‘I am no longer human. I am a Titan. A god!’

The Fascist Quest to Regenerate Time*

The ‘revolutionary festival’

Some two decades ago, Mona Ozouf’s *Festivals and the French Revolution* provided impressive testimony to the centrality of myth and ritual in the dynamics of even a ‘modern’, ‘rational’ revolution purportedly carried out in the name of Enlightenment principles. Now that, at long last, some scholars are taking seriously the proposition that Fascism as well as Nazism attempted to create a new type of culture, it seems an appropriate moment to consider whether the conspicuously ritualised, theatrical component of both Fascism and generic fascism can be illuminated by the concept of ‘the revolutionary festival’. As we shall see, applying such a concept has a particular heuristic value when applied to fascist ideology and practice, despite the radical differences which clearly separate the largely spontaneous explosion of populist mythic energies unleashed by the French Revolution from those deliberately engineered in ordinary citizens by Fascist and Nazi elites. By the time he wrote *Mein Kampf*, Hitler was already aware of the need to emulate the power of the mass demonstrations held by communists which

burned into the small wretched individual the proud conviction that, paltry worm as he was, he was nevertheless part of a great dragon, beneath whose burning breath the heated bourgeois world would one day go up in fire and flame and the proletarian dictatorship would celebrate its ultimate final victory.4

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The notion that there can be qualitatively different experiences of time is pivotal to such an investigation. The issue of subjective ‘times’ is clearly one of enormous psychological and anthropological complexity, and is by its nature susceptible to any number of conceptual schemes. Yet it is significant that not only countless poets\(^5\) but also several major Western intellectuals have suggested that a dichotomy between ‘ordinary’ time and ‘special’ time persists in the age of modernity. Émile Durkheim, for example, not only distinguished between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ time,\(^6\) but devoted considerable attention to ‘effervescent assemblies’ in which individual, anomic time gives way to a collective sense of belonging and temporal purpose. Similarly, one of the effects which Max Weber attributed to the progressive ‘rationalisation’ of all aspects of modern existence was ‘disenchantment’ (Entzauberung), the erosion by secularisation of the religious, magic dimension of reality that bound together pre-modern communities, though he recognised that it might re-emerge capriciously and spasmodically in the form of collective charismatic energies to temporarily release human beings from their iron cage of reason.\(^7\) More anthropologically oriented cultural commentators such as Joseph Campbell, building on Carl Jung’s pioneering studies of the ‘archetypal unconscious’, have explored how mythic consciousness still provides the substratum of ‘modern’ human experience, lifting individuals out of ordinary time whenever their lives intersect with primordial patterns of cosmological (‘mythopoeic’) and ritual consciousness.\(^8\) One of the most influential figures in the investigation of the distinction between profane and sacred time is Mircea Eliade, who, in a stream of writings, has documented the constant recourse by human beings to myth and ritual in order to stave off the ‘terror of history’, the invasion of life by the all-consuming chronos of meaningless clock-time.\(^9\)

Seen from such a perspective, the cultural rebellion against the Enlightenment project which gathered such strength from the 1880s onwards in Europe – generally known today as ‘the revolt against positivism’\(^10\) – can be seen as the appearance of a number of highly idiosyncratic quests to put an end to ‘decadence’ (i.e. a ‘fallen’, disenchanted, entropic, private, ‘old’ time) and inaugurate a ‘rebirth’ (i.e. enter a ‘higher’, magic, regenerative, collective, ‘new’ time).\(^11\) If confined to the experiential sphere of individuals or small groups, this might involve no more than the cultivation of visionary, mystic states of consciousness, or the quest for sources of knowledge and insight neglected by mainstream Western culture to the point of causing the cults of Carl Jung, William Blake, and Carlos Castaneda during the counter-cultural ‘revolt’ of the 1960s. However, so widespread was the disaffection with the official cult of material, liberal progress in linear time that intellectuals and artists all over Europe were attracted to the idea that their own bid to break free from a stultifying ‘normality’ was part of a wider impulse, a sea change in history. They were convinced they were living through a watershed in the evolution of Western civilisation. In individual