

BOOK REVIEW

Tiago Saraiva. *Fascist Pigs: Technoscientific Organisms and the History of Fascism*.
Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016. 344 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-2620-3503-3

Jonathan Harwood

University of Manchester
Center for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine, Kings College London
jonathan.harwood@manchester.ac.uk

This is a remarkable book. For one thing, its disciplinary reach extends well beyond history of science and technology and STS to include environmental history, colonial history and the history of fascism. Moreover, it is a study of agriculture and breeding in three fascist societies (made possible, it would appear, by a reading knowledge of all the major European languages). Inevitably this means that no single reviewer (including me) can do justice to the book as a whole.

Saraiva's basic concern is to demonstrate the importance of "technoscientific organisms" – i.e., plant varieties and animal breeds developed by breeders– for the implementation of fascism in Italy, Portugal and Germany. His point is that these organisms played a central but so far unrecognised role in fascist plans to create a new and modern but "organic" national community. The book's six core chapters make this case by analysing the wheat campaign in Mussolini's Italy; its counterpart in Salazar's Portugal; the roles of potatoes and pigs in Nazi Germany; the use of cash crops and forced labour to produce coffee, rubber and cotton in

Ethiopia, Mozambique and Eastern Europe; and the place of Karakul sheep in establishing fascist settler societies in Africa and Eastern Europe.

Apart from its general emphasis upon the role of technoscientific organisms, the book makes three specific arguments.

First, that agriculture under fascism was modern. Although it is generally accepted by historians that fascism was a modernising project - not just a radical form of conservatism – which was designed to counter the unsettling effects of modernisation, Saraiva argues against what he sees as a common tendency among studies of fascism to see (peasant) agriculture as traditional, backward and only relevant in preparations for war. Instead he shows how fascist governments championed the technical modernisation of agriculture via tractors, chemical fertilisers, new seeds and improved breeds. More generally, he argues that while the emphasis upon race varied among different fascist societies, the commitment to a modernised agriculture which would make the nation strong and self-sufficient was common to all of them.

Second, Saraiva argues that although the literature on fascism has often downplayed its colonial dimension, colonialism was in fact crucial for the fascist project, as can be seen in the central role of technoscientific organisms for both. Empires were important for fascist regimes – not just to compete geopolitically with Britain and France, to absorb the metropolitan country's "surplus" population, and to boost its economy – but also for ideological reasons. For it was in the colonies that new model societies would be established where the "master race" would thrive and the economy would be based upon suitably engineered organisms (coffee, cotton, rubber, Karakul sheep).

Third and most important is the argument that technoscientific organisms "performed" fascism. Since the 1980s it has been commonplace for historians to place science and technology in social context in order to illuminate their development. But Saraiva's aim is different; he seeks to show not that breeding research in these societies reflected its fascist context but that its products had actual material consequences for fascism. Thus the breeders' new organisms "contributed... to fascist ideology," "became important elements in the institutionalisation and expansion" of fascist regimes, and "were major elements in imagining a fascist alternative modernity" (pp. 2, 3 and 10).

Claims as bold and far-reaching as these, of course, are not easy to make persuasive. In the case of the third argument, for example, there are two questions one might raise. For one thing, it is not hard to imagine that the significance of technoscientific organisms for fascism – e.g., that "the battle of wheat mobilised every... peasant in defense of the [Italian] nation" (p. 42), or that under National Socialism "pigs served first and foremost to nurture the national community" (p. 133) - was fully endorsed by the party-faithful. What is not clear, however, is

whether anyone else in those societies bought into this vision. Was the performative power of these organisms, therefore, all-pervasive or only skin-deep?

The other issue that calls for clarification is a certain ambivalence in the argument. Namely, did the animals and plants engineered in these regimes bear any features which were specifically “fascist”? At a few places in the text the answer seems to be “yes”: “The politics is to be found in the science itself” (p. 257) and “...the animals and plants discussed in this book were designed as things embodying fascism” (p. 238). On the other hand, as the author acknowledges (pp. 81, 99, 131, 133 and 233), there are many examples in the book of quite close similarities between breeding in fascist and non-fascist regimes. To be sure, pigs bred in Nazi Germany were different from those bred in the US or UK in the 1930s (pp. 120-126), but the explanation seems to have more to do with the Nazi policy of import-substitution than with anything specifically fascist. On balance, therefore, apart from the political service which they performed, it looks as though “fascist pigs” were not that different from liberal-democratic or socialist ones.

Such queries apart, this remains a highly stimulating book which deserves a wide readership, not only among historians of science and technology but also further afield.