

# **UCLA**

## **Working Papers**

### **Title**

Ecstatic Crowds, Addicted Dictators, Intoxicating Politics: Reflections on Rausch and Fascist Italy

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/67w279nj>

### **Author**

Falasca Zamponi, Simonetta

### **Publication Date**

2004-12-20

# **ECSTATIC CROWDS, ADDICTED DICTATORS, INTOXICATING POLITICS: REFLECTIONS ON RAUSCH AND FASCIST ITALY**

*Simonetta Falasca Zamponi*  
University of California, Santa Barbara

Can the concept of ecstasy explain some of the rationale of dictatorships, and more specifically of fascism? And can the concept of ecstasy be connected to manipulation? These are the two central questions I would like to raise and explore in this paper, although there are also other questions that will emerge in my discussion which I hope will help clarify the relationship between ecstasy and manipulation. I should however state as a premise that I find the notion of manipulation quite problematic, and will therefore attempt to show, in what follows, its limitations and shortcomings when applied to the specific case of Italian fascism. But first, let me give you a sense of what kind of issues I am thinking of addressing here regarding the question of Rausch.

In its more denotative meaning of displacement, entrancement, astonishment, it would seem that "extasis" could give way to a process of manipulation. If you are exalted, overpowered by emotion, and beyond the realm of reason, your ability to think is clearly diminished and somebody could take advantage of this state of irrationality to steer your behavior in specific directions.<sup>1</sup> Manipulation clearly involves a relationship, or at least a dual process of interaction between the subject and the object of a manipulation. The subject obviously has a project that he or she intends to pursue and accomplish through the manipulative act, unless one manipulates for the sake of manipulating. Now, when we face a political movement, a government, or worse a dictatorship it would seem that manipulation is necessarily geared toward an end-goal. In the case of Italian fascism, this would entail the presupposition that the fascists knew

---

<sup>1</sup> This belief is indeed at the basis of Le Bon's and others' conceptualization of the crowd as negative.

what they were doing, but my question is: did they really? Or more specifically: did they actually manipulate the Italians toward an end-goal, or were they rather fascinated with the possibilities of manipulation? But also: is manipulation the same as propaganda? What is their relationship? And can ecstasy be connected to propaganda? In addition: is manipulation through the media ecstasy? Or can ecstasy only occur in mass gatherings and in connection to festivals? Ultimately, is political intoxication necessarily negative? By addressing these questions (although not very systematically) I will try to problematize the concept of Rausch in order to test whether it can be a useful concept to adopt in the study of political dictatorships. I am, however, convinced that we need to consider the dichotomy of ecstasy and manipulation, if we want to make of Rausch a useful and not a vague notion.

Let's look at ecstasy first. In philosophy, ecstasy is directly connected to the religious experience of the mystics. It is a mystical experience that is detached from the world. In Max Weber's famous analysis of religious typologies, mysticism as an abnegation of the world is characterized by "the contemplative possession of the holy."<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the action-oriented asceticism in which the devout operate for God -- the devout are "God's tools" in Weber's terminology -- mysticism rejects action and, indeed, tends to flee the world in order to reach an other-worldly religious state which is "absolutely irrational" or incomprehensible. In this case, the individual is not a tool but a "vessel of the divine," and even when the differences between mysticism and asceticism can be reduced to a minimum, Weber still maintains the peculiarly silent disposition of the mystic "so that God may speak."<sup>3</sup> For, the mystic is in this world but only "in order to gain a certainty of his state of grace in opposition to the world by resisting the temptation to take the ways of the world seriously."<sup>4</sup> S/He almost has an "incognito" existence in the

---

<sup>2</sup> "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions" in Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 323-359.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

world, because s/he is actually proving himself against the world. Mystical experience is fundamentally supposed to connect the devout to the irrational meaning of the divine. It is a flight from the world but through contemplation. We can thus understand the meaning in ecstasy of being out of place, displaced: we are in this world but in a sense we are not. We do not actually act; we lead a contemplative, "incognito existence." In addition, even if Weber only glossed over the idea of possession, we can also surmise that ecstasy requires a state of rapture. Being mystically possessed involves an overpowering of emotions, a state of trance, a state of being beyond the realm of reason and self control. What is really crucial in the ecstatic experience is the intensity of the feelings, the extraordinary emotions, the loss of one's self. And here's where the idea of intoxication can be connected to ecstasy.

Still, we are talking about a condition, not a process yet. By this I mean that we haven't really analyzed the issue of how one reaches this state of ecstasy, what produces it, what instigates it. And it is only when we establish this fact that we might be able to draw a connection between ecstasy and the concept of manipulation. We know that the great mystics reached ecstasies by drawing from their own inner beliefs, mostly contemplation. But if we think of Saint Theresa, for example, her *unio mystica* with God was more than ethereal. The physicality of her passion is renown (as portrayed in the famous Bernini sculpture) and does dispel the vision of a purely psychic, otherworldly state of bliss. Also Weber indicated that the magical origin of the desire for a communion with the divine was closely linked to the search of an extraordinary emotional state. Such state, he claimed, was not different from the "religious and alcoholic intoxication of the Dyonisian or the soma cult,"<sup>5</sup> as well as orgiastic activities of different kinds and all sorts of magical intoxication. In all these cases, a material element clearly caused the physical intoxication that then made possible the mystical communion

---

<sup>5</sup> "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," *ibid.*, p. 278.

with the divine. Ecstasy was an induced state, and in this sense we should ask what and who can produce such an effect once we deal with the political realm.

But there is another element in Weber's analysis of other worldly religious experiences that I think can be useful in our own discussion of Rausch. I am referring here to what Weber defines as the "here and now" focus in the attainment of otherworldly sacred values. Weber states that in most religions of the past sacred values were connected to goods of this world, among them health, wealth, and a long life. Only the religious virtuoso, the monk, etc. strove for otherworldly sacred values. Still, even in those cases, such values, Weber claims, were not values of the *beyond*, rather of the "here and now." Possession, orgy and, for what concerns us, ecstasy all held an emotional value for the devout. This temporal-spatial dimension of ecstasy, as well as the notion of passivity inherent in it, its connection to overpowering emotions, and the material, orgiastic source of its sensations, are I think crucial for understanding the role of ecstasy in politics.

If we now translate these different aspects of ecstasy into the area of dictatorships, and in particular Italian fascism, we can begin to assess the use-value of ecstasy in totalitarian regimes. The main question for me, as it may be clear from the set-up of my whole discussion, is whether the masses of totalitarian regimes were indeed ecstatic and whether the "ecstatic masses" were manipulated. This is a tricky question, because one still needs to resolve the issue whether manipulation is required to attain ecstasy or whether ecstasy is a precondition of manipulation. This distinction is crucial because of my prior question: what goals does manipulation have? In the first instance, I would conclude that the goal of using manipulation to attain ecstasy is the communion with the leader; in the second case the manipulation of ecstatic "masses" is tied to a specific objective. Thus the two alternatives would bear different outcomes, even if they are not mutually exclusive. They could, indeed, both take place, but it is still useful to theorize their possible ramifications.

Of course, what makes a huge difference when one analyzes the fascist phenomenon as compared to the mystic religion is the fact that we look at the ecstatic experience as a mass phenomenon. Yet, even Weber, despite his discussion of religious virtuosos and mystics, considered the communal nature of orgiastic events characterizing various religions. And Weber's contemporary, Durkheim, elaborated a social conception of religion according to which the sacred time is the time of festivals and ceremonies, of group gatherings. Religious sentiment only develops as a social sentiment, Durkheim claimed. Without the physical presence of the group, the sacred cannot ensue, even if this does not exclude that the emotional bond created and cemented by the group gathering ties and connects the individuals when they are not physically together, that is, when they are involved in their own individual activities during the profane time.

Now, if we look at fascism, there is no doubt that mass gatherings were crucial moments in the life of Mussolini's regime, although we still need to understand the psychological process that anticipated, or prepared, the single individual's involvement in the "crowd." But putting this question aside, we can focus on the dynamics of mass gatherings. Why did these gatherings become so crucial in fascism? What happened during these mass events? What were the important dimensions that made possible, or facilitated, the intoxicating ecstasy? Here, maybe, is where the differences between fascism, nazism and Stalinism might emerge. Under fascism, I see ecstatic situations only possible in events where the dictator was present. In my opinion it was the relationship between the dictator and the mass, between Mussolini and the "crowd," that is crucial here. So if we want to talk about festivals as moments of mass ecstasy in fascism, I would mostly refer to the mass celebrations presided by Mussolini. I have discussed elsewhere the centrality of Mussolini's myth in the identity construction of fascism and in the regime's pursuit of a fascistized Italy. The admiration and the emotions that Mussolini drew have been amply documented. Personal letters, testimonials, official reports constitute reliable sources for framing the nature and extent

of the Italians' enthusiasm and awe for Mussolini "the Man" (at least until a certain time). Yet, I think one can safely state that Mussolini contributed to build his own fame and to create a cultic aura around his persona through his own understanding of, and approach to, the new protagonist of modern day politics: the "mass." I am suggesting here that Mussolini consciously pursued an aestheticized politics that revolved around the spectacular presence of the leader and on the hierarchical notion of a dependent passive "mass." From this point of view, we can certainly see in the case of Mussolini a strong fascination with and attraction for the idea of manipulating the "masses," of distancing himself from, and dominating, this inferior "crowd."

Mussolini was not unique in his attraction/repulsion for the crowd. He lived in the era of crowd theories that examined and questioned the behavior of large groups of people in the public arena. Despite the fact that many social scientists contemplated the role of these new protagonists of social life, it is not by chance that Mussolini sided with and admired Le Bon, who pioneered a very negative outlook of the crowd and of the consequences of what he believed was the crowd's irrational nature. For Le Bon, crowds were characterized by illogical spirit, instinctive character, and a propensity to be governed by feelings. "Little adapted to reasoning, crowds, on the contrary, are quick to act," Le Bon stated in the introduction to his popular text, *La psychologie des foules*.<sup>6</sup> Le Bon affirmed that the qualities one could find in the "crowd" were the same as the ones in "beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution" -- that is women, savages, and children.<sup>7</sup> He ultimately offered a portrayal of the "masses" as unable to participate responsibly in political processes.

Mussolini did not spare evaluations of the "crowd" along the lines traced by Le Bon. According to him, the irrational "masses" needed not only to be tamed but also excited by the leader. Mussolini gives away his secret about how to govern: he does play

---

<sup>6</sup> See *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Viking, 1960), p. xvi.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

with the "masses" emotions; feelings have a central role in his political style. Mussolini's fascination with the leader/"masses" relation and his reliance on exciting emotions helps to explain why the highest moments of festivals in Italian fascism can be identified with the events presided over by Mussolini. In this sense, the notion of Rausch rather effectively directs our attention to the emotional side of fascism's politics. But the problem with Rausch for me, and its danger, is in the idea that, on the one hand, Mussolini's plan of control could be interpreted as a reality: Mussolini had reached total power over the people. On the other hand, the issue remains whether "crowds" can indeed be manipulated and in what ways. Here we can also refer back to the issue brought to the fore by Weber and that well suits a discussion of behavior at mass rallies: the "here and now" issue. We can hypothesize that the visible presence of Mussolini in visual or audio version created the cathartic moment, the kind of trance that an ecstatic displacement provokes and that affected many of those who gathered to admire the dictator.<sup>8</sup> It is Mussolini's presence, or the evocation of his presence, that functions as a catalyst for the production of energy, a surcharge of human excitement. I cannot think of any other fascist festival that would recreate these conditions of strong involvement and exaltation on the part of the people. And yet, the limits of the here/now dimension on the potential reverberation of ecstasy are considerable. The effect of the electrifying presence of the dictator, if we want to assume that Mussolini indeed had electrifying effects, was spatially and temporally defined and circumscribed. It was satisfying not in terms of, or in view of, the future grandeur of fascist Italy, but in terms of its immediateness. It was satisfying on the moment of its occurrence. The effect was not postponed, nor delayed, although one might assume that it could also endure. But then the issue is, for how long after the rally breaks up and people go home, and in what specific direction, toward what goal? Here we can also reconnect to Weber's description of the orgies accompanying the

---

<sup>8</sup> Of course, we also need to take into account the several people who only attended these rallies because forced to.



production of the ecstatic experience: I am referring here to the physical sensation of the here/now, the effect on the flesh, the drunkenness that enters the organism and is materially taken on. The sensations derive from and are connected to the bodily presence of the "mass" at the rallying point. In Durkheim's formulation, one could say that it is not beliefs, or not only, but also practices -- the ritual ceremonies -- that produce the religious sense, a sentiment *sui generis*. Of course, this is also what the crowd theorists claimed disparagingly. But whether one analyzes the phenomenon in a negative or positive way (Durkheim and Weber did not see it negatively), the central idea remains of the specific actions and feelings the individual develops when being part of a "crowd." And this is even more the case when a leader is addressing the "crowd," whether in person or through other media such as films. Although we might assume that the reactions to a speech by Mussolini were in part scripted, especially for those who came from the rank and file of the fascist organizations, we also know that there were uncontrollable reactions. We know that spontaneous responses to the happening developed that, even considering the limits and constraints of a summoned upon and orchestrated rally under a dictatorial regime, genuinely and positively responded to the leader's appeals. To me, these are the most constitutive moments of ecstasy in "crowd" situations under fascism. It is the arousal, if we want to use this highly connoted term, of people's affect towards the dictator in a non-specific direction.

With this I do not mean to imply that the regime did not exploit such potential of "mass" excitement for more action-oriented goals. The case of war in the instance of the Ethiopian conflict in 1936 constituted such a moment. Yet, one cannot merely impute the success of the Italians' support for the Ethiopian war to the manipulative abilities of Mussolini and his oratorical verve. Mussolini had begun to trace the path to a warrior-like fascist Italy several years earlier, and if this fact testifies to something vis à vis the issue of manipulation, it is the long-term nature of the manipulation process. It took Mussolini many speeches to convey his dream and ambition of a strong, powerful,

fighting, imperial Italy. The question remains whether he consciously set up the direction and content of his "dialogues with the crowd" in view of a potential chance to take up the opportunity of war and whether this helped convince and carry the "crowd."<sup>9</sup>

It is when I raise these questions, however, that I see the concept of manipulation as defective or deficient, because manipulation involves a clear rationally oriented action in order to pursue specific goals. It involves clear intent and clear ends and a deceiving inclination. But when the deceiver believes what he says, like in the case of Mussolini, how do we analyze these situations of manipulated crowds? Or better, what analytical tools do we have available or do we need to develop in order to deal with such instances? Is "manipulation" adequately helpful with its completely subjected sense, its negative "passive" implications, its sense of ecstatic communion as mere instrument?

This question leads me to some final observations about my uncomfortableness with the term "manipulation" and its connection to Rausch. To be sure, reference to Rausch allows one to overcome the overly heavy emphasis on repression and control as elements necessary to understand and study the modern dictatorships of the early twentieth century. I fully support the idea of moving away from this model and stressing the importance of people's active engagement in the making of these regimes. But I fear that the underlying assumption of the manipulative dimension of Rausch makes the concept problematic. Why? If we focus on the notion of ecstasy in my discussion, we see that the notion implies some version of a religious *élan*, a transport that indicates the desire on the part of the devout to transcend the utilitarian world of everyday experience in order to reconnect not necessarily with the beyond, but with sacred values in the here and now (as Weber argued in "The Social Psychology of the World Religions"). It was a psychological state, an emotional attitude that was sought for by the devout as a way to live through the extraordinariness of the religious experience. We should not forget that,

---

<sup>9</sup> However, we know he believed in the idea of struggle as the wheel of history. Such idea was indeed at the heart of his understanding of human relations and social change.

if fascism appealed to the Italians, it is not merely because it manipulated them to evince their support but because it appeared to offer something that people were seeking and were attracted to. If we lose the active dimension of people's involvement in fascism, then we sacrifice our ability to comprehend the peculiarities of the fascist phenomenon. People were not merely manipulated passive objects. They were looking for something, they yearned for a novel approach to politics and also for a less utilitarian or mundane Weltanschauung. They thought they could find it in Mussolini. Little they knew, of course. Still, they acted, they actively engaged in their search and desire for change, and their active stance cannot be ignored because of the nature of the response to their demand.

Mussolini posited himself and appeared as the person who could take upon himself these needs and yearnings. However, he ultimately failed to "substantively" satisfy people's longings.<sup>10</sup> He offered instead a "formal" appearance of a transformed social world. Mussolini wanted to appear as the charismatic God-like leader of a new social vision and a new social model, but only according to his own idea of what the new society should look like and whom should be in charge. In the end, he neutralized the Italians' political engagement and denied the masses any active role. The masses could express their emotions and advocate changes, but they could not ultimately act on their desire for change because of their organic inability and immaturity. Their presumed irrationality created the space for the coming of the Führer who would then need to control and rein in such irrationality and annul it. The leader could not permit people's enthusiasm to run wild; rather, he needed to channel it toward supporting his own leadership.

From Mussolini's point of view, and this is the last reflection I wish to offer, the ecstasy that takes place in fascism is checked in and tamed; it should not overflow but

---

<sup>10</sup> Here, it would also be interesting to discuss Weber's idea of mysticism's objectless devotion to anybody, "not for man's sake but purely for devotion's sake." p. 333.

rather be rendered harmless. Ecstasy in fascism is almost a controlled intoxication that, on the one hand, needs to be regulated artificially, on the other hand, has to be cleansed out of the system -- an intoxication that cannot be too intoxicating. In this sense, I think, a better use of ecstasy would be as a critical tool for evaluating the leader who presides over the ecstatic crowd -- the leader's relationship vis a vis ecstasy. If we examined the case of Mussolini, I believe it would become clear that he indeed wished to avoid an overflowing ecstasy, a demanding ecstasy. Limits should be overcome, but then only to be reined back in. For ecstasy can have a radical potential in contrasting the taken for granted daily existence with the unknown sanctity of the extraordinary; the immobility of the status quo with the transformative power of innovations. This is what I see, without wishing to romanticize it, with the case of D'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume that preceded the coming to power of Mussolini.<sup>11</sup> By comparing the two cases, I think one could conclude that for Mussolini exceptional moments needed to fit in the daily practice.<sup>12</sup> They were counted in and discounted at the same time, they were neutralized before they would get out of hand, or at least that was Mussolini's intention. The dictator would contain the efflux of emotions because according to him he was the only one capable of controlling the masses' irrational energy.

I would like to stop here, even if I realize that I have not exhaustively developed the several issues I raised in the paper, nor have I presented much evidence on the specific workings of ecstasy in fascist Italy. My discussion was intended more as a stimulating reflection than a coordinated answer to the many questions raised by the notion of Rausch and its meanings. From this point of view, Rausch for me has certainly played the

---

<sup>11</sup> After World War I, D'Annunzio took the initiative of reclaiming for Italy the territories of Dalmatia and the city of Fiume that the League of Nations had denied to Italians. On September 12, 1919, in a whirlwind of events and circumstances, D'Annunzio at the head of a small army entered Fiume occupying it in the name of Italy. He governed the city for fifteen months during which he created a unique experiment in aesthetic rule that stood as a model of anti-liberal politics and example of a new political style.

<sup>12</sup> Mussolini asked: "Can fascism find its tables in the statute of the Carnaro Regency? In my opinion, no. D'Annunzio is a genial man. He is the man of exceptional hours, he is not the man of daily practice." See *Scritti e discorsi di Benito Mussolini* (Milan; Hoepli, 1934-1939), vol. II, p. 204.

positive function of helping to interrogate the role of emotions in modern dictatorships.

The next step would be to combine the theoretical interrogation with more historical evidence pertaining to the deployment of emotions in fascist Italy.