

Facism

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new perspective. Volume 3. Number 1. September 1997

Summary: *facism is one of the most complicated issues in modern history. There is no simple or generally accepted definition: the term needs to be understood on a variety of levels (as a political ideology, as a style of rule, as a sub-division of totalitarian power politics, and as characteristic policies).*

IN 1918, at the end of a brutal and exhausting war, many Europeans were determined that another such conflict should never occur again. The Great War must be 'the war to end war'. Militarism was to be outlawed, state boundaries redrawn to take account of national identity, and human rights respected. In short, the world was to be made safe for democracy. The future would surely be the best of times. Twenty years later, however, such hopes seemed childishly naive. By then, one state after another had given way to authoritarian rule and a second world war was about to be unleashed. For many it was the worst of times; and the chief culprit, it seemed, was easily found - *facism*, which the German novelist Thomas Mann described in 1938 as 'a disease of the times, which is at home everywhere and from which no country is free'. Quite simply, it was 'the plague of the twentieth century'.

Why had this contagion spread and what exactly was it? These are profoundly difficult questions to answer. Justly has it been said that facism stubbornly remains 'the great conundrum for students of the twentieth century'. As a result, some students often misunderstand the term and use it inappropriately, while others steer clear of it altogether. Admittedly, 'facism' is a slippery and elusive concept, but we must attempt to get to grips with it.

Why Democracy Collapsed

Interwar Europe saw the collapse of one democratic regime after another. There were, in fact, four interlocking problems affecting much of the Continent:

1. The Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917 led to communist threats - real or imaginary - in other states.
2. Many European powers were aggrieved with the Versailles peace settlement: hence nationalist passions, stimulated by the war, were kept at fever pitch.
3. Economic problems afflicted Europe. There was immediate hardship, with high unemployment and mounting inflation; then came a relative boom in 1924-8; and finally, in 1929-33, economic miseries multiplied, with unemployment reaching unprecedented heights. Many began to fear, and the communists to hope, that the whole capitalist system was breaking down.
4. Finally, many democracies were built upon insecure foundations. Could the new states of central and eastern Europe survive, especially since they often contained not only separate 'cultural nations' but also many smaller minorities? In addition, the future of several older states was in jeopardy.

These four issues go a long way towards explaining the overthrow of democracy (and, conversely, its survival in states like Britain, Belgium and France - see map, page 28). But they need to be seen alongside a fifth issue, the Great War itself, which exacerbated each of the four problems and, in addition, produced a large number of ex-servicemen who were ready recruits to paramilitary groups, like the *squadristi* in Italy or the Free Corps in Germany. The existence of these common, European-wide factors may well lead us to accept the notion of a 'fascist road to power'. Yet a full understanding of the eclipse of democracy demands also a consideration of the political and economic inheritance in each country ('historical factors') and of the actions of important individuals and of luck or chance ('contingent factors'). The overthrow of democracy is, in fact, a highly complex affair. Nevertheless, it is a much more straightforward issue than the next to be considered: exactly which parties and regimes should be called fascist?

Mussolini's Fascism

There is no generally accepted definition of fascism, partly because the term has been employed more often by its enemies than supporters. It became a term of abuse used to lump together groups of right-wingers who often felt that they had little in common.

Some believe that the word fascism derives from the Italian *Fasces*, which were bundles of rods, often attached to an axe, carried in front of the magistrates in Ancient Rome as a symbol of authority. Others insist that it comes from *Fascio*, a group or club. Fasci of workers in the Sicilian sulphur mines had organised strikes in the 1890s; in 1915 Fasci were formed to campaign for Italy's entry into the war; and after the war Fasci, including Mussolini's *Fasci di Combattimento* or Combat Group, were set up to oppose the communists. But whatever the derivation of the term, Mussolini's Fascism had no clear-cut meaning. It was not an ideology, he said, but an anti-ideology, a (Zen-like) synthesis of every idea and its opposite: it was aristocratic and democratic, conservative and progressive, reactionary and revolutionary. 'Our doctrine is action,' said Mussolini. On another occasion, he insisted that the essence of Fascism was a 'trenchocracy' - rule not by discredited democrats but by those, like himself, who in the trenches had shed blood for their homeland.

Mussolini became Italian prime minister in 1922 and, within a few years, had assumed dictatorial powers. Soon he talked about a 'Fascist century' and even a 'Fascist Era' (in which 1922 would be Year One). He began to sponsor oppositional parties in other countries - including the Nazis in Germany, the *Heimwehr* in Austria, Mosley's British Union of Fascists and the Falange in Spain - and liked to see himself as head of an international movement. Yet few historians think that these efforts achieved much success. Indeed, it is a widely accepted convention that specifically Italian 'Fascism' should be distinguished from other forms of 'fascism' (without the capitalised first letter). One of the main components of fascism as a European-wide or general - or *generic* ('of a type') - movement was extreme nationalism, and thus there were bound to be significant differences between the forms it took in different countries. The question is, how many local variations can the concept of generic fascism support before it becomes meaningless?

Generic Fascism: The Ideological Framework

Many philosophers and historians of ideas insist that fascism is, first and foremost, an ideology. It grew up in the third quarter of the nineteenth century and particularly in the 1890s, its 'incubatory period'. Its component parts included: (1) an extreme form of nationalism which insisted that human beings were sub-divisions of a larger national whole which alone could give meaning to their lives; (2) social Darwinism, which insisted that struggle between nations was natural and inevitable; (3) the 'science' of racism, which constructed a hierarchy of races and branded some, including the Jews, as inferior; and (4) anti-positivism, the idea that human beings are motivated not by logic and reason (as the philosophers of the Enlightenment had said) but by myths, intuition and emotion (as Romantic thinkers had believed).

In addition, there were two further ideas. First, there was the notion of the heroic, all-wise leader who embodies the will of the nation. Second, there was the concept of the 'corporate state'. Capitalism pitted owner against worker, while communism, deriving from this class antagonism, insisted that workers should rise up against their exploiters. But proponents of the corporate state insisted that every industry should be governed by representatives of the owners and of the workers, under the benevolent eye of the State. Such an arrangement would be neither capitalist nor communist, but a constructive 'third way'.

The Great War created the ideal climate for the growth of these ideas, and after 1918 they flourished. According to this interpretation, fascism was essentially a matter of ideas. Admittedly, they varied from place to place, but there was a 'minimum' or 'lowest common denominator' which justifies the concept of generic fascism.

Yet several criticisms must be made. First, perhaps the ideas associated with fascism were little more than half-baked clichés and prejudices which do not deserve to be dignified as a political ideology. Certainly, it must be admitted, that if fascism was an ideology, then it was one of the vaguest and least coherent. Second, no two supporters of this school of thought seem to agree on the exact ingredients of the lowest common denominator. For instance, some - but not all - include the corporate state or anti-Semitism or an aggressive foreign policy or the 'leadership principle' (Führerprinzip). However, what should be grasped, above all, is that those who adopt this method of defining generic fascism are not describing any particular regime or creating any complete model to which regimes must conform before they can be called fascist. Nor are they pointing to the most historically important aspects of these groups. They are simply arguing that the ideas which certain groups had in common allow them to be called 'fascist'. Hence, generic fascism is a means of classification - or, to use the jargon, 'a taxonomic device'. It is not an all-inclusive definition of any regime or the only label that can be used.

Mistaken Identity: The Extreme Sceptics

Generic fascism has its critics, some of whom deny that the concept has any validity. To them, fascism is the creation of historians' loose thinking. They insist that each authoritarian regime was separate and unique. In Italy the Fascists came to power and in Germany the Nazis, while elsewhere there was a variety of monarchical and military dictatorships which were all different. Very few parties, they argue, actually called themselves fascist, and most authoritarian regimes - for instance in Spain, Hungary and Poland - were buttressed ideologically not by any new anti-positivist ideology but by old-fashioned Catholicism. Furthermore, most of these regimes were actually opposed by small fascist-like parties, often on Mussolini's payroll. To apply to them the common label 'fascist' is, therefore, to assert a similarity where, in reality, there were only differences.

Historical Utility: The Moderate Critics

Other historians accept that regimes and parties can be seen as examples of generic fascism: given the way the term has been defined, it seems impossible not to accept generic fascism as one possible means of classification. Admittedly, they argue, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany were each unique: but what does this really mean? It cannot be that they were different in every respect but only in some respects - and, therefore, in other ways they were similar. Yet they doubt that this way of classifying regimes is necessarily useful. What if the differences between generically fascist regimes outweigh their similarities? In this case, the use of the common label may well hinder historical understanding. For instance, the regimes of Mussolini and of Hitler can be classified as fascist. But Hitler was rabidly anti-Semitic, while Mussolini believed that scientific racism was sheer nonsense: Hitler, he once jeered, was not only a 'horrible sexual degenerate' but a 'muddle-headed fellow whose brain is stuffed with philosophical and political tags that are utterly incoherent'. Such differences, of course, do not stop proponents of the fascist 'minimum': they simply exclude anti-Semitism from the common fascist ground. Yet if the driving force in Germany was a determination to liquidate the 'lesser races' in order to create a racial rather than a class society, then the common ground with Italy may be historically unimportant. The Holocaust may render generic fascism startlingly irrelevant.

Political historians tend to insist that the ideological approach to fascism is inadequate. From their perspective, ideas are important in so far as they influence actions. Thus they view generic fascism from the perspective of what happened, identifying common fascist strands in different countries and classifying regimes as fascist overall if such similarities outweigh the differences. This sounds straightforward enough: in reality, however, constructing a comparison is a highly complex business. (Were the Fascist and Nazi regimes different in kind or merely in degree? Can Hitler be called the 'German Mussolini'? Was the Nazi regime simply a more efficient - or Germanic - version of Fascist Italy?) Nevertheless, the essential point is that we must look at actions and achievements, as well as ideas and assumptions.

A Style of Rule and Totalitarianism

Others see the link between fascist regimes not in ideas or actions but in the 'style' that the dictators adopted to impress and indoctrinate the masses. From this perspective, fascism is a matter of mass rallies, militaristic parades, political symbols, the cult of the leader, various forms of 'fancy dress', and of extensive control of the mass media. In this way far more regimes - including that of the *Caudillo* in Spain, General Franco - may be described as fascist. Perhaps we should look also at the secret police and the prison camps, at terror as well as propaganda, and at the attempt to indoctrinate youth. If we adopt this approach, and ignore ideology altogether, then fascist regimes bear a strong resemblance to Stalin's Soviet Union. In so far as this is true, fascism may be seen as a version of totalitarianism (the doctrine that the State should control all aspects of citizens' lives - that *everything* should be rendered unto Caesar). In a totalitarian regime, as in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, power is an end in itself. Perhaps Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin were all versions of 'Big Brother'. If so, fascism may well be seen as simply unprincipled opportunism and power politics.

The Theorists

Generic fascism can be seen as a third way between capitalism and communism; it can be seen as basically the same as (Stalinist) communism; and it can also be seen as its opposite. Marxist intellectuals have argued that fascism was a terrorist dictatorship set up by the capitalists to prevent the sort of proletarian revolution that had occurred in Russia. Others have argued that it was essentially revolutionary, a force for modernisation, rather than reactionary. Such theories provide simple explanations to the conundrum or

fascism, or seem to. Almost certainly they are gross exaggerations, but at least they are open to empirical investigation. We should examine the connections between the fascist dictators and big business and investigate who supports the fascist parties. Similarly, we must examine the effects of fascist rule. In short, fascism should be subjected to historical investigation rather than theoretical analysis. Yet no final significance can be assigned to it, if only because new ('neo-') fascist groups exist today.

Conclusion

Generic fascism has been the subject of intense myth-making from the dictators, their supporters and their enemies. In addition, it has been subject to endless speculation from political scientists and philosophers. There can be no 'solution' to the problem of fascism. We can't assign one meaning to the term, if only because so many different, contradictory meanings have been given to it. Two things are essential. We must be careful, when we use the word, to define what we mean by it; and we must be aware of the main interpretations that have been put forward. Then we will understand that a regime can be called Nazi, totalitarian, anti-Semitic, and unique - at the same time as being fascist. Perhaps the most useful approach has been that of the 'check-list': fascism is looked at on several levels, including ideology, style and organisation, and actions. Such a wide-ranging approach comes close to the advice of the Italian historian Tasca, who said that the best way to define fascism is to write its history. These are wise words. What is important is not what precise name we assign to portions of the past but that we understand what happened and why - and the more we understand, the less the particular labels matter. The search for terminological exactitude is doomed to failure; the search for historical understanding is always fruitful.

Further Reading: Richard Bessel (ed), *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, CUP, 1996; Alexander J. De Grand, *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, Routledge, 1995; Roger Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, Chatto & Windus, 1995; Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, Routledge, 1993; Roger Griffin (ed), *Fascism*, OUP, 1995; Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-45*, UCL Press, 1995.

Words and concepts to note

generic: of a type or whole group (for example, Hoover has become a generic name for vacuum cleaners).

naive: simple or unsophisticated.

authoritarian: a style of authority in which the ruler has very much power and many rights.

conundrum: puzzle or riddle.

contingent: dependent on chance; an uncertainty, the fortuitous.

totalitarian: description of a style of government which seeks to control all areas of citizens' life and even their thought, often by the use of propaganda and terror.

anti-Semitic: opposed and hostile to Jews.

Questions to consider

- ◆ Why is fascism so difficult to define?
- ◆ What is helpful, and what is unsatisfactory, about an ideological definition of generic fascism?
- ◆ How safe is 'style of rule' as a discriminator between those regimes which were fascist and those which were not?

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