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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Andare verso il popolo (Moving Towards the People)': Classicism and Rural Architecture at the 1936 VI Italian Triennale

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At the sixth Milan Triennale in 1936, entitled 'Continuity-Modernity', Giuseppe Pagano and Edoardo Persico displayed two divergent but complementary ideological and aesthetic positions: leaning toward classicism and showcasing rural examples, respectively. This article focuses on how these two approaches share similarities with the idea of populism, a concept often associated with dictatorial regimes. Populism implies a defined and strict notion of people and of national identity. This article explores the relevance of the expression 'andare verso il popolo', here translated as 'moving towards the people', a term used by Pagano in an article in *Casabella* of 1935 to define what a national architecture could be. It also explores how architecture can be popular without being populist.

The central argument is that the phrase 'moving towards the people' became a politicised expression embodying two contrasting conceptions of a populism in which architectural ideas playing a defining role. The context is the architectural discourse during the controversial period of the Fascist regime and the rationalist debate in Italy between 1928 and 1936. The two main venues of the architectural debate were *Casabella*, which the same Pagano and Persico had been editing since 1931, and *Quadrante*, founded by the intellectual and literary figures Pietro Maria Bardi and Massimo Bontempelli in 1933. The two different aesthetic positions of Persico and Pagano within the 1936 Triennale would later be associated with two contrasting lines of populism: one more conservative and associated with the Fascist regime, and the other more reactionary that influenced the *resistenza* of the left.

Introduction

Two exhibits in two different spaces at the sixth Triennale, 'Continuità-Modernità' ('Continuity-Modernity'), held in Milan in 1936, faced each other ideologically. Two rooms, two architectures, two ideologies. One, designed by Edoardo Persico (1900–1936), was a room ornamented upon classicist principles, housing two monumental Greek-inspired statues. The other housed an exhibit co-curated by Giuseppe Pagano (1896–1945) of houses and barns—'minor' architecture, as Pagano called it. These two rooms showcased two ideological and aesthetic trajectories of a modernist populism prevalent in Italy at the time, one inspired by classicism and and the other championing rural architecture. The contributions of Persico the classicist and Pagano the rural advocate reveal different tastes and ideas about the ethical, aesthetical, political, and cultural values of architecture. Their work followed different trajectories that later became associated with two different political factions. Persico embraced the idea of an abstract classicism and a monumental architecture often associated with the aesthetic of the Fascist regime itself, while Pagano addressed another aspect of myth, that of the search for primitive origins and a rural taste, a path that also appealed to Benito Mussolini and was later associated with the *resistenza* (Sabatino 2010: 128–164). Both began from the same premise, but their different approaches offered two very different possibilities.

This article explores how the expression 'andare verso il popolo' ('moving towards the people') is relevant to architecture in Italy at the time and to the ways in which instances of populism entered architectural debates during the controversial period of the Fascist regime. In 1931, Mussolini used the expression in a speech he delivered in Naples. It is unclear if Mussolini knew that the expression had first been used by Russian revolutionaries (Mira and Salvatorelli 1972: 534). Since 1931, Pagano and Persico had been editing *Casabella*, founded in 1928 by Guido Marangoni and one of the two main venues for architectural debate at the time. Later, in 1935, and prior to the VI Triennale, Pagano published the article 'Architettura nazionale' ('National Architecture'), in which he tried to define what 'moving towards the people' meant through a definition of a national architecture:

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> The closer Italian architecture moves towards the people, the more national it will be. And moving towards the people means that a true Italian architecture would also express a brutal clarity, the scrupulous administration of public funds and an exemplary simplicity. The architects who have the courage to have a 'pride in modesty' will truly be Italians of our age. (Pagano 1935a: 5)[1]

Pagano adopted the expression and developed his interest in rural architecture as a way to move towards the people, as he would illustrate in his exhibit at the Triennale.

Both the Fascist regime and the protagonists in architectural debates were seduced by the concepts of classicism and rurality and the idealized qualities of 'simple' men and women. The article focuses on how Pagano and Persico developed their ideas about a 'popular architecture' without becoming populists and in doing so illustrates the pathways through which populism entered the architectural debate during this controversial period in Italian history. First, I will introduce the architectural context and the rational debate. Second, I will present the Triennale of 1936 and the different work that Persico and Pagano showcased in it. Finally, I will explain how populist differs from popular through the distinction between people and elite and between nation and nationalism.

Rationalism Representing the Modern State

The relationship between Italian politics and the architectural scene during the Fascist regime has been the subject of wide-ranging scholarship. Many of the terms employed in this context are ambiguous, their positions ambivalent, which architecture historian Diane Ghirardo says is typical of the period: 'the entire 20-year history of Fascism was marked by vacillation between an apparently adventurous modernism and recalcitrant traditionalism' (1980: 114). She points out that from both a political and an architectural point of view, 'Italian Fascism was not built on a coherent, monolithic system of ideas. Fraught with inconsistencies, its short run political success derived from efforts to appeal simultaneously to diverse aspirations and social groups' (1980: 112).

David Rifkind notes that 'rationalism, the Italian variant of the modern movement in architecture, was at once pluralistic and authoritarian, cosmopolitan and nationalistic, politically progressive and yet fully committed to the political program of Fascism' (2013: 4). He also says that modernism and mass identity in other countries were associated with politics of the left:

> Rationalism was the only movement of modern architecture that sought to represent the political values of a fascist regime, and Italy, through both the state and the fascist party, provided official patronage for modern architecture at a level not equalled by any other country in the interwar period. (2013: 6)

Terms such as rationalism, classicism, *italianità*, and *mediterraneità* were defined and utilised inconsistently and often in a confusing manner. Those terms have never been satisfactorily clarified. When one of the main exponents of Italian rationalism, Alberto Sartoris, attempted to define what he meant by *architettura razionale*, he used the words *razionale*, *funzionale*, *elementare*, and *organica* indiscriminately, as if they were synonyms. He explained that these characteristics of *architettura razionale* could be achieved through qualities such as bareness, openness, order, harmony, balance, geometry, simplicity, and purity, as opposed to waste, ornament, decoration, imitation, heaviness, and academicism (1931: 32).[2] The problem with this vagueness and ambiguity was that concepts such as classicism, *mediterraneità*, or *italianità* were syntheses of both the classic Italian tradition and vernacular tendencies. All these different terms were used in the architectural debate.

The ambiguity of the term rationalism and its connection with the Fascist regime's search for an architectural identity and appropriate monuments came to be represented by different aesthetic solutions. Rationalist examples included clear geometric functional forms, such as those of the *Casa elettrica* at the 1930 Monza Triennale, by Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini and realised by Gruppo 7. More abstract classicist and monumental examples include Giuseppe Terragni's well-known *casa del fascio* in Como (1933–1936). Rationalism also allowed for the combination of rurality and modernity in the attempt to create a Mediterranean character, such as in Adalberto Libera's Casa Malaparte (1938–1942) in Capri. In the years after World War I and especially towards the end of the 1920s, Italian architects explored these different directions. While there was an interest in building a nation through its modernisation, there was also a resurgent interest towards more regional and rural tendencies. In one sense, this could be seen as a distinctive Italian twist of the arts and crafts movement.

Before 1936, when the group of Italian architects adhering to rationalism was cautiously looking for a compromise between modernity and tradition, they soon moved away from the more radical European experiences. In an article published in *L'Ambrosiano* in 1931, the artist Fillia (a pseudonym for Luigi Colombo) describes the different approaches: 'the greyness, the monotony and collectivism that dominates the production of European colleagues are opposed to the Italian temperament, full of lyricism and individuality' (1931: 14).[3] It is clear that the first Italian rationalists took pride in distinguishing themselves from European architectural production elsewhere.

The Italian debate on modern and rational architecture came almost ten years later than comparable European experiences, mainly those in Germany and France, and lasted a decade. At the first exhibition of rational architecture, held in 1928 at the Palazzo delle esposizioni in Rome, the works exhibited ran the gamut of examples that sought to embody both *italianità* and *mediterraneità*. At the same time, they participated in the larger European debate about rationalism in functional architecture and

also addressed the perceived need for modernisation (see Libera and Minnucci 1928).

Yet, as Michelangelo Sabatino notes, although rationalist architects negotiated both classical and vernacular sources, futurists had earlier rejected the former on the basis of its elitism and associations with academic historicism. Sabatino also explores how the vernacular and the classic could meet in the concept of *mediterraneità* (2010: 119). The elitist position was still maintained by most architects and intellectuals. The two main venues of the architectural debate were *Casabella* and the magazine *Quadrante*, founded in 1933 by the intellectual and literary figures Pietro Maria Bardi and Massimo Bontempelli. The intellectuals involved in the publication of *Quadrante*, which ran until 1936, championed modern architecture as an explicitly Fascist mode of construction, both endorsing Fascism's project of modernisation and supporting the regime's self-identification with the tradition of imperial and papal Rome. As Rifkind asserts, *Quadrante* was not launched to report on contemporary architecture; rather, it aimed to create it (2013: 6). Intellectuals wanted to 'move towards the people' but were always separated from the elitist position they maintained. Architects such as Terragni appealed to the state to educate the people about how to appreciate a new architecture while still being clear about the distinction between intellectuals and 'the people'. In Vincenzo Gioberti's words, 'it is necessary to create a universal conscience: intellect and culture have the task of raising the people, the intellect is not made by the people, but it makes the people' (Ciucci 1989: 124).[4]

Fascist rhetoric uses an appeal to the people, as opposed to the elites, to engage a broader segment of the population. This explains why Mussolini used the controversial expression 'andare verso il popolo' in his speech in 1931 (Mira and Salvatorelli 1972: 534). The philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), an intellectual source for many Italian thinkers at that time, stressed the importance of 'myths' in history for their role in mediating between religion and praxis. For Croce, myths originated from the human need to find some meaning of life through stories that were at the same time mystical and magical (1941). Such myths appealed to human instinct and non-cognitive motivations, and they were also apt to offer practical solutions to human dilemmas. Thanks to myths, and the appeal to a non-cognitive position, ruling classes were able to convey ideas and ideologies to the masses.[5] Though condemned by Croce, the irrational component was used by the Fascist regime to appeal to the masses. The historian Delio Cantimori attributes the intellectual elite's distancing from the masses to their incapacity to include the irrational element as part of their rhetoric, for example (Chiantera-Stutte 2011). However, Fascist politicians had been able to successfully integrate the irrational in their propaganda so as to gain the approval of the masses. The challenge for intellectuals was to regain that public support and engage with the larger masses. In other words, they needed to 'move towards the people'.

The involvement of the intellectual in practices of populism stemmed from the Italy's complex history. Unlike other European countries, Italy has never experienced a popular revolution, has never witnessed a collaboration among the lower classes to achieve political changes, as France did with its revolution. Antonio Gramsci contended in his *Prison Notebooks* that the Italian Risorgimento did not witness enough participation of the popular masses in the events that had defined Italian national unity, an idea that originated with the southernist Gaetano Salvemini (Gramsci 1992: 126). Undeniably, most political decisions had been made from above.

Yet who are 'the people'? The two architects in question, Pagano and Persico, mainly referred to the 'common people'. The political theorist Margaret Canovan explains the ways 'the people' has been understood:

> Since Greek and Roman times, 'the people' has been used in at least three senses: first, the people as the whole (which is to say, all members of the polity, or what used to be called 'the body politic'); second, the 'common people' (the part of the *res publica* made up of commoners, or in modern terms: the excluded, the downtrodden, and the forgotten); and, third, the nation as a whole, understood in a distinct cultural sense. (Müller 2016: 22)

To Pagano and Persico, the common people are in contrast to political and intellectual elites. But they also represent the nation as a whole.

The 1936 Triennale: Edoardo Persico on a Lyrical Monumental Architecture

The year 1936 is a key date not only in Italian social and political history but also in architectural debate. The country had just defeated Ethiopia and annexed it to the Italian empire. Mussolini built upon the political axis of Rome and Berlin through the Iron Pact with Hitler, thus sealing Italy's isolation from the rest of Europe, and he initiated vast public urban plans for the foundation of new cities, such as cities like Sabaudia and Littoria (now Latina). Metaphorically and in actual fact, the Fascist regime was working towards the construction of a nation. But as Giorgio Ciucci has pointed out, by 1936, 'Italy had shifted from wanting to represent a modern state to symbolising a new Roman empire' (1989: 157). Also in 1936, the magazine *Quadrante* ceased publication. The magazine had promoted an 'architettura di stato', an aesthetic that could be a blend of European modernity and Italian regionalism representing the Fascist regime. And in 1936, Persico died, and shortly thereafter Pagano resigned from the directorship of the Triennale (**Figure 1**).

In this context, the Triennale in Milan of 1936 was hosted within the new building designed by Giovanni Muzio, known as the Palazzo dell'arte. First organised as a Biennale, and initially held in Monza, the exhibition became a Triennale in 1930, then moved to Milan in 1933 and became an international exhibition for art and architecture. Specifically, the 1936 Triennale, for the first time, carried the term 'modern' in its title: Esposizione internazionale delle arti decorative e industriali moderne (International Exposition of Decorative and Industrial

Figure 1: Entry to Giovanni Muzio's Palazzo dell'arte, Milan, 1931–1933. The Triennale moved to Milan in 1933. Archivi Triennale Milano.

Modern Arts). Architecture here came to represent a fusion of other disciplines, almost the idealist synthesis of arts described by Croce (1904). Its theme of continuity and modernity underlined, once more, the Italian difficulties and inherent contradictions in trying to maintain a connection to its past while at the same time working towards the modernisation of a nation.

While Pagano organised the 1936 Triennale with Mario Sironi (1885–19961) and Carlo Alberto Felice (1886–1949), critics primarily credit Pagano and Persico for it (for a comprehensive history of the Triennale, see Pica 1957; De Seta 1985; Ciucci 1989). They developed its binary theme in two different but complementary ways.

Persico, a fervent Catholic, was born in Naples in 1900, moved to Turin in 1927, and to Milan just two years later (for more on Persico, see Veronesi 1964; Camilleri 2012; De Seta 1987) (**Figure 2**). In Milan, he began a career as a critic of art and literature, as a self-taught man. Only in 1931 did he become a critic of architecture, while he and Pagano published *Casabella*. Although he was a prolific and brilliant writer, he never produced a book or a longer essay; in fact, neither of his two major architectural texts, 'Punto e da capo per l'architettura' (Back to Square One, 1934) and 'Profezia dell'architettura' (Prophecy of Architecture, 1935), exceeds ten pages.[6] His plan to compile a comprehensive history of architecture also never happened. His first critical history of modern architecture was envisioned and sketched out but never realised. Persico's disparate writings were published as fragments, aphorisms, and articles, mostly in *Casabella* and *Domus*, and never collected into a single volume.[7] He was self-taught, too, when it came to architectural practice. Prior to the VI Triennale, he, together with Marcello Nizzoli, designed the Sala delle medaglie d'oro (Gold Medals Room) at the Italian Aeronautics Exhibition in 1934. With Nizzoli and Giancarlo Palanti, Persico also designed the Salone d'onore (Hall of Honour) at the VI Triennale. More eloquent than his writings, the four white walls of this temporary exhibition seem to express the architectural testament of this Neapolitan critic and graphic artist — who died five months before the work was completed, and who was committed to promoting the new architecture: a new rationality after the irrationality of the War (**Figure 3**).

With the Salone d'onore, Persico, Nizzoli, and Palanti mounted a space within a space to create a European work with a Mediterranean character, almost an exhibition framework, which, nonetheless, claimed its status as a work of architecture. The Salone itself was conceived as an entirely independent entity inside the Palazzo dell'arte; one accessed the Salone by the main staircase of the Palazzo. In the Salone d'onore, the designers placed, parallel to the existing walls of the hall, a misaligned double-walled partition made of white cloth, creating a distributive ring around the perimeter, which resulted in a physical and metaphorical distance from the other areas of the Palazzo and its architecture. This small and isolated space, which framed the Salone and prevented a complete view of it, provided a series of openings instead. It served the purpose of neutralising the directionality imposed by the pre-existing entrances, offering the visitor, on the contrary, the freedom to follow this sort of peristyle and to enter the hall through one of the many openings between the partitions (**Figures 4** and **5**).

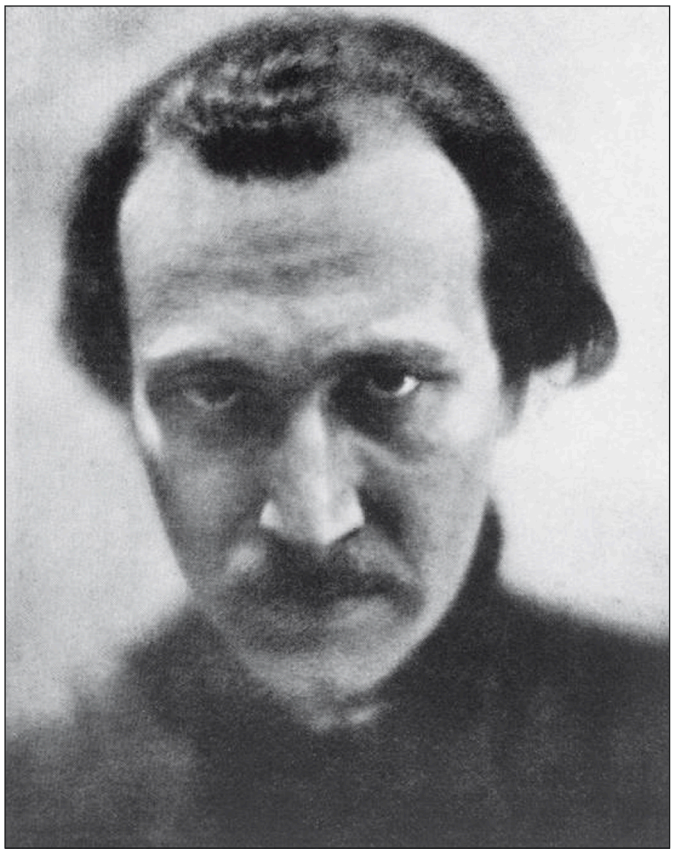

Figure 2: The Naples born critic and architect Edoardo Persico, 1928 (Camilleri 2012: 21).

Figure 3: View of the Salone d'onore, by Edoardo Persico, Marcello Nizzoli, and Giancarlo Palanti, at the 1936 VI Milan Triennale. In the background is the Athena Nike by Luciano Fontana. Archivi Triennale Milano.

Figure 4: Athena Nike by Luciano Fontana in the Salone d'onore, 1936, VI Milan Triennale. Archivi Triennale Milano.

Figure 5: Athena Nike by Luciano Fontana, view from behind, in the Salone d'onore, 1936, VI Milan Triennale. Archivi Triennale Milano.

At one end of the Salone was a female figure, sculpted by Lucio Fontana, representing Athena, the goddess of wisdom, handicraft, and war. It was a gigantic sculpture in white plaster, built in only a month, to celebrate the Italian conquests in Ethiopia by the Fascist regime. This female figure was inspired by the Athena Nike in Samothrace and was placed behind a pair of rampant horses. The Athena Nike was on a pedestal that presented inscriptions from the celebratory speech by Mussolini on the African expedition, although there is no mention of the speech in the design report that Nizzoli, Palanti, and Persico published (1936: 8–11). The historian Giulia Veronesi claims it was added later (1953: 70) (**Figure 6**).

As with many other monumental set designs, this work was conceived to move the viewer but not to endure over time. In fact, it was destroyed after the Triennale ended. The sculpture stood solemnly at one end of the modern secular chapel, in which Persico managed to obtain Croce's synthesis of the arts: architecture, sculpture, and the figurative arts. Ciucci also suggested that such architecture contains a mystical world of art in which the myth of Athena — here represented by Nike, goddess of victory — shelters warriors but also contains works of peace (Ciucci 1989: 161).

Persico's report helps with understanding the aims of the design for the Salone d'onore, later called Salone della vittoria (Victory Hall) (Veronesi 1953: 70):

> This project does not intend to be a mere decoration of the Salone del Palazzo dell'arte, but rather an original architectural work like the others that will be presented at the VI Triennale: a contribution towards the solution of some issues which are more emphatically placed under the consideration of modern artists. (Nizzoli, Palanti, and Persico 1936: 8)[8]

In this way the Salone was considered as a simple area in which to place a completely independent and original work. Even if very different in the materials used, the design was in some way reminiscent of the project for the Sala delle medaglie d'oro, at the Italian Aeronautics Exhibition in 1934. The structural logic underlying the project was the same.

Figure 6: Detail of the pedestal of Athena Nike in the Salone d'Onore, by Luciano Fontana, 1936, VI Milan Triennale. The inscription contains part of Mussolini's speech celebrating the conquest of Addis Ababa. Archivi Triennale Milano.

Neither of the two spaces presented solid or continuous partitions, but rather they displayed diaphragms of columns. In the Italian Aeronautics Exhibition, Persico and Nizzoli had implemented a rarefied steel construction within one room, while in the 1936 Triennale, they rarefied the wall through a series of solid partitions and intervals built within a solid space (**Figure 7**). These diaphragms created a space with an evocative, lyrical, and quasi-mystical atmosphere conveyed through chiaroscuro effects.

At the end of the room, on the opposite side of Athena's location, one of the partitions, or columns, was doubled and moved to the front to support the portraits of Roman emperors, as a reference to a bygone prestige (**Figures 8** and **9**).[9] Yet the reference to classicism in the name of a Roman empire, although well appreciated by the regime was, in Persico's intentions, far from being propaganda: 'The style of the work', the report read, 'is inspired by the highest concepts of new architecture and the classical flavour of the composition is legitimate in the view of the major "Rationalists", in whom the aspiration for a new European "Renaissance" is always alive' (Nizzoli, Palanti, and Persico 1936: 8).[10]

The tension between a European standardised and modern style and a connection to a more classical Italian legacy was always present in Persico's work. The continuous rhythm of the walls and the chiaroscuro play, created by a series of membranes, were almost a combination of the two main elements of modern architecture: the practical element of serial construction and the reference to the classic colonnade. The repetition of partitions — columns — stood for modern serial production interpreted through the lenses of, in Persico's words, 'the ancient principle of a colonnade' (Nizzoli, Palanti, and Persico 1936: 8). [11] For Persico, classicism, in the form of Roman references, symmetry, proportions, geometry, classical orders, and monumental sizes, represented the common ground from which an entire European culture could be reborn and to which Italy could and must contribute.

In his report, Persico used the term 'European Renaissance' to refer to the ability to create a new language in architecture that could serve practical and contingent needs, while at the same time asserting the importance of a broader view influenced by and influencing a European perspective. He wanted to present a monumental project that was still European in essence. Even though he favoured a comprehensive European orientation, he opposed merely imitating European models — namely the early German examples — and espoused original invention. His Triennale design is characterised by the absence of the German direction that he had earlier supported. His contradictory return to classicism was for him the only way to avoid the risk of falling back into the nostalgic and 'romantic' styles — reminiscent of Germany's *Heimatstil*.

Indeed, the VI Triennale can be considered to be Persico's theoretical and practical testament, one in which his fragmented and contradictory beliefs came together in one room: he preached against a monumental myth and instead offered a solid but a more spiritual one.

The 1936 Triennale: Giuseppe Pagano on Rural Architecture

Inside a pavilion of the Triennale, Pagano addressed a different concept: the search for a primitive origin and for rural taste, with the goal of accessing the more 'intuitive' side of architecture.

Pagano was born near Trieste in 1896 (on Pagano's life and work, see De Seta 1985) (**Figure 10**). Like Persico, he went first to Turin, where he studied architecture at the Polytechnic, and moved to Milan in 1931 to work on *Casabella*. Trained in architecture, he had wide-ranging

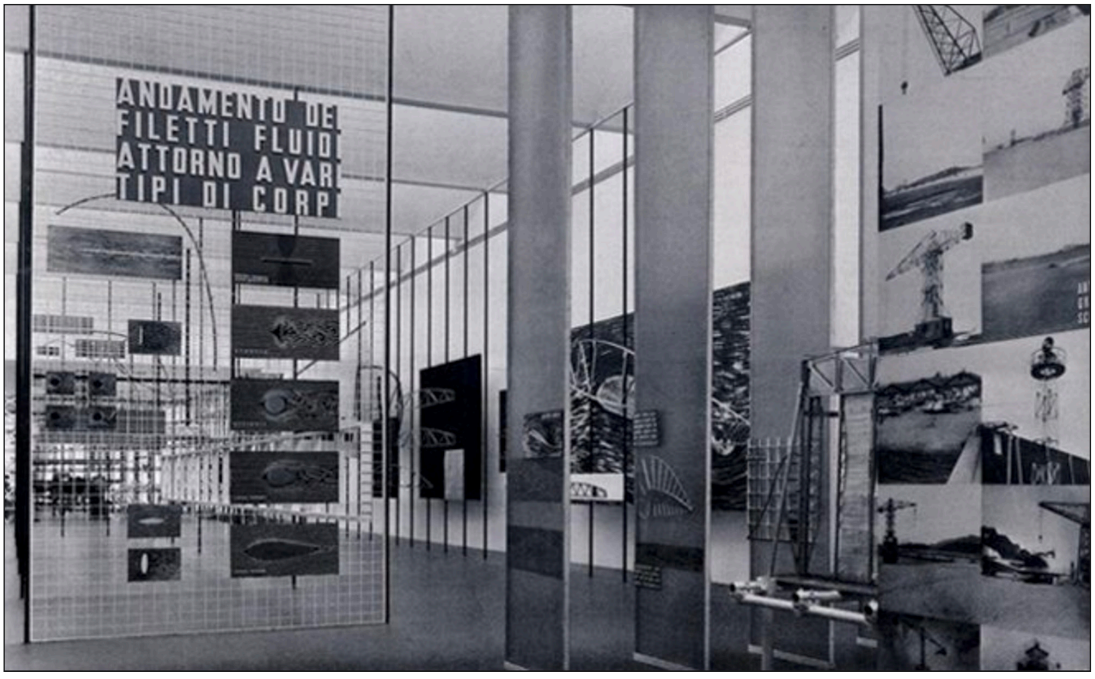

Figure 7: The rarefied steel construction of the *Sala delle medaglie d'oro* (Gold Medals Room), by Edoardo Persico and Marcello Nizzoli, at the *Italian Aeronautics Exhibition*, Milan, 1934 (Veronesi 1964).

Figure 8: Detail of the portraits of Roman emperors in the Salone d'onore, by Edoardo Persico, Marcello Nizzoli, and Giancarlo Palanti, 1936, VI Milan Triennale. Archivi Triennale Milano.

Figure 9: Casabella headquarters, a few days before Persico's death in 1936. Note the Roman art on the wall (Veronesi 1964).

Figure 10: The architect Giuseppe Pagano, prior to 1945. Photo from, *Architects Architecture Archituul*, http://architectuul.com/architect/giuseppe-pagano.

interests, from architecture and magazines to construction engineering and photography. During his career as an architect and editor, he was interested in rationalist tendencies as well as rural construction, both of which coincided for him. Initially a Fascist, as were many other intellectuals at that time, he later renounced Fascism, openly criticised the regime, and entered the *resistenza*. For this reason, he was imprisoned in 1943 (the first of two imprisonments).

Together with Guarniero Daniel, Pagano celebrated the 'other' side of architecture at the VI Triennale with an exhibition on rural housing, entitled 'Architettura rurale italiana: Funzionalità della casa rurale' ('Rural Italian Architecture: Functionality of the Rural House'), which emphasised 'minor' architecture, such as barns and free-standing houses (**Figure 11**). The exhibition presented panels with photographs taken by Pagano himself. They were grouped by typology which, as Sabatino has noted, was more typical of an 'architecture-engineering' approach than that of a historian of art like Giulio Ferrari, who had curated 'L'architettura rusticana nell'arte italiana' ('Rustic Architecture in Italian Art') back in 1925 (2010: 134). The VI Triennale coincided with the appearance of a book by the two men in September 1936, with the same title, *Architettura rurale italiana* (Rural Italian Architecture), published by Hoepli in Milan (Daniel and Pagano 1936). Pagano had already anticipated the topic and promoted the tradition of rural architecture through the pages of *Casabella*, as a way to 'move towards the people' (Pagano 1935a; 1935b; 1935c) (**Figures 12** and **13**).

In the Triennale, Pagano and Daniel showed an architecture that had no titles, the architecture of remote parts of Italy from which came a taste and style that they wanted to suggest as the alternative to monumental architecture. Their idea of history and what architecture should do tackled a different history, one of the anonymous, with no names, one that could help rediscover a national taste. To them, rural architecture contained the seed of a linguistic revolution and expressed the functionality of rural housing. While they claimed that temples, churches, and

Figure 11: 'Architettura rurale italiana: Funzionalità della casa rurale', exhibit curated by Giuseppe Pagano and Guarniero Daniel, 1936, VI Milan Triennale. The panels showcased 'minor' architecture such as barns and freestanding houses. Archivi Triennale Milano.

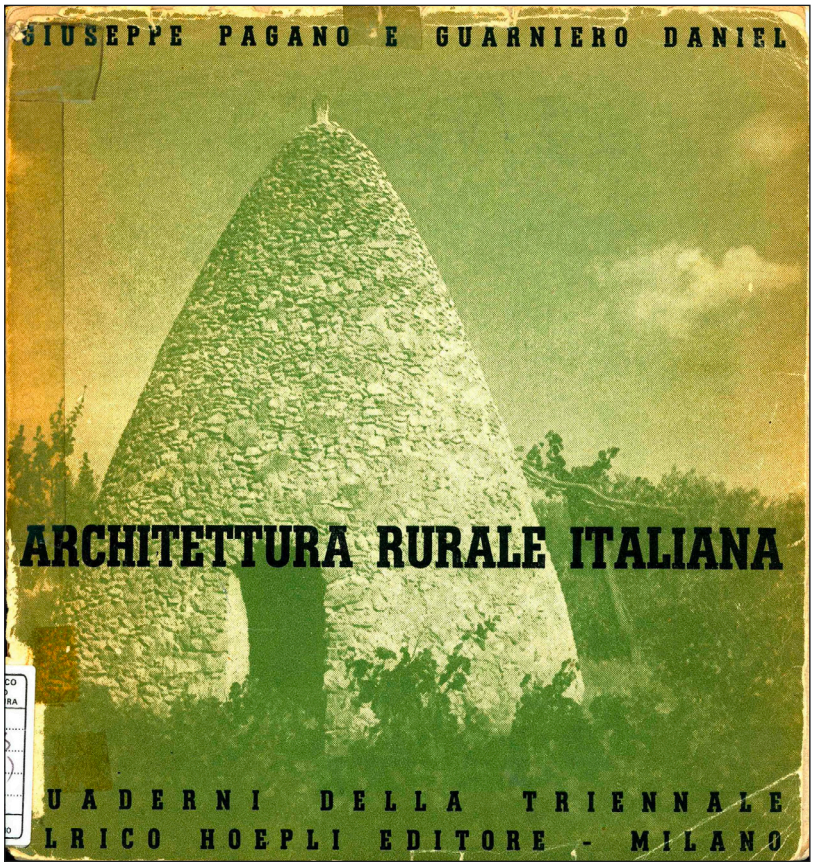

Figure 12: Cover of *Architettura rurale italiana* (Daniel and Pagano 1936).

Figure 13: Evolution from the dovecote to the tower, from *Architettura rurale italiana* (Daniel and Pagano 1936: 54).

palazzi were commonly used to infer taste in architecture, they actually were only the expression of an architectural elite and did not represent the real everyday architecture of Italy. Pagano and Daniel illustrated and explained how ordinary housing, such as the regional trullo in Puglia or the *casa colonica* (farmstead) in Latium or Tuscany were the functional, rational, and direct successors of the barn and the hut (**Figures 14, 15,** and **16**).

They recognised in Italy's rural architecture the most functional, though not uniform, expression of contemporary taste: 'clear, logical, linear, morally and formally very close to contemporary taste' (Daniel and Pagano 1936: 6). As a consequence, rural architecture became the best exemplification of a national taste derived from Italian regional culture. They saw in this rural work the perfect balance, a combination of tradition with modernity proclaimed within the rational debate. The aesthetic of rural houses is the absence of any dogmatic anxiety that is not linked to functional necessity. As an example, the symmetrical façade is the direct translation of a planimetric and functional need. Historically, every choice has a functional reason — the 'aesthetic value of function'.[12] The 'inertia of man — that which we can call tradition or legacy — tends to maintain the same shape even when the primary utility has ceased to exist' (Daniel and Pagano 1936: 27).[13]

The two designers presented an architecture characterised by a simple, essential form, one that would reflect the functionality of the spaces, would refuse ornamentation and decoration, and would prove the aesthetic value of its function. Pagano uses words like 'wonderful primitivism' and 'healthy and honest' to describe this architecture, somehow romanticising these rural constructions, though devoid of any patronising sense (Daniel and Pagano 1936: 6, 15).[14] Pagano here is reminiscent of John Ruskin one hundred years earlier, when the English art critic had romanticised the Picturesque in Italian rural housing, entranced by the simplicity of forms.

In the pages of *Casabella*, Pagano had already anticipated the topic of rurality and promoted the tradition of rural architecture as a way to 'move towards the people' (Pagano 1935a; 1935b; 1935c). All those articles anticipated the publication of *L'architettura rurale*. In the 1930s, Mussolini himself had flirted with the romantic idea of the *homo rusticus* and had him pictured working in the fields. As literary critic Alberto Asor Rosa writes, populism finds itself by recognising the 'common people' as an idealised

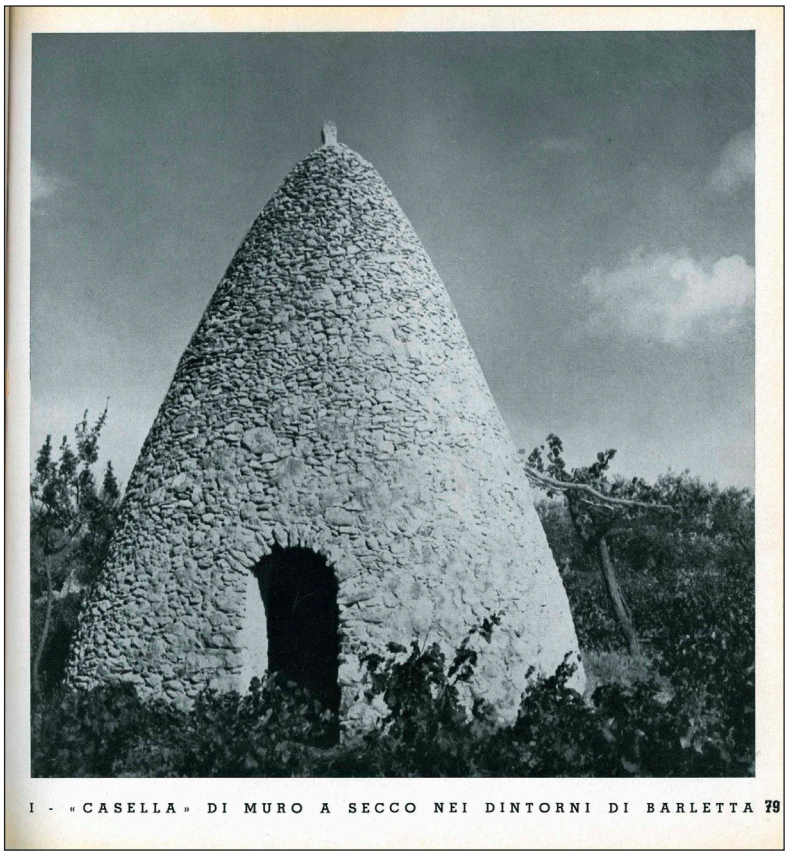

Figure 14: Example of a trullo in southern Italy, in *Architettura rurale italiana* (Daniel and Pagano 1936: 79).

Figure 15: Example of a *casa colonica* (farmstead) in Tuscany, in *Architettura rurale italiana* (Daniel and Pagano 1936: 118).

entity characterised by positive values and the absence of corruption (1965). Somehow, rural architecture, especially the *casa colonica*, was close to the Fascist pursuit of an Italian taste in rural values. The regime had considered a modern rural house that could be suitable for all, but a generic and standard solution could not offer an adequate answer for every part of the country and the specific regional needs in terms of climate and geography. However, trying to design a standardised house fit with Mussolini's desire to build a nation and a state using architectural principles. The compromise of rurality and modernisation, a rural modern house, had the potential to combine an authentic Italian character with modernity. Nevertheless, the Fascist aesthetic ended up privileging neater, classical, and monumental architectural features to represent its imperial power. More broadly, as Sabatino has pointed out, 'the concept [of rural architecture] was by no means unprecedented', as shown by the 'Mostra d'arte rustica' ('Exhibition of Rustic Art') in 1921 by Marcello Piacentini, Gustavo Giovannoni, and Vittorio Ballio Morpugno in Rome, as well as the aforementioned 'L'architettura rusticana nell'arte italiana' ('Rustic Architecture in Italian Art' of 1925 by Ferrari, and the *Casabella* articles by Pagano and Roberto Pane (Sabatino 2010: 132).

Populist versus Popular Architecture: People versus the Elites

To understand what the expression 'moving towards the people' means and therefore to answer the question of whether it is possible to talk about a popular but not populist architecture, I will single out two concepts that signify a populist attitude: the exclusive dichotomy of people versus an elite and the definition of nation and nationalism. Even if they are necessary conditions, these two concepts are not sufficient for, or exclusively synonymous with, a populist attitude. A populist attitude always includes establishing a dichotomy between people and an elite and representing the former as opposed to the latter. But as the theorist Jan-Werner Müller describes in his book *What is Populism?*, a populist attitude is defined by some exclusivist prerogative to be the only one representing 'the people' (2016: 18–19). To Müller, every populist movement claims to be for the people and against the elite, to give voice to 'the people', where those people are the only segment of the population to be considered under the label of 'the people'.

Pagano described the common people as being separate from political and intellectual elites. But as Müller outlines, it was never clear if the common people actually enjoyed the attention and the interest of the intellectuals. He writes,

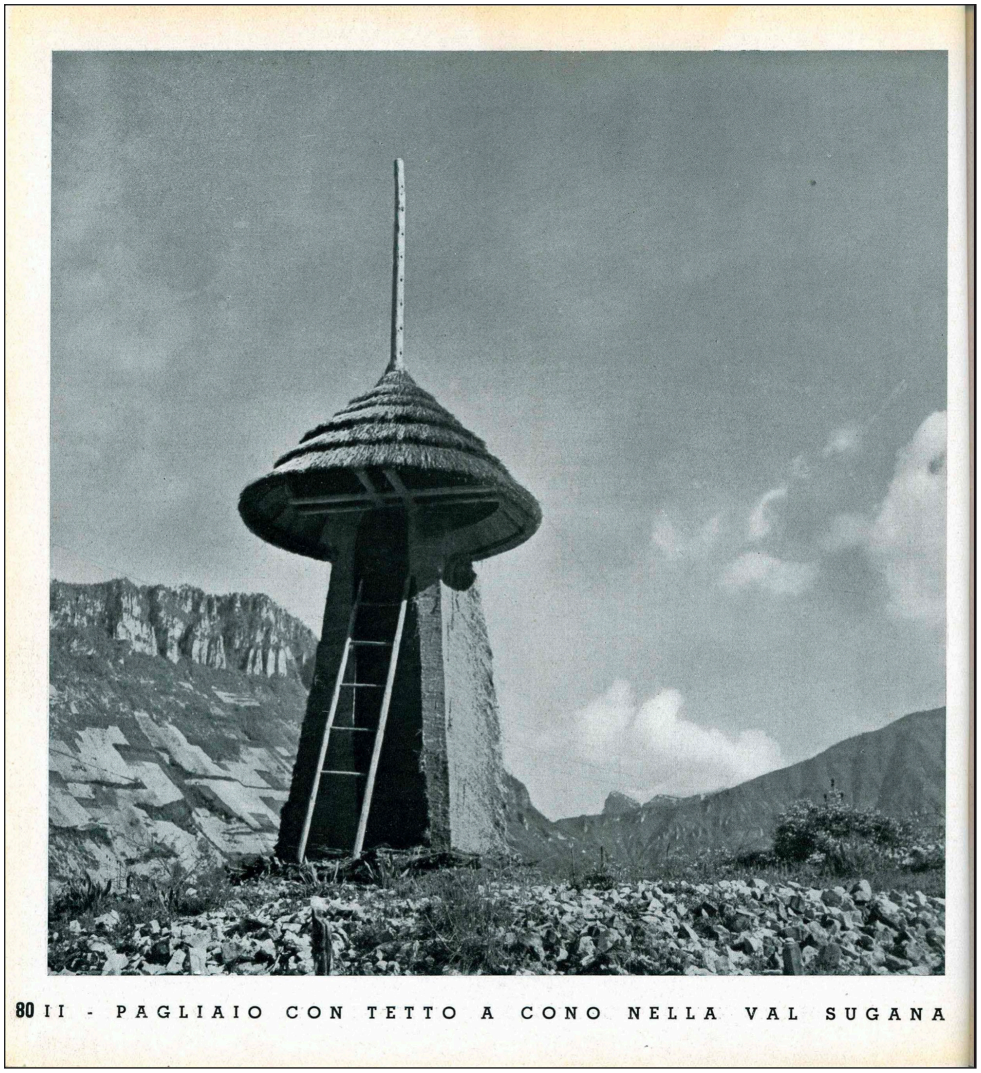

Figure 16: Example of a barn in northern Italy, in *Architettura rurale italiana* (Daniel and Pagano 1936: 80).

> They [the intellectuals] also advocated 'going to the people' for political advice and guidance. And like many urban intellectuals they found that 'the people' neither welcomed them in the ways they had hoped nor recognized the political prescriptions deduced from their supposedly 'pure ways of life' by intellectuals. (2016: 18)

When, in 'Architettura nazionale', Pagano tried to define what moving towards the people meant by defining a national architecture for Italy, he said that 'the closer Italian architecture moves towards the people, the more national it will be' because of the simplicity of forms and the 'pride in modesty' (1935a: 15).[15] In his seminal book *Gli architetti e il fascismo* (Architects and Fascism), Ciucci commented on this passage briefly by referring to Pagano as a populist (1989: 157). Sabatino himself, in his book *Pride in Modesty*, also calls Pagano a populist (2010: 135). Yet the question becomes more complicated and controversial than it may at first seem, much like the terms classicism, *mediterraneità*, or *italianità*. Pagano insisted on the honesty and ethics of primitive architecture and on the 'artistic theme' bridging aesthetics and functionalism. For him, architecture could be popular without being populist. He explained the evolution of the rural house to demonstrate its clarity of purpose and how it addresses the needs of people. This clarity of purpose is always visible and there is no casual aesthetic detail. Each element serves a function. Even decorative elements have some practical reason, either current or as a remnant of the past, such as the ancient dovecotes or the openings for a ventilation system (**Figure 17**).

In the *Casabella* article, Pagano mentions a farmhouse in the Bergamo area, in northern Italy, as an example of architecture that could move towards the people. Nevertheless, Pagano rarely mentions 'the people' but rather talks about 'an architecture produced for men / everyone', implying all human beings (Pagano 1935a: 2). Pagano, and the architecture he proclaimed, was against any empty rhetoric that could be associated with populist attitudes. Nearly every city in Italy, for example, had a *casa del fascio* (a building dedicated to the use of the local Fascist party), which would be later demolished or used for other purposes; the one in Pontida, Pagano said, went against the idea of a pure architecture because it was heavily decorated.

While criticising the elite is not necessarily synonymous with a populist attitude, a populist attitude often includes a moralistic tendency. Pagano, however, talks about the moral conditions that an architecture should enhance: moral, but not moralistic (1935a: 2). Pagano writes, 'The moral, social, economic and social atmosphere of the new district (Pontinia, Latium) was perfectly aligned with that "Pride in Modesty" that moves those who really work for our times' (1935a: 6).[16] He continues, 'It will give us the pride to know the true native of Italian architecture: clear, logic, linear, morally but also formally close to contemporary taste' (Daniel and Pagano 1936: 6).[17] Without any paternalistic approach, Pagano sees in rural architecture the aesthetic evolution following functional needs and the cultural evolution of men and women. Architecture should have a moral strength against any kind of empty rhetoric; Pagano recognises the social aim of architecture.

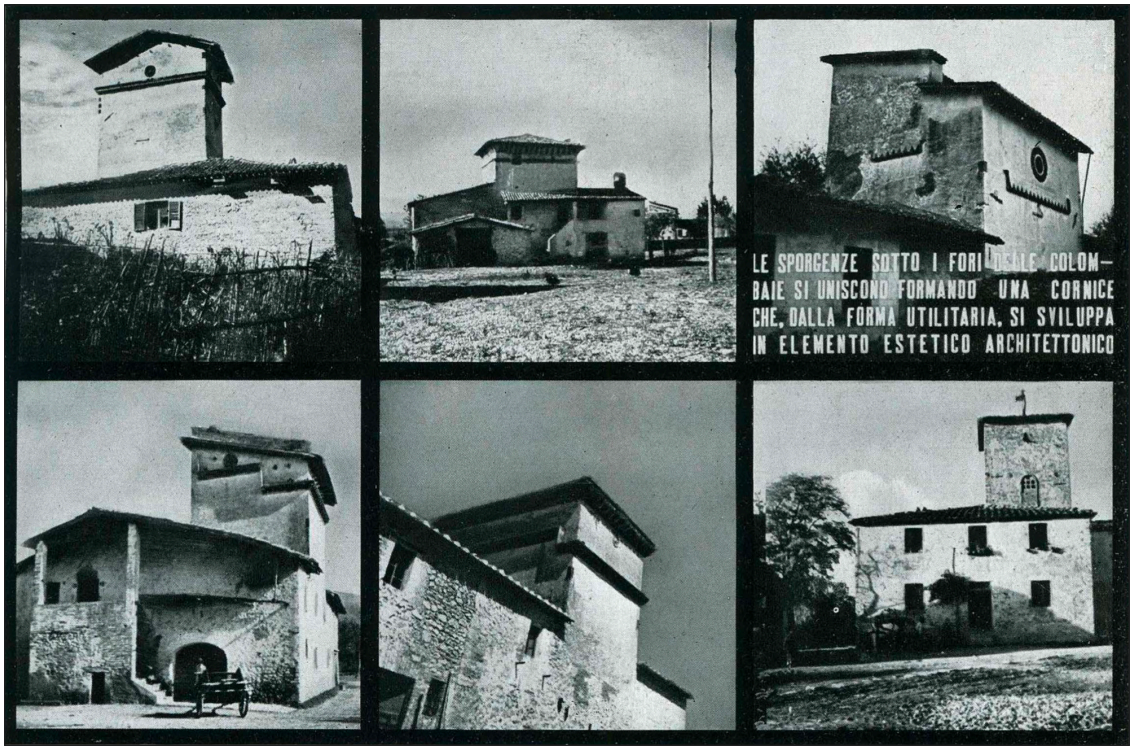

Figure 17: The dovecote became a peculiar characteristic of the house. Eventually, the small openings and the ledge became an integrated decorative element where the dovecote once was, in *Architettura rurale italiana* (Daniel and Pagano 1936: 53).

When it comes to a moral attitude to architecture, Persico approaches the topic more directly. The mediation between religion and praxis as well as between the ruling class and the masses is crucial in his work. As a Catholic, he openly referred to an evocative and abstract spirit and a faith, which Italy lacked in the realization of a new architecture. But Persico mainly addressed the concept of a European taste to promote a European aesthetic without losing its Italian character. The concepts he promoted tend towards a definition of a social architecture. In his major article, 'Punto e da capo per l'architettura' ('Back to Square One for Architecture'). Persico recalls the words of Charles Fourier: 'The architecture of a people exactly represents its social status ... [and] we need a new architecture for a new social organisation' (1934: 4). Both Persico and Pagano looked to architecture to fulfil a social and human aim and to fight against the demagogic Fascist myth that maintaining a static form is the way to appeal to 'the people'. Architecture, through tradition, could create a new way of designing but one rooted in an Italian legacy.

Populist versus Popular Architecture: Nation and Nationalism

Both Pagano and Persico participated in the debate about what a national architecture should be. In the *Casabella* article 'Architettura nazionale', Pagano discusses how architecture could be considered to express the identity of a nation if it moves towards the people. He looks at local roots to find and recuperate a national taste and insisting on the frugality and austerity of rural architecture against an elitist architecture. Elsewhere in the same issue of *Casabella*, he describes and lists rural examples, promoting a return to local values to build a nation (1935a: 2). Pagano insists on these ordinary characteristics: 'the physiognomy of a city, of a country, of a nation is not made of those extraordinary works but of those many others that the historical critics classify as "minor architecture", non aulic architecture, less bound to representational intents' (1935a).[18]

In 1937, Pagano was still trying to define, through the pages of *Casabella*, the concept of *italianità* (1937). In his article 'Alla ricerca dell'italianità' ('In Search for an Italian Character'), Pagano continued trying to outline a national architecture, but he refused to appeal to any classical Roman character (*romanità*) in terms of formally adopting the use of capitals, columns, and arches. He persists in suggesting a distinct use of materials connected to a specific land and a specific cultural tradition. The elements for building this architecture are 'bricks, stones, wood, concrete, iron' — the so-called musical notes of architecture and not part of the Greek orders (1937: 5). The way to use such material changes with time, he says, and would be useful to this country (*paese*) for finding 'pride in simplicity, sensibility of a pure volume, desire for clarity and modesty' (1937: 5).[19] This introduces the definition of nation ('paese', which also includes country) as a set of common uses and traditions that Pagano strived to resuscitate. The difference between a nation and a state, according to the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, is that a nation is a group of people gathering according to culture and interests, while a state needs a legislature (2003).

For his part, while Persico may have been looking for a national identity through the appeal to a classic *romanità*, he was nevertheless mainly searching for a universal solution over a national one. When Persico looked at Roman and Greek examples within the Triennale, he was trying to bring architecture into a more universal and spiritual debate. He turned to the classical spirit, celebrating the theme of a classic monumentality by placing Fontana's sculpture at the centre of the Salone. The Athena Nike represented a pacified Europe, but it also seemed to project the room towards the divine. With it, Persico, still connected to Croce, declared the desire to elevate architecture to a higher spirit, removing the idea of classicism from any political legacy (Veronesi 1964: 2016–2017). Veronesi paid homage to Persico by writing that his aim was to reach for an ideal, a universal topic, the 'human aspect of rationalism' (1953: 102–104).

The concept of Europeanism was influenced by the debates taking place in literary journals such as *L'ambrosiano*, *La critica*, *La voce*, *Il baretti*, and *Solaria.* Moreover, Persico identified the most valuable character in Italian rationalism in trying to align to European tendencies. To him, the merits of the first rationalists from Milan and Turin were that they had an 'intuition' and that the economic and social conditions of those northern cities would have presented the perfect conditions to create a 'concrete European existence' (1934: 4). The main problem Persico identified was the lack of a 'faith' among Italian architects; he blamed them for not having developed these themes further, thus also once again invoking his Catholic credo. Persico clearly saw religion and morality behind the building of a nation. While the 1928 exhibition of rational architecture in Rome followed European trends, along the paths of Gropius and Le Corbusier, but still with a connection to Roman examples, the second exhibition of 1931 withdrew towards the theme of *mediterraneità*. As this debate was unfolding, the country was struggling with the aspiration of becoming a nation (Veronesi 1953: 54). Persico talked about the realization of a state and about the need for the entire nation to be ready and mature (1934: 6).

The people whom both Pagano and Persico addressed, they said, should be involved in finding a common ground, this common ground being tradition. Pagano and Perisco both wanted to create that common ground through architecture, to build a cohesive nation thanks to and through the optics of tradition: local for Pagano, universal, lyrical, and spiritual for Persico. But as Veronesi succinctly notes: 'Tradition? ... [A] spontaneous architecture — generally rural — exists in Italy: but it is not national, it is rational' (1953: 60).[20] Indeed, both architects wanted to find not just a common ground but a rational one, circling back to the concept of nation in the search for a shared culture.

Conclusion

Both Persico and Pagano dove into the problematic terrain of history and the role of architectural practice within it. They both started from a similar premise, as they both conceived architecture as serving a social aim, though in the end, they arrived at different solutions.

The connection with a much debatable populism is worth considering, as the Triennale tackled two different meanings. Both Pagano and Persico could be considered populist in how they advocated for a distinct separation between intellectual elites and ordinary people and for unifying a nation through architecture. Persico was also interested in a mystical, almost irrational aspect of architecture. They both tried to achieve a popular architecture not only by showing examples made by the people for the people — especially in the case of Pagano — but also by challenging high culture from within.

With the rise of Mussolini and the Fascist regime, Italy had become an empire. Persico died in January 1936 and shortly thereafter Pagano resigned from the directorship of the Triennale. On 22 April 1945, Pagano died in a concentration camp, along with many other intellectuals. Because of Fascism, Italy diverged socially and economically from the path of other European countries, and because of the regime's censorship, intellectual and architectural debates were confined to an Italian, if not provincial, sphere. Because people like Persico and Pagano defended the concept of *mediterraneità* and the myth of *italianità*, Italian architecture's entry into the modern European or international debates was delayed. The two rooms by the two architects 'faced' each other through their ideology. Persico thought classicism was irreconcilable with Fascism and had tried to give it a more lyrical tone. Pagano, on the other hand, had sought to introduce ethical values to rural work, against the corruption that he saw in the monumental classicism proposed by the Fascist propaganda. He wanted to 'move towards the people' and find pride in modesty.

Neither architect was successful. In the following years, classicism and a monumental architecture came to be associated more and more with Fascism and rural architecture with the *resistenza* and anti-Fascism; the latter became another kind of populist rhetorical myth and saw its success during the late 1940s. While Persico had sought a national expression within a lyrical monumental classicism, Pagano had sought the rational and the monumental in the popular. What Persico had located in the spirit, Pagano had located in place.

Notes

[1] 'L'architettura italiana sarà tanto più nazionale quanto più andrà verso il popolo. E andare verso il popolo significa anche rude chiarezza, gelosa amministrazione del danaro pubblico, esemplare semplicità. Saranno veramente italiani della nostra era quegli architetti che avranno il coraggio della modestia'. Translation by F. Billiani and L. Pennacchietti (Billiani and Pennacchietti 2019: 172).

[2] '... nudità, trasparenza, ordine, armonia, equilibrio, geometria, semplicità, purezza come contrapposto all'ornamento, allo spreco, all'imitazione, alla decorazione, alla pesantezza, all'accademismo'. All translations are by the author, Daria Ricchi, unless otherwise noted.

[3] 'L'individualità lirica di ogni singolo architetto ... poiché il grigiore, la monotonia e il collettivismo che domina la produzione europea dei colleghi sono contrari al temperamento italiano, ricco di lirismo e individualità'.

[4] 'Bisogna creare una coscienza universale: all'ingegno e alla cultura spetta il compito di *sollevare* il popolo, l'ingegno *non è fatto* dal popolo ma fa il popolo'.

[5] The historian Delio Cantimori (2011) insists that the task and responsibility of the intellectual is to create some of these myths to appeal to the masses and consequentially to educate them. Cantimori identified Mussolini's ability to use populist myths to promote his politics.

[6] 'Punto e da capo per l'architettura' (Persico 1934) has never been translated into English, while 'Prophecy of Architecture' (Persico 1945) was translated by Diane Ghirardo and published in *Archetype* in 1979.

[7] Persico began projects and left them unfinished. He began studying law, with the intention of writing a thesis about the right to strike, and later he wrote a novel that he never published. He planned to have his own publishing house, but this too never materialised. Mysteriously, the cause of his death remains unsolved: he was found dead lying in his bed in January 1936. His death could have been an accident due to his health or general living conditions (rumours had it he was so indigent that he could not pay his bills and lived in an attic), a suicide (the least probable option), or a political homicide (because of his unclear political position, pro- or anti-fascist, he was a target for political powers). Whatever the reason, his abrupt death at the age of thirty-five contributed to the myth of Persico as a thinker and intellectual. In *Dentro il Labirinto* [*Within the Labyrinth*], Cammilleri suggests that his death may have been at the hands of OVRA, the fascist police. In that particular period, it was not unusual for people to disappear because of their political and/or ambiguous affiliation. Yet this same ambiguity made Persico an object of whimsical attraction.

[8] 'Questo progetto non vuole essere una mera decorazione del Palazzo d'Arte, ma un'opera originale di architettura come le altre che appariranno alla VI Triennale: un contributo alla soluzione di qualche problema che con maggiore evidenza si pone alla considerazione degli artisti moderni'.

[9] In December 1935, Persico published the pamphlet 'Arte romana: la scultura romana e quattro affreschi della Villa dei Misteri' (Roman Art: Roman Sculpture and Four Frescos in Villa dei Misteri) as a supplement to volume 96 of *Domus* (Persico 1935).

[10] 'Lo stile dell'opera è ispirato ai concetti più elevati dell'architettura nuova, ed il sapore classico della composizione è legittimo nell'indirizzo dei maggiori 'razionalisti', nei quali è sempre viva l'aspirazione ad un nuovo 'rinascimento' europeo'.

[11] 'Il principio antico del colonnato'.

[12] 'Dimostrare il valor estetico della sua funzionalità'.

[13] 'Inerzia dell'uomo (che si chiama tradizione o eredità) tende effettivamente a conservare la forma anche quando lo scopo utilitario e primario ha cessato di esistere'.

[14] 'Architettura rurale sana', 'motivi di onestà, di chiarezza, di logica, di salute edilizia'.

[15] 'L'architettura italiana sarà tanto più nazionale quanto più andrà verso il popolo. E andare verso il popolo significa anche rude chiarezza, gelosa amministrazione

del danaro pubblico, esemplare semplicità. Saranno veramente italiani della nostra era quegli architetti che avranno il coraggio della modestia' (Billiani and Pennacchietti 2019: 172).

[16] 'L'atmosfera morale, sociale ed economica del nuovo comune (Pontinia, Lazio) era nitidamente impostata e collimava perfettamente con quell' 'Orgoglio della modestia' che anima la fantasia di chi opera veramente per il nostro tempo'.

[17] 'Darà l'orgoglio di conoscere la vera tradizione autoctona dell'architettura italiana: chiara, logica, lineare, moralmente ed anche formalmente vicinissima al gusto contemporaneo'.

[18] 'La fisionomia di una città, di un paese, di una nazione non è data da quelle opere di eccezione ma da quelle altre tantissime che la critica storica classifica come 'architettura minore', cioè arte non aulica, meno vincolata da intenti rappresentativi'.

[19] 'L'orgoglio del semplice, la sensibilità del volume puro, il desiderio di chiarezza e modestia'.

[20] 'La tradizione? … Quella dell'architettura spontanea (generalmente rurale) in Italia esiste: e che non è nazionale, ma razionale'.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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