6 Fascism, Real or Stuffed: Ordinary Scepticism at Mussolini's Grave

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Introduction: Dear Fascist Dickhead

Many politicians are habituated to receiving hate mail or abuse, perhaps due to their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or because of some particular policy they espouse. Giorgio Frassineti, mayor of Predappio during most of the period of my fieldwork, received regular postcards from different holiday destinations while he was in office, all from the same anonymous individual, and all beginning, "Dear Fascist Dickhead." Another regular writer would address all of his correspondence to Giorgio as the "Podestà" of Predappio, the official designation for a mayor under the fascist regime.

"Predappio" and "Fascism" are indissolubly linked in the minds of most outsiders who have heard of the town. This is because Benito Mussolini was born in the tiny hamlet of Predappio (as it was), because he reconstructed it in its entirety as a monument to fascist urban engineering and as a sort of open-air museum to his early life, because his regime bussed thousands and thousands of tourists there to visit the house in which he was born, and because his remains were buried there in 1957, making it Italy's most famous place of neo-fascist pilgrimage (see Heywood 2019, 2021, 2023b, 2024a).

So, it is not only Giorgio, as Predappio's most public citizen, who falls victim to this association. I was told on countless occasions that it was a common habit for Predappiesi to lie about their origins when travelling outside of the town in order to head off the inevitable assumptions that outsiders would make about them. Not that such assumptions always lead to negative consequences: many Predappiesi have stories of discounts or other forms of preferential treatment at hotels when they show their passports, and the Italian police are famous in the town for displaying leniency to Predappiesi caught speeding, as are the military for giving an easy ride to Predappiesi conscripts.

Gianni, a local artist, has a favourite story of visiting a bar in Rome ("They're all Fascists there, you know," he says) and being overheard to pronounce his

s's in the idiosyncratic fashion of Emilia-Romagna. Upon revealing to his new Roman friends that he is from Predappio, he was instantly taken to be a *camerata* (a fascist term of address, akin to "comrade") and directed to a variety of restaurants in the city in which the mention of his hometown would earn him a very cheap dinner.

Gianni is not, in fact, a Fascist, or at least not according to any criteria that would make sense to anybody in Predappio or most people elsewhere. He has no compunction accepting a cheap dinner from self-proclaimed Fascists because he is an easy-going man with almost nothing to say about politics, preferring instead to devote himself to his paintings. Mayor Giorgio may well be a "dickhead" in the opinion of many Predappiesi who did not vote for him, but nobody except an outsider going only by his place of residence would call him a Fascist. He has been a member of Italy's mainstream left-wing party – the successor to the Italian Communist Party – throughout his political career.

Of course, the association between Predappio and Predappiesi on the one hand, and Fascism on the other, is not really dependent on the thought that everyone in Predappio is actually a Fascist. Rather, in cases like these, Predappio and Predappiesi are indexes of Fascism to those around them. That is, the town, or the appearance of its inhabitants, seem to do the work of making Fascism itself present to others, for good or for ill, in the same way in which a swastika indexes the presence of Nazism (Shoshan 2016). In providing a discounted room rate or restaurant dinner, or in forgiving a speeding ticket to someone for no other reason than that they are from Predappio, one is somehow – among other things – doing a favour for Fascism. In addressing the mayor of Predappio as a "dickhead," one is striking a blow at Fascism, even if this particular mayor, like all his postwar predecessors, is an erstwhile member of the Communist Party. More obviously, Predappio also clearly has long had an iconic as well as indexical relationship to Fascism, from the early days of fascist picture postcards of Predappio under the regime, to a woman who caused international consternation by mocking up a representation of the Predappio skyline on a T-shirt in place of the Disneyland logo, above the word "Auschwitzland" (Heywood 2019).

In some senses, this and other forms of behaviour by visiting neo-Fascists in Predappio, as well as letters addressing its mayor as a "fascist dickhead," look like stereotypical instances of what we have come to associate with "free speech" – extraordinary and dramatic (and sometimes hateful) interventions in the public sphere (cf. Candea et al. 2021; Pipyrou and Sorge 2021). Such interventions have increasingly become indexes of the very concept of "free speech," as it feels more and more impossible to discuss the topic without immediately invoking racist demagogues, hate preachers, or Nazis marching in Illinois (to reach back to an older exemplar).

This perhaps helps in part to explain the lack of widespread anthropological interest in "free speech." Given our discipline's methodological and philosophical

preference for the mundane, the everyday, and the quotidian, iconic controversies around "free speech" are often wont to pass above our heads, or beneath our noses. Forms of speech that have tended to interest anthropologists often – though certainly not always, as in studies of political oratory – look very different indeed to the bombastic rhetoric of many who claim to exercise "free speech." The traditional objects of anthropological interest in speech are instead – often carefully recorded and transcribed – instances of "ordinary language": of an initial consultation between a patient and a Mapuche healer (Guzman 2014), or the role ethnonyms have to play in stories of the past in an urban community in Pennsylvania (Smith and Eisenstein 2013), or the cultural significance of fricative voice gesturing in Korea (Harkness 2011), to take three random examples from the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. This opposition – between the "ordinary language" anthropologists tend to study and specially marked and controversial instances of "free speech" – is reinforced by arguments around "free speech" that either presuppose or critique the idea that the subject of free speech – the free speaker – is an autonomous individual giving voice to an independent interiority (e.g., Fish 1994): "ordinary language" is social (and therefore real), whereas "free speech" is individual (and therefore a fantasy or ideology).

If in this sense we are wont to think of "free speech" as unworthy of attention, both because it is not "ordinary" enough and because the linguistic ideology of decontextualized individuals expressing an unmediated inner self is merely a chimera, it has in these regards something in common with other forms of speech or utterance: those Ludwig Wittgenstein famously characterized as instances of "language on holiday" – that is, language that is "free," if you like, in the sense of being somehow unmoored or divorced from its proper context, not doing the job it usually does. Perhaps the quintessential example is sceptical speech, forms of which are often imagined – like "free speech" – to be the polar opposite of "ordinary language," as when sceptical philosophy is conjured up as the latter's opposite, precisely because such sceptical forms seem untethered to any sensible ordinary context: we do not under normal circumstances question the existence of tables, tomatoes, or bits of wax in front of our eyes. To do so is to use language in a way that grinds against the context – that makes no sense in any language game except the peculiar one of philosophy.

The kind of "free speech" I examine in Predappio, being on the inflammatory topic of Fascism, is sometimes "free speech" in this sense of being marked as special or eventful or significant (as opposed to being ordinary), particularly when it is indulged in by neo-fascist visitors. It indexes those qualities of controversy and bombast that we have increasingly come to take as interchangeable with instances of "free speech" in action, despite being, in fact, more or less ordinary in Predappio because of the town's very particular history and status.

But what I primarily wish to explore here are ways in which this sense of "free speech" ties into forms of sceptical speech about Fascism by Predappiesi

themselves – forms of speech that might look at first like instances of "language on holiday," but which make perfect sense in the very specific context of Predappio. To illustrate this second sense of "free speech," I return to the question posed by the story of the letter writer: How do you know a Fascist when you see one?

Two Senses of "Free Speech"

Speech about Fascism in all sorts of other contexts is very often fraught. There is also a recursive quality to its fraughtness insofar as not only can speech about Fascism be difficult, but it is also itself often invoked as an explanatory factor for that very difficulty: actors accused of restricting "free speech" are labelled "Fascist," as very often are those whose (racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, etc.) speech is actually or potentially restricted in any given legal context.

This quality of fraughtness has an extended history, almost as long as the history of Fascism itself. Philosophers, historians, political scientists, and commentators of all varieties have argued endlessly over the proper use of the word Fascism (Heywood 2023a). George Orwell (1944) once called "What is Fascism?" the most important unanswered question of our time, and in recent years that question has suddenly seemed relevant to many across the world once more, as a flurry of new or familiar answers have emerged in response to an international resurgence of the far-right. There is now a Wikipedia page solely devoted to competing "Definitions of Fascism," and *Slate* magazine, for example, recently printed an excerpt from Passmore's *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction* (2002) as part of its academy series on Fascism, suggesting readers consult the extract to determine whether or not they were living in a "fascist state" (Passmore 2017). *The Atlantic*, noting the "elusiveness" of definitions of Fascism, interviewed historian Robert Paxton in search of a checklist of features with which to assess the extent to which Donald Trump is a Fascist (Green 2016). The pages of international news and commentary have recently been filled with speculation as to whether and how far France's National Rally (formerly the National Front), Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD), or the Freedom Party of Austria "count" or do not "count" as "Fascist," and the word was in the running to be *Merriam-Webster*'s "Word of the Year" in 2016. There is even a name – "Godwin's Law" – for the predictability with which almost any prolonged internet argument will inevitably devolve into accusations of Fascism.

We might imagine three sorts of responses to Orwell's problem. One sort of response seeks to provide a definition of some sort, a "fascist minimum," in the words of one well-known such attempt (Eatwell 1996). This sort of response has been attempted by a number of historians and politicians, as well as by jurists, who have, in contexts such as postwar Italy and Germany, been charged with the task of identifying and rooting out the remains of fascist regimes.

Historians and other academics have defined Fascism as, among other things, a class-based response to the development of socialism (see, for instance, Poulantzas 1974; Trotsky 1944), a psychological phenomenon resulting from a kind of mass hysteria (Reich 1933), a species of "developmental dictatorship" as a politico-economic stage (Gregor 1979), a palingenetic type of ultra-nationalism (Griffin 1991), and a form of religion as a political movement (Gentile 1990), to name just a few.

This sort of response will sound uncompelling to many anthropologists. It would seem to rely on the same "descriptive fallacy" (Austin [1946] 1979) upon which the linguistic ideology behind many arguments about "free speech" also depends – that is, the view that what language does is pick out "meanings" or things in the world (see Sidnell in this volume). It would suggest that the sort of speech about Fascism with which we are concerned here is a simple matter of assessing the qualities of the object it picks out against a benchmark definition. This might be true of actual, ordinary usage if it were the case that there were broad and general agreement about such a benchmark definition. This is true, as J.L. Austin ([1946] 1979) points out in his "Other Minds" critique of scepticism, of the way in which we often use words: if a qualified ornithologist tells us that the bird at the bottom of our garden is a goldfinch because of its red head and distinctive eye markings, we will probably take them at their word rather than ask whether or not they can be sure it is a real goldfinch rather than a stuffed one.

The problem in the case of Fascism – and a lot of other cases beyond goldfinches – is that there is no such broad and general agreement on benchmark criteria. So simply asserting an abstract definition that bears no relation to the variety of ordinary usage will not tell us much. It does not tell us if "being the mayor of Predappio" is a necessary or sufficient criterion for identification as a "fascist dickhead" in the same way that distinctive eye markings are so for a goldfinch.

The second sort of response is one with which anthropologists and social scientists may well feel more at home. It is neatly encapsulated in an essay penned by Umberto Eco (1995) for the *New York Review*. Though the piece is in part an attempt to enumerate a list of basic features of what Eco calls "Ur-Fascism," it is most notable for the argument that Fascism, like "game" in Wittgenstein's writings, is a family resemblance term. That is, in ordinary language it is used not with the intention of picking out a definable and essential characteristic but to draw together a set of phenomena, none of which in fact share any single quality:

> Fascism became an all-purpose term because one can eliminate from a fascist regime one or more features, and it will still be recognizable as fascist. Take away imperialism from fascism and you still have Franco and Salazar. Take away colonialism and you still have the Balkan fascism of the Ustashes. Add to the Italian fascism a radical anti-capitalism (which never much fascinated Mussolini) and

> you have Ezra Pound. Add a cult of Celtic mythology and the Grail mysticism (completely alien to official fascism) and you have one of the most respected fascist gurus, Julius Evola. (Eco 1995)

An argument such as Eco's – and the Wittgensteinian claims on which it is based – feels a great deal more fine-grained and more ethnographically sensitive than the first kind. Unlike definitional arguments, it reads not as an assertion ("Fascism is X") but as a description of fact, or ordinary language use ("This is just how we talk about Fascism"). I will return to this form of response in my conclusion.

In Predappio, the question of what is and is not Fascist is posed in a rather particular form, unsurprisingly, and its relevance has never been purely historical. As I will describe, some speech about Fascism in Predappio is definitionally assertive in the manner of the "fascist minimum"; there are also a great many arguments of the sort noted above over what the proper criteria for such a minimum definition are. But what I wish primarily to explore ethnographically here is a third sort of response to Orwell's question – one foreshadowed in the example of Austin and the goldfinch.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein famously described some forms of philosophy – and the scepticism Austin was targeting in "Other Minds" is certainly a form he would have had in mind – as instances in which language "goes on holiday" (§38). "Free speech" in this sense – that is, speech that has gotten free of its moorings, of convention and context – is misuse of language, and on most occasions asking a qualified ornithologist who points to a goldfinch in your garden how they know that the goldfinch is real or stuffed is an example.

But what if there are no qualified ornithologists on hand? What if we do not agree on which distinctive features function as benchmark criteria for the identification of goldfinches, or what if a range of such criteria exist and we do not know how to choose between them? If on every occasion on which an apparently qualified person identifies a real goldfinch, another equally qualified person denies that it is so, or denies that it is real, a reasonable response might well be to suspect that the word "goldfinch" has been invented to drive people mad and is incapable of describing any actually existing bird.

Today we find the equivalent of such a position actualized in arguments that take the apparent variety of Fascism's usage as evidence for its lack of legitimacy as a term in political debate. But in truth there has always been a sceptical undercurrent to debates about Fascism. In 1979, one prominent historian became so frustrated by the ambiguous use of the term in his discipline that he famously called for it to be banned from historical discourse (Allardyce 1979; see also Holmes 2000, 13). Orwell (1944) himself, in raising the question of "what Fascism is," was making nearly the same point in remarking that he had heard the word applied to "farmers, shopkeepers, Social Credit, corporal

punishment, fox-hunting, bull-fighting, the 1922 Committee, the 1941 Committee, Kipling, Gandhi, Chiang Kai-Shek, homosexuality, Priestley's broadcasts, Youth Hostels, astrology, women, dogs and I do not know what else."

In this chapter, I describe an ethnographic equivalent of this sort of scepticism, a situation in which a form of "free speech" – scepticism as "language on holiday" – has become in a sense conventionalized, or been brought back to work, as it were. The work such scepticism does, in the very particular context that is Predappio, is to render less troubling the sorts of accusations – or claims to fellow feeling – we have seen expressed towards Giorgio and Gianni, and which are so commonplace in regard to Predappio. When everyone around you takes you and your town as indexical or iconic signs of Fascism, being sceptical about "what Fascism is" accomplishes particular effects by muddying the waters of that taken-for-granted relationship.

Paradoxically for an instance of "language on holiday," I argue that one such effect is to render what might otherwise be taken as a dramatic and extraordinary accusation ("free speech" in the sense of inflammatory, special, or significant speech, such as the claim that someone or something is Fascist) into rather ordinary, mundane, banal terms. The work scepticism does here, in other words, is not to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary (by, say, doubting the existence of a garden variety bird in front of one's eyes) but to turn the extraordinary into the ordinary (Clarke 2014; Heywood 2021, 2023b, 2024a) by substituting a highly charged category (Fascism) for something else: graspingness, political self-interest, family loyalty, and so on. The fascist goldfinch, it turns out, is almost always stuffed rather than real.

Such expressions of scepticism are instances of "free speech" in a number of complex senses: in being focused on the question of who or what is a Fascist, they are of course part of the controversial universe of fascist discourse and accusations of Fascism that so much contemporary "free speech" seems to be about, and thus far from "ordinary." Yet they are perfectly ordinary – in the sense of being commonplace – in Predappio, whose existence is so thoroughly saturated by Fascism and by arguments about it. Finally, as I have noted, though such expressions may be as sceptical as Austin's doubter of goldfinches, they are far from being "free" in the sense of "on holiday," or of not doing work in the context in which they emerge: they are aspirational attempts to disaggregate the indexical link between Predappio and Fascism – to "free" the former from the latter.

Fascists, Not Nazis

Attempts to adjudicate the question of who or what is Fascist have an especially complex history in Italy, where Fascism became, in effect, a criminal category after the fall of the regime. Article 30 of the Long Armistice between Italy and the Allies, signed on 29 September 1943, obliged the Italian government to

"carry out all directives which the United Nations may call for, including the abolition of Fascist institutions, the dismissal and internment of Fascist personnel, the control of Fascist funds, the suppression of Fascist ideologies and teachings" (quoted in Domenico 1991, 22).

After the war, Provision XII of the 1947 Italian Constitution forbade the reorganization, "under any form whatsoever," of "the dissolved Italian Fascist Party." This provision was then clarified and somewhat extended in a 1952 law known as the "Scelba Law," which not only forbids the reorganization of the dissolved Fascist Party, but also "apologia" for it, as well as public demonstrations in favour of it. Yet these measures too have been undermined in a number of ways, most obviously by the 1946 Togliatti amnesty for convicted fascist criminals and associated legal reforms, which led to the release of 20,000–30,000 people, as well as the electoral successes of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI) in 1948 (Domenico 1991, 212–14; Parlato 2006, 2017, 44).

Moreover, several Italian courts have, over the years, issued a number of decisions that very much restrict – or simply confuse – the scope of the application of the Scelba Law and its constitutional antecedent, as I have described elsewhere (Heywood 2019). For instance, already by 1958, at the trial of three men – two of whom were indicted for performing the Roman salute and wearing a black shirt at Mussolini's tomb in Predappio – Italy's Constitutional Court ruled that the law could only apply in situations in which there was a realistic and intended prospect of the reconstitution of the Italian Fascist Party (Partito Nazionale Fascista, PNF) (see Sentenza Corte Costituzionale n. 74, 1958), not simply in cases in which "demonstrations" were made in favour of it. Similarly, in 1994, the Consiglio di Stato ruled that use of the *fasces* as a political symbol could not in and of itself constitute a breach of electoral law, given the symbol's longer historical association with ancient Rome (Maestri 2017). More recently, the criminal section of the Corte Suprema di Cassazione condemned two CasaPound militants for giving a Roman salute at a memorial day gathering, and then, in 2016, absolved seven other militants for performing exactly the same gesture at a larger such memorial event (Casarotti 2017). In Predappio, where Roman salutes are a regular occurrence, often in full view of police or Carabinieri agents, no one expects intervention from the judicial authorities (Heywood 2019).

Policemen may not consider themselves experts on identifying Fascists in the manner in which an ornithologist could identify a goldfinch, but other outsiders to Predappio do. On a large march marking the anniversary of Mussolini's seizure of power on 28 October 1940, I was watching a small group of men of varying ages wearing black fascist military uniforms, led by a shaven-headed man in his forties. As the troop neared Mussolini's mausoleum at the edge of the town, its leader called out to the group to begin marching in military step.

After a brief and obvious moment of confusion, a young man towards the rear of the group began to goose-step, before being instantly reprimanded by the troop leader: "No! That's their [the Nazis'] thing! We're Fascists, not Nazis!"

I was reminded of this minor display of technical discrimination ("goose-stepping" makes you a Nazi, not a Fascist, and the difference is important to some) a little later that same day as I stood on the street with some anti-fascist acquaintances of my friend Carlo, who had come to Predappio from Forli to witness the extent of the turnout and to take their dog for a walk. As we stood and watched individuals and groups of people pass by, some of whom were returning to town from the mausoleum, on foot and by car, one acquaintance began reeling off ostensive definitions of her own: "That one's Fascist … that one too … probably that one … that one might not be …" I asked how she was able to tell who was a Fascist and who was not, and she listed some of what she took to be indexical signs: black clothing (not an essential criterion, of course, because anarchists wear black too), leather (also not essential), biker paraphernalia, shaven head (also not an essential criterion), fascist slogans printed on T-shirts, and origin of car licence plate. Later on Carlo gave me another example of a comparable practice from his days in the 1970s as a member of the left-wing group Lotta Continua, one adopted by leftist militants from Forli looking for visiting Fascists to attack: a volunteer would wait by the side of the road below a local hilltop for a coach to pass by; when it did, the volunteer would raise his arm to give the Roman salute, and if the coachload of visitors did the same in response, he would signal to comrades at the top of the hill, who would promptly begin dropping rocks and boulders on the coach from above.

Historic Turncoat Number One

The search for a "fascist minimum" has, as I have been describing, an established history both in Italy and abroad. One might well imagine that Predappiesi would have elevated this search into a science: Where would one be more likely to find experts on what constitutes Fascism than in the birthplace of its founder, and a kind of Disneyland for neo-fascists across the world? Yet the brief examples I provide above all involve outsiders: neo-fascists seeking to distinguish themselves from Nazis, and anti-fascists looking to identify the enemy. Predappiesi themselves are remarkably reticent in applying this label.

That is not of course because of a shortage of candidates. The most obvious candidates are the visitors themselves, many of whom would quite happily self-describe as "Fascist." Predappiesi themselves, however, very rarely refer to their visitors with any variant of political characterization. In line with their wider response to the ritual marches I have outlined elsewhere (Heywood 2019, 2021, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b), the most commonly used term for these visitors is *nostalgici*, "nostalgics." This resembles Predappiesi descriptions of

the marches themselves as "folkloric," "traditional," or "carnivalesque," and suggests the visitors are more like a troop of historical re-enactors than part of a political movement. As in Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce's famous characterization of Fascism as a "parenthesis" in the otherwise great history of Italy, the implication of calling the visitors "nostalgic" is that the object they venerate is dead and gone, a piece of history rather than a living political movement.

That is not to say that all the visitors are perceived in the same way. Massimo, for example, a restaurateur who owns an upmarket eatery very near to the cemetery containing Mussolini's mausoleum, distinguishes between "historic" and "nostalgic" tourists. The former come because they are in the area, and Mussolini's grave is simply a tourist destination to them like any other ("Like I'd go to Jim Morrison's grave, wherever that is"). They come with their families, and if they stop at his restaurant they ask polite questions about the local area and leave again without further ado. The "nostalgic" tourists are those who come in uniforms, who come for the organized marches, and who tend to appear as large groups of men on buses. If Massimo does not attempt to stop them, they will perform Roman salutes in his restaurant after visiting the tomb, and of this group he is rather wary (though not at all averse to taking their coin, as we have seen). At no point does he use the word "Fascist" or any variant thereof to describe them. Massimo does not identify "nostalgics" with Fascists; he distinguishes them from "historical" tourists on the basis of the kind of feeling they have about Italy's fascist period and the intensity of such feelings. Both groups are defined by their feelings about Fascism as a thing of the past, rather than either being isomorphic with it.

There are local candidates too. Sergio, for example, founded the local chapter of the MSI, the postwar reincarnation of the Fascist Party. I have heard him called an "old Fascist" on occasion, but invariably in a jocular tone and in contexts – discussions of the past – that suggest the label refers more to his history as a soldier and his recalcitrance after the war rather than to any present quality in him. He is a very genteel and extremely elderly man, and he is treated with the respect accorded to his age. Nothing about his politics excludes him from sociality with others in the town, and he himself keeps a trove of partisan songs dedicated to Predappio's first postwar mayor and former partisan leader (Heywood 2021).

Other obvious candidates are the owners of three "souvenir" shops (as they are widely known) that punctuate Predappio's main street. "Souvenir shop" is itself something of a euphemism, given that these shops sell repugnant pieces of fascist and Nazi paraphernalia. Here the label "Fascist" is used more frequently, at least in one case, as I discuss below. But even in these cases the waters may be muddied. The most obvious question – often raised by Predappiesi – is whether it is ideology or money (or some combination of the two) that motivates the shop owners.

Two of these proprietors are from Predappio, one of them now deceased. This latter is one whom a number of Predappiesi would willingly call a "Fascist": he effectively began the souvenir trade by selling postcards and relics near the cemetery on the days of the anniversary marches. "He was always a Fascist," Chiara, a town council employee tells me, "even before, even when he wasn't selling gadgets [another common euphemism for fascist paraphernalia]." Her father, a retired lorry driver, disagrees immediately: "No, I think it's for the money. It's not for the politics, it's the money." Angela, a cafe owner, says that when this proprietor opened the first souvenir shop, people in the town joked that he would be selling Che Guevara T-shirts if Predappio had been lucky enough to be Che's birthplace. But she also seconds Chiara's point: "He was always a Fascist though."

Federica, a retired schoolteacher who has taught most of the town's inhabitants, is similarly equivocal:

> Let's say that this guy was the most involved from the beginning, from the point of view of politics. But even he didn't only do this, he did other, normal things too [he owned a hardware store]. And I know his family, they are actually really good people. His wife bends over backwards to help. When I needed a flag in school, she would always find one for me and give me a good price. But it would really bother me every time I went to the shop and had to see all those other things.

The second proprietor from Predappio, still living, is one about whom Predappiesi are much more cynical. "He was in a totally different business," recounts Federica,

> selling chickens, owning poultry houses. But then he went bankrupt, found himself without work, and had the idea to take advantage of this situation and open the shop. So he reinvented himself selling Mussolini souvenirs, but without, I think, any specific political inclination. I mean, it was a way to survive.

Angela is less generous and makes no mention of bankruptcy:

> He had this poultry farm and he made so much money, because it was a huge business, and his brother had an amusement arcade in Predappio. So, when he got old and closed this down, the other one decided to open this shop. He was, how would you say, a "busy bee." He knows where the money is. But there is no ideology there. If tomorrow someone else is popular, he will change his whole business.

Chiara is similarly convinced: "There's definitely more self-interest than ideology in his shop. He saw the business, he did it for the money. I know the family, they have never been Fascists, and he was never involved in politics his whole life before this."

Though it is not the largest, this second shop is in some ways the most conspicuous, at least for pedestrians, since it sits in the middle of Predappio's main street, and the merchandise spills out onto the pavement outside. The owner, a short, grey-haired man with a handlebar moustache, is often at work behind the counter or tidying up the displays, and his compatriots usually greet him politely as they pass. Even Giorgio, the erstwhile left-wing mayor, says hello, and though he dislikes entering the shop in case he is photographed by journalists, I have known him to do so and to reluctantly share a small glass of Mussolini wine with the owner.

The last proprietor is not from Predappio, as Predappiesi will happily tell you, and therefore not seen as their responsibility. He is the most widely known of the three outside of Predappio – even though his shop is the smallest and the least noticeable – because he is also the owner of the Villa Carpena, a fascist-inspired "museum" to Mussolini a little way down the road from Predappio. His pecuniary motivations are taken for granted by most Predappiesi, and there is a degree of resentment at the fact that an outsider is profiting from the town's heritage.

Of course, self-interest and ideological conviction need not be mutually exclusive, and my point here is not about whether or not these men are, in fact, really Fascists. It is that Predappiesi frequently deploy monetary self-interest *as if it were* mutually exclusive with political beliefs. When Predappiesi speculate about the self-interest of these men they are not doing so in order to add "greed" to their charge sheets. They do so in order to dismiss them, with a snicker or a guffaw and a wave of the hand. There is nothing really special about them, is the implication; they are simply businessmen – unscrupulous, perhaps, but this is not an unusual assumption for Italians to make about businessmen in general. In other words, there is a degree of reluctance involved in attaching the label of "Fascist" to even those who might seem most obviously to merit it. But also, in line with Predappiesi attitudes more generally, the way in which that reluctance is evidenced is by opposing something pragmatic or ordinary – like "making a living," being a "busy bee," and knowing where the money is – to the high politics of Fascism.

One might imagine that this sort of distinction would at least lead one to a certain set of criteria with which to identify who is, in fact, a Fascist. If self-interest is a characteristic that excludes people from this set, then presumably there are nevertheless other, less self-interested individuals who fit more comfortably within it. What is doubted here may not be the nature of Fascism as real or stuffed, but the particulars of any specific instance of identification.

The problem, however, is that self-interest is frequently perceived to be at the heart of apparently genuine political convictions more generally. This is of course a broader Italian phenomenon, but it takes on a specific character in Predappio (Heywood 2021, 2023b, 2024a), evidenced by a fascination with

stories of *voltagabbana*, or "turncoats," people known to have switched from one political side to another. The implication of such stories is that political affiliation usually runs only skin deep, and that beneath the colours of red or black is simple self-interest. This leads to an even more profound scepticism as to the possibility of identifying Fascism.

One favourite such story of "turncoats" is of Angelo Ciaranfi, the last democratically elected mayor of Predappio in 1920, before the advent of Fascism forced his resignation in 1922. After a few years under the regime, however, Ciaranfi underwent a conversion and joined the Italian Fascist Party. In order to make the strength of his new convictions clear, he even rewrote his will to include a codicil requiring him to be buried in a fascist black shirt.

Later still, "after the disaster and the tragedy of war and the failures of Fascism," runs a local history book,

> Ciaranfi, good old Ciaranfi, realized he'd made a serious mistake and turned on his feet politically again, joining the Italian Communist Party [Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI]. After the liberation of Predappio, he served in the administration of the first postwar democratic mayor, Giuseppe Ferlini. But those tumultuous years had no doubt radically transformed Ciaranfi's existence, like those of many other Italians, and it's probably for this reason that he forgot to rewrite his will. So, when he died in June 1948, and his testament obliged him to be buried in a black shirt, there was much consternation and embarrassment amongst his comrades, who were expecting to send him off draped in the red flag with the "Internationale" playing. In the end, and not without argument, it was decided that his body would lie in an open casket, and obligatory black shirt, for a brief private ceremony with the family, before being buried with casket closed in a civil ceremony, complete with the PCI band and the red flag.[1] (Capacci, Pasini, and Giunchi 2014, 219)

Many of my Predappiesi friends loved the story of Ciaranfi, his multiple switches of political allegiance, and his awkward funeral.

There are a number of other such stories that Predappiesi like to tell. One concerns a *repubblichino* (a soldier of the post-1943 German puppet government of the Republic of Salo, the RSI) returning to Predappio after the Axis surrender and being stopped on the road outside the town by a band of anti-fascists looking to exact punishment on any returning RSI soldiers they encountered. Among this band the *repubblichino* is very surprised to find his former battalion sergeant, who had deserted from the army of the RSI only a month before the end of the war (Capacci, Pasini, and Giunchi 2014, 216–17). Another favourite is very similar: in the early 1920s a local man refuses to sign up to the

1 All translations are my own.

Fascist Party and is regularly beaten up by local Fascists as a result. Finally, he converts, and with a convert's zealotry he even goes on to fight for the RSI after the fall of Mussolini in 1943. After the surrender in 1945 he returns to Predappio, and as in the previous story, is seized by a band of anti-fascists in the town upon his return. Upon realizing that one of the men about to beat him for being a Fascist was one of the men who used to beat him for not being a Fascist, he says calmly to the group, "All of you can punch me as much as you want, except him, he's already had his turn" (217).

But it is Mussolini himself who is perceived as a sort of "turncoat-in-chief." This is particularly striking given how often man and movement are intertwined in the case of Fascism. As Robert Paxton (2004, 9) has strikingly put it, speaking of the idea that Fascism ought to be identified with its leader, "this image, whose power lingers today, is the last triumph of Fascist propagandists. It offers an alibi to nations that approved or tolerated Fascist leaders, and diverts attention from the persons, groups, and institutions who helped him." Indeed, this co-mingling of Mussolini and Fascism is one of the things that makes Predappio, Mussolini's birthplace and home to his grave, such a powerful attraction for contemporary neo-fascists.

But if, for neo-fascists, this isomorphism brings some degree of clarity regarding what it is they come to Predappio to pay homage to, for Predappiesi themselves – with their intimate knowledge of Mussolini's opportunism and chameleon-like qualities – it only further muddies the waters of definition: "Historic turncoat number one in Predappio was Benito Mussolini, the Duce of Fascism, son of Alessandro Mussolini, anarchist socialist, and blacksmith of Dovia" note the authors of one local history book (Capacci, Pasini, and Giunchi 2014, 212).

Mussolini was a fervent socialist for much of his early life, and his father had been a socialist town councillor in Predappio. His departure from the Italian Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano, PSI) and move to the far-right was a scandal, as it occurred while he was editor of *Avanti!*, the national party organ. When he first visited Predappio as Italy's Duce he had many of his erstwhile compatriots from the Socialist Party arrested for the day so that the disjuncture between his past and present politics would not be too overt (Heywood 2021). So, in addition to the comic stories of political turncoats above, Predappiesi have similar stories about Mussolini himself. In one, during a visit to the town, Mussolini stops a local character he recognizes from his days in the PSI to ask him what he thinks of the political situation, and the man replies (in dialect) that he has never liked the white poplar leaf ("la fója de farfaraz," a metaphor for a turncoat due to its tendency to change colour) and turns away (Capacci, Pasini, and Giunchi 2014, 203). In another, a godson of Mussolini is baptized by the Duce himself, when he was still a socialist, with the name of "Rebel." After the Lateran Pact with the Catholic Church, Mussolini tells the

child's father that he must change his son's name, and the father replies that since, after all, Mussolini gave him the first name, he had better be the one to change it (214; see also Heywood 2021).

In other words, at the very heart of Predappiesi conceptions of Fascism is an even deeper scepticism about identifying it than that expressed by doubt over any particular characteristic. In these conceptions there is a sense in which Fascism was never, in fact, anything more than a cloak for the self-interest of Mussolini.

Conclusion: Ordinary Scepticism

Eco (1995) describes Fascism as an "all-purpose term." Writing about both an Italian and an international context, his point, broadly speaking, is that anti-fascism is a vital and important cause, and that we "know," in some sense, to what it is opposed. This is revealed not by some fact about Fascism, but – as is characteristic of this view of speech more broadly – by the ways in which we use the word "Fascism" in ordinary language. "Who are They?" Eco asks, posing the sceptical philosopher's question only rhetorically, and then giving us the ordinary language philosopher's answer: "They" are those whom we call "Fascist."

But who are "We"? In the context of Predappio, it is far from clear whether a sense of the indefinability of the word either stems from a feeling that people know a Fascist when they see one or serves the purpose of allowing them to pick out the family resemblances between different kinds of Fascist. Ironically, Predappiesi ordinary language about Fascism instead looks more like that of the sceptical philosopher. Either it questions the application of the term based on a particular characteristic or set of characteristics ("he's not Fascist, he's just self-interested"; "they're not Fascists, they're just nostalgic clowns"), or, as in the stories of Mussolini, Ciaranfi, and those above, it implies an even more profound scepticism: if a man wears a fascist uniform, serves the fascist regime, holds a Fascist Party membership card, and yet later is to be found proclaiming his anti-fascism and beating returning soldiers, what hope is there of ever answering Orwell's question? If Mussolini himself is thought to have founded Fascism in part because the French bribed him into supporting the Entente in the First World War, then what does it even mean to be a Fascist?

My argument here is that the "underlying feelings," as Eco puts it, revealed by Predappiesi ordinary language about Fascism revolve not around some unspoken notion of "Ur-Fascism" revealed by a "we-know-we-see-it" mentality. Instead, they revolve around a deep-seated and profound scepticism about whether or not anyone is "really" identifiable as a Fascist. Talking to people in Predappio about Fascism is a little bit like talking to an expert ornithologist who denies the existence of goldfinches. Each time you believe you have

spotted a real one it is in fact revealed to be stuffed, possessing the appearance of "goldfinchness" but being something else entirely at heart.

Unlike the scepticism Austin describes though, this sort of scepticism is perfectly ordinary in Predappio, in the sense that it is common, usual, and conventional to express such sentiments. Indeed, one of the ways in which it becomes "ordinary" is by virtue of repetition – the quality "Fascist" is not repudiated in a single grand instance of scepticism (most people do not simply claim that there is no such thing), but rather slowly eroded as any given instance of Fascism is revealed to be, in fact, something else.

Moreover, this form of free or sceptical speech is not "language on holiday," but is doing a particular sort of work. At the heart of such work is Predappio's indexical and iconic association with Fascism in the wider Italian popular imaginary. The fact, in other words, that for most other people who have heard of Predappio one need look no further for a better example of something one could point to and label as Fascist than Predappio itself. As I noted at the outset of this chapter, outsiders who have heard of Predappio rarely share Predappiesi scepticism about identifying Fascism – indeed, they often take the town itself, its inhabitants, and its appearance as indexical and iconic signs of the regime. Roman neo-fascist restaurateurs provide cheap dinners to Predappiesi tourists, policemen forgive speeding tickets to Predappiesi drivers, and army sergeant-majors hand out the best jobs to Predappiesi conscripts. Meanwhile, others consign the whole town to the "toxic waste dump of history" for its associations with Fascism (Wu Ming 2017). Newspaper reports about the ritual marches in Predappio are much more likely to call the marchers "Fascists" than "nostalgics," and non-Predappiesi are usually shocked to discover that the town consistently elected left-wing mayors until 2019. Predappiesi experience this association on a very regular basis – they experience their home's saturation with the symbolism and architecture of the regime every time they step outside their front doors, they experience its status in the eyes of neo-fascists every day when they pass such visitors on the street, and they experience how it is perceived by other Italians every time they are asked where they are from and either lie or face the consequent judgment.

In response, Predappiesi scepticism attempts to untether Fascism from any real-world referent, and certainly from their home and from their most famous co-citizen, who emerges from their stories not as an ideologue or a militant but as just another self-interested opportunist, of whom there are many in Italian politics. So, the "ordinary scepticism" I describe here is not simply "ordinary" in the sense of being common and "everyday" in the town, but also "ordinary" in that its effect – like the effect of other aspects of Predappiesi life I have described elsewhere (Heywood 2021, 2023b, 2024a) – is to scale Fascism down to the colour of a shirt one wears for the convenience and benefits it confers. In this vision, the high (or low) politics of Fascism, and of accusations of

Fascism, come down simply to where people think their interests lie. This is a form of sceptical speech endowed with a particular meaning and purpose by the context in which it takes place.

Talk about Fascism by people in Predappio – rather than by visitors to Predappio – often turns out not to be "free speech" in the sense of dramatic, extraordinary interventions in public discourse. Much talk about Fascism in Predappio aims instead at the opposite, despite its topic: at the ordinary, the banal, and the quotidian. Moreover, it does not turn out to be "free" in the sense of being "language on holiday," despite the sceptical form it takes.

One might imagine ordinary language to be the opposite of "free speech," in both of the above senses – the opposite of both talk about extraordinary and controversial subjects such as Fascism, and of epistemic positions such as scepticism. Yet in Predappio both are combined, and both are perfectly ordinary. What this points to, I suggest, is the need for contextualization – not just of phenomena that seem to resist contextualization, like free speech, but also of phenomena that come with a built-in sense of *what context is*, as our own talk about the putative opposite of free speech – ordinary language – sometimes does.