

Anthony Comegna ([00:21](#)):

Welcome back everyone to another week of ideas and progress from the Institute for Humane Studies. I'm your host, Anthony Comegna, and we have a terribly special set of episodes for you all this week. And next, we're featuring Professor Katy Hull, who holds a Ph.D. in American History from Georgetown and a Masters in International Relations from the Johns Hopkins University. Her book and our topic here on the show is *The Machine Has a Soul: American Sympathy with Italian Fascism*, which is available for pre-order right now on Amazon and other booksellers. It's a fantastic read and covers a wide array of important themes in American history, from then right up through the present moment.

All right. So Professor Hull, thank you very much for being with us. I'm really, really excited to talk with you today because I absolutely loved reading this book, *The Machine Has a Soul: American Sympathy with Italian Fascism*. I'm not a 20th-century guy. My training is in early American History. I'm a Jacksonian era specialist. I try to stay away from the 20th-century because I just think it was so horrible in so many way. Obviously, it was great in its own right too, but it's just such a horrible time of death and destruction and awful ideas and just the most horrible kind of rot in the world coming to full bloom, and I just can't take it sometimes.

So I try to stay away from it, but this was really great. It's always fun to stretch that sometimes too, and to dive into stuff like this. But I want to start because this apparently came out of your dissertation, and you did thank a historian I'm familiar with, Michael Kazin. I think it's Kazin.

Katy Hull ([02:11](#)):

Yeah.

Anthony Comegna ([02:11](#)):

You tell me if I'm wrong. We used to teach... when I was at Pittsburgh, we used to teach portions of his book, *The Populist Persuasion*. So I'm wondering, can you tell us a little bit about how this project evolved out of your dissertation and how you went about finishing up the book manuscript?

Katy Hull ([02:28](#)):

Sure. Anthony, and thank you for having me. And so Michael Kazin was indeed my dissertation advisor, and as you know, he's a historian of American Politics and American Social Movements. Author of among, many books, *The Populist Persuasion*, also *American Dreamers* and I think he's currently working on a history of the democratic party. And one of the best advice he gave me when writing my dissertation was to write the dissertation as if I were really already writing a book. So I think I really took that advice to heart in the way I both sort of organize my chapters. But then also in my writing style. So I try to make it as clear and as jargon-free as possible.

And to be honest, that actually kind of gels with my own preference in writing. I quite like short, crisp sentences. I'm not a huge fan of pretentious terms. But I think as a result of that advice, I didn't actually have to make a ton of changes when it came to structure or language when it came to adapting the dissertation to a book. I did need to get rid of some footnotes, and there are probably still way too many footnotes in the manuscript. But one of the pieces of advice that I got at the review stage, so when it was in the review stage with the press, was that I had a tendency in writing my dissertation to read *American Fascist Sympathies* in the 1920s and '30s in the light of what we now know about fascism.

So maybe to kind of make that more concrete, say judging American fascist... American sympathies for the fascist corporate state, but sort of judging it against what we now know about what fascism became in the second World War and actually that was something I tried to avoid doing. But I

think there was still this sort of tendency of a tone of moral judgment that snuck in. So something I tried to do to some degree when converting the dissertation to a book was really attempt to evaluate American fascist sympathizers ideas on the grounds of the information that they had available to them about Mussolini and fascism at the time that they wrote.

But what I would say here is that it wasn't as if even at the time, all the news was rosy, right. And that even when they were writing in the 1920s, they knew that Mussolini was imprisoning his political enemies, and they knew that the kind of plebiscites that Italians participated in weren't free and fair elections. So I think we can still kind of assess their responses to fascism against what they chose not to explore and sort of behind what they chose not to explore. I think that that own preferences which are less towards individual liberties and more towards aspects of social control.

Anthony Comegna (05:38):

Yeah. I sometimes think I'm not cut out for traditional academia anyways because I can't avoid the moral judgments. I find it very, very hard to be a detached analyst of certain subjects. And on that note, though, I think it bears emphasis that you are talking about sympathizers with Italian fascism and not German Nazism. And I mean, it is right there in the title. It's Italian fascism.

Katy Hull (05:38):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anthony Comegna (06:07):

But perhaps you can start us out talking about the content with kind of a rough and ready definition of the different types of fascism and why the distinction is so important.

Katy Hull (06:20):

Sure. I would say the Italian fascism, at least in power, had longer roots. So whereas Hitler came to power in 1933, Mussolini was in power from 1922, and behind the fascist state through the 1920s, there were a lot of theories about corporatism. So resolution of the capital-labor conflict through a sort of a novel concept of the parliament, which wasn't representative democracy. But was modeled on parliament through different professional groups and capital and labor coming together in a parliamentary setting. And that was kind of the underlying theory that I think really drove Italian fascism in the 1920s. I think that these various forms of fascism, whether it's German, Italian, Spanish, they did have certain elements in common.

And some of the important facets that I do think they had in common outlined really well in a book by Robert Paxton. I think it's called *The Anatomy of Fascism*. But something I like that Paxton does is that he arrives at the definition of fascism at the end of his book by observing what fascism was in practice and what fascism was in action. And I think it's a very sort of smart way of doing it because rather than saying, Fascism is this fixed notion that then forms of government to comply with. It's a sort of an acceptance that fascism was evolving and ever-changing to a certain degree, but that there were certain characteristics that emerged through fascism in practice. And I can go into a few of those characteristics if you want.

Anthony Comegna (08:18):

Oh, sure. Yeah. Please.

Katy Hull ([08:20](#)):

Okay. So, for instance, a belief in the primacy of the group or the nation and a belief that one has duties to that group or nation that are certainly superior to any individual rights so that you can see something that's flying straight in the face of classical liberal philosophy, right. A belief in the beauty of violence and the redemptive power of violence. A tendency to accumulate power in a single individual. And that individual is male and his masculinity is relevant. I can go into more details about that down the line. But in contrast to other forms of authoritarian regime, and say tyrannies, which also accumulate power in a single individual, a fascist regime will have some form of mobilization and mass participation in politics.

So they don't ignore the masses. The masses aren't involved in any kind of decision-making in the way they potentially are in a democracy. But they are somehow incorporated into the polity, in a way that they wouldn't necessarily be in a traditional, sort of tyrannical form of government. And then, sort of other facets that I felt were very important in my analysis of Italian fascism, somewhat present in Paxton's definition were very much emerged from fascism as it was observed by these American fascist sympathizers was a view that parliamentary democracy was decadent and irrelevant, an effort to create holistic solutions. [inaudible 00:10:01] this gets back a bit to the concept of the corporate state. So, for instance, and I did it, the state itself can devise a complete and integral solution to some of the major issues of the day, like the cap conflict between capital and labor.

And then I would say the last thing, and the Italian historian Emilio Gentile has written quite a lot about this. But it's an attempt to appropriate or replace institutions of civil society. So the extent to which fascism became or attempted to become a state religion that replaced the church or the extent to which it banned organizations like the Boy Scouts and replace them with sort of parallel institutions emanating from the state. And I think that as you can see, it's a very kind of multifaceted definition, right. And quite a complex definition. But I think that would be a fair definition of Italian fascism.

Anthony Comegna ([11:09](#)):

Yeah. I really appreciate that. And I think it gives context to the fact that fascism was emerging as an alternative to what were they perceived as the main ideologies of the day, the decadent liberalism and the radical fanatic communism. And what strikes me about that list is that while they are common things to fascist regimes and certainly antagonistic to any type of classical liberalism, they are not all totally alien to American life and thought, especially as modernization really took hold. I mean, so much of that is right there in Teddy Roosevelt and the developing cult to the presidency and stuff like that.

Katy Hull ([11:09](#)):

Right.

Anthony Comegna ([11:53](#)):

You can certainly overstate those characteristics. But yet it makes sense to me that there are, at least, a significant number of Americans in the twenties who do have plenty of sympathy for this type of regime.

Katy Hull ([12:07](#)):

That's not exactly right. And one of the reasons why I pulled these facets out in my definition as well. I mean, first of all, they apply to the fascist Italy, but they were absolutely relevant to American fascist sympathizers because they... there was a lot of discourse in the 1920s, not just among the group of people who are sympathetic towards Italian fascism, but there was a lot of discourse around how relevant it... are democratic institutions in the modern age, there was a lot of anxiety about this conflict

between capital and labor and ideas about all the ways outside our existing institutions that would be better at solving it. And I love your reference to Teddy Roosevelt and that kind of [inaudible 00:12:52] of masculinity. And I absolutely see an overlap between its sort of values that Roosevelt was trying to project as the strong male rough rider and what fascism sympathizers saw American fascist sympathizers saw in Mussolini and Richard Washburn Child, who we'll talk about I'm sure in a little bit.

He edited Mussolini's English language, bio... autobiography, but in the introduction that Child wrote to the autobiography, he makes a lot of comparisons, explicit comparisons between Mussolini and Roosevelt. And Anne O'Hare McCormick, who's another of these individuals that I really studied in great detail, draws parallels between the fascist squads in 1920 or 1921 and Roosevelt's Rough Riders. So there was this desire to put Mussolini and fascist squads into this sort of chivalric mold. And a sort of nostalgia for something that was fading in American society and the era of industrialization that Roosevelt already captured as the wise politician he was, and these fascist sympathizers writing some years after Roosevelt's death sort of continue to harp on about.

Anthony Comegna ([14:16](#)):

Now I love this book because it's not just intellectual history. You're not just focused on the ideas and the politics, national and international, although all of that is kind of the backdrop. But this is really a sort of stitched-together series of biographies of four big figures sympathizers with Mussolini's regime. You just mentioned two of them. Go ahead, and tell us who are the four figures that make up your study here. And take them in sort of whatever order you wish and just give us an idea of who they were and what they were up to, maybe how they factor into your overall argument.

Katy Hull ([14:54](#)):

Sure, and maybe before I do that, I can also sort of reflect a little bit on how I came to pick these individuals. And in part, it was because I wanted to find people who sympathize with fascism over a significantly long period of time. So I could really sort of analyze the evolution of that thought. And all four of the people I look at wrote about fascism over the course of two decades. And in 1972, a historian called John Diggins, who's an intellectual historian, wrote a very thick and wonderful book, which is the definitive book about American fascists, [inaudible 00:15:33] people in the United States, who sympathize with fascism and also people in the United States who disagreed with fascism. And he touches on all these individuals in his book, but he kind of gives little passing glimpses because the book covers hundreds and hundreds of people.

And I want it to get much deeper into some individuals and really understand their intellectual biographies. And then kind of the last motivating factor for me in terms of who to pick was building on Diggins's observations, which were very much the people who sympathize with fascism from all walks of American life. I wanted to maintain his history of graphical contribution there because it sort of flies in the face of a more sort of ideological and politicized writing, for instance, by Jonah Goldberg, who in 2008 equated fascist sympathies as a sort of unique to American progressives. And then a few years later, and absolutely unknown to American readers and Italian journalists. And [inaudible 00:16:39] Pareto equated fascist sympathies to American conservatives and sort of the American business establishment. And actually, neither Goldberg nor Pareto were entirely wrong, but they were both framed much and very intentionally only telling half of the story.

And the reality is the fascist sympathizers in the United States were both Democrats and Republicans. They were both progressive and conservatives. And so I really wanted to restore this notion that already Diggins had established, what is that 50 years ago that fascist sympathies ran across that political spectrum. But in terms of these four individuals, I've already mentioned Richard Washburn

Childs. He was a Republican political operative. He was a speechwriter for Warren Harding when he ran for the presidency. And as a reward for the efforts that he put into getting Harding elected, Harding appointed him as American ambassador to Italy in 1921. And Child came at fascism from an [inaudible 00:17:46] conservative perspective. And the main forum after he left the ambassadorship, the main forum he had for expressing his support for Mussolini was *The Saturday Evening Post*, which, at the time, was the nation's most widely circulating weekly magazine.

And it had a very sort of a middle of the road conservative perspective. The second person I look at, and I've also mentioned is, Anne O'Hare McCormick. She was a very successful and totally self-made journalist for the *New York Times*. And she was also quite progressive in her instincts because she was profoundly influenced by concepts of Catholic social justice. And then I considered Generoso Pope, who was a very important Italian-American leader. He was the democratic party PowerBroker, and then he was also the publisher of a number of Italian and American newspapers. They were the newspapers that had the widest circulation in New York and Philadelphia. And his newspaper empire grew in the late 1920s partly, actually, with the help of intervention by the Italian government, with people who are selling the papers and they kind of put a good words in for Generoso Pope and helped him buy more newspaper because they recognized that he was a friend.

And then the final person I consider is Herbert Wallace Schneider. And he was based at Columbia University, and he was a professor of both moral philosophy, and for a time, political science. And Schneider, we can't really pin him down as either left or right in the political spectrum. He seemed fairly agnostic in domestic political terms, at least. I think why I picked these people and what they contribute is that they do show how fascist sympathies within the United States were coming at different angles and from different perspectives. And for instance, because she was very interested in notions of Catholic social justice, McCormick was particularly interested in the corporate state and how that might be able to resolve the conflict between capital and labor. And at least, initially, Child kind of referenced Mussolini and fascism as this idea of a very [inaudible 00:20:17] tunes an efficient state, right.

Which was more of kind of a conservative ideal. Schneider, as a political scientist. Or as someone with a political science background, was particularly interested in corporatism as an alternative to liberal democracy. Generoso Pope, I would say, was just more a broad fan of fascism and said lots of positive things in lots of positive areas. But it's absolutely true that these different people bring different facets of sympathy. And reflects on the fascist state in different ways. But actually, one of my main arguments is that despite their differences and despite the fact that they came from very different places themselves in the American political spectrum, that they all felt similarly about fascism in one particular way, which is that they saw in fascism a way to challenge... to manage the challenges of modernity that they considered to be a really big problem in the United States. So they had that very much in common.

Anthony Comegna ([21:25](#)):

Yeah. And then this imagery of machines is so, so significant. Again, obviously, it's right in the title here.

Katy Hull ([21:34](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anthony Comegna ([21:35](#)):

And you say, fascism is not just this mish-mash series of ideas and people, but it is about reconciling the old and the new and all the changes sweeping over people constantly and protecting them from that. So what is it with this imagery of the machine? What is it with all this focus on cultural rot and decay and perversion and things like that? Why... These people are self-conscious modernizers, hyper modernizers, and in some sense, I mean.

Katy Hull ([22:08](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anthony Comegna ([22:09](#)):

God, Mussolini's Italy is kind of bizarre in that sense. The Italian futurist movement and all this stuff. He's got his supervillain layer in Rome. And with the giant picture of himself out front. It's just really this weird mix of modernization and reaction against modernity to fuse those two together. How did they... what were they thinking? What were they really up to? How did they want to accomplish that, and why?

Katy Hull ([22:39](#)):

So I really... I love the way you put it, and there is a weird mix there, and it can be quite confusing to the viewer looking back. I'm not sure how confusing it was to people at the time, actually, because I think that, especially for those who sympathized with fascism, it felt like this perfect blend. And the thing that I would point anyone to particularly on this topic is a political theorist called Roger Griffin, who's a British political theorist in modern historian, and he's written a lot about fascism's relationship with modernity. And really pointed to the fact that it's a very ambivalent relationship to modernity, right. So that we can sort of cling onto these images of Italian, sleek, aerodynamic cars and airplanes, and some of the sort of the sculpture and imagery and architecture of the fascist state.

And it seems to be simply a worshipping modernity, but actually, behind that, there's a much more complex relationship. And this idea of the machine with a soul that's in the title, it's something actually that Child quoted Mussolini as saying, but in a sense that perfectly encapsulates what American fascists sympathizers believed Mussolini's Italy to be, which was taking all the efficiency of a machine, but not allowing the machine to overtake ordinary life and ordinary people in a way that it had appeared to in the United States. So that they saw the machine in Italy held in balance by the state in a very deliberate balance by the state. And I can give a few little concrete examples, I think, just so it doesn't sound so entirely abstracts. So, for instance, McCormick wrote a lot about American politics. And she traveled a lot around the United States as well.

And she wrote a series. I think it was in 1924 and 1925 from Florida, which was a new development. The Florida land boom. And the fact that land was being dredged out of the sea in Florida. And buildings were going up, and prices were going crazy. And there was this sort of very high tempo life. And she felt this sort of high tempo life in the United States was really out of control and that it made people feel anxious. It made people feel sense of senselessness, in fact. And she would write, for instance, about the noise in American society, the sound of cars, the horns, the factories, and the radios, and the fleetest feeling that amongst kind of all this noise and all this movement, people were feeling really empty, really disconnected from one another, and that they didn't have any sort of sense of autonomy or control over their daily existence.

And she used fascist Italy very much as a sort of counterpoint to that, not by describing it as a place that was trapped in time. And she didn't sort of hang onto this romantic notion of Italy. Instead, she said that it was cutting edge and that, for instance, a city like Florence had all the latest

technologies. But the Italians were using those technologies deliberately as a way of making life easier and simpler rather than kind of allowing the technology to take over to the point where their lives were so complicated that they couldn't grasp head from tail or top from button. So she sort of described Florence as this quintessentially Italian city. Where everything ran very smoothly, but machines haven't taken over, and everyday life was still very calmly paced, was defined by simple interactions in the market place.

People would go from store to store, pick out their fruit, pick how that vegetables go to another place, pick out their cheese. At each point, talk to the person they were buying their food from, making eye contact, slowing down, stopping, but still, the city had a beautiful transport systems and garbage disposal and all the sort of trappings of modernity. And so she really held up fascist Italy as a place that had got the right balance between man and machines.

Anthony Comegna ([27:14](#)):

I love that example and that explanation because you have me thinking there's also a certain amount of escapism here to the ideology. Wanting to obviously escape so much that is annoying or demanding about the modern world. But then they kind of look at Italy as sort of a sandbox to play around in with their American... they're distinctly American problems in American imaginations. And so, I'm reading your book, and I'm thinking they're talking about the Mussolini's march on Rome. And you've got all this squadristi violence in the streets and these fascist street brawlers fighting with communists and stuff like that as the regime takes over and consolidates. And the American observers are kind of looking at it like a LARPing.

It's [[crosstalk 00:28:06](#)] an example of live-action role-playing, and they just are having fun with the exciting and invigorating. The real the realness of the street violence, as opposed to the fake modernity that's all around them, squawking at you all the time. There's something real and legit about this. And I don't know, that's bizarre to me on the one hand, but boy, it also rings true with our modern period. We see that all over the place. So I'm wondering what... was this Americans treating real, very real post World War I, Italian politics as some fun distraction from their own country's problems?

Katy Hull ([28:51](#)):

I agree with you in the sense that there is a sense that they're using Italy therapeutically kind of as consumers, right. So, none of that observations or that interactions with Italian fascism or about Italian fascism alone, they are really about the United States. And so there's almost a sense that they kind of go to fascist Italy and they observe fascist Italy with this sort of attitude of, "What have you done for me lately," right. "What can you tell me about the world that I live in and the world that I come from?" And I really like the parallel you drew with LARPing, and it wasn't one that I had in mind when I was talking about the invigorating feeling, but they could get from the proximity to violence that I will... I'll share with you what I had in mind in the second.

But I think that this feeling and you sort of said what's going on there with why did they see these conflicts as sort of invigorating and sort of we need to some degree further back and think about feelings of disillusionment that many Americans and almost all Europeans had with the first World War. But even back to the kind of culture of the first World War itself and historians like Chris Cappozola and David Kennedy, who've written a lot about the culture of American interventionism in the run-up to American entry into the first World War and how that this culture helped to promote a belief that participating in war would help cultivate higher values.

For instance, like service and honor. And that it would also help to create a much kind of morally purified world. And these ideas circulated both in writing. For instance, people like Walter Lippmann wrote in these terms in 1917. But they also entered into British and American propaganda during the first world war so that when the war was done and people sort of realize how duped they'd been by propaganda, there was a huge wave of disillusionment, not just in America but also across Europe. And this idea that war would usher in a morally pure and more chivalric worlds felt laughable. It felt like a sales pitch, essentially.

And I think what was quite typical in fascist sympathizers don't fall into this category at all, but what was quite typical in American culture in the early '20 were cultural expressions that sort of satirize and knowing [inaudible 00:31:33] satirize this notion. But war would be an elevating experience for individuals. So I'm thinking about writers here like F. Scott Fitzgerald, who's *The Beautiful and the Damned* really undermines this notion that war could have an elevating effect. I think [inaudible 00:31:50] his antihero never leaves the United States. He spends his time in military training, frequenting, [inaudible 00:00:31:56], prostitutes, and getting drunk. And that was sort of F. Scott Fitzgerald's way of just saying, "This was all pointless [inaudible 00:32:04]." Really running counter to that pervading culture.

You have people like Anne O'Hare McCormick and Richard Washburn Child who essentially never lost the idea. And it's an idea that they shared very much with the fascists and the squadrist themselves that violence could have restorative effects on morals. So when they sort of observed and they... Child himself was in Rome during the march in Rome when they participated at least from the sidelines as an observer in the march on Rome. They told this part of history and these stories of squadrist violence in very positive terms, this is sort of an example of a nation that was fulfilling these wartime ideals that showed that these wartime ideals were actually meaningful and that they continue to have meaning in the post-war era. And in terms of that parallel, you draw with LARPing.

I think it holds because on one level these observers didn't take the fascist violence very seriously. Schneider, for instance, talked about the violence that the fascist squads inflicted on their political enemies, and he compared it to fraternity fun, fraternity pranks. And so they really didn't think about the human consequence of violence, which shouldn't surprise us in a sense, because these weren't people who really thought about the consequences of fascism for individuals, right. And instead, they enjoyed violence as sort of a performance, which I guess is where the LARPing parallel comes in and something that made them feel alive. So they were kind of vicarious consumers.

And actually, when I was writing, this is kind of a slightly personal story, but it made me think, and I think I said something in the book about how anyone who's been in a post-conflict environment knows that feeling of the enlivening effect of proximity to violence. But in my very late teens, so this was the late nineties. I spent a summer in Bosnia, and I spent a lot of time in the town. A lot of time. I spent a significant time in the town of Mostar, which was the town that had been horrendously hit by war, and I befriended or was befriended by some American volunteers.

No, they weren't volunteers. They were American United Nations workers. And we had a great time together. But I do remember that there was something very... there was a very particular atmosphere that was generated by sort of being in a city that had so recently seen war. And that feeling of that was [inaudible 00:34:57] something, somewhat little intoxicating. And I felt that they felt it too. So, when I wrote that, I wasn't thinking about LARPing, but it was reflecting a little bit self-critical in a way on my own experience.

Anthony Comegna ([35:18](#)):

My greatest thanks to Professor Hull for joining us this week. And we will be back with the rest of the interview next week. A nice little Christmas gift for all of you out there. Still more about fascism in America. But ugly as it might be to contemplate. I'm not so sure the old arguments for American exceptionalism from ideas movements like socialism or fascism hold up anymore. In fact, I'm not so sure they ever really did in the first place, but you'll all just have to tune in next week to hear more about this. And while you're at it, be sure to pre-order your copy of *The Machine Has a Soul* because I absolutely guarantee it's worth the read. Enjoy your holiday season, everyone. And as always, keep the progress coming.