

ŽIŽEK GOADS AND PRODS

AGAINST POETOCRACY

What a fascist regime has to repress is thus not emancipatory or liberal legacy but its own subversive core.

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Oct 10, 2026

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Picture: A group of legionaries in Fiume during D'Annunzio's campaign in 1919. On September 12, Gabriele d'Annunzio led the march from Ronchi that led to the occupation of the city, which was destined to last until the "Bloody Christmas" of December 1920.

Igor Bezinović's *Fiume o Morte* (2025), a documentary with enacted moments from D'Annunzio's reign in the city of Fiume (today's Rijeka in Croatia), fully deserves the international attention it has attracted: it renders perfectly the crazy atmosphere of a unique political experiment in the early twentieth century, the short-lived Free State of Fiume. In one of the chapters of his terrific *Otherworlds*, Federico Campagna¹ deals with the fascinating origins of this experiment; the state of Fiume was grounded in the intervention of a military general and the best-known writer associated with decadent literature in Italy, Gabriele D'Annunzio. What emerged from D'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume was an exceptionally complex interstice in the political climate of a Europe ravaged by war, one that positioned equality, liberty and aesthetic experimentation at the heart of its constitutional and

cultural foundations. D'Annunzio was more than a poet: an acclaimed novelist and playwright, he was also a decorated war hero many times over, an aviator, a transgressive performer, a fashion innovator, a pioneering advertiser, an egomaniac and an avid consumer of cocaine.

His seemingly inexhaustible creativity had made him an international celebrity, and his inventions had taken hold of the Italian imagination. In later years, when the Fascist Party seized power in Italy, the regime would appropriate elements of his aesthetics, casting an enduring shadow on his legacy. However, D'Annunzio himself was not reducible to fascism. Rejected by the Italian government, Fiume called to itself all the rebels against capitalism and Anglo-American imperialism: the then nascent fascists, but also syndicalists, anarchists and communists. "I stand for communism without dictatorship. No wonder, considering that my entire culture is anarchic. It is my intention to make this city a spiritual island from which an eminently communist action can radiate towards all oppressed nations," wrote D'Annunzio. "Here the Bolshevik thistle turns into a rose of love."

However, although the anarcho-communism of Fiume had little in common with the harshness of Lenin's doctrine, it also lost its way in blood. It was a form of "Latinised Bolshevism" that combined the cult of action and a genuine attention to the plight of the oppressed and to the demands of the workers with a decadent aesthetic and the ambition of bringing about a spiritual revolution through art. All this took place within a hopelessly besieged town

and through the efforts of the international brigade of deserters, rebels, criminals and artists who had responded to a poet's call. D'Annunzio recognised and confirmed the sovereignty of all citizens without distinction of sex, lineage, language, class or religion. Here are some paragraphs from the constitution of Fiume:

All citizens of both sexes have full authority to choose and engage in all industries, professions, arts, and crafts. Citizens are endowed with all civil and political rights upon reaching the age of twenty. Without distinction of sex, they become legitimate voters and eligible for all offices. The fundamental freedoms of thought, press, assembly, and association are guaranteed to all citizens. Every religious worship is admitted, respected, and can build its own temple.

The spirituality of D'Annunzio and his followers was diametrically opposed to the bigoted conservatism of the official Church of the time. Fiume was a "city of life" pervaded by an atmosphere of intense eroticism. Nudism was widely practised, even by the most prominent figures of government, in the name of a more authentic connection with nature. Women and men engaged in a polyamorous season that brought the local hospital's ward for sexually transmitted diseases to its knees. Homosexuality was not merely tolerated but became a constitutive part of the ethos and aesthetics of the revolution. Looking from his balcony at some of his men going hand in hand towards a known cruising spot,

D'Annunzio favourably remarked: "Look at my soldiers: they walk together in couples like the warriors of the ancient Theban legion." The beauty of naked bodies and the fire of youthful passions were living symbols of what the revolution wished to achieve. After sixteen months of siege and five days of bloody fighting, on 29 December 1920, Fiume capitulated under the bombardment of the Italian navy.²

The republic of Fiume was not unique: there are vague parallels with the Paris Commune (without the religious aspect, of course), and even with some radical millenarian religious communities which we find in Christianity (Canudos in Brazil), but also in Islam (the notion and practice of the end of the world in the Order of Assassins, when all moral prohibitions are suspended). In these and similar cases, the participants do not fight for utopia in a long process which demands discipline and sacrifice; they want to enact a utopia now. However, the orgiastic spirit of liberation was de facto limited to the Italian elite (who came there and occupied the city), while there was a silent majority (of Hungarians, Croats and other Slavs, mostly) who were socially more conservative and experienced the Fiume republic as a nightmarish intrusion disturbing their way of life – they just wanted to survive in the shadows of the great spectacle. In spite of the egalitarian rhetoric, it was a sort of communism for the ruling class.

What took place in the Fiume republic was not a case of what Marcuse called "repressive desublimation", a

permissiveness which serves the existing power as an instrument of oppression – just think about how Trump attacks his opponents with open vulgarity or how people around Netanyahu openly debate how to torture Palestinians. D'Annunzio's Fiume was rather a kind of pre-ideological mixture of heterogeneous elements: fascination with promiscuous sex, drugs, spectacular parades, an intense experience of the sacred, and the theatricalisation of the violence of war and of the heroism of risking death... What keeps this series together is a negative feature: every element is in stark opposition to the routine of the stable bourgeois social order. Fiume was in a permanent state of exception, which is why it couldn't last.

Analysts usually designate D'Annunzio's Fiume as a "proto-fascist" formation, but I think it is all too easy to see D'Annunzio's hippy-fascism as a movement that necessarily has to end in fascism. A certain radical dimension erupts in "fiumianism", which did provide the background for fascism, though not only for fascism; but this dimension was more a kind of vanishing mediator which had to be repressed once true fascism emerged – no wonder the Italian regular army bombarded Fiume and ended the republic. What a fascist regime has to repress is thus not an emancipatory or liberal legacy but its own subversive core. Or, to paraphrase the old warning not to throw the baby out of the tub together with the dirty water: this, exactly, is what fascism does – it keeps the baby (the pseudo-harmonious new regime), throwing out the dirty water in which the baby grew... The best

characterisation of the republic of Fiume is “a poetic regime”, as Leopold Froelich put it:

Fiumianism grew out of Futurist and anti-bourgeois movements. D’Annunzio combined a robust nationalist identity in Italy with fin de siècle Nietzscheanism. With its clownish epaulettes and opera buffa emotiveness, the government verged on the preposterous. Still, it was a poetocracy. In article 65 of the Fiume Constitution D’Annunzio mandates that in “every commune of the province there will be a choral society and an orchestra subsidized by the state. In the city of Fiume, the College of Aediles will be commissioned to erect a great concert hall, accommodating an audience of at least ten thousand with tiers of seats and ample space for choir and orchestra. The great orchestral and choral celebrations will be entirely free—in the language of the Church—a gift of God.”³

These dreams of social poetic spectacles do, in some sense, point towards fascism since, as Walter Benjamin put it, the logical result of fascism “is the introduction of aesthetics into political life”. D’Annunzio initiated the Roman salute and dressed his henchmen in black shirts; he took the title of Duce from the Latin *dux*, cognate with *duke*, but he also stands for the repressed core of fascism. Gramsci himself was not sufficiently Gramscian here in his reaction to fiumianism – it was as if he didn’t yet know his own notion of hegemony:

D'Annunzio, the head of the legionnaires, was depicted as a madman, a histrionic enemy of the homeland and an instigator of civil war, opposed to all human and civil laws. To further its own ends, the government roused the most intimate and profound sentiments in the collective consciousness: the sanctity of the family violated, fraternal blood coldly spilled, the integrity and liberty of the people left at the mercy of a mob of drunken, lust-crazed soldiers, girlhood contaminated by the most wanton sexual urges. By planting these ideas the government managed to achieve a near perfect consensus: public opinion was manipulated with unprecedented ease.⁴

If the Fiume rulers really “roused the most intimate and profound sentiments in the collective consciousness” (or, rather, the unconscious), is it not all too easy to refer to this as “manipulation” (which implies a fully self-aware agent manipulating others)? The public at large was not “manipulated with unprecedented ease” – the circle around D'Annunzio, mostly young Italians who arrived there following his call, was “manipulated”; or, rather, they “manipulated” themselves: they took their poetic dream seriously and were ready to fight for it. What *fiuminismo* achieved was precisely a brilliant case of what Gramsci later called ideological hegemony: their “poetic” vision (and practice) combined, within the same ideological space, brutal nationalism, the celebration of war, etc., with potentially progressive elements – sexual liberation, gay rights... – described by Gramsci in

surprisingly traditional terms (“the sanctity of the family violated”). Plus, Gramsci ignores the poetic nature of the ideological monster of *fiuminismo*.

Poetry and war: are they not opposites? No: some form of poetry is needed to make the cruelty of war palpable. And the poetry that plays this role is not necessarily bad poetry – whatever D’Annunzio was, he was not a bad poet; he was the most famous Italian poet of his time. The point is more general: in a confused ideological situation, poetry definitely cannot provide the answer – or, if it does, it is a terrifying one.

Against fascist poetry, we should shamelessly turn back to Plato. Plato’s reputation has suffered on account of his claim that poets should be thrown out of the city. This is rather sensible advice, judging from my own post-Yugoslav experience, where the path to ethnic cleansing was prepared by the dangerous dreams of poets – the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić being only one among them. If the West has its military-industrial complex, we in ex-Yugoslavia had a poetic-military complex: the post-Yugoslav war was triggered by an explosive mixture of poetic and military components. Just before his final defeat in Fiume, D’Annunzio, just like Karadžić, resorted to ethnic cleansing: in one of his last decrees, he ordered all non-Italians to leave the city... So here is Plato’s basic argument:

We should at last be justified in not admitting the poet into a city that is going to be under good laws, because he awakens this [bad] part in the soul and nourishes it, and, by making it strong, destroys the calculating part, just as in a city when someone, by making wicked men mighty, turns the city over to them and corrupts the superior ones. Similarly, we shall say that the imitative poet produces a bad regime in the soul of each private man by making phantoms that are very far removed from the truth and by gratifying the soul's foolish part, which doesn't distinguish big from little but believes the same things are at one time big and another little.⁵

Although it would be easy to reject the validity of this argument, pointing out that, with the explosion of artificial intelligence, the “calculating part” of our souls praised by Plato poses a threat to our very survival, Plato nonetheless made a valid point, especially with regard to the well-established fact that AI is a bric-a-brac full of inconsistencies, heterogeneities and hallucinations – the more complex LLM agents become, the more they hallucinate. Does the confused ideological edifice of “fiuminismo”, then, not point forward to a half-elaborated AI construct? The standard reproach that AI cannot write poetry should be turned around: it produces too much (bad) poetry. Elon Musk and Peter Thiel are today's D'Annunzios.

See Federico Campagna, *Otherworlds: Mediterranean Lessons on Escaping History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2025).

2

Quoted from <https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/fiume>.

3

<https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/poetic-regime>.

4

Quoted from op. cit.

5

Quoted from

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D10>.