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What is fascism?

Author: Roger Eatwell

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Abstract:

The definition of fascism has centered around socio-economic rather than political factors. Perhaps it is a movement of the middle class or capitalism in crisis. It is now believed that fascism attracted all social classes and is an ideology based on false assumptions. Fascism in Germany was nationalism and socialism fueled by racial prejudice and hatred. Views of Zeev Sternhell, Stanley Payne and Roger Griffin are discussed.

Full Text:

In Part One of this article, which appeared in the last issue of History Review, I argued that it was vital to have a definition of fascism in order to assess major questions, such as which inter-war movements were truly fascist, or whether fascism is reviving today?

But this is easier said than done. Definitions of fascism have typically focused on socio-economic rather than political factors. In part, this emphasis is explained by the social history and Marxist tendency to view the probing of origins and functions as more sophisticated than the analysis of characteristics such as doctrine. Thus fascism has perhaps most frequently been defined as a movement of the middle class, or of capitalism, in crisis. The widespread belief that fascism was not a serious ideology, that it was little more than a violent form of nihilism or opportunism, has further encouraged this tendency.

However, there have been notable developments over the last twenty years which have begun to lead to a change of perspective. It has increasingly become accepted that fascism was not simply a tool of the owning classes, and the more sophisticated Marxists now talk of the 'primacy of politics'. It has now also become more widely accepted that fascism, especially in Germany, attracted all-class support during its rise. These socio-economic perspectives have been accompanied by a growing willingness to accept that there was a serious side to fascist ideology, that it is not best summed up by the infamous aphorism 'When I hear the word "culture", I reach for my gun'.

What I have sought to do in Part Two of this article is to offer a sympathetic critique of three important historians who have taken an essentially political approach to defining fascism, and who have produced notable recent books. This is followed by what I see as an improved definition, which is based on the argument that fascism must be taken as a serious (albeit morally flawed) ideology -- an approach which gives important insights into wider questions of why fascism succeeded or failed.

Zeev Sternhell

The Israeli historian, Zeev Sternhell, argues that the best shorthand definition of fascism is: 'Nationalism + socialism'. But the nationalism referred to is not the liberal nationalism of the mainstream French revolutionary tradition. Sternhell is concerned with the aggressive new nationalism of the late nineteenth century, which was linked to the rise of racial thinking, the quest for a more holistic society [in which the whole is greater than the parts] and belief in the need to forge more martial youth. The socialism too is of a specific type. Sternhell is especially interested in those who had been influenced by Social Darwinism, the new elite theory, vitalist philosophy stressing the importance of action and will, and new developments in psychology which sought to demonstrate the power of the irrational and leadership. The result was a doctrine which accepted private property as natural and most likely to be highly productive, bUt which sought to mobilise the masses to the violent overthrow of the individualist-materialist bourgeois order. The key tool of mobilisation was to be political myths. Initially, the primary focus was on the claim that a working class general strike could overthrow capitalism; but the jingoism associated with the outbreak of the First World War led some to believe that nationalism was the more potent myth.

Sternhell's erudition is remarkable and his arguments contain many fertile insights missed by those who dismiss fascism as totally lacking an ideological base. His works on France in the inter-war period also go on to show how fascism could develop a serious Third Way (between capitalism and socialism) economic programme. However, his approach has a variety of flaws

The first relates to the basic building blocks of his account. It is a view of politics largely concerned with the writings of a small number of primarily French thinkers (most notably, Georges Sorel and Maurice Barres, one of the key figures who developed the doctrine of holistic nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century) Little effort is made to discuss more concrete politics, or how ideas relate to society or support for particular groups. Thus he underplays the impact of the First World War and especially the Russian Revolution on crucial groups, like the Establishment and the young, who were to be so important in early fascist movements.

A second problem concerns Sternhell's long-standing rejection of Nazism as a form of fascism (though this view is shared by other notable commentators). Whilst Sternhell accepts that Barres's blood and soil and anti-Semitic views had many affinities across the Rhine, he holds that Nazism's biological determinism made it fundamentally different from fascism. This seems strange, for not all Nazis were biological racists. Moreover, on most other counts Nazism had much in common with his depiction of fascism. It was certainly anti-materialist and anti-liberal; it unquestionably shared the cult of youth and violence; similarly, the cult of will and leadership lay at the heart of Nazism.

Although less explicit in his writing, Stenhell's view of Nazism also reflects his claim that fascism had notable left-wing roots, an argument which brings out a third problem. His primarily French focus means that he misses other intellectual routes by which it was possible to come to fascism. Most people who were to become fascists came from the right rather than the left, though Sternhell is correct to identify some form of synthesis with aspects of socialism as an important basis of fascism. Indeed, much fascist thought involved an attempt to synthesise apparent opposites, and at its core was the synthesis between a conservative view of man constrained by nature and the more left-wing view of the possibilities of creating a 'New Man' (fascism has traditionally been a male-oriented ideology) who could be freed from bourgeois conditioning.

Stanley Payne

The American historian Stanley Payne has produced a remarkably clear and highly influential definition of fascism. The approach has three poles which stress fascisms (i) negations, such as anti-Marxism, anti-liberalism and anti-conservatism (ii) ideology and programme, such as nationalism, a positive evaluation of war, imperialism and corporatism (iii) style, such as the organised party-mass movement and extensive use of symbolism. In his latest work he also offers a one-sentence definition which seeks to distil an essence from these various fascisms, arguing that it is a form of revolutionary ultra-nationalism for national rebirth that is based on a primarily vitalist philosophy, is structured on extreme elitism, mass mobilization and the Fuhrerprinzip, positively values violence as end as well as means and tends to normatize war and/ or military virtues .

Overall, there is no doubt that Payne's latest book is the best general history of fascism in the inter-war period. His analysis is linked to a typology which makes it clear how fascism differed from what is sometimes termed 'the authoritarian right', like the Spanish Franco or Portuguese Salazar states, which he sees as too conservative to be fascist. Nevertheless, the Payne approach incorporates a series of weaknesses.

The first concerns his treatment of ideology. Although Payne accepts the seriousness of fascist ideology, it is not a primary concern. The result is that his ideological perspective is ultimately little more than a preface to a list-definition, stressing a few key words. As a starting point this has its uses, but the list-like analysis of fascist ideology fails to bring out its serious intellectual basis, its different permutations, and its ability to develop as an ideology. For instance, a positive evaluation of violence/war conjures up images of males in uniform, aggression and foreign wars. But it could also symbolise the 'blood socialism' of those who fought in the First World war, people who interpreted the experience more in terms of community and sacrifice for a cause which was not determined by purely financial concerns.

A second problem with Payne's approach concerns his stress on negations, which reinforces the impression that fascism was at best rather vacuous in terms of policy and at worst downright nihilistic. It is more helpful to see that fascism's negations partly stemmed from the fact that -- as a latecomer to the political spectrum -- it tended to attack existing ideologies and groups as a way of defining space for itself. To the extent that fascism's negations need underlining, they are best seen as part of a more fundamental ideology, which included a Manichaeian tendency to divide the world into 'us' and 'them', to create a sense of identity by clearly defining who the enemy is.

A third problem in Payne's approach is its undue focus on the inter-war years and particular contexts associated with this period. Indeed, there is a sense in which his claim that fascism was essentially a movement of the inter-war era in Europe is verging on being true by definition. By stating that a model of fascism must derive from concrete movement examples within Europe during this period, contextual facets become necessary ones. The militarised political party is clearly one example. It owes much to the combination of the disastrous consequences of the First World War in some countries being superimposed on the sudden entry of the masses into politics. The emphasis on anti-Semitism and even anti-communism must also been seen within particular contexts. Early Italian Fascism was not in any significant sense anti-Semitic, and some forms of fascism were not particularly anti-communist.

Roger Griffin

The British historian Roger Griffin does not adopt Payne's threefold typology, offering instead a shorter one-sentence definition, namely that fascism's 'mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form [see below] of popular ultra-nationalism. There are growing signs that this definition is becoming widely adopted, not least because it does not lock the concept of fascism largely into the inter-war era -- an important perspective as fears grow of the revival of fascism. Nevertheless, Griffin's approach contains a variety of problems.

The first concerns the focus on 'palingenesis'. The idea of rebirth was important to fascism because it was intimately linked to much of its aesthetic propaganda (especially, the image of phoenix or Christ-like rebirth). It helped to fudge whether what was really sought

was a radically new society, or essentially a restoration of the old. Indeed, a very similar language to fascism in this context can be found in a variety of individuals, movements and regimes which are not truly fascist -- such as the pre-war German Leagues or the inter-war French Croix de Feu. Griffin clarifies this point in his wider text by stressing that fascism was essentially a radical rather than conservative force. But this leaves another problem. Rebirth is a philosophically banal concept, which makes its centrality to an approach which accepts the serious nature of fascist ideology somewhat strange. Certainly the leading philosopher who supported Nazism, Martin Heidegger, had nothing interesting to say about rebirth: his work is far more interesting when he develops themes such as the need to harmonise tradition and modern technological society in a form of proto-ecologism.

A second problem for Griffin's formulation concerns the inclusion of the word 'populism'. This term poses serious difficulties for any definition, as 'populism' is arguably an even more elusive term than 'fascism'. One meaning often attributed to 'populism' is the celebration of a past, simple form of life. Although fascist propaganda had elements of this within it, the ultimate goal of fascism was essentially to create a new political culture. At other times, 'populism' is commonly used to mean 'popular', sometimes with the connotation that it uses anti-establishment views to achieve mobilisation. This also causes definitional problems. Some fascists despised the masses, which partly accounts for the fact that the Nazis before 1924 were putschist. In general, fascists have sought to lead rather than follow the masses, though inevitably any successful political movement in a democracy has to a large extent to make itself appear the representative of popular sentiments.

A final problem concerns the fact that the one sentence definition says nothing about economics. Although this neglect is common to many other major approaches, some fascists had distinct ideas about economic policy. For example, Nazi regime economic policy was ultimately based on the desire to make business, like social values more generally, less materialist, more concerned with the long-run and national social stability. But this was not an anti-modernist philosophy, as has been frequently claimed. Rather, the point was to blend economic dynamism and new technology with a less alienating conception of work and social structure. It sought a form of Third Way economics, synthesising left and right.

An alternative definition of fascism

It would take a book to set out fully an alternative conception of fascism. The approach which is set out below, therefore, focuses more on the construction of the 'fascist minimum', presented in two complementary ways: (i) a one-sentence definition, which seeks to balance what is central with what is more context-dependent, and (ii) a set of four annotations to the terms which make up the core of this definition, a device employed to help minimise the problems of simple list and one-sentence definitions. The result is an approach which can encompass both Nazism and Fascism, together with what are commonly seen as other notable manifestations of fascism such as the early Spanish Falange or the French Front National today. On the other hand, the definition excludes more conservative authoritarian systems like Francoism.

The one-sentence definition 'Fascism is an ideology that strives to achieve social rebirth based on a holistic-national radical Third Way, though in practice it has tended to stress style -- especially action and the charismatic leader -- more than detailed programme, and to employ a Manichaean demonisation of its enemies.'

The annotated list definition It is important to stress that none of the key-words which follow reflect a principle unique to fascism: ideologies overlap and have blurry edges. But together they form the basis of the core fascist world view.

1 Nationalism The belief that the world is divided into nations is central to fascism, though the nation should not necessarily be equated with existing states or ethnic groupings. Although some forms of fascism were based on biological racism, the mainstream form of nationalism was cultural, which meant it was possible to 'imagine' new nations. Thus some intellectual fascists sought the defence of the European 'nation' against what were seen as primitive, but more virile cultures.

2 Holism Fascism is sometimes called an 'integral' form the term holism -- meaning that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts -- is a more evocative word. Fascism is based on the view that the collective predominates over individual interest and rights: it is thus hostile to liberal democracy. The individual only becomes truly free when he breaks free of conditioning -- a belief which can under-pin a violent conception of politics and devotion to charismatic, quasi-religious leaders.

3 Radicalism Fascism involves a rejection of the power of Establishment groups (though in practice it can compromise with such groups while struggling for and consolidating its hold on power). Whilst the idea of rebirth figures prominently in propaganda, there is no reactionary or populist desire to return to a former society or mythical past. Some aspects of the past are valued highly, such as communal solidarity, but the goal is to create a new political culture.

4 The third Way Fascism sees capitalism as too individualistic, and ultimately not loyal to the community. It sees socialism as too internationalist and based on false views of equality. It syncretically seeks to draw on what is seen as the best of capitalism (the naturalness of private property, its dynamism) and socialism (its concern for the community and welfare). Far from celebrating irrationality, fascism sees such principles as being based on a scientific understanding of

RELATED ARTICLE: Books on Fascist Ideology

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Roger Eatwell, Fascism: a History, Vintage 1996, is a critical narrative of Germany, Italy, France and Britain, coming up to the present day. (*)

Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, Routledge 1993, is an excellent monograph, rather above A level standard. (*)

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Stanley Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, University of Wisconsin Press 1980, is a very wide-ranging analytical work.

Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-45*, University College London Press 1995, is a superb history and accessible discussion of the problem of definition and neo-fascism. (*)

Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left*, University of California Press 1986, is a major monograph focusing on inter-war French fascism; rather detailed.

Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, Princeton University Press 1994, is a monograph on Italy and France; in general above A level standard. (*)

(*) Currently available in paperback editions.

human nature. [Note that in some forms, of fascism, science underpinned racism, and welfare was only to be offered to those who were seen as being members of the 'true' national community.]

Conclusion: ideology and the problem of fascist support

It is important to stress that the definition of fascism remains a highly controversial field. Some historians continue to reject the view that fascism can be considered a serious ideology. Others make some concessions in this direction, but argue that ideology tells us little about the vital issues of why fascism arose or the nature of fascist regimes. However, I would argue that the ideological definition of fascism is vital to both of these more concrete issues. It is impossible to develop this point fully in a short article, but an important aspect of the argument can be seen by considering what could be called 'grand theory' approaches to the rise of fascism -- namely attempts to explain the rise of fascism mainly in terms of one sweeping cause.

Two approaches of this type have tended to dominate attempts to pinpoint who voted for fascist parties. The most common approach is based largely on economic motives, and sees fascism as a movement of the middle class. In particular, small business people, artisans and farmers are seen as the core of fascist movements -- people who felt threatened by the rise of both the left and big business, although in the German case considerable emphasis has also been placed on the role of inflation and later economic depression in harming the economic position of a wider section of the middle class. The main competing approach is mass society theory. This holds that very rapid social change, caused by sudden industrialisation and/or the catastrophic impact of war, produces a sense of anomie, particularly among the young. People in this state are characterised by loss of a sense of communal values and moral norms, and are prey to new 'collectivist' and activist ideologies (hence communism can appeal as well as fascism).

Historians and social scientists have devoted considerable effort to testing these theories, often using computers. Until recently, most thought that middle class theory offered a better explanation. But there were various qualifications to this conclusion, including local and national variations, and the way the social composition of the vote changed through time (for instance, the Nazi vote seems to have been more middle class in 1930 than 1932).⁽¹⁾ Moreover, recently there has been growing support for the argument that Nazism was an all-class movement, though with particular pockets of strength in the middle class and young, and weaknesses among practicing Catholics and those active in trade unions (whose organisation and values helped to protect their members from the Nazi appeal).

These qualifications and changes point to the dangers of too sweeping a form of grand theory. But they should not point to the opposite conclusion, that fascism needs understanding in a very specific set of local contexts, which tend to highlight diversity and chance rather than useful generalisations. It is more sensible to conclude that fascism had the ability to attract different types of voter, in particular two sorts. Its syncretic ideology allowed it to appeal both on grounds of economic rationality and on more emotive-psychological grounds. There seems little doubt that the latter appealed to most of the early activists, and also to those who were attracted by the increasing concentration in Nazi propaganda after 1929 on Hitler's charismatic personality. But Nazism's take-off electorally in rural areas came in 1928 and after, and was closely associated with the publication of new programmes which promised to rectify specific economic grievances. The same point is true of the sudden take-off of Fascism in Italy after 1920.

Fascism did not gather support simply because of its organisation and propaganda, though these were notable features of its activity. Different types of socio-economic stress were necessary preconditions (tensions which affected both elites and voters more generally). But fascism is best defined as an ideology, and adopting an essentially syncretic approach helps explain the dual nature of successful fascisms' electoral base.

The same point about the importance of ideology can be applied to important aspects of fascist regimes, for example the events which led up to the Holocaust. But this is another story -- perhaps for a future issue of *History Review*.

(1.) Most work on voting for fascism has dealt with the Nazis. This is not simply a reflection of its greater historical 'sex appeal'. Italian Fascists contested relatively few elections, and then often in alliance with other parties. The Nazis contested a large number of elections, especially in the crucial take-off period 1928-32.

Roger Eatwell is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Bath. He has broadcast on radio and television and is the author of

Fascism: a History (Vintage 1996)

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