

Comic Fascism: Ideology, Catholicism, and Americanism
in Italian Children's Periodicals. By Zane Elward.
Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2025. 226 pp.

How might reading children's comics nuance our views on the relationship between politics and culture in twentieth-century Italy? In *Comic Fascism*, Zane Elward uses comics published in Italian children's periodicals as a lens through which to analyze the competition to shape members of the younger generations during and after Fascist rule. Focusing on this novel form of popular media, Elward contends, brings forward the underlying affinities and tensions between different "sociopolitical positions," in this case, conservatives and Catholics, and the Fascist regime (p.7). At the same time, *Comic Fascism* goes beyond the genre of comics to shed light on the Fascist state's cultural policies, tracing how these policies were impacted by domestic and international politics. In addition to being a cultural history, *Comic Fascism* is therefore also a revealing study of how the Fascist regime placed boundaries on cultural expression and how the cultural workers navigated various forms of censorship.

Elward locates the importance of comics in adult concerns with socializing and politically schooling children, especially around World War I, and their anxieties over this new form of highly visual media. And yet, as Elward explains, in the Italian context, comics, or *fumetti* (named after the text bubbles, which resemble puffs of smoke), also resonated with homegrown traditions of illustrated storytelling for moral instruction. Before World War I, pioneering children's periodicals such as *Il Corriere dei Piccoli* had introduced comics through stories that aimed to inculcate respectable bourgeois values in Italian children.

The advent of comics as a popular medium with which to reach Italian youth thus did not begin with the rise to power of the Fascist regime. Yet as with other forms of media, such as better-studied cinema, Fascism developed a close relationship with children's comics that could sometimes appear contradictory. The first three chapters take up this relationship via Fascism's "infiltration" of Italian comics in the 1920s, the entry of American comics into Italian periodicals, and the Catholic response in the 1930s. Despite the Fascist state's pretensions to control Italy's cultural field, by 1937, when the Catholic *Il Vittorioso* (or *Vitt*) was introduced, young Italian readers could still choose from a relatively wide offering of comics periodicals. As Elward argues, this relative plurality was made possible by these publications' underlying alignment with Fascist ideas and values. While conservatives or Catholics may have stressed specific differences in

values, they still operated within a Fascist framework. Indeed, as Elward asserts, their “differences were expressed as contestation *within* the Fascist parameters of discourse, rather than in opposition to the regime.” This meant that publishers were “sometimes corroborating the regime’s cultural project, while at other times offering alternative definitions, interpretations, and priorities” (p.13).

Elward underlines how liberal publications like *Il Corriere dei Piccoli* avoided early crackdowns by printing stories that were generally sympathetic to Fascist viewpoints. In turn, the Fascist Party modeled its new *Giornale dei Ballila* on *Il Corriere*’s image, incorporating the latter’s visual style while explicitly espousing Fascist ideals, such as Italy’s imperial destiny and strict loyalty to the regime. Yet these periodicals soon faced competition. In the “comics craze” of the 1930s, Italian publishers chased profits by adapting American comics in new periodicals such as *Jumbo* and *L’Avventuroso*. These comics lacked the political-pedagogical thrust of Italian journals, but with their focus on entertainment, they tended to sell better. Catholics answered through *Vitt*, which emphasized religious duty more than the power of the state, while also reinforcing notions of hierarchy and tradition prized by the regime. Across children’s periodicals, presentations of racial hierarchies, often through exotic colonial stories, proved a common point of convergence, including for American imports. Though Fascist intellectuals and social conservatives decried the alleged crudeness and sexualization of American series, these imports nonetheless did not contradict the regime’s messaging because they employed similar racist, colonial tropes.

Comic Fascism’s initial chapters also highlight the nexus between the regime’s cultural policies and its stability. While the political Left was suppressed, Fascist Italy remained culturally relatively open in the 1920s, as the regime pursued internal consolidation. It remained relatively open throughout the early 1930s, as the regime was enjoying a moment of popular consensus, had reached a “modus vivendi” with the Catholic Church, and maintained sympathetic relations with the United States. This last condition in particular meant that dealing with American publishers and with giants such as Disney and Hearst could bring great profits, particularly to those able to exploit regime connections. Such was the case for the Milanese publisher Mondadori, which acquired the lucrative rights to Disney’s *Topolino* (Mickey Mouse) from a Florentine competitor in part through patronage. Indeed, as Elward underlines, it was only after Italy’s relations with the US soured following the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 that Fascist authorities began to apply more restrictive cultural policies.

The second half of the book departs from Italy's increasing political isolation to examine how Italian comics were shaped by upheaval, first through the Fascist autarky drive, then through war and postwar recovery. Before Fascist cultural control was broken for much of Italy in 1943, comics, like Italian cultural products in general, were subjected to increasing censorship. In line with a general Italian policy of *bonifica*, or cultural reclamation, the Ministry of Popular Culture demanded the Italianization of children's comics in 1938. Yet Elward shows that while this order changed the content of the comics, producing more "Italian" characters, settings, and stories, and curtailed American imports, ways around these restrictions existed for the inventive and well connected. Mondadori, for example, was able to keep publishing *Topolino* while other comics, such as *Flash Gordon*, were stopped. One of Elward's intriguing arguments is that this final turn against foreign, American comics (above all, *Flash Gordon*) is what made these comics come to be understood as anti-Fascist in the first place.

Though Italy's entry into World War II in Europe in 1940 brought more formal restrictions, Elward shows that comics continued to reflect public sentiments and the ideological imperatives of competing social-political groups. Again, these different accents could exist because they aligned with the regime's prowar messaging. Even as Catholic *Vitt* presented Italian soldiers as fighting for God more than for Fascism, the Church's Christianizing mission harmonized with the state's anti-Bolshevism, especially after the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. With Italian defeats piling up, however, many periodicals responded by turning away from the war, before Mussolini's removal and the onset of a chaotic civil war in 1943 temporarily paused many publications.

Finally, Elward uses postwar comics to expose important continuities with the Fascist past while also emphasizing the ways in which 1945 represented a true break. As the political spectrum finally widened to include the Left, socialist and communist voices launched their own periodicals, such as *Il Pioniere*. Interestingly, Elward shows that the Left had to overcome prejudices against this form of media that resembled those that earlier had plagued the Right. Besides the apparent continuities in publishers, personnel, and publications that persisted into the postwar period (with Mondadori and *Topolino* again serving as an illustrative example), Elward asserts that certain values associated with Fascism also carried over into the comics of the Right. Periodicals like *Il Corriere* continued to promote visions of Italian racial superiority and an authoritative, hierarchical society at home, while *Vitt* maintained its crusade for a Christian Europe. Elward shows too how comics reveal the internal tensions among

conservatives in the incipient Cold War, best seen in the challenges they faced in their efforts to balance a strong anti-communist line with their anxieties over America's expanding dominance. Ultimately, by extending its scope beyond the end of World War II, *Comic Fascism* presents a more nuanced narrative of the transition to a "New Italy."

One of the significant strengths of the book is Elward's attention to ambiguity. His careful analyses of comic stories show great attentiveness to the multiple meanings that could emerge for earlier generations of readers, which he uses to push back against convenient readings of comics as a form of anti-Fascist resistance. To cite a few poignant examples, *Il Corriere's* strip *Marimittone* features a character who, through his incompetence, often ends up in prison. To some, the figure represents a "parody of Fascism" that exposed the realities behind the new, supposedly orderly Fascist Italy. Yet Elward is not so sure. He argues that in the late 1920s, the strip may have functioned as a "cautionary tale, informing readers of the need to take military training seriously, to discipline oneself, and to follow orders" (pp.25–26). Another elucidating case is *Flash Gordon*, typically seen as the most prominent of the American comic "Trojan horses spreading anti-Fascist values," particularly for the way in which its protagonist stands up to an intergalactic empire (p.67). Yet Elward reminds us that many of the comic's associations with anti-Fascism were generated *after* the war, and he shows how Gordon, as a heroic male figure (in the model of the "New Man") fighting alone against the caricatured, seemingly Asian Emperor Ming (evoking the threat of "Asiatic despotism"), could be seen to align with, not against, Fascist ideals (pp.68–70). Such a reading ties into his argument that *Flash Gordon* became anti-Fascist only once the suspicious Fascist authorities banned it. In any case, as Elward makes clear, the messages that young readers took away from comics were not always clear, and stories of anti-Fascist resistance in the form of comics may be easier to spin than to support.

Comic Fascism should also be commended for its excellent embedding of comics into the wider context of Fascist Italian and international politics. This is facilitated by the internal structure of the individual chapters, which typically begin with shifts in the political and social context before delving into what the comics and their stories might reveal about these shifts. At the same time, it seems worth asking what a different, inverted approach might have offered. Would a narrative strategy that began with the stories in the comics themselves and only then considered context have succeeded even more in breaking down accepted notions of Fascist cultural censorship, internal political relations, and

historical periodizing? Elward achieves this to a certain extent by basing his initial chapters around competing publications, but the structure still generally conforms to received chronologies of Fascist Italy.

A second critical point regards the images used. *Comic Fascism* is relatively generous in its reproduction of comics, as twenty images are included within the text. Often, these images are used effectively, as when Elward shows how a recently banned American series, *The Phantom*, was renamed and modified in 1939 to allow for its inclusion in *L'Avventuroso* (p.126). Yet for a history that deals with visual sources at such depth, the inclusion of more examples would be welcome. This is especially the case when Elward zooms in on stylistic differences between publications. For example, he notes how *Vitt* “developed its own style of comics,” privileging captions over speech bubbles and creating distinctive visual arrangements (p.86). While Elward’s description is crisp and clear, it nevertheless would have been instructive to see a reproduction of an image or two from the publication itself. The same goes for other cases in which Elward points explicitly to visual differences, such as contrasting postwar representations of Pinocchio (p.176).

Of course, these points do not detract from the book’s achievements. *Comic Fascism* does much more than explore how Fascism left its imprint on Italian comics. Rather, it uses comics to reconsider creatively how different ideological orientations competed within Fascism, how porous (or strict) Fascist cultural restrictions could be, and how Fascist legacies left their traces on Italy’s postwar cultural sphere. As a highly readable text that combines deep source analysis with rigorous contextualizing in the political and social world of Fascist Italy, it will appeal not only to historians of twentieth-century Italy and Fascism but also to readers interested in the relationship between authoritarianism and culture, youth movements, and conservative politics more generally.

Christopher Wendt
Czech Academy of Sciences
christopher.wendt@ibot.cas.cz