

Fascism

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History and Theory

NEW AND UPDATED EDITION

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Introduction: The Anti-Fascist Wager

The purpose of this book is to explain why fascism was such a destructive form of politics, first as a movement and then in power. There are countless examples in history of subversive parties being tamed once they were in government. With the rare honourable exception, the electoral history of the Socialist movement, the Greens, the various digital parties of this century¹ can each be fitted into this pattern. But, unlike these examples, the fascists became more radical in office. Whether you were a worker, a socialist or one of the fascists' racial enemies, life was unmistakably different and worse in 1939 than it had been before the fascists took power in 1921 or 1933. How did fascism continue to radicalise?

This book derives an answer from those interwar writers who accurately predicted fascism's cruelty. They were overwhelmingly located on the far left of politics and among the group of people who were fascism's oldest and most irreconcilable adversaries, the Italian and German Marxists. From the pamphlets and newspaper articles written by these leftists and from their speeches, a coherent theory of fascism emerges. Fascism was not a form of ideas but a kind of organisation and a kind of rule. Indeed, it was essentially the same politics wherever it occurred. Fascism, these writers argued, should not be understood as an ideology, but as a specific form of reactionary mass movement.

The argument of the interwar Marxists was that, because fascism (unlike traditional right-wing politics) sought to build a mass base, it had a capacity to win recruits at a time of crisis and among social layers that the left liked to think of as its own, including workers, the unemployed and the young. As a result, even when fascists were relatively few, they were able to grow quickly. The Marxists insisted that there was a tension between the goals of fascist ideology and the aspirations of its members. That contradiction could play out in numerous ways: in the collapse of fascist parties through conflict

with a non-fascist rival, or in the radicalisation of fascist parties in power. But the one possibility that could be excluded was the gradual taming of fascism once its leaders were in office.

When fascism began, hardly anyone else in politics agreed with it. The set of people who were potentially anti-fascists is very large indeed. It includes liberals, conservatives, Christians, anarchists, feminists and countless others besides. None of these traditions, I would argue, grasped fascism's potential for violence as quickly as the Marxists. At the time of the fascist triumphs, Socialist and Communist ideas had an unchallenged authority on the European left. They were part of a common approach to politics which was shared by tens of millions of people. 'Marxism' was not a singular thing but a range of politics.² It appealed to people who believed in the actuality of revolution and were determined to bring about an immediate popular uprising. It was employed by others who had no truck with any idea of mass revolt but restricted their desire for change solely to the slow advance of the rights of workers and other subaltern groups. It also had the support of millions of people who held to any number of positions in between.

As the twentieth century wore on, Marxism was dethroned from its position of authority, as a result of the rightward drift on the part of post-1945 social democracy, the collapse of the Communist regimes and the dissolution of the Communist parties. But if we focus on the period of the rise of fascism, this subordination belonged to the future. So you will find in the pages of this book Marxism being used as a shared means for understanding and resisting fascism by the likes of Clara Zetkin, who had been for 25 years the editor of the German Socialist women's newspaper *Die Gleichheit* (*Equality*) and a sponsor of the resolution which led to the establishment of today's International Women's Day; Leon Trotsky, the former leader of the Bolshevik Red Army; and Daniel Guérin, who lived into the 1970s when he was an anarchist, a member of the Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action in France and one of the leading figures of the gay liberation movement.³ In the Europe of the 1920s and 1930s, and in the face of fascism, they shared a

common language and had essentially the same approach for resisting the rise of Hitler.

The interwar Marxists were the first to formulate what can be called the anti-fascist wager. This is the belief that fascism is an especially violent and destructive form of right-wing politics, that it has the capacity to grow rapidly in times of social crisis and if ignored will destroy the capacity of the left to organise and set back by decades the demands of workers and other dispossessed groups for change. If the wager is correct, it follows that it is repeatedly a priority for its opponents to confront fascism, even at times when other forms of discrimination are endemic, and even when other right-wing politics have more support than fascism. This way of thinking assumes a present in which labour is still exploited and discrimination on grounds of race and sex is prevalent. Even in these circumstances, it warns, fascism is an unruly, chaotic agent of negative change. It can make systematic what today is limited. Fascism is capable of extending suffering on an enormous scale. Conversely, where fascism is defeated, the other forms of oppression on which it thrives can also be weakened.⁴

The anti-fascist wager is not a distinctively Marxist position; all sorts of people have held it. But the first time in history that any significant group came to adopt it was in the mid-1920s, when the Marxists discussed in this book began to campaign against the threat of fascism outside Italy. This approach recognised the potential of Mussolini to inspire imitators including in Germany.

At the time these clear-sighted warnings were first made, Hitler himself was a mere regional politician. Any electoral success he had enjoyed had been modest, and he faced a series of competitors in a space between fascism and conservatism, several of whom were better funded, had easier access to the media and their own means to employ paramilitary violence against their rivals. To say that fascism, despite all Hitler's weaknesses, was the most threatening opponent facing the German left was to make a prediction about how fascism would grow and what it would do in power. It is worth listening to the people who grasped that risk, at a time when almost everyone else on the right and centre of European politics disagreed

with them. In writing this book, I trust that their approach will be of interest to others facing the different right of our own times.

This is the second edition of this book.⁵ The original spoke in some detail about the revival of fascism after 1945 but I have cut that material almost entirely from this edition. The reason I have removed it was not because I am blithe to the danger of fascism's re-emergence but because I have long been preoccupied with it. There are countless examples of journalists and contemporary historians taking a strong and understandable dislike to political figures in the present day, reinterpreting fascism to mean whatever processes they reject in the present and then hunting for echoes of them in the past. But the contemporary right is in many ways unlike fascism. The temptation is there to define fascism in terms of some secondary characteristic, emphasising perhaps not so much Mussolini's actual killing of his opponents but maybe his willingness to taunt them and threaten them with violence; or Hitler's support, say, for tariffs and economic protection as opposed to global institutions of free trade.⁶ The risk is of chasing after some passing feature we dislike in the present and thereby softening our shared understanding of fascism, making the past fuzzier, blurred and less exact.

Once you have a definition of fascism then the extent of the analogy between different generations of reactionary mass politics legitimately arises, and this is something which I have explored in another recent book, *The New Authoritarians*,⁷ to which this study stands as a companion. But the analogy must be considered in relation to something of a fixed and definite meaning, which has been drawn up in order to be as accurate as possible to what happened 80 years ago rather than to keep up with the changing demands of the present.

This book is an exploration of the Marxist theory of fascism, which is treated as if it was a single analysis of that politics. And yet it should be acknowledged that there has not been just one Marxist theory, but at least three. The first, which I have described as the left theory of fascism, has tended to explain fascism as a form of counter-revolution acting in the interests of capital. The more stridently this interpretation has been advanced, the less concerned its adherents have been to examine what was specific about fascist

counter-revolution. The Italian and German Communist Parties described fascism as one form of counter-revolution among many, and in doing so they disarmed their supporters, leading them away from organising with a single-minded focus against the fascists.

The second, or right theory of fascism, by contrast, could only see the mass, radical character of the fascist movement. The Marxists who argued for this interpretation treated fascism as something radical, exotic, outside and threatening to capital. They called for alliances with anyone at all, with centrist and even right-wing politicians. In this way, the Italian and German Socialist Parties in the 1920s, and subsequently the world's Communist Parties after 1934, allowed their anti-fascism to be moderate and irresolute, militant only in undermining the mass movements around them, which they disarmed both metaphorically and literally in the face of fascist advance.

This book also explores the third, or dialectical theory of fascism. That theory treated fascism as *both* a reactionary ideology and also a mass movement, as a politics which could grow incredibly fast and do untold damage but was also vulnerable when faced with popular challengers which confronted it and could offer its supporters a more persuasive means of effecting transformative change. This book argues that this third theory reached a more accurate appreciation of fascism, not just than other Marxists but than anyone else in the interwar years.

1

Interwar Fascism

The theme of this book is that the approach developed by the opponents of Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler on the Marxist left provides a compelling set of answers to a series of questions which continue to divide historians of fascism. Subsequent chapters explain the Marxist theorists of the 1930s and summarise what they argued. In this chapter, I set out some of the places where today's historians disagree with each other in their accounts of the two fascist regimes.

Fascism: A Single Tradition?

Even before Mussolini became prime minister of Italy on 29 October 1922, there were people outside Italy who wanted to copy his movement. In summer 1925, Mussolini was said to be considering the launch of a fascist international, which would combine up to 40 foreign parties 'that call themselves fascist or are declared to be such'. Among groups considered for this alliance were the British Fascisti, founded on 6 May 1923 by former wartime ambulance driver Rotha Lintorn-Orman during a moment of epiphany as she dug the weeds in her Somerset vegetable garden. British fascism's dependence on the Italian model could be seen in the name of the new party and the location of its headquarters on Great Russell Street, shared with the London offices of Mussolini's Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF). That sense of indebtedness to a foreign originator did not end with the decline of the British Fascisti after 1926. Between 1933 and 1935, Lintorn-Orman's eventual successor, the double-turncoat former-Conservative former-Labour politician Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists accepted nearly a quarter of a million pounds in donations from Mussolini's government.¹

For the interwar Marxists, fascism was a single form of politics which was replicated in country after country. So, in November 1920, Antonio Gramsci, a young Italian supporter of the Russian Revolution and of the workers' movement in Turin,² characterised fascism as 'an international phenomenon ... the illegal aspect of capitalist violence ... a universal development'.³ In June 1923, in a speech to the Executive Committee of the Communist International veteran German socialist feminist Clara Zetkin called for a struggle against fascism to be waged in Germany, Hungary and the United States, arguing that fascism was already a global phenomenon, 'a question of survival for every ordinary worker'.⁴

Yet for many years after 1922, people rejected this idea of the international and unitary nature of fascism. On the centre and the right of politics, there was a reluctance to treat fascism as more than a transitory phenomenon, or to acknowledge that fascism was a single force. 'The only people who seem to have perceived fascism as an international one (and a dangerous one) were the far Left,' writes the historian of the British right, Richard Griffiths. 'Marxists,' notes the biographer of Hitler, Ian Kershaw, produced 'the first serious attempt to explain fascism in theoretical terms'.⁵ Roger Griffin, the most influential theorist behind today's 'New Consensus' theory of fascism, concurs: 'Initially ... "fascism" referred specifically to Mussolini's new movement, and it was left-wing Italian intellectuals, convinced of its repressive and reactionary nature as a violent assault on the working-class movement, who made the first attempt to interpret it as a more substantive and general political phenomenon.'⁶

Many at the centre and on the right of politics refused to see fascism in this way. They had all sorts of reasons, both bad and good, for their reluctance. They saw the Communists as the dynamic force in global politics and hoped to entice some of the fascists into an anti-Communist alliance. To such mainstream politicians and to those who took a lead from them, it made sense to stress the competing interests beneath fascism and its incoherent nature. Britain's wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill is celebrated in popular memory for the determination with which he warned against the rise of Adolf Hitler, and for his principled anti-fascism which was

unusual among Conservatives before 1940. Yet even in his anti-Nazi period, Churchill was effusive in his praise for Mussolini, urging one British audience in February 1933 to distinguish between Hitler's pernicious intentions and the statesmanlike and anti-Bolshevik instincts of Mussolini, 'the Roman genius ... the greatest lawgiver among living men'.⁷ In the United States, the likes of Wilbur Carr, undersecretary of state to Roosevelt, and Breckinridge Long, ambassador to Italy, praised Mussolini in glowing terms and recommended the acceptance of his occupation of Ethiopia. Italy was a valuable ally and Mussolini her country's 'only one first-class mind'. It was better, it followed, to focus on the country's geopolitical significance than the destructive ideology of its rulers.⁸

More generous explanations can also be given other than mere anti-Communist realpolitik. There is a long-standing controversy, discussed below, as to the extent to which racism played an equal role within Italian and German fascism. There were indeed other differences between the fascist parties. The Iron Guard in Romania (founded by Corneliu Codreanu after he claimed to have been visited by the Archangel Michael while in prison) portrayed the clergy as an essential force in the transformation of society, so much so that in that country's 1937 elections, some 33 of its 103 candidates were Orthodox priests.⁹ Mussolini depended on the Vatican for support, which was reciprocated. Hitler, meanwhile, despised both the Protestant and Catholic churches.¹⁰

Fascism was a project for nationalist rule. Accordingly, many of its leaders called for independence or the expansion of the borders of their own nation, potentially at the expense of other fascist states. At one point in 1942 a concentration camp in Germany held the leading personalities of each of Austrian, Romanian and Ukrainian fascism (Kurt Schuschnigg, Horia Sima and Stepan Bandera).¹¹ In Romania, Hitler preferred to negotiate with authoritarian conservatives rather than his own ideological admirers. Meanwhile Bandera's mistake was to demand an independent Ukrainian state when Hitler preferred to keep the country under direct German rule. The more successful fascism was in Italy and Germany, the more that fascists outside were faced with a choice: were they accountable to their own

aggrieved middle classes, or to the leaders of the two main fascist states? To characterise fascism as a single international tradition is not to deny the possibility of conflict between fascists.

This book has already referred, in passing, to the New Consensus school. This is now the most influential approach in political science for understanding fascism. It is a series of arguments associated with the British writers Roger Griffin and Roger Eatwell, the American historian of Spanish fascism Stanley Payne and the Israeli historian of French fascism Zé'ev Sternhell. Eatwell argues that fascism must be seen primarily as a set of ideas: 'fascism is best defined as an ideology'. Fascism, he adds, cannot be viewed as a form of regime, because 'there were only two'; moreover, fascism cannot be defined as a species of political movement, because such movements 'exhibit time and context-specific features' which draw attention away from the decisive heart of fascist ideas. Fascism was: 'An ideology that strives to forge rebirth on a holistic-national radical Third Way, though in practice fascism has tended to stress style, especially action and the charismatic leader, more than detailed programme and to engage in a manichean demonisation of its enemies.'¹²

In numerous books and articles, Sternhell has argued that fascism emerged first in France in the 1880s and 1890s. It was born in the minds of writers and artists. Fascism began as a rejection of the idea that reason could be used to understand society. It resulted, Sternhell argues, in the formation of a 'new generation of intellectuals [which] rose violently against the rationalist individualism of liberal society'. Various French intellectuals absorbed and then synthesised socialism and nationalism and thus created a new ideology, 'a socialism without the proletariat', which became fascism.¹³

One of the small ironies of this approach is that, while it is a main way in which politics students are taught to understand fascism, several of its advocates express a deep uncertainty as to whether the various fascist parties can usefully be treated as belonging to the same tradition at all. For Sternhell, 'Fascism can in no way be identified with Nazism', 'Nazism cannot ... be treated as a mere variant of fascism, its emphasis on biological determinism rules out all efforts to deal with it as such.' According to Payne, Hitler's Germany was

‘a non-Communist National Socialist equivalent’ to Stalin’s Russia: ‘Mussolini’s Italy bore little resemblance to either one.’¹⁴ Griffin accepts that Hitler’s Germany was a fascist state,¹⁵ although he shares with Sternhell and Payne the idea that Mussolini’s Italy was closer to the core of the fascist experience:

It is a particularly grotesque and tragic example of the operation of ‘Murphy’s law’ in the historical process that of the only two forms of fascism that managed, against the odds, to seize state power, one of them was informed by an ideology of unparalleled destructive potential. The Mazzinian squadrista or Roman Empire myths invoked by fascist Italy, [or] Mosley’s vision of a Greater Britain ... cannot compare with the sheer scale of military aggression and racial persecution implied by the Nazi dream of a Jew-free racial empire.¹⁶

The interwar Marxist theorists of fascism saw the matter differently. As long ago as the early 1920s they insisted on seeing fascism in Italy, Germany and Hungary as local variations on the same theme. One advantage of seeing fascism as a single form of politics is that it enables you to explain the common politics which persisted despite these groups’ undoubted differences. When fascists took power, their systems of government were highly similar: in the way they curtailed the liberty of their subjects and attacked their racial and political enemies. They promoted the same groups of people while subordinating the same enemies. Ian Kershaw lists the similarities between German and Italian fascist rule:

- Extreme chauvinistic nationalism with pronounced imperialistic expansionist tendencies;
- an anti-socialist, anti-Marxist thrust aimed at the destruction of working-class organisations and their Marxist political philosophy;
- the basis in a mass party drawing from all sectors of society, though with pronounced support in the middle class and proving attractive to the peasantry and to various uprooted or highly unstable sectors of the population;

- fixation on a charismatic, plebiscitary, legitimised leader;
- extreme intolerance towards all oppositional and presumed oppositional groups, expressed through vicious terror, open violence and ruthless repression;
- glorification of militarism and war, heightened by the backlash to the comprehensive socio-political crisis in Europe arising from the First World War;
- dependence upon an 'alliance' with existing elites, industrial, agrarian, military and bureaucratic, for their political breakthrough;
- and, at least an initial function, despite a populist-revolutionary anti-establishment rhetoric, in the stabilisation or restoration of social order and capitalist structures.¹⁷

It would have been possible, in effect, for a traveller in Europe in 1936 or 1939 to trek the 700 miles from Rome to Berlin and feel that for all the differences of language and geography between the two cities they were in the same country, governed by the same people, working to the same ends.

Another advantage of seeing fascism as a single entity is that it allows you to grasp how developments in one country fed into politics elsewhere. In the words of the socialist and anti-fascist Clara Zetkin, 'neither the Peace Treaties nor the occupation of the Ruhr have given such a fillip to Fascism in Germany as the seizure of power by Mussolini'. In autumn 1922, days after Mussolini's appointment, Hitler told one supporter, 'We have in common with the fascists the uncompromising love for the fatherland, the will to rip class from the claws of the International and the fresh, comradely frontline spirit.'¹⁸ The following year, Hitler's attempted Beer Hall Putsch was modelled on Mussolini's March on Rome.

Later, Hitler's release from prison in late 1924 and his re-establishment of the Nazi party in early 1925 coincided with the moves by Mussolini towards the creation of a dictatorship. After Hitler's succession to power in 1933, German economic policies were modelled on the Italian, albeit without the pretence of a corporate industrial facade. Mussolini's status as a leader of European

significance was an inspiration to Hitler, causing the German leader to seek to emulate Italy's then influence over Austria.¹⁹ Mussolini and Hitler met at Venice in June 1934, the location reflecting Mussolini's ascendancy over the German chancellor. It was also an opportunity for differences to emerge. Hitler wanted Mussolini to agree that Nazis should participate in the Austrian government but was rebuffed.²⁰ Afterwards, Hitler ceased to treat Mussolini as his leader.

In December 1934 Mussolini held a congress of his Fascist International at Montreux in Switzerland, with delegates attending from Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Holland, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Romania. The event was used to promote an image of Italy as the spiritual and financial centre of fascism, a right-wing counterpart to the Soviet Union with its Communist International. The shared programme of the European fascists was said to be, 'the reconstitution of the state on a new basis ... the organisation of labour, liberties contained within sane and honest limits.' The National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) was a notable absentee, relying on various allies at the congress (including the Norwegian fascist Vidkun Quisling) to put the case for National Socialism on Hitler's behalf.²¹

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War again changed the relationship between the two dictators. German planes carried tens of thousands of Franco's troops. In October 1936, the fascist powers reached an agreement recognising Italian conquests in Africa in return for the German annexation of Austria. Hitler's warships patrolled the Spanish coast, his planes bombed Guernica. In autumn 1937, Mussolini, now the junior figure in the partnership, visited Hitler. Afterwards, attempts were made to impose on Italian society rules modelled on everyday life under the Nazis. Handshakes in plays and films were banned. Italians were instructed to greet each other, as in Germany, with the fascist salute.

After 1939, the fascist states were able to impose on occupied Europe a variety of systems of rule, ranging from conventional military dictatorship in Vichy France, to puppet fascist regimes, such as in Croatia where a Ustasha Racial State set out to emulate the Nazi

example, including by introducing its own 'Law on Jews', modelled closely on Germany's Nuremberg Laws.²²

Understanding the two fascist states together helps to explain some of the processes by which the fascist regimes became more radical in office. There was a reciprocal relationship between the two fascist parties, a dynamic of cooperation and competition as if the fascists were seeking to outbid each other's victories, so that the gains made in one country had to be surpassed in another.²³

The Societies that Produced Mussolini and Hitler

Both Italy and Germany were industrial capitalist societies, in which production was for the market and the majority worked in someone else's factory or on someone else's land. Both were European societies. Each saw itself as marginal within Europe. Italy was, in Mussolini's phrase, a 'proletarian nation', unfairly deprived of the general European right to occupy the poorer countries of Asia and Africa. Part of the fascist mission was to overcome the likes of Britain and France.²⁴ Hitler had much the same idea of Germany, complaining that the Treaty of Versailles had prevented his country from taking its place among the great powers.²⁵ If it is right that Italy and Germany were underdeveloped (and this is something which should not be accepted without question), it is reasonable to ask whether these failings can be blamed for those countries' later adoption of fascism.

One of the first attempts to use underdevelopment to explain the rise of fascism was made by a writer who is discussed in several later chapters of this book, the Italian Communist writer and parliamentarian Antonio Gramsci, who was born in Sardinia in the Italian south and died in captivity in 1937 after ten years of imprisonment at the hands of Mussolini. In April 1921, for example, he wrote that 'fascism is the name for the profound decomposition of Italian society ... [it can] be explained only with reference to the low level of culture which the Italian nation has reached in sixty years of unitary administration'.²⁶

In the 30 years after 1945, the idea of a German special path (*Sonderweg*) or deviation from the rest of Europe, was (in the words

of one historian, Heinrich August Winkler) 'the national master narrative' of West Germany. As developed by historians including George Mosse, Fritz Stern and Ralf Dahrendorf, the idea was that the Western democracies had liberated themselves from their feudal pasts by means of social revolutions: Holland in 1588, England in 1649 and France in 1789. In Germany, by contrast, a pre-industrial elite – the Prussian Junkers – remained dominant well into the twentieth century. It was the political representatives of that class, Franz von Papen and Paul von Hindenburg, who played the key roles in appointing Hitler chancellor of Germany.²⁷

Other examples of underdevelopment theories of fascism could also be given. For example, the former serial contributor to British fascist journals,²⁸ and later professor of political science at Berkeley, A. James Gregor, has sought to place fascism within a category of nationalist regimes that came about through what he terms 'revolution in an economically less developed environment', and sought to catch up with richer countries elsewhere, making fascism a European counterpart to the politics of Marcus Garvey, the Nation of Islam or Chairman Mao.²⁹

There has, however, always been a difficulty with *Sonderweg* arguments in that they contrast Italy and Germany to a 'normal' path of development which very few countries followed. In consequence, explanations of this sort have tended to become less popular in recent years.³⁰ Even Gramsci, as we shall see, refined several times his explanation of the processes that had made Italy vulnerable to fascism. The problems with the approach become even starker as it is applied to Germany, long one of the world's three largest economies, and at the forefront of production in the key industries of the day: coal, iron and steel.

The interwar Marxists could see that fascism broke through in European countries aspiring to become colonial powers. As the Italian American Socialist Vincenzo Vacirca wrote, days after Hitler's victory, 'It was in countries – like Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Poland – where modern industry is taking its first uncertain steps that Fascism exploded in all its fury.'³¹