have played a similar role as ideology, though in different historical ages.<sup>1251</sup> Both are a manifestation of man's irrational side, of his need to strive for a better world, a better future, a “fully furnished house”.<sup>1252</sup> Popular piety represents the opposite of reason<sup>1253</sup>, and provides a shelter in times of crisis, those very times which captured Mosse's attention in that it is then that the irrational side of man is more likely to get the upper hand.<sup>1254</sup> Times of chaos and change fuel crisis of the spirit and of civilization. The apocalyptic beliefs of millenarianism had led to 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century witch hunts; in a similar fashion, the ideology of race had led, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the Holocaust.<sup>1255</sup> Both popular piety and ideologies originate from man's spiritual sources, and are apt to become “ways of life” which lead man to action. “This popular piety provided the basis for the popular support of the Reformation”<sup>1256</sup>, Mosse wrote in 1953; years later he demonstrated, in his books on National Socialism, how Volkish ideology had provided the basis for the popular support of the Third Reich.

The importance of the role played by popular piety in early modern history is the preamble to

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1250 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1988), op. cit., 4

1251 “The theology I worked on was above all concerned with popular piety, and popular piety and modern ideology are not so far removed from each other.” *Nazism. A Historical And Comparative Analysis Of National Socialism*, op. cit., 27. Popular piety has been discussed and defined in Chapter II.

1252 Mosse wrote: “ideologies fulfill a need, and nationalism certainly did this; therefore, the content of that ideology was related to the need it fulfilled rather than to the verification of actual historical development.” *The Culture of Western Europe* (1988), op. cit., 70

1253 “Changes in Religious Thought”, op. cit.

1254 “In most spiritual crises, man's troubled soul has found an outlet in mysticism – the idea that man could get into direct touch with God for at least a few moments by exerting his will and ridding his mind of any worldly interests ... This was an attractive creed for times of chaos and change.” *The Reformation*, op.cit., 17

1255 Huizinga wrote in 1935: “sarà quindi utile orientare storicamente la coscienza che abbiamo della crisi attuale, attraverso il confronto coi grandi sommovimenti del passato. Subito ci balza agli occhi un'essentialissima differenza tra allora e ora. Vivacissima fu, nelle epoche più diverse, la convinzione che il mondo entro cui si viveva (grande o piccolo che fosse) era in pericolo, e minacciato di decadenza o di rovina. Ma, di regola, questa convinzione portava all'attesa di una prossima fine del mondo. Sicché al pensiero: come ovvieremo al male? non si arrivava neppure. Era naturale dunque che l'antico senso di crisi non trovasse mai un'espressione scientifica. Anzi, come tale, aveva una prevalente intonazione religiosa. Se per dei timori terreni c'era ancor posto accanto ai pensieri sulla fine del mondo e sul giudizio universale, il senso della decadenza rimaneva nello stato di sospensione di un'indeterminata paura, che in parte si scaricava sotto forma di odio verso i poteri che erano da ritenere colpevoli della miseria terrena, o venivano considerati come malvagi in generale, come eretici, streghe, maghi, ricchi, consiglieri del re, aristocratici, gesuiti, framassoni, secondo la speciale tendenza dell'epoca in questione. Oggi il pullulare di criteri di giudizio rozzi e volgari ha ravvivato in molti i fantasmi di cosiffatte forze maligne diabolicamente organizzate. Anche persone colte si abbandonano a una ‘malvagità di giudizio’ che sarebbe scusabile solo nel popolino più basso e più ignorante.” Da J.Huizinga, *La crisi della civiltà*, Einaudi, Torino, 1938, 16

1256 *The Reformation*, op.cit., 18

Mosse's pathbreaking interpretation of fascism as a cultural revolution, an interpretation that gave ideology a central place in the analysis of fascism. But what did Mosse mean by ideology, and how did he relate ideology to culture? The two terms are generally ambiguous in that they can easily overlap: an ideology can be a

“complesso di idee, credenze e valori sull'uomo e sulla società, che caratterizza società, comunità o gruppi sociali particolari: una definizione che presenta però rischiosi problemi di sovrapposizione con altre categorie, in particolare con quella di cultura.”<sup>1257</sup>

A more specific definition of ideology could be:

“an ideology is a value system or belief system accepted as fact or truth by some group. It is composed of sets of attitudes toward the various institutions and processes of society. An ideology provides the believer with a picture of the world both as it is and as it should be and, in doing so, organizes the tremendous complexity of the world into something fairly simple and understandable.”<sup>1258</sup>

In Mosse, historical changes are the result of an interaction between “outward reality” and “human condition”, that is, between “what is” and “what should be”. Ideology, in Sargent's definition, offers an image of the world in its two basic elements: reality, “the world ... as it is”, and the idea, the world “as it should be”. Mosse had written:

“though this Reformation was a religious movement, centred on a concern for salvation, it nevertheless wrote its message upon a canvass much wider than this. If men expressed their dilemmas in religious terminology and through religious longings it was because this was their ideology: they saw their entire way of life and attitude toward life in the terms of Christianity. Any change in religion meant a change in the whole tenor of life itself.”<sup>1259</sup>

If ideology provides a “picture of the world”, here men “saw” their way of life and attitude toward life

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1257 “Ideologia”, *Dizionario di storiografia*, op. cit.

1258 L. T. Sargent, *Contemporary Political Ideologies. A Comparative Analysis*, Belmont 1993, 3

1259 *The Reformation*, op.cit., 2

in terms of religion, which is, in Mosse's view, an ideology. Ideology comes to be a lens which allows the believer to look down at the world according to certain criteria, thus informing that action which creates history. Ideology is, in the last resort, "the formation of basic attitudes", as Mosse put it in 1963.<sup>1260</sup> From such a point of view it becomes easier to understand the link between ideology and culture in Mosse's thought. He wrote:

"the system of thought, the ideology, is primary, for it produces attitudes toward life and thus toward all that life means to people. Let us also remember that ideology is never isolated from the problems faced by an age; it is rather a response to them. What is of importance in cultural history is not people's mode of life but their attitudes toward that life and the possibilities it holds. ... Perhaps we should broaden the definition of culture upon which this book is built. Culture is a state or habit of mind which becomes an attitude toward life, intimately linked to the challenges and dilemmas of contemporary society; indeed, through the formulation of ideologies culture becomes an allegiance to a way of life itself."<sup>1261</sup>

Culture formulates ideologies which, in turn, produce attitudes toward life; through ideology, then, culture becomes itself an attitude toward life. Attitudes toward life are the background against which actions are taken, and yet these attitudes are "linked to the challenges and dilemmas of contemporary society": ideologies are responses to the problems faced by an age and at the same time they produce those attitudes which are linked to reality. This is what Mosse later called the "interplay between perception and reality" that drives history: years later, commenting on his book on European culture, he gave a "clear definition of culture – not history of ideas but habits of mind which become ways of receiving reality. Underlying: that what drives history is how reality is perceived, rather than what it is, or better, the interplay between perception and reality."<sup>1262</sup> In this scheme, a perception is a "way of receiving reality", a sophistication of the "attitudes toward life". Ideologies, formulated by culture, produce attitudes toward life (and, by extension, perceptions), but at the same time they are influenced by them in a dialectical connection, since culture itself has become a perception.

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1260 "The Peasant and the Ideology", in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit. Mosse admitted that he used ideology "in a whole gamut of ways", but he stated that "by and large I come back always to the role of ideology in forming attitudes, because the attitudes of people depend on the image they have of themselves and their place in the world, and they always have several choices", "Fascism Once More", in *The Intellectual Foundations of National Socialism*, cit.

1261 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1961), op. cit., 5

1262 George L. Mosse, "Culture of Western Europe – Maastricht", notes for a course on Western Civilization, undated; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 32; Leo Baeck Institute. Though undated, the notes undoubtedly date back to a recent period, in that Mosse criticizes his book, and particularly the little emphasis put on the positive sides of nationalism, the scarce attention devoted to respectability as the cement of society, the weight he had not given to the ideal of *Bildung* and the neglecting of the role played by the Great War. All these are themes Mosse will deal with not before the 1970s.

Moreover, culture, being a habit of mind, has a character of immediacy, unlike ideology, which is a “system of thought” that needs intellectual formulation. Intellectuals can be “barometer of ideas, voicing them clearly and formulating a mood”; the “mood of the population ... interacts with the ideas built up by intellectuals” provided that the latter elaborate an accurate “analysis of the mood, hopes and needs of the times”<sup>1263</sup> (*The Culture of Western Europe* still focussed on the thought of intellectuals, though Mosse, in the 1988 edition, referred to a vaster mass culture<sup>1264</sup>). However, ideology eventually acts upon culture in the realm of both thought and action. Concluding his book on the Reformation, Mosse expresses his conviction that the theological disputes between Catholics and Protestants were not confined to theology, they encompassed the whole culture of the epoch: “the difference between Protestantism and Catholicism did not remain confined to theology alone, they came to encompass divergent attitudes to the whole texture of religious experience and, through this, toward life itself ... Two different views on the nature and capabilities of man confronted each other ... the style of life of the inhabitants was deeply affected”; there were “deep differences between Catholic and Protestant attitudes toward life. Thus, the Reformation had consequences that far exceed any theological quarrels; it led to a division which was one of cultural attitudes, indeed attitudes toward life itself.”<sup>1265</sup> The history of the whole XVI century can be, Mosse said, interpreted as follows: “the sixteenth century is a crucial age in the development of European supremacy: not because it managed to conquer the world by force, but because it laid the foundations for an attitude towards life which, in the end, proved favourable to those political, economic and social changes essential to the evolution of Europe into the modern age.”<sup>1266</sup>

### ***The History of Perceptions***

“My kind of history that I do might really be called a history of perceptions. That’s what I would say, because I think people act on their perceptions and their perceptions sometimes have

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1263 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1988), op. cit., 5

1264 However, it must be noted that Mosse’s concept of the institutionalization of ideology was already developed in the early 1960s and fully elaborated in *The Crisis of German Ideology*, thus moving a first step toward that analysis of mass politics which came about in the late 1960s: “the importance of an ideology is how it was institutionalized”, wrote Mosse in 1963, focussing then not only on individuals or groups or disciples, but also on movements which, he continues, ought to be studied with greater attention. George L. Mosse, review of W. M. Simon, *European Positivism in the Nineteenth Century. An Essay in Intellectual History*, 1963. Reviewing another book, Mosse lamented the neglect of the “institutionalization of ideas. Surely the transmission of ideas becomes a more effective force in society when such ideas are embodied in social or educational institutions.” George L. Mosse, review of *Ideas in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Philip P. Wiener and Aaron Noland, 1962. “Ideas are ‘important’ only to the extent that they become popularized ... and diffused across social boundaries and geographical and chronological distance”, Wald, “Cultural History and Symbols”, op. cit., 172

1265 *The Reformation*, op. cit., 110 and 112

1266 H.G.Koenigsberger, G.L.Mosse, *Europe In The Sixteenth Century*, op. cit., 10



very little to do with reality. I used to say to my students, you also live by perceptions because if you saw yourself how you really are, you would commit suicide. Thank God we don't see each other as we really are. ... Your perceptions were also reformed by reality. I mean that depends on the person. If they're formed by reality, you know what happened and try to move away from it, obviously. But the whole world is now perceptions. What do we know about the people who rule over us. What do we know about anything? We don't. It's all mediated. It all plays on our perceptions or tries to manipulate them.”<sup>1267</sup>

Mosse, as we have seen, believed that “what man is, only history tells”. His history can therefore be defined not only anthropological, but also anthropocentric. Man stands at the centre, and particularly man's mind: “man's mind – Mosse says – is central to perception and perception determines the view of himself and the world”.<sup>1268</sup> The view of the world is nothing less than a worldview, a *Weltanschauung*, which is what an ideology provides. Ideology and myth can, in Mosse, coincide or, perhaps better, “myth becomes a faith – a beleaguered faith in the view of the ideology”.<sup>1269</sup>

Mosse has introduced the concept of “perception” fairly late, and has elaborated on it only in the 1980s, when he came to define his history “history of perceptions”. “That what drives history is how reality is perceived, rather than what it is, or better, the interplay between perception and reality”<sup>1270</sup>: since man's mind is “central to perception”, man's mind drives history, or better, as Mosse would say, the interplay between man's mind and reality drives history. Myths and ideologies are creations of man's mind, and here the dialectics between myth and reality comes full circle in the “interplay between perception and reality” as “that what drives history”. Man's perceptions provide him with the background against which he takes his choices: they lead him to practical action. Perceptions formed by reality affect reality: in this process, man manifests his individuality through his freedom of choice. Such a view rejects any historical determinism:

“in qualsiasi analisi del passato, ciò che conta è la realtà oggettiva e come l'uomo l'ha percepita. Per tradizione, gli storici sono stati inclini a concentrarsi soltanto su una parte della dialettica tra intuizione e realtà: hanno distrutto a poco a poco le realtà sociali, politiche ed economiche in cui

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1267 Interview with George Mosse, March 13, 1995, cit.

1268 George L. Mosse, “Europe and the Modern World”, cit.

1269 *Ibid.*

1270 Culture of Western Europe – Maastricht, cit. “Mosse does not separate objective reality and the way it is perceived into two discrete analytic moments. Perception of a thing is as real as the thing itself. In such a process, myth, symbol, and value not only give form to perception, but become currency in themselves and the political system brought into action to valorize the dream”, “George Mosse and Political Symbolism”, in *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe. Essays in Honor of George L. Mosse*, op. cit., 5

uomini e donne vivevano, elevando ogni tanto le circostanze esteriori delle esistenze degli uomini a dignità di leggi storiche. Si disse che uomini e donne, nell'ambito di leggi del genere, avessero poca libertà di scelta, in quanto la necessità storica sacrifica l'individualità. Effettivamente fa comodo vivere con un simile determinismo economico, sociale o politico; esso introduce forze invariabili nello stesso processo storico, rendendo più facile allo storico di far fronte a una realtà mutevole o di guardare a un passato insopportabile. Ma uomini e donne, per quanto limitati siano dalla realtà oggettiva, hanno delle scelte da fare. Effettivamente, quella realtà ha la tendenza a essere foggata dal modo in cui uomini e donne la percepiscono, dai miti e dai simboli mediante i quali essi comprendono il mondo esistente. Miti e simboli servono a interiorizzare la realtà e a trasferirle i timori, i desideri e le speranze dell'uomo. Uomini e donne agiscono in base alla realtà come essi la percepiscono, contribuendo così anche a formarla.”<sup>1271</sup>

Introducing a course, Mosse summed up his view:

“for it is not economics that determines history, or social or political factors but all of these together. But even this is not enough: men act according to their own vision or perception of things. There are always choices, and the question is why do man take that choice or this? In the last resort history is based on people and their perceptions – not on cosmic forces or predetermination. But this perceptions, these myths by which we all live are informed by reality and reflect reality. Thus we must say at the very beginning: what we are concerned with is the interplay between myth and reality, people's perceptions which leads to their actions and the reality with which they interact. Thus we must avoid single causes ... Only in this way can we come close to historical reality.”<sup>1272</sup>

Reality remains a fundamental factor in that it determines the limits of human perceptions: “social and economic realities are crucial, they determine the limits of human perceptions, they determine the framework of human perceptions, but human perceptions are more than just the actual realities” for

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<sup>1271</sup> George L. Mosse, *L'uomo e le masse nelle ideologie nazionaliste*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1980, 16. A concrete example of this interplay between perception and reality is given by Mosse with regard to the “new politics”: “I cannot list here all the factors which went into modern nation building such as war, social and in some nations rapid economic change. The 'objective conditions' (to quote Karl Marx) are always vital to any historical analysis, but they do not by themselves translate into human actions. They must be mediated by people's perceptions, and these – in turn – can create new facts of great historical importance. Myths and symbols sway peoples' perceptions, especially in times of rapid movement and social and political disorientation. The new politics is both a product of objective reality and helps to create it.” “Fascism as a Nationalist Movement: The Missing Link”, cit.

<sup>1272</sup> “Europe and the Modern World”, cit.

men internalize reality, they infuse it with their wishes and hopes, their wish for security, for eternity<sup>1273</sup>. “Reality sets the framework and cannot be ignored”: as opposed to man's “need for utopia, need for fairy tales ... reality always stands in the way”; this is, according to Mosse, the “rhythm of history: utopia and its obstacles”.<sup>1274</sup> In the last resort, perceptions constitute, in Mosse's view, the backbone of cultural history:

“cultural history centers above all upon the perceptions of men and women, how these are shaped and enlisted in politics ... these perceptions may at times correspond to what historians or sociologists with hindsight conceive as their true situation in society, and yet, people act upon their perceptions true or false as they might be, rather than upon what historical or sociological analysis tells us as to their actual place in the scheme of things.”<sup>1275</sup>

### ***The History of Mediated Human Perceptions***

In the revised edition of *The Culture of Western Europe* Mosse wrote:

“the perceptions of life, the fear and hopes we have discussed, will be reflected throughout the book. The culture of western Europe was set within social and national conflict. There is no room here to describe the crucial social, economic and political events. That is why we have tried to analyze the changing pace of life by way of the perceptions of men and women, for how individuals see their world and how they attempt to live their lives have a direct impact upon culture – indeed upon all of history.”<sup>1276</sup>

In this passage Mosse makes his intention of focussing his attention to the “ideal” side of the myth-reality dialectics explicit. However, he always felt the need to stress the importance of perceptions, myths and of the ensuing role liturgy plays in mass politics: “to ignore the new politics as important in any explanation of the success of European fascism means to exclude most of the popular perceptions of fascism. The rejection of political liturgy as a serious and at times even decisive factor in the evolution of modern political movements lies in the unwillingness to acknowledge the importance of man's perceptions as an agent of politics.”<sup>1277</sup> Mosse was fully aware that he could be accused of laying too much importance on ideology and liturgy, and yet, convinced that this was not the case, he

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1273 “European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870”, Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., lecture 01

1274 “Europe and the Modern World”, cit.

1275 George L. Mosse, “Fascism as a Cultural Movement”, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 11; Leo Baeck Institute.

1276 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1988), op. cit., 27

1277 “Fascism as a Nationalist Movement: The Missing Link”, cit.

defended himself against such accusations. He said that he had been accused “of over-valuing ideas” yet he replied that “once the need for myth, for mediation, is understood there is no over-valuation, but a clarification of the link between ideas and reality. Thus ideas, a world view, have consequences in action: not just by ideologues and revolutionaries, but by everyone. Reality is never received, understood, unmediated. Here social myths [are] elaborated.”<sup>1278</sup>

While analyzing Mosse's passages, we have often encountered the word “mediation”. It is now time to focus on this concept, in that it is a key element of his “history of perceptions”. “What do we know about anything? - asked Mosse - We don't. It's all mediated.”<sup>1279</sup> As a consequence, “mediation is what our history is all about: how people perceived themselves and their world, the myths they lived by and the symbols they sought”.<sup>1280</sup> Discussing Cassirer's approach, Mosse praised “his conception of how men mediate between their own minds and reality” which “is useful at all levels of historical analysis. Myths and symbols can be analyzed historically because the human mind works within definable categories of cognition. Cassirer shared with anthropologists the presupposition that all freedom of action is checked by the recognition of certain objective, inner limitations upon the reaches of the human mind. This assumption becomes all important when one uses myth and symbol for an understanding of the human mind and the society within which it has to work.”<sup>1281</sup> Once again we find the centrality of man's mind. Relying on the psychological discoveries of the 20th century, as we have seen, Mosse saw in myth as part of man's unconscious drives a fundamental half of the dialectic of history. In 1980 he wrote:

“a questo punto lo storico diventa un ricercatore in materia di mitologia. Non solamente il nazionalismo, ma tutte le ideologie moderne cercano di esprimersi mediante simboli che uomini e donne possano capire al volo, che possano vedere e toccare. Il XX secolo, l'epoca della politica di massa e della cultura di massa, ha preferito affidarsi di più all'immagine che alla parola stampata. Questa tendenza a servirsi dell'immagine è sempre esistita in mezzo a una popolazione in gran parte analfabeta, ma oggi, in seguito al perfezionamento della fotografia, del cinema e del rituale politico, essa è diventata una considerevole forza politica. Come è esposto nei saggi seguenti, miti, simboli e modelli convenzionali hanno in gran parte determinato il pensiero politico nell'intervallo tra le due guerre.”<sup>1282</sup>

Images are political forces, in that they mediate between man and reality: “questi saggi, pertanto,

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1278 Culture of Western Europe – Maastricht, cit.

1279 Interview with George Mosse, March 13, 1995, cit.

1280 George L. Mosse, *European Culture 1815-1970 – Enlightenment and Pietism*, cit.

1281 “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, op. cit., 448

1282 *L'uomo e le masse nelle ideologie nazionaliste*, op. cit., 12-13

riguardano i miti nazionali, i simboli e i modelli convenzionali che diedero a molti uomini e donne la possibilità di far fronte alle responsabilità della vita: sono i filtri tramite i quali si percepisce la realtà.”<sup>1283</sup>

Images as mediating filters are used by modern ideologies to mediate between man and reality:

“in questi saggi ci occupiamo delle percezioni di uomini e donne, che rappresentano una metà della dialettica in corso tra le forze umane e le forze oggettive della storia. Ecco perché le nostre fonti sono così sovente letterarie, ecco perché, inoltre, l’immagine è tanto importante, come abbiamo già visto. L’edificio di miti e di simboli – il modo in cui uomini e donne fanno da intermediari tra la loro identità e determinate realtà della vita – più spesso di quanto si creda si basa su ciò che ha fornito la letteratura e su ciò che essi riescono a vedere e a toccare. Non è una coincidenza che il nazionalismo, in quanto forza mediatrice tra intuizione e realtà, rappresentasse se stesso come movimento in gran parte letterario ed estetico. ... Perciò questo libro è una ricerca nella storia delle intuizioni umane, nelle forze mediatrici tra l’individuo e il suo mondo. ... L’analisi dei miti e dei simboli tramite i quali uomini e donne percepiscono il loro mondo può farci vedere a fondo nelle scelte personali e politiche, per mezzo delle quali essi tendono a fronteggiare la realtà e a contribuire così alla formazione dell’avvenire.”<sup>1284</sup>

Mosse's aim was to go what motivates men, to what leads to action, and here comes men's perception of things. Reality, in his view, is always mediated through the mind. We all live by myths about ourselves, about the outer world: myths mediate, explained Mosse in a lecture.<sup>1285</sup> Mosse's point of view is derived from his interpretation of Hegel: “man's mind mediates reality through its comprehension, its consciousness ... it is no surprise therefore that Hegel sees man defined through his actions which are a result of his consciousness.”<sup>1286</sup>

Myths and symbols, the liturgy of nationalism are the “mediating devices”<sup>1287</sup> of ideologies, and Mosse had focussed his attention on nationalism: “the nation was the intermediary between the individual and a personal scheme of values and ethics ... National glory and the love for order expressed themselves through the symbols and myths mentioned earlier. They acted as a bridge

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1283 *Ibid.*, 16

1284 *Ibid.*, 16-7

1285 “European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870”, Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., lecture 01.

“Anthropology can be of great help, for not only have anthropologists concerned themselves with the analysis of folkways and community customs, but their use of myths and symbols can provide useful ways to penetrate the mind of modern as well as primitive man.” “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, op. cit., 448

1286 George L. Mosse, “European Culture 1815-1870 – New Nationalism and Hegelianism”, lectures, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 20; folder 6; Leo Baeck Institute.

1287 “Mass Politics and the Political Liturgy of Nationalism”, op. cit., 50. The general will of the people, Mosse wrote, is “mediated” by the nation. *Confronting the Nation. Jewish and Western Nationalism*, op. cit., 27

between the people and government, for many taking the place of representative government itself.”<sup>1288</sup>

“Mediated human perceptions”<sup>1289</sup> are then the core of dialectics and, as a consequence, of Mosse's history. “Mosse argues that symbols are the meaning in themselves, that they order perceived reality, have multiple dimensions, and mediate between subjects and between subject and object. Historical actors perceive their own interests in distorted form. The very processes actors set in motion for their purposes rarely function exactly as intended and do so under conditions that often mask sources of tension from them. The only way to handle the problem is for the historian to incorporate the dialectic into historical practice.”<sup>1290</sup> To understand that history is dialectical means to be able to grasp its irrational, apparently inexplicable side. Without such an approach, says Mosse, a phenomenon like National Socialism cannot be explained:

“a unicausal explanation of this phenomenon will not do, ... you have to bring in people and the desires and myths of people which are not always directly determined by their so-called objective class position. Usually people have false rather than true consciousness in this regard.<sup>1291</sup> As history is still made by people and based on people, certainly this has to be part of the historical dialectic. It seems to me very sterile to mouth slogans of class, capitalism, or reactionary without defining them in terms of their situation and without connecting them to the kind of world people want. In other words, these categories, useful though they are and investigated though they must be in detail, should be connected to the myths by which people live, to their attitudes of life. And these attitudes are never so crudely determined by the political and economic environment as some historians seem to believe. We must finally discard unmediated and positivist analyses for the examination of a mediated dialectic.”<sup>1292</sup>

### ***Mosse and Croce***

Recalling his historical training, Mosse wrote:

“like all of my generation, I was taught his [Ranke's] canon of writing history: to abstract myself as much as possible from my historical writing. It took me many years to realize that writing

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1288 *The Culture of Western Europe* (1988), op. cit., 68

1289 Steven Aschheim, “George Mosse – The Man and the Work”, op. cit., xii

1290 “George Mosse and Political Symbolism”, in *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe. Essays in Honor of George L. Mosse*, op. cit., 6

1291 According to Marx, consciousness is man's awareness of politics and of his position in history. False consciousness is caused by ideology, which submits man to an explanation and justification of a certain existing condition, thus subjugating his freedom to the existing order of society. In the drafts of a lecture, Mosse said that myth and ideology are what Marx called consciousness, though it is most likely that, in that context (he was speaking of the Eichmann myth), he was referring to “false” consciousness. “Europe and the Modern World”, cit.

1292 *Nazism. A Historical And Comparative Analysis Of National Socialism*, op. cit., 117

about historical problems which have affected one's own life was no barrier which stood in the way of understanding historical reality; indeed, I was helped to this realization by a colleague at the University of Iowa who once observed that I was so interesting while my books were so dull. I now think that the reason I never wrote about problems which in reality were always present in my thoughts during those early years, was not merely the quest for academic respectability or desire for integration ... but also my graduate training: the ideal of historical scholarship without the personal involvement of the historian. After some forty years of training graduate students ... it is my opinion that the best results are achieved if the student has some personal or at least internal relationship to his historical work. I suppose that for my generation which has seen so many wars and oppressive regimes ... history must needs be present politics.”<sup>1293</sup>

It is not true, I believe, that Mosse's early books were written in a detached fashion. There is little doubt that since he started writing on National Socialism and racism his personal involvement became stronger, but it has been shown that his concern with individual liberty and with the question of political morality deeply affected his work from the beginning, and stemmed from biographical factors. The historian's personal involvement to his work was a belief Mosse inherited from the thought of Benedetto Croce. Mosse relied on several aspects of the Italian's thought: the centrality of the mind of the historian, the connection between the historian's life and his interest in the past, the fact there is no reality outside history, but also the religious nature of ideologies and the function of myth.<sup>1294</sup>

In a speech entitled “Culture and Civilization: The Function of the Historian”, Mosse mentions Croce and embraces his belief that “as all analysis of history passes through the mind of the historian, it follows that in as much as he himself lives in the present 'only an interest in the life of the present can move one to investigate the life of the past'.”<sup>1295</sup> The centrality of the mind of the historian is connected with the problem of objectivity. Mosse said:

“this task of organizing and interpreting also becomes more than ever bound up with the historian's personal experiences ... It is basic to understand that no history is ever 'objective' for it always passes through the mind of the historian. Its central focus is analysis and organization: facts do not, after all, speak for themselves – nor do the dead. You must recognize the evidence

1293 George L. Mosse, “Response by George Mosse”, in *George Mosse. On the Occasion of his Retirement*. 17. 6. 85, op. cit., xxviii-xxix. Ze'ev Mankovitz has written about Mosse: “he has taught the art of passionate detachment”, in Mankovitz, “George Mosse and Jewish History”, in *George Mosse. On the Occasion of his Retirement*. 17. 6. 85, op. cit., xxiv

1294 Croce's idea of myth and his pessimism about the masses came about with greater force only later in his life, after the climax of fascism in Europe and the catastrophe of World War II.

1295 George L. Mosse, “Culture and Civilization: The Function of the Historian”, speech, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 31; Leo Baeck Institute. Historians, Mosse continues, must not confine themselves to the past, they must turn to the present: “if trained historians do not once more become presentists, the job will be done by those who are not trained for it: instead of history we will make grand schemes put forward by men for whom a historical fact is something to be stretched out of recognition ... subordinated to an irrational philosophy of life.” *Ibid.*

(data) ... and then you must come to a conclusion about them. This must be as near to historical reality as you can make it but it will still be a personal thing if it [is] worth anything at all ... Analysis passes through the mind laden as it is with some prejudices, some preconceptions and your own place in history – that, above all.”<sup>1296</sup>

This is connected to the idea that “ogni vera storia è storia contemporanea”<sup>1297</sup>, in that it originates from a present problem or concern. “Il passato ... è l'eterno presente e vivente”<sup>1298</sup>, Croce said, a belief which fully espouses Mosse's conviction that “through the medium of historical studies we learn about our social, moral and intellectual origins. And these origins determine our condition of life as much as the very cells which physical sciences seek to study”.<sup>1299</sup> The contemporaneity of all history implicates, both in Croce and Mosse, a link with practical necessity: “il bisogno pratico, che è nel fondo di ogni giudizio storico, conferisce a ogni storia il carattere di 'storia contemporanea', perché, per remoti o remotissimi che sembrino cronologicamente i fatti che vi entrano, essa è, in realtà, storia sempre riferita al bisogno e alla situazione presente, nella quale quei fatti propagano le loro vibrazioni.”<sup>1300</sup> Moreover, the two historians share the view that the historian must pose “vital problems”<sup>1301</sup> which ought to stem from the historian's mind, in that thought is part of life and not separated from it.<sup>1302</sup>

Historicism has, according to Croce, a deep rationalistic underground, it confronts experience as against the abstract thought of the Enlightenment, and can therefore accept and understand the importance of the irrational, “lo scopre a suo modo razionale e ne definisce le forme peculiari”.<sup>1303</sup> To realize the importance of irrationality implies to accept myth and utopia as historical factors:

“l'utopia fa anch'essa parte del mito, traducendo in immagini l'appagamento pieno e intero della sempre rinascnte sete dei nostri desideri e la risoluzione di tutte le difficoltà in cui ci travagliamo; e resterebbe mero simbolo di questo impulso sentimentale se non scambiasse il suo sogno con l'attuato o con l'attuabile, o, peggio, non si accingesse, come talvolta è accaduto, alla perigliosa e vana fatica di attuarlo”<sup>1304</sup>

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1296 “Europe and the Modern World”, cit.

1297 Benedetto Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, Adelphi, Milano, 1989, 14

1298 Benedetto Croce, “Antistoricismo”, in *La mia filosofia*, Adelphi, Milano, 1993, 80

1299 Speech delivered at the Newman Club, cit.

1300 *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, op. cit., 5

1301 *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, op. cit., 34

1302 *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, op. cit., 27

1303 *Ibid.*, 53

1304 *Ibid.*, 254. Croce defines “myth” as a “fede che non nasce nel puro pensiero, sibbene da una condizione crepuscolare, intermedia tra l'immaginazione e il pensiero, nella quale i fantasmi ricevono dal pensiero carattere affermativo, cioè di realtà, e i pensieri trapassano in fantasmi, condizione intermedia che si dice mito”. This religiosity, continues Croce, has always been, and will always be, part of human nature. *Ibid.*, 216



Mosse had affirmed that, in the case of racism, myth had in the end become reality; myth, as we have seen, translates man's hopes and fears into images, especially in times of crisis. Croce's idea of the function of myth is very similar to that of Mosse: both authors fully realize the mechanisms of mass politics, and it could be said that they did so from an elitist point of view. Croce faced this problem after the Second World War: he wrote about the masses,

“che non è dato per alcun conto condurre a pensare scientificamente, a praticare la critica, ad accettare la realistica verità, sottomettendosi al rigore della logica e dispogliandosi dei loro ora tenacissimi ora variabilissimi e sempre tumultuanti sentimenti. Anche l'educazione popolare, che il liberale secolo decimonono intraprese con grande zelo, non rispose alla speranza di renderle politicamente pensanti; e su di esse ha avuto sempre maggiore presa la propaganda non scientifica, nutrita di passione e di immaginazione: e guai per loro stesse se fosse vero quel che i propagandisti annunziano, che 'il fato del popolo è nelle sue mani'. Il popolo chiede che gli si fornisca non già la verità, ma il mito che lusinga i suoi affetti: e la prima ma ingrata verità che gli si dovrebbe inculcare è di diffidare dei demagoghi che lo agitano e lo inebriano. Non rimane perciò se non confidare in quella parte delle élites dominanti che si è scientificamente educata, che guarda in faccia la verità senza temerla e ne fa sua guida nei rapporti con le altre parti: nella classe che noi chiamiamo intellettuale.”<sup>1305</sup>

Such a view fully espouses Mosse's beliefs in freedom as the goal of education, in the task of intellectuals, in the danger of demagogy and of a political life not based on facts. The affinities, moreover, become even stronger as Croce continues by saying “la vita politica delle masse e la *coesione sociale* vogliono che si accettino i miti, che la coscienza critica nega inesorabilmente”.<sup>1306</sup> Myth fulfils, in Croce and Mosse, the same function as it provides society with cohesion.<sup>1307</sup>

Croce, like Mosse, believed nationalism, racism and Communism to be religions with a cultic apparatus which endangers man's dignity.<sup>1308</sup> The two also shared the belief in the dialectic nature of history: “sembra indubitabile in linea di fatto che l'individuo operi attraverso infinite illusioni, proponendosi fini che non raggiunge e raggiungendo quelli che non si propone”, which implies a “dualismo tra l'illusione dell'individuo e la realtà dell'opera, tra l'individuo e l'Idea”.<sup>1309</sup>

Mosse's intellectual debt towards Croce was openly admitted by the German historian: “he influenced me, above all, through his concept of the totality of history, something I believe very much

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1305 Benedetto Croce, “Verità politica e mito popolare”, in *La mia filosofia*, op. cit., 231

1306 *Ibid.*, 232 (my italics)

1307 See the discussion in Chapter V

1308 Croce defined cults as “offensivi dell'umanità”. *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, op. cit., 251. See also Croce's “La concezione liberale come concezione della vita”, in *La mia filosofia*, op. cit., 260-270, particularly pages 262-3.

1309 *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, op. cit., 112-113

– that outside history there is no reality”.<sup>1310</sup> As Mosse said in a course, “every statesman and indeed every person lives within a framework which has to a large degree been determined for him by the kind of history we have discussed. That is why outside history no reality at all seems possible, even though, and this I should finally make clear, many interpretations of this historical reality are possible besides the one which I may have given you this term”.<sup>1311</sup> Steven Aschheim has written that

“George Mosse is a historian who analyses phenomena that go against his grain – a humanist pushed into the study of the inhumane. But, like Benedetto Croce ... he accepts the notion that this is an unavoidable task, for outside history there is no reality. The only way, therefore, of confronting the reality is by coming to grips with history from the inside and in a committed, rather than a positivistic and descriptive manner. History for him, must be a passion, certainly not 'a profession like any other'. Like Croce, Mosse insists that the mind of the historian is central to historical analysis; as a result, only history relevant to one's present situation is worthy of its name. Like Croce's work, too, Mosse's writings are animated by a commitment to individual liberty in a world threatened by the forces of mass irrationality and mass politics.”<sup>1312</sup>

### ***Mosse and Hegel***

History, in Mosse's view, is a totality which includes every human phenomenon, it becomes “a kind of updated Hegelian totality, a dialectic in which the political cannot be separated from the religious, the scientific from the aesthetic, the rational from the mythological”.<sup>1313</sup> The expression “Hegelian totality” which Aschheim uses leads our analysis to the other great influence, other than Croce, that Mosse experienced. Giuseppe Galasso holds that the greatest and most enduring influence on Mosse was that of Hegel. According to the Italian historian, Mosse's Historicism derives far more from Hegel than from Croce, “una derivazione – beninteso – non scolastica, né esclusiva, e nemmeno pura e senza molteplici contaminazioni e, soprattutto, senza varie diffidenze, prese di distanza e precisazioni; e, tuttavia, una derivazione abbastanza evidente.”<sup>1314</sup> Galasso shows Hegel's imprint on Mosse's idea of history, on his dialectical view, and on his definition of culture.<sup>1315</sup> He then turns his

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<sup>1310</sup> *Nazism*, op. cit., 29

<sup>1311</sup> George L. Mosse, “Europe and the Modern World”, lecture notes, 1956/75, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 29; Leo Baeck Institute

<sup>1312</sup> Steven Aschheim, “George Mosse at 80: A Critical Laudatio”, *The Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 34 (2), 1999, 307. Croce believed that liberty is “l'ultima religione che resti all'uomo, l'ultima non nel senso che sia l'ultimo avanzo, ma nell'altro senso che è la più alta che si possa attingere, la sola che stia salda e non tema i contrari venti ... Coloro che la ignorano o la sconfessano sono, nel mondo moderno, i veri atei, gl'irreligiosi.” “Antistoricismo”, op. cit., 93

<sup>1313</sup> Steven Aschheim, “George Mosse – The Man and the Work”, in *George Mosse. On the Occasion of his Retirement*. 17. 6. 85, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1986, xii

<sup>1314</sup> “*Il Novecento di George L. Mosse e le sue origini*”, op. cit., 51

<sup>1315</sup> Galasso quotes from *La nazione, le masse e la nuova politica* and from *The Culture of Western Europe*, listing the common

attention to Mosse's interpretation of Hegel in *The Culture of Western Europe*, arguing that this interpretation is a very subtle one, which takes a closer look on the relationship between Hegel's thought and his early liberalism in the age of the Napoleonic wars. Mosse, holds Galasso, has rendered justice to the liberal aspects of Hegel's thought, lamenting the fact that most interpreters had stressed only the idealistic side of it, neglecting the rationalistic.<sup>1316</sup> “Una tale considerazione di Hegel”, goes on Galasso, “non si spiegherebbe senza una consapevole solidarietà o, almeno, affinità teoretica, sentita anche più di quanto sia dichiarata”.<sup>1317</sup> The Italian historian concludes: “a noi sembra che qui la posizione storiografico-filosofica di Mosse risulti più che mai evidente: uno storicismo ... di ispirazione hegeliana, con alcune riserve di principio, con timidezze o inadeguatezze (egli non si sentiva affatto un filosofo) teoretiche, con influenze eterogenee o addirittura con contraddizioni, senza alcuna sistematicità, fin troppo preoccupato degli avvenimenti del giorno e non in grado di dominarli intellettualmente del tutto. ... E, tuttavia, uno storicismo di forti convinzioni liberali, chiaro nel suo insieme di indirizzo di pensiero e nel suo significato ideologico.”<sup>1318</sup>

Mosse, who can be considered one of the forerunners in the field of study of political religions, as it has been debated above, incurs in what Marina Cattaruzza has defined “Hegelian sickness”:

“in my opinion, historical research on 'political religions' in some cases still suffers from a kind of 'Hegelian' sickness. Religious manifestations in the sphere of politics are analyzed and depicted as something barely 'occurring'. A stronger analytical effort might perhaps cast some more light on how the sacralisation of politics develops, on historical subjects in the context of creating rituals, cults and sacred writings, and on intentions and reciprocal relations between 'officials' and the 'liturgical mass'. In this context, it is worth stressing that Mosse declared himself a 'Hegelian'. Emilio Gentile confronts this issue in his differentiated conclusions to the *Sacralisation of Politics*, where he underlines the intentional character of Fascist lay religion: 'Once in power, Fascism instituted a lay religion by sacralising the state and spreading a political cult of the masses that aimed at creating a virile and virtuous citizenry, dedicated body and soul to the nation.' But he also honestly admits that the problem of the sincerity of faith, of manipulation 'from above', of the dialectic between rulers and masses, is still far from having been solved.”<sup>1319</sup>

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features in the two authors: “la storia, nella sua 'potenza dinamica', come 'base' della ragione; 'il fattore determinante' e, insieme, 'l'incarnazione della ragione'; la storia usata 'per definire la ragione', per cui 'il modo di operare della storia, i principi che muovevano lo sviluppo storico erano di vitale importanza'. Il 'processo dialettico', la dialettica 'fatta di tesi e antitesi' come modo di svolgersi della storia; la dialettica come 'continuo conflitto di forze contrapposte, come una lotta che avrebbe prodotto una sintesi duratura', per cui 'il dramma della storia era ... un dramma di lotta e di momentanei successi'. La cultura come manifestazione di uno 'spirito popolare', che ne 'determinava la forma'.” *Ibid.*, 52

1316 *Ibid.*, 52-55

1317 *Ibid.*, 55

1318 *Ibid.*, 56

1319 Marina Cattaruzza, “Introduction” to the Special Issue of *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*: “Political Religions as a Characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century”; *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 6, No. 1, June 2005, 12

Mosse himself was actually certainly not immune from this sickness: to quote just one example out of many possible, he once stated that “conscious and unconscious wishes, desires and frustrations are manipulated in order to produce adherence to the political movement”, yet without specifying who manipulated them, and how.<sup>1320</sup> The nation, nationalism, or, for example, respectability are often the subjects of sentences. Isabel Hull had raised the problem while reviewing Mosse's 1982 article on nationalism and respectability:

“the major question, it seems to me, that Mosse's essay leaves open is: what were the actual, historical agents which forged nationalism and respectability together? Which institutions began to mix the discourses of two such different value-systems? Once we ask this question, we get nearer to the motives behind the process, whether they were conscious or not, the product of transient historical conjunction or of a longer, structural pattern, or whether they grew out of some dynamic internal to the institution(s), unrelated either to nationalism or respectability.”<sup>1321</sup>

Eric Leed as well had his say in a 1988 letter to Mosse when commenting on *Nationalism and Sexuality*: “the terms are interesting, the notion of respectability seems to be one that is worthy of respect even though one isn't getting it and is a kind of magical self-evolution, a gest toward an unseen eye, a compensatory complex which creates itself. It is this boot-strapping feature of respectability which interests me, respectability creates itself and contains, inherently, the aspect of self-generation.”<sup>1322</sup>

Getting back to Galasso's interpretation of Mosse, it can be said that he is certainly right when he observes how Mosse was closer to the “first” Hegel than to the “second”. Mosse, reviewing Friedman's book on the philosophy of the Frankfurt School, criticized him on the basis that “the Hegel discussed here for the most part is the old Hegel preoccupied with the end of history and not the young Hegel with his open-ended dialectic and his emphasis on the mediation of reality.”<sup>1323</sup> Yet I think that the influence of Croce was as important as that of Hegel. If the latter lent Mosse his idea of the dialectic of history and that of mediation, the former influenced him with his belief in the contemporaneity of the historical inquiry and the totality of history, a view that informed Mosse's fundamental belief in the task of history and of the historian.

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1320 “History, Anthropology, and Mass Movements”, op. cit., 451

1321 Isabel V. Hull, “The Bourgeoisie and its Discontents: reflections on 'Nationalism and Respectability', *The Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 17, No. 2, April 1982, 248

1322 Eric Leed, letter to Mosse, 10 November 1988, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 15; folder 2; Leo Baeck Institute

1323 Mosse, review of George Friedman, *The Political Philosophy of the Frankfurt School*, op. cit., 188

## *The Role of Empathy: The Way People Think*

In a lecture, Mosse said that “attitudes towards culture ... are as much part of our objective environment as any stone or tree or economic endeavour. Whenever one or several men create some outward signs or imprints of their private thoughts and feelings, a vital element of the historical process is 'objectified', made concrete and subject to analysis. The study of history must be, therefore, in large measure the 'objectifications' of man's consciousness. For our thinking is an interaction between our own 'subjective' mind and products of other minds which confront us everywhere. This should be obvious and it is this which forms the 'attitudes of people' which leads to their actions”.<sup>1324</sup> This view, he continued, was inspired by Dilthey (a founding father of Historicism), and was reinforced by the study of psychology. Mosse relied much on his European background, having been influenced by Croce, Hegel, Meinecke and being therefore an intellectual debtor to the tradition of Historicism. Mosse's tool for understanding, much in accordance with Dilthey, was empathy: “it is my firm belief that a historian in order to understand the past has to empathize with it, to get under its skin, as it were, to see the world through the eyes of its actors and its institutions”; “empathy is for me still at the core of the historical enterprise, but understanding does not mean withholding judgement. I have myself mainly dealt with people and movements whom I judged harshly, but understanding must precede an informed and effective judgement”.<sup>1325</sup> The historian, said Mosse in a lecture, “must be able to understand attitudes which are to him, personally, distasteful ... Understanding means empathy – to look at the world, at least for a moment, through the world view of others, however distasteful. This all important fact ... is vital. It comes easier the more one knows, the more one is learned. But it is most difficult, I think, for that person who himself is committed to an absolute as a truth which stands outside history.”<sup>1326</sup> Reflecting on the historical profession, Mosse said on another occasion: “I think we analyze the way people think as we look back over history. Why do I think so? Because certain patterns do emerge and these patterns of thought reflect themselves in many ways: in the way people behave and in their attitude towards life.”<sup>1327</sup>

Empathy was a gift Mosse had, a gift he made full use of and which allowed him to elaborate his revolutionary interpretation of fascism. Albert Speer himself, as we have seen, recognized this, and Mosse's contribution to the historiography of fascism has been widely accepted. Empathy was one of the keys Mosse used to unlock the door to the fascist mind: “the cultural interpretation of fascism

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<sup>1324</sup> Europe and the Modern World - Final Lecture, cit.

<sup>1325</sup> *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 53 and 172. “Empathy means putting contemporary prejudice aside while looking at the past without fear or favor”, *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>1326</sup> Europe and the Modern World - Final Lecture, cit.

<sup>1327</sup> George L. Mosse, “The Way People Think” - Contemporary Trends, lecture, 1958-1959; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 16; folder 26; Leo Baeck Institute.

opens up a means to penetrate fascist self-understanding, and such empathy is crucial in order to grasp how people saw the movement, something which cannot be ignored or evaluated merely in retrospect.”<sup>1328</sup>

### ***The Rational and the Irrational: Further Considerations***

David Warren Sabean recalls: “while we were preparing Mosse's Festschrift in 1980, Robert Nye wrote quite astutely: 'I have always taken Mosse to be an intuitive sort of intellectual historian, feeling his way through his materials and reconstructing intellectual developments as they 'must' have occurred. On this view, empathy has been his most useful tool; in his hands, ideology appeals as much to deep emotional structures as to rational and cognitive ones.”<sup>1329</sup> We have already discussed Mosse's relationship with the categories of the rational and the irrational.<sup>1330</sup> However, it is now worth to elaborate a bit further on the subject basing ourselves on the new considerations made in this chapter. Benedetto Croce, as we have seen, had written that Historicism accepts and understands the irrational, “lo scopre a suo modo razionale e ne definisce le forme peculiari.”<sup>1331</sup> Mosse, criticizing Lovejoy's approach, said that

“Arthur Lovejoy wrote ... that ideas are derived from philosophic systems and he adds that logic is one of the most important operative factor in the history of thought. He warned of giving the non rational too much place in the new discipline. How strange and isolated even such intellectual Americans must have been in the 1930s! For most of the world was in the grip of irrational systems which had, to be sure, a logic of their own but not one opposed to irrationalism. This can surely not longer satisfy. Not only for the 20. century but for the earlier centuries as well. How much irrationalism will face us here in the 17. and 18. centuries – perhaps the movement of mysticism, of social revolt for the sake of the millennium – these are in the long run as important as the supposedly rationalistic systems of the pre Enlightenment and the Enlightenment itself.”<sup>1332</sup>

As early as in 1948, Mosse had showed an interest in irrationalism and traced it back into the period he

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1328 *The Fascist Revolution. Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, op. cit., xi. Years before, in 1958, Mosse expressed the same belief with regard to his works on the Puritans: he had sought to “analyze their thought as I think these men themselves understood it”. George L. Mosse, letter to Professor Daniel J. Boorstin, 21 November 1958, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 14; folder 29; Leo Baeck Institute.

1329 “George Mosse and *The Holy Pretence*”, op. cit., 16

1330 See “Claude Lévi-Strauss, the Masses and Irrationality”, in the paragraph “The 'Anthropological Turn': The Idea of Myth”, Chapter III

1331 *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, op. cit., 53

1332 George L. Mosse, *European Culture 1600 to 1800*, lectures, undated (probably late 1950s), George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 19; folder 41; Leo Baeck Institute

was studying: in a speech on mysticism and the Renaissance given in 1948 he stressed (quoting Huizinga and Leo Olschki) the importance of mystical thought in the early modern age, despite the fact that the age is generally associated with the rise of secularism; and he drew a comparison with the modern world: “within the cultural chaos of the modern world many have returned to the spiritual presupposition of the mystics of the 13. and 14. century”.<sup>1333</sup> Mosse saw European history as a gradual “erosion of rationality”<sup>1334</sup>, and history “also confronts emotion with rational analysis through its criticism of ideology and 'myths' – which so often make up the essence of ideology”.<sup>1335</sup>

This character of history leads to the task of the historian:

“il problema principale di fronte al quale ogni storico si trova è quello di catturare l'irrazionale mediante un esercizio razionale della mente. Ciò diventa più facile quando l'irrazionale si fa concreto tramite atti razionali entro i confini della propria struttura ideologica ... Le diverse espressioni del nazionalismo radicale di cui questo libro è pieno possono sembrare irrazionali e perfino bizzarre, ma sono una logica conseguenza dei presupposti e delle funzioni del nazionalismo moderno ... [Aby Warburg and Ernst Cassirer were convinced that] l'irrazionale si potesse addomesticare inserendolo in una struttura di pensiero razionale mediante un esercizio mentale. Esaminarono i miti del passato allo scopo di garantire un'impostazione razionale alla costruzione della società attuale. ... Credevano che un'indagine dotta, storica e filosofica, dei miti e dei simboli avrebbe condotto all'integrazione di ciò che era antirazionale nella critica razionale della cultura. Non possiamo più condividere l'ottimismo di questi uomini, fondato com'era sull'idea, formulata da Cassirer, della progressiva elevazione intellettuale dell'umanità fino a raggiungere la consapevolezza della base razionale della sua esistenza.”<sup>1336</sup>

Commenting on this passage, Gentile has noted how Mosse “svincolava l'irrazionalismo dal nichilismo, conferendo all'irrazionalismo stesso una sua propria razionalità, costituita dalla logica inerente alle forme attraverso le quali esso si esprimeva e si concretizzava come movimento politico”.<sup>1337</sup> The rationality of the irrational manifests itself in the systematization of an ideology, or in the organisation

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1333 George L. Mosse, speech on mysticism and the Renaissance, 1948, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 44; Leo Baeck Institute.

1334 George L. Mosse, “Culture and Civilization: the Function of the Historian”, cit.

1335 Europe and the Modern World - Final Lecture, cit.

1336 *L'uomo e le masse nelle ideologie nazionaliste*, op. cit., 17-18. In “The Appeal of Nazi Culture” Mosse said that “the irrational is made concrete through rational acts within the terms of its own ideological framework. If this were not so, no political movement based upon irrational premises could exist or succeed. But this also means that in cultural terms it is, at times, possible to detach the rational from the irrational and to ignore the latter, especially if there exist a predisposition to accept the goals of such a movement. This was certainly the case in the relationship of many Germans towards National Socialism.” “The Appeal of Nazi Culture”, cit.

1337 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 84

of a political movement through a fully-developed liturgy. “Sorel’s myth - Mosse said - was the overt rationalization of the deepest feeling of the group”<sup>1338</sup>: myth itself, the irrational side of the dialectic myth-reality, can be a rationalization. Nationalism as an ideology is also a rationalization which integrates and organizes the masses: the nationalization of the masses is, in a way, their rationalization.

### ***The Mind of the Historian***

David W. Sabeen has vividly described Mosse’s way of working and his historical method:

“on the one hand, narrative provided for him the dimension of practice, while on the other hand, theory was useful for generating questions, rigorously linked to context. He uses narrative to structure what he has to say. Theory for him is not directly linked to the narrative but involves a series of meaningful questions that are often only loosely linked to the matter at hand or to the overarching story he is telling. The questions often seem unprompted by the material itself: they come at right angles, so to speak, to the text he is developing. They can arise from his extensive reading, from his experience, or from something suggested by his imagination – a leap, an analogy, a comparison – and any of these things can seem at once compelling for the reader and wildly out of place. He could be writing on some late-nineteenth-century text at the same time he was reading Philippe Ariès’s *Centuries of Childhood*, the latter providing an insightful question, which he would sometimes make explicit and sometimes leave for the reader to guess where the flash of insight came from. There was no overarching “theory” but rather a myriad of theoretical points and analytical critiques pushing their way into and opening up spaces in the plot he was constructing. The plot itself usually involved an expository reading of text after text, each one chosen for its thematic usefulness. He treated the texts of Western (German) thought much as a biblical expositor might treat Scripture, moving back and forth, explaining here and there, bringing the texts from quite different places into juxtaposition. He takes a theme, builds a central focus, and explores variations.”<sup>1339</sup>

This description suits perfectly Mosse’s work, and makes also clear why it is sometimes very difficult to discover the origin of his ideas, connections, and possible influences. The difficulties in locating, for example, Mosse’s anthropological sources of inspiration may derive from his “leav[ing] for the reader to guess where the flash of insight came from”.

In a speech given at a Graduate Club in the 1950s, Mosse faced the question of “how much

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1338 “The Genesis of Fascism”, op. cit., 15

1339 “George Mosse and *The Holy Pretence*”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 17-18



should and indeed can the Historian keep up with the present?" Mosse's answer sheds further light on his way of working and his approach to history:

"I have read William Ames from cover to cover, but I have never read the diplomatic correspondence of Yalta and Teheran. In the modern period I have read the novels of Freytag and Balzac, and know something about Stefan George and Henry Adams – but know nothing and, on the whole, care less, about the diplomatic negotiations leading up to the war of 1870 or 1914. Now in the ideal world of the private scholar or the European Professor this would matter little – but in our world we usually teach also a survey course. Now my point is this: that it is better to start even such a task from the limited point of view described, a point of view and knowledge which can be acquired in the short Historian's day rather than attempt to broaden out this day to the point where both reading and thought fritter themselves away in the totality of human history. In other words I believe that the specialist is better equipped to teach Freshman course than the 'Universal Historian' for he has a base from which to depart in his analysis. The events and crisis of early modern Europe, in my case, lend some precision to my thinking about the present. It is a peculiar perspective, perhaps, but any Academic course to have a sense must have a thesis - a clearly defined viewpoint, if it is to be more than 'a textbook wired for sound'. Here the very limitations of the Historian's day are a help rather than a hindrance. If my knowledge of the religious struggles of the sixteenth century leads me to develop a thesis about politics which I believe also has value for subsequent centuries then my courses will make sense. Facts can be gotten from the textbooks. This I think plays into what constitutes good lecturing. You will only lecture well, I think, if you have the sense of giving the students something new: some theses which you have arrived at, on the bases of your researches – that is, if these researches have a value above the mere digging process. In my own case the work I did for my Ph. D. on the concept of sovereignty, and the work I have done subsequently on the relationship of Christianity to political thought, has given me a perspective over all of modern history. There is, I think, a great deal to be said for Ph. D. topics which are analytical in nature and deal with segments of constant problems in modern history. It must be plain that all this means that I regard the difference between research and teaching non existent. Only on the basis of continuing research can you be any kind of inspiring teacher who has developed his own scholarly point of view. Otherwise you will indeed be just a text book wired for sound."<sup>1340</sup>

This long quote needs little commentary. Its explicitly describes Mosse's conception of learning and

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1340 George L. Mosse, speech at the Graduate Club, undated, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 44; Leo Baeck Institute.

teaching, and provides evidence to support Sabeian's description of his way of working. In his speech, Mosse went on criticising those academic administrators who believe that research is a “luxury”, thus creating “operators”, “wheels” in the system who do not have a real research interest and focus exclusively on academic success. They are bound to become “successful business men”, and may even “get a reputation as perfectionist[s], for this will be [their] excuse for never publishing. I can really not consider such people as Historians. ... Publishing is of the very essence of the Historian's craft and good writing too”, says Mosse.<sup>1341</sup> He then concludes his speech saying that the historian

“must have ideas and imagination and research more than fleeting antiquarianism. ... For the student ... should get new impressions and insights which can only come from a man who has done concentrated scholarship. ... Well, perhaps I have been idealistic, but a Historian's day must be taken up reading, writing and teaching History. Obviously this talk has been made by a bachelor.”<sup>1342</sup>

Mosse's vision of history, as Sabeian points out, is “tragic”.<sup>1343</sup> Mosse was aware of the dangers inherent in human nature which could lead people into the arms of powerful, irrationalist ideologies, and at the same time knew that many other people, among whom Jewish intellectuals in the 1930s, did not do so but instead chased “a noble illusion”<sup>1344</sup>. The finding of a balance was, as we have seen, his ideal goal. “I know full well that men and women do not as a rule learn from history, but it seems to me that at least the historian can do so”, he said in 1985.<sup>1345</sup> Despite his pessimism, he considered the task of the historian essential: Mosse's work always had a “didactic element” and a “pedagogical intent”<sup>1346</sup>, he always fought “to keep the torch of freedom alive”. He often did so by way of provocation: “I like to provoke, to break taboos, but purely theoretically, as a myth destroyer, to get people to think – not in the practice of daily life”, he wrote in his memoir.<sup>1347</sup> A belief he had always held. Commenting on the reactions to *The Holy Pretence*, he wrote in 1958: “I have come to the conclusion that the only book worth reading is one which puts forwards new ideas, however controversial they might be. We need much more of that sort of thing. ... I may be wrong, but I wrote *The Holy Pretence* and everything else I have done on the Puritans also to stimulate some debate.”<sup>1348</sup>

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1341 *Ibid.*

1342 *Ibid.*

1343 “George Mosse and *The Holy Pretence*”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 19

1344 *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, op. cit., 12

1345 “Response by George Mosse”, op. cit., xxxi

1346 “George Mosse and *The Holy Pretence*”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 19

1347 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 180-181

1348 George L. Mosse, letter to Professor Daniel J. Boorstin, 21 November, 1958, cit.

## CONCLUSION

### GEORGE MOSSE'S LEGACY

“I was never to close the gap between ideal and reality,  
and I learned myself what I used to tell my students:  
true maturity is reached only when one realizes  
that there exist insoluble problems.”<sup>1349</sup>  
(George L. Mosse)

“Our enemies have been and will always be those who lack  
tolerance toward individual rights and freedoms, who seek security in a  
rigid conformity and in emotion not tempered by reason”<sup>1350</sup>  
(George L. Mosse)

Sterling Fishman, describing Mosse's approach to history, has stated that “George's historical genius does not rest on his commitment to theoretical models. He is an artist with a vision rather than an architect with a carefully drawn plan”<sup>1351</sup>; similarly, Emilio Gentile has defined Mosse's sensitivity as that of an “artista della storia”.<sup>1352</sup> Such descriptions fit into Mosse's way of performing history. He had an extremely intuitive approach to the subject, “era mosso più dall'intuizione complessiva di un problema e di un fenomeno che dalle teorie”.<sup>1353</sup> This accounts for what James Wald has termed the “general nature” of his work, which was the “secret of his success”:

“for his innovation lies in having a broad vision, in putting seemingly disparate topics together, in getting the big picture. He transcends the specificity of his researches to arrive at a synthetic analysis. One senses that he is not the type that prefers detailed studies. He has too many ideas to allow himself to stay put for long, he feels the constant need to move on. To be sure, he has carefully reconnoitered the historical landscape that he has chosen to write about; but his is not the nature given to producing elaborate topographical maps. A scout rather than a settler or surveyor, his aim is not to stake out an exclusive claim to a homestead, but rather to blaze a trail,

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1349 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 184

1350 “Response by George Mosse”, in *George Mosse – On the Occasion of His Retirement. 17.6.85*, op cit., xxxi

1351 Sterling Fishman, “GLM: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 279

1352 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 189

1353 *Ibid.*, 188

sketching the salient features so as to enable others to join or follow his search.”<sup>1354</sup>

Indeed, Mosse has been a pioneer in many fields of historiography, and the pathbreaking nature of many of his works has been recognized by most of his reviewers. It has been written that he was “years ahead of his times”<sup>1355</sup>, that he had an “extraordinary gift for anticipating what would become the important historical questions for the future, what taboos had to be transgressed, what myths shattered”<sup>1356</sup>. Stanley Payne has written that “it is no exaggeration to say that Mosse pioneered what have become some of the main trends of research [on fascism] at the beginning of the twenty-first century”<sup>1357</sup>. And yet Mosse worked “without a specific theoretical program”<sup>1358</sup>, which caused many of his intuitions to go almost unnoticed, if only to be rescued later, and often without mentioning him: in Anson Rabinbach's words, Mosse was “a pioneer, but he never stayed long enough in any one of those territories to post fences and mark disciplinary boundaries.”<sup>1359</sup> His works brushed against the grain, defied historiographical common places, were written in order to “stimulate some debate”, and sometimes to provoke, to “get people to think”: this very fact made them highly innovative on the one hand, and yet on the other his usually unfashionable theses met with neglect and were appreciated only with some delay.

For Aschheim, Mosse has been “instrumental in transforming the very idea of what we understand to be 'cultural history'”<sup>1360</sup>: this happened through the two methodological turns, first with the adoption of literature, and then with the turn to anthropology and aesthetics. The role he attributed to myth, stereotype and symbols “opened up new approaches on the study of mass politics, fascism, racism, Jewish history, sexuality, and personal identity”<sup>1361</sup>, and later also on the history of the Great War. Thanks to his approach, Mosse “was able to uncover a wealth of new information and formulate provocative theses by devoting himself to the study of popular culture such as mass literature, pamphlets, religious tracts, and non-verbal sources of all levels and types, including art, architecture, and ritual. If [his] ideas strike us as insightful, but not quite new, it is precisely because Mosse was a pioneer in cultural history.”<sup>1362</sup>

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1354 James Wald, “Cultural History and Symbols”, op. cit., 181-2

1355 Steven Aschheim, “George Mosse at 80: A Critical Laudatio”, op. cit., 296

1356 Anson Rabinbach, “George L. Mosse 1919-1999: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 335. Mosse “développa un type d'histoire culturelle qui n'était pas en vogue à l'époque, mais qui semble étonnamment familier aujourd'hui”, Jay Winter, “De l'histoire intellectuelle à l'histoire culturelle: la contribution de George L. Mosse”, op. cit., 178

1357 Stanley Payne, “The Mosse Legacy”, *The Wisconsin Academic Review*, Summer 2000. Payne has also stressed Mosse's innovative contributions to the history of racism, mass movements, nationalism, sexuality, gender and respectability.

1358 Jeffrey Herf, “Mosse's Recasting of European Intellectual and Cultural History”, *German Politics and Society*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Winter 2000, 18

1359 “George L. Mosse 1919-1999: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 336

1360 Steven Aschheim, “George Mosse – The Man and the Work”, in *George Mosse – On the Occasion of His Retirement*, 17.6.85, op. cit., xi

1361 Phyllis Cohen Albert and Alex Sagan, “George L. Mosse Memorial Symposium: Introduction”, *German Politics and Society*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Winter 2000, 1

1362 “Cultural History and Symbols”, op. cit., 171

If Mosse is best known for his contributions to modern history, his early modern works as well had innovative traits, in that he focussed on original themes, and had posed connections that had not received much attention. Among these, the resistance to the process of State-building on the bases of the common law, the centrality of Jesuit casuistry in the theological discourse of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (as well as the parallel drawn between catholic and protestant casuistry), and the stress on the significance of popular piety as opposed to established religions.<sup>1363</sup> Many of his books on early modern Europe went through several reprints, and some are still valuable contributions to the subject.<sup>1364</sup> However, there is little doubt that the greatest and most enduring success has been reached through the works on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Books like *The Crisis of German Ideology*, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, *Toward the Final Solution* and *Fallen Soldiers* are by now classics in the field, and as in the case of the first two, published respectively in 1964 and 1975, they still are (after over thirty years since their publication) a must-read for anyone who approaches the history of national socialism and of fascism.

Mosse's innovative approach is self-evident from the titles he gave to his works, not to mention their historiographical significance. *The Crisis of German Ideology. Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (1964) broke new ground in two respects. First, as it opposed interpretive categories of national socialism that were well established in the 1960s, like that of totalitarianism and its related concepts of manipulation and propaganda; second, because this work gave “subintellectual” ideas a place in the writing of intellectual and cultural history of fascism and Nazism”, showing the importance of such ideas: here Mosse “blurred the boundaries between political, intellectual/cultural, and social history”, thus attempting a synthesis, a reconciliation between these diverse disciplines.<sup>1365</sup> Unlike Fritz Stern's *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (1963), Mosse's work contended that the historian must examine the penetration of ideas (also those of third-rate publicists) into the broader public and institutions, since it is here that they become effective, that is, when they are institutionalized and not as long as they remain abstract entities detached from political realities, which had been the standard set, for example, by Arthur Lovejoy's work on the history of ideas. Moreover, the book linked the rise of national socialist antisemitism to the more general pattern of the crisis of modernity, thus viewing it in a historical perspective and not as something above history.<sup>1366</sup> The new model for cultural history, the problem of consensus, and the setting of the origins of antisemitism into the general context of the crisis of modernity are among the most innovative traits of this work. Related to the *Crisis* book, *Nazi Culture. Intellectual, Cultural and Social life in the Third Reich* (1966) is another outstanding example of Mosse's going against the grain. A book on Nazi “culture” at a time when Nazi ideology was regarded as

1363 On this, see Renato Moro's remarks in “George L. Mosse, storico dell'irrazionalismo moderno”, op. cit., 29

1364 Notably the booklet *The Reformation*, op. cit., and *Europe in the Sixteenth Century*, op. cit. For Mosse's contribution to early modern historiography, see also Johann Sommerville, “George Mosse's Early Modern Scholarship”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit.

1365 “Mosse's Recasting of European Intellectual and Cultural History”, op. cit., 20

1366 This has been observed by Steven Aschheim, in “George Mosse at 80: A Critical Laudatio”, op. cit., 302

subintellectual and therefore unworthy of serious consideration was “shocking”, and the title's association itself between national socialism and culture seemed an “oxymoron”.<sup>1367</sup>

The “anthropological and visual turn brought even more drastic innovations, inaugurating what Emilio Gentile has rightly defined as the phase “più originale e feconda ... della storiografia di Mosse sul fascismo.”<sup>1368</sup> *The Nationalization of the Masses. Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* delved deeper into the modern and European origins of the fascist political style, describing the essence of a kind of politics which represented an alternative to liberal parliamentarism. The book shed light on the appeal and dynamics of mass movements in the modern age, grasping aspects which had been so far neglected. Moreover, it pointed again to the necessity of integrating diverse disciplines such as anthropology and history, thus expanding Mosse's idea of cultural history beyond the inclusion of literature in the historical discipline. Mosse was putting forward a concept of history which aimed at comprehending the totality of man's existence, thus refusing “to separate the political from the religious, the scientific from the aesthetic, and the bureaucratic from the mythological and symbolic”.<sup>1369</sup> Last but not least, this work drew a direct connection between the French Revolution and fascism, including the latter into modern European culture, defying those interpretations that regarded it as an aberration, a “parenthesis”, a drift from the liberal-oriented course of European history.

Such an orientation was made even more explicit when Mosse began dealing with the “darker side of Enlightenment”. With his *Toward the Final Solution. A History of European Racism* (1978) Mosse has been defined the first historian to write a major interpretation of the Jewish genocide based on the European tendency to aesthetics and the visual.<sup>1370</sup> The book's originality, Aschheim has argued, lay in the “emphasis on the centrality of visual stereotypes” and the crucial role attributed to aesthetics.<sup>1371</sup> Antisemitism is set by Mosse at the centre of European cultural history: the Holocaust and modernity are linked in a picture which reveals the contribution given by the Enlightenment to the greatest mass murder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Mosse followed the new path he had entered, he produced even more controversial works, most of which centered on the role bourgeois values played for nationalism, racism and fascism. *Nationalism and Sexuality. Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*

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1367 Such considerations have been made by Steven Aschheim, in “George Mosse at 80: A Critical Laudatio”, op. cit., 296, and Anson Rabinbach, “George L. Mosse 1919-1999: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 335

1368 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 84

1369 Seymour Drescher, David Sabeau, Allan Sharlin, “George Mosse and Political Symbolism”, Introduction to *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe. Essays in Honor of George L. Mosse*, op. cit., 7. Mosse's view of history as a “Hegelian totality” has been emphasized also by Aschheim in “George Mosse – The Man and the Work”, op. cit., xii, and “George Mosse at 80: A Critical Laudatio”, op. cit., 297

1370 “George L. Mosse 1919-1999: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 335

1371 “George Mosse at 80: A Critical Laudatio”, op. cit., 300. Rudy Koshar has argued: “Se pensiamo a quanto sia oggi attuale l'interesse degli storici per la dimensione visiva, non possiamo che ribadire ancora una volta quanto la ricerca di Mosse abbia percorso i tempi”, Rudy Koshar, “George Mosse e gli interrogativi della storia tedesca”, *Passato e presente*, XXI, 2003, n. 58, 106. See also Koshar, *George Mosse and “Destination Culture”*, in S. Payne-D. Sorkin-J. Tortorice (ed. by), *An Historian's Legacy*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2002

(1985) highlighted the *collective* dimension of sexuality and its political implications. Aschheim has defined this work a landmark which posed a “strikingly new perspective” not only for the history of antisemitism, but also for that of all groups of people (homosexuals, Gypsies, the mentally ill) who were depicted as “outsiders”<sup>1372</sup>: the book addressed, just as *Toward the Final Solution* had done, the whole of European society, pointing the finger at the process through which so-called “respectable society” had excluded a portion of its members, thus paving the way for their further isolation and eventual extermination under the Nazis. *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (1996) was “one of the first histories of stereotypes and images of 'masculinity'”<sup>1373</sup>, but also one of the first comprehensive analyses of the “new man” of fascism.<sup>1374</sup>

*Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (1990) was another pathbreaking book which “helped inaugurate the memory boom of this decade”.<sup>1375</sup> Here Mosse was a pioneer again: he saw in the “cult of the fallen soldier” the highest point of encounter of Christianity and nationalism. All his work has dealt, in a sense, with the process of secularization in Europe and its consequences. In particular, he has focussed on the counter-reaction, that is, the explosion of irrational pseudo-religious beliefs which culminated in what he called “civic religions”. Even here he pioneered, and he can be considered one of the precursors of the revival in the study of political religions since the 1990s.<sup>1376</sup>

### ***Mosse's Work Between Recognition and Neglect***

The reception of Mosse's work has varied from country to country. The very fact that his cultural history was deeply unconventional and innovative has often led to its neglect, or to late recognition in certain intellectual environments, yet elsewhere it has been deeply influential. So it has been in Italy, perhaps the country which has proved more receptive to Mosse's approach. Mosse himself, on receiving a prestigious award in the country, attributed his favorable reception also to the “diffusa predisposizione nel vostro paese a saper pensare visivamente”.<sup>1377</sup> The fact that his best-

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1372 *Ibid.*, 302

1373 “George L. Mosse 1919-1999: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 336

1374 In this regard, see Gentile's “L'uomo nuovo” del fascismo. Riflessioni su un esperimento totalitario di rivoluzione antropologica”, op. cit.

1375 Rabinbach, “George L. Mosse 1919-1999: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 336. The “decade” Rabinbach refers to is the 1990s.

1376 To be sure, Emilio Gentile has drawn a clear distinction between his concept of “religione della politica” and Mosse's “new politics”, basing it on the contrast between the “sacralization of politics” of the former, and the “aesthetics of politics” of the latter (Emilio Gentile, *Le religioni della politica. Fra democrazie e totalitarismi*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2001, 211ff). Despite these differences, both historians looked at the religious dimension of mass politics, and Gentile's book on the “sacralization of politics” in Italy (*Il culto del littorio*, op. cit.) was indebted to Mosse's work. For a debate on the concept of “political religions” see, among the many recent publications, the Special Issue of *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*: “Political Religions as a Characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century”; *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 6, No. 1, June 2005, 12. The volume originated from a symposium promoted by Professor Marina Cattaruzza at Berne University in 2003, on the occasion of the Hans Sigrist Award presented to Emilio Gentile for his works on political religions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

1377 Pier Francesco Listri (ed. by), “George Mosse”, Quaderni del 'Premio Prezzolini', Le Monnier, Firenze, 1990, 15

received book in Italy was *The Nationalization of the Masses*, a study on the aesthetics of politics, seems to confirm this thought.<sup>1378</sup> Mosse's work entered the Italian historiographical debate through Renzo De Felice and Emilio Gentile. De Felice, who already had an interest in the incidence of the religious on modern politics, highly appreciated Mosse's efforts at writing his book on the “new politics”: the two had met in 1967, right in the middle of the Mosse's “anthropological and visual turn” which implied the search for the roots of fascist consensus, a theme that lay at the heart of De Felice's historiographical preoccupations.<sup>1379</sup> De Felice was instrumental in promoting his colleague's work in Italy: his wife translated *The Nationalization of the Masses*, which was published at the same time as in the United States, and had Mosse win the prestigious Premio Acqui-Storia in 1975 (De Felice was in the jury)<sup>1380</sup>. Emilio Gentile too pinpointed the originality of Mosse's work, which diverged from the mainstream of Italian traditional historiography, still dominated by a view of fascism based on propaganda rather than on consensus.<sup>1381</sup> The historians grouped around De Felice and the journal “Storia contemporanea” grasped the importance of Mosse's contributions: Gentile defined him “uno dei più grandi storici contemporanei”, Niccolò Zapponi saw in his work a real “svolta storiografica”, De Felice wrote an important introduction to the Italian edition of *The Nationalization of the Masses* praising Mosse's achievements.<sup>1382</sup> The work of the German-American historian opened new vistas which influenced an important trend in Italian historiography, thus paving the way for an approach which directly affected the work of De Felice and Gentile.<sup>1383</sup> Apart from the favorable reception of these historians, Mosse's work remained substantially ignored or misunderstood by other scholars of fascism until the mid-1980s, when the tide turned.<sup>1384</sup> Aramini attributes this turn to the crisis of the “paradigma interpretativo antifascista” and to the new interest in the irrational, which now was not interpreted as a “mera struttura propagandistica e manipolatrice” anymore, and which had been

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1378 On the reception of *The Nationalization of the Masses* in Italy, see Aramini, “George L. Mosse e gli storici italiani: il problema della 'nazionalizzazione delle masse’”, op. cit.

1379 On the personal and professional relationship between Mosse and De Felice see, by Emilio Gentile, “Renzo e George, anti-antifascisti”, in “Il Sole 24 Ore”, 14 May 2006; *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit.; *Renzo De Felice. Lo storico e il personaggio*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2003. See also “Carteggio George L. Mosse – Renzo De Felice”, op. cit.

1380 In 1985, Mosse was also awarded the Premio Prezzolini. De Felice and Gentile were in the jury. See “George Mosse”, Quaderni del ‘Premio Prezzolini’, op. cit.

1381 Emilio Gentile, “La nuova politica”, in “Il resto del Carlino”, 24 May 1975 (quoted in “George L. Mosse e gli storici italiani: il problema della 'nazionalizzazione delle masse’”, 133-134. Aramini mentions the negative reactions to Mosse's book by Guido Quazza and Enzo Collotti, whose criticisms “dimostrano la difficile comprensione iniziale da parte della storiografia 'progressista' italiana dell'opera di Mosse, la cui metodologia e le cui tesi risultavano agli occhi di questi studiosi vicine a un possibile tentativo riabilitativo del fascismo”, *Ibid.*, 136)

1382 See “George L. Mosse e gli storici italiani: il problema della 'nazionalizzazione delle masse’”, op. cit.

1383 Aramini shows Mosse's influence on Gentile's *Il mito dello Stato nuovo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1982, and on De Felice's *Mussolini il Duce*, vol. II, *Lo Stato totalitario 1936-1940*, Einaudi, Torino, 1981. “George L. Mosse e gli storici italiani: il problema della 'nazionalizzazione delle masse’”, op. cit., 138-139. Aramini mentions also De Felice's praise of Mosse's studies on racism, *Ibid.*, 140

1384 Pier Giorgio Zunino's *L'ideologia del fascismo. Miti, credenze e valori nella stabilizzazione del regime*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1985 “ruppe drasticamente con tutte le interpretazioni 'classiche' ritenute ormai ampiamente superate, riconoscendo a Mosse un ruolo chiave nell'aver impostato il discorso sul fascismo e sul nazismo in termini nuovi ed originali”, Aramini writes in “George L. Mosse e gli storici italiani: il problema della 'nazionalizzazione delle masse’”, op. cit., 144-145



furthered by the translations of important works on the Great War (Paul Fussell and Eric Leed), and by the influence of the works “degli studiosi dell'ultima generazione delle 'Annales'” (Maurice Agulhon, Pierre Nora, Mona Ozouf and Michelle Vovelle).<sup>1385</sup> At the turn of the 1990s, Mosse's works reached the height of success, affecting the reflections on the aesthetics of politics on the one hand, and those on the nation building process on the other. However, though Mosse was not criticized anymore and his contribution was widely praised, many historians stuck to their view based on the concept of propaganda, thus overturning the very essence of Mosse's concept of “nationalization of the masses”.<sup>1386</sup> Since the 1990s, Emilio Gentile has built on Mosse's premises with considerable success and influence, though following an own path which investigated the “sacralization of politics” rather than its aesthetic dimension, which had been Mosse's concern.<sup>1387</sup> Moreover, since the mid-1990s the first analytical essays on Mosse appeared: in 1995 Mosse was awarded a *laurea honoris causa* by the University of Camerino, and on the occasion Renato Moro wrote the first important organic contribution (in Italian) to Mosse's whole work; five years later, Giuseppe Galasso published another comprehensive essay on his historiography; Emilio Gentile analyzed the development of his interpretation of fascism in an important 2004 article, and then wrote the first book entirely devoted to Mosse's work and figure (2007).<sup>1388</sup> Striking a balance of Mosse's reception in Italy, Aramini concludes that

“Mosse viene oggi citato di frequente dalla storiografia italiana e i suoi lavori sono sistematicamente oggetto di lode. Resta da chiedersi se alla crescente “fortuna” delle sue ricerche abbia corrisposto un'effettiva crescente “ricezione” anche delle tesi in esse esposte. Alcune delle sue interpretazioni sono state sviluppate in un senso profondamente diverso da quello originale, a testimonianza di una ricezione che, seppure per motivi diversi rispetto al periodo 1975-1985, è rimasta, almeno in parte, profondamente ambivalente. Al di là di questi aspetti, comunque, ciò che appare oramai opinione generalizzata e indiscutibile da parte della storiografia italiana è che il volume *La nazionalizzazione delle masse*, come aveva sottolineato diversi anni fa Niccolò Zapponi, ha contribuito in modo determinante, «to see “fascism” as an interference between politics and mythical and religious convictions» e a quel ripensamento dell'esperienza dei fenomeni totalitari fascista e nazista compiuto dalla cultura di origine ebraica che ha progressivamente sostituito

1385 “George L. Mosse e gli storici italiani: il problema della 'nazionalizzazione delle masse’”, op. cit., 145

1386 *Ibid.*, 146-151. Important exceptions to this trend were, apart from Gentile, Renato Moro and Rudy Koshar (whose contribution in this regard was published by the journal “Passato e presente”), *Ibid.*, 151

1387 See Gentile's *Il culto del littorio*, op. cit.; *Le religioni della politica. Fra democrazie e totalitarismi*, op. cit.; *La democrazia di Dio. La religione americana nell'era dell'impero e del terrore*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2006

1388 Renato Moro, “George L. Mosse, storico dell'irrazionalismo moderno”, op. cit.; Giuseppe Galasso, “Il Novecento di George L. Mosse e le sue origini”, op. cit.; Emilio Gentile, “A Provisional Dwelling. Origin and Development of the Concept of Fascism in Mosse's Historiography”; Emilio Gentile, *Il fascino del persecutore*, op. cit.

l'interpretazione fornita dalla tradizione storiografica dell'antifascismo militante.”<sup>1389</sup>

The relation between Mosse's work and his native land, Germany, is very different from that he enjoyed in Italy. Such relation has been examined by Moshe Zimmermann in 1985.<sup>1390</sup> Zimmermann notes how it took almost fifteen years before *The Crisis of German Ideology* was translated into German, and how the book was ignored by the *Historikerkunft*, the German Historical Association. According to Zimmermann, the reasons for this neglect lie in the fact that Germany historiography was, in the 1960s and 1970s, dominated by social history on the one hand, and engaged in the *Fischerkontroverse* on the other. This left little room for discussion on Mosse's work. Social historians had no interest in intellectual history, and were reluctant to accept anthropological approaches such as those Mosse would adopt since the late 1960s. Moreover, Germany historiography at the time tended to regard national socialism as an “accident” in German history, whose roots had to be looked for in the 1920s and 1930s. This plainly contrasted with Mosse's view of a national socialism whose origins lay deep in German history from the time of the wars of liberation against Napoleon. Zimmermann writes of a “typical German uneasiness” at establishing a direct line between German nationalism and Nazism, exactly was Mosse was aiming at.<sup>1391</sup> Indeed, German historians were making the “attempt to rescue Germany from Nazism in retrospect”, and claimed that Volkish thought had played no concrete role in politics, thus betraying the “paranoia plaguing German historical understanding”.<sup>1392</sup> Mosse himself, speaking on the *Historikerstreit*, had lamented the fact that nationalism was “a word that will hardly be found in any discussion about the *Historikerstreit*”, and this was due to “the dominance of social history” and to the fact that nationalism had been discredited after 1945, especially among those Germans who had overdone it before the war; but, Mosse continued, “without confronting the problem of nationalism not only can the whole period not be properly understood but even what the *Historikerstreit* is really all about”.<sup>1393</sup> Nationalism, according to Mosse, is the key for the understanding of German history, and if it was not addressed in the *Historikerstreit*, that was because the problem went “to the heart of a crisis of national identity tied to this past”. To be sure, Mosse's poor reception in Germany improved since the late 1970s, when the taboo was broken and his works on the nationalization of the masses and on racism were immediately translated. Zimmermann holds that, while Mosse's work on national socialism had been initially disregarded, he was considered from the start an authority on Jewish history, which seems to confirm, in Zimmermann's opinion, Germany's general uneasiness in coming to terms with

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1389 “George L. Mosse e gli storici italiani: il problema della 'nazionalizzazione delle masse’”, op. cit., 158-159

1390 Moshe Zimmermann, “Mosse and German Historiography”, in *George Mosse – On the Occasion of His Retirement*. 17.6.85, op. cit., xix-xxi

1391 *Ibid.*, xx

1392 *Ibid.*

1393 “Nationalism and War”, cit.

her Nazi past.<sup>1394</sup> However, as Aschheim has observed<sup>1395</sup>, since the late 1980s Mosse's historiography has been recognized in Germany, and he has been the recipient of various academic honours, including the Goethe-Medaille from the Goethe-Institut in Munich in 1988 (“für hervorragende Verdienste um die deutsche Sprache im Ausland und die Förderung der internationalen Kulturbeziehungen”<sup>1396</sup>) and an honorary doctorate from the Universität-Gesamthochschule, Siegen, in 1998.<sup>1397</sup>

Mosse's work has also had an impact on French historiography, though this had been belated. Only two of his books have been translated into French, and this in the late 1990s.<sup>1398</sup> Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, in his essay on Mosse's reception in France, looks for an explanation for this neglect. On the one hand, he attributes this to the fact that Mosse's works hardly dealt with France, if not to connect the French Revolution with fascist political style, or to stress the strength of French antisemitism before 1914. Audoin-Rouzeau writes of Mosse's poor knowledge of the country's history, which accounted for France's poor knowledge of his work.<sup>1399</sup> On the other, he clearly speaks of “une tendance longue au repli historiographique sur le pré carré national, à une fermeture à l'historiographie étrangère beaucoup plus grande qu'on ne veut bien généralement l'admettre”, and invites French historians to catch up on lost time and pay the due attention to this “grand historien”.<sup>1400</sup> To be sure, if Mosse's work has generally been ignored, his contributions to the history of the Great War have been much influential in France, where it has represented “una delle rare intersezioni di Mosse con la

1394 “Mosse and German Historiography”, op. cit., xxi

1395 “George Mosse at 80: A Critical Laudatio”, op. cit., 296

1396 Award Certificate of the Goethe-Institut, 22 March 1988, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 1; folder 43; Leo Baeck Institute.

1397 It is significant that the University of Siegen is the home university of Professor Klaus Vondung, who has been very receptive to Mosse's work, being himself a precursor - rather in solitude in the German historiographical environment - of the study of the liturgical aspects of national socialism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. See Klaus Vondung (ed. by), *Kriegserlebnis. Der Erste Weltkrieg in der literarischen Gestaltung und symbolischen Deutung der Nationen*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980, where Mosse published two of his first studies on the First World War. Vondung is also the author of *Magie und Manipulation. Ideologischer Kult und politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus*, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1971, a book that, in Roger Griffin's definition, “achieved for the understanding of the cultic dimension of Nazism what Gentile's *Culto del littorio* has done for Fascism” (Roger Griffin, “I Am No Longer Human. I Am A Titan. A God! The Fascist Quest To Regenerate Time”, “written-up version of a talk given in November 1998 at the Institute of Historical Research as part of the seminar series *Modern Italian History: 19th and 20th Centuries* organized by Carl Levy”. The essay can be found on the internet: <<http://www.history.ac.uk/eseminars/sem22.html#53t>>). See also Vondung's “National socialism as a political religion: Potentials and Limits of an Analytical Concept”, in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 6, No. 1, June 2005. As to Germany's recent favorable reception of Mosse, see also, for example, Saul Friedländer's “Mosse's Influence on the Historiography of the Holocaust”, in *What History Tells*, op. cit., 134-147. Another German historian who was close to a cultural approach was Thomas Nipperdey, whose influence on Mosse has been discussed in Chapter III.

1398 The two books are *The Image of Man* and *Fallen Soldiers: L'image de l'homme. L'invention de la virilité moderne*, Paris, Éditions Abbeville, 1997, and *De la Grande Guerre au totalitarisme*, Paris, Hachette-Littérature, 1999. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau has noted that only two articles on Mosse and one interview have appeared in French: Bruno Cabanes, “Les deux guerres de George Mosse”, *L'Histoire*, 199, May 1996, 13-14, and Annette Becker, “Barbarie de la Grande Guerre”, *L'Histoire*, 241, March 2000, 23; the interview is “Du Baroque au Nazisme: une histoire religieuse de la politique”, op. cit. In Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, “George L. Mosse : réflexions sur une méconnaissance française”, *Annales* 2001/1, 56e année. There is one more contribution in French, Jay Winter, “De l'histoire intellectuelle à l'histoire culturelle: la contribution de George L. Mosse”, op. cit., 1

1399 “George L. Mosse : réflexions sur une méconnaissance française”, op. cit., 185

1400 *Ibid.*, 185-186

storiografia francese”<sup>1401</sup>, and has brought to an evolution of French historiography on peace and war that was based on his suggestions.<sup>1402</sup> His works on fascism had a quite different reception, especially insofar as he connected it with the thought of Rousseau and with the French Revolution. His essay “Fascism and the French Revolution” fuelled a lively debate with the great French historian François Furet, who rejected Mosse's connections, defining them anachronistic, and lamenting the little stress set by him on the contrast between the revolutionary ideals and fascist values.<sup>1403</sup>

George Mosse's work has been widely praised in many countries: he has been awarded numerous prizes and honorary degrees, and a number of *Festschäfte* have been published to honor and assess his contributions and his personality.<sup>1404</sup> Despite this recognitions, the “outsider nature” of his writings has been ignored in important works, including some on fascism and national socialism.<sup>1405</sup> Ian Kershaw's classic *The Nazi Dictatorship*, published in 1985 and significantly revised in 1993, hints at Mosse only in one footnote,<sup>1406</sup> Klaus Hildebrand's *Das Dritte Reich* (1979 and 1989) hardly mentions Mosse, and never about his cultural approach or his “revolution” in fascist historiography.<sup>1407</sup> Rolf-Ulrich Kunze, in his 2005 summary of the interpretations of nationalism, extensively deals with the mingling of history and anthropology in the study of nationalism, and Mosse's name does never appear.<sup>1408</sup> The leading British cultural historian Peter Burke, writing his recent *What is Cultural History?*, mentions Cassirer, Huizinga and Kantorowicz as precursors of the new cultural history, but then sets the “rediscovery” of this kind of history in the 1970s and its flourishing in the 1980s and 1990s, fully

1401 Michele Nani, review of *Confronting History. A Memoir*, in *Chromos* 10, 2005

1402 In this regard, see François Cochet, “Pace e guerra nel ventesimo secolo. Un bilancio storiografico della ricerca francese”, *Mondo contemporaneo*, 1, 2005

1403 In this regard, see Emilio Gentile's remarks in *In fascino del persecutore*, op. cit., 191-193, and also the correspondence between Mosse and Furet (but also with Emilio Gentile) in the George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 21; Leo Baeck Institute. Mosse's article, that should have appeared in a volume on the legacy of the French Revolution edited by Vito Laterza, was eventually published on *The Journal of Contemporary History*, 24, January 1989 due to Furet's opposition.

1404 Among the most significant recognitions he has received: Doctor of Literature (honorary) from Carthage College, 1973; the above quoted Acqui-Storia Prize, 1975, and the Premio Prezzolini, 1985; Doctor of Letters (honorary) from the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, 1987; Dr. L.C. (honorary), from the Università Degli Studi di Camerino, Camerino, Italy 1995; Dr. L.C. (honorary), from the Universität-Gesamthochschule, Siegen 1998; American Historical Association's Award for Scholarly Distinction 1998; Leo Baeck Medal for distinguished contributions to Jewish and European History, 1998. Important *Festschäfte* in his honor are *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe. Essays in Honor of George L. Mosse*, op. cit.; *George Mosse. On the Occasion of his Retirement*, 17. 6. 85, op. cit.; *La grande guerra e il fronte interno. Studi in onore di George Mosse*, op. cit.; *The German-Jewish Dialogue Reconsidered. A Symposium in Honor of George L. Mosse*, op. cit.; *What History Tells. George L. Mosse and the Culture of Modern Europe*, op. cit.; see also the special issue on Mosse of *German Politics and Society*, Issue 57, Vol. 18, No. 4, Winter 2000, op. cit. Most of these *Festschäfte* originate from symposia held in Mosse's honor. Furthermore, a George Mosse Foundation has been created at the University of Amsterdam in order to further the advancement of gay and lesbian studies.

1405 Rudy Koshar has written: “l'idiosincrasia di Mosse per la teoria aveva indubbiamente i suoi costi, se è vero che in gran parte dei suoi scritti egli ignorò, ad esempio, dibattiti rilevanti su questioni quali la modernizzazione e i movimenti sociali, che avrebbero invece potuto sostenere e arricchire la sua opera. Inoltre, data la sua capacità di dedicarsi a tematiche di ricerca che in seguito sarebbero entrate in voga, intervenire anche occasionalmente nei dibattiti teorici gli avrebbe permesso di imprimere il proprio segno su varie discipline, più di quanto non sia effettivamente riuscito a fare.”

Rudy Koshar, “George Mosse e gli interrogativi della storia tedesca”, *Passato e presente*, XXI, 2003, n. 58, 104

1406 Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, Arnold, London 1993

1407 Klaus Hildebrand, *Das Dritte Reich*, Oldenbourg, Munich, 1979 and 1989

1408 Rolf-Ulrich Kunze, *Nation und Nationalismus*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 2005

ignoring the pathbreaking contribution given by Mosse and his fellow German-Jewish émigrés, with the exception of Aby Warburg who was, at any rate, no historian<sup>1409</sup>. Burke writes of “the moment of historical anthropology”, analyzing the importance of anthropological ideas for historians, especially those of myth and symbol, but no mention is made of Mosse. Instead, Burke amply discusses the “new cultural history” of the 1980s and 1990s, devoting room to its roots in the work of Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, and yet Mosse's name is absent from the discussion, surprisingly enough even when Burke turns to the “history of the body”. Turning to nationalism, he sees in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) a pioneering study in the analysis of nationalism from a cultural point of view, with its focus “not in political theory but in unconscious or semi-conscious attitudes to religion, time and so on”.<sup>1410</sup> Moreover, Burke sees only in recent studies, from the 1980s onward, an emphasis on “the contribution of political festivals to the construction of community”.<sup>1411</sup> He eventually offers a chronological and “personal selection” of publications on cultural history from 1860 to 2003, and none of Mosse's works appear. Similarly to Burke, another British historian (of German nationalism in this case), Geoff Eley, fully neglects Mosse in his book *The Crooked Line. From Cultural History to the History of Society* (2005).<sup>1412</sup> He draws a long list of journals which furthered the emergence of cultural history, yet Mosse and Laqueur's influential *Journal of Contemporary History* is not in the list. Moreover, speaking of the dialogue between history and anthropology, he refers to an article by Edward Thompson published in 1972, overlooking Mosse's pivotal “History, Anthropology and Mass Movements”, that went to print in 1969.<sup>1413</sup> Eley even mentions the “pathbreaking” *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (1992), a study that was admittedly debtor to Mosse's theses.<sup>1414</sup> Not even once Mosse's name appears in Eley's book.<sup>1415</sup>

### *Mosse as Émigré Historian*

In Italy, Mosse deeply affected the historiographical debate on fascism; in Germany, his work was long neglected, apart from his specific contributions to Jewish history; in France, he had a belated impact on historiography, and only with his books on the Great War. As to the American context, Mosse belonged to those German-Jewish refugee historians who “transformed the way Americans

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1409 Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?*, Polity Press, Cambridge-Malden, 2004

1410 *Ibid.*, 83

1411 *Ibid.*, 84

1412 Geoff Eley, *The Crooked Line. From Cultural History to the History of Society*, The University of Michigan Press, 2005

1413 *Ibid.*, 131. The article in question is Edward Thompson, “Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context”, *Midland History*, I, 1972, 41-55

1414 *The Crooked Line. From Cultural History to the History of Society*, op. cit., 144. For the explicit recognition of Mosse's determinant influence for the quoted work, see Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yeagar (ed. by), *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, Routledge, New York, 1992

1415 It must be noted that neither Burke nor Eley focussed their attention on national socialism and fascism, which may account for their neglect of Mosse's work.

studied the German past”, who “taught Americans how to be historians of modern Germany”.<sup>1416</sup> These German-speaking historians gave a determinant contribution to the study of German history in the United States which was, in the 1930s, “not well established at American universities”, suffering “from the wave of anti-German hysteria during and after World War I”.<sup>1417</sup> Indeed, “the three decades following World War II witnessed the solid establishment of German history as a critical part of the curriculum of every major university”, and this despite the “pervasive anti-Semitism that had marked America's major private universities between the wars”. This antisemitism “receded in the early fifties”, and “the émigrés may have, in fact, played a significant role in weakening” it.<sup>1418</sup> These historians brought with them “certain values and a cultivation that was not common ... in American academe”, along with “a sense of *Gravitas* – of intensity – about their subject”, that was, in fact, “a calling ... that required seriousness of purpose and a prodigious capacity for work”.<sup>1419</sup> The émigrés “were able to ensure that German history would become an accepted part of the American university curriculum ... Their own commitment to a liberal-democratic interpretation of German history meshed well with the democratic values of young, educated Americans of the postwar era”.<sup>1420</sup> They were primarily concerned with the question “Why did radical fascism come to power in Germany?”, the fruit of the almost obvious heritage they brought with them from their native country.<sup>1421</sup> Barkin notes how the Nazi period was mainly ignored by historians at the time, and Neumann's *Behemoth* and Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* were the most read books on the subject. The refugee historians focussed on the roots of national socialism instead, and did so stressing the importance of ideas and “the conviction that intellectual history provid[ed] a vehicle for understanding the failure of democracy to take root in Germany”, thus emphasizing the country's divergence from the liberal-democratic tradition other European nations had made their own.<sup>1422</sup>

Mosse belonged to the so-called “second generation” of German-Jewish refugee historians, that is, to those historians who left Germany after having experienced the rise of Nazism, but before completing their studies.<sup>1423</sup> Steven Aschheim has argued that these historians (beyond Mosse, he refers

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1416 Kenneth D. Barkin, “German Émigré Historians in America: The Fifties, Sixties, and Seventies”, in Hartmut Lehmann and James Sheridan (ed. by), *An Interrupted Past. German-Speaking Refugee Historians in the United States after 1933*, German Historical Institute, Washington, D. C., 1991, 147. Barkin argues that, though these historians were crucial for the establishment of German history, the greatest influence overall “on the entire discipline of history” was that of German-Jewish social scientists like Hannah Arendt, Erich Fromm or Erwin Panofsky. *Ibid.*, 165

1417 “German Émigré Historians in America: The Fifties, Sixties, and Seventies”, op. cit., 153

1418 *Ibid.*, 153-154. Telling in this regard are Mosse's recollections of antisemitism in the United States: see *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 95 and 119

1419 *Ibid.*, 155. This reminds of Mosse's own “sense of mission” when teaching. *Ibid.*, 138

1420 “German Émigré Historians in America: The Fifties, Sixties, and Seventies”, op. cit., 156-157

1421 *Ibid.*, 157

1422 *Ibid.*, 158-159. Barkin mentions Hans Kohn, Hajo Holborn, Fritz Stern, Leonard Krieger, Klaus Epstein and George Mosse, though emphasizing the differences between their objects of study and methodology. Intellectual history was not new in the United States, Barkin says mentioning Lovejoy, and yet it must be kept in mind how Mosse deeply revolutionized such an approach. In this regard, see also Gentile's interesting observations in *Il fascino del persecutore* op. cit., 32-34

1423 Steven Aschheim, *Beyond the Border. The German-Jewish Legacy Abroad*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford,

to Peter Gay, Walter Laqueur and Fritz Stern) “virtually reinvented German cultural and intellectual history and recast our understanding of it. They did so in the 1960s, long before the 'linguistic turn', and on the basis of epistemological assumptions and contextual emphases quite different from the 'constructivist' and textual insidencies of the later 'new cultural history'”.<sup>1424</sup> Aschheim has drawn an interesting comparison between these cultural historians and the German social historians (Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Jürgen Kocka, Hans and Wolfgang Mommsen, Martin Broszat, Wolfgang Schieder and others), a comparison that sheds much light on the émigrés' original contribution as well as on the reasons why Mosse's approach, and cultural history in general, have found such a poor reception in Germany for a long time, at the same time highlighting the importance “ethnonational identities, generations, and geographical locations” have for the historical profession. This helps to further stress and clarify the link between life and work in Mosse. These two groups of historians, active since the 1960s, had much in common: all of them were Liberals or Social Democrats, all of them sought to read German history against the traditional, conservative trend of German historiography, all of them searched for a distanced and critical evaluation of the German past. They tried to link National Socialism to “immanent elements within German society itself”, and leaned toward a *Sonderweg* view of German history.<sup>1425</sup> Aschheim maintains that, despite these similarities, these two trends “emerged from significantly different, emotionally fraught textures of feeling, experience, and perception and resulted in rather differently nuanced representations of that traumatizing past”.<sup>1426</sup> Despite the shared focus on the same period, and the attempt to delve into the historical roots of national socialism, German social historians centred around 1933 as symbolic date, while the émigrés focussed on 1941-1942: “for the social historians ... the *Sonderweg* was the collapse of liberal democracy; for the cultural historians it was anti-Semitism, genocide, and related Nazi atrocities”.<sup>1427</sup> The émigré historians “instinctively turned to 'culture' (in its broader sense) as an explanatory key, to ideology, issues of self-identity under crisis ... The turn to 'culture' was ... deeply connected to an awareness of the enormous power of ideological and symbolic forces within German history and National Socialism. These émigrés had, after all, experienced the weight of these forces directly on their own persons ... The kind of history they composed was an expression of this inherited sensibility.”<sup>1428</sup> German social historians, Aschheim argues, fully ignored their work, perhaps also because they did not grasp the deeply innovative character

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2007. Among prominent members of the “first generation”, Aschheim lists Felix Gilbert, Hans Rothfels, Arthur and Hans Rosenberg among others. The importance of “second generation” scholars has been generally neglected by the vast literature on German-Jewish émigré historians: see Jeremy Popkin, *History, Historians and Autobiography*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, and Ethan Katz, “Displaced Historians, Dialectical Histories. George L. Mosse, Peter Gay and Germany's Multiple Paths in the Twentieth Century”, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, vol. 7, n. 2, July 2008, 135-155, which focusses on the parallel between Mosse and Gay, and yet aims at a wider perspective.

1424 *Beyond the Border. The German-Jewish Legacy Abroad*, op. cit., 46

1425 *Ibid.*, 47-48. To be sure, Mosse strongly distanced himself from such view, despite his initial closeness to it in the 1960s.

1426 *Ibid.*, 48

1427 *Ibid.*, 49

1428 *Ibid.*, 62-63

of their cultural history, since they stuck to a view of it which was traditional and conservative (that of *Kulturgeschichte*), thus overlooking the radical transformations they had brought about. These German-Jewish scholars focussed on the role of irrationalism, if only to confront it with their own humanist, Enlightenment ideals. Moreover, Aschheim interestingly maintains that, “perhaps”, German Jews, “when it came to issues related to National Socialism ... both because they were above suspicion and beyond the border, could openly address these ideological issues, the putative magnetism of right-wing radicalism and Nazi politics, in a way that would have been taboo for Germans in Germany”.<sup>1429</sup> Thus these German-Jewish historians could offer a great contribution to modern German history, in a way complementing the works on the sociopolitical process of social historians, but also shedding light on a phenomenon that most Western observers had, in the 1950s and 1960s, almost totally neglected: the Holocaust.<sup>1430</sup> Enzo Traverso has investigated the reasons that brought these réfugiés “to see and think about something that was almost invisible to their contemporaries”, how they were able “to act as pathfinders for our later historical consciousness”.<sup>1431</sup> These emigrants had “a common feature: they were exiles, marginal people and outsiders”, and “one should not consider this characteristic – exile – anecdotal or accidental; on the contrary, it was probably an essential precondition for their clear-sightedness and analytical sharpness. In other words, they illustrated the *epistemological privilege* of exile.”<sup>1432</sup> Traverso regards this privilege as “a kind of intellectual compensation, doubtless at a very high price, for the privations and uprooted life of exile”.<sup>1433</sup> Indeed, Mosse has written in his memoir that one of the reasons which had pushed him into the study of the Holocaust had been that “finding an explanation has been vital not only for the understanding of modern history, but also for my own peace of mind”.<sup>1434</sup> This search led to a significant result, since these émigrés, in the midst of the triumph of western democracies against fascism and their belief in a return to “a new era of Enlightenment”, “like unwelcome Cassandras theorized a terrible and irreversible civilisational break ... while Western culture seemed to return to an idea of Progress eclipsed in the cataclysms of the modern ‘Thirty Years’ War, exiles played the role of killjoys identifying progress with catastrophe”<sup>1435</sup>: Mosse’s continuous provocative assault on bourgeois society and values must be seen also in this light. The point of view of the outsiders is set by Traverso at the centre of their innovative perspectives on

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1429 *Ibid.*, 68

1430 One rare exception to this rule was Gerald Reitlinger’s *The Final Solution*, Beechhurst Press, New York 1953

1431 Enzo Traverso, “To Brush against the Grain: The Holocaust and German-Jewish Culture in Exile”, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Autumn 2004, 243-270. Though Traverso focusses on Hannah Arendt, Günther Anders, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, his conclusions fully apply, in my opinion, to other émigrés of the “second generation” like Mosse, who is also quoted by Traverso in his article.

1432 *Ibid.*, 254-255. The deep connection between historiography and personal memory is a rather recent trend. As far as German-Jewish exiles are concerned, see Ethan Katz’s observations in “Displaced Historians, Dialectical Histories. George L. Mosse, Peter Gay and Germany’s Multiple Paths in the Twentieth Century”, op. cit., and Aschheim’s *Beyond the Border. The German-Jewish Legacy Abroad*, op. cit.

1433 “To Brush against the Grain: The Holocaust and German-Jewish Culture in Exile”, op. cit., 255

1434 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 219

1435 “To Brush against the Grain: The Holocaust and German-Jewish Culture in Exile”, op. cit., 256



history: “as strangers, extraterritorial and 'free-floating', refugees were free of many of the social, cultural, political and also psychological constraints of the context they lived in. Indeed, they looked at war and Nazism with different eyes than did American or even Europeans ... Objectively forced to see the world with critical eyes, refugees adopted the position of the outsider, the heretic, the destroyer of orthodoxy and accepted norms.<sup>1436</sup> These refugees shared a “lack of prejudice”, a “great sensitivity to injustice”, they “escaped from national stereotypes”, they perceived the death camps “not only as a Jewish tragedy but also, more deeply and universally, as a wound changing our image of humanity and our interpretation of history”.<sup>1437</sup> Many refugees embraced Marxism, but not as “a state's theory” or “a revolutionary strategy”: rather as “a critique of domination”, an inclination Mosse shared in some way in his attempt to fuse socialism with liberalism, thus giving it “a human face”. Traverso concludes his reflections pointing at the legacy of these emigrants who “created something new in American culture”, and at the same time saw their intellectual background based on Bildung be affected by “Atlantic' ideas of freedom, law and norms”. The path was, he writes, summed up by Mosse's “brilliant dictum: 'from Bildung to the Bill of Rights’”<sup>1438</sup>, which perfectly fuses Mosse's combination of German Enlightenment values and his preoccupation with individual rights and freedoms as represented by American society.<sup>1439</sup> As Renato Moro has observed, Mosse, along with Arendt, Cassirer, Talmon, Poliakov, Aaron, Fromm and Sternhell has contributed to that “ripensamento del fascismo dal punto di vista ebraico” which has been so important for modern historiography<sup>1440</sup>; Jeffrey Herf has written that Mosse, Stuart Hughes, Peter Gay and Fritz Stern has vitally contributed to the “salvage operation” for humanism and liberalism, an operation, they would have perhaps added, that has sought to preserve an important part of German culture, which had been so severely damaged under the Third Reich.<sup>1441</sup>

### ***Contingency and Determinism***

At first glance, it appears that Mosse's work was highly influential and appreciated in the United States, Israel and in Italy, while its reception in Germany and France has been belated, and in Britain

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<sup>1436</sup> *Ibid.*, 257

<sup>1437</sup> *Ibid.*, 257-258. Traverso asserts that these refugees (referring, to be sure, to those of the “first generation”), however, paid the high price of being stateless and politically powerless. If Mosse surely managed to integrate into American society, even adopting respectability, he perfectly fits Traverso's assertion that “the passport became the focal point of exile existence”: indeed, Mosse insisted on numerous occasions on his enduring fear at letting go of his passport. Speaking of his “built-in insecurity” due to exile and statelessness, he wrote the his father had bought him a Luxembourg passport without an expiration date: “I have kept this passport to this day in case of emergency, for anxieties about passports have never left me, and I still refuse to hand my American passport over to hotels for overnight registration”. *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 90

<sup>1438</sup> “To Brush against the Grain: The Holocaust and German-Jewish Culture in Exile”, op. cit., 263. The reference is to Mosse's contribution to Abraham J. Peck (ed. by), *The German-Jewish Legacy in America 1933-1988*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1989

<sup>1439</sup> See the discussion in Chapter I

<sup>1440</sup> “George L. Mosse, storico dell'irrazionalismo moderno”, op. cit, 35

<sup>1441</sup> “Mosse's Recasting of European Intellectual and Cultural History”, op. cit., 18

only partial.<sup>1442</sup> Emilio Gentile has suggested that the difficulties that accompanied Mosse's reception in Europe were also due to the fact that he considered fascist ideology seriously, thus running the risk of being accused of revisionism (in the pejorative meaning of the word), which he avoided as he himself had been a victim of national socialism.<sup>1443</sup> However, there is still a considerable lack of specific works on his reception in different countries, and any conclusions would as yet be premature.<sup>1444</sup> At any rate, a thorough discussion of the acceptance of Mosse's work would be beyond the scope of this essay, whose purpose has been above all an analysis of the inner development of his historiography. Any intellectual biography of George Mosse must necessarily, as I have argued at the beginning of this study, connect his life and his work. This is the inevitable starting point since, in Mosse's case more than in other historians', the two are mingled to an extent which makes it impossible to understand one without taking the other into consideration, an observation which applies to most of the German-Jewish émigrés we have mentioned. Here the most incisive factor is, beyond any doubt, their Jewishness which, as Aschheim has put it, resided “in a sense of identification through common descent, historical circumstance, and cultural achievement” and not in any religious tie.<sup>1445</sup> As a matter of fact, Mosse's natural collocation in the historical landscape of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be among those German-Jewish refugee-historians who turned their attention to German history, and did so from a cultural point of view. All the themes Mosse deals with are, directly or indirectly, connected to his having been a Jew in Nazi Germany. Had it not been so, he would not have been forced to emigrate, he would, in all probability, not have become a historian, he would not have been concerned with the problems he faced. His early modern writings lay the bases for all his subsequent works: his concern with the dignity of man was expressed through the analysis of the double relation between the State and the individual, and between political necessity and ethics. Mosse's whole historical production has developed from this foundation, and its main focus, the Holocaust, is the point of arrival of his studies, the place where the two relations merge. In his interpretation, the process set in motion by Machiavellism eventually produced the nation states and, as a consequence, that nationalism which was the basis for fascism. At the same time, a new ethics irradiating from the State was at the core of that “fateful divorce of ethics from politics” which would account for the “Nazi split personality” and help explain the Final Solution. The search for an explanation of the extermination of the Jews (but not only them) informed all his modern writings, whatever the subject they dealt with. This peculiarity of Mosse's work has caused him

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1442 As to Britain, I have mentioned Burke and Eley on the one hand, but on the other Roger Griffin's contributions must not be forgotten, as well as Michael Burleigh's. As to the latter, see his *The Racial State. Germany 1933-1945*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, which refers to Mosse's works on more than one occasion. The book was written together with Wolfgang Wippermann of the Freie Universität Berlin, thus providing another example of the recent reception of cultural history and of the importance of ideology among German historians.

1443 *Il fascino del persecutore*, op.cit. 193

1444 Exceptions to this are the above quoted essays by Aramini, Zimmermann, and Audoin-Rouzeau, which deal respectively with Italy, Germany and France.

1445 *Beyond the Border. The German-Jewish Legacy Abroad*, op. cit., 72

to be accused of writing teleological history: Rudy Koshar, commenting of *The Crisis of German Ideology*, has stated that “l’ascesa del nazismo vi viene inquadrata in una prospettiva teleologica”, and that the book’s narrative “procede compatta verso un esito che appare inevitabile”.<sup>1446</sup> Mosse himself, in his memoir, tackled the question:

“I have been accused, not without reason, of writing teleological history, that is to say, history which always looked to the future, ending up in the fascist or Nazi embrace. However, fascism did provide the climax of many of the trends which have interested me, and if I have shown how what was latent or inherent in nationalism or in the discrimination of the outsider became overt through these movements, then I have filled in a neglected piece of history, one which is also relevant to the present.”<sup>1447</sup>

In 1985, Mosse said that “all my books in one way or another have dealt with the Jewish catastrophe of my time ... built into our society and attitudes towards life. Nothing in European history is a stranger to the Holocaust.”<sup>1448</sup> However, though Mosse actually read German and European history with the Holocaust in mind, this does not imply that he saw in the Holocaust the inevitable outcome of German history. Then, I believe that to simply state that his history was teleological does not render justice neither to the complexity of his work, nor to its evolution. In the *Crisis* introduction, he had clearly stated that his object was by no means any historical determinism, and that concrete causes had determined the eventual triumph of a Volkish ideology, which “grew out of a historical development”.<sup>1449</sup> James Wald has argued that, in Mosse’s interpretation, “the triumph of Nazism was ... not the ‘inevitable’ outcome of German history ... but rather, *one* logical outcome, contingent on a particular constellation of social and intellectual circumstances”<sup>1450</sup>: Mosse himself, in the preface to the 1997 edition of the *Crisis*, has discussed the contingent nature of the national socialist victory.<sup>1451</sup> Moreover, his growing concern with the First World War since the late 1970s had as an effect a stress on the deep caesura this event has meant for German history. The crucial role of the war in Mosse’s work has been rightly pointed out by Aschheim and Herf, who have highlighted it as a fundamental “element of contingency”, thus wiping out any determinism.<sup>1452</sup> If Mosse had always rejected the inevitability of national socialism, such a belief became ever stronger the more he realized how

1446 Rudy Koshar, “George Mosse e gli interrogativi della storia tedesca”, *Passato e presente*, XXI, 2003, n. 58, 101-102

1447 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 182

1448 “Response by George Mosse”, in *George Mosse – On the Occasion of His Retirement. 17.6.85*, op. cit., xxviii

1449 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., 8

1450 “Cultural History and Symbols”, op. cit., 172

1451 *The Crisis of German Ideology*, op. cit., v-x

1452 Jeffrey Herf, “Mosse’s Recasting of European Intellectual and Cultural History”, op. cit., 26. See also Steven Aschheim’s “George Mosse – The Man and the Work”, op. cit., xii, and “George Mosse at 80: A Critical Laudatio”, op. cit., 298

important the war had been. His history was teleological only insofar as this is understood as an interest in trends which culminated in a determinate event; yet it must be kept in mind that Mosse repeatedly argued against historical determinism, which is nowhere to be found in his works. The balance between ideas and reality has always been integral part of his conception of history. He enthusiastically embraced the new “discoveries” he continued to make to the very end, never tired of investigating new fields of his subject. The concern with the dark side of the Enlightenment led him to the “Nazi as the ideal bourgeois” assertion, that was significantly revised by his analysis of the Great War, which eventually became the decisive explanation for the Final Solution, thus further diminishing any teleological nuance in his work.

### ***The Message of a Life***

Mosse's Jewishness cannot be separated from another crucial factor in his intellectual and personal biography: the role the 1960s played for him. This decade saw the intertwining of the main events that affected his historiography: the search for the roots of the appeal of national socialism was crossed by the student revolt, and fed on its ideas and its self-representation. The “anthropological and visual turn” originated from concrete problems posed by historical research, but mingled with an ever-growing interest in Mosse's own intellectual background that made him more receptive to anthropological and aesthetics criteria on the one hand, while on the other pushed him to the study of a world to which he belonged and had yet remained distant from him. In the 1960s, Mosse's methodology underwent its most significant turn, but those very years also saw the opening of a whole series of new perspectives on the professional and the personal level. The two sides of his outsiderdom forcefully began to emerge: his homosexuality was slowly freed by the sexual revolution, while the influence of the Frankfurt School had him look at the Enlightenment and at bourgeois values with different eyes, thus paving the ground for his provocative works on the dark side of western society. On the other hand, the rediscovery of his Jewishness opened his mind to a new world or, perhaps better, to a world he had been part of but which he had momentarily lost. The German-Jewish intellectual legacy, with its Enlightenment, humanist and cosmopolitan values which he enthusiastically embraced offered him a glimpse into the bright side of western society, giving the deep pessimism of his earlier works a shade of hope. His concern with the dignity of the individual, present from the beginning, now became associated with what he held to be the “true mission of Judaism”: the humanization of that nationalism which he had harshly criticized in his writings, and of which he now began to appreciate the “positive” side, embodied by the concept of patriotism. And yet his growing emotive involvement with the state of Israel and with Zionism made him increasingly aware of his own

weakness when confronted with irrationalism. He must have felt like his Divines of *The Holy Pretence*, torn between the values he believed in and the awareness of the necessary demands of Reason of State. Moreover, as a double outsider he knew full well what were the dangers of conformism, and to what extent society's need for cohesion could threaten man's liberty and dignity. Yet at the same time he recognized the necessity for this cohesion, for respectability (Paul Breines has pointed out how Mosse himself was very respectable)<sup>1453</sup>, for nationalism, for the need to create communities: Anson Rabinbach recalls how Mosse “made it clear that there was a community of his former students, a camaraderie that still exists to this day”, and how he “was a relentless critic of the search for 'authenticity', yet he himself was uniquely authentic. The consummate historian of communitarian doctrines created communities everywhere he went”.<sup>1454</sup>

Mosse's criticism sought always to be constructive: when faced with nationalism, Marxism, or religion, as Aschheim has observed, he did not react through a “mindless opposition”, since he believed that this forces “answer deep needs for human community and meaning”, that they address “real human desires”. Therefore he did not stand for their abolition but, rather, for their humanization. He proposed no solution, “his personal response is rather a meliorating one, based always on the compassionate mode. The task is to reassert the positive potentials of these forms of community and to stress solidarity and humanization over domination and superiority”.<sup>1455</sup> The real danger, he never tired of repeating, lies in conformity, in the putting down of opinion. The antidote he proposed was the adoption of a critical mind through education. As he told his students in the 1960s, the university is a teacher of scholarship, and scholarship

“means knowledge defined as respect of facts, as an open mind for rational argument, a primary belief in freedom of inquiry, which means freedom of opinion arrived at through using rational qualities of mind upon a body of fact. It is the aim of understanding to come as near to 'realities' as possible. This does not exclude hypothesis, of course, or the commitments to the search of truth. It does, however, mean a check upon sheer emotionalism – something into which moral indignation unchecked by understanding through scholarship can easily escape. This means, in the end, a denial of freedom, a denial of rationality. For there is no doubt that an emotion, however praiseworthy, unless controlled by the attitudes which the University seeks to instil, becomes a real danger to all of humanity ... [University must] teach the knowledge, the scholarship, the attitudes which control the emotions, which bend them, if possible, towards respect for facts and reason. To ignore this imperils the causes in which the new student

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1453 “Finding Oneself in History and Vice Versa: Remarks on ‘George’s Voice’”, op. cit., 16

1454 Anson Rabinbach, “George L. Mosse 1919-1999: An Appreciation”, op. cit., 333 and 336

1455 “George Mosse – The Man and the Work”, op. cit., xvii

generation and to a certain extent I myself, very much believe.”<sup>1456</sup>

Mosse wished that the University “has given you [the students] a rational foundation for your view of the world, based on knowledge through scholarship.”<sup>1457</sup> In a talk given to a fraternity in 1968, Mosse emphasized the role of reason as against the “longing for Utopia”, and stated that learning and reason must precede action, which is, if taken per se, useless and episodic, and can only lead to violence, which does not create a situation for radical change and is therefore counterproductive.<sup>1458</sup> In the 1960s, as we have seen, Mosse's concept of irrationalism changed, and he ended up regarding it not as a simple opposition to normative, bourgeois liberal rationalism as it had been in his earlier works; moreover, in those years he began a new series of considerations about the rational and the irrational, considerations which were enriched by his encounter with the thought of German-Jewish Weimar intellectuals who had faced the problem of myth.

Mosse believed that history is no logical process which could be grasped only through reason. Indeed, he has been defined “*the* historian of modern irrationalism”, a “rational man, a humanist, pushed into the study of the irrational and the inhumane”, whose enterprise was “to bend the irrational into the rational; to tame it into a framework of rational thought.”<sup>1459</sup> And yet this self-defined “Enlightenment man”<sup>1460</sup> also firmly believed in the inevitability of irrational attitudes, from which he was admittedly far from immune, as his recollection of his emotions when faced with the Zionist ideal witnesses. He often repeated that “men must dream before they can act”, and praised idealism as long as it is based on facts, and emotions as long as they are “tempered by reason”. Thus he ended up advocating the necessity of a balance between myth and reality, between utopia and political necessities, just as seventeenth-century Casuists had attempted, and Weimar intellectuals had failed to do. As he put it concluding his *The Holy Pretence*, “it must be stressed once again that the endeavour to combine the Serpent and the Dove does not imply hypocrisy. Rather these attempts raise the problem of what can be the Christian answer to the survival of a good man in an evil world.”<sup>1461</sup> The “new politics”, perhaps his most original historiographical concept that was first applied, with an undoubtedly negative nuance, to fascist liturgy, became eventually necessary for a rightful view of politics that involved participation of all citizens in the political process as expressed by parliamentary democracies. It is significant that, when he was asked to commemorate the figure of the Italian politician Aldo Moro, Mosse praised his

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1456 Unidentified Lectures - To Students, cit.

1457 *Ibid.*

1458 George L. Mosse, “Fraternity Talks”, 1968, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 19; Leo Baeck Institute.

1459 Steven Aschheim, “George Mosse – The Man and the Work”, op. cit., xi, xvi and xvii. Renato Mose has entitled his essay on Mosse “George L. Mosse, storico dell'irrazionalismo moderno”, op. cit.

1460 “European Cultural and Intellectual History, 1660-1870”, Lectures given for The University of the Air, cit., Lecture 05

1461 *The Holy Pretence*, op. cit., 154

attempt to involve the masses in a sense of political participation.<sup>1462</sup> As Paul Breines has put it referring to the “manipulative techniques of mass politics” which Mosse “rejected from the outset”,

“yet in the present age, those are the triumphant techniques. While Mosse is no advocate of such techniques, his historical studies point to two vital tasks facing the humanistic socialism to which he has been closer than he reveals: intensive study of the history of popular culture as the soil from which modern mass movements have sprung; and investigation of the symbols, images, and fantasies adequate to a movement for change that is at once massive and humane.”<sup>1463</sup>

Mosse loved to say that “what man is, only history tells”. On receiving an important recognition of his work, he asserted that, in order to understand Erich Fromm's “escape from freedom”, one must explore themes like “l'integrazione delle masse con lo stato e la società, le forze coesive di cui la società ha bisogno per funzionare e sopravvivere, e soprattutto come uomini e donne siano condizionati dalla storia nel guardare il mondo in cui vivono”.<sup>1464</sup> Mosse saw the real foes of humanization in fanaticism and dogmatism, in those who seek for instant utopia, thus lacking the patience to build a cohesive society without destroying human rights. The balance between individual liberty and social cohesion is the base upon which “dipende l'esistenza del governo parlamentare e dei diritti umani.”<sup>1465</sup> His teachings and beliefs can still provide important insights into our society, especially in the age of the *homo videns*.<sup>1466</sup> Mosse believed our age to be

“still a visual age to which the 'new politics' of fascism were so attuned. The method used to appeal to the masses (or public opinion as it is called today), if not the form or content, is in our time, for example, reflected in the public relations industry and refined through the use of television as an instrument of politics. Symbols and myth are still used today though no longer in order to project a single and official attitude, but instead a wide variety of attitudes towards life. The danger of successful appeals to authoritarianism is always present, however changed from earlier forms or from its present worldwide manifestations.”<sup>1467</sup>

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1462 George L. Mosse, “L'opera di Aldo Moro nella crisi della democrazia parlamentare in occidente”, interview with Alfonso Alfonsi in Aldo Moro, *L'intelligenza e gli avvenimenti. Testi 1959-1978*, Fondazione Aldo Moro, Milan, Garzanti, 1979

1463 “With George Mosse in the 1960s”, op cit., 293

1464 George L. Mosse, “Discorso di ringraziamento”, in Quaderni del 'Premio Prezzolini', op. cit., 6

1465 *Ibid.*, 8

1466 The expression has been used by the Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori in his masterful analysis of the impact of television on human nature and behavior. Giovanni Sartori, *Homo videns. Televisione e post-pensiero*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1997. See also, as to the relationship between knowledge based upon the written word and knowledge based on television images, Neil Postman's classic study *Amusing Ourselves to Death. Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Penguin Books, 1985

1467 *The Fascist Revolution. Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, op. cit., 44

Echoing Ernst Bloch's work, he reflected on political indoctrination in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century during a speech. Indoctrination means “carrying the myth to the people”, Mosse said, and continued:

“this is still the age of mass politics and the same longings which were operative until 1945 are still with us surely – the political process is still a drama transmitted to us by the media. We participate indirectly through emotions aroused, a mood induced. Politics is still symbolic action – governmental actions create a common perception and beliefs, myths and symbols are still used to mobilize support ... the old traditions seem to have broken down, but now we have them again under a different form, mediating between us and the world, between us and our hopes in escaping from the crisis of our time which is the crisis of mass politics and mass democracy. Indoctrination is in reality this mediation and it would not work if it did not represent a principle of hope. Rather than condemn it we must understand its function: then perhaps we can begin to escape its all pervasive present.”<sup>1468</sup>

Mosse once wrote that “rapid changes in history usually come about when the gulf between what is and what should be, between outward reality and the human condition, becomes painfully apparent.”<sup>1469</sup> He had always showed a profound concern with times of crisis, when man easily turns to utopia as against the hardships of reality. National socialism had been, in his interpretation, the most brutal example of such tendency to escape reality. Then Mosse always firmly hanged on to the necessity of keeping the balance, of not letting the “gulf” expand. This despite the fact that he realized the difficulties inherent in this attempt: he himself had sought respectability, and had directly experienced the fascination of nationalism. As he admitted, “I was never to close the gap between ideal and reality, and I learned myself what I used to tell my students: true maturity is reached only when one realizes that there exist insoluble problems.”<sup>1470</sup> Mosse claimed that the task of the historian is to unmask myths and symbols in order to understand the past, and consequently the present. In turn, the teaching of history is to provide people with the necessary intellectual weapons to resist any temptation to plunge into utopia (what should be) on the one hand, and to fall prey of conformism (what is) on the other. There is always, he said, “the tempter who will ask you to adjust unquestioningly to 'what is', to admire power and prestige for its own sake, to ignore facts which may hurt. To him you must give a clear 'no' –

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1468 George L. Mosse, untitled speech on indoctrination in “Is Fascism Alive? - Australian Broadcasting Corporation”, 1973, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 17; folder 47; Leo Baeck Institute.

1469 George L. Mosse, *The Reformation*, op. cit., 1

1470 *Confronting History. A Memoir*, op. cit., 184



he is the Mephistopheles of modern society.”<sup>1471</sup> Mosse undertook this task armed with a solid realism. He once said: “I know full well that men and women do not as a rule learn from history, but it seems to me that at least the historian can do so.”<sup>1472</sup> And yet he devoted his life to passionate writing and teaching, infusing both with a “sense of mission”; it may apply to him what he once said about rabbi Manfred Swarsensky: “the greatest message one can preach is one's life”.<sup>1473</sup>

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1471 “Commencement Address”, 1960, cit.

1472 “Response by George Mosse”, in *George Mosse – On the Occasion of His Retirement*. 17.6.85, op cit., xxxi

1473 “Manfred Swarsensky”, cit.

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