

A Sociology of Fascist Movements

TAKING FASCISTS SERIOUSLY

This book seeks to explain fascism by understanding fascists – who they were, where they came from, what their motivations were, how they rose to power. I focus here on the rise of fascist movements rather than on established fascist regimes. I investigate fascists at their flood tide, in their major redoubts in interwar Europe, that is, in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and Spain. To understand fascists will require understanding fascist movements. We can understand little of individual fascists and their deeds unless we appreciate that they were joined together into distinctive power organizations. We must also understand them amid their broader twentieth-century context, in relation to general aspirations for more effective states and greater national solidarity. For fascism is neither an oddity nor merely of historical interest. Fascism has been an essential if predominantly undesirable part of modernity. At the beginning of the twenty-first century there are seven reasons still to take fascists very seriously.

(1) Fascism was not a mere sideshow in the development of modern society. Fascism spread through much of the European heartland of modernity. Alongside environmentalism, it was the major political doctrine of world-historical significance created during the twentieth century. There is a chance that something quite like it, though almost certainly under another name, will play an important role in the twenty-first century. Fascists have been at the heart of modernity.

(2) Fascism was not a movement set quite apart from other modern movements. Fascists only embraced more fervently than anyone else the central political icon of our time, the nation-state, together with its ideologies and pathologies. We are thankful that today much of the world lives under rather mild nation-states, with modest, useful powers, embodying only

a fairly harmless nationalism. National government bureaucracies annoy us but they do not terrorize us – indeed, they predominantly serve our needs. Nationalism usually also appears in comforting domesticated forms. Though French people often proclaim themselves as culturally superior, Americans assert they are the freest people on Earth, and the Japanese claim a unique racial homogeneity, these highly suspect beliefs comfort themselves, amuse foreigners, and rarely harm anyone else.

Fascism represents a kind of second-level escalation beyond such “mild nation-statism.” The first escalation came in two parallel forms, one concerning the nation, the other the state. Regarding the nation, aspirations for democracy became entwined with the notion of the “integral” or “organic” nation. “The people” must rule, but this people was considered as one and indivisible and so might violently exclude from itself minority ethnic groups and political “enemies” (see my forthcoming volume, *The Dark-side of Democracy*, chap. 1, for more analysis of this). Regarding the state, the early twentieth century saw the rise of a more powerful state, seen as “the bearer of a moral project,” capable of achieving economic, social, and moral development.¹ In certain contexts this involved the rise of more authoritarian states. The combination of modern nationalism and statism was to turn democratic aspirations on their head, into authoritarian regimes seeking to “cleanse” minorities and opponents from the nation. Fascism, the second-level escalation, added to this combination mainly a distinctively “bottom-up” and “radical” paramilitary movement. This would overcome all opposition to the organic nation-state with violence from below, at whatever the cost. Such glorification of actual violence had emerged as a consequence of the modern “democratization” of war into one between “citizen armies.” Fascism thus presented a distinctively paramilitary extreme version of nation-statism (my actual definition of fascism is given below in this chapter). It was only the most extreme version of the dominant political ideology of our era.

(3) Fascist ideology must be taken seriously, in its own terms. It must not be dismissed as crazy, contradictory, or vague. Nowadays, this is quite widely accepted. Zeev Sternhell (1986: x) has remarked that fascism had “a body of doctrine no less solid or logically indefensible than that of any other political movement.” Consequently, said George Mosse (1999: x), “only . . . when we have grasped fascism from the inside out, can we truly judge its appeal and its power.” Since fascists did offer plausible solutions to modern social problems, they got mass electoral support and intense emotional commitment from militants. Of course, like most political activists, fascists were diverse and opportunistic. The importance of leadership and

power in fascism enhanced opportunism. Fascist leaders were empowered to do almost anything to seize power, and this could subvert other fascist values. Yet most fascists, leaders or led, believed in certain things. They were not people of peculiar character, sadists or psychopaths, or people with a “rag-bag” of half-understood dogmas and slogans flitting through their heads (or no more so than the rest of us). Fascism was a movement of high ideals, able to persuade a substantial part of two generations of young people (especially the highly educated) that it could bring about a more harmonious social order. To understand fascism, I adopt a methodology of taking fascists’ values seriously. Thus each of my case-study chapters begins by explaining local fascist doctrine, followed, if possible, by an account of what ordinary fascists seem to have believed.

(4) We must take seriously the social constituency of fascist movements and ask what sorts of people were drawn to them. Few fascists were marginals or misfits. Nor were they confined to classes or other interest groups who found in fascism a “cover” for their narrow material interests. Yet there were “core fascist constituencies” among which fascist values most resonated. This is perhaps the most original part of this book, yielding a new view of fascism, and it derives from a methodology of taking fascist values seriously. For the core fascist constituency enjoyed particularly close relations to the sacred icon of fascism, the nation-state. We must reconstruct that nation-state-loving constituency in order to see what kinds of people might be tempted toward fascism.

(5) We must also take seriously fascist movements. They were hierarchical yet comradely, embodying both the leadership principle and a constraining “social cage,” both of which heightened commitment, especially by single young men for whom the movement was almost a “total institution.” We must also appreciate its paramilitarism, since “popular violence” was crucial to its success. Fascist movements also changed as they were tempted by two different prospects. One was to use power in more and more radical and violent ways. The other was to enjoy the fruits of power by compromising under the table with powerful traditional elites. These led toward either a hardening of fascism (as in Germany) or a softening (as in Italy, at least until the late 1930s). Fascists also experienced “careers” in the movement, which might lead them down either path. We must observe fascists in action: committing violence, trimming, pursuing careers.

(6) We must take “hardened” fascists seriously in a far more sinister sense, as the eventual perpetrators of great evil. We must not excuse or relativize this but seek to understand it. The capacity for evil is an essential human attribute, and so is our capacity to commit evil for what we believe to be

moral purposes. Fascists were especially self-deluded. We need to know more of the circumstances in which we humans do this. Though we prefer to write history and sociology as a happy, progressive, moral tale, this grotesquely distorts the reality of human experience. The twentieth century saw massive evil, not as an accident or as the resurgence of the primitive in us, but as willed, purposive, and essentially “modern” behavior. To understand fascism is to understand how people of apparently high modernizing ideals could then act to produce evil that was eventually unmitigated. However, I leave the very worst for my forthcoming book, *The Dark Side of Democracy*.

(7) We must take seriously the chance that fascists might return. If we understand the conditions that generated fascists, we can better understand whether they might return and how we might avoid this. Some of the conditions that generated fascism are still present. Organic nationalism and the adoption of paramilitary forms, committed to ethnic and political cleansing, at present moves many thousands of people across the world to commit supposedly “idealistic” yet in reality murderous acts against neighbours and political opponents whom they call “enemies.” This may horrify us, but it is not dismissible as a return to the “primitive” in us. Ethnic and political cleansing has been one of European civilization’s main contributions to modernity; while violent paramilitarism has been distinctively twentieth-century. We must comprehend these aspects of modernity. It is rather fortunate nowadays that “statism” (the third main component of fascism after organic nationalism and paramilitarism) is greatly out of fashion, since both its historic carriers, fascism and communism, collapsed disastrously. Current cleansing regimes tend to be paramilitary and authoritarian, but pretend they are democratic; the words “fascist” and “communist” have largely become terms of imprecise abuse. Given time for a supposedly stateless neoliberalism to do similar damage to parts of the world, this rejection of the powerful state will probably fade. Then extreme statist values might be harnessed again to extreme paramilitary nationalism in movements resembling fascism – unless we can learn from the history I record here. I doubt new movements will call themselves fascist, since the word is now so abhorred. Yet some of the substance of fascism lives on.

There are two main schools of thought on fascism. A more idealist “nationalist school,” which I discuss first, has focused on fascists’ beliefs and doctrines, while a more materialist “class school,” discussed second, has focused on its class basis and its relationship to capitalism. The debates between them constitute yet another replay of the traditional polemic between idealism and materialism in the social sciences. But since the two approaches

often appear to be discussing different levels of phenomena – beliefs versus social base/functions – they frequently talk past each other. Thus we lack an acceptable general theory of fascism. Such a theory would have to build on top of both approaches, taking from each what is useful and adding what both neglect.

I have chosen not to here give the reader a heavy dose of sociological theory. But my own approach to fascism derives from a more general model of human societies that rejects the idealism-versus-materialism dualism. My earlier work identified four primary “sources of social power” in human societies: ideological, economic, military, and political.² Class theorists of fascism have tended to elevate economic power relations in their explanations, while nationalist theorists have emphasized ideology. Yet all four sources of social power are needed to explain most important social and historical outcomes. To attain their goals, social movements wield combinations of control over ultimate meaning systems (ideological), control over means of production and exchange (economic), control over organized physical violence (military), and control over centralized and territorial institutions of regulation (political). All four are necessary to explain fascism. Mass fascism was a response to the post-World War I ideological, economic, military, and political crises. Fascists proposed solutions to all four. Fascist organization also combined substantial ideological innovations (generally called “propaganda”), mass political electoralism, and paramilitary violence. All became highly ritualized so as to intensify emotional commitment. In attempting to seize power, fascist leaders also sought to neutralize economic, military, political, and ideological (especially church) elites. Thus any explanation of fascism must rest on the entwining of all four sources of social power, as my empirical case-study chapters demonstrate. My final chapter presents the pay-off from this model: a general explanation of fascism.

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF FASCISM

Obviously, we must define our terms, though this is no easy matter. Some scholars have refused to define fascism at all in any “generic” sense, believing that “true” fascism was found only in Italy, its original home. Along with many others, I disagree. However, I do not initially seek a generic definition that might apply across many times and places. I merely seek one offering heuristic utility across the interwar period in Europe – until my last chapter, when I raise the issue of whether fascist movements have existed in more recent times and in other places.

Let us first get a general sense of fascism through the views of its prominent intellectuals, with the commentaries of Sternhell (1976, 1986, 1994) and Mosse (1999), plus Griffin's compilation of fascist texts (1995), as my main guides. Most of them were initially nonmaterialist leftists who then embraced organic nationalism. In 1898 the Frenchman Barrès called his fusion "Socialist Nationalism," though it was the Italian Corradini's inversion of these words, as "National Socialism," which caught on, though by socialism he really meant syndicalism: "Syndicalism and nationalism together, these are the doctrines that represent solidarity," he emphasized. Class and sectoral conflict could be harmonized with the help of syndicalist (labor union) organizations coordinated by a "corporate state." So national socialism would be confined within national boundaries, with class struggle transformed into struggle between nations. "Bourgeois nations" (such as Britain and France) exploited "proletarian nations" (such as Italy). To resist, the proletarian nation must fight, with economic weapons and through "the sacred mission of imperialism." Except for the last phrase, this resembles the "third world socialism" of recent years. These were not uncommon ideas in the twentieth century.

As leftists but not materialists, these men also lauded "resistance," "will," "movement," "collective action," "the masses," and the dialectic of "progress" through "struggle," "force," and "violence." These Nietzschean values made fascism "radical." Fascists were determined to overcome all opposition ruthlessly, by will, force, whatever was necessary, without compromise or scruples. This meant in practice forming paramilitaries as well as parties. As collectivists they despised the "amoral individualism" of free market liberalism and "bourgeois democracy," which neglected the interests of "living communities" and of "the nation as an organic whole." The nation was essentially one and indivisible, a living and breathing entity, defined as either "integral" or "organic." To be German, Italian, or French, fascists asserted, meant much more than just living in a geographical space; it meant something outsiders could not experience, involving a basic identity and emotion, beyond reason. As Mosse emphasizes, the Germanic version of the nation differed from the Southern European, being racial as well as cultural. It drew more on social Darwinism, anti-Semitism, and other nineteenth-century racist strands of theory to generate a *Volk*, a singular ethnic-cultural unity transcending all possible conflicts within it, but erecting higher boundaries against other peoples.

Nonetheless, the nation had both a moral and a rational structure. Building on Rousseau and Durkheim, the theorists said that competitive institutions such as markets, parties, elections, or classes could not generate

morality. This must come from the community, the nation. The Frenchman Berth railed against liberalism: "Society is brought to the point where it is only a market made up of free-trading atoms, in contact with which everything dissolves. . . . dustlike particles of individuals, shut up within the narrow confines of their consciousness and their money boxes." Panunzio and Bottai followed Durkheim in praising the virtues of "civil society," believing that voluntary communal associations were the foundations of liberty. Yet they must be integrated into an overall corporate state that would then represent the interests of the nation as a whole. Without this linkage between state and communal associations, they said, the state would be "empty," with "a deficiency of sociological content," as was the case in the liberal state (Riley 2002: chap. 1). In contrast, the fascist state would be "corporate" and "sociological," based on strong bonds of association. Again, this sounds quite modern. Berth and Panunzio might have been targeting the neo-liberalism dominant a hundred years later.

Fascist intellectuals also attacked a left trapped within passive "bourgeois materialism." Its revolutionary pretensions had been exposed, they argued, by the superior mobilizing power of modern warfare between entire nations. Nations, not classes, were the true masses of modernity. Class conflict between capitalists and workers was not the core of the problem, they insisted. Instead, the real struggle was between "workers of all classes," "the productive classes," ranged against "unproductive" enemies, usually identified as finance or foreign or Jewish capitalists. They would defend the productive workers of all classes. The Frenchman Valois wrote that "nationalism + socialism = fascism," and the Englishman Oswald Mosley said, "If you love our country, you are national, and if you love our people you are socialist." These were attractive ideas in the early twentieth century, the "age of the masses," since fascists promised to "transcend" a class struggle then seemingly tearing apart the social fabric. Indeed, milder versions of such claims to transcendence have been adopted by most of the successful political movements of the twentieth century.

The nation should be represented through a corporatist, syndicalist state. It could "transcend" the moral decay and class conflict of bourgeois society with a "total plan" offering a statist "third way" between capitalism and socialism. The Italian Gentile (a late convert to fascism) claimed that fascism resolved the "paradox of liberty and authority. The authority of the state is absolute." Mussolini agreed: "[E]verything in the State, nothing against the State, nothing outside the State." "Ours will be a totalitarian state in the service of the fatherland's integrity," proclaimed the Spaniard José Antonio Primo de Rivera. The Belgian Henri de Man applauded

“authoritarian democracy.” The “fascist revolution” would produce “the total man in the total society, with no clashes, no prostration, no anarchy.” said the Frenchman Déat.

But this was the future. Right now, the nation must struggle against its enemies for self-realization. It would be led by a paramilitary elite. The more radical fascists endorsed “moral murder.” They claimed that paramilitary violence could “cleanse,” “purify,” “regenerate” the elite who committed it, then the nation as a whole. Valois expressed this brutally:

- to the bourgeois brandishing his contracts and statistics:
- two plus three makes. . . .
- Nought, the Barbarian replies, smashing his head in.

For Valois the “barbarian” fascist represented morality since he alone represented the organic community of the nation, from which all moral values flow. Of course, for these intellectuals, inhabiting the same post-Nietzschean world that generated vitalism, surrealism, and Dadaism, much of this was just literary metaphor. Yet rank-and-file fascists were later to use these justifications of their activities.

O’Sullivan (1983: 33–69) notes that fascists hated the “limited” nature of liberal democracy, its imperfect, indirect, and only “representative” (rather than “direct”) form of rule. Liberal democracy tolerates conflicts of interest, “smoke-filled rooms,” “wheeler-dealing,” and “dirty” and “unprincipled” compromises. Acceptance of imperfections and compromise is actually the essence of both liberal democracy and social democracy. This reduces the stature of potential “enemies” into mere “opponents” with whom deals might be struck. Liberal and social democracies recognize no monopoly of virtue, no absolute truth. They are antiheroic. I have learned from writing these two books not to expect our democratic politicians to be too principled. We need their instrumentalism, their dirty deals. But fascists differed. They saw politics as unlimited activism to achieve moral absolutes. In Max Weber’s terms, this was “value rationality,” conduct oriented toward the achievement of absolute values, not merely instrumental interests.

This brought a higher emotional content. Fascism saw itself as a *crusade*. Fascists did not view evil as a universal tendency of human nature. Fascists, like some Marxists, believed that evil was embedded in particular social institutions and so could be shed. The nation was perfectible if organic and cleansed. As O’Sullivan notes, the Romanian fascist leader Codreanu was an extreme example of this. He saw his “Legion of the Archangel Michael” as a moral force: “All [other] political organizations . . . believe that the country was dying because of lack of good programs; consequently they put together

a perfectly jelled program with which they start to assemble supporters.” In contrast, said Codreanu, “This country is dying of lack of men, not of programs.” “We must have men, new men.” Thus the Legion would free Romania from “the power of evil.” It would contain “heroes,” “[t]he finest souls that our minds can conceive, the proudest, tallest, straightest, strongest, cleverest, bravest and most hardworking that our race can produce.” They must fight against the “enemies” polluting the nation (Codreanu 1990: 219–21). He believed that in defense of good against evil, violence was morally legitimate.

Obviously, however, to understand fascists we must move beyond the intellectuals. How could the ideas quoted above stir millions of Europeans into action? What conditions of real life made such extraordinary sentiments seem plausible? Sternhell tends to see fascism as complete before World War I, neglecting the war’s conversion of the blustering rhetoric of the few into mass movements. Fascism would have probably amounted only to a historical footnote without the Great War. But to investigate the values and emotions of later subaltern fascists is not easy. Most left little record of their views. If they did, many lied (since at the time they were on trial for their lives). My empirical chapters assemble what evidence I have found.

Sternhell’s account is also somewhat biased toward early Italian, Spanish, and French intellectuals and glaringly omits Germans. Mosse and others say that “fascism” is not the same as “Nazism.” They say that the racist and anti-Semitic Nazis focused more on the people, the *Volk*, and less on the state and that the Nazis altogether lacked a model of a utopian state. The Nazi movement, not the state, represented the nation, just as the Führer personified it. In contrast, few Southern European fascists were racists or anti-Semites, and they developed corporatist, syndicalist blueprints of their desired state. Whereas Nazism was *völkisch*, fascism was statist (Mosse 1964, 1966, 1999; Bracher 1973: 605–9; and Nolte 1965, among others). And only Nazi racism perpetrated genocide, they say. Thus Nazism was not fascism.

Though there is some truth in this, I join those who believe that Nazis *were* fascists and that fascism can be treated as a more general phenomenon. Hitler and Mussolini thought they belonged to the same movement. “Fascism” was an Italian term, which Nazis, being German nationalists, did not want to borrow (nor did some Spanish writers whom everyone calls fascists). But, as we see below, the two movements shared similar core values, had similar social bases, and developed similar movements. Nationalism was more emphasized in Nazism, statism in Italian fascism. But these were variations on common themes.

The tendency to dichotomize Nazism and Italian fascism also reveals an obsession with Germany and Italy. Yet fascism spread more broadly, against a backdrop of wider political ferment, especially on the political right. I focus on five cases of mass fascist movements: Italy, Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Romania. While each was unique, they all shared some features. They were a family of fascists, differing mainly in their abilities to seize power. Only the first three achieved stable (if short-lived) fascist regimes. This was mainly because the different timing of their forward surges led to different strategies of containment by their political rivals, especially those on the right. In fact, Austria, Hungary, and Romania are all cases in which we can analyze a dialectic between fascism and more conservative forms of authoritarianism, a dialectic that helps us better to understand the nature of fascism more generally. I finally analyze Spain, an example of countries that contained relatively few fascists but many fellow-travelers, and where more conservative nationalists and statists managed to keep firm hold over their fascist allies. My forthcoming book also includes a swath of fascist-leaning nationalist movements – Slovakian, Croatian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and so on – adapting varying blends of Italian fascism and German Nazism to their own purposes. There was not a dichotomy but a *range* of fascist doctrines and practices – as there has been in movements such as conservatism, socialism, or liberalism.

But unlike socialism (which has Marxism), fascism contains no systematic theory. The men I have quoted above say a variety of things within only a looser *Weltanschauung* (“world view”), a number of views that broadly “hang together” and from which different fascist movements made different selections. Various scholars have sought to identify this core. Nolte (1965) identified a “fascist minimum” combining three ideological “anti’s” – anti-Marxism, antiliberalism, and anticonservatism – plus two movement characteristics, the leadership principle and the party-army, all oriented toward a final goal: “totalitarianism.” This is not very clear on what the fascists wanted positively, while his stress on the anti’s makes him reach the dubious conclusion that fascism was essentially a reactionary form of antimodernism.

Stanley Payne is now the preeminent comparative historian of fascism. He says the fascist core comprises Nolte’s three anti’s, plus a list of other items: nationalism, authoritarian statism, corporatism and syndicalism, imperialism, idealism, voluntarism, romanticism, mysticism, militarism, and violence. Quite a list! He narrows this down into three categories of style, negations, and programs, though these are more abstract than substantive qualities. And he ends by saying that fascism was “the most revolutionary form of nationalism” and that it centered on philosophical idealism and