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Fascist movements

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Political and long-term causes

Fascism belongs to the "family" of right-wing authoritarian and radical nationalist movements and regimes. Fascist movements regard the state as an organic whole and omnipotent principle transcending class interests, economic tensions, and ethnic conflicts. Fascism and authoritarianism rejected and repressed Marxist socialism, liberalism, ethnic minorities, and laissez-faire capitalism. One may distinguish between authoritarian, reactionary, corporatist, and fascist movements and regimes according to the degree of mass support used to mobilize society and the forms of violence and murder used to dominate society.

Fascist movements gained significance mainly within right-wing authoritarian forms of government, especially when conservatives failed to establish broad social connections and gain acceptance by means of moderate nationalism and/or respect for their economic competence. Fascist movements also arose where the parliamentary system developed late and, thanks to oligarchic traditions, was not fully established even after World War I. Lack of acceptance for a multi-party system, free elections, and corresponding changes of government, as well as skepticism toward free and rational political debate, characterized this right-wing authoritarianism, which provided fertile ground for fascist movements.

The destruction of the multi-ethnic empires after World War I, the weakening of traditional conservatism, the intensification of state interventions in technology and business, as well as the strengthening of aggressive nationalism against wartime adversaries, promoted a new nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s, especially in the Mediterranean and East-Central Europe. Fascism aimed to cleanse a purportedly unitary and indivisible nation of enemies, developing organicist and racist notions of society.

Socioeconomic preconditions

It is now generally accepted that fascist movements did not draw on the support of the "panicking" middle classes (Falter 1991). The three major socioeconomic explanations for the rise of fascism – late industrial and democratic development and/or economic backwardness; sudden and profound economic crisis; and social tensions caused by heightened class conflict – emphasize that fascist movements did best in countries that were neither particularly backward nor had completed a steady and protracted modernization process.

Recent scholarship has questioned the assumption that class should be central to our understanding of fascism. Instead it stresses that explanations for its rise need to incorporate a set of complex social preconditions like youth, military experience, education, religion, and regional peculiarities (Mann 2004). The rise of fascist movements is poorly understood as the product of material and status-based interests of social groups. Social contexts were not causal explanations, but merely created opportunities. Fascist collective action cannot be derived from psychological dispositions or social problems. Fascists were neither the puppets of capital nor the rejoicing (or more aptly, thrashing) third party in societies rent by class struggle. Instead of deriving fascism from social circumstances we should look instead at what fascists actually did.

Short-term causes and the impact of World War I

The following political and social changes after World War I and the Russian Revolution played a key role in the process of supporting fascist movements: a widespread acceptance of social welfare models influenced by eugenics; fantasies of a potentially total and state-directed shaping of society, fueled by planning for war; radical populist nationalism oriented toward communal ties; the spread of anticommunism and antifeminism; the deployment of violence and militarism as political instruments; and the

attraction of theatrical politics with charismatic elements.

The mass mobilization of society during World War I made elitist political forms less tenable; social conflicts erupted in the class-stratified army and on the home front in response to hunger and hardship. Young soldiers' experience of violence, the sometimes extreme flows of refugees, and territorial shifts within the European nations created important preconditions for fascism's emergence.

The period following World War I witnessed a militarization of public opinion and the political culture, in which the "metamorphosis of the political" expressed itself in a dramatization and emotionalization of the political, stoked by the mass media. World War I engendered a "fundamental crisis of representation" (Weisbrod 2000) through mass media transmissions of glorious promises invoking heroism and sacrifice. This visual, dramatic, and violent charging of the political corresponded to social distribution battles and rationalizing tendencies, culminating in the "compulsively normalized society" of fascism, which propagated "introspection instead of intellect, feeling instead of analysis, community instead of social contradictions, ideals instead of interests." The utopian model of a society pacified in this manner thus highlighted the repressive features of social norms and discipline (Peukert 1989).

The young men who had experienced the front only in the accounts of fathers and older brothers succumbed to the propaganda of unflappable superiority in the face of mortal danger that flourished after 1918. The image of cool masculinity parted with the nineteenth-century cult of conscience. The martial absoluteness of the heroic, determined, and violent man was attractive particularly for nationalist youth, who sought to shield themselves from the presumed unmanly weakness of returning shell-shocked veterans. The fascist movements' glorification of youth fell on fertile ground, given the socioeconomic problems of young men and the changes in and crisis of the male image (Herbert 1996; Wildt 2010).

International constellations

Between the Convention of Lausanne of January 1923 and World War II, more than 40 million people were forcibly resettled according to ethnic, religious, or linguistic criteria (Aly 1999). The massive frontier shifts after World War I, some of which conflicted with ethnic self-attributions and promoted or "invented" this ethnicization, not merely spawned a number of irredentist demands, but also fostered a new type of nationalism and racism. Particularly in the new nations in Southern and East-Central Europe, the combined economic, military, political, and cultural crisis after World War I inspired calls for order, security, and hierarchy as well as the emergence of a value system oriented more toward the sacred than the secular, and more toward national than class interests, which promoted the advent and development of fascism (Mann 2004).

The thesis that fascist movements succeeded in establishing themselves in countries where the communist and socialist movement had been especially powerful and class conflict particularly intense no longer holds up to scrutiny. In all European countries – with the notable exception of the Soviet Union – the violence of fascist movements surpassed the violence of socialists in the immediate postwar period. But fascist activities and successes in the various European countries were not consistently an immediate response to communism, since most fascist coup attempts and violence occurred only in the 1930s, far too late to be considered responses or even "understandable reactions" (Nolte 1987) to left-wing violence. Yet it was more the demonization of the socialist foe and the virtually hysterical (liberal) bourgeois bewilderment and fear, conjured up by memories of the Russian Revolution and the unrest of 1918–1919, that continued to lend the violent fascist politics of the 1930s the appearance of communicative appeals to the bourgeoisie and heightened its intransigence. This was the source of fascism's image as a nationalist force for order and a militant protector of capitalist property relations.

All classifications for comparing fascist movements aside, neither Nazism nor Italian *fascismo*, the Hungarian Arrow Cross under Ferenc Szálasi, or Zelea Codreanu's Romanian Iron Guard can be understood in isolation. Italian fascism's function as a "historic indicator" (Schieder 2008: 149–249) in the 1920s and early 1930s was as significant for European fascist movements as the cultural transfer and linkages between fascisms. At the time of the Great Depression, with widespread anxiety about the future and disgust with the present, Italian fascism, in particular, appeared to offer a model. People sought stability and orientation in an authoritarian alternative to the parliamentary system and democracy, in the introduction of corporatism, which supporters hoped would provide a third way between capitalism and socialism. Arthur Moeller van den Bruck's 1922 dictum "Italia docet" was on everyone's lips (Schieder 2008: 149–184).

A European network of fascist movements had emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. A transnational history of these diverse mutual receptions, contacts, and exchange relationships that explores the chronology of their reciprocal influences and transformation processes remains to be written, but such an inquiry is certainly needed in order to understand the divergences and convergences of European fascisms (Woller 1999; Reichardt & Nolzen 2005).

FASCIST MOVEMENTS AS POLITICAL PRACTICE

Overall, in its movement phase, fascism was characterized by a combination of five traits:

1. *A high degree of violence and militancy.* Particularly in their early phase, fascist movements adopted a violent style, and their combat groups embodied vitality, intransigence, youth, militarism, camaraderie, discipline, virility, and physical violence. Violent actions were the actual meaning and object of fascist combat groups. The struggle against "Marxism," communists, and social democrats was their central purpose. Paradoxically enough, it was frequently also this very violence that appeared to promise the middle classes peace and order.

The violent destruction of traditional groupings and the "rapid reintegration [of their members] into a wholly new group formation" were key characteristics of the fascists and their "gospel of violence" (Mannheim 1952: 150–156). Violence became the "decisive principle" (Neumann 1988: 467) of their social organization and an expression of fascist volition. The violent acts themselves performatively produced a myth that represented their self-image and served the purposes of mobilization. For the fascists, acts of violence were indicative of a creative will to live, an act of freedom, collective decisiveness, and heroic deeds. The intellectual misgivings of critical reflection were sacrificed to aestheticized action. Fascist street fighters presented themselves as diffusely dangerous and aggressive, targeting not one particular group, but anyone outside the martial manliness in their own ranks. A propensity toward racism and a cult of violence, camaraderie, and the glorification of danger and adventurism as revolutionary gesture belonged to the fascist repertoire (Reichardt 2009).

Violence, as a polyvalent manifestation of fascist movements, lent them their unmistakable stamp: thematically in political attitudes, symbolically in propaganda style and movement/party aesthetic, organizationally in the paramilitary combat groups, physically at movement/party events and everyday "party work" in the streets. Violence enhanced group cohesion within and propaganda outward. It was intended to show that fascists were not all talk and no action. The cult of violence and action as well as the violence-prone

lifestyle demonstrated intransigence and mocked any willingness to compromise or rational modes of the finding of justice. Even fascist regimes were incapable of a regulated resolution of political conflicts, belligerently oriented towards foreign expansionism.

2. *The absence of stable organs of decision-making or a bureaucratic movement structure.* Fascist organizational work concentrated on propaganda to mobilize the base and foster aggressiveness. The polycratic rule within fascist movements, marked by constant rivalries, did not, however, prevent a strong attachment to the movement among the core membership. The integrative principles of *Bund* (Schmalenbach 1922: 35–105) meant that their entire lives increasingly took place within the organizational life of the movement. The largely informal but effective organizational structure formed a new type of political entity as social movement, which integrated the whole person with all aspects of his/her existence.

   Fascist movements were characterized by the nonformalized, highly personalist organizational form of communion, combined with a quasi-military organization of the masses. The initiation process, isolation from the outside world, uniforms, lists of regulations, systems of privileges and penalties, informal control by comrades, pressures to conform, and use of specialized jargon all created an informal normative code alongside official instructions, which acted as a second, disciplinary sublife. The propensity for violence and the emotional and romanticized ideal of camaraderie were not in conflict, but mutually reinforced each other.

   The high proportion of paramilitaries within fascist movements – half of all fascists in Germany and Italy, for example, and a good deal more in Romania – almost inevitably led to tensions between the paramilitary lifestyle and cult of violence and the strategy for taking power through parliamentary elections. This created polycratic power relations and inner instability, for which fascisms had to compensate with the figure of the charismatic leader, increased militarization and hierarchy, the redemptive promise of quick success, perpetual momentum, and violent activism.

   The fascist movements were thus marked by two permanent and paradoxical pairs of tensions: First, the tension between the centrifugal force of polycracy and the significance of the charismatic leader, which had no regulated relationship with each other and required continual renegotiation. Second, there was the tension between the increasingly routine nature and perpetuation of violent acts and the propagandistic trumpeting of their extraordinary nature. In order to balance this tension, fascist movements were virtually obliged to radicalize their violence constantly.

3. *Affinity between the "leader principle" and the movement's structures.* In contrast to the compromise politician, the charismatic leader was eminently suited to embodying the movement's faith in the future. The emotionalization and aestheticization of politics was accompanied by the ornamentalization of the masses and the closed crowd, as well as a sacralized glorification of violence. In many respects, fascist movements assumed the character not of a "political religion" but of a form of sacralized politics (Gentile 1996). The constant use of religious terms such as sacrifice, faith, resurrection, or spirit was directed against the alleged moral decay of a society branded as hedonistic, skeptical, and rationalist. A mystical certainty of salvation and victory and repeated reminders of the necessity of struggle characterized the sacralization of fascist politics. This attitude of redemption by ruthless combat, as well as proclamations of immortality and the impending advent of a destined everlasting dominion, constituted two sides of the same sacralized mode of politics.

   In fascism, the figures of the uncanny, the sublime, and the adventurous mingled with a leader/follower relationship that has been characterized as a "paradox of mutual subordination" (Gumbrecht 1998: 383–389). While the leader had to embody the collective whence he emerged, he also remained lofty and isolated from the masses. His propagandistically polished solitude became a condition of his political charisma. The leader existed between the poles of his followers' trust and affirmation and elevation above the mass. Paradoxically, the leader had an at once rigid and loose power relationship with his adherents, since his charisma proved itself only in interaction with, and in the faith and acknowledgment of, his followers. The opportunity for charismatic rule and the charismatic formation of community were rooted in the connection between mass body and individual heroism (Gumbrecht 1998). Fascists presented and staged themselves as "totalitarian democrats," they combined populism and hierarchy.

4. *An asserted monopoly on male youth and a self-image as the "organized will of youth" against the "gerontocratic" and "effeminate" democracies.* This propagandistic thrust, which the generational conflict in postwar societies intensified and stylized, was effectively underlined by the fact that fascist parties could claim the lowest average age and the largest percentage of male members of all parties of their day. Fascist propaganda associated the elements of maleness and youth with dynamism, energy, and future. The cult of male youth underlined the fascist claim to represent a new, fresh force, an awakening, and an avant-garde. Like palingenetic nationalism and the charismatic cult of the leader, youthfulness was strongly aestheticized in fascism and, like integral nationalism, assumed a compensatory function that consisted of papering over the tensions and conflicts within the socially heterogeneous fascist movements.

5. *Fascist movements assumed an eclectic, vague, and sacral political stance marked by an emphasis on nation and race.* Fascism manifested itself not in a unified ideology graspable in terms of the history of ideas, but far more in the historical protagonists' bodily behavioral routines, collective interpretive models, symbols, and subjective assignments of meaning, which were in turn anchored in their actions. Fascism focused on the "political field" (Bourdieu) in which what counted were power struggles, affects, and emotions as well as strategic aims, while its implementation in the "intellectual field," where what counted were coherent ideologies, doctrines, and ideas, remained secondary (Breuer & Bach 2010).

A key element of fascist meaning systems was racism and an extreme, palingenetic and integral nationalism, which fostered chiliastic attitudes. The masculine, military, and hierarchical image of a community marked by fanatical anticommunism and racism as well as (male) homosocial sociability manifested itself in fascism's radical nationalism, which was rehearsed practically in daily marches and funeral ceremonies, and cemented by symbols from flags to uniforms. The reference to violence and the will, to military tradition, the army, and the comradely community belonged to this circle of organic, integral nationalism, whose obsession with purification and uniformity constructed a clear image of the enemy both within and outside the nation.

This connects to the racism of all fascist movements, which made "ethnic cleansing" a main objective against the "inferior" races. Racism was explicitly installed as a countermodel to class-based social hierarchy, and expressed itself often in anti-Semitism, which permeated not just the Nazi movement, but also Romanian fascism under Zelea Codreanu, Hungarian fascism under Ferenc Szálasi, the Croatian Ustasha under Ante Pavelić, and (to

a lesser degree) Italian fascism. Although a convincing integration of racism, ethnic cleansing, and genocide remains a desideratum in theories of fascism, it has become unmistakably apparent in recent years that Italian fascism also had racist and anti-Semitic traits and in this respect differed from Nazism not structurally, but only as a matter of degree.

CONCLUSION

Fascism may be understood as a form of political and social practice that articulated itself in the symbols, rituals, and world-views of a racist and "ethnically" homogeneous society (Paxton 2004). Nationalist militarists organized in mass organizations and allied with traditional elites enforced the fascist cult of unity and purity, community and will.

Fascist street politics successfully occupy the newly vacant field of political relationships in historical situations of a profound crisis of democracy, in which the legitimacy of political parties, government, and the state were increasingly tenuous. In such situations fascists transformed previously loose contacts with traditional power elites into alliances. Because alliances with traditional elites did not succeed everywhere, many European fascisms failed to develop beyond the movement phase.

Fascism was a type of social movement that adopted a radical opposition to the parliamentary system and the socialist labor movement, not least in violent public propaganda. In their political style and techniques for capturing power, fascists coupled repression with acclamation.

Fascism underwent changes, and needs to be (re)defined according to its founding, movement, implementation, regime, and radicalization phases (Paxton 2004; Schieder 2008: 7–28). Nonetheless, strong similarities between the fascists existed in ideologemes, propaganda forms, organizational structures, militarism, and the practice of violence, particularly in the movement phase (Kershaw 1994).

Fascism was a political paradox because it combined populist mass enthusiasm with civil subordination, order with destruction, conservative stability with dynamic, youthful mobility, and fanaticism with opportunism. The rejection of liberal democratic society and socialist movements alike was expressed in the massive use of violence to "purify" the nation, with the ultimate aim of foreign expansionism. Fascism's radicalness was fostered by a structure of rule stabilized by charismatic leadership, permanent propagandist mobilization, and a shared attitude toward life (Broszat 1970, 1983). While the capacity for open discussion and compromise was limited among communists by ideological dogmatism, among fascists it was the intransigent lifestyle and cult of the will that hampered these mechanisms. What united fascisms was above all a certain political practice, which made use of an aestheticized cult of the will and of violence. This expressive side of fascist cultural practices influenced its ideological side. Both were tightly intertwined and mutually influential.

SEE ALSO: Charisma; Culture and social movements; Nationalist movements; Nazi movement (Germany); Racist social movements; Right-wing movements; Strain and breakdown theories; Violence and social movements.

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