Nimrod Amzalak

Fascists and Honourable Men

Contingency and Choice in French Politics, 1918–45

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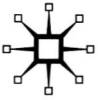

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To my beloved daughters
Noa and Michal

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A Contextual Approach to the Study of Fascism

1. The problem of essentialism

The study of fascism has by now become an important branch of almost every discipline of the social sciences. However, since its early beginnings in the 1950s to the most recent contributions, it has never ceased to be a controversial topic not only in its substance but also, and perhaps primarily, in its form and procedure.

In a book published in 1998, Roger Griffin argued that during the 1990s a new consensus had emerged among the major scholars of fascism, which, although still in an embryonic form, constituted a major step towards the consolidation of a new paradigm.[1] Indeed, the fact that many of these scholars chose, in the second half of that decade, to republish their old works with only minor theoretical additions or, alternatively, to compile anthologies and readers that mapped out the current state of research, seems to support Griffin's claim that scholars of fascism had indulged 'in ritual lamentations over its lack of a consensus, or at least working, definition'.[2] But before examining this alleged 'new consensus', it would be helpful to remind ourselves of the history of fascist scholarship in its various phases.

The first attempt to tackle the fascist phenomenon on the theoretical level was made by Marxist theoreticians in the 1930s. In fact, Marxist theories of fascism have always been present in the research arena due to their dual function as both a contribution to the academic debate and as a part of the political combat, first against the fascist regimes and, later on, in the context of the cold war.

There are several common features to all Marxist theories of fascism: (a) they all regard fascism as a side effect of the crisis of capitalism rather than as an independent political phenomenon; (b) fascism is

conceived as a strategy in the service of some socio-political agent rather than as a comprehensive ideology; (c) the characteristics of the Italian and, more commonly, of the German varieties of fascism are regarded as paradigmatic of fascism in general. Thus the Executive of the Communist International (Comintern) asserted in 1933 that 'Fascism is the open, terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist and most imperialist elements of finance capital',[3] and considered the rise of fascism a dialectic process of a brutal assault on socialism that would lead to the strengthening of class antagonism and to the acceleration of the collapse of capitalism:

> When the bourgeoisie recognizes its tottering dictatorship on a fascist basis in order to create a firm, solid government, this, in the present conditions, leads to the strengthening, not only of its class terrorism, but also of the elements which disrupt its power, to the destruction of the authority of bourgeois law in the eyes of the broad masses, to the growth of internal friction among the bourgeoisie and to the collapse of its main social support – social-democracy.[4]

A more sophisticated version of the Marxist argument is that of the French historian Nicos Poulantzas[5] who regards the fascist state as an exceptional form of the capitalist state. Its uniqueness is due to the special function assigned to it by the ruling classes: that of overcoming a particularly acute economic and political crisis. It therefore has a very different nature from that of other capitalist states, which do not experience a similar crisis. The fascist party invades the state from without by a manipulation of public opinion, which, demoralised by the crisis, is especially susceptible to extremism, and with the collaboration of the state itself, which seeks to use fascism's authoritarianism to protect itself from collapse. The state then delegates various responsibilities to the fascist party, which gradually consolidates its hegemony and, later on, its total exclusiveness in the political arena. The fascist regime is therefore not an ephemeral emergency measure designed to combat a particular threat, but a reorganisation of the political structure of the ruling class whereby power is shifted from the official apparatuses of the state to an external agency in the form of the fascist party.

Marxist theoreticians have contributed considerably to the demystification and normalisation of fascism as an endogenous element of the political dynamics in liberal democracies. The common view that Marxist theory refuses to regard fascism as an ideology is only partially true. While it is certainly the case that Marxist scholars do not, for the

reasons discussed above, consider fascism as an *autonomous* ideology, they do not argue that it is a mere power structure that may serve whichever ideology. Instead, they place it in the general framework of one particular ideology – bourgeois ideology – of which it is allegedly an agent. Marxist theory, therefore, doesn't deny the ideological character of fascism but simply reduces it to a very narrow and transparent set of motifs through which one can clearly see the guiding hand of the ruling bourgeoisie.

Most non-Marxist theorists, starting from the 1950s, while rejecting the view that fascism was the deliberate and conscious work of a particular social group, nevertheless accepted that it was a manifestation of the distress of certain social elements in view of the dysfunction of the liberal state and of capitalist economy as a result of the process of modernisation. Seymour Lipset, for instance, regarded fascism as a movement of the middle classes who felt threatened by the rapid industrialisation and the shift to mass production which also involved the standardisation of both economic and cultural activity. Since the liberal-democratic political order failed to protect them against this process (and in many cases even did much to advance it), the middle classes opted for authoritarianism:

> It is not surprising, therefore, that under certain conditions small businessmen turn to extremist political movements, either fascism or anti-parliamentary democracy. These movements answer some of the same needs as the more conventional liberal parties; they are an outlet for the stratification strains of the middle class in a mature industrial order. But while liberalism attempts to cope with the problems by legitimate social changes and 'reforms' ('reforms' which would, to be sure, reverse the modernization process), fascism and populism propose to solve the problem by taking over the state and running it in a way which will restore the old middle classes' economic security and high standing in society, and at the same time reduce the power and status of big capital and big labour.[6]

Ernst Nolte, in his study of three manifestations of fascism,[7] remains within the conceptual framework that sees fascism as a reaction of the middle classes to modernisation, but adds to the political and sociological consideration of his predecessors a philosophical dimension. For Nolte, fascism isn't merely a reaction to the immediate materialist consequences of modernisation, but an overall rejection of the entire intellectual edifice of modernism and in particular the individualism and

rationalism of the Enlightenment, which had undermined traditional socio-economic and political structures and transformed deeply rooted cultural patterns by introducing abstract philosophical concepts of society instead of the concrete and organic models of the old order. The rejection of this 'transcendental' worldview by the traditionalist and reactionary middle class was at the basis of its rallying to the cause of fascism.

Thus, both Marxist and non-Marxist theories of fascism until the 1970s had certain common features: (a) they all regarded fascism as a reactionary force either consciously expressing or unconsciously representing the interests of a particular social group, normally the middle class; (b) they all attributed the emergence as well as the nature of fascism to exogenous sources.

During the 1970s, several studies appeared which challenged this consensus. One such study was A. J. Gregor's *The Fascist Persuasion in Radical Politics*,[8] where the author uses for the first time the concept of 'generic fascism'. Gregor rejects the view that fascism was a mere agent, a tool in the hands of more authentic and fundamental political forces, lacking an ideology of its own and therefore reactionary by definition. In an article written shortly after the publication of his book, he argues that not only was fascism in Italy not anti-modern, it had its own positive agenda of modernisation advocating 'an industrialized Italy, with flourishing urban centres, secular political control of community life (sometimes with due regard for traditional religious values), and a rationalized bureaucratic (if anti-parliamentarian) infrastructure to govern the peninsula effectively'.[9] This emphasis on the positive modernising crusade of fascism leads him to regard all mass mobilising movements aiming at the establishment of a dictatorship under the auspices of a single party in developing countries as either fascist or 'fascistic'. Fascism is thus promoted from the position of an agent to that of an independent participant in the political debate, with its own positive and coherent programme.

George Mosse, arguing along similar lines, accepts the active nature of fascism. He writes:

> Fascism was everywhere an 'attitude to life', based upon a national mystique which might vary from nation to nation. It was also a revolution attempting to find a 'Third Way' between Marxism and capitalism, but still seeking to escape concrete economic and social change by a retreat into ideology: the 'revolution of the spirit' of which Mussolini spoke; or Hitler's 'German revolution'. However, it encouraged activism, the fight against the existing order of things.[10]

With Mosse's definition, the general framework of what Griffin calls 'the new consensus' is beginning to clarify: fascism is a typical form of modern political radicalism in the sense that it shares certain structural elements with other revolutionary, mass-mobilising movements in developing and crisis-stricken countries; it is unique in its particular ideological content which aims at achieving irrational goals by rational means.

The most complete formulation of this new consensus can be found in Stanley Payne's *A History of Fascism*, where he restates with several modifications his arguments from the early 1980s.[11] Payne's theory is based on his tripartite definition of fascist ideology which distinguishes between its positive ideological aspects (what it stands for), its negative aspects (what it stands against), and the structural and organisational form it assumes (what it looks like). An examination of all three aspects leads Payne to define fascism as 'a form of revolutionary ultra-nationalism striving towards national renaissance'. On the basis of this definition, he then offers what he calls 'a retrodictive theory of fascism', which distinguishes between the cultural, political, social, economic and international causes for the actual appearance of fascism.

Payne's theory redefines the poles of the spectrum of research in the field of fascism. For the old, Marxist-inspired school, this spectrum was drawn between, on the one hand, a view of fascism as a conscious expression of the class interests of the bourgeoisie and, on the other hand, a view which regards it as an unconscious representation of such interests. For the new school, however, the spectrum stretches between a predominantly objective view of fascism as a by-product of various cultural, political and socio-economic dynamics related to modernisation, and a subjective view that sees the development of fascism as an ideology relatively independent of various exogenous influences. In general, scholars closer to the subjective pole would be more inclined to regard fascism as authentically revolutionary, more left-wing than right-wing, and would put less stress on the sociological and structural features of fascism. Their main field of research would be that of intellectual history. Payne himself, together with Griffin, Eatwell and others can be placed about midway on this spectrum, while Mosse for instance is more inclined towards the subjective pole.

One scholar who is most definitely on the subjective pole is Zeev Sternhell, whose trilogy on French fascism published between the early 1970s and the early 1980s, was followed by a broader work on fascist ideology in 1989.[12] For Sternhell, fascism has its roots in certain intellectual developments which occurred during the late nineteenth century,

predominantly the entry of the masses into politics, the maturation and popularisation of the new social sciences – in particular Darwinian anthropology and mass psychology, the rise of integral nationalism and the first moves towards an anti-materialist revision of Marxism. These various elements had nourished each other, finally leading to a new synthesis that was fascism. This process had already been well under way when the First World War broke out and cannot therefore be attributed to it or to other contemporary political or socio-economic factors such as the economic crisis of the 1930s or the stalemate in the political systems of the European liberal democracies, which served only as catalysts for the spread of fascism and not as direct causes for its initial inception. Sternhell's approach allows him to sketch a very coherent and relatively neat history of fascist ideology, which presents its development as a linear progression from an embryonic form to a mature and independent protagonist in the political debate of the interwar period. The problem, however, is that it also frees him from the constrains of the specific historical context of fascism and thus lends itself to idiosyncrasy in arguably laying too much stress on small and politically insignificant instances of fascism which comply with its specific intellectual narrative while ignoring some of the more influential fascist elements. Many scholars, who refuse to accept his exclusion of Nazism and of other, more right-wing groups, from the fascist narrative, have criticised Sternhell precisely on this point.

It was in order to avoid this problem that Roger Eatwell developed his theory, published in 1992, which offered what he called a 'spectral-syncretic model'. This model, according to Eatwell, 'is a spectral-syncretic distillation of different phases of fascism. As such it tries to limit the problem which afflicts some ideological models, namely a tendency to focus exclusively on the more interesting fascist intellectuals, like Drieu La Rochelle, who, according to one leading critic, had minimal influence over actual fascist leaders and parties.'[13] Eatwell objects to the 'check-list' model favoured by many scholars of fascism who attempt to determine a fixed set of features, which could then be neatly integrated into a definition of fascism. Every such list, he claims, ends up giving only a partial picture of fascism since none can be exhaustive if it wishes to avoid internal contradictions. Instead Eatwell suggests a looser model, which underlines the major themes of fascist ideology rather than its specific tenets since 'there was a series of core themes in European fascist ideology, notably synthesis, but these did not produce a unique set of conclusions'.[14] Eatwell thus proposes to examine four main themes: natural history, geopolitics, political economy

and leadership, activism and party propaganda, in order to determine fascism's original contribution to them and to consider the various concrete forms these contributions can assume.

It would seem that Griffin was correct in speaking of a new consensus in the study of fascism, which he outlined as follows: 'Fascism is a genus of modern, revolutionary, "mass" politics which, while extremely heterogeneous in its social support and in the specific ideology promoted by its many permutations, draws its internal cohesion and driving force from a core myth that a period of perceived national decline and decadence is giving way to one of rebirth and renewal in a post-liberal new order.'[15] This indeed stands in sharp contrast to the old consensus, which, as already mentioned, was dominated by various formulations of the agent theory.

While 'new consensus' theories are certainly different from 'old consensus' ones, it is still not obvious that they are less problematic for the understanding of fascism. Let us summarise the antecedents of this consensus:

(a) It assumes that fascism has a certain 'essence' which 'stands behind' its various manifestations. However, in order to define this essence, it must address itself to those very instances (normally starting with the allegedly paradigmatic ones such as German Nazism and more commonly Italian Fascism) in which it seeks the most frequent elements. Such elements are then compiled into a 'check list' which will be used as the criteria for determining whether a certain individual or group can legitimately be labelled fascist.
(b) It is generally agreed that fascism becomes a significant political factor only if a strong correlation exists between its ideological postulates and its concrete manifestations in political behaviour and discourse.
(c) Although most 'new consensus' theories generally consider the support base of fascism chronically heterogeneous, they at the same time tend to agree that it is normally groups undergoing a major crisis, be it political, socio-economic or psychological, which are most susceptible to this ideology. Thus Lipset, de Felice and others speak of 'the crisis of modernization'; Poulanzas emphasises the role of an economic crisis; Mosse and some scholars of the Frankfurt school point to a major cultural crisis; and Sternhell insists on the ideological crisis of Marxism. Fascism is thus conceived as essentially abnormal, since its political significance depends on the occurrence of a major dysfunction within the public domain.

All theories of fascism to date are therefore based on the assumption that fascism is a distinct political phenomenon manifested in the correlation between certain ideological elements and certain political practices which occur simultaneously only in exceptional and abnormal historical situations of acute political crisis. Within this consensus, the debate between the different scholars is thus centred on the determination of the essential ideological and political elements, the minimal strength of the required correlation, and the specific crisis, which makes it politically significant.

However, this debate constantly runs against the same fundamental paradox: the more precise the definition becomes, the fewer instances of alleged fascism it is able to account for. The core of this paradox lies in the essentialist conviction, shared by most scholars in this field, that the coherence of the concept of fascism can only be obtained through all-embracing definitions based on elements shared by every instance of this concept. On the basis of this conviction they have tended to pursue a selection process of relevant case studies, which retained only those cases that could be neatly arranged into a compact generic definition that was reducible to a single element allegedly constituting the essence of fascism. This selection was informed for every scholar by his own particular, metaphysically predetermined, conceptual framework. All cases rejected in this process were either declared completely irrelevant or relegated to a secondary status as 'proto-fascism' or 'pseudo-fascism'.

However, the claim that the meaning of fascism can be rationally deduced from a larger and more abstract notion (capitalism, modernism, etc.) with little or no reference to the actual role played by fascism in various specific contexts seems very dubious. For on what basis could such a deduction be performed? What could possibly tell us whether a particular definition of fascism is indeed more 'basic' or 'essential' than any other? Surely, just the fact that a certain definition fits neatly into a general conceptual scheme implied by an overriding abstract notion is not a sufficient qualification of its validity. Is there then some privileged standpoint that allows us to evaluate our entire social world with all its practices? Undoubtedly if there is one, it is itself a rational construction which therefore needs to be justified by a reference to yet another, more abstract conceptual scheme, and so on. In this process we move away from the specific problem we initially set out to solve, and thus the concrete circumstances in which that problem arose become irrelevant and the problem itself is lost in an infinitely incremental philosophical procedure.