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# Fascism

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# Fascism

An investigation into the semantic value of “fascism” immediately presents the paradox of a term that confronts us, on the one hand, with connotative clarity—everybody instinctively understands that it means something bad—and, on the other, with a bewildering excess of meanings. Its polysemy is an embarrassment for historical semantics, which strives to contain and order its content, as it is for the practitioners of *Begriffsgeschichte*, who attempt to register its variations from a core meaning that “fascism” does not have. The entry “Faschismus” in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* is not only brief but largely summarizes the views that its author, Ernst Nolte, had contentiously sustained in *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche* (1963).<sup>1</sup> For Nolte, the meta-political phenomenon that the term “Fascism” subsumed pointed to a European movement of anti-modern reaction against Marxism which “seeks to destroy the enemy by the evolvment of a radically opposed yet related ideology and by the use of almost identical and yet typically modified methods, always, however, within the unyielding framework of national self-assertion and autonomy.”<sup>2</sup> “Fascism’s” semantic value of reactionary and authoritarian political praxis, as distinct from traditional forms of conservatism, lies in its unavoidable link with Italian Fascism (which gave it the name), its historical unfolding, and the history of its interpretations by various historical agents. But “fascism” is bewildering for the philologist, too, as its etymology does not contain its semantic exuberance. It comes from “fascio” (“bundle”), figuratively used since the 1870s as the name of “group,” “association,” “union,” initially of labor unions, but also of temporary political alliances (Mussolini used it in this sense in both 1914 and 1919) as well as of cultural groups. The symbolic association with the Roman *fasces lictoriae*—often mistakenly taken as its etymological origin—came later (and Mussolini’s *fascio* was not even the first one to adopt it). The adjective “fascista” simply meant “membership to” or “pertaining to” a “fascio,” and its use was not exclusive to Mussolini’s *Fasci italiani di combattimento* before 1921.

An analysis of the heuristic affordances of the signifier “fascism”—i.e., what it means, what it is called to signify, the cognitive legitimacy of its use as heuristic category—must therefore begin from a history of its meanings. What “fascism” means is, in fact, the history of the processes and events that consolidated in the common encyclopedia the denotative and connotative markers that different historical actors (Mussolini, other Fascist leaders, transwar antifascist activists and thinkers of different political leanings, postwar historians and political theorists,

journalists, etc.) invested in the cultural unit "fascism" in different historical circumstances and for different purposes.

The primary denotative marker of "fascismo," a term Mussolini first used in May 1919 and utilized at first only sporadically, was a deictic (or indexical) reference to what the movement did and what it claimed its actions meant. Its connotations were initially extremely volatile and contradictory: Fascism was "socialist," "democratic," "republican," "anti-clerical," "anti-communist" and "nationalist" in 1919; in 1921 it became "anti-democratic" but also the only answer to the "hypertrophic democratic demands" of the Italian masses, "anti-liberal" but liberalistic in its economic orientation, "monarchical," and the only defender of the Catholic traditions in Italy; it continued to claim its revolutionary ambitions in 1922, but collaborated in a coalition government with traditional conservatives and moderate centrists; only "anti-communism" and beliefs in "regenerative violence" against its enemies were constant.

After 30 October 1922, the day Mussolini received the mandate of prime minister from the King Victor Emmanuel III in a sort of coup d'état masqueraded as a flamboyant revolutionary upheaval, Mussolini's semiotic labor on "fascism" intensified. The term "fascism" as proper name of the regime was syntactically and semantically used as coextensive with "government," "state," and "nation." Fascism was conceived by its leaders as the purest institutional expression of a "nation" whose interests and full blossoming it alone could guarantee through government. Fascist leaders stressed that, as the State, "fascism" had the connotations of "totalitarian," insofar as it aimed to transform, coercively and suavisely, every aspect of the life of Italians in order to help them achieve full development as a nation; "imperial" (1936-1940), as the possession of an empire was economically indispensable to support the nation and culturally beneficial to experience the natural hierarchy of races and to restore the splendor of the Roman Empire; and "racist" (1938-1945), as Italians, within the larger racial group of the Aryans, were destined to rule over all other underdeveloped races. As political ideal and praxis, "fascism" was also "universal" (1930-1934) as particular instantiation of a meta-historical law common to all nations in the world to organize into "nation-states." Finally, "fascism" was authentically "revolutionary" (in opposition to socialism and communism, which denied the ontological axiom of the nation in the name of internationalism) because it intended to subvert the system of liberalism, founded upon representative mediation, in order to impose a new regime that was established upon an unmediated relation between state and people through

rituals of communion with the *duce* and through the participation of all in Fascism (at school, in sports, at work, within the family, etc.).

In the texts of contemporary antifascist commentators, the meanings of “fascism” were not only polemically opposed to the semantic ideology of the regime (sketched above) but had the revelatory function of disclosing its true nature and thus facilitating the struggle against it. The antagonistic definitions of “fascism,” which would affect the denotative and connotative markers of the term in the postwar period, heavily depended on the political orientation of the critics. For conservative liberals (“liberal” is here used in its European sense), “fascism” was an “aberration,” a “disease,” a “perversion” of the liberal ideals of representative institutions, free-market, and individuals’ liberties, caused by the political immaturity of Italy (Benedetto Croce), or by the lingering effects of the First World War (Mario Missiroli), or as direct effect of the Bolshevik Revolution (Karl Popper, Friedrich August von Hayek). For progressive liberals, Fascism was a totalitarian deviation produced by nationalism, which recruited the dissatisfied middle classes and was financially supported by great industrialists (Piero Gobetti, Gaetano Salvemini). For Marxists, Fascism was a counterrevolutionary reaction of the capitalist classes to the revolutionary movements that spurred in Europe in the aftermath of World War I and incited by the Russian Revolution. Within the camp of Marxist interpretations of Fascism, some saw it as an inevitable phase of monopoly capital (the mechanistic interpretation of Stalin’s controlled Comintern), while others saw it as ensuing from alliances between industrialists, landowners, and a petty bourgeoisie left in disarray by the First World War, but exercising power not just through totalitarian violence, but cultural hegemony as well (Antonio Gramsci).

It was among Marxist thinkers that the first genericization of “fascism” occurred already in the early 1920s. It operated mainly metonymically and comparatively to highlight similar socio-economic ontogenesis of different forms of reactionary authoritarianisms that spurred in the interwar period. The usage was inconsistent, and it is not rare to find in their writings “fascism,” “nazism,” “authoritarianism,” “totalitarianism,” “caesarism,” “revolutionary conservatism,” etc. used interchangeably as synonyms. Most importantly, apart from for the Comintern adherents, generic fascism was not really the name of a new political ideal type.

The second genericization of the term occurred in the postwar period and has operated since the 1960s as a metahistorical category that is synecdochically predicated as an ideal type for right-wing regimes, movements, or ideologies beyond the context of Mussolini’s Italy—to the extent that Italian Fascism is only one

among many others of its instantiations (tokens), and often not even the most representative one, as most definitions of the “fascist minimum” were modeled upon German Nazism. As distinct from the first genericization, most proponents of the “fascist minimum” (Stanley Payne, Roger Griffin, Walter Laqueur, Roger Eatwell) intended to make of “fascism” a political ideal type like “democracy,” “socialism,” “communism,” etc. and to sever its association with capitalism and with the institutions of liberal democracy.

After the Second World War, “fascism” has been loosely mobilized in political propaganda and popular culture as a scare-word to attack and criticize different forms of perceived authoritarian resurgences. Following the Soviet Union’s terminology of the “Great Patriotic War Against Fascism” (*Velikaya Otechestvennaya voyna protiv fashizma*), orthodox Marxists embraced it to rail against any form of perceived reaction, from neo-Nazis to NATO. But the term “fascism” was also mobilized as a critique of Leninism–Stalinism (“red fascism”) by authors like Bruno Rizzi, Wilhem Reich, Franz Borkenau, and Otto Rühle in the aftermath of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. Activists used it to criticize political and police attempts to curb the student, anti-imperialist, and civil-right movements during the global 1968, from Berkeley to Tokyo, via Paris, Rome, and Berlin. Anti-establishment commentators used it to condemn the conservative chauvinism of Ronald Reagan’s cold-war strategies as well as the friendly dictatorial regimes of Pinochet, Saddam Hussein, George Papadopoulos, and Park Chung Hee. It has reawakened today in the slogans of both left and right to denounce Islamofascism and far-right Zionism, Brexiters’ isolationism and Trump’s MAGA supporters, Polish and Hungarian nationalisms and the *souverainisme* of Matteo Salvini’s Lega, Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement national, Jörg Meuthen’s Alternative für Deutschland, and the postfascism of Giorgia Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia. In the United States, appeals to fascism have engaged historians and public intellectuals in an effort to raise people’s awareness on the impending authoritarian derive during Donald Trump’s presidency.<sup>3</sup> Today, it looms behind the rumble of Russian tanks invading Ukraine to pursue Vladimir Putin’s imperialistic designs: while Putin claimed that the invasion of Ukraine was aimed at a “defascistization” and “denazification” of Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s government, Western commentators did not hesitate to use “fascism” to define Putin’s own autocratic regime.

This combination of semantic fuzziness and widespread use suggests that the best approach to assess the heuristic value of “fascism” as a political category should address its interpretive advantages and disadvantages. Indeed, historians and

political theorists employing the term as heuristic concept always intervene in selecting and privileging specific denotative and connotative markers of the signifier “fascism” to support their interpretations of a certain sociopolitical phenomenon. These interpretations, in turn, add to the already enlarged semantic sphere of the term. On the one hand, the usage of “fascism” as insult or scare-word for the large part of the postwar period presents a clear advantage for agitation and polemic. Indeed, antifascism is one of the strongest unifying values of left-wing liberalism since the end of the Second World War. On the other hand, the semantic markers of the cultural unit that is “fascism” are too unstable and fuzzy to offer analytical clarity. Palmiro Togliatti pointed that out already in 1926: “We have become accustomed to use the term ‘fascism’ in such a general meaning that it serves to designate the most diverse forms of bourgeois reactionary movements. This may be useful for agitation, but it undoubtedly harms the clarity and exact understanding of the facts.”<sup>4</sup>

Extensionally, “fascism” cannot avoid reference to the historical event that was Italian Fascism. Intensionally, the denotative and connotative markers at our disposal largely depend on the *political* orientation of historians and theorists making the selections. As such, the way we use “fascism” reveals more of our own political values than of our object of analysis.

The most visible characteristics of Italian Fascism and German Nazism depended on the historical situation of the transwar period: militarism, the celebration of violence, charismatic leadership, ultranationalism, racism, economic crisis, the juvenility of democratic values and institutions, etc. Abstracted from that historical context and distilled into a generic definition, the “fascism” of the scholarship of the fascist minimum is conceptualized as a threat to liberal democracy from *without*, as an invading pathogen, repurposing a metaphorical association, originally devised by Benedetto Croce and Friedrich Meinecke, of Fascism and Nazism as plagues or poisons perturbing the normal condition of market liberalism and democratic institutions. But the experience of Fascism and Nazism showed that these different movements expressing distinct ideologies originated *within* their own specific sociopolitical and cultural conditions and remained parasitical upon the pre-existing liberal institutions and a capitalist mode of economic organization. Fascism and Nazism were not invading pathogens, but intrinsic neoplastic diseases born within the liberal system. This is what Antonio Gramsci intended to stress when he discussed “democratic authoritarianism.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Theodor W. Adorno contended in 1959, “I consider the survival of National Socialism *within*

democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies *against* democracy.”<sup>6</sup>

Historical Fascism—like Nazism, etc.—was a specific expression of an authoritarian possibility that is inherent in the liberal political-economic order in particularly critical circumstances. Its particular essential characteristics resulted from the circumstances of the transwar period (that socio-political laboratory that was the long period of the “second thirty-year war,” 1914-1945) rather than being deductively retrievable from an “ideal type.” Paradoxically, appeals to generic “fascism,” which Ernst Nolte embraced in polemical reaction to the *Sonderweg* explanation of Nazism as an inherent result of Germany’s modern development, ideologically exculpates socio-political elites for their support of the violent counterrevolutionary reactions of Mussolini’s and Hitler’s regimes. Reinhart Koselleck’s *Kritik und Krise* (1959) similarly reduced Fascism and National Socialism, alongside Communism, to different versions of the same reaction against the *ancient régime* which originated in the Enlightenment: the “pathogenesis” or “destructive disease” they produced thus became the inevitable result of the utopian aspirations of these ideologies of bourgeois modernization.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, the signifier “fascism,” the meanings of which are inevitably linked to the historical experience of that period, stands as a placeholder for a potential authoritarian development inherent of the liberal order that remains still unnamed: it does not deny the people’s sovereignty, but rather ideologically reconfigures the system of political representation in terms of unmediatedness; it is supported by forms of identitarian ideology (which can be nationalistic, as it was in the transwar period, but also territorial, racial, religious, etc.); and receives the fundamental support of portions of the capitalist elites but also of the disaffected middle classes. “Revolutionary conservatism,” “democratic totalitarianism,” “populism,” and “democratic authoritarianism” are some alternative labels, which are heuristically more advantageous for both historical and contemporary political analysis, but perhaps do not yet have the performative felicity of “fascism” (and “antifascism”) to affectively mobilize political resistance.

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Tags: Italy / politics / semiotics

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Nolte, "Faschismus," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 2, ed. Werner Conze, Otto Brunner, and Reinhart Koselleck. Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1975, 329–336.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Nolte, *The Three Faces of Fascism*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965, 20–21.

<sup>3</sup> See a history of the debate in Udi Greenberg, "What Was The Fascism Debate?" *Dissent* 68, no. 3 (Summer 2021), online at: <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/what-was-the-fascism-debate> (05.01.2023).

<sup>4</sup> Palmiro Togliatti, *La politica nel pensiero e nell'azione*, ed. Michele Ciliberto and Giuseppe Vacca. Milano: Bompiani, 2014, 79.

<sup>5</sup> See Dylan Riley, *The Civic Foundation of Fascism in Europe: Italy, Spain, and Romania, 1870–1945*. London: Verso, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through the Past," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, translated from German by Henry W. Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, 89–103, here 90.

<sup>7</sup> On Koselleck's "medical-political" concepts and metaphors of the crisis of modernity as a "destructive Krankheit" in *Kritik und Krise*, see Gennaro Imbriano, "'Krise' und 'Pathogenese' in Reinhart Kosellecks Diagnose über die modern Welt," *Forum Interdisziplinäre Begriffsgeschichte* 2, no. 1 (2013), 38–48, here 47.