

Fascist Italy's Illiberal Cultural Networks

Culture, Corporatism and International Relations

Benjamin G. Martin
Uppsala University, Sweden

Abstract Italian fascists presented corporatism, a system of sector-wide unions bringing together workers and employers under firm state control, as a new way to resolve tensions between labour and capital, and to reincorporate the working classes in national life. 'Cultural corporatism' – the fascist labour model applied to the realm of the arts – was likewise presented as a historic resolution of the problem of the artist's role in modern society. Focusing on two art conferences in Venice in 1932 and 1934, this article explores how Italian leaders promoted cultural corporatism internationally, creating illiberal international networks designed to help promote fascist ideology and Italian soft power.

Keywords Fascism. Corporatism. State control. Labour. Capital.

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1 Introduction

The great ideological conflict of the interwar decades was a clash of world-views and visions of society, but it also had a quite practical component: which ideology could best respond to the concrete problems of the age? Problems like economic breakdown, mass unemployment, and labour unrest were not only practical, of course: they seemed linked to a broader breakdown of so-

ciety, and, along with demographic crisis and Europe's unstable security environment, suggested a deep threat to the nation. Debating one another on the international stage, intellectuals were quick to interpret such problems through grand philosophical *prises de position*, such that proposals for practical economic and political measures became, through a kind of ideological escalation, expressions of irreconcilable world views. This was perhaps especially the case with regard to social and economic measures in areas of life that were already overdetermined and supercharged with national significance, like culture and the arts.

When it came to linking policy to ideology, pro-fascist Italian intellectuals were certainly not to be outdone. In the crisis years of the early thirties, fascist officials and publicists claimed a leadership role for Italy in Europe on the basis of the argument that fascism alone – in particular the innovations of fascist corporatism – offered solutions to the problems of modern life. Fascist corporatism, launched with the 1927 Charter of Labor (*Carta del lavoro*), was a major focus on Italy's ideological-political outreach. Italy's model, calling for sector-wide unions bringing together workers and employers under firm state control, was presented as having squared the circle of relations between labour and capital in a novel way and as a tool for reincorporating the working classes in the fabric of national life. Fascists outlined a similar model in the realm of culture: the visual arts, letters, music, theatre, and so on. Interwar discussions of the arts, it should be remembered, mixed rarified concerns – such as matters of style and taste, or theories of the modern artist's proper role in modern society – with highly practical issues, such as how to ensure artists' livelihood in a changing economy, their legal rights, their pensions. To these challenges, fascist officials responded by claiming that the organisation of the nation's artistic and cultural life through the tools of the *stato corporativo* resolved both practical and profound questions affecting the world of the arts.

These claims, touting the benefits of what could be called 'cultural corporatism', were not for domestic audiences alone. Mussolini's Italy used cultural corporatism – a practical appeal, linked to broader ideological claims – to position itself as a leading force for change, as a source of new ideas, and as the nexus of an international circuit of modern people and fresh ideas. This article explores this last aspect: how a coalition of Italian leaders in politics and the arts promoted cultural corporatism internationally, creating illiberal international networks that would promote fascist ideology and a kind of Italian soft power. Assembling international allies was a way to promote Italy's role in this particular set of issues in the arts. More broadly, it was a way to fulfil the Duce's prophecy that the twentieth century would be the "century of fascism" (Mussolini 1932).

2 Broadcasting Cultural Corporatism

It is of course ironic to find self-described ultra-nationalists conducting international cultural outreach. But leading figures in Italy, like elsewhere in the highly interconnected thirties, recognised that where modern problems were international, the solutions would have to be, as well. Fascism's emphasis on corporatism was present in this sense, too.

Corporativist development - the theorist Ugo Spirito declared in 1932 - does not and cannot stop at the nation's frontiers without contradicting its very nature. Instead, the move must be made from national to international corporations in which all nations find ideal conditions for economic and spiritual development. (Spirito [1932] 2000, 153)

Embracing this spirit, Italian intellectuals and officials used international conferences to propose cultural corporatism to high-profile foreign audiences. Two events in Venice - the 1932 International Congress of Contemporary Art, and the 1934 international gathering on 'Art and Reality; Art and the State' - exemplify the Italians' effort to present fascist cultural corporatism as an Italian-made, but universally applicable solution to pan-European crises of modernity. This effort was part of a broader strategy, whereby fascist leaders sought to improve Italy's position in powerful international intellectual networks and, at the same time, to position fascism as the best, most up-to-date political ideology. Fascist corporatism - these events aimed to show - was uniquely capable of addressing the practical problems that plagued modern cultural life. Fascism could thereby be presented as the one ideology of the day capable of resolving profound tensions in the role of culture in modernity.

In 1938, a Roman publisher put out an English-language book explaining how Fascist Italy applied corporatism to the arts. Here, readers learned that "the organisation of men and women exercising the liberal arts and professions in registered occupational unions (*sindacati*) affiliated to a General Confederation, and their participation as such in the activities of the Guild State, is one of the most original and remarkable achievements of the Fascist régime" (Missiroli, Agresti 1938, 5). This achievement was particularly original and remarkable with regard to 'Literature, the Fine arts, and Music'. Fascism had "succeeded in organizing a category of workers who had always seemed refractory to any form of organization. [...] Fascism has the deepest respect for the creative work of the artist but it looks upon such work as a factor for improving and elevating the life of the nation. Disinterested service to the nation is a duty, as Mussolini reminded intellectual workers in the address to the first assem-

bly of the liberal arts and professions" (Missiroli, Agresti 1938, 55-6). Mussolini addressed that first conference, on October 1, 1932, in Rome's Teatro Augusteo. By then, fascist Italy had applied corporatist organisation to the arts and professions for several years. In 1927, Italy's artists were organised, via provincial unions, into a national corporate body, the Syndicate of the fine arts (Sindacato fascista delle belle arti), which represented them in turn within the larger Syndicate of intellectual workers (Sindacato dei lavoratori intellettuali). These artists were granted a privileged position as 'intellectuals' alongside teachers, journalists, writers, and publishers (Stone 1998, 25; Salvagnini 2000, 13-14; de Grazia 1981, 147). In the period of intense discussion, organisation, and debate that followed the publication of fascism's Charter of Labor in 1927, the artists' syndicate played an active role in crafting the emerging theory and practice of fascist corporatism.

Corporatism sought to organise labour in vertically integrated sector-wide unions under state oversight, supposedly bringing labour and management into cooperation for the higher good of national production. The 1927 Charter demanded that all categories of labour must be organised: "organizational and executive, intellectual, technical, [and] manual". In this context, the artists' union seemed to be a successful example of fascist corporatism in action. In 1927, in the same intellectual wave that produced the Charter of Labor, the intellectual circle around Giuseppe Bottai launched the idea that under fascism, the state would help resolve "the problem of art" precisely by building on existing forms of "syndicalism of artists", but now linked to the state. Fascism understood, Bottai wrote in an unsigned editorial of February 1927, the need to "provide for the economic support of the artists, be they excellent or mediocre, and this the State will do through the respective artists unions" (quoted in Salvagnini 2000, 344).¹ In practice, the union "offered its members material assistance in the form of loans, relief payments, old-age pensions, and retirement homes", as well as less tangible but no less important benefits regarding the artist's social status (Stone 1998, 28). According to Mussolini, addressing representatives of Italy's professionals and artists in Rome in 1932, fascism's extension of corporatist organisation to the world of culture and the arts marked nothing less than a historic transformation of the role of the artist in society. He explained, as *Il Popolo d'Italia* reported, that "before fascism, professionals and artists, in the liberaloid state, lacked the right of citizenship". Now organised into corporatist unions, artists could cel-

¹ "Lo Stato e il problema dell'arte". *Critica fascista*, 4, 15 February 1927, 61: "provvedere alla tutela economica degli artisti, sia eccellenti, sia mediocri e questo lo Stato farà attraverso i rispettivi sindacati degli artisti" (all translations are made by the Author).

celebrate “the recognition that fascism has conferred upon them”, as the regime used the power of the state to incorporate them into the fabric of the nation (Mussolini [1932] 1958, 131).²

Fascism's cultural journals likewise celebrated this transition. The prominent futurist Ardengo Soffici celebrated the new role of the state in using syndical organisation to support and guide the arts by guaranteeing artists' working conditions. Fascism, he wrote in 1927, did not seek any official art of the state. At the same time, he argued, the whole issue of the “freedom of the artist” was typical of bourgeois democracies and fundamentally *passé* (quoted in Salvagnini 2000, 349). On the contrary, fascism's corporate structures would liberate Italian painters, sculptors, and writers from the exaggerated individualism and self-indulgence of the isolated, bourgeois artist. In this “new climate”, opined one commentator, “artists no longer need to distinguish themselves with such superficialities as wide-brimmed hats and fluttering ties” (quoted in Stone 1998, 26).³ Statements like this one, like Mussolini's celebration of these achievements, addressed a domestic matter to a domestic audience. But, by the time Mussolini gave his speech to Italy's intellectual workers in Rome in 1932, the regime had already begun spreading the same message internationally.

3 Venice 1932: Better Art Through Organisation

On April 30, 1932, representatives of nine European nations arrived in Venice for the “First International Congress of Contemporary Art”. This title, and the fact that the event was organised by the famous Venice Biennale art exhibition, suggested that the guests would, in fact, be talking about art. But the Italians' goal with this event was to launch fascist corporatism in the fine arts as an international model.

The conference's official programme made this clear: “In the life of today”, it confidently announced, “the class order has preeminent importance. Everyone is organising in order to affirm the ideal and material need to live and work”. The burning issue of contemporary art was apparently not form or colour, not modernism or traditionalism, not even the issue of elite versus mass taste. It was, rather, organisation.

Artists – the programme explained – unjustly believed to be incapable of unity and discipline, by now feel the need to adhere to the

² “Come prima del fascismo, i professionisti e gli artisti, nello stato liberaloide, non avessero diritto di cittadinanza. [...] il riconoscimento che il fascismo ha loro conferito”.

³ Biagi, Bruno (1933). “Il sindacato, l'arte ed i giovani”. *Gerarchia*, 11, February, 89.

principles of modern life, to discuss among themselves their common interests, to develop and collegially maintain contacts not only with other members of their own class, but also with the society in the midst of which they live and for which they work. (*Primo congresso* 1932, 11)⁴

The guests who received this programme – some twenty-five artists, critics, and arts officials from nine nations – must have been struck by Italians' insistence that these practical matters really were *the* issue facing the arts in 1932. But then, as the text declared, the drive toward organisation expressed nothing less than “the principles of modern life”. In this way, the text quickly but effectively established a unique position for fascism in the ideological landscape of the day. Indeed, one could say that the conference organisers landed blows against both liberalism and socialism, and seized a place for fascism as a kind of third way between these – all in the first lines of this conference programme. First, claiming that state-led organisation of artists was in step with “modern life” implied that the individualism in the arts typical of the liberal democracies was unmodern, out of step, and historically superseded. Second, the conference text's particular use of the word “class” was meant to refer to artists as a social group, rejecting the Marxist understanding of class as the historical social formation defined through its relationship to the means of production. Using the word “class” in this way, at an elite arts conference, was an effort to claim the term for the language of (fascist) corporatism. Ultimately, these ideas came together in the conference's central claim: that practical changes in the social organisation of the arts offered the key to positive changes in artistic production. In order to ensure that the conference scrupulously follow this *via regia* toward a new, better contemporary art, guests were actually barred from discussing aesthetic questions! “Not discussions of artistic tendencies”, the programme insisted, “not disquisitions on critique and aesthetics, but an ordered, calm and practical analysis of the problems that must be resolved for the good of art and artists”. The organisers repeated this point in the conference's guidelines: “Discussions about particular artistic tendencies are excluded according to

⁴ “Nella vita d'oggi, l'ordinamento di classe ha un'importanza preminente. Tutti si organizzano per affermare la necessità ideale e materiale di vivere e di operare. [...] Gli artisti, creduti a loro torto incapaci di unione e di disciplina, sentono ormai il bisogno di aderire ai principi della vita moderna, di discutere fra loro degli interessi comuni, di allacciare e mantenere collegialmente i contatti non soltanto con i componenti della loro stessa classe ma anche con la società in mezzo a alla quale vivono e per la quale lavorano”.

the program of the Congress itself" (*Primo congresso* 1932, 11, 18).⁵

These claims – that contemporary art was in need of rejuvenation, and that such a revival could only be achieved through the social organisation of the arts – were not new ideas. Indeed, for nearly twenty years they had been the personal obsession of the man who played the leading intellectual and practical role in planning this conference. This was the writer, exhibition curator, and art critic Ugo Ojetti, who served as Congress President and head of its executive committee. An essay of his, published in 1914 in the journal *Pagine d'arte*, had opened an important debate in Italy on the social role and status of the artist. Raising the issue of the formal economic and legal recognition of artists as professionals, this debate quickly expanded, as the art historian Paolo Fossati explains, to address “the need for a concrete and public definition of intellectual and artistic labor” (Fossati 1982, 175).⁶ Before this debate, nineteenth-century European artists had sometimes called on the state to take up the role as patron of the arts left vacant by the declining role in the arts of the Church and the aristocracy. But the discussion that Ojetti launched went beyond asking for state money. It posited a deep, structural relationship between the actual quality of painting and sculpture and the social, political and economic organisation of arts, insisting on what Fossati calls “the link between pictorial growth and cultural structures” (Fossati 1982, 175).⁷

In the twenties, Ojetti, already a dominating presence in his field, embraced fascism and conducted an extraordinary campaign of cultural-political work, organising exhibitions, founding and editing journals, and coordinating the sections on the arts in Giovanni Gentile's *Enciclopedia italiana*. His journals, although open to much young talent and to international ideas, excluded critics who approached art through the purist idealism associated with the philosopher Benedetto Croce (Cerasi 2013, 181). Beyond writing, though, Ojetti had little room in which to put his more concrete ideas on art and society into practice.

By 1930, the year Ojetti was made a member of Italy's Royal Academy, two developments had changed the prospects for action. First, as we have seen, in 1927 the fascist regime had extended its model of corporatism to broader sectors of national life, including the arts and the free professions (doctors, lawyers, and so on). In 1928,

⁵ “Non discussioni di tendenze artistiche, non disquisizioni di critica e di estetica, ma un'ordinata, serena e pratica disamina dei problemi che urge risolvere pel bene dell'arte e degli artisti” (11). “Le discussioni su particolari tendenze d'arte sono escluse secondo il programma dello stesso Congresso” (18).

⁶ “La necessità di una definizione concreta e pubblica del lavoro intellettuale e artistico”.

⁷ “Il legame fra crescita pittorica e strutture culturali”.

the link between the state and the existing artists' syndicate was strengthened by Mussolini's decision to break up and reorganise the system of syndicates (Confederazione delle Corporazioni Sindacali). This confederation had been led until then by Edmondo Rossoni, whose 'left fascism' Mussolini now sought to quash. The break-up of Rossoni's Confederation, an intervention known as the *sbloccamento*, created a new structure with twelve employers' organisations (Federazioni dei datori di lavoro) opposite twelve federations of state-controlled labour unions for workers in those sectors. The *sbloccamento* also created a thirteenth confederation, the Confederazione dei Professionisti ed Artisti. But this thirteenth labour federation was not matched with a corresponding employers' federation. Rather, the main counterpart, interlocutor, and employer for artists and intellectuals was henceforth understood to be the fascist state (Salvagnini 2000, 13-14). The way was open for a radical rethinking of the place of the artist in society, and the totalitarian state would now play the decisive role.

The second key development in 1930 was that Mussolini, reversing his earlier insistence that fascism was "not an article for export", declared that fascism was "universal", offering solutions to the political, economic, and spiritual crisis of the West (Scholz 2001). Among the ideological innovations that Italian fascism was most proud of, and which was already attracting most attention abroad, was corporatism (Pasetti 2016). There was every reason to hope that an information campaign about fascism's application of corporatism to the world of the arts might meet with similar international interest.

Finally, a third set of developments gave Ojetti an ideal location from which to launch such a campaign: the nationalization and internationalization of the Venice Biennale. Founded in 1895 as a locally run art fair, the Biennale had been brought under the ever-closer control of the fascist regime since about 1930. The 1932 edition of the Biennale would be its first in its new legal form as an 'autonomous [state] agency' (*ente autonomo*) with national rather than local funding (and control). In the meantime, the exhibition's nationalization had been marked by a simultaneous internationalization. The Biennale had of course attracted artists, buyers, and *beau monde* tourists from across Europe already before World War I. The fascist restructuring of the exhibition rendered this quality explicit: in conjunction with the corporatist organisation of artists unions, the Biennale was assigned the role as Italy's premiere international exhibition, in contrast to the newly created Quadriennale of National Art in Rome (Stone 1998, 32-43; May 2009). In 1931, Mussolini ordered the exhibition's lead organiser, the sculptor Antonio Maraini, to support fascism's increasingly aggressive campaign of international self-promotion by further strengthening and highlighting the Biennale's international quality (De Sabbata 2006, 19). Ojetti was well connected

with the Biennale's leadership. Maraini had been a protégé of Ojetti, who had supported the younger sculptor's elevation to the leadership of the exhibition. All these developments offered Ojetti an opportunity to build on his ideas on art and society, in Italy and abroad, and he was quick to seize it.

As the First International Congress of Contemporary Art opened in Venice on 1 May 1932, Ojetti made his core claims directly in his opening speech.⁸ Here, addressing guests from Denmark to Hungary, he sought to explain how a conference focused on matters of economics, law, and social policy could be relevant to the aesthetic and philosophical concerns facing artists in interwar Europe. He did this, ironically, by insisting that the core of the problem facing the arts in Europe was *not* primarily that many artists struggled economically. The deeper issue had to do with the relationship between the modern artist and the public. "The truth is", he declared, "that the public has never been as separated from art as it is today" (Ojetti 1932).⁹ The reason for this, Ojetti claimed, could be identified simply by looking at works of contemporary painting. While art from earlier periods could be appreciated simply by looking at it, the viewer of nineteenth and twentieth-century works had to fight his way through thicket of interpretation and opinions before he could really *see* the images. This problem, he averred, "is universal, in Italy as in Germany, in France as in England", but it was not simply a matter of stylistic choices. Rather, this separation reflected the deeper alienation of the artists from society. Fascist corporatism offered a solution to this problem: Italy's proposals for reordering the economics of the arts could bridge the gap between artists and the public by re-rooting the artist in his (or, occasionally, her) community.

Against this backdrop, the conference took on weighty, European significance: it would be "a practical Congress, on present and urgent issues and problems, in the hope of arriving at an agreement, if not to resolve them, then to formulate them with courage, in these years that seem to be of exhaustion but that, for us, are only [years] of hard work to prepare a future of resurrection and greatness for all of European civilization" (Ojetti 1932).¹⁰ Italy's cultural corporatism offered the keys to nothing less than a pan-European artistic revival. In his effort to rally foreigners around this vision, Ojetti enjoyed the support of powerful officials, whose presence in Venice

⁸ Ojetti, Ugo (1932). "Il discorso di Ugo Ojetti". *Gazzetta di Venezia*, 1 May.

⁹ "La verità è che il pubblico non è mai stato quanto oggi separato dall'arte".

¹⁰ "Un Congresso pratico, su fatti e problemi presenti ed urgenti, con la speranza di arrivare d'accordo, se non a risolverli, a formularli con coraggio, in anni che sembrano di stanchezza ma, secondo noi, sono soltanto di sorda fatica per preparare un avvenire di resurrezione e di grandezza [di] tutta la civiltà europea".

underlined the official nature of the event. Emilio Bodrero, President of the National Confederation of Professions and Arts (Confederazione Nazionale delle Professioni e delle Arti), sat on the conference's committee of honour. Presiding over the Congress was Minister of Justice Alfredo Rocco. Roberto Forges Davanzati, the powerful fascist journalist and president of Italy's Authors' Rights Society (Società italiana degli autori ed editori, or SIAE), opened the conference's first working session.

Turning from Ojetti's broad claims to practical matters, Forges Davanzati held a presentation on the subject of copyright (*diritti d'autore*) and the work of art. This apparently dry subject was a considered choice. Copyright law was an area in which Mussolini's Italy played a leading role in Europe. The regime had nationalised SIAE, founded as a private authors' rights society in 1882, and in 1925 passed a groundbreaking copyright law that protected the author's moral rights (*droit moral*), an issue that was widely discussed among European artists and composers. These reforms were seen as ideologically related to fascist corporatism, but they did not remain on the domestic level. At an international conference in Rome in 1928, Italian jurists had succeeded in making their 1925 copyright law the basis for a major reform of the Berne Convention (Baldwin 2014, 165–8). Forges Davanzati could thus discuss Italy's achievements and future visions in this field with confidence. He did so in some detail, addressing issues like the extension of moral rights after the artist's death, how copyright law must respond to the new technologies of mechanical reproduction, the determination of a work's nationality, and the matter of *droit de suite*, by which an artist (or his heirs) are entitled to share in the proceeds of the resale of a work.¹¹

Over the following days, the grand meetings rooms of the Palazzo Ducale hosted further speeches by Italians highlighting the achievements of fascism in organising the arts according to corporatist principles. On Sunday afternoon, 1 May, Antonio Maraini outlined "The Organization of the Biennale". Maraini, a sculptor and keen fascist, was a leading figure in the organisation of the Biennale and, from 1932, *commissario* of the Sindacato nazionale degli artisti. He was thus well placed to explain the special role of the Biennale at the top of the highly structured pyramid of local, regional, national, and international art exhibitions over which the syndicate presided. That same day, futurist leader F.T. Marinetti declaimed on "The rights of the artistic avant-gardes". The following morning the painter Felice Casorati explained the reform of Italy's fine arts academies. Others explicitly outlined models of future international cooperation in the

¹¹ "Il primo Congresso internazionale d'arte contemporanea inaugurato da S.E. Rocco alla presenza di S.A.R. il Duca di Genova" (*Gazzetta di Venezia*, Sunday, 1 May 1932).

new spirit. The futurist painter Enrico Prampolini, taking a break from organising the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution in Rome, appeared in Venice to give a speech outlining the “[n]eed for an international agency for exchange and credit for the artists of today” (*Primo Congresso* 1932).¹²

The foreign guests, invited to share and compare how the arts were organised in their countries, largely echoed the concerns laid out by their Italian hosts. The Danish painter Erich Struckmann explained how artists’ associations worked in Denmark; the painter Béla de Déry described the artists’ unions in Hungary; the prestigious British painter Charles Holmes laid out how art was taught in England; and a whole panel, on Monday afternoon, discussed “The state and art” (“Lo stato e l’arte”), comparing policies in Austria, France, Denmark, and Poland. Several of the guests followed their hosts’ lead in focusing on copyright issues. Oswald Grill, the prominent Austrian landscape painter and president of Vienna’s Künstlerhaus, Austria’s national artists’ association, spoke on “The new tasks of copyright legislation”. The Russian watercolourist Pierre Besrodny spoke on “the international protection of artists’ copyright”.¹³ As a Russian who had lived and worked in Constantinople, Paris, Algiers, and, since 1924, Venice, he knew something about the complexities of copyright issues for the internationally active artist. Ojetti had sought to attract a prominent, pan-European group of painters and officials to an international discussion based on his original idea – that the future of the arts lay in the corporatist organisation of the artistic field – and he was evidently successful.

4 Italy’s International Cultural Outreach: Strategies and Themes

Ojetti’s effort in Venice to promote Italian cultural leadership to an international audience was not the only one of its kind. Indeed, on the very day that Ojetti, Minister Rocco, and the Duke of Genova greeted their foreign guests in Venice, Italy’s King Victor Emanuel III presided over the inauguration of the International Book Fair (*Fiera internazionale del libro*) in Florence. Several fascist officials joined the 1 May 1932 ceremony that opened the event, which featured pavilions representing England, France, Germany, Hungary, Switzerland, Belgium, Romania, Russia, Brazil, Siam, and the Vatican. In Rome on the same day, Mussolini himself welcomed the Ambassadors of France

¹² “[n]ecessità d’un ente internazionale di scambi e di credito per gli artisti d’oggi”.

¹³ Grill, “I nuovi compiti della legislazione sui diritti d’autore”; Besrodny, “Protezione internazionale dei diritti d’autore”.

and England and government representatives from Hungary, Mexico, and Greece to the Mostra garibaldina, a special exhibition celebrating the life of Italian *Risorgimento* hero Giuseppe Garibaldi.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Italy's Royal Academy was preparing to host leading intellectuals from across the continent for a major international conference on the theme of Europe, in November 1932 (Accademia d'Italia 1933). In these events, and others like them, one can identify a broad project of Italian international outreach in the early thirties that pursued three goals: to promote fascist ideology, to mobilise the "soft power" of Italian culture, and to lay claim to a central role for Italy in Europe's expanding networks of cultural exchange (Martin 2016, 17).

By focusing on corporatism applied to the arts, Ojetti's event in Venice linked fascism's ideological innovations in the realm of social-economic policy to the other two themes of fascist Italy's tripartite self-presentation. The congress focused on Italy's traditional strengths in the visual arts, and it built on the status the Biennale already had as an international meeting point for the art world. Ojetti's use of the Biennale as a stage on which to present cultural corporatism to foreigners dovetailed with Maraini's eagerness to make the exhibition into an even more powerful tool for Italian self-affirmation in Europe and the world. Finally, mobilising the Biennale in this way allowed Italians to furthermore mobilise the beauty, history, and attractive powers of Venice itself. Welcoming the foreign guests to the Art Conference in 1932, the city's mayor, Mario Alverà, explicitly linked these themes. Venice was the "natural seat of art". Rome, since Mussolini's seizure of power in 1922, had been a "lighthouse of vivid light and creative will, creating new orders, new social disciplines". It was then only natural that the International Congress on Contemporary Art, bringing together innovative social policy with Italy's claim to primacy in visual aesthetics, should take place "on Italian soil".¹⁵ The fact that the organisers succeeded in attracting a broad, international participation to this event suggested that Italy's bid for leadership in this field was going well.

Quite apart from Italians' rhetoric, or the attractions that a trip to Venice always offers, it seems clear that Ojetti's 1932 conference was able to attract international interest because fascism's model of cultural corporatism spoke to concerns that were widely shared beyond Italy's borders. Fascist proposals for the state-led organisation of artists intervened simultaneously into two of the great debates of the age in which cultural and social issues merged: the issue of the

¹⁴ "Il Re inaugura a Firenze la Fiera internazionale del libro". *Gazzetta di Venezia*, 1 May 1932; "Il Duce visita la Mostra garibaldina". *Gazzetta di Venezia*, 1 May 1932.

¹⁵ "Il primo Congresso internazionale d'arte contemporanea inaugurato da S.E. Rocco alla presenza di S.A.R. il Duca di Genova". *Gazzetta di Venezia*, Sunday, 1 May 1932: "sede naturale dell'arte"; "faro di vivida luce e di volontà creatrice di nuovi ordinamenti, di nuove discipline sociali".

role and status of “intellectual labour” and the issue of the changing status of art and artists in modern mass society.

“The division between mental and manual labor”, the historian Michael Denning writes, “is one of the founding oppositions of all socialist thought, and it lurks behind many of the classic ‘problems’ of socialist theory and politics” (Denning 1996, 96). Indeed, many of the classic interwar works of leftist cultural and social theory, by figures like Antonio Gramsci or Walter Benjamin, deal with questions raised by the changing status of ‘mental’ or ‘intellectual’ work in the capitalist economy. How should one understand the new prominence of ‘white collar’ wage workers or the apparent proletarianization of writers, journalists, musicians, and artists, buffeted by technological and social changes that undermined their traditional ways of making a living? But, in the early twentieth century, it was not only leftists who grappled with these questions. Across the ideological spectrum, debates raged over how best to classify, and to organise, artists, intellectuals, and certain professional groups in the sphere of labour relations. Nationalists, including Italian fascists, had another problem: how could these important social groups – whose elevated social status often relied on their knowledge of and contact with foreign cultural trends – be more firmly tied to the nation?

Recasting artists and intellectuals as mental or ‘intellectual workers’ offered a way forward on both fronts, but only if this new group could be organised effectively. Efforts to promote what one historian calls “intellectual trade unionism” had begun already in the late nineteenth century (Verbruggen 2010). By 1922, Albert Thomas, the head of the newly founded International Labor Organization (ILO), claimed that the “movement towards the organization of intellectuals” was “certainly one of the social phenomena most characteristic of our time” (quoted in Laqua 2011, 242). The League of Nations’ International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation published an *Enquiry into the Conditions of Intellectual Work* in 1923, the same year that French campaigners created the *Confédération Internationale de Travailleurs Intellectuels* (CITI) in Paris (Laqua 2011, 243). As the internationalist twenties gave way to the nationalist thirties, finding ways to bridge the divide between manual and mental labour drove the ideological projects of not a few thinkers who transitioned away from socialism toward various types of fascism. Hendrik De Man, for example, the Belgian socialist who became a keen supporter of Nazism, hoped to mobilise intellectuals as the vanguard of a new ‘ethical’, rather than materialist, socialism. During the German occupation of Belgium, De Man would lead the creation of an integrated manual and intellectual workers’ union that sought to make this vision reality (Verbruggen 2010, 83-4). Long before that, however, it was Mussolini’s Italy that seemed to be making strides in resolving these issues through corporatism – and in a manner that nationalists could embrace.

Within the broader debate over the future of 'intellectual labour', the issue of *artists'* professional status (and eventual organisation or unionisation) had particular resonance. This was because it touched on the hotly contested matter of the role of the artist in modern, mass society. Was the artist a free-floating creative individual, to be protected from political pressures, or a representative – or indeed, servant – of his (or her) class, or nation, or race? Should artists embrace their role as producers for a market, or should state power be used to liberate artists from market forces? The thirties saw a bitter ideological conflict on these questions. Liberals defended the autonomy of the artist and writer, linking this to the spirit of interwar cosmopolitan internationalism. The PEN Club, for example, brought together writers from across the world, irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, or religion, on the basis of a commitment to the creative freedom of the individual writer from state censorship or persecution (Wilford 1979). This spirit was maintained through the thirties by appeals like the writer Franz Werfel's 1937 call for the foundation of a "World Academy of Poets and Thinkers" (*Weltakademie der Dichter und Denker*). This should be composed of somewhere between 24 and 40 writers from around the world, nominated not by states but on the basis of literary achievement alone, free from politics, with the task to "confront the politicization and barbarization of the world" (quoted in Kundera 1984). In the Soviet Union, in the meantime, Stalin's art apparatus demanded in the early thirties that artists serve the revolution. On 23 April 1932, just days before Italians' International Congress of Contemporary Art was to begin in Venice, Stalin's Politburo released the infamous resolution creating a new, centralised, and state-run Union of Soviet Writers. This resolution promised also "to carry out an analogous change along this line in the other types of art" (Clark, Dobrenko 2007, 151-3). That same year the Soviet regime introduced the demand that all art follow the stylistic doctrine of 'socialist realism'.

In the context of these ideological struggles, Italian fascist cultural leaders believed themselves to be in a position to offer compelling solutions to both these sets of issues. As we have seen, Ojetti and other fascist intellectuals presented Italy's cultural corporatism as offering a 'third way' regarding the organisation of artists and intellectuals as 'class' *and* regarding the role of the artist in society. In Venice in 1932, Ojetti and colleagues presented this package of ideas in the most attractive way they could.

5 Venice 1934: Art and the State, Italy and the League

The powerful currency of these questions may account for the positive responses enjoyed by the 1932 art conference in Venice. The Italian hosts of this event, at any rate, seem to have considered it a great success. Indeed, when it came time to plan the Biennale of 1934, the organisers, led by Ojetti and Maraini, decided to convene another international conference on similar themes, but this time extended to all the arts, including literature, architecture, and music. Their work culminated in July 1934, when Venice hosted a four-day international conference devoted to the double theme “Art and Reality; Art and the State”. A much higher-profile event than its predecessor, this conference was coordinated in conjunction with the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation. This was the Paris-based executive wing of the Committee on International Intellectual Cooperation in Geneva, a body of the League of Nations (Renoliet 1999; Laqua 2011). Drawing on the networks, and prestige, of the League-sponsored intellectual cooperation, this conference assembled an extraordinary list of participants, including the German novelist Thomas Mann, the Belgian architect Henri van de Velde, the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, the French novelist Jules Romains, and the Swiss architect and theorist Le Corbusier (De Sabbata 2010; IICI 1935).¹⁶

Even more than at the 1932 event, Italians used the 1934 Venice conference to present to an elite international audience the mechanics, but also the deeper rationale, of fascist cultural corporatism. Biennale secretary Antonio Maraini, who welcomed the foreign guests, was an ideal bearer of this message. He had, since the last event, become the head (*Commissario straordinario*) of Italy's corporatist artists' union (*Sindacato fascista belle arti*), while retaining the leadership of the Biennale. Bringing these roles together, he used his opening address to introduce the foreigners to the structures of Italy's artists' union and tout its role in the Biennale. But the *Sindacato's* true goals, he continued, extended far beyond a means for selecting paintings for expositions. It sought, rather, to “accompany [artists] through their lives and, in a general sense, include them in national life”. There was, he acknowledged, a long tradition of celebrating a bohemian vision of the artist as somehow “a being outside of life, having neither the same obligations nor the same duties as other citizens”. But fascism rejected this view, and fascist corporatism acted against it: “The principle of the [artists'] union is precisely to tie the artist to the life of the nation, and, so to say, to awaken

¹⁶ See also “Il convegno internazionale d'arte di Venezia”. *Cooperazione intellettuale*, 1(1935), 194-200; and “Il convegno internazionale d'arte della Società delle Nazioni”. *Gazzetta di Venezia*, 25 July 1935.

in him the qualities of citizen and man". In this way, the union "will be able to have a practical result even in the creation of works [of art]" (IICI 1935, 239).

The Italian journalist and art critic Roberto Papini laid out similar ideas at greater length and with a more blunt political tone. Corporatism in the arts was based on what, he reminded the foreign guests, were the fundamental principles of the 1927 *Carta del lavoro*: "the necessary, progressive and inevitable inclusion, within the state, of all productive forces in accordance with the three terms which are at the basis of the origin of fascism: order, discipline, and hierarchy" (IICI 1935, 245). To apply these principles to the arts was not simply to take one ideological position against another. Corporatism in the arts would do nothing less than conclude one historical age and open another, bringing to an end a long-term historical development that had changed the place of art in society. Offering a broad historical overview, Papini argued that the emergence of the modern artist (that free creative individual, liberated from the constraints imposed by the Church and the state – more or less precisely the social figure that Pierre Bourdieu identifies in his famous *Rules of Art*, 1996) had in fact been a fall from grace. The current confusion in the arts, and what he called the social emptiness of modernism, could be traced to this social-historical transformation. One sign of art's decline had been the rise of the exhibition as the main vehicle for viewing art and as a central tool for the artist's livelihood: the exhibition was a "typical phenomenon of the nineteenth century, the only possible market for an art without use and without fatherland, which thought it had conquered its liberty at the moment when, on the contrary, it had lost he who commands [*celui qui commande*] and needed, anxiously and pathetically, to look for a buyer" (IICI 1935, 254). Art had gained its freedom, but at the cost of its link to the nation.

As outlined by Maraini and Papini, this vision of cultural corporatism went far beyond practical matters. It went beyond even Ojetti's (already ambitious) claims that a new form of organisation could improve the quality of painting. What the Italians presented at Venice in 1934 was a vision of a culture re-rooted in its society, a culture that, through the guiding hand of an authoritarian state (evoked in Papini's somewhat poetic reference to *celui qui commande*), could overcome the corrosive effects of a century of liberalism. In this sense, it posited a rival modernity: imagining a future of *Gemeinschaft* rather than *Gesellschaft*, of a culture guided by a *telos*, rather than the free-floating *anomie* of modernity. And Mussolini's Italy was the country that would lead Europe there.

These presentations seem to have had a powerful effect on their foreign audience. The conference president, the Belgian socialist, president of the International Museums Office and vice-president of the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation Jules Destrée,

was warmly enthusiastic: "What you are doing in Italy is a true example, and that is why we must talk more especially about your experiences which we are all following with great interest" (IICI 1935, 282). The French painter Waldemar George offered a passionate celebration of the successes of fascist art policy, which he had clearly studied long before coming to Venice; his remarks quoted speeches by Mussolini. He politicised his comments to a degree that even the Italian hosts had shied away from. Any "mechanical and abstract" (liberal) state, he argued, might protect the artist's "juridical and administrative character", but art would still remain "autonomous", and that, for him, was no victory. A true improvement in the life of the arts could come only on "the day that the totalitarian State saturates (*imprègne*) the nation with an ideology. Art then becomes a function of national life [...] Art ceases to be considered an entertainment or a luxury item". This great goal was being achieved in Italy, through fascism's broader aestheticization of national life: "I am thinking of the fascist rites, of the parades, of the corporate festivals, of the internal structure of the State, of its ethic, of its philosophy. I think that art reclaims the position it deserves in the social environment when all of life is orchestrated, set to a rhythm, and arranged like a beautiful work of art" (IICI 1935, 295). The French writer Jules Romains, a defender of artistic freedom (and future president of PEN International), used his time at the conference to praise Soviet theatre policy for bringing culture to the masses. But he too embraced the proposition that the state must guide resources to create a modern culture, in contact with the people.

Either way, the Italian organisers achieved another goal: simply by holding this event in Venice, in the context of the Biennale, Italians strengthened the Biennale's claim to be not only the premier place for viewing and purchasing contemporary art, but also the meeting point where the international and trans-ideological discussion of art's social and political future would take place. There is a kind of hegemony implicit in playing host in this way (Cox 1993), and the Italians seem to have known this.

There were strong similarities, then, between the 1932 International Conference of Contemporary Art and the 1934 meeting on Art and Reality and Art and the State. Corporatism was again presented as an Italian-born, but widely applicable solution to core problems of modern artistic life; Venice's Biennale provided the ideal backdrop for an Italian claim to hegemony in questions having to do with the visual arts; and fascist Italy managed to appear as both passionately nationalist and as a gracious host, open to the world. There were also important differences between the two events. For one thing, to achieve this successful performance for their foreign guests, the Italians needed to hide a good deal of internal conflict that had erupted in the meantime. Since mid-1932, the heady theoretical debate about fascist corporat-

ism within Italy had become highly controversial and politicised. At a major conference on corporatism in Ferrara, held in May 1932 shortly after the art conference in Venice, the more radical proposals touched off a political crisis that forced Giuseppe Bottai to resign as Minister of Corporations. Maraini, whose appointment as Commissar of the artists' syndicate coincided with this change, entered into a bitter public feud with Ojetti. In a series of articles in prominent journals in 1933, the art critic and his now very powerful former protégé argued over what kind of art should be shown at the Biennale and whether it was appropriate for Maraini to be both union boss and head of the Biennale – a discussion sharpened by Ojetti's anger that Maraini was trying to get art critics, like Ojetti himself, pushed off the Commissions of the 1934 Biennale (De Sabbata 2006, 56-64). On the international stage, however, Ojetti and Maraini cooperated smoothly and such conflicts were hidden to all but the most well-informed guests.

But the most crucial difference between the 1932 and 1934 conferences was that the second of these events was organised in conjunction with the League of Nations. Officially, the conference was in fact the Third International Conference of the International Committee of Arts and Letters of the League of Nations. Ojetti was again a leading organiser, but this time in his capacity as Italy's representative on the Comité permanent des lettres et des arts, a committee of the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (De Sabbata 2010, 58). Led by prominent French man of letters Paul Valéry and later by the Belgian art critic and socialist politician Jules Destrée, the International Committee of Arts and Letters organised two of the Institute's most famous and lasting achievements: the publication series *Correspondences* – which included the Freud-Einstein exchange *Why War?* – and a cycle of conferences called *Entretiens* (Conversations). The papers presented at the 1934 Venice conference were published in this series, in French.

The close cooperation of a ultranationalist, fascist dictatorship with the internationalist bodies of the League of Nations was rather ironic. In 1932, the semi-official *Enciclopedia italiana* had claimed that the League was an institution “which the European powers, and especially France, sought to make into an instrument of hegemony, under the cover of ideals and according to old recipes” (Sestan 1932, 644). But working with League institutions was, in fact, a broader strategy of fascist Italy in the first half of the thirties, when various branches of the Italian state made use of the League's international networks to promote fascist ideology. Italians mobilised Geneva's internationalist infrastructure to spread positive impression of various fascist reforms, in particular corporatism, fascism's distinctive ‘after-work’ leisure programmes for workers, the regime's state-run educational cinema, and Italy's innovations in copyright reform (in music even more so than in the visual arts) (Taillibert 1999, 2003;

Liebscher 2009, Fleischer 2015, Herren 2017; Tollardo 2016). This effort was very much underway at Venice in 1934, where the fascist ideological content was the same, if not indeed more explicit, than it had been at the 1932 event, which had been organised without the League. This phenomenon reached the point where the anti-fascist activist Silvio Trentin, in exile in Paris, felt the need to sound the alarm, warning of the insidious workings of *Le fascisme à Genève* (Trentin 1932). What fascists realised, perhaps, was that internationalism was not so much a package of values as it was a vector, a medium, which could, in fact, be mobilised on behalf of very different ideological and even ethical content. International meetings were perfectly good places to present fascist corporatism, and to outline – through the apparently non-political matter of the arts – a broader fascist vision of modernity. The role of League institutions guaranteed the meeting's international credentials, but could not guarantee that its content would be supportive of liberal values. In other words, Trentin was right to be worried.

6 Conclusion

A final important difference between the events in 1932 and 1934 was, of course, that the international situation had changed: in 1933 Hitler had come to power in Germany. Mussolini had met with Hitler for the first time in June 1934, at the Villa Pisani in Stra, not far from Venice. Both men had then (separately) visited the Biennale (De Sabbata 2006, 20). But there was no sense in July 1934, as conference participants met to discuss the arts, that the two dictators were destined to be allies. Italian fascism's cultural-political leadership had already responded to the Nazi seizure of power by rethinking and intensifying Italy's international cultural outreach. In 1933, Bottai used his journal *Critica fascista* to call for Italian intellectuals to develop a distinctive fascist vision of cultural modernity, one based on the fusion of Italy's cultural legacy with novel elements of fascist political and social ideology – precisely so as to stake Italy's claim to leadership against Germany's Nazis (Petracchi 1995, 385). Indeed, German-Italian relations reached a new low point during the 1934 conference. Austrian Nazis assassinated Austrian Prime Minister Engelbrech Dollfuss on 25 July 1934 and the murder dominated the headlines of every newspaper when the guests met for breakfast on the conference's second day. On Friday, July 27, Venice's *La Gazzetta* reported Mussolini's decision to move troops to the Brenner pass in order to underline Italy's commitment to defending an independent Austria against Hitler's Germany.

Ultimately, of course, Mussolini gave up Austria and allied with Hitler. Likewise, Italy's efforts to claim a leading place in internation-

al cultural questions were overridden by the Nazis' own, more powerful initiatives. As Mussolini bound Italy's future to Nazi Germany beginning in 1936, Italian cultural organisers were forced to abandon much of their careful work, especially everything they had done through the League of Nations, from which Italy withdrew at the end of 1937. Italian cultural leaders, including Maraini and Bottai, angled instead for a position of power for Italy within the new pan-European cultural networks created by Nazi Germany (Martin 2016).

Italy's international promotion of cultural corporatism was, then, ultimately a failure. But its strategies and its short-lived successes are interesting and important for a richer understanding of the vagaries of corporatism, and of internationalism itself, in the interwar period. Above all, the degree of international interest aroused by Italy's model of social organisation of the arts underlined the intellectual and political power inherent in interwar longings for culture to offer meaning, community, and *telos* to national communities. It highlighted, too, the wide range of artists and political actors who were prepared to accept a mighty, even coercive, new role for the state in order to achieve that outcome. Appealing to these ideas, fascism's cultural corporatism was an important part of the way Mussolini's Italy, for a short time, successfully created international networks based on illiberal visions of the relationship between culture, community, and state – visions that may be worthwhile to understand today.

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