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Rethinking *Campanilismo*: Community and Conflict in Fascist Arezzo, 1922–1928

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This article looks at the everyday experiences of rural communities in the province of Arezzo, Tuscany, during the first years of Italian fascism. Following an approach that borrows from *Alltagsgeschichte* and *microstoria*, the article uses diaries, memoirs, local newspapers, and fascist reports to analyse the phenomenon of village parochialism, or *campanilismo*, in the context of fascist paramilitary violence. Firstly, it reassesses the role of *campanilismo* in provincial society, showing that parochialism was a function of community expression that contributed to the making of webs of ‘thin trust’ across rural communities. Secondly, the paper distinguishes the types of parochial conflict inherent to *campanilismo* from the violent conflicts generated by the fascist movement. Ultimately, the paper claims that fascist violence destroyed the functional mechanisms of *campanilismo*, replacing these with dysfunctional and terroristic violence that made the successful implementation of the fascist programme impossible in the provincial space.

In the summer of 1926, rising tension in the locality of Cavriglia, Tuscany, finally exploded with a very public brawl between musicians of the town’s fascist band. The fight was so bad that the fascist authorities called for an external disciplinary hearing. Investigators found three main causes for the altercation: ‘selfish personal interest, ambition, and jealousy over women’.¹ The disciplinary report was damning for Cavriglia’s fascist organisation, which was dissolved soon after. It stated that the men of Cavriglia had little grasp of what being fascist involved. What is more, the report claimed that the fight was a symptom of a more deep-rooted issue: ‘In Cavriglia *la lotta di campanile* (parochial fighting), still reigns ... and has painful repercussions for the municipality’.² The report thus emphasised local character and the phenomenon of rural parochialism, known in Central Italy as *campanilismo*. For the regime, *campanilismo* was an unwanted hangover from a corrupt liberal past. It was alien to fascist nationalist values and it evidenced the stunted character of provincial Italians.

Cavriglia was not an isolated case. It was representative of the challenges that the provincial fascist movement faced and how the fascist hierarchy characterised these challenges. From the outset of the fascist takeover, provincial fascist leaders used local newspapers to vent their frustrations with the slow, parochial nature of municipal councils now under fascist control. One article from 1923 in *Giovinezza*, a Tuscan fascist newspaper, criticised widespread in-fighting in the region’s local administrations: ‘Too much of the liberal and democratic mentality is still in us...’.³ The revolution would never be complete, the writer complained, if provincial fascists were unable to work towards a common, national fascist future.

But *campanilismo* was not specific to the fascist era. It was rooted in a rural culture that went back centuries. *Campanilismo* was a complex phenomenon that guided rural communities, drawing them

¹ Archivio di Stato di Arezzo (ASA), Carteggio Casa Fasci (CCF), 3, Fascio di Cavriglia e Castelluccio, official report on Fascio of Cavriglia, 4 Aug. 1926.

² ASA, CCF, 3, official report on Fascio of Cavriglia.

³ *Giovinezza*, 28 Jan. 1923, no. 61.

together in an elaborate patchwork of kinship, rivalry and alliance. It was a framework for rural life – at once an expression of local pride and the groundings on which conflict would occur and tension be released. It is precisely here, in its complex local functions, that *campanilismo* differed from other forms of provincial culture. Historians have demonstrated how distinctive European localisms tied the local to the nation. In Germany, the idea of *Heimat* framed small towns and provincial territories as the physical and symbolic landscapes – the common denominator – of abstract national identity.⁴ In Spain, *el terruño* or *la patria chica* denoted what Helen Graham has usefully described as ‘the lived unit of existence’.⁵ These terms, nonetheless, fed into an ideal of Spanish national consciousness.⁶ With its nostalgic exaltation of folklore and rural traditions, the Italian idea of *piccola patria* was more akin to these forms of localism; through it the fascist movement aimed to de-politicise local culture and elevate it to national importance, and in doing so establish a common national sentiment that stemmed from provincial life.⁷

Campanilismo, too, was a marker of identity. But beyond this it was practical and political, having evolved with the tradition on the Italian peninsula of highly independent municipalities. In contrast to *Heimat* or Spanish regionalism, *campanilismo* was not related to ideas of national identity; rather, it was a longstanding framework for rural life that encompassed the web of interpersonal relationships, power dynamics and identities that were specific to each rural community. At its heart was a sense of rivalry that pitted villages against one another, and that served as a defence mechanism for them to maintain their own specific territorial and cultural integrity. Owing to its individualistic and defensive features, *campanilismo* was not conducive to centralised nation-building processes. Studying how the fascist movement defined and related to *campanilismo* is, therefore, crucial to our understanding of how fascism evolved in highly rural spaces and communities, and how these communities responded to fascist rule.

The worlds of interpersonal relationships that existed in local communities made up the foundations of provincial life; it was into these worlds that extreme events, such as the rise of fascism, erupted.⁸ These local situations do not necessarily reflect the macro experience of fascism but rather show us unique instances of how and where fascism manifested in specific communities. With *campanilismo* as a focal point, we can trace how fascist practices impacted traditional community structures and, in turn, how these structures twisted fascist strategies of conquest. To do this, I use *campanilismo* in two ways: as a lens to examine the dynamics of ordinary provincial life at a micro-level, and as an analytical category to tease apart the tensions that existed between fascism and local systems of life. Central to this analysis are the inhabitants of the rural communities I study, who one way or another engaged with fascism, whose relationship with the movement may have been complex, and who the fascist movement readily disregarded as provincial and backwards. I use the term ‘ordinary citizens’ to describe these individuals collectively, although they shaped their lives in an extraordinary social and political context marked by fascist violence. Where possible, I refer to individuals according to their village provenance to reveal their shared parochial identity.⁹

⁴ For the case of Germany, see: Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871–1918* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁵ Helen Graham, ‘Spain 1936: Resistance and Revolution: The Flaws in the Front’, in Tim Kirk and Anthony McElligott, eds., *Opposing Fascism: Community, Authority, and Resistance in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 66.

⁶ Xosé-Manoel Núñez and Maiken Umbach, ‘Hijacked Heimats: National Appropriations of Local and Regional Identities in Germany and Spain, 1930–1945’, *European Review of History* 15, no. 3 (2008): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507480802082615>.

⁷ Stefano Cavazza, *Piccole patrie: Feste popolari tra regione e nazione durante il fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997), 29.

⁸ Giovanni Levi, ‘Un problema di scala’, in Sergio Bologna et al., eds., *Dieci interventi sulla storia sociale* (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1981), 76.

⁹ Claire Langhamer’s article has been instructive on the need for ‘definitional precision’ with the term ‘ordinary people’. See: “‘Who the Hell Are Ordinary People?’: Ordinarity as a Category of Historical Analysis”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 28 (2018): 195, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440118000099>.

In line with the strength of local particularity across Italy, provincial fascist movements in the early 1920s developed according to local contexts and did not adhere to one monolithic fascist structure.¹⁰ In the province of Arezzo, and across much of Tuscany, agrarian fascism was markedly reactionary and violent, as it took on a well organised and entrenched socialist peasant movement.¹¹ If Mussolini's dictatorship began in 1924, the conditions for its control were founded in the terror of fascist violence of the immediate postwar. To analyse how the distinctive strand of agrarian fascism of Arezzo entered the constellation of villages and towns that made up the rural province, I draw from *Alltagsgeschichte* and *microstoria*. By focusing on 'highly concrete micro-historical settings', not only do we reveal overlooked peculiarities of local life but, crucially, we gain perspective on processes of social change.¹² In this case, examining the impact of fascist violence on *campanilismo* and vice-versa illustrates the disintegration of established community structures. Ground level examples from the area show the challenges that the regime faced in its attempts to rule over citizens whose identities were immeasurably attached to the local space, its cultures and traditions. Moreover, these examples demonstrate the tendency of the fascist movement to use *campanilismo* either as a motive for its failings or as a rhetorical strategy to impose a centralised ideal of fascism over the varied provincial versions.

Historians of fascist Italy, too, have cited *campanilismo* to explain the failures of the regime in the provinces, citing the 'closed off universes' of rural territories, their isolating topographic features, familial ties and the abundance of personal disputes.¹³ Paul Corner and Valeria Galimi have argued that resorting to *campanilismo* to explain the disjointed fascist programme in the provinces blinds us to other factors, such as the relationship between local elites and the centre.¹⁴ In studying the interaction between fascism and *campanilismo*, I aim to turn this discussion on its head. I argue that fascist violence wore down the positive structures of parochial trust in provincial society, which for centuries had helped rural communities negotiate their co-existence. Breaking down these structures – notably with violence – caused local networks of trust to collapse. The functional mechanisms of *campanilismo* were replaced by dysfunctional and violent practices that suppressed communal life. Forms of village cohesion did survive, exemplified best by small acts of resistance, but the blunt force of fascism was transformative for rural society.

To address the complex interplay between fascism and systems of rural life, this article covers three main areas. First, it discusses the phenomenon of *campanilismo* in more depth, placing it in the context of the province of Arezzo. Second, it looks at the fascist strategy to conquer the provincial space. Finally, it demonstrates how *campanilismo* worked within and against the fascist movement. Extracts from diaries, memoirs, fascist correspondence and local newspapers illustrate how the citizens of rural Arezzo adapted to this violent process.

Campanilismo and Community

As a political and social entity, the *comune* (municipality) has a long history on the Italian peninsula. In his work on Renaissance Italy, Edward Muir conceptualised the idea of the *comune* as a physical space, as social interaction and as a process of exclusion.¹⁵ Central to Muir's depiction of community life in the *comune* is the notion of 'thin trust', the trust that existed between complete strangers or mere acquaintances based on their shared provenance. The physical spaces of the *comune*, its *piazze* and churches, narrow closes and taverns, its winding rivers, forests and fields offered venues for frequent

¹⁰ Paul Corner, *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini's Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 25, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198730699.001.0001>.

¹¹ Giovanni Galli, *Arezzo e la sua provincia nel regime fascista 1926–1943* (Firenze: Centro Editoriale Toscano, 1992), 52.

¹² Geoff Eley, 'Foreword', in Alf Lüdtke, ed., *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), ix, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400821648>.

¹³ See, for example, Paolo Giovannini, 'Comunità rurali e fascismo. Le prime amministrazioni comunali nell'entroterra marchigiano (1922–1926)', *Storia e problemi contemporanei. Sulle Marche* 37 (Bologna: Clueb, 2004): 48.

¹⁴ Paul Corner and Valeria Galimi, eds., *Il fascismo in provincia: Articolazioni e gestione del potere tra centro e periferia* (Firenze: Viella, 2014), 10–11.

¹⁵ Edward Muir, 'The Idea of Community in Renaissance Italy', *Renaissance Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2002): 3.

and repeated social exchange, which ‘thickened’ the ‘thin trust’ that existed across the community.¹⁶ It was in these spaces that ordinary citizens experienced the ebbs and flows of the everyday, where information was gathered and dispersed, tensions reckoned with, social bonds formed and the mundanities of local life played out. This thin trust was intimately woven into the unique physical and material manifestations of the community. Of course, twentieth-century provincial Italy was not Muir’s Renaissance society. Nonetheless, physical space and thin trust retained their centrality to life in rural communities over the centuries. Connecting the physical spaces of the village, town or territory to the social structures of these communities leads us to ask how individuals encountered that space, determined its quality and developed their own relationship to it.¹⁷

Diary extracts and memoirs of individuals from these small communities convey the significance of space in the rural setting. When writing her memoirs of growing up in rural Tuscany in the 1930s, Dina Brogi recalled that as a child she could feel the atmosphere of her community change at night as locals from all around congregated at the communal water fountain.

When evening fell, especially in summer, this space would fill up with people with all kinds of receptacles. Numerous peasant women would arrive, jugs tucked under their arms, with coarse, dark aprons held up by a clip, and with a handkerchief in their hair, tied behind their neck. They looked like Russian matryoshka.¹⁸

Brogi’s account may well be tinged with nostalgia for a past childhood. Nevertheless, spaces such as the communal water fountain were essential to communities for the ordinary yet critical functions they provided. The water fountain was a central point for the entire village, not just one segment of it, and was exactly the kind of space where thin trust would be thickened, as neighbours interacted with each other and spread local news.

Other descriptions of towns and villages in the area paint familiar pictures of rural life. One memoir described Badia al Pino as a group of buildings perched on a small hill dominated by the parish church. The town’s youths would congregate at the central *piazza* when not working in the fields, while younger boys would kick a football (the prized possession of the vet’s son) against the wall of the council watchman’s hut; most wore wooden clogs, but a lucky few enjoyed leather soles on their feet.¹⁹ During the chestnut harvest children were taken out of school to spend their days working in the forests. In the mid-1930s, one primary school teacher from Caprese Michelangelo, an Apennine town in the northeast of Arezzo, wrote of her desperation at harvest time: ‘How much better off they are here, writing, instead of out there in the bush, under the slow rain, harvesting chestnuts ... with the help of God I hope they will become good, strong and brave, just as our *Duce* wants them.’²⁰

Villages were intimate places broken by distances of rugged mountainous terrain and harsh weather conditions. Life in these areas was tough, and hardy people were forged out of this deep connection with and dependence on the land: people whose knowledge of that land was matched, perhaps only by their knowledge of their local village. It was in the intimate spaces of the *comune*, amid the unforgiving landscape outside it, that ordinary citizens came to witness and experience for themselves the turbulence of fascism.²¹ And it was in these spaces that fissures developed between community members, and where fascism became most evident.

Recalling life as a child in the village of Bucine, Guglielmo Francini described how social class was a marker of fascism. He remembered a group of boys (‘daddy’s boys’)²² who would spread malicious

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷ Alf Lüdtke, ed., *Everyday Life in Mass Dictatorship: Collusion and Evasion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4, <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/9781137442772>.

¹⁸ Archivio Nazionale Diaristico (ADN), MP/91, Dina Brogi, ‘L’infanzia nella società contadina degli anni Trenta’, 1978, 5.

¹⁹ ADN, MP/Adn2, Ferdinando Turchetti, ‘Civitella della Chiana’, 1943–95, 2.

²⁰ ADN, A/Adn, Autori vari, ‘Il diario scolastico di una maestra’, 1934–35.

²¹ Kirk and McElligott, eds., *Opposing Fascism*, 4.

²² ‘...figli di papa tutti’.

rumours about suspected local communists. Francini writes that, unlike him, they were not the sons of peasant farmers but were privileged and included the sons of a shopkeeper, a fascist leader and a landowner. When they tried to persuade Francini to join the fascist youth organisation, he said he would but that he did not have the eight lire registration fee. Besides, he claimed that peasant boys were never allowed on fascist marches because they were deemed too scruffy.²³ On another occasion, not being able to pay the registration fee landed the young Francini in trouble with the local fascists, who branded him an ‘antifascist traitor of the fatherland’.²⁴

The reliability of diaries and memoirs, such as Francini’s (written in 1960), poses an issue for historians. The ‘fog of emotion and uncertainty that clouds the normal passage of time’, alongside authorial memory, hindsight and a more comprehensive understanding of the fascist regime surely influenced these memoirs.²⁵ Moreover, there are questions of self-representation in the context of a repressive regime or, indeed, in the highly contentious memory politics that came after. Many memoirs clearly distance the author from the fascist movement or convey general indifference to it. While in any given case this may well be true, the subjectivity of such accounts raises questions about how far we can take these sources at face value. Recognising their subjectivity, however, does not diminish their historical value. Rather, it encourages us to rethink how we look at them, asking ‘not just what an autobiography says, but *why* and *how*...’.²⁶ Conveyed implicitly and explicitly throughout Francini’s and other accounts is the importance of communal space and a clear sense of power dynamics in that space, often marked by class and transmitted across generations. This information helps us to reconstruct a sense of how individuals perceived and interacted with their communities.

It was in these village spaces and social relationships that we find *campanilismo*. Rudolph Bell ties *campanilismo* to a traditional way of life that rooted rural Italian peasants to their place of birth and its immediate surroundings.²⁷ More than a simple form of parochial patriotism, *campanilismo* (literally translated as one’s attachment to the village belfry, or *campanile*) governed practical dimensions of local life, and was expressed in knowledge passed down over generations that planted the village firmly in space and time. It could be related to very real and significant rights one might enjoy as a member of a particular community, for example the right to hunt, to forage for fungi, chestnuts or berries, or to collect firewood from a designated forest. It could even determine an individual’s access to parcels of land for cultivation.²⁸ Following this unwritten code meant sharing resources with one’s neighbours, and the entire system relied on a base level of mutual trust and social recognition. This extended to the economic organisation of these communities. Various accounts tell us that peasant farmers would rarely see money and instead paid for services, such as shoe repair by the cobbler, with olive oil or other produce. In one town, the local blacksmith stood out as one of the few to receive money for his work.²⁹ Unique village practices also stretched to food production, which was often a community experience, like the annual pig slaughter where labour and resulting produce were equally shared.³⁰

Some communal practices of village life remained largely stable over centuries. This is not, however, to paint a picture of a *longue durée* of a rural Tuscan society untouched by modernity. Industrialisation had swept across the region, while the consequences of the First World War brought irreversible transformation and tension to Italian society that could not be managed by the mechanisms of old liberal politics.³¹ But this was not a cut and dried shift, and often the old combined with

²³ ADN, MP/90, Guglielmo Francini, ‘I ricordi di un contadino’, 1960, 93.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁵ Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini’s Italy* (London: Vintage, 2013), xiii.

²⁶ David Carlson, ‘Autobiography’, in Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann, eds., *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth and Twentieth Century History*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2020), 214.

²⁷ Rudolph M. Bell, *Fate and Honor, Family and Village: Demographic and Cultural Change in Rural Italy since 1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁹ ADN, MP/Adn2, Ferdinando Turchetti, ‘Civitella della Chiana’, 1943–95, 3.

³⁰ ADN, MP/Adn2. Bruno Gnerucci, ‘Stagione toscane’, 2002, 12–13.

³¹ Roberto Bianchi, *Pace, pane, terra: il 1919 in Italia* (Roma: Odradek, 2006), 7.

the new. For example, the turbulent years 1919–20 saw spontaneous pre-industrial forms of protest (peasant land occupations, assaults launched on communal ovens, confiscations of produce and attacks on centres of power) merge with elements of the new century (mass politicisation, trade unionism, socialism, Bolshevism, and so on).³² Intertwined with peasant mobilisation in this period, the nationalist right developed a virulent reactionary strain: agrarian elites formed armed ‘self-defence’ groups to combat peasant organisation, the state colluded in violent suppression and fascist paramilitary violence dragged Italy into what many considered a civil war.³³ Even as this hybrid of old and new forms of political mobilisation and political violence emerged in rural society, mobility remained limited and the strong ties of kinship and local power dynamics continued to dominate rural life, ‘making little reference to the centre’.³⁴

The disconnection between rural life and national politics is evident in a joke made by a Tuscan landowner about the ignorance of the rural population. Writing to his friend in 1919, Alfonso B. recounted a conversation with one of his *contadini* (peasant farmers). The farmer was anxiously awaiting the return of his son from the war and commented on the question of Gabriele D’Annunzio’s occupation of the city of Fiume: ‘The last thing we need is to fight over a river; we have so much water in Italy already, we could easily do without it and leave it to others’.³⁵ Ideas of national irredentism, territorial expansion, or of the implications of Italy as a modern state were vague for many, or at least this was the perception from the outside. Certainly, the human cost of these grand ideas was all too well understood in rural areas. Nevertheless, the village as the centre of life remained steadfast.

The seemingly ancient traditions that bound villagers to their villages were also expressed through *campanilismo*. It was ‘a conserving and preserving force, defined by birth ... circumscribing the present by the past’.³⁶ The expression of individuality and tradition gave integrity to a village and its villagers; and this integrity was reinforced by the existence of many *campaniles* in proximity. The identity of *il paese* (town/village) was not just created in opposition to other *paesi*, but alongside them too.

Anthropologists have demonstrated the centrality of *campanilismo* to rural life. Herman Tak claims that ‘*campanilismo* in Central Italy is a boundary mechanism that is connected to the closeness and commitment between villages’.³⁷ Taken in this sense, *campanilismo* was an unwritten framework to communal life: it arbitrated over the immediate space in and around *il paese*, protecting that space from the outside. This did not necessarily mean excluding the outside, but rather reinforcing specific identities. As part of this framework, parochial conflict was integral to the coexistence of villages as it offered an outlet for tension and a path for mediation. Such conflict translated into general antagonism between villages, usually based on ideas of superiority – a common practice being the proliferation of derogatory nicknames.³⁸ Other forms included quarrels over resources, questions of municipal politics or rivalries linked to tradition. Take the municipality of Civitella della Chiana in Arezzo, for example. Between 1922 and 1926, the fascist council struggled to get past the issue of administrative separatism, as the village of Civitella sought to split from the existing municipality and establish its own council. The rift was responsible for the resignation of one mayor and the attempted resignation

³² Ibid., 8.

³³ Fabio Fabbri, *Le origini della guerra civile: l’Italia dalla Grande Guerra al fascismo (1918–1921)* (Turin: UTET, 2009), ix–xxvii.

³⁴ Corner, *The Fascist Party*, 2.

³⁵ ADN, E/93, Famiglia A., ‘Letter from Alfonso B. to Michele B.’, 1919. The word *fiume* in Italian translates to ‘river’, hence the farmer’s confusion.

³⁶ Bell, *Fate and Honor*, 152.

³⁷ Herman Tak, ‘Changing Campanilismo: Localism and the Use of Nicknames in a Tuscan Mountain Village’, *Ethnologia Europaea* XVIII (1987): 149.

³⁸ Tak, ‘Changing Campanilismo’, 149; Bell, *Fate and Honor*, 151; Sydel Silverman, *Three Bells of Civilization: The Life of an Italian Hill Town* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 6.

of several councillors, and it received far more attention from the council in those years than any matter of fascist governance.³⁹

At times, parochial antagonism may have isolated communities from one another, but it was also a way for them to express pride and rivalry. Through the negotiation of local tension, communities would come to understand the principles and practices that defined them.⁴⁰ This antagonistic feature of *campanilismo* was, therefore, a valuable function of rural life that bonded the inhabitants of the dense constellation of mountain and valley-floor villages of rural Arezzo. The imposition of fascist rule and the fascist occupation of the physical space of these communities eroded the mediating facets of *campanilismo*, causing communal solidarity to wane.

Remoulding Local Values: Violence and Tradition as the Tools of Provincial Fascism

In Arezzo, fascist celebrations of local heritage became a common feature of the provincial calendar. These events complemented *squadristo* (fascist paramilitary) activity, the principal objective of which was to systematically destroy all traces of democratic life, erasing any gains made by local peasant movements.⁴¹ A three-day medieval fair held in the town of Bibbiena, in the north of the province in October 1923, provides us with an example. The main leaflet created for the event reflected the fascist policy of appealing to local identity as a tool for broader nationalisation.

And think, that in this first bond with your town, with your small region of birth, with your PICCOLA PATRIA (*small fatherland*), lies the first foundation, solid and powerful, of that vast bond of endless love that unites us all in the devote worship of our shared GRANDE PATRIA (*great fatherland*): Italy.⁴²

The purpose of the fascist characterisation of the *piccola patria* was to create a feeling of national adhesion that ran from one's village upwards: *il paese*, the centre of all life for its inhabitants, was now more than ever characterised as the soul of a greater national ideal. Patriotism was now locally sourced. As in Nazi Germany and Francoist Spain, fascists tapped into local traditions, celebrating romanticised rural culture as the true culture of the nation. In Germany, the Nazis used *Heimat* to imbue local populations with the national socialist ideology of race, blood and destiny.⁴³ In Spain, the Franco regime elevated local Spanish tradition as the 'authentic' spiritual basis for its authoritarian Spanish nation.⁴⁴ Ideologically, fascist localism was about winding back the clock to a time of deep conservatism and marked social and gender hierarchies.

Fascists in Central Italy latched on to pre-existing local revitalisation movements that had roots in complex social processes related to the societal transformations brought by modernity.⁴⁵ In celebrating local traditions with a distinct fascist brand, the regime aimed to gain legitimacy in the provinces and to encourage ties between the rural elites and the centre.⁴⁶ Among the leading advocates of this policy was a group of provincial leaders and fascist 'thinkers' who identified themselves as the *strapaese* (ultra-localists) and who considered local culture to be at the centre of an alternative fascist modernity.

³⁹ Archivio Storico (Postunitaria) Comunale di Civitella della Chiana (ASCCC), 'Deliberazione del consiglio dal 12 marzo 1921 al 29 giugno 1928', No. 13, 117–387.

⁴⁰ Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington, eds., *Communities in Early Modern England: Networks, Place, Rhetoric* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 6.

⁴¹ Fabbri, *Le origini della guerra civile*, 464.

⁴² ASCCC, Carteggio VIII 1923, 'Comitato promotore delle Tre Giornate Casentinesi', Sept. 1923.

⁴³ Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials*, 19.

⁴⁴ Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, 'La región y lo local en el primer franquismo', in Stéphane Michonneau and Xosé M. Núñez-Seixas, eds., *Imaginaris y representaciones de España durante el franquismo* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2014), 127. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.cvz.1165>.

⁴⁵ Cavazza, *Piccole patrie*, 7.

⁴⁶ On the fascist use of local culture, see: Vittorio Cappelli, 'Identità locali e stato nazionale durante il fascismo', *Meridiana* 32 (1998): 55–6; Raffele Romanelli, 'Le radici storiche del localismo italiano', *Il Mulino* 336 (1991): 712.

Through their publication *Il Selvaggio*, these ultra-localists connected modern fascism to an imagined and romanticised past, lauding, for example, ‘the ancient and very young Italy of traditions and transformations’.⁴⁷ The strategy worked to a limited extent: in rural Arezzo many supported fascist efforts to regenerate provincial folklore, enjoying the popular events and feeling that they resonated with collective memories of the past.⁴⁸ In its entirety, however, this strand of localism was never sufficiently embedded in Italian society to conjure a sense of national identity as strong as that achieved by *Heimat*.⁴⁹

Rather than investigating the national-cultural values fascism sought to create around the revival of provincial traditions, I prefer to focus on the interplay between fascist attempts to exalt local culture and the violence of the fascist rise to power in peripheral areas. It is in this interaction between culture and violence that we can most effectively uncover the impact of fascism on local communities, and therefore, on the structures of *campanilismo* – which, for the regime, was the wrong kind of local culture. In Arezzo, fascistised events like the medieval fair in Bibbiena went hand-in-hand with sustained paramilitary violence. From 1920, *squadristi* (fascist paramilitaries) violently attacked democratic and anti-fascist structures across provincial Italy, disrupting established features of community life. Alongside this violence, the medieval fairs of Bibbiena, and scores of other fascist celebrations across Arezzo laid the groundwork for a new fascist vision of local heritage and society. Complementary to one another, these two aspects of early fascism in the provinces forced ordinary citizens into situations of feeling both fear and pride: fear to discourage resistance and ensure compliance, pride to tie the movement to the *piccola patria* and consolidate the fascist vision of the nation.

The leaflet for the Bibbiena fair celebrated the *piccola patria* but separated this new form of localism from the parochial factionalism of old. The font, art and vocabulary used were evocative of Bibbiena’s imagined medieval origins, while poetic descriptions historicised the local struggles between the factions of the area to a pre-fascist era. The fascist organisers of the fair made a point of distinguishing between damaging parochial violence, and the new, heroic violence of the *squadristi*.

In the dark conflicts and bloody struggles of factions, discord and fighting were sparked in olden times, between the castles of your ancestors; and from their embattled towers, treachery, revenge, and slaughter brooded between neighbouring brothers. ... Today the sad rancour that existed between town walls, and between castles has been expunged and destroyed in the great purifying and renovating fire of national unity.⁵⁰

Fascist violence, which was as brutal as any form of medieval violence, was euphemised in the leaflet as the ‘renovating fire of national unity’. It was this heroic violence in the name of the national cause that would overcome the local factionalism epitomised by *campanilismo*.

A diary from the *fascio* (local fascist branch) of Strada Casentino, only eight miles from Bibbiena, is a case in point.⁵¹ Written in 1935 by the group’s founding members (three medical students from Strada studying in Florence), the document retraced the organisation’s early punitive expeditions.⁵² The geographic proximity between the fair in Bibbiena and the activities of the group in Strada Casentino illustrates the tight connection between fascist discourses of revitalised localism and locally sourced violence perpetrated in the name of fascism. The group’s first excursions in 1920 were within Strada Casentino and to other nearby villages in the *comune*, where they ousted socialist councillors,

⁴⁷ Curzio Malaparte, ‘Strapaese e stracittà’, *Il Selvaggio*, 10 Nov. 1927, as seen in Jorge Dagnino, ‘Italianness during Fascism: The Case of *Il Selvaggio*’, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 19 (2014): 1–14.

⁴⁸ Cavazza, *Piccole patrie*, 8.

⁴⁹ Corner and Galimi, eds., *Il fascismo in provincia*, 12.

⁵⁰ ASSCC, Carteggio VIII 1923, ‘Comitato promotore delle Tre Giornate Casentinesi’, Sept. 1923.

⁵¹ The *fascio* of a town or village refers to its local fascist organisation. The *casa del fascio*, refers to the headquarters of the local *fascio*.

⁵² ASA CCF, 7, 1935, Aldo Martini, Domenico Vettori, and Giovanni Ponticelli, ‘Diario del fascio di combattimento di Strada Casentino dalla origine alla Marcia su Roma. 1921–1922’.

handed out ‘healthy thrashings’ and ‘cleaned the towns’ with their ‘persuasive truncheons’.⁵³ The language of the *squadristi* dehumanised and de-nationalised their adversaries: ‘red beasts’ or ‘rabid dogs’ were favoured labels for socialists.⁵⁴ In Strada Casentino, the *fascio* replaced parochial characterisations with political labels for local towns targeted by the group: ‘subversive lairs’ (Poppi), ‘where communism had not yet surrendered’ (Borgo alla Collina), ‘where there were few fascists’ (Borgo alla Collina), ‘where the *comune* was in the hands of socialists’ (Montemignaio), and in one case, ‘a centre of *popolari* (members of the Christian Popular Party) led by the priest’ (Caiano). Likewise, their victims were labelled as ‘agitators’, ‘subversives’, ‘suspect’, ‘drunk on wine’, ‘communist’, or a combination of any of these. An entry for July 1921, for example, tells us that one *squadrista* was forced to fire his revolver into the air to ‘defend himself’ against a ‘howling and menacing mob of subversives’.⁵⁵ Thus, with florid descriptions the diary juxtaposed the courage of the fascists against the savagery of those who opposed them.

These descriptions were political and sinister, far from the *campanilistic* verbal antagonism that characterised the area. Tak’s anthropological analysis of collective nicknames in Versilia, another mountainous area of Tuscany, shows us the types of labels that proliferated under the loose system of *campanilismo*. Nicknames included ‘*lumaconi*’ (big snails/lazy), ‘*fagiolini*’ (beans/idiots), ‘*burrai*’ (buttermakers), ‘*carbonai*’ (charcoal burners), ‘*gobbi*’ (hunchbacks), ‘*ranocchi*’ (frogs/disabled/from an area full of frogs), ‘*grottaioi*’ (cave-dwellers), ‘*gentiluomini*’ (gentlemen), or ‘*schiaccioni di faggiuoli*’ (bruised beechnuts).⁵⁶ On the one hand, these nicknames exposed the degrading and defensive feature of *campanilismo*, whether by referencing physical traits or mocking ‘uncivilised’ behaviours.⁵⁷ On the other hand, through references to particular flora and fauna or commercial activities, they matched up to the landscapes and specific qualities of different villages and their inhabitants. Changing from place to place, parochial nicknames helped to set boundaries between villages and to build a vocabulary of local knowledge about a village’s networks and prejudices.⁵⁸ They were, therefore, robust expressions of rivalry and knowledge that fed into the guiding framework of *campanilismo*.

Internal nicknames were also part of the cultural praxis of the *squadristi*. In contrast to parochial labels, however, these nicknames were largely centred around the appetite for violence, if not recalling past national heroes. Fascist paramilitary groups across Central Italy included ‘The Tormentors’, ‘The Devils’, ‘The Black Wolves’, and ‘The Knights of Death’.⁵⁹ Self-generated nicknames for groups and their members were both a symptom of and a catalyst for the close bonds that drew *squadristi* together. Sven Reichardt argues that the intense camaraderie that men found in their groups superseded any sense of belonging to a local community, a phenomenon that was also true for provincial SA groups in Nazi Germany.⁶⁰ It was this lived intensity of social bonds that ultimately made violence possible.⁶¹

Violence became a vocation for group members and had many functions. Alessandro Saluppo has illustrated the ‘pedagogical’ feature of fascist violence, citing how Mussolini encouraged fascists to ‘batter obstinate skulls’ as an educative method against subversive thinking.⁶² Humiliation was weaponised: castration, rape, the forced ingestion of castor oil, the shaving of heads, and the cutting

⁵³ ASA CCF, 7, 1935, Martini, Vettori, and Ponticelli, ‘Diario del fascio di combattimento di Strada Casentino’, entry for 8 Aug. 1921.

⁵⁴ Sven Reichardt, *Camicie nere, camicie brune. Milizie fasciste in Italia e in Germania* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009), 343.

⁵⁵ *Una turba di sovversivi...urlante e minacciosa*. ASA CCF, 7, 1935, Martini, Vettori, and Ponticelli, ‘Diario del fascio di combattimento di Strada Casentino...’, entry for 19 July 1921.

⁵⁶ Gilberto Cocci, *Vocabolario versiliense* (Firenze: Barbèra, 1956), 148–149, as seen in Tak, ‘Changing Campanilismo’, 152.

⁵⁷ Tak, ‘Changing Campanilismo’, 152.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁵⁹ Reichardt, *Camicie nere, camicie brune*, 243.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁶¹ Alf Lüdtkke, ‘Ordinary People, Self-Energising, and Room for Manoeuvring: Examples from Twentieth Century Europe’, in Lüdtkke, ed., *Everyday Life in Mass Dictatorship*, 22.

⁶² Alessandro Saluppo, ‘Paramilitary Violence and Fascism: Imaginaries and Practices of Squadristo, 1919–1925’, *Contemporary European History* 29, no. 3 (Aug. 2020): 299, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777319000390>.

of fascist symbols and slogans onto victims' bodies were all documented methods of the *squadristi*.⁶³ The performative quality of the violence added to its horror and gave it a lasting impact.⁶⁴ On a market day in Strada Casentino in October 1921, for example, the local *fascio* met in the town's butcher's shop run by one of their members, where they armed themselves with butchers' knives before storming into the village to publicly challenge anyone who might have antifascist sympathies.⁶⁵ On another occasion, visiting *squadristi* from Prato (Tuscany) encountered a group of 'menacing' tenant farmers 'armed with scythes' on the road into Borgo alla Collina ('where there were few fascists'). In the ensuing mêlée, one farmer was killed 'by a severe trauma to his skull'.⁶⁶ Police reports from Arezzo corroborate the level of violence described in the diary, showing that gunfights, beatings, intimidations, brawls, killings, and castor oil humiliations were all part of life in the Aretine province at this time.⁶⁷ So pervasive and disturbing was this violence that it 'violated the most basic assumptions about safety, human empathy and care. Familiar and viable realities were shattered into meaningless, chaotic and terrifying settings'.⁶⁸ This was not a question of a parochial dispute but rather a campaign of terror designed to condition the everyday and take control of local space. Sites of community and of communal solidarity – be it at the market, on the road into the village, or in the *piazza* – were now stained by the memory and lingering threat of nightmarish violence. On many occasions this violence was perpetrated by visiting *squadristi* from the wider region. Frequently, however, *squadristi* belonged to the very communities on whom they inflicted punishment.

Fascism in the provinces was local; *squadristi* violence was often fratricidal. John Foot has characterised the violence of the *squadristi* as private and collective, criminal (but not seen as such), political and personal: on many occasions it was about 'settling old scores'.⁶⁹ Perpetrators may well have known their victims; they may have belonged to the same parish, bartered together at the market, attended the same village festivals, been treated by the same doctors, and so on. They were ordinary members of provincial society, not outsiders. A sample from the town of Badia al Pino evidences this. Of the forty-one members of the local *fascio* in June 1923, there were eight tenant farmers, seven farm labourers, five landowners, three cobblers, two carpenters, two tailors, one council employee, one bricklayer, one pensioner, one shopkeeper, one student, one roadman, one postman, one post office employee, one mechanic, one soldier and one privately employed worker.⁷⁰ The sample is representative of a wider trend of underrepresentation of the working classes in the *squadristi* ranks, and of the overrepresentation of landowners, tenant farmers, and middleclass burghers.⁷¹ Significantly, of the forty-one members, thirty-one had served in the military and twenty had endured the trenches of the First World War, highlighting the tangible link between experiences of the military and conflict and the make-up of local *fasci*. This shared experience only reinforced bonds among the *squadristi* and justified their isolation from the outside community. *Squadristi* who were too young to have fought in the war made up for their lack of service with zeal.⁷²

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁶⁴ Matteo Millan, 'Origins', in Joshua Arthurs, Michael Ebner, and Kate Ferris, eds., *The Politics of Everyday Life in Fascist Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 28, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-58654-4_2.

⁶⁵ ASA CCF, 7, 1935, Martini, Vettori, and Ponticelli, 'Diario del fascio di combattimento di Strada Casentino', entry for Oct. 1921, 5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, entry for Apr. 1922, 6.

⁶⁷ Scores of reports on this violence can be found in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (DGPS), Categorie Annuali 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924.

⁶⁸ Saluppo, 'Paramilitary Violence and Fascism', 297.

⁶⁹ John Foot, 'A Micro-History of Fascist Violence: Squadristi, Victims and Perpetrators', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 27, no. 4 (2022): 531, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2045454>.

⁷⁰ ASA, CCF, 2, 'Fascio di Badia al Pino', 10 June 1923.

⁷¹ Reichardt, *Camicie nere, camicie brune*, 395–6. The given sample offers us a snapshot of the make-up of the local fascist squad in a particular moment. Over the years, membership changed as a result of in-fighting, disciplinary action or disillusion with the National Fascist Party. However, the high representation of men with military and conflict experience remained constant.

⁷² Salvatore Mannino, *Origini e avvento del fascismo ad Arezzo: 1915–1924* (Provincia di Arezzo: Editrice Le Balze, 2004), 153.

The very ordinary job profiles of the *squadristi* of the town is striking. They tell us that these men were, on the face of it, respectable members of their communities. They would have enjoyed a great deal of familiarity with their victims. And if they did not know them personally, they were nonetheless locals of the same rural area. It was this closeness between victim and perpetrator that was so crucial to the terror of fascist squads, and that strengthens the argument that fascist violence eroded the 'thin trust' that was integral to community life. In the new reality of violence, existing community relations broke down, while new bonds among the perpetrators emerged. Committing acts of violence hardened these bonds and fuelled comradeship between active paramilitaries.⁷³ As the unifying features of *campanilismo*, its mediated conflict and its guidelines for life in the community were torn apart; non-fascist villagers were excluded and were increasingly less able to rely on solidarity based on shared provenance, or to feel at home in the traditionally safe spaces of their villages. The men of the *fasci* were shattering the framework, and in its place they aimed to impose a new form of life governed by terror.

Of course, those who experienced the contempt of the *squadristi* or even suffered their wrath were not passive victims. Within the parameters of life under dictatorship, in which one's very existence was 'policed through violence, fear, and other forms of compulsion', individuals were still able to make decisions, to react and adapt to what they faced, and to negotiate their way through the context they found themselves in.⁷⁴ This is evident in the countless instances of sporadic resistance across the province of Arezzo: episodes that were often bloody, or simply trivial, and highly localised. The *fascio* of Strada Casentino recalled that they were once ambushed by angry villagers in the hamlet of Rifiglio, who were lying in wait for their arrival: 'A mass brawl and pistol gunfight broke out in the quiet mountain settlement'.⁷⁵ Guglielmo Francini of Bucine recalled an outspoken woman of his village ('*di quelle con pochi pelli sulla lingua*' ['one of those who has few hairs on her tongue/ doesn't mince her words']), who mocked an arrogant, young, and heavily armed fascist for his 'ridiculous uniform', asking him 'who had reduced him to such a state', and whether he did not think of himself as a 'complete idiot'.⁷⁶ Fascists too navigated this new world with unique responses. Luigi Pratesi from Ciggiano recalled that a near-fatal road accident involving a truck full of *squadristi* shook the town's *fascio* to its core. The shock of the accident continued through time, and a saying was coined in Ciggiano to explain the local group's odd reluctance to use the characteristic vehicle of the paramilitaries: 'I'm still fascist, but there's no way I'm getting back on to one of those trucks'.⁷⁷ In this case, the *squadristi* of Ciggiano rejected a key practice of fascist paramilitarism as a result of a shared, village-specific, memory.

Resisting fascist oppression in any form called for rare courage. I contend that these unique instances were linked to the unifying features of rural society, bound in no small part by the framework of *campanilismo* and the mutual trust it generated. Indeed, all these episodes occurred within the confines of close-knit communities where certain levels of solidarity prevailed, and where inhabitants felt they belonged to a larger group. Aspects of village individuality survived in the face of systematic violence, and to a limited extent rural citizens could draw on community cohesion to challenge, resist or reframe the conventions of fascism in small ways. Ultimately, though, the violence of the squads destroyed the social dynamics of rural communities. It drove wedges between different groups and left fear hanging over the once safe spaces of villages. Coupled to a cultural re-education programme that exalted fascist visions of localism, fascist attempts to conquer the countryside devastated provincial life.

⁷³ Sheila Fitzpatrick and Alf Lüdtke, 'Energizing the Everyday: On the Breaking and Making of Social Bonds in Nazism and Stalinism', in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 292.

⁷⁴ Joshua Arthurs, Michael Ebner and Kate Ferris, 'Introduction', in Arthurs, Ebner and Ferris, eds., *The Politics of Everyday Life in Fascist Italy*, 7.

⁷⁵ ASA CCF, 7, 1935, Martini, Vettori, and Ponticelli, entry for 15 Sept. 1921, 6.

⁷⁶ ADN, MP/90, Guglielmo Francini, 'I ricordi di un contadino', 94–5.

⁷⁷ '... fascista resto, ma nel camion non ci salgo più'. ADN, A/Adn Luigi Pratesi, 'Ciggiano in Contraluce', 1978, 10.

Targeting Key Actors in the Community: The Persecution of Village Priests

Local fascist groups uprooted the established societal structures of *campanilismo* through violence. Targeting key-actors within communities was crucial to this, and as insiders, *squadristi* knew who held sway. As Matteo Millan argues, the groups ‘turned the practice of violence into a real skill, which became the base for specific social strategies’.⁷⁸ The persecution of parish priests provides us with powerful evidence of one such social strategy.

In provincial Italy, the duties of the parish priest extended beyond spiritual guidance; from the late nineteenth century, the clergy had carved out a position in rural society as the providers of welfare and performed diverse roles: as educators, mediators and local politicians.⁷⁹ They were as much a part of the landscape of rural Arezzo as the campaniles at the centre of each village. Many parish priests had leveraged their traditional status in rural society for political movements, especially in the first two years after the First World War, when they had demonstrated an impressive ability to rally peasants round the left-leaning social Catholic movement of the *Partito popolare italiano* (Italian Popular Party). The social and democratic strand that ran through much of the Italian clergy, however, was not represented in the factional and hierarchical nature of the Church itself, whose members were drawn from the entire political spectrum. While some priests built a reputation for their leftist politics, others were famed for exploiting their parishioners. When recalling the parcel of land her family worked on, Dina Brogi remembered that their landowner ‘was a very special master: the priest. We practically belonged to the church. But that did not change anything; my parents still worked like pack animals’.⁸⁰ One way or another, the parish priest held a position of power in his community which was expressed through the relationships he shared with his parishioners. Whether respected or not in a community, the *parroco* (parish priest) was another feature of village life that brought inhabitants together in a patchwork of interpersonal networks.

Local fascist elites understood the power dynamics in their towns and villages. If they could not count on the support of priests, fascists would persecute them. In part, this related to the anticlericalism of early revolutionary fascism, although this was quickly outweighed by the reactionary objectives of the fascist agrarian elites whose aim was to wipe out peasant unions and local democratic movements. They did not discriminate between peasant leaders based on their faith.⁸¹ This was about the public fight for power in the local arena. Where priests expressed anti-fascist sentiments, fascists would visibly lock them out of communities, removing them from everyday life altogether. To do so, the fascists turned to the methods they excelled in most: intimidation, humiliation and violence.

Through the pages of *Giovinezza*, veiled threats responded to the alleged subversive mutterings of parish priests. In the summer of 1922, *Giovinezza* printed a message to the *parroco* of Terranuova, after he had been overheard saying that ‘socialists and fascists should be burned alive in the middle of the piazza ... the only good party is our party’.⁸² To this, the fascists of Terranuova declared that the times of Giordano Bruno, the heretical philosopher burnt at the stake in Rome in 1600, had passed. If the priest had forgotten any of this, ‘their members would be happy to remind him’.⁸³ With its violent undertones, the message conveyed disdain for the authority of the church: the local *fascio* now had the monopoly on violence. Similarly, in the village of Laterina, Don Dario Maraghini was singled out by the paper for having become too involved in the politics of the municipal council: ‘Don Maraghini who is perhaps too preoccupied with politics; who has always ranted against fascists; who has been too much of a “Don Sturzo” in the issues of our *comune*, has ended

⁷⁸ Matteo Millan, *Squadristo e squadristi nella dittatura fascista* (Roma: Viella, 2014), 10.

⁷⁹ Alice A. Kelikian, ‘The Church and Catholicism’, in Adrian Lyttelton, ed., *Liberal and Fascist Italy, 1900–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 47–53.

⁸⁰ ADN, MP/91, Dina Brogi, 5.

⁸¹ Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919–1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 122.

⁸² *Giovinezza*, 9 July 1922, no. 33. ‘Our party’ referred to the Christian-democratic *Partito popolare italiano*.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

up creating a treacherous environment around himself, and has become scared'.⁸⁴ A repeated fascist refrain when it came to the involvement of priests in local politics was that the church was a place of meditation, while politics was for the *piazza*.

Fascist action against priests went beyond the written word. In Ambra, local *squadristi* smeared faeces across the church façade.⁸⁵ In the mountain hamlet of Castelluccio, things escalated even further. During Advent 1923, fascist militia broke into Don Cortellini's home and dragged him away in front of his parishioners. The priest was beaten and forced to march nearly ten miles to the nearest town, where he was reported to the police for subversion.⁸⁶ The attack on Don Cortellini, however, put the provincial movement into a bind. When the archbishop of Arezzo published an open letter to Mussolini, denouncing the treatment of his priest, he provoked a public scandal. To distance the movement from the attack, fascist leaders in Arezzo chalked the incident down to 'old political grudges' (read: parochialism, or *campanilismo*).⁸⁷ The Vatican's *Osservatore Romano* disputed this claim, arguing that Don Cortellini's case could not be defined as a 'small local episode' but was rather an example of premeditated fascist violence. This pushed the fascist hierarchy to pivot from the idea of parochialism and instead label Cortellini as a 'subversive', a 'mediocre priest', and a 'terrible Italian'.⁸⁸ Understanding that the excuse of parochialism was no longer convincing, fascist leaders reverted to the political language of the *squadristi*, undermining the authority of the archbishop and the Church.

The provincial fascist movement of Arezzo aimed to systematically restructure the power dynamics of rural society. A consequence of this was the destruction of the features of *campanilismo* that bound rural communities together. As traditional reference points like priests or respected municipal councillors were forced out of communities, and as safe spaces dwindled, individuals within small communities were pushed into isolation. With their knowledge of their immediate social environments upturned, and without a wider guiding framework to draw on, villagers became less and less able to depend on one another.

Campanilismo Within and Against the Provincial Fascist Movement

The interplay between fascism and local identity was complex and unclear. As the movement progressively occupied the social and physical space of the province, conflict between fascists inevitably broke out. Sometimes this was related to fascist politics, individual power plays and infighting, known as *beghismo*.⁸⁹ Sometimes it was linked to village dynamics. What we do know from correspondence between village *fasci* and the provincial fascist headquarters in Arezzo is that the province was in chaos at least until the mid-1920s. *Campanilismo* played a part in this chaos; it was given as the main excuse for fascist ill-discipline, insubordination, provincial behaviour and municipal failings. Overwhelmed by the situation in the rural peripheries, the fascist hierarchy enforced strict disciplinary action and transmitted the complaints of local fascist bosses back into the province through local

⁸⁴ *Giovinazza*, 10 Sept. 1922, no. 42. Don Sturzo referred to Luigi Sturzo, a Catholic priest considered to be one of the fathers of the Christian democratic movement in twentieth century Italy, and one of the founders of the Italian Popular Party. For a discussion on Sturzo's political thought see: Maria Chiara Mattesini, 'Uguaglianza, libertà e democrazia nel pensiero di Luigi Sturzo', *Democrazia e diritto* 3 (2019): 185–202.

⁸⁵ ASA, CCF, 1, 'Fascio di Ambra: Situazione politica ed ecclesiastica 1927–1929', testimony of Don Fedoro Soldini, sent to Federal Secretary of PNF Arezzo, 4 Sept. 1928.

⁸⁶ ASA, CCF, 3, Fascio di Castelluccio, report by the Royal Prefecture of Arezzo, 'Violenze fasciste in danno del parroco di Castelluccio Don Scipione Cortellini', 21 Dec. 1923.

⁸⁷ For the archbishop's letter, see: Emanuele Mignone, *La vita del popolo*, 22 Dec. 1923, no. 42. For the official report citing 'old political grudges', see ASA, CCF, 3, Fascio di Castelluccio, report by the Royal Prefecture of Arezzo, 'Violenze fasciste', 21 Dec. 1923.

⁸⁸ 'Una energica nota dall'Osservatore Romano', *La vita del Popolo*, 29 Dec. 1923. See also: ASA, CCF, 3, Fascio di Castelluccio, 'La Federazione Provinciale Fascista Aretina comunica', undated (likely Jan. 1924).

⁸⁹ Matteo Di Figlia, 'The Fascist Ruling Class', in Giulia Albanese, ed., *Rethinking the History of Italian Fascism* (London: Routledge, 2022), 87, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003092933-5>. See also Paul Corner, *Fascism in Ferrara 1915–1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Frank M. Snowden, *The Fascist Revolution in Tuscany, 1919–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

papers. ‘Little ambitions’, ‘reprisals’, ‘local questions’, ‘ferocious egoism’ and ‘flattering demagogy’ were some of the terms used by the provincial fascist hierarchy to vent its frustrations with village fascists in the pages of *Giovinanza*.⁹⁰ Fascist actors also used *campanilismo*, which they saw as the main manifestation of ‘backwards’ provincialism, as a discursive tool to develop their own visions of what fascism should be in contrast to what it ostensibly was not. The following examples from fascist reports and letters demonstrate the extent of this situation.

On 12 September 1923, the prefect of Arezzo addressed a plea for intervention to the National Fascist Party (PNF)⁹¹ headquarters. The prefect had become aware of a local dispute in the northern village of Campogialli between ‘local fascists and a part of the population’, and a local landowner – ‘also fascist’ – who was refusing to give up a stretch of land for a war memorial.

As the disagreement is escalating each day, with evident damage to the prestige of the party and with the danger that it might transcend into an act of reckless violence, given the excessively intemperate character of the rural population, I would consider it appropriate for Your Excellency to intervene.⁹²

The prefect’s use of the terms ‘excessively intemperate’ and ‘reckless violence’ to characterise the rural population (both fascist and non-fascist) gives us some insight into the psychology of the fascist movement and ruling administration. The prefect related the conflict to a lack of self-restraint. In assigning this trait to the protagonists’ rural origins, he conveyed a common stereotype of the provinces, which fed into a fascist narrative of the need to transform provincial Italians into ‘civilised’ fascists. As civil servants, prefects in Mussolini’s coalition government of 1922–24 were not necessarily fascist, although many were sympathisers. Confronted with fascist paramilitarism, even those who were not sympathetic were subordinate to the PNF and its provincial leaders.⁹³ Indeed, historian Philip Morgan has demonstrated the ‘chilling complicity of prefects in the erosion of political freedoms’ between 1922 and 1924, which ‘indicated that career state officials could be relied on to do the bidding of the fascist government’.⁹⁴ Biographic information for the prefect of Arezzo in 1923, Enrico Cavaliere, indicates that after his first posting as prefect (Arezzo, 1922–24), he continued in service for the duration of Mussolini’s dictatorship, eventually reaching senior rank in the Fascist Blackshirts.⁹⁵ This suggests a successful career founded on a long-standing commitment to fascist rule.

High-ranking officials were not the only ones to make disparaging characterisations of the local population; these often came from locals themselves. In 1926, a frustrated doctor from Caprese Michelangelo wrote a long letter of complaint to the province’s fascist federal secretary in Arezzo. The doctor had taken issue with the fascists in the neighbouring town, Pieve Santo Stefano, who due to ‘parochial’ differences, were blocking his efforts to set up an independent *fascio* in Caprese Michelangelo. As a result, the ‘67 dedicated fascists’ of Caprese Michelangelo had nowhere to organise themselves, giving free reign to ‘the old plucked *popolari* who still continue to spread subversive propaganda ... among the simple people’.⁹⁶ Alongside his frustration at the parochialism of his neighbouring fascists, the doctor’s description of his own townspeople as ‘simple’ and as easily led astray by

⁹⁰ ‘Ambizioncelle’, ‘ripicchi’, ‘questioni locali’, ‘feroce egoismo’, ‘demagogie lusingatrici’ – all examples come from issues of *Giovinanza* dated between 1922 and 1925.

⁹¹ Partito Nazionale Fascista (National Fascist Party).

⁹² ASA, CCF, 2, Fascio di Campogialli, ‘In Frazione Campogialli’, letter from prefect to the PNF headquarters in Arezzo, 12 Sept. 1923.

⁹³ Philip Morgan, ‘The Prefects and Party-state Relations in Fascist Italy’, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 3, no. 3 (1998): 245, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545719808454980>.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁹⁵ Alessandro Garofoli, ‘Cavaliere Enrico’, in Alessandro Garofoli, ed., *Dizionario biografico degli aretini 1900–1950* (Arezzo: Società Storica Aretina), accessed 1 Oct. 2024, <https://www.societastoricaretina.org/biografie/AGCavaliere150303.pdf>.

⁹⁶ ‘Gli vecchi spennacchiati popolari continuano ancora a svolgere propaganda sovversiva...in quelle...semplici popolazioni?’. ASA, CCF, 2, Fascio di Caprese Michelangelo, letter from Dante Giacomelli to the Federal Secretary of PNF Arezzo, 16 Dec. 1926.

elderly Christian leftists is telling of his mindset. The doctor looked down on his compatriots and believed that fascism embodied superior values around which national unity could take root among a generally uneducated population, if only he could break past the obstacle of the uncivilised fascists in the neighbouring town. The doctor tied this perceived dysfunction of local fascism to *campanilismo*, emphasising the drawbacks of the local character. His purpose was to convey a classist self-perception of superiority and to gain traction in the local fascist movement.

A common complaint among provincial fascist leaders was that their men did not understand what fascism was, and thus did not know how to behave as fascists. This was so for the disbanded *fascio* of Cavriglia, whose band members had disgraced the village, as related in the introduction. Similarly, the mayor of Marciano in southern Arezzo stoked controversy when, in January 1925, he used *Giovinezza* to rail against 'the misunderstanding of fascism by many of its members'.⁹⁷ This was not unique to Arezzo, or even Tuscany. In 1925, the intransigent leader of the PNF, Roberto Farinacci, launched a tirade against the calamitous ill-discipline of provincial fascism throughout Italy: 'I am banning, therefore, the numerous local questions, the stomach-churning dissidence that has caused so much damage to our party, I am banning the ambitious and the profiteers, I am banning any spirit of indiscipline'.⁹⁸ Whether these issues were locally sourced, or the result of fascist insubordination, the fascist hierarchy invariably put them down to the provincial character of local fascists. Fascist leaders claimed that the weight given to local issues prevented small-town fascists from seeing the national picture or from acting as fascists should. In many cases local movements reacted badly to this charge, and to the measures taken to centralise peripheral groups. One mutinous letter from the fascists of Ambra and Bucine, for example, complained about the new leader who had been imposed on them from above, remarking that 'we do not want leaders who do not have fascist faith and much less do we want people from outside getting mixed up in our business'.⁹⁹

The lack of fascist discipline in rural communities continued far into the 1920s and was a running theme for officials sent from Arezzo into the wild countryside to enact the ideals of the regime. In 1928, a letter from the leader of the *fascio* of the tiny village of Pozzo della Chiana to Arezzo gave an unwittingly satirical description of the local fascist movement, demonstrating just how little the town's fascists respected him.

It is with true regret that I must note that the fascists in Pozzo della Chiana are undisciplined and do not have even the slightest principles of education or common sense. Called to gatherings, they do not turn up, reprimanded, they do not listen, commanded, they make up absurd excuses. This situation must come to an end because the fascist must be disciplined, conscious and must have only one purpose ... to serve the fascist cause at the cost of any sacrifice.¹⁰⁰

This was not the first time that a fascist officer had complained about Pozzo della Chiana and its lack of fascist principles. A year earlier, the then leader of the village *fascio* had been shocked to discover that one of the community's valued civil associations, *la croce bianca* (the White Cross), was being run by a mixture of ex-socialists, communists and 'renegade fascists'. He immediately reported this to Arezzo and managed to get the association disbanded.¹⁰¹ Certain forms of village cooperation transcended national politics. Associations such as this, or village choirs, orchestras, or fire services

⁹⁷ Mayor of Marciano, *Giovinezza*, 24 Jan. 1925, no. 2.

⁹⁸ Roberto Farinacci, *Giovinezza*, 25 Feb. 1925, no. 7. '*Bando, quindi, alle numerose questioni locali, bando agli stomachevoli dissidentismi che tanto danno hanno arrecato al partito, bando agli ambiziosi ed ai profittatori, bando ad ogni spirito di indisciplina...*'.

⁹⁹ ASA, CCF, 1, Fascio di Ambra, letter from fascio of Ambra to Guido Bonaccini, Secretary for the Provincial Federation of the PNF in Arezzo, 20 Mar. 1928.

¹⁰⁰ ASA, CCF, 6, Fascio di Pozzo della Chiana, letter from Tiezzi Narciso to the Provincial Secretary of the PNF in Arezzo, 6 Nov. 1928.

¹⁰¹ ASA, CCF, 6, Fascio di Pozzo della Chiana, letters from Bettino Quinti to the Provincial Secretary of the PNF in Arezzo, 25 Mar. 1927.

were places of 'local sociability, solidarity, and recognition', not easily substituted by new fascist politics, especially where national fascist values had not found a strong foothold.¹⁰²

If *campanilismo* was allegedly to blame for a lack of discipline within the *fasci*, it also remained a problem for local governance in the late 1920s. In April of 1928, a *podestà* expressed his dismay with the fascists of Civitella della Chiana.¹⁰³ Still raw about its failed separatist efforts, the village had isolated itself, while its *fascio* stubbornly refused to attend municipal events in the neighbouring town of Badia al Pino, instead holding alternative events within the walls of their medieval hilltop settlement. The *podestà* claimed that the village *fascio* was 'rebelling against the authority invested in me' and was using 'the ancient feeling of *campanilismo* in the village' to disrupt his plans.¹⁰⁴ Civitella della Chiana, he claimed, was the last bastion of such *campanilismo*, as he had successfully rooted out all other parochial disputes in the municipality.

All these examples show a disarticulation between local fascist organisations and the established political values of the national fascist movement. In the province of Arezzo, chaos, feuding, and violent disputes characterised peripheral fascist organisations from the outset and well into the 1920s. In Arezzo, wherever local fascist groups antagonised the provincial hierarchy or pushed the boundaries of condoned fascist behaviour, their actions were put down to stereotypes of local character and their ignorance of true fascism, all of which was said to be lodged in a broader and pernicious culture of *campanilismo*. Instead of being recognised as a guiding framework to rural society, the provincial fascist movement blamed *campanilismo* for the chaos of ill-disciplined fascist movements. This misreading cemented the regime's failure to penetrate the towns and villages of rural Italy. By empowering a certain class of men with weapons and a licence to commit atrocities during a time of political and social upheaval, fascism destroyed the very web of trust that held provincial communities together. In doing this, the provincial fascist movement generated destabilising violence and local power vacuums. With the traditional frameworks of local life torn apart, ordinary citizens had to negotiate their way through new power dynamics and a violent reality.

Conclusion

The people of rural Arezzo were intimately connected to the physical space that surrounded them. The very definition of *campanilismo* attests to this connection, as do villagers' nicknames for each other, closely linked as they were to the physical and social conditions of the land. By shifting the analysis away from the nation-building features of provincial culture and focusing, instead, on its guiding social structures, we gain insight into how 'ordinary' rural citizens interacted with and imagined the places where they lived. Moreover, connecting physical space to social organisation helps us to define the power relationships and the social bonds that existed across communities.¹⁰⁵ Looking at how and where these long-standing features of community life resisted, transformed, or broke under the strain of fascism is key to developing a nuanced picture of the 'lived experiences' of ordinary citizens from below during fascist regimes. This is a versatile framework that can complement scholarship on everyday life under dictatorship – for example, work on Francoist Spain that looks at how the regime reconfigured communal space as a repressive measure, or work on fascist Italy that analyses the practices that shaped and were shaped by local spaces, such as taverns, during the regime.¹⁰⁶ The eruption of fascism in rural Arezzo was so impactful precisely because it occurred in the functional and intimate

¹⁰² Paul Corner, 'Collaboration, Complicity, and Evasion Under Italian Fascism', in Lüdtke, ed., *Everyday Life in Mass Dictatorship*, 87.

¹⁰³ The council system was disbanded in 1926 and replaced by the one-man rule of the fascist prefecture and later the *podestà*, marking the end of any trace of municipal autonomy.

¹⁰⁴ ASCCC, Carteggi VIII 1928, f. 28, letter from *podestà* of Civitella della Chiana to the Provincial Secretary of the PNF in Arezzo, 23 Apr. 1928.

¹⁰⁵ Paul Steege et al., 'The History of Everyday Life: A Second Chapter', *The Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 2 (2008): 364, <https://doi.org/10.1086/588855>.

¹⁰⁶ Miguel Ángel del Arco Blanco and Claudio Hernandez Burgos, 'Los componentes sociales de la represión Franquista: Orígenes, duración, espacios y actores', *Historia Actual Online* 41, no. 3 (2016): 84–86; Kate Ferris, 'Everyday Spaces:

spaces of rural society that were intrinsic to village networks and social cohesion. Fascist action desecrated these spaces, and in turn uprooted existing interpersonal networks and established new power dynamics, thereby forcing local citizens to navigate a new reality.

In the void created by fascist paramilitary action, provincial elites began to jostle for position, bringing long-standing local issues to the fore. The added tension and pressures of fascist violence aggravated conflict among fascists in the local space. For the regime, however, it was not this fascist violence but rather the parochial dynamics in the provinces that hindered the national fascist project. It viewed *campanilismo* as a subversive force: as an innate provincialism of rural Italians that was embedded in the structures of municipal councils and local *fasci*. From this perspective, the movement was able to blame *campanilismo* for its own shortcomings – or, conversely, use the idea of *campanilismo* as a discursive strategy to impose different visions of what fascism should look like. In fact, in the case of Arezzo, it was the innate violence of the fascist movement that made the successful and long-lasting fascist conquest and re-education of the province impossible.

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