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The Decay of an Enterprise

In the course of the closing decade of the twentieth century, a dedicated minority of journalists and academics decided that the rise of "neofascism" posed a serious threat to public decency and political integrity in the Western industrialized democracies. One consequence was that by the first years of the twenty-first century, literally hundreds of books and articles dedicated to some sort of treatment of the subject had appeared. Their intended purpose was to warn society of the insidiousness of the peril.

For these works to have accomplished their purpose, one would have expected some indication of what "neofascism" meant, followed by a serious treatment of the candidate neofascisms that constituted the menace. Unhappily, little of the former is to be found in many if not most works – and without even lexical definition, it is difficult to isolate the proper objects of concern.

It often appears that however "neofascism" is defined, its relationship to Benito Mussolini's Fascism remains, at best, obscure. Often an unspoken assumption functions as part of the sorting criteria in identifying neofascism. Most of the authors who have surfaced within the past two decades choose to fuse fascism, national socialism, and the political right together into a single subject category, usually identified as either "fascism," "neofascism," or "right-wing extremism," as though all constituted a single reference class. The consequence has been considerable confusion, with uncertainty concerning the class of political movements and/or ideologies that constitute the proper objects of scrutiny.

The issue is not simply academic. The identification, for instance, of the Silvio Berlusconi government of the Italian republic as neofascist is a matter of no small consequence.[1] That government has been an important ally of

[1] We are told by some, for example, that the Berlusconi government is not at all what it appears to be. We are informed that no matter the democratic pretense, the political party of Berlusconi's Vice Premier Gianfranco Fini's "AN's [Alleanza nazionale's] ideological tap-root

the United States in a variety of international circumstances. Its description as "neofascist" not only prejudices the relationship, but taints the action that is a byproduct of that relationship.

More immediately, the identification of any political movement as "neofascist" tends to limit its moral right to free expression. Any and all political movements, however eccentric, have every legal right to such expression in a representative democracy. Everyone acknowledges that the exercise of those rights is difficult for dissident movements. To insist on their "neofascism" further reduces their opportunity to gain access to a public hearing.

Other than those immediate concerns, there remain the academic responsibilities of conducting one's inquiry in accordance with generally accepted criteria of objectivity, public evidence, coherence, and consistency. Much of the subsequent discussion will trade on just those criteria.

In terms of that discussion, its explicit, initial contention is that the real or pretended study of "neofascism" is inextricably related to the study of Italian Fascism, in which the name finds its origin. That granted, the inquiry must commence with a synoptic study of a reasonably discrete, if enormously complicated, series of events that covered more than a quarter-century of European and world history during the past century. To study neofascism meaningfully would seem to necessitate that we know something substantial concerning Fascism – at least some major elements of its peculiar history and the ideology that animated its behavior. It might be further argued that a notion of a generic "fascism" would occupy conceptual space somewhere between Italian Fascism and neofascism as a transitional object of reflection in any serious cognitive enterprise. It would seem that to speak of "neofascism," one must entertain some notion of a generic fascism.

However elementary all that might appear, everything involved in the undertaking is beset by problems. Many decades after its disappearance, Mussolini's Fascism continues to remain an uncertainty in the minds of many – if not most – academics. Very few have a sure grasp of its origins, its history, or its historic impact. To this day, the literal or operational meaning of the generic term "fascism" remains sorely contested. Some, including some of the luminaries of contemporary historical research, have, in fact, denied the generic term any real referents.[2]

is still thrust deep into historical Fascism . . . retaining many Fascist core values," and that one still finds a "Fascist spirit" among those of the party, with the "ineliminable core of generic fascism still [lurking] within the AN mindset. . . ." Roger Griffin, "The 'Post-Fascism' of the Alleanza Nazionale: A Case Study in Ideological Morphology," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 1, no. 2 (1996), pp. 138, 142.

[2] Renzo De Felice, the most prominent among them, has argued that there really was only one Fascism, and that the entire notion of a generic fascism is dubious at best. To maintain historiographic integrity, he held that any discussion of fascism as a phenomenon would have to be "rigidly limited" in time (between the two world wars) and space (Western Europe). See Renzo De Felice, *Intervista sul fascismo* (Rome: Laterza, 1975), p. 82.

Thus, while prepared to recognize some affinities between Adolf Hitler's National Socialism and Mussolini's Fascism, Renzo De Felice, one of the twentieth century's foremost scholars of Fascism, denied the reality of a generic fascism.[3] Ernst Nolte, in his major work on Fascism, while prepared to speak of a generic fascism, insisted on a studied distinction between the Fascism of Mussolini and the "radical fascism" of Hitler. National Socialism distinguished itself from Mussolini's Fascism by emphatic differences.

Irrespective of the distinctions insisted upon by the most celebrated scholars, all too often Italian Fascism is simply identified with the National Socialism of Adolf Hitler – with both conceived instances of a generic "fascism." Rarely is an argued rationale for such usage provided. It has simply become a matter more of custom and usage than historic confirmation – a practice inherited from the time of the Second World War, when the industrialized democracies found themselves embroiled in a desperate and protracted "war against fascism."

In fighting that war, to identify the enemy, without distinctions, as perfidious, racist, antihumane, and irredeemable was a major propaganda convenience. Hitler's National Socialists could easily be so characterized. Whether Mussolini's Fascists, or the imperial Japanese, could be so typified, without significant qualification, was a matter of little practical concern to the Allied powers, who were more occupied with winning the war than making fine historical distinctions. As for the intellectuals of the period, there were a sufficient number of shared properties between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy that the identification could be advanced without excessive intellectual discomfort.[4]

Both European regimes opposed representative democracy; both insisted on ideological conformity; both were led by "charismatic" leaders; both were nationalistic; both were militaristic; both employed controlled information to create and sustain popular support; both were bellicose; both were irredentist; and both were anticommunist. That seemed to constitute a constellation

[3] Ibid., pp. 24, 70; see De Felice's entire discussion concerning race and anti-Semitism and the comparison between Fascism and National Socialism in De Felice, *Rosso e Nero* (Milan: Baldini and Castoldi, 1995), pp. 149–163.

[4] Prior to the war, a number of English language texts treated Fascism with considerable objectivity. None of the properties that identified Fascism with National Socialism appeared with any prominence. See, as examples, Paul Einzig, *The Economic Foundations of Fascism* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1933); G. Lowell Field, *The Syndical and Corporative Institutions of Italian Fascism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938); Herbert W. Schneider, *Making the Fascist State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1928); William G. Welk, *Fascist Economic Policy: An Analysis of Italy's Economic Experiment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938). There were, of course, "committed" scholars, mostly Marxists and Marxist-Leninists, who saw Fascism only as "reactionary" and "antihumane" because it was anti-Marxist. With the advent of the war, it was eminently simple to identify Fascism with National Socialism. In the propaganda efforts strenuously pursued during the war, there even was an attempt to identify the Japanese wartime leadership as "fascist."

of traits sufficient to license the use of the generic "fascist" to cover both Hitler's National Socialism and Mussolini's Fascism.

Given all that, in the context of a war for survival, the facile identification of Fascism and National Socialism was only to be expected. What that identification did not address, of course, were the clear and cognitively significant distinctions between the regimes.

De Felice suggested some of the consequences. Appalled by the singularly horrific consequences of Hitler's racism and anti-Semitism and the ready identification of Fascism with National Socialism, both were characterized by the same moral disabilities. That tended to support an interpretation that saw both, Italian Fascism as well as Hitler's National Socialism, as instances of a "collapse of Western moral values." Generic fascism was understood to be the result of a lapsed moral conscience on the part of Central and Southern Europeans. Even immediately prior to the Second World War, more emphatically during that war, and for a not inconsiderable time thereafter, the fascists, as "enemies of Western civilization," were in effect demonized, identified as peoples who had forsworn Christianity and who suffered grievous psychoanalytic and psychiatric morbidities. They were little more than embodiments of unmitigated evil.[5] For both academics and lay persons, generic fascism tended to represent evil incarnate.

For a long time after the conclusion of the Second World War, a substantial minority of lay persons and academics were ill disposed to abandon such an apodictic moral interpretation of what had transpired. The mass murders associated with National Socialism in the context of a dictatorial system decked in all the trappings of violence and war were sufficient to convince many that the moral characterizations were true of all "fascisms." The many so convinced were to serve as teachers for postwar generations. They transmitted to their intellectual heirs a conviction that saw generic fascism as the monstrous product of a kind of moral madness. The judgments were so effectively transmitted from the wartime generation to subsequent ones that, in general and until today, generic fascism is still depicted in much the same terms.

Together with the host of moralizers who collected around the interpretation of fascism as the product of moral decay were the Marxists and sometimes Marxists who, before, during, and after the war, argued that generic fascism was the predictable product of a universal "class struggle" of "proletarians" against oppressive capitalism. Fascism, in whatever form, was understood to be an excrescence of industrial and/or finance capitalism, a weapon in capitalism's reactionary struggle against the advent of a liberating proletarian revolution. Based on the theoretical Marxism of the

[5] See A. James Gregor, *Interpretations of Fascism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2000), chaps. 2 and 3.

nineteenth century, committed scholarship left little room for any alternative interpretation.

The role of Fascism was understood to be the domestication of workers' organizations in the service of monopoly capitalism. Since capitalism, to sustain its profitability, must restrict its labor costs and increase prices, the most propitious environment would be one in which the nation is at war. Price controls restrict the movement of wages, and the escalating demand for products inflates prices. Since the wartime demand for products is critical to the nation's very survival, "Big Business" receives whatever it demands from the government for its output.[6]

In such circumstances, Fascism, in the service of its masters, is required to keep the nation either in conflict or on a war footing. The unrelenting drive to involve Italy in war had to be understood as an irrepressible and inextricable feature of Mussolini's rule. Fascism's military adventures in Ethiopia, Spain, and the Balkans, concluding with Italy's catastrophic involvement in the Second World War, were simply the necessary consequence of Mussolini's subservience to his masters' interests.[7]

While distinctive in its own right, the Marxist interpretation, which rapidly became an interpretation of generic fascism, enjoyed an easy compatibility with the moral assessment that colored prevailing judgments. Capitalists were oppressors and exploiters – and fascists were their janissaries. The proletariat was the savior of freedom and fulfillment – and fascists were their sworn adversaries. Fascists represented the immoral and reactionary "right," while the "left" embodied all the virtues of the European Enlightenment.

Fascists, of whatever provenance, were of the right because they were the hewers of wood and the drawers of water for "finance capitalists."[8] Since industrial capitalism could no longer sustain itself, given the "laws" of capitalism outlined in the work of Karl Marx, the leaders of industry were compelled to seek recourse outside the traditional liberal democratic system in which they had found their origin and in which they had originally prospered. The Fascists were funded, organized, and elevated to power in order to create the conditions for economic survival in circumstances of declining rates of profit – made inevitable, according to Marx, by the very conditions of advanced industrialization.

The interpretation, which quickly became identified with Joseph Stalin, became standard for Marxist-Leninists in general, and adherents of the Third

[6] See the discussion in Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966), pp. 156–7.

[7] The most direct expression of these theses is to be found in Rajani Palme Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* (New York: International Books, 1934).

[8] See Georgi Dimitroff's report to the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, 1935, reprinted in *The United Front Against War and Fascism* (New York: Gamma, 1974), p. 7.

International in particular. It made all and any "fascism" a "right-wing extremism," defined as any movement or regime committed to the defense of capitalism – at the price of interminable involvement in bloodshed and organized violence.

Those Marxists independent of the Third International very early took exception to the "standard version." They argued that Italian Fascism gave every indication of being an autonomous, mass-mobilizing movement that arose in social and economic circumstances in which the established elites found it impossible to rule effectively. Whatever else Fascism did, it arrogated to itself political power, and if capitalists, finance or industrial, profited as a consequence, it was largely because their profit served the political interests of Mussolini and his entourage.[9]

Some independent Marxists went further. Fascism's "task" was seen as the "further development of the productive forces" of the peninsula. Fascism was seen as having "systematically spurred" development in heavy industry, in its chemical, automotive, aircraft, and maritime branches. Otto Bauer, Franz Borkenau, Arthur Rosenberg, and August Thalheimer, as independent Marxists, were prepared to acknowledge the developmental intentions of Fascism. However much capitalists may have benefited, Fascism's purposes were "progressive."[10] Fascism was hardly the creature of finance or industrial capitalism; whatever benefits Italian capitalism may have enjoyed were purchased by submission to the totalitarian rule of Mussolini.

The opening of Italian archives after the war revealed no evidence of a conspiracy between the "magnates of industry" and Mussolini's Fascism. In fact, there is ample evidence of a mounting resistance to Fascist rule by the leaders of industry throughout the twenty years of its tenure. Fascism had gradually assumed control over fundamental aspects of the overall Italian economy. By the mid-1930s, most of the critically important functions of enterprise had been surrendered to Fascist control. The availability of credit was largely determined by members of the Fascist elite. The peculiar development of domestic manufacturing was largely controlled by the Fascist government through the corporative agencies fabricated by those around Mussolini.[11]

After the termination of the Second World War, Italian economists affirmed that "after 1936 the Fascist government controlled proportionately a larger share of Italy's industrial base than any other nation in Europe other than the Soviet Union."[12] Equally clear is the fact that the Italian

[9] See the discussion in August Thalheimer, "Über den Faschismus," in W. Abendroth (ed.), *Faschismus und Kapitalismus* (Berlin: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1967), pp. 19–38.

[10] See the discussion in Renzo De Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 31–54; Gregor, *Interpretations of Fascism*, chap. 5.

[11] See the discussion in Rosario Romeo, *Breve storia della grande industria in Italia* (Rocca San Casciano: Casa Editrice Licinio Capelli, 1967, third edition), pp. 134–201.

[12] Ibid., p. 173.

business community, in general, welcomed the disappearance of Fascism. Fascism never served the interests of Italian business. As will be argued, Fascism had made its revolution with the rapid expansion and technological development of Italian industry as one of its programmatic goals. As a consequence, the Italian entrepreneurial class did benefit – but at the cost of its independence.

Curiously enough, beginning in the decade of the 1960s, particularly outside of the intellectual environment of the advanced industrial democracies, the interpretation of fascism as a tool of "capitalism," in general, or "finance capitalism" in particular, gradually receded. In the Soviet Union, the formal Stalinist interpretation of the interwar years gradually gave way to a much more nuanced account that saw Italian Fascism, as distinct from Hitler's National Socialism, a multiclass response to late industrial development. While still a "class phenomenon," Italian Fascism was beginning to be understood as a far more complex and functional response to a set of socioeconomic conditions than Marxist-Leninists had ever previously considered.[13] By that time, it had become increasingly difficult to understand why Fascism represented a "right-wing" political response to issues. It was certainly not the White Guard of capitalism. In the late 1920s, Fascism had declared private property rights and private initiative to be contingent on their service to the state.[14] By the mid-1930s, foreign observers could maintain that "the [Fascist corporative] system has been and is likely to continue to be . . . not an agency for the economic self-government of the Italian people but an instrument of economic control used by the totalitarian Fascist state for the achievement of its ultimate economic and political ends."[15]

Why any of that made Fascism "right-wing" is difficult to understand. That it was not a democracy seems clear, but not all antidemocratic polities are right-wing. Furthermore, there is no credible evidence that Fascism controlled the nation's economy for the benefit of the "possessing classes."

All the evidence notwithstanding, for decades after the end of the Second World War, Fascism continued to be identified with the interests of capitalism and private enterprise at the expense of the "common man." Many academics in the West were convinced that only "left-wing" arrangements could provide succorance to the needy and oppressed.

[13] I have outlined the process in A. James Gregor, *The Faces of Janus: Marxism and Fascism in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), chaps. 3–5.

[14] "All labor, under all its managerial and executive, intellectual, technical, and manual forms, is a social duty. . . . The corporative state considers private initiative in the arena of production as the most efficient instrument in the service of the nation. . . . Should private initiative prove to be inadequate, or when the political interests of the state are in play, the state will intervene in the form of direct control, encouragement and direct development." *La carta del lavoro* (Rome: Edizioni del "Diritto del lavoro," 1928), paras. 2, 7, 9, pp. 115, 117–18.

[15] William G. Welk, *Fascist Economic Policy: An Analysis of Italy's Economic Experiment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), p. 250.

For a time, scholars in the Soviet Union were standard-bearers of just that sort of interpretation of the domestic and international political and economic order. Marxism-Leninism was left-wing, and Fascism in all its variants was right-wing. Many academics in the West simply accepted such a construal of the then-contemporary world.

For years after the war, many in the West imagined Joseph Stalin to be the moral guide for a left-wing, liberating revolution of workers and peasants. Not until after Stalin's death and the revelation of massive violation of citizens' rights, the abuse of minority groups, and the mass murder of innocents in the Soviet Union did many of those Western intellectuals who identified human liberation with the Soviet Union think better of their position. The Soviet Union under Stalin had begun to look remarkably like Germany under the ministrations of Hitler. The right-wing/left-wing distinction began to become undone.

For many Western intellectuals, one of the consequences of the revelations concerning the Great Terror, the death of millions, and the anti-Semitism of Stalinism was the abandonment not of the right-wing/left-wing distinction, but of Soviet Marxism as the normative guide to liberation. Stalinism was forsaken and some of those self-same intellectuals simply transferred their loyalties to the Marxism-Leninism of Mao Zedong. For a not inconsiderable number, Mao's China assumed the role of a leftist vanguard of human liberation. Given the circumstances, even after the abandonment of Stalinism, the interpretation of fascism as an immoral, right-wing anticommunist tool of reaction continued to maintain a semblance of plausibility.

In that intellectual environment, any anticommunist effort on the part of individuals, groups, governments, or confederations was interpreted by some to be a sure sign of "right-wing fascism." Greek colonels, Chilean generals, and any anticommunist authoritarianism, anywhere in North or South America, Asia, Africa, or the Middle East, were immediately perceived as "fascist." The study of fascism and the "new postwar fascism" – "neofascism" – was embarrassed by riches. So many candidate neofascisms were available for scrutiny that their characterization had, of necessity, to be very general. They were all "reactionary" and "right-wing," which seemed to mean anticommunist or, alternatively, that they were allied to a power or powers that were anticommunist. That sort of notion was supplemented by the conviction that such right-wing fascisms were devoted to the oppression of the dispossessed and vulnerable. Thus, it was argued that while the left-wing Maoist government on the mainland of China was unshackling workers and peasants, the right-wing Kuomintang government on the island of Taiwan was subjecting its population to fascist reaction. As these interpretations continued, developments took place in the Western academic community that were to address the facile identification of the "right" with neofascism, while the generic "left" was conceived a liberating force in the service of the wretched of the earth. In the 1950s, the concept "totalitarianism"

gradually made its appearance, to offer an interpretive classification prepared to subsume fascism and the Marxist-Leninist dictatorships, as species or subspecies, under one inclusive antidemocratic political genus.[16]

Conceived as better representing the reality of a bipolar world of democratic and antidemocratic political polities, the concept "totalitarianism" was pressed into service to better understand the evolving Cold War. While a subsidiary distinction between the left and the right persisted, it no longer carried the weight of moral contrast.

Fascism and National Socialism remained kindred, but their kinship became more abstract, generous enough to reveal their affinities with Marxist-Leninist systems. The international politics of the period accommodated, fostered, and sustained the interpretation. There was clear political advantage in identifying the enemies of democracy with the National Socialism of Adolf Hitler and the Fascism of Benito Mussolini – and there were entirely plausible institutional similarities supporting the notion of a totalitarian kinship between them all.[17]

In the course of these developments, a group of scholars emerged who were to influence the interpretation of fascism in ways that were to transform the character of "fascism studies." Of those scholars, Ernst Nolte and Renzo De Felice were among the most important. Together they were to give shape to a subdiscipline that had become increasingly amorphous over the years since the termination of the Second World War.

Their respective efforts, while different in a variety of fashions, shared several common features: There was a clear conviction that however odious their crimes, National Socialism and Fascism were historical phenomena that required the same systematic objectivity in their study as any complex historical event.[18] Moreover, both treated the ideas that animated fascism with measured consideration. Rather than dismissing fascism's political convictions as simply "right-wing," "irrational," "immoral," and "contradictory" – as had generally been the wont – they accorded them the same seriousness as others did the ideology of Marxism-Leninism in all its many variants.

While both De Felice and Nolte used the concept "totalitarianism" only with considerable reservation and abundant caution, they both accepted it in principle. Within the context of a kind of inclusive totalitarianism, both sought to restrict their study to those interwar and wartime systems

[16] The major works included Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951); Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Praeger, 1956).

[17] See the discussion in A. James Gregor, "'Totalitarianism' Revisited," in Ernest A. Menze (ed.), *Totalitarianism Reconsidered* (London: Kennikat Press, 1981), pp. 130–45.

[18] See the discussion in De Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism*, chap. 1; Ernst Nolte, "Author's Preface to the English Translation," in *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française Italian Fascism National Socialism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. ix–xi, chap. 3.

they identified as fascist. They both were exceedingly skeptical about any fascisms that were extraeuropean or that survived the Second World War. It seemed evident that outside of Europe and after the end of the Second World War, there were no candidates that might really pass as both fascist and totalitarian. For De Felice and Nolte, fascism was intimately and inextricably connected with Europe and the social, political, and economic consequences of the First World War.[19] Even those fascisms that emerged in Southern and Eastern Europe in the years following the First World War were held to be largely mimetic and a peculiar product of time-conditioned strategic and political circumstances. De Felice, more demanding than Nolte, dismissed most interwar and wartime "fascisms" as not fascisms at all. Other than National Socialism and Italian Fascism, there were no authentic fascisms – and even National Socialism and Fascism distinguished themselves from each other by very fundamental ideological and behavioral differences.[20] For De Felice, Fascism meant essentially Italian Fascism. His employment of the term "right-wing" was restricted to mean "anticommunist" or "anti-Marxist," without the baggage that frequently accompanied its use. Moreover, while prepared to grant that Fascism shared some minimal affinities with National Socialism, he insisted on the "enormous differences between Italian Fascism and German National Socialism." For De Felice, Mussolini's Fascism and Hitler's National Socialism arose out of "two worlds, two traditions, two histories so different that it is extremely difficult to address them both within a single discussion."[21]

Like Nolte, De Felice dismissed the possibility of a fascism outside the historic parameters of the interwar and war years and the geographic confines of Western Europe.[22] As a consequence, any talk of a "neofascism," the heir of the fascism of the interwar and wartime years, was dismissed. Like De Felice, Nolte did not pretend that it was their right-wing properties that linked Fascism and National Socialism. Right-wing properties played no significant role in the identification of generic fascism. In general, the term

[19] See De Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism*, chap. 1; Ernst Nolte, *Die faschistischen Bewegungen: Die Krise des liberalen Systems und die Entwicklung der Faschismen* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1966), chap. 1.

[20] Hitler's racial ideology, and the attendant mass murder of innocents, was one of the major distinctions between National Socialism and Fascism – but that was predicated on deep historic, cultural, and social differences that distinguished the two systems. See the discussions in De Felice's introduction to the new edition of *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), pp. vii–xix. See his discussion concerning Fascist anti-Semitism at its most vile, during the last years of the Fascist Social Republic, 1943–5, *ibid*., pp. 446–86.

[21] De Felice, *Intervista sul fascismo*, p. 24.

[22] De Felice dismisses those social science generalizations that "greatly diffuse the geographical and chronological scope of the Fascist phenomenon. . . . [and which overlook] one of the fundamental characteristics of Fascism: its intrinsic relation to the moral, economic, social and political crisis of European society in the aftermath of World War I." De Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism*, p. 77.