

**THE CIVIC**  
**FOUNDATIONS**  
**OF FASCISM**  
**IN EUROPE**

**ITALY**  
**SPAIN**  
**AND**  
**ROMANIA**

**1870-1945**

**DYLAN RILEY**

# ***THE CIVIC FOUNDATIONS OF FASCISM IN EUROPE***

Italy, Spain, and Romania, 1870–1945

Dylan Riley



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# ***The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe***

***Ad Emanuela con amore***

## ***Acknowledgments***

This book grew out of my studies at UCLA and has consumed much of my life for the past ten years. But its core idea has a more precise origin: a warm August day in 2001 in the foothills of the Italian Alps in a small town called Torre Pellice. There, in a sunlit room with no books and only a laptop, it struck me that fascism had developed precisely in the dense, culturally rich, and politically sophisticated zones of north-central Italy. These were the same regions in which the seeds of modern civilization, especially the idea of popular sovereignty, had been preserved and then “reborn” in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Further, it was here that dense webs of cooperative societies, chambers of labor, and mutual aid societies had developed in the early twentieth century. Was there any connection between these facts? Did fascism grow from a civic soil? This question immediately raised others. What was the real nature of fascism? To what extent were fascist movements “antidemocratic,” as they are widely presented in both historical and sociological accounts? How should fascism be understood comparatively? These questions have occupied at least some of my waking hours, and sometimes all of them, every day since.

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## ***Abbreviations***

aA	agrarpolitisch Apparat
ACNP	Asociación Católica Nacional de Propagandistas
ACS	Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome
AF	Archivi fascisti
AfA	Allgemeine frei Angestelltenbund
ANI	Associazione Nazionalista Italiana
CDI	Centralverband Deutscher Industrieller
CEDA	Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas
CGL	Confederazione Generale del Lavoro
CGT	Confederación General del Trabajo
CNCA	Confederación Nacional Católico Agraria
CNT	Confederación National del Trabajo
DAF	Deutsch Arbeitsfront
DC	Democrazia Cristiana
DDP	Deutsch Demokratische Partei
DGPS	Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza
DN	Direttorio nazionale
DNVP	Deutschnationale Volkspartei
DVP	Deutsche Volkspartei
ÉME	Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete
EOA	Ente Opera Assistenziali
ERC	Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya



FET	Falange Española Tradicionalista
FET-JONS	Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional-Sindicalista
FIOM	Federazione Italiana Operai Metallurgici
FISA	Federazione Italiana dei Sindacati degli Agricoltori
FNR	Frontul Renașterii Național
FNTT	Federación Nacional de Trabajadores de la Tierra
GdA	Gewerkschaftsbund der Angestellten
Gedag	Gesamtsverband Deutscher Angestelltenwerkshaft
IRA	Instituto de Reforma Agraria
JAP	Juventud de Acción Popular
JONS	Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional-Sindicalista
LAM	Legiunea Arhanghelul Mihail
LANC	Liga Apărării Național-Creștine
MAIC	Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio
MI	Ministero dell'Interno
MOVE	Magyar Országos Véderő Egyesülete
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei
PCI	Partito Comunista Italiano
PNF	Partito Nazionale Fascista
PNL	Partidul Național Liberal
PNR	Partidul Național Român
PNȚ	Partidul Național-Țărănesc
PPI	Partito Popolare Italiano
PSD	Partidul Socialdemocrat
PSI	Partito Socialista Italiano
PSOE	Partito Socialista Obrero Español
PTȚ	Partidul Țărănesc

RLB	Reichslandbund
SA	Sturmabteilung
SP	Segreteria Politica
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
SPEP	Situazione politica ed economica nelle provincie
TPȚ	Totul pentru Țară
UGT	Unión General de Trabajadores
UIL	Unione Italiana del Lavoro
UMN	Unión Monárquica Nacional
UNCC	Unión Nacional de Cooperativas del Campo
UP	Unión Patriótica
USI	Unione Sindacale Italiana

## ***The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe***

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# 1

## Civil Society and Fascism in Interwar Europe

Between 1890 and 1914 an organizational revolution occurred in Europe as mutual aid societies, rural credit organizations, and cooperatives blossomed (Callahan 2000: 142–148; Eidelberg 1974: 98; Lyttelton 2000: 69–78; Tenfeld 2000: 85).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, scholars have identified the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century as a period of intensive development of civil society, especially in the countryside (Nord 2000: xvii–xviii; Putnam 1993: 137–148). Such developments, according to a widely held “Tocquevillian” thesis, should have produced vibrant liberal democracies across the continent (Arato 1981; Cohen and Arato 1992; Gellner 1994; Nord 1995; Putnam 1993, 2000; Varshney 2002). Yet, in roughly half of Europe, fascism followed this intense wave of associational growth. This outcome is especially puzzling in countries such as Italy, Spain, and Romania (the empirical focus of this book), which had well-established liberal institutions by the late nineteenth century. Associational growth should have strengthened their already existing parliamentary regimes but appears instead to have undermined them, for, rather than shifting from liberal oligarchies to mass democracies, Italy, Spain, and Romania developed as fascist regimes in the interwar period. Explaining why this happened is the central goal of this book.

Investigating the connection between the development of civil society and fascism is by no means of purely academic interest. Contemporary political culture is suffused with civil society romanticism: the term itself is now treated as virtually equivalent to liberal democracy.<sup>2</sup> There is, however, a relative absence of comparative and historical research focused on the political consequences of associational development. Instead, most exponents of the Tocquevillian thesis, and their critics, investigate the relationship between associationism and the quality of democracy in already consolidated liberal democratic regimes (Howard 2003; 148–152; Kaufman 2002; Putnam 1993: 3; 2000; Skocpol 1997).<sup>3</sup> I believe that investigating the effect of associationism on the emergence of interwar European fascism raises serious issues about the political consequences of civil society development and suggests the need for a rethinking, although by no means rejection, of the Tocquevillian thesis.

My argument, in brief, is that the consequences of associational development for regime outcomes, rather than being direct, depend on the presence or absence of hegemonic politics. Civil society development facilitated the emergence of fascism, rather than liberal democracy, in interwar Italy, Spain, and Romania because it preceded, rather than followed, the establishment of strong political organizations (hegemonic politics) among both dominant classes and nonelites. The development of voluntary associations in these countries tended to promote democracy, as it did elsewhere. But in the absence of adequate political institutions, this democratic demand assumed a paradoxically antiliberal and authoritarian form: a technocratic rejection of politics as such. Fascist movements and regimes grew out of this general crisis of politics, a crisis that itself was a product of civil society development.

This argument suggests two important conclusions, to which I return more fully below. The first is that the impact of associational or civil society development depends heavily on the preexisting structure of political conflict, or what I call, following Gramsci, the presence or absence of hegemonic politics. The second is that fascism, far from being the opposite of democracy, was a twisted and distorted form of democratization that, paradoxically, embraced authoritarian means. My broader aim in this book is, accordingly, to propose a rethinking of the impact of civil society development on regime forms and a rethinking of the nature of interwar European fascism.

The remainder of this introduction accomplishes three main tasks that lay the analytic foundations for the rest of the book. I first develop a definition of fascism as an “authoritarian democracy.” I then present the Tocquevillian approach

to interwar fascism and develop some key theoretical and empirical criticisms of it. The chapter then turns to a discussion of Gramsci, explaining how his concepts of civil society and hegemony (and particularly the connection between them) provide a useful corrective and extension of more conventional Tocquevillian approaches to civil society. Finally, I close with a brief consideration of my analytic and case selection strategy and adumbrate the argument to come.

## Fascism as Authoritarian Democracy

What is a fascist regime? Unfortunately there is very little consensus about this question. Some scholars favor a highly restricted definition that refers at most only to Italy and Germany, classifying other regimes as “authoritarian” or “traditional authoritarian” (De Felice 2000: xii; Linz 2003: 23–24; Mahoney 2003: 158). Others argue for a much broader approach, emphasizing the similarities among all capitalist authoritarian states (Luebbert 1991: 3; Moore 1993: 433–452; Stephens 1989: 1060–1064). A third group of scholars seeks to establish detailed typologies of various kinds of authoritarian regimes (Mann 2004: 44–48; Payne 1980: 14–21; 1995: 462–470). Although all of these conceptual strategies shed light on different aspects of interwar authoritarianism, none of them are perfect. The first risks circularity by defining fascism in a way that makes it equivalent to the interwar authoritarianisms produced by Italy and Germany. The second strategy risks obscuring crucial differences among authoritarian regimes by calling them all fascist, while the third risks burying its object under a bewildering variety of labels. The approach I take tries to strike a reasonable compromise among these positions. I believe that a rather broad swath of authoritarian regimes in interwar Europe are usefully understood as fascist, not least because their political elites often consciously modeled themselves on the “classic” fascist regimes of Italy and Germany. I also hold that there were enormous variations in the types of fascism produced in different national contexts. My concept of fascism, I hope, is general enough to allow for conceptual analysis but sensitive enough to capture these important variations. Let me, then, define this regime type.

Fascist regimes, in my view, are best understood as authoritarian democracies (Diehl-Thiele 1969: 20; Fritzsche 1996: 634–635; Gentile 2002: 28–29; Gregor 2005: 150; Sima 1972: 101; Spampanato 1933: 46).<sup>4</sup> By this seemingly paradoxical formulation, I mean that fascist political elites claimed a form of democratic legitimacy even as they ruled through authoritarian means (Bendix 1978: 16–18; Weber 1978: 212–215).<sup>5</sup> Fascists dismantled parliaments, elections, and civil rights but embraced

fully the modern state's claim to represent the people or nation (Bottai 1928: 100–101; Mann 1999: 29; 2004: 2; Manoilescu 1936: 90; Mazower 2000: 29; Nolte 1966: 104; Rocco 1938: 637–639, 641; Therborn 2008: 205–209).

Defining fascism as an authoritarian democracy is bound to raise two sorts of objections. The first and most obvious one is that fascist regimes are generally understood as antidemocratic dictatorships. Indeed, much of the literature on fascism concentrates on the “breakdown of democracy” (Linz 2003: 576–62). This framing relies either explicitly or implicitly on a very specific definition of democracy as a procedure for selecting political elites through universal suffrage (Kelsen 1955: 3; Schumpeter 1942: 269). There are many very good reasons for adopting a proceduralist definition of democracy, but for my purposes in seeking to understand why civil society development seems to have led to fascism, such a definition is not helpful. By *democracy*, I mean a principle of legitimacy or sovereignty (Mosca 1994: 70). From this perspective democracy is not so much a regime as, in Mosca's phrase, a “political formula” that can be combined with a variety of institutional forms.<sup>6</sup>

Liberalism and authoritarianism, in contrast, are sets of institutional arrangements that can claim democratic legitimacy, but need not (Tönnies 1927). Fascists tended to reject liberalism but embrace democracy as a political formula. They argued that membership in regime-sanctioned parties and corporate groups were a more adequate method of establishing popular rule than the “outdated” techniques of parliament and elections (Balakrishnan 2000: 69–76; Schmitt 1985: 32).<sup>7</sup> As James Gregor (2005: 120) writes, in his acute summary of the doctrinal basis of Italian fascism: “Individuals in liberal societies, lumped together geographically for the purposes of exercising suffrage, shared little in common. As a consequence, there was little unanimity in terms of interests, projects, or intentions that might constitute the ‘general consensus’ that, in turn, could provide the ‘democratic’ support for elite rule.” The fundamental problem with liberalism, from the fascist perspective, was not that it was democratic, but precisely the opposite. Elections and parliaments, from the fascist perspective, were intrinsically incapable of representing the interests of the nation. Because of this, the nation must be represented through some other mechanism. The rule of the people, from the fascist perspective, had become, at least in modern conditions, incompatible with parliamentary government. It is in this sense that one might say that fascists were authoritarian democrats and that fascist regimes were authoritarian democracies.

The second sort of objection one might make to defining fascism as an authoritarian democracy concerns the issue of “totalitarianism.” Many scholars suggest



that fascist regimes, unlike other forms of authoritarianism, were totalitarian, and therefore are most similar to the soviet political system (Friedrich 1964: 47–60; Gleason 1995: 108–120). In contemporary comparative and political sociology, the distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes continues to be very important (Mahoney 2003: 158). In my view the essence of totalitarianism lies in the existence of a monopolistic single-party organization (Linz 1970: 255). Although I believe that such organizations characterized some fascist regimes, particularly the Italian and German ones, I also think it is unhelpful to equate fascist regimes as such with single-party dominance. In other words, some fascist regimes were totalitarian, others not. Authoritarian democracies (fascist regimes) could be established using institutions other than, or alongside, a mass mobilizing party. For example, traditionalist institutions such as the church could form a functional substitute for a mass party. This occurred to some degree in Spain. Alternatively, fascism might do away with party organizations altogether in favor of state-organized corporate groups. This was the predominant solution in Romania and was widely discussed in Italy. I return to this issue below in my discussion of the three forms of authoritarian democracy that emerged in Italy, Spain, and Romania in the interwar period.

At this point the reader might object that all modern political regimes claim some form of popular mandate and that therefore the existence of such a claim is not a useful criterion for distinguishing among regime types. However, fascist regimes were quite unusual because they conceived their form of authoritarianism specifically as an alternative to electoral democracy. Fascists did not justify their regimes as exceptional or “parenthetical” dictatorships, nor as a form of transition from a class society to a nonclass society. Rather, the fundamental basis of the fascist claim to legitimacy lay in the belief that fascism offered a superior way of connecting the population to the state in modern economic and social conditions. In short, fascist regimes not only claimed popular legitimacy, they constructed institutions conceived specifically as alternatives to electoral democracy (Pombeni 1995: 108–109).

Fascism as a form of rule was thus an unusual combination of democratic legitimacy and authoritarian means. Fascists combined the claim to represent the people with a rejection of politics as the institutionalized struggle of groups over control of the state. Fascists held that elections, parliaments, and discussion about public affairs—in short, the stuff of politics—were incapable of constituting and representing a “general will.” They therefore attempted to replace political struggle, and representative institutions, with a form of nonpolitical interest representation.