

George L. Mosse, Historian of Modern Irrationalism

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I am particularly pleased to be he who presents George L. Mosse to our department on this most solemn occasion, which sees Camerino as the first European university to present him a *laurea honoris causa*. I am particularly pleased not only because of the respect and intellectual admiration with which I regard the works of this great scholar, a regard which I'm sure all of you share; not only because during my studies of the interwoven relationship between religion and political ideology in Italy between the two world wars I turned to Mosse's works as a constant source of comparison, inspiration and reflection; and not only simply for the fact that when I teach university courses Mosse's books on nationalism, racism, and nationalism of the masses are always among those assigned to my students, since I have always believed that they are among the most formative books for understanding the profound character of the modern world. But I am delighted to make this presentation for a personal reason as well which, if you allow me, I would like to recount to you, and above all to him. The works of George Mosse played a primary role in reinforcing and determining my personal vocation to become a historian. And I would like to briefly recall this meeting between a young man and historiography.

When I began my university studies I was still very uncertain about the course of study I wanted to pursue, and concrete, realistic considerations concerning my professional future were in contrast with my already vivid interest for the study of the past. Even though I had many doubts, I decided to leave the Department of Law in which I had registered only a few months before, and signed up in the Department of Literature. Two experiences in this new course of study immediately confirmed that I had made the right decision. They made me feel that this was what I wanted to study, that this was the life I wanted, that I had finally "found my way home" and I would never leave it again. These two experiences were taking Rosario Romeo's course on modern history, and reading the book that Romeo had assigned to the class: George Mosse's book on 15th-century Europe. What immediately fascinated me about Mosse's work was his ability to revive the mentality of men who lived so long ago. His approach was novel in that he did not concentrate only on the upper-class cultural world, but he provided a broad fresco of the popular world. His interpretation provided an open, vivacious, and rich description of the contradictions of an age in which the birth of rational and scientific modernism was so closely accompanied by traditional forces, by myths and past beliefs. From that moment, I have always closely identified Mosse's name with a fascination for history and with a model of one with a vocation for historiography, even though in the future I would encounter other sources of inspiration.

This short personal digression has not, however, brought us off our course – on the contrary it brings us directly to the first point which I intend to make. Today George Mosse is known in the world, and in Italy as well, as the scholar who transformed our way of viewing nationalism of the masses, thanks to his studies of the culture of the Third Reich. Actually, as my first encounter with his writings years ago emphasizes, he is also a foremost scholar in the study of the history of culture and mentality, whose research activity spans the "modern" period from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, and whose work in this area is marked by significant achievements. He is above all one of the scholars who has radically transformed, and has succeeded in doing so by

pursuing an extremely independent and original course, the way we view the “history of ideas” and the way we view the history of politics.

Mosse has always been very reluctant to perform systematic methodological interventions (operations), and has resisted making his books dull by including methodological discussions and even by including a lengthy and exhaustive list of the sources and cultural references that were essential to him in his analysis. Nevertheless, I think it is fair to say that today there is no doubt, almost thirty years after his first edition of the *Journal of Contemporary History* in January of 1966, that he has played an important role in radically transforming into completely new terms those used to define what is commonly known as the history of culture and the history of politics. Mosse has always felt skeptical towards political analyses which are limited to the documentation produced by a foreign ministry or which analyze elections or parliamentary votes from a mere statistical point of view. And even the titles of some of Mosse’s books reveal a historiographical methodology that is undoubtedly very innovative for the period in which they were published: *Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life under the Third Reich* (1966), *The Nationalization of the Masses* (1975), *Sexuality and Nationalism* (1984). The same impression emerges when scanning the titles of many of his articles in the *Journal of Contemporary History*: “Education and Social Structure in the Twentieth Century” or “Literature and Society,” (both published in 1967), “Urbanization: The City in History” (1969), “Generations in Conflict” (1970).

Following the great tradition of *Kulturgeschichte*, dominated by historicism (simply consider some of the great masters who have also influenced the personal itinerary of Mosse himself: Croce, Meinecke), inquiry has always been limited to analyzing “learned”, formalized, abstract thought. The theoretical and intellectual heights of human thought were considered. And this privileged attention given to the world of the *élite* has been strongly present in that historiographical tradition which is typically Anglo-Saxon – the “*history of ideas*”, consider Lovejoy, for example. In both cases, however, ideas were always considered as something which were born independently and “above” the historical process. Mosse’s studies, and not only those on the ideologies of the masses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but his study of the Reformation, of fifteenth-century culture, of the encounter between religious thought and reason of State in England in the sixteenth century, and of religious changes during the Baroque age, are not limited to the world of abstract and rational ideas, nor is his historical research confined to the narrow world of the *intelligentsia*. Mosse leads us into the much vaster territory of popular culture “where,” as has been mentioned, “the spreading of myths and ideologies, of symbols and stereotypes, which is often far removed from the detached world of intellectual research or of rational contemplation, becomes of primary importance.”

Together with Croce and Meinecke, another scholar contributed actively to Mosse’s cultural formation – the well-known Dutch historian Huizinga, whose work can be traced in a certain sense to the *Kulturgeschichte* tradition. Yet Huizinga’s thought was also undoubtedly a precursor to a more recent and modern historiographic tradition, in fact even the French “history of mentality” school tends to include him among their pioneers. For Huizinga, the imaginary, feelings, play, and even gratuitousness are as important as the economy in historical interpretation. In *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* he wrote that “the story of civilization” had to “also be concerned with dreams of beauty and romantic illusion, and not only with figures

related to population and taxes.” He also added that “the illusion itself in which contemporaries lived” had “the value of truth.” Huizinga’s thought concerning symbols and myths was certainly fundamental for Mosse, especially the tendency of the great Dutch historian to see in symbols and myths “the necessary personalization and concrete expressions of abstract ideas.” Huizinga’s main passage which Mosse has often made reference to is, in fact, that which states “when thought, which has acknowledged that an idea has its own independent reality, necessitates its translation into an image, the only means that it can use to do so is that of personalization”. Consequently, there are historical periods such as the fifteenth century and, adds Mosse the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well, in which “once having attributed a concrete existence to an idea, the mind feels the need to see it live, and it can do so only by personalizing the idea.”

Other independent and solitary figures, whose relation with a new model of cultural history has been acknowledged only over time, and other new frameworks and original currents in the analysis of culture, are important elements in the background of Mosse’s analyses: from “the learned study, both historical and philosophical, of myths and symbols” of “men such as Aby Warburg and Ernst Cassirer”, to the research of Norbert Elias and Mario Praz. But there is no doubt that the methodological results achieved by the American historian are completely original. Thanks to his remarkable ability to grasp the contours of myths and symbols, and a vivid understanding of the crucial role which they have in the life and the auto-description of the common man, Mosse has been able to elucidate, often in suggestive and surprising ways, pre-rational areas of the human experience. Yet in doing so he has never lost sight of the profound link with a more complex reality. The cultural history that he offers us is thus a global view, in which he refuses to separate the political from the religious, the scientific from the aesthetic, the mythological and the symbolic.

Upon first thought it may seem as though Mosse’s broadening of the framework of historiographical research links him substantially to the influential French “nouvelle histoire” school, and more specifically with the “history of mentality”. And, of course, there are contacts (chronological as well) between this school and Mosse. For example, both have felt the influence of anthropological elements, and Mosse also uses the concept of culture as an organic whole which is regulated by vast yet finite possibilities for internal association. This concept does not differ greatly from the similar ideas of Lévi-Strauss, the structural anthropologist. However, Mosse’s perspective is quite different, if not at least even partially antithetic in relation to that of the French historians of the *Annales*.

For many of those belonging to the French school, the history of mentality is part of that structural totality of the society as a whole. It is part of the vaster “total history” which should also view past society as a whole. The French thus undertook their search for meaning in the world of symbols using a flexible structure superstructure framework which assumed that an adequate understanding of social and economic conditions, the reconstruction of the role played by psychological aspects, and the aid of a few fundamental epistemological categories, symbols can certainly be explained. However, there seems to be no uncertainty concerning Mosse’s absolute belief in the irreducibility and autonomy of the cultural aspect. For Mosse it becomes one of the basic mechanisms of in the historical process, and one of the elements of the dialectic of society. In fact, Mosse argues that symbols are in themselves the meaning, that they provide an order for reality, that they have multiple dimensions and that they mediate between subjects as

they mediate between subjects and objects. Protagonists of history perceive their own interests in a distorted way; the resulting processes rarely take the direction that they desired and at any rate the processes are subject to conditions which disguise the tensions derived from them. The fundamental background of Mosse's formation is historicism. More than once he has declared "that which is the world," and "that which is man, can only be explained by history." According to Mosse, this is true not only for man himself, but for all of society and for the mental attitudes that are created to satisfy needs. Croce, one of the historians who influenced Mosse more than any other, taught him that "everything is history," that no reality exists outside of history and that therefore to approach history from within, with involved commitment and not in simply positivist or descriptively, is the only way to approach reality. Mosse has taught us that beyond archives, the responsibility of the historian lies in "raising problems and pointing out dangers." He has taught us the art of impassioned detachment. His historiography is always "committed." "As a historian," he has stated, "I have always felt that my role is to destroy received and traditional myths with the aim of challenging students to unceasingly make use of their critical reasoning."

We must also remember that Mosse tends to see culture and cultural processes in terms of dialectical relationships. He feels that the only way to deal with the problem of the relationship between the mythological dimension and reality in a historical analysis is to incorporate dialectics into the practice of historiography. Mosse considers himself Hegelian; in his own words, he is deeply convinced of "the idea that a dialectic exists, for example, between myth and reality, and that all of history can be seen in dynamic and dialectic terms." To those who have described the event of the new political religion of the Fatherland as anti-Christian, Mosse in fact objects that they "are reasoning in a non-dialectic way", because it is a phenomenon that is "both Christian and anti-Christian". "Political ceremonies," he comments, "were Christian in that they used the rhythm of Christianity. D'Annunzio's, Mussolini's and Hitler's famous balcony speeches can be clearly linked to the call and response in Christian liturgy. For centuries, it was the kind of liturgy known to the masses. Nor is this fact surprising. The element of faith was Christian as well. That which was anti-Christian, however, was the specific contra-position to certain elements of the Christian liturgy, to the belief that baptism was more important than race, and above all to the powerful organization of the Church. But we must not forget that initially there was collaboration between the Church and Fascism, and the Church saw an advantage in Fascism. Specifically, the Church felt that political faith would have positive repercussions on religious faith, and that its churches would once again be filled. Naturally this did not come to be. But (...) without doubt a dialectical relationship can be seen here."

Mosse of course also specified that, as is obvious, today one can be Hegelian only in one very particular way since, as important schools of social history have made clear, dialectics interacts between myth and social forces, between "myth and what Marx referred to as objective reality". A complex dialectic circuit is thus created between myth and reality. Mosse does not separate objective reality and the way in which it is perceived into two distinct analytical phases. The perception of an object is as real as the object itself. It is above all in his studies of racism that Mosse has demonstrated the existence and the importance of these profound dialectical relationships between myth and reality: the systematic dehumanization of the victim transformed him into the actual image that the murderer desired: "The myth, accepted as reality, became reality itself". The same dialectical relationship is created between the ideal and the counter-

image, between type and anti-type. Those who are integrated acquire an identity, and they define themselves in comparison to the outsider which they themselves have created. There cannot be an ideal-type without an anti-type. The victor cannot be understood if separated from his victim. "An anti-type was needed for the idea of race," Mosse wrote, "and the Jew assumed this role."

In this process myths, symbols and values not only provide a concrete form for perceptions, but they become values in and of themselves. And the same happens in a political system as well, an aspect of which is certainly that of attributing values to individuals' dreams; Mosse has always contested the concept that propaganda is deceitful when applied to mass nationalistic movements. Leaders do not simply manipulate their followers. They are able to gain consent and obtain a submission that has a symbolic valence. People need symbols because they provide a concrete form to myths and thus offer participation, identity and salvation. In *The Nationalization of the Masses*, Mosse wrote that in mass nationalistic movements "the pragmatism of daily politics was surrounded by a cultural framework which disguised it in the eyes of the people." He added, however, that "'disguise' is not exactly the correct term in this context, because all 'disguises' which make use of normal liturgical or cultural forms become 'magical' rites in which both the leaders and the people believe, and it is exactly this magic that we are interested in."

As has been stated, Mosse is perhaps "the contemporary historian of modern irrationalism." The term "modern" here has a wide scope, since even though, especially in his latest research period Mosse has concentrated on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he has also worked extensively on the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Whether he is analyzing popular piety and the Reformation, the issue of the reason of State and Christian casuistry, or modern nationalist ideologies, his interest appears to be focused fundamentally on the mechanisms by which myths, in his opinion, so often regulate people's lives, assume political relevance, and penetrate reality.

However, it is not only this radical and innovative framework for historiography which provides a common thread to Mosse's work, whether it is that related to the modern age or that concerned with contemporary history. When one browses even quickly over his vast bibliography, a basic continuity in interest emerges. Mosse has always maintained that he is more interested in historiographic problems than in chronologically defined investigations; he has always held that one must be more concerned with issues rather than with dates. When he himself mentions how he began to study contemporary history (for reasons which were almost incidental), he recounts that it was not a "rupture," but rather the natural progression of a lasting "interest in the myths people lived for, for the penetration of these myths, and for their political relevance," and thus for "the issue of irrationalism in modern politics" and the link "between aesthetics and politics, or between theology and politics." He wrote that "the issues involved in most of my studies concerning the first modern age – the relationship between reason and irrationalism, or the problem of reason of State – are not that far removed from the issues I dealt with later on."

Mosse completed his first studies at Cambridge, then in the United States at Haverford, and then at Harvard in the school of Medieval history. His family, of Jewish origin, was originally from Posen and then moved to Berlin. One of its members was a prominent German editor, and founder of numerous newspapers (among them the *Berliner Tageblatt*) and an advertisement

agency which operated on a global scale. In 1933 the Mosse family was of course forced to leave the country. In his youth, he was thus among those exiles who came from that unique hinterland of the elite German Jew. His doctorate thesis at Harvard, presented in 1946 and which soon became his first book, dealt with what seemed to be a traditional subject in a juridic-constitutional environment. It reflected the interests of his then most important professor, Charles Howard McIlwain, a great scholar of English constitutional history. The book discussed the assimilation of the idea of sovereignty as established by English constitutional and political thought between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. From this theme emerged the analysis of the destruction of the medieval concept of limitations to sovereign power and above all the reconstruction of the attempt, performed by those who wanted to somehow obstruct the drift towards sovereignty, to protect themselves behind the pretense of “common law,” in defense of the rights of the individual. This attempt made explicit reference to the importance this conflict assumed in the 1600’s concerning sovereignty and the relationship between the individual, the State, and power. There is continuity between these first interests of Mosse and his subsequent research, which were gathered in a volume in 1957 called *The Holy Pretense*. This book dealt with the relationship between the new political and the new religious thought of the 1500’s, Machiavelli, and the Reformation. The study did not deal with the beliefs of this or that reformer, nor did it deal with the direct influence of Machiavelli or Machiavellianism. It rather took the more emblematic approach of analyzing the tension between religious presuppositions and political realities; that is, it looked at the “casuistical” aspect, at the adjustment undergone in the Christian-ethical framework in relation to new situations and new dangers. In response to Machiavelli’s famous question concerning how a virtuous man can survive in an evil world, many clergymen, both Catholic and Protestant, felt that they could only make a pact with what Machiavelli referred to as the “political” world. They would have to devise an evil stratagem that would, however, benefit both Church and State. This extensive inquiry into the relationship between Christianity and reason of State, which Mosse felt was one of the most neglected aspects of the history of Western Christian thought, was conducted by the American scholar as an initial, partial research on English Puritans. But he did not exclude returning to this topic in more general terms. In fact, between the 1950s and the 1960s he began a series of fervent studies on the Catholic perspective of the issue (on the Baroque age, on Urban VIII, and on the Jesuits), and worked in Rome and in the Vatican library.

These studies contained many extremely innovative elements, and profound intuitions which later historiography has only recently acknowledged. Among them is the conflict between the construction of the modern State and resistance at the level of consuetudinary law, the centrality of Jesuit casuistry and Urban VIII’s papacy, the secularity and parallelism between the Catholic and the Protestant itinerary, and finally the reality presented by a popular piety which was different and in opposition to that of the two worlds represented structured religions. What is important to our discussion is the fact that this was certainly one of the paths that brought Mosse to the knot of modern ideology. The problem of casuistry is, in fact, “the question of the vitality of Christianity as an ideology”, and “it is an eternal issue, which does not change greatly from century to century.” The theology he studied was related above all to popular behavior and social practice, and popular piety and modern ideology did not appear so far removed from each other. On the other hand, it is not accidental that Garret, one of the major scholars of millennial traditions in relation to the French Revolution, turned to Mosse’s studies of religious history in the middle of the 1970s, reclaiming the concept of “popular piety” as a central theme.

The other path which brought Mosse to the themes of Fascism, Nazism, and racism was of course his Jewish identity. In fact, Mosse's first studies on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries begin to appear in 1957 and 1958. They deal with the Jew in popular German culture and antisemitism. There is no doubt that there is an autobiographical element in Mosse's research. His attempt to reconstruct his own origins and his own destiny as an "exile" in England and in the United States, as well as his attempt to come to terms with the fate of his entire generation, certainly led him to confront the nature of Nazism and Fascism, the destiny of Judaism in Europe, with his own relationship with Germany and with the Holocaust. Mosse himself wrote that, from the moment he began studying the contemporary age, all of his books have in one way or another dealt with the catastrophe of Judaism in his time. He feels that this catastrophe is neither accidental, nor can a structural blame be attached to it, nor is it the result of continuity in bureaucratic habit, but that it is probably incorporated in our society and in our attitudes towards life. "Nothing in European history," wrote Mosse, "is removed from the Holocaust, and I have tried to probe ever deeper into the nature of European society to analyze its perception of the outsider and its attitude toward him."

Mosse's first essay which deals with Europe in 1800 and 1900 is *The Culture of Western Europe*, published in 1961. It is a comprehensive enquiry into two centuries of cultural history. It holds that the distinction between culture and civilization, and the depth of the romantic phenomenon which still persisted and was decisive, reflected "the modern attachment to Humanism and the Enlightenment." The main interest of the book was however the affirmation of the irrational tendencies of the masses and the decline of the individual. And in the same year Mosse's first work on Nazism appeared, his essay on *The Mystical Origins of National Socialism*.

The viewpoint of this work, like the fundamental volume on German ideology published in 1964 that soon followed, was in many ways revolutionary. It appeared in the 1950s, when historiography was divided concerning the interpretation of Nazism as a either German historical accident, or its interpretation in relation to a "from Luther to Hitler" schema, an interpretation that attributed a single dimension to this period of German history, and one which even well-known historians such as Taylor had discussed. Mosse's writing radically denied that Nazism had been a product of propaganda and manipulation of the masses, that it was the expression of a ruthless elite dominating a terrified and powerless populace. In his research for the cultural origins of Nazism, Mosse concluded that a lengthy process of cultural development lay behind it, and that this process was not at all similar to that which was commonly seen as the "logical precursor "to the Fascist phenomenon (as in the process that was reconstructed by Lukács). As Niccolò Zapponi, a dear friend who recently passed away, observed, "If Nietzsche, Wagner, or Spengler had never existed, Hitler would still not have lacked a cultural tradition to appeal to." In fact, a century of *völkisch* tradition had helped to create a favorable mentality, and, linked closely with the "crisis of modernity", it procured the consensus of the German middle class for National Socialism. Following Mosse's reconstruction, the success of Nazism could no longer be explained simply as a form of cultural "bankruptcy" or as a simple phenomenon of ideological-cultural deterioration. It was the last step in a cumulative process that had been developing for more than a century. In short, Nazism was the expression of a culture, it was not simply the *crisis* of culture.

Mosse continued along this same line of research. After a series of significant essays, his new book in 1975 revealed the importance and the substance of a century-old trend within the *völkisch* tradition in Germany towards a “new politics,” which was an ideological (and mythological) tradition hostile, or actually an alternative to, representative and parliamentary democracy. In this way, Mosse progressed from an analysis of the mythical and symbolic content which shaped the Nazi tradition to an analysis of its form. *The Nationalization of the Masses* documented above all the channels used to disseminate and to spread a mentality and a new way of putting to practice a new “political style” (public celebrations, plays, concerts, athletic, coral, sport and paramilitary clubs). The method was characterized by feelings of common belonging, by irrationalism, and it involved intense aesthetic components. But it also, and perhaps above all included a “religious” tendency which could be seen in its symbols and “national cult” rites. Mosse’s book illustrated the century-long process which built a “political liturgy” around a nation. Thus, Mosse’s lasting interest for the 1600s in terms of art and casuistry was directly related to his subsequent interpretation of Fascism as an ideology and way of life that contained a strong visual component. His analysis of the impact of the Baroque period continued to have relevance in the age of secularization: “During the Baroque age,” Mosse observed, “myth, theater, and symbols played an important role in distancing the reality of the world. But the success of the Jesuits lay in the fact that, while they were distancing you from the world, they were in fact at the same time integrating you into their system.”

As Zapponi noted, this issue led the American scholar to approach the problem “of the influence of unconscious factors in the organization of culture into basic trends, and of the latter’s ‘resistance’ to superficial ideological entreaties” even more explicitly. Mosse attempted to grasp the sensation, which he observed working in all Fascist movements, “of a door that opens onto a utopia composed of tolerance, happiness, productivity, and everything else people aspire to,” a utopia that is presented to people in the form of ceremonies and symbols. *The Nationalization of the Masses* thus signaled a new starting point, a sort of “histoire à la manière anthropologique,” which carefully outlined the complex interaction between events, leaders and the crowd, and which attempted to define the mechanism by which experiences and significant ideas can move masses through the mediation of myths and symbols.

The research of this American scholar of German origin, which would soon become even more substantial with the publication in 1980 of *Man and the Masses in Nationalistic Ideologies*, thus assumed a significant value and meaning. It was dedicated more to the suppositions that explained Fascism, and not to the phenomenon itself, because it was solidly based on the thesis that fascism was preceded by a long period of incubation. Mosse’s theory rejected fascism as a “parenthesis” in the normal course of European history, whether it was seen as a fascism of non-culture, to which this was closely related, or as a fascism of anti-culture in relation to the past two centuries of Europe’s intellectual heritage. Italian Fascism and German Nazism were thus the concrete expressions of a fundamental characteristic of European history. And this aspect still conserves in some way, even though not in the same way expressed in the years between the two wars, an ever-present underlying danger, because just as such a complex historical reality could not have emerged from nothing, so could it not vanish completely. At least the mechanisms and the needs that produced it must still persist in our society. However, it must be emphasized that in his most original outlook the American scholar did not interpret German history in

deterministic or fatalistic terms. Mosse has always insisted that the Nazi triumph was a contingent fact and was never inevitable. He has repeatedly stated that before 1914, the country in which the most dangerous proto-fascist, racist, and antisemitic tendencies existed was France and not Germany. The *völkisch* tradition became determinant only due to the first world war, because of its brutal characteristics and because of the German defeat. The economic, social and political crises that occurred during the period between the two world wars were a direct cause of the rise of fascism. They were thus events that catalyzed numerous tendencies in European culture, they acted as an extraordinary *humus* which caused a series of elements to bloom, and which the Fascist movements were able to exploit in their skillful management of a “synthesis” between activism and order, modernization and resistance to modernization, revolution and tradition.

Renzo De Felice noted that Mosse was the scholar who was “certainly the best culturally prepared” to “penetrate” racism, “thanks to his triple-faceted Jewish, German, and American background.” The great merit of his studies in this field (and in particular his 1978 volume) lies in his elaboration of the interpretative models that he developed in earlier work. It has been said that Mosse “does not underestimate or, even worse, deride as others have done, but rather attributes the right measure of importance to those cultural and pseudo-cultural (yet typical to the culture of certain periods) elements which contributed to forming racism. These elements turned racism into a phenomenon which, influenced by diverse sources (aesthetics, linguistics, anthropology, ethnology, eugenics, history, etc.) adapted it to various environmental and political circumstances, and made it capable of penetrating all social environments to the point of becoming one of the reference points that aggregated many of the mass movements of our century, and in some cases those of the second half of the nineteenth century as well.” Mosse, above all, brought to light the inseparable link which has been established between racism, antisemitism, and mass politics. In order to understand the new guise that antisemitism has taken over the past 200 years, to understand the process that led to the annihilation of the Jews, Mosse explains that the only explanation is to view antisemitic racism as a “secular religion.”

His book published in 1984 on *Sexuality and Nationalism* also presents extremely innovative aspects in terms of method and content. Mosse’s main premise is that just as nationalism had appropriated the rituals of traditional religion, it had also appropriated the morals of the middle class which were, in fact, no longer adhered to by a single class. Mosse went beyond the original French schema of “the history of private life” which was often restrictive, and looked at the collective side of sexuality and its political repercussions. In the name of “respectability,” the alliance between nationalism and bourgeois morality defined for virility and for a precise model of masculinity an essential role as a national image with which the nation identified itself. And those who did not possess these characteristics were excluded. The traditional image of the fascist and the Nazi as Nietzschean nihilist or as Mann’s Doktor Faustus is completely reversed by Mosse. It has been observed that Mosse’s Nazi is a bourgeois whose main preoccupation is to preserve and purify his world of the degenerative forces that he feels are present in the society that surrounds him. And the Holocaust itself does not represent a radical antithesis of the bourgeois experience, but simply an expression of this experience, even if in a residual and corrupt way.

Mosse's most recent studies have basically taken two directions. On the one hand, he has returned to World War One which he has referred to many times as the main and determinant factor in understanding the tragedy represented by fascisms. On the other hand, he has considered the phenomenon of nationalism in more general terms.

In Mosse's opinion, the encounter with mass murder has been one of the main experiences shaping modernity. It has produced incredibly far reaching political consequences, so much so that it has marked an intense new phase in the story of nationalism. He feels that the unbearable reality of modern war has deeply changed the mentality of European society. As can be seen in his volume published in 1990, Mosse feels that this is due in large part to the re-elaboration and the transfiguration of the war experience, which has helped to mitigate the tragedy and has induced a form of collective resignation. In particular, the "cult of the fallen" is an important new development, because it has contributed to the formation of an actual "religion" of sacrifice for one's country. It is rooted in Christian symbolism and represents in Mosse's eyes a crucial phase in the integration between Christianity and nationalism.

In his other research, after having closely studied the history of Jewish nationalism and its evolution from an ideal whose essence was solidarity and not exclusion, to a hardened and more intolerant attitude, Mosse concludes that the mission of our age is to humanize nationalism, not abolish it. The American scholar is convinced that nationalism, even though it creates concern and can be potentially hostile, is however a component of a historical reality which we must come to terms with, and which drives deep-seated needs. As critical as he is towards the major irrationalistic ideologies of the modern world, Mosse has in fact always displayed a deep understanding of the world of myths, the symbols and the ideologies that he has studied. He has always said that he is aware that these elements have profound meaning for the community, and that they cannot be simply exorcised in the terms of an obtuse opposition.

There can be no doubt that there is extreme coherency in the themes and the issues dealt with in George L. Mosse's historiographic production. Mosse's work, like that of one of his models, Benedetto Croce, seems to be dominated by the search for answers to the problems of individual freedom in the world of mass politics. Nevertheless, it is another name, and not Croce's, which comes to mind when one tries to embrace in a single glance the enormous production of Mosse the scholar, and tries to find a single intellectual pivot around which all his works can rotate. It is a name which I have rarely, or perhaps never seen used in juxtaposition to Mosse's, but which, however in my opinion must be fundamental: Ernst Kantorowicz.

The historian of *The Two Bodies of the King* and *Frederick II* comes from the Jewish German elite as well. Even though he belongs to a different and older generation, Kantorowicz, too, was forced to emigrate from Germany to American universities. Most importantly, in Kantorowicz's work one can clearly see the secret and passionate search for a logic in the history of Western politics. His inquiry touched the study of political mysticism, political theology and the sacredness of power which, when examined today, reveals many parallels, even extraordinary parallels, with Mosse's work. Kantorowicz himself in his 1957 preface to *The Two Bodies of the King* stressed that his study could "be among other things considered an attempt to understand and, if possible, demonstrate, how, and using what means and methods, certain axioms for a political theology that, *mutatis mutandis* retained validity into the twentieth century were first

developed in the late Middle Ages.” And, more specifically, in the results they brought about, even though this was not the original intention of the author, how an attempt “to investigate the emergence of some of the idols of modern political religions (...) based on the provisions of the horrible experience of our time in which entire nations, from the smallest to the largest, fell prey to the most irrational dogmas, and in which political theologisms became authentic obsessions which challenged the most elementary principles of human and political reason”. Therefore perhaps it is not incidental that in the 1990’s Mosse, like Kantorowicz, embraced the theme of *pro patria mori*. In 1950 Mosse thanked Kantorowicz for having made his knowledge of medieval history available to him, to enable him to prepare for the study of the struggle for sovereignty. Therefore, in his youth Mosse had contact with Kantorowicz. Probably the influence, perhaps the indirect influence, of this great German historian was consequential if only in determining some of the issues that were to be essential to the young scholar. Mosse has said that, looking back, he is pleased to have spent the first decades of his academic career studying the first modern era, to have dealt with the questions of Christian theology, because he feels that it is essential that he who deals with modern European issues have first-hand knowledge of the Christian foundations of Western civilization, to be able to judge continuity and change. “All the phenomena of our civilization,” he once said, “are in a certain sense Christian, because Christianity is what the people know. Each political theology derives in a perfectly natural manner from Christian theology.” I feel certain that such a statement came to Mosse in some way from Kantorowicz. juxtaposition to Mosse’s, but which, however in my opinion must be fundamental: Ernst Kantorowicz.

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But all this brings us to a final consideration. Mosse’s work can be seen as one of the parts of the immense composition that Jewish culture has produced. For more than thirty years it has amassed critical observations and interpretative models, and offered them to collective consideration, to produce an overall revision of the twentieth century experience and the fascist experience in it. From Arendt to Cassirer, from Talmon to Poliakov, from Aron to Sternhell, from Fromm to Mosse, the body of thought on fascism from the Jewish point of view has become ever vaster. Perhaps it is not by mere chance that the two major lines of interpretation, both originating in the years immediately following the Holocaust and in cultural environments that were extremely sensitive to religious issues – one Catholic (consider Voegelin) and one Jewish, both saw fascism as an interference between politics and mythical and religious convictions. And especially from the Jewish point of view, there was the conviction that a “Fascist” code of conduct existed, which was of course perverted yet at the same time was based on a morality, even if that morality was so distorted as to be lacking in any form of human respect. And perhaps, as has been observed, the distinctive mark of the recent years in the field of historiography is exactly the affirmation of this perspective as the interpretation of fascist movements; and vice versa the probable end of the period in which the interpretation was essentially that of militant antifascism. Perhaps, as always, one of the best interpreters of the persecutor is his victim.

Mosse has at times insinuated that he feels he is a rational man, a humanist, who is driven to study the irrational and the inhuman, that he is the protagonist of a scholarly career “mainly dedicated to the study of evil.” Actually, the description that Mosse provides of the Jewish-German intellectual born of the *Bildung* is representative of his own work: “shape the irrational into the rational, tame it within the framework of rational thought.” And it is perhaps for this reason that he has stated that he is convinced that a usable past and a non-usable past do not exist, but only a past which we must come to terms with in order to draw nearer to a better future. And for this important lesson, from a historian, from a great intellectual – and, allow me to say, from a very wise man – we must be deeply grateful.