

# RETHINKING THE NATURE OF FASCISM

**Comparative Perspectives**

Edited by  
**ANTÓNIO COSTA PINTO**



# Rethinking the Nature of Fascism

## Comparative Perspectives

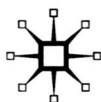
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# Rethinking the Nature of Fascism

*Also by António Costa Pinto*

RULING ELITES AND DECISION-MAKING IN FASCIST-ERA DICTATORSHIPS

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# Foreword

*Stanley G. Payne*

The study of fascism has occasionally been likened to the historiography of such major developments as the French Revolution or the Reformation, even though such analogies are, in some respects, inappropriate since the influence of fascism was both more limited and more purely negative and destructive. However, they do serve to highlight the fact that fascism was a major historical development, and always one of the most slippery to deal with. In no other phenomenon of modern history has the issue of multiple 'interpretations' received so much attention—a diversity of analysis that is likely long to continue.<sup>1</sup> Although Roger Griffin, not inaccurately, posited a kind of limited consensus by the mid-1990s, unsurprisingly this has been rejected by some scholars.<sup>2</sup>

Broad new treatments of fascism will continue to appear, focused and structured in diverse ways: by concept, theme, phase, chronology, level of development, emphasis on national characteristics, reinterpretation of major aspects and frequently by synecdoche (taking the part for the whole). Not uncommon are critiques that do not propose a new overarching interpretation but which point out pitfalls in the existing approaches and suggestions for analytic improvement—a good example of this is provided by Michel Dobry's study in the present volume. There will be no end to this discussion, since the study of fascism will remain primarily in the hands of 'idiographic' historians who will never relinquish their grasp of the particular, while 'nomothetic' scholars will not want for further critical theoretical perspectives.

The consequence will be that full consensus is not likely to be achieved in the near future. It is important always to repeat that—except for Italy—fascism was never a 'thing' or an empirical object, and that it can only be posited and exploited as a model or an ideal-type since 'fascism' never really existed as a discrete entity. This still does not seem to be fully grasped by many commentators.

What seem to be the principal problems or lacunae in the study of fascism at this point in the twenty-first century? Although a great deal has been accomplished during the past 40 years, many issues remain. The conclusion that the various fascist movements did indeed possess ideologies has been conceded by many analysts for some time. It is still pointed out that ideological contradictions were numerous, but that in

no way obviates the preceding conclusion since few ideologies are bereft of contradictions and virtually all students of fascism have recognized that, if anything, the genus registered even more contradictions than most radical movements.

Systematic study of ideology has nonetheless been rare; the leading exception being A. James Gregor's *The Ideology of Fascism*.<sup>3</sup> The chief defect of this work is that it synthesizes fascist ideology much more completely than any fascist ideologue ever did, so that it has always stood not merely as the leading individual study of fascist ideology, but also as the only truly systematic ideology of fascism. It scarcely has competitors dealing with other fascist movements, since inclusive and systematic ideological study remains, at least, a partial lacuna.

It has also, to some extent, come to be accepted that fascist movements were revolutionary, so the title of George L. Mosse's posthumous *The Fascist Revolution* no longer came as a surprise in 1999.<sup>4</sup> As Griffin has pointed out in the present volume, it is further appreciated by many specialists that the key revolution of fascism was neither political nor socio-economic but, in the Mossean presentation, cultural or, in Emilio Gentile's felicitous term, 'anthropological'. Here again the insights have rarely been systematized, so that complete studies of the character of fascist revolutionism remain wanting.

During the past 20 years, more has been achieved in the area of fascist culture than in any other major subfield. The prophet was indeed George L. Mosse, as Griffin has pointed out so well, although it was not until the general 'cultural turn' of historiography in the 1980s that any significant number of scholars was willing to follow him. Mosse's influence was also limited—in part by his style of exposition, which was full of insights but which was never completely systematic and never attempted to showcase a specific general theory.

Cultural historians of the past 20 years have added any number of case studies, although these have sometimes come at a significant price as they have involved not merely the study of the aesthetics of fascism but in some cases have tended to reduce fascism simply to the level of aesthetics—as Gentile has warned. The key work in this area, which has raised the study of fascist culture to a higher level, is Griffin's *Modernism and Fascism*.<sup>5</sup> This book completes the case for fascist modernism, but also highlights the need to carry such research into other fascist movements.

More work is still appearing rapidly in this subfield—particularly with regard to the two principal cases—but there is still very little study of fascism within modern ideologies in general from the eighteenth century

onward. Earlier works, such as Mosse's 'Fascism and the French Revolution' and Lawrence Birken's, *Hitler as Philosophe*, have few followers despite all the criticism of the Enlightenment in recent years.<sup>6</sup>

The same may be said for attempts to situate fascism within the broad genus of the nationalisms that have received so much attention. Was there really something unique about fascist nationalism? Was it simply more 'extreme' than other nationalisms? Did it harbour an inherent tendency toward 'genocide'—as Aristotle Kallis argues—stemming first from what Mark Neocleous has termed the 'xenophobic' tendencies of nationalism? Was the indubitably genocidal nationalism of the Young Turks (CUP—Committee of Union and Progress) also in some way 'fascist'?

The time has also come for a new look at fascism and the political right. There has been a great deal of publication in this area but, once more, little systematic study. A recent work, Hermann Beck's *The Fateful Alliance*, is an indication of the considerable amount of research and analysis that remains to be done in this area.<sup>7</sup> Fascism was a movement more of the 'right' than the 'left' because of its stress on nationalism and inequality, but of course it was not at all a movement of the right in the standard sense.

All studies emphasize the importance of war and violence, yet once more careful and complete investigation is usually lacking. The anecdotal references that frequently appear are of little use since in most cases they are already well known. What exactly was the presentation and evaluation of violence in fascist doctrine? I am aware of no systematic investigation—even with regard to the principal cases. It was awkward even for a fascist-type movement to argue that violence itself was an unalloyed virtue, and so that presentation was usually rather more complex. The situation with regard to war was clearer and simpler on the doctrinal level, but what was the role of war in politics, planning, image presentation and propaganda, where the issues were not so simple? In this regard, as in others, it is important to pay attention to the lesser fascisms as well. Finally, the fundamental issue of fascism and the military has received only a limited amount of attention, but it merits more.

What of the relationship between fascism and communism and of their similarities and differences? What does this tell the analyst about fascism? The more one looks into this issue, the more complex it becomes. It has been approached in two different ways. One is the history of the relations between the two movements, sometimes subsumed under the rubric of 'European civil war'; the other is the 'comparison approach', which seeks—with varying degrees of success—to compare and contrast.<sup>8</sup> A very great deal of work remains to be done in this area.



The problem of fascism and religion has sometimes been overlooked, although John Pollard has attempted to resituate this issue in his helpful article. This needs to be analysed within a broader framework of church-state relations in modern polities, where the difference from communist regimes becomes apparent. Despite their development of the terminology, fascist regimes did not adopt the totalitarian approach that sought the direct subjection and control of the churches under a militantly atheist system. To some extent, they followed the approach of rightist authoritarian regimes, often fudging the issue of religious identity and seeking rather to appropriate religion for their own purposes and to channel it: religious affiliation and party membership were almost always allowed to overlap. This was a different project from that of the rightist authoritarian regimes, which to a much greater degree respected the autonomy of the churches and provided yet another example of the differences between Germany and other fascist states or movements. It is also a further instance of the reversal of revolutionary priorities between the Soviet Union and fascist states.

Was there a 'fascist economics'? While Norman Kogan rejected the concept 40 years ago, analytically the matter is not quite so simple. It would refer to comparative systems of nationalist corporatism or nationalist socialism, such systems having numerous political and structural points in common, so that it is analytically coherent to treat them as a distinct subset of economic policies.

Among the secondary European cases, that of Spain is by far the best studied, while the East European examples remain the most problematic since few Western scholars have the linguistic range to be able to carry out new work on them. However, by the same token the greatest rewards for new research probably lie in this area.

It becomes increasingly difficult to present new synthetic analysis of generic fascism due to the exponential increase in the literature. However, this also stems from the mesmerizing effect of National Socialism, since nothing else in fascism can remotely compare with its historical significance. As indicated above, it remains extremely important to avoid synecdoche in fascist studies as elsewhere. If there is no willingness to do so, it would be better to cease to presume to speak of generic fascism. This has usually been the central analytic problem—aside from the sheer complexity of trying to get things right—and it is likely to remain so in the future.

The study of fascism has long presented probably the most severe problem in comparative historiography. It is not surprising that all recent efforts to contribute to the general theory or model consist in varying forms of analytic commentaries rather than integrated historical

accounts. The 'new consensus' of the 1990s may have been limited indeed, but it has only been extended and/or modified in specific ways and certainly not replaced. Pointing out that fascist movements went through a series of phases or sequences does not present a new paradigm: new studies extend the plateau achieved in the late twentieth century, but thus far do not transcend it.

Significant new achievement will rest on the results of noteworthy new research, on the willingness to work in the broadest comparative context, and to eschew synecdoche and to move beyond standard emphases into new areas and new analytic themes.

## Notes

1. R. Griffin and M. Feldman's five-volume, *Fascism*, London, 2004, is destined to long remain the classic and most inclusive anthology.
2. R. Griffin, ed., *International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus*, London, 1998, especially pp. 1–22.
3. J. Gregor, *The Ideology of Fascism*, New York, 1969.
4. G. L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, New York, 1999.
5. R. Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a New Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, London, 2007.
6. G. L. Mosse, 'Fascism and the French Revolution', *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 1, 1989, pp. 5–26, subsequently reprinted in Mosse, *Fascist Revolution*, pp. 69–93; L. Birken, *Hitler as Philosopher: Remnants of the Enlightenment in National Socialism*, Westport, 1995.
7. H. Beck, *The Fateful Alliance: German Conservatives and Nazis in 1933. The Machtergreifung in a New Light*, Oxford, 2008.
8. Perhaps the best-known work is Ernst Nolte's *Der Europäische Bürgerkrieg, 1917–1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus*, Frankfurt, 1987, although it is more a parallel account and a history of mutual relations than a comparative history. The concept of 'European civil war' is developed more effectively—if briefly—by E. Traverso, *A ferro e fuoco: la guerra civile europea, 1914–1915*, Bologna, 2007. There is of course a sizeable literature in German, Russian and English on relations between Germany and the Soviet Union, and a much briefer literature—mainly in Italian—on relations between Fascist Italy and the Soviet Union. Achievements of the comparative approach have been somewhat limited. By far the best effort is that of R. Overly, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia*, New York, 2004. By contrast, I. Kershaw and M. Lewin, *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison*, Cambridge, 1997, consists largely of separate studies of aspects of each regime.

# Acknowledgments

This book is the result of an informal working group on fascism that meets regularly in the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon. The group has always brought together political scientists and historians, and the dialogue between them has not always been easy.<sup>1</sup> Here, the challenge was to rethink the study of fascism 40 years after the publication of Stuart Woolf's *The Nature of Fascism*.

The contributors to this volume met in Lisbon to participate in a workshop entitled 'The nature of fascism 40 years on', at which the first version of the chapters published here were discussed. The editor would like to thank Stuart Woolf and Adrian Lyttelton for their participation and for providing a bridge between the two books, and Stanley G. Payne, who followed closely the labours of the workshop, despite being unable to attend, for his foreword. The editor would also like to thank the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon and the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (grant PTDC/HAH/65818/2006) for their generous support, and Stewart Lloyd-Jones for editing the texts ready for publication.

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## Note

1. A previous publication resulting from the work of this group is A. C. Pinto, R. Eatwell and S. U. Larsen, eds, *Charisma and Fascism in Interwar Europe*, London, 2007.

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# 1

## Introduction: Fascism and the Other ‘-isms’

*António Costa Pinto*

This book revisits the major themes of research into, and interpretation of, the nature of fascism that have been developed since the 1970s. European fascism continues to attract a considerable degree of attention, as the continuous publication on theme testifies. During the past 20 years the comparative study of fascism has concentrated increasingly on its ideological and cultural dimensions, at times becoming ‘ideology-centred’. We may even say that the analysis of so-called ‘generic fascism’ has moved from a ‘sociological’ to a more ‘political’ perspective, giving both ideology and culture much more importance than was previously the case. On the other hand, this area has become more restricted in disciplinary terms, with historians clearly dominating over sociologists and political scientists.

When, in 1969, the British historian Stuart Woolf published, under the title *The Nature of Fascism*, a balance of the main research tendencies concerning fascism, the situation within the social sciences was very different; indeed, so much so that a simple description of his main headings highlights the difference.<sup>1</sup> The first part of the book’s four parts (covering politics, society, economy and culture) was dominated by a blend of theories of totalitarianism and modernization; in the second some Marxist ‘class’ determinisms were very much present; the third part, which contained Tim Mason’s brilliant essay ‘The primacy of politics: politics and economics in National Socialist Germany’, was much more nuanced; while the fourth part was dominated by George L. Mosse’s pioneering ‘Fascism and culture’. The division between historians and political scientists was as clear then as it is today; however, the main turning point of the last decades was, without doubt, the cultural turn in fascist studies, which has helped refine earlier approaches and inspired new work.