

On Fascism

Theory past, present and future

By Borjan Zic

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The term “Fascism” is one most commonly associated with the Italian government of the 1920s to the 1940s. It is also a word that is bandied about in casual discourse by those labeling their ideological opponents as “fascists.” Given the confusion that often surrounds the word and the ongoing conceptual relevance of Fascism today, it is important to examine Fascism in terms of its ideological principles and philosophical underpinnings. Fascism is an outgrowth of a political and psychological dichotomy which commonly occurs in various societies, namely that of modernity juxtaposed against traditionalism. In this case, modern societies are those which are based on a free, democratic order and advocate the values of individual liberty and equality. This modern political order is one that has developed in tandem with the progress of human civilization in the last five hundred years. On the other hand, a traditional political order is one that is usually authoritarian and hierarchical. In this sense, such political orders parallel the initial pattern of human organization that was necessary for survival at the dawn of history. Essentially, these initial forms of organization were based on tribes and clans, with every individual having a certain role and being ruled over by one leader. The traditional authoritarian state seeks to provide the same sort of order on a larger scale by protecting the individual and limiting his freedom in the hierarchy of the nation-state. Fascism is a more extreme version of a traditional, authoritarian government. In fact, as an ideology, Fascism can best be understood as a perverse manifestation of certain tendencies that are present within human psychology and human nature. Moreover, these tendencies are brought forth as a reaction against the values and society produced by a liberal, capitalist economic order and a democratic political system. In reacting against liberalism, Fascism is founded on opposing values, the most important of which are a romanticism of the past, dictatorial government and a glorification of violence.

First, the spread of liberal ideas and values, including free market principles, popular sovereignty, the innate dignity of man and bourgeois society engendered an intellectual rebellion towards the end of the nineteenth century, as many prominent thinkers criticized various aspects of what had by then become modern society. In the beginning of the twentieth century such criticisms grew more vocal and broader in scope. Gabriele d’Annunzio, Italy’s most well-known writer at the time, argued that the country should be ruled by one great leader instead of being a parliamentary democracy. Georges Sorel, a former French civil servant, wrote his *Reflections on Violence*, in which he urged the end of the contemporaneous capitalist economic system. One of the forerunners to Italian Fascism was the nationalism espoused by Enrico Corradini, who attacked democratic politics because it did not provide opportunity for heroism within the nation. Broader sentiments were pervasive as well. Liberal democracy and bourgeois life were seen as atomizing, leading to a feeling that life lacked purpose and greater meaning. Many people felt alienated by modern life, separated from both other individuals and traditional values

and institutions which had previously provided structure and purpose. It is important to note that both Mussolini and Hitler, the leaders of the two nations which eventually came to be based on a fascist political order, praised their experiences in World War I. Both felt that the war was an exhilarating time in their lives because they were united with other individuals in the service of a great cause, that of the nation. Once they returned to civilian life, they felt alienated and empty once more. Subsequently, as a result of postwar conditions, particularly the economic and political failings of democratic Italy and Weimar Germany, Mussolini and Hitler were able to cull a specific psychological reaction from the masses within their respective countries. The tough conditions in those nations were presented as evidence for the overall failure of liberalism, and the growing frustration and alienation among the public at large served as a catalyst for the acceptance of fascist ideology. Much like the values that Mussolini and Hitler praised during World War I, Fascism extolled the group instead of the individual and unity of human beings in the service of the nation in place of the principle of liberty. Thus, Fascism was a direct reaction against liberal civilization, and its ideological and political success was stimulated by a psychological need, latent in human nature, for a group-based and unified society which would guarantee the contentment and meaning in life that liberal democracy had been unable to provide.

In regards to the specific values and principles that underpin Fascist ideology, one of the most important is the act of romanticizing a mythic past. This phenomenon occurred in both Italy and Germany, whereby the nineteenth century versions of Nationalism and Romanticism were taken to their philosophical extremes. The Italian and German people were promised a return to the greatness that they had enjoyed in the distant past, which would offer an opportunity for the heroic acts and glory that liberalism denied. In Germany's case, Hitler praised a mythic and largely nonexistent ideal of a medieval German culture which was supposed to have provided a great, noble life, in contrast to the corruption and baseness of modern culture. These images of a false past achieved their greatest use as propaganda devices which filled new adherents of Fascist ideology with a mythic reverence for their nation and the form of government constituted by Fascism. The worship of a mythic and imaginary past, including such elements as tribalism, paganism, and primitive social organization, is an example of a direct ideological rebellion against the progress and modernity encapsulated in liberal civilization. Once again, intellectuals helped contribute to the spread of this regressive longing for earlier times. D'Annunzio and Maurice Maeterlinck, another famous writer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are examples of artists who had their romantic praise of the past co-opted by Fascist ideology. Underneath this longing for previous historical time periods lies the psychological human tendency toward nostalgia and a desire for simpler circumstances in the face of rapid change. Politically, Fascism drew its potency by exploiting this aspect of human psychology among those who were disenchanting and desperate, leading to the wholesale rejection of modern liberal ideology in favor of Fascist ideology.

The other two components which are found at the root of Fascism are a totalitarian political order and the prominence of violence as an end of human and state action. As examples of Fascist ideology put into practice, 1920s and 1930s Italy and Nazi Germany

indicate the degree of state authoritarianism inherent in Fascism. In these nations, the state made all of the important decisions within a hierarchical societal order, at the apex of which was the dictator of the country. Police forces, especially in Germany, kept close watch over the behavior of the citizenry. Furthermore, the state united and mobilized the people for some greater purpose, which for both Italy and Germany was the promotion of national glory through war and battle, a goal which was intertwined with and founded upon the special role granted to violence within Fascism. Both of these Fascist values are, once more, directly opposed to liberalism, since rule by the people is replaced by the rule of one leader, and the values of peace, humanitarianism and the dignity of human life are cast aside in favor of military might, aggression and violence. It can be said that a preference for the type of dictatorship advocated by Fascist ideology reflects an element of human nature which finds solace in the leadership of a strongman, much like the tribes of early history whose leaders achieved power through brute force. In addition, the ease with which those who accepted Fascist ideology also accepted its praise of violence in lieu of liberal humanitarianism suggests that Fascism was also able to gain prominence because it tapped into the human propensity for aggression and desire for power over others. Political examples of the Fascist emphasis on violence included Italy's bombardment of Corfu and invasion of Ethiopia, which served no other purpose but the exercise of military force for its own sake.

Therefore, while Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany may serve as the best practical examples with which to define Fascism, they both stemmed from a larger Fascist ideology. This ideology has its seeds in latent human psychological proclivities, suggesting that it is an idea which may recur throughout history. It is an ideology which opposes modern liberal civilization in all its forms, thereby basing itself upon principles which are in direct contradiction to those espoused by liberal democracies. While it may be important to question and criticize certain components of modern culture and liberal society, Fascist ideology and politics demonstrate the danger of undermining and foregoing liberal principles. The lives of Italians and Germans under Fascist regimes were not made better by an abandonment of liberalism, and the blind pursuit of military glory and violent conquest brought untold suffering to the rest of Europe, as well as the citizens of Germany and Italy themselves. The US triumph in World War II marked the end of Fascism as a viable political alternative, as well as the suppression of Fascist ideology. It was made clear that people would be more content living in a free society with the choice to find happiness on their own instead of being given a "purpose" in life by an oppressive government or dictator.

Unfortunately, Fascist ideology is currently coming back into prominence in the guise of Islamic fundamentalism. This set of beliefs has made the greatest inroads in the Arab Middle East, a region which is known for mass poverty and governments which ignore the plight of their citizens. Much like the anti-liberal sentiments at the start of the twentieth century, the spread of modernity and liberal values through globalization has led to a fundamentalist reaction among many in the Middle East. These fundamentalists fear the erosion of traditional Islamic values as a result of modernization, and the most committed of them seek to replace both current Arab governments and liberal democratic values with a political order based on their beliefs. While Islamic fundamentalism does

not preach national and interpersonal unity in the same way as traditional Fascist ideology, it does promote unity within Islam, in the sense that everyone is to be under the same belief system. The Fascist stress on violence finds its parallel in the terrorist groups that have developed from Islamic fundamentalism. Although terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda do give specific political reasons for their actions, their primary grievance is against liberal civilization in and of itself, and their ultimate goal is the destruction of that civilization through violence. Islamic terrorist groups draw their sustenance from those alienated and frustrated by the failure of modern Islamic countries, much as Mussolini and Hitler drew their strength from similar emotions in Italy and Germany. Osama Bin Laden's repeated urging of a return to a traditional and 'pure' form of Islam resembles the Fascist tendency to romanticize the past and is a parallel to Hitler's praise for German medievalism and 'racial purity.' Moreover, the mullahs in charge of Iran, including the Ayatollah Khomeini, constitute fundamentalist state dictators akin to Mussolini or Hitler. In addition, Al Qaeda is run under the leadership of Bin Laden and his lieutenants, thereby constituting a hierarchical, Fascist form of organization within a fundamentalist terrorist group. Modernity's response to the fundamentalist threat must be firm in order to be effective. Liberal civilization has to continue defending itself, a stance which necessitates destroying any nascent future Taliban-like regimes, eliminating terrorists, and seeking to spread liberal values as a possible means with which to undermine Fundamentalist teachings. In this way, Liberalism will triumph over the new variant of Fascist ideology just as it did over the old.