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The Rise and Fall of Fascism

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Fascism was probably the most important political ideology created during the 20th century. In the inter-war period it dominated half of Europe and threatened to overwhelm the other half. It also influenced many countries across the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and South Africa. In Asia, for example, its influence was probably strongest on the Chinese Kuomintang, Japanese militarists and Hindu nationalists. My book *Fascists* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) is based on research on fascists where they were strongest, in six European countries -- Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania and Spain. In the book I ask the question, why did fascism rise to such prominence? And I answer it looking at the men and women who became fascists: who were they, what did they believe in, and how did they act?

There are two main schools of interpretation among scholars as to the rise of fascism. An idealist school has focused on fascists' beliefs and doctrines, emphasizing their nationalist values. Most recently, some of these scholars have termed fascism a form of "political religion".¹ A more materialist school has focused on fascism's supposed lower-middle class or middle class (petit bourgeois or bourgeois) base and the supposed way in which fascism was used to save capitalism when it was in difficulties. The debates between them constitute yet another replay of ongoing polemics between idealism and materialism in the social sciences.

Both nationalism and class were important in fascism. But my own approach is broader. In my work I identify four "sources of social power" in societies -- ideological, economic, military and political.² Class theorists elevate economic power relations in their explanations, nationalist theorists emphasize ideological power. Yet all four sources of social power are needed to explain fascism. To attain their goals, all social movements wield combinations of control over ultimate meaning systems (ideology), control over means of production (economic), control over organized physical violence (military) and control over centralized, territorial institutions of regulation (political). Fascism involved them all. Fascism also arose as a response to contemporary crises concerning all four sources. My approach thus adds more military and political causes of fascism than is conventional -- while trying not to neglect the economy and ideology either.

¹ Eg Gentile, Griffin.

² My general theory is presented in the introductory chapters of the two published volumes of my history of power in society (Mann, 1986, Mann 1993).

I define classical inter-war fascism as **the pursuit of a transcendent and cleansing nation-statism through paramilitarism**. This definition contains four main elements, spanning all the sources of social power.

(1) **Cleansing nationalism**. Ideologically, fascists wanted an “organic” or “integral” nation. Fascists could not tolerate diversity, saying this subverted the unity and “purity” of the nation. The “threat” posed by enemies within and outside to national unity was the source of fascism’s aggression. Racially-tinged fascism, like Nazism, proved even more extreme. Other ethnic or racial identities cannot be “un-learned” – only physical removal can eliminate them from the nation. We have become distressingly familiar again with “ethnic cleansing”, though fascists also forcibly cleansed political enemies like socialists and communists.

(2) **Statism**. Politically, fascists worshiped state power, which they saw as “the bearer of a moral project”, capable of achieving economic, social and moral development through corporatism and authoritarianism³. Since the nation is organic, its state must be authoritarian, with a singular, cohesive will expressed by a party elite adhering to the “leadership principle”. This is fascist “totalitarianism”.

(3) **Transcendence (imperfect)**. This nation-statism could “transcend” social conflict. Fascists rejected conservative notions that the existing social order is harmonious; they rejected liberal and social democratic notions that the conflict of interest-groups is normal to society; and they rejected socialist notions that harmony could be reached by overthrowing capitalism. Fascists originated from the political right, centre and left, and they attacked both capital and labour. They would “knock both their heads together”. Fascist economic programs were consistent with this. Private interests would be subordinated to national interest, planning and social welfare would be imposed from above, and interest groups would be brought into the state in syndicalist or corporatist institutions.

Yet transcendence was never accomplished. In practice, once in power, fascists leaned toward capitalism and made deals with old regimes. Fascists ultimately lacked interest in capitalism and class. Nation and state comprised their centre of gravity, not class. This brought them into conflict with the left more than the right since Marxists, not conservatives, were internationalists. Fascists tended to attack not capitalism *per se* but particular kinds of capitalism – finance, foreign or Jewish capitalism. In Romania and Hungary, where these forms of capitalism dominated, fascism had a distinctly anti-capitalist and proletarian tone, but other fascist movements were more pro-capitalist. When fascists seized power, they encountered a special problem. Though they hoped to subordinate capitalists to their own goals, as authoritarians they believed in managerial powers yet lacked the skills to run industry themselves. So they compromised with capitalists -- transcendence imperfect. Yet fascist “radicals” remained

³The notion that the 20th century saw the rise and fall the state as the bearer of a moral project is the main theme of Perez-Diaz (1993).

committed to transcendence, generating enduring conflict between them and “opportunists”.⁴

(4) **Paramilitarism.** Military power dominated fascist organization. Paramilitaries were seen as “popular”, welling-up spontaneously from below. Their violence would “knock heads together”. No fascist movement was simply a political party – it was always uniformed, marching, armed and dangerous. Paramilitarism caged fascists rather like an army does soldiers, it also coerced their opponents, and it won the respect of many bystanders, for fascists could impose order and end class conflict through violence. Paramilitarism was not strong enough to overcome regular armies. Only when fascists neutralized armies by attracting their soldiers could they seize power.

This combination made fascists “revolutionary”, though not in conventional left-right terms. They were “revolutionaries of the right”, for they had their own distinct notion of revolution, focusing on the nation-state, not on capitalism or classes.

My explanation of fascism’s rise across inter-war Europe has two parts. The first concerns the forward surge into power of a broader family of authoritarian rightists. The second was the rise of fascism within that family. The rightist authoritarian surge was unexpected. World War I had been won by democratic Europe and America, while socialists had already captured the Russian Empire. In Eastern and Central Europe the post-war treaties established supposedly democratizing regimes. But soon, dictatorships of the right began to seize power. Why?

Let us first look at a map of Europe. Note that almost all the regimes of east, central and southern Europe went authoritarian, while those of northwestern Europe remained liberal democratic. That simplifies my question into -- why did only one geographic region go authoritarian, with parts of this region later going fascist?

The surge in authoritarian rightism occurred mainly in response to economic, military, political and ideological crises brought on or intensified by World War I. Before the War Europe was slowly moving toward democracy and fascists formed only small cliques of intellectuals. Without the War and the crises it brought, there would have been no authoritarian surge and fascism would have been a footnote in world history. There would have been no Hitler regime, no Holocaust, and probably no Second World War either. So these crises are extremely important in explaining fascism.

(1) **Economic** crisis came at War’s end and then again as the Great Depression struck in 1929. In between, in the mid 1920s, came lesser inflation crises, while inter-war economies were never very buoyant. Since governments were now expected to have economic policies to ameliorate hardship, the condition of the economy kept delegitimizing governments. But all countries suffered economically. In fact the Great Depression bit deepest in the United States and Britain,

⁴ Fascist “betrayal” of their values is stressed by class theorists and by others doubting the sincerity or consistency of fascists (eg Paxton, 1994, 1996). But many writers on Nazism have noted the way its radicalism was displaced from class to ethnic/ racial enemies.

and they stayed liberal democratic. Nor did rightist coups tend to occur during economic crisis. They occurred throughout the inter-war period, amid good economic times and bad. True, coups occurred more often in the more backward countries. I will explain this by the fact that the most developed economies (except for Germany) had already generated liberal democracy before World War I. But fascism cannot be explained in a similar way, since it did not rise in just backward countries. The countries with the biggest fascist movements were at all levels of economic development – from advanced Germany, through Austria, Italy, Hungary and backward Romania. Economic crises weakened all governments of the period, but they cannot directly explain fascism.

But we must also consider another aspect of economic power relations – the question of class struggle, as stressed by materialist theories. Was this a way for the capitalist class to keep its economic power? But there was no general threat to capitalist property relations across Europe after about 1921. The Bolshevik Revolution had been followed only by failed, repressed revolutions elsewhere (in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy and Spain). The revolutionary left was defeated everywhere. Most of the rightist surge occurred **after** serious revolutionary threat from below had died away. However, it is true that some centre-left governments and the Great Depression were squeezing capitalist profits. Perhaps capitalists used coups to force labour to bear more of the costs. But the trouble with this argument is that political elites in the northwest were devising much better strategies of profit-maximization than repression. They were devising corporate liberalism in the US of the New Deal. They were devising the first stages of social democratic compromise in Scandinavia. These protected the survival and profitability of capitalism, while allowing some improvements to labour. Remember that the primary goal of the northwest's leading economist, Keynes, was to preserve capitalism by boosting demand and prosperity among the population as a whole. Even in democracies where Keynes was ignored – as in his homeland, Britain – the dispute split the left party and allowed conservatives to continue ruling. Authoritarian rightism was not the most rational strategy for increasing capitalist profits.

So why did some of the capitalist class become so hyper-sensitive to opposition from the left that they reached for the authoritarian gun when neither property nor profits were much threatened? One version of the “security dilemma” stressed by recent political scientists suggests that people may over-react to a threat which is “life-threatening” even if the threat has a low probability of being realized..The chance of a Bolshevik Revolution occurring in Germany after 1922 might be low, but German capitalists might over-react to leftists on the principle “better safe than sorry”.

Indeed, agrarian landlords were more vulnerable. Land reform was generally considered desirable across Europe, and landlords felt that their control over old regime states might not last much longer. They still controlled many officer corps and ministries of the interior, so why not guarantee their property rights with military coups? Officer corps and churches reasoned similarly. Military caste autonomy was threatened by demands for civilian control over the military by liberals and the left. Their budgets were threatened. They (and others) also had geopolitical fears. Ethnic, religious and political minorities were accused of being linked to foreign Powers. Leftists were seen as (Russian) “Bolsheviks”, Jews as “Judeo-Bolsheviks”; foreign, finance and Jewish capital and liberal separatists etc. were all seen as both domestic and

foreign threats. Churches feared liberals and socialists threatening church property and wealth and contesting their control over education, marriage and other social practices. Churches also exercised ideological power over the community of the faithful, especially in more rural areas.

Combined, these fears worsened the overall sense of threat. As threats become more diffuse, they seem more all-enveloping. Goals were displaced away from a narrow instrumental rationality calculating about economic interest to a broader “value-rationality” in the sense of Max Weber’s use of the term. Order, safety, security, hierarchy, the sacred rather than the secular, national rather than class interest become the primary slogans, while the enemy became the antithesis of all these values, unworthy of democratic or (in extreme cases) of humane treatment. So though class struggle was important in the surge of the authoritarian rightist family, so were more political and military fears. Fear led rightists into dangerous areas which first threatened their “enemies” and later threatened their own survival.

(2) **Military** crisis. The war brought defeat and territorial losses for some and demobilization, dislocation and a less stable geopolitical environment for all. Neutral countries and combatant countries which had experienced no territorial changes experienced least dislocation, and this included most of the countries of the northwest. The military crisis was more severe in the centre and east of the continent, which contained most of the defeated Powers. It endured longer where “revisionists” were still challenging the peace treaties, demanding that their “lost territories” be restored. Embittered refugees and nationalists kept agitating and even fighting in Austria, Germany and Hungary. Even in victorious Italy, there were demands for the extra territories Italians believed they had been promised on joining the Entente side in 1916. But this does not apply to Romania, which had gained many territories. But military power came to matter in a second way: all the big fascist movements arose out of paramilitaries formed among veterans at the end of World War I, mostly for revisionist purposes. Some of them even fought in the disputed territories. Their militarism also became more principled, moving them toward fascism. In 1918 military power was not fully demobilized, and this will be an important part of my explanation of the rise of fascism.

(3) **Ideological** crisis. Central, eastern and southern conservatives saw modernity as desirable but dangerous, liberalism as corrupt or disorderly, socialism as chaos, and secularism as threatening moral absolutes. Civilization needed rescuing before modernization could proceed further. This could be done by a top-down populist nationalism, by state-led economic development, and by the military ideals of order and hierarchy. These values began to circulate especially among middle class youth in high schools, universities and military academies, and in conservative Christian churches. But ideologies became seriously destabilizing only where the other crises were severe. Ideology was more a response to than a cause of crisis.

(4) **Political** crises offer the best explanation. They were severe only in one half of Europe. The northwest of the continent already had liberal regimes well before 1914, and these regimes were able to confront all three crises mentioned above with changes of government leaving unchanged their basic liberal constitutions. Governments weakened by crises – for example, by the Great

Depression -- were simply voted out of office, and another party formed a new government. Yet the centre, east and south of the continent was only half-way through a process of accelerated democratization begun in 1918. This region still had dual states which were part parliamentary, part authoritarian. Since old regime conservatives usually controlled the executive part of the state, including its military and police institutions, they could respond to crises with coups or half-coups – declaring martial law, limiting elections, banning some parties etc. These were the real political crises. Yet some conservatives also began to feel that in the modern world repression was no longer enough. They believed they had to also undercut democracy with alternative ways of mobilizing the masses. They began to form top-down mass-mobilizing parties. This yielded authoritarian rightist regimes, but not specifically fascist ones.

So one half of the most developed continent of the world saw a conservative political offensive by the propertied classes, led by an old regime wielding some state repression while sponsoring mass political parties with nationalist and statist ideologies. They went authoritarian rightist mainly for reasons of political power, but using military power as their main means. They had the option of mounting military coups and militarized demonstrations and riots, whereas the more democratic regimes of northwest Europe did not.

I reach the second part of my explanation, explaining fascists. Fascists did not grow large in the northwest, where crises were not responded to by dual states and panicking old regimes. Fascists were nurtured among the authoritarian rightists and continued to have close family relations with them. As in all families, their relationships could involve love or hatred. Thus the second part of my explanation must account for where and when fascists surged.

I have emphasized that fascists were distinctive. Neither their organization nor their values allowed them to be simply a vehicle for class interests. They were nobody's dupes. They were more "bottom-up" than were other authoritarians. Apart from Italy, where they came quickly into power, electioneering was important to fascists, and they became pioneers in techniques of mobilizing militants and manipulating voters. Unlike the more conservative authoritarian rightists, fascists were not already in power, so they could not use the power of the state to manipulate and fix elections (until after they came to power). Though fascists did not believe in democracy, it was vital to their success.

But electioneering sat alongside a second form of "popular" struggle, by volunteer paramilitaries engaged in street-fighting. This was deliberately "provocative", intended to produce a violent reaction from political enemies, so that fascists could declare their own violence to be "self-defence". Violence also worked, since fascist paramilitarism gave them superiority in street warfare. They could bring "order" to the streets, proving they could end social chaos. Paramilitaries could finally launch coups -- provided the army was immobilized by fascist sympathies.

Paramilitarism also brought distinctive recruits to the movement. The first cohort of recruits, without whom fascism would never have got off the ground, consisted largely of young military veterans transmitting wartime values of comradeship, hierarchy and violence into a peacetime

political movement. Then the values were transmitted to two further generations of recruits, composed mainly of ex-soldiers, cadets, students, athletes and working class roughnecks. Fascists were gangs of young men for whom demonstrating, marching and brawling had a *machismo* attraction. Fascism's main strength was probably its attraction to young people, willing to give more of their time and energy than were activists in any other political movement. This militancy centred on the ability to cage young single men within comradely, hierarchical and violent "cages". Fascist parties and paramilitaries were almost "total institutions", providing an entire social and material life for recruits. Fascism benefitted from more general modern trends, liberating young males from family discipline, young females from much of the burden of childbirth, the growth of organized sports, and the growth of professions requiring more education, especially the profession of war. The Nazis won the German student elections each year from 1930 onwards – they won most converts among the best educated. These age-cohort effects were part of the growing cult of youth in the 20th century. Fascism was its first great political manifestation.

Fascism had other distinctive core constituencies of support as well. It resonated especially among embittered refugees, "threatened border" regions, state employees (including armed forces), state-owned or state-protected industries, and Churches which saw themselves as "the soul of the nation" or "the morality of the state" – like Romanian Orthodoxy or German Protestantism, but not German Catholicism. It is not surprising that nation-statism should appeal most to those with a close structural relationship to the nation or state.

Its relationship to class was more complex. It did not greatly attract the organized working class – except in Romania, where fascism actually created the most effective trade unions. It did not much appeal to persons from the middle or upper classes who were directly confronted by organized labour. Instead, fascism attracted those on the margins of such conflict, persons of all classes and various sectors, in smaller or newer industries and the service sector. These were the persons looking at class conflict from the outside, persons likely to cry "a plague on both your houses", impressed by fascist claims to transcend class conflict.

Yet patterns of class recruitment varied between countries. Italian fascism got most bourgeois and petit bourgeois recruits, Romanian fascism was disproportionately working class, while German recruitment (if we combine the party, the SA and the SS) drew equally from all classes. The threat from each working class movement was not correlated with fascist strength. Of my countries, the threat was probably greatest in Spain, where there was least fascism. The threat may have seemed substantial (though it had already peaked) in Italy; it was more apparent than real in Austria; Germany had a large but moderate labour movement; Romania and Hungary had negligible left movements by the time fascism loomed -- indeed fascism itself provided their main labour movements. We see once again that class was less central to fascism than nation-statism.

But the popularity of fascism also depended on the political strength and stability of old regime conservatism, which (more than liberal or social democracy) was its main rival. Only weakened and factionalized old regimes were undermined by fascist movements. United old regimes repressed or subordinated them (as in Spain), slightly weaker ones had to borrow much fascist

clothing to survive (as in Hungary and Romania). Much weaker ones enabled fascists to subvert them (as in Italy and Germany, and to a lesser extent Austria) . Fascists thrived on an already existing three-way electoral struggle, pitting the left against a liberal centre and conservatives moving rightward. Fascists could then swallow up part or all of the radical right while the centre was hollowed-out and the left repressed. That was how the fascists achieved electoral success.

Yet fully parliamentary regimes entrenched in the northwest of the continent survived all four crises with their institutions intact. There fascists did appear, but remained tiny minorities. Fascism occurred only where dual states were ruled by weakening “old regime” executives and vibrant but only half-institutionalized parliaments. Fascism resulted because an attempted process of rapid democratization occurred amid profound war-induced crises. Fascism perverted this process, giving its own distinctively statist and militarist version of “rule by the people”, the dominant political ideal of our time.

We are now in the 21st century. Is fascism dead, or are there fascists reviving amongst us? I defined fascism as the pursuit of a transcendent and cleansing nation-statism through paramilitarism. I stressed that fascism was a principled ideology offering plausible solutions to serious contemporary crises. For example, it contained a serious economic policy. I also stressed the influence and aftermath of World War I, when borders remained disputed, military veterans were forming paramilitaries, class conflict was quite strong, and the Great Depression followed. World War II had opposite effects -- no paramilitaries, few disputed borders, and revolution only in Asia. In the West the aftermath generated successful capitalism, stable democracy and the institutionalization of class conflict. In Eastern Europe it brought a seemingly stable state socialism, and in most of the world it brought decolonization and mild Third World socialism and nationalism. Fascism had brought world war and genocide. Its defeat brought a new world order which seemed to make fascist solutions irrelevant.

So fascism has recently appeared mainly as the exclamation “fascist!” -- a term of imprecise abuse hurled at people we do not like. Only a few crackpots and thugs have called themselves fascists or Nazis. From the 1970s in Europe, some neo-fascists and neo-Nazis did appear but remained insignificant, though offering good copy for journalists. “Populist” or “radical populist” parties of the right have recently seemed more threatening, for they have reached up to 10-25% of national votes. Parties such as Le Pen’s *Front National* and the Austrian Freedom Party of Haider⁵, are now a persistent feature of European politics. Yet they are full of contradictions. They denounce “the system” and “the establishment” but endorse democracy. They demand the state be tough on law, order and morality, but want the state off their backs. Some are neo-liberal, like Haider, who wants business deregulated and the civil service cut by two thirds. This is closer to the state-hating Republican right in the United States than state-worshipping fascism.

⁵ There are many more – the Italian Northern League and the National Alliance, the German Republikaner, the Flemish Volksunie and Vlaams Blok, the Danish DPP, the Norwegian FrP, the late Pim Fortuyn's anti-immigration List in the Netherlands etc.

They thrive on a single issue: recent immigration into Europe, which they connect to law and order, moral decline, unemployment, and housing “threats”. They say immigrants are incompatible with their own national culture and traditions, but have no general theory of race or culture, no aggression toward other nations abroad, and no paramilitaries.⁶ They seem stuck in electoral cycles, and they are not fascist.

Ex-Soviet Bloc countries might seem more fertile ground. They did attempt an absurdly rapid double transition to capitalism and democracy. But their regimes deny they are authoritarian, and they avoid fascism – which would prevent them from getting into the European Union or NATO, and which would dry up aid from the EU, the US and international financial institutions. European fascism is dead and probably buried.

Parts of the South of the world are more receptive. Many want the state to promote development. Ethno-nationalism directed at internal minorities assisted by a “homeland” state next door, is often reinforced by military aggression. Where states weaken and factionalize, paramilitaries emerge. It is tempting to label paramilitaries in the Congo or Sierra Leone, or the Tamil Tigers, as “fascist”. But they lack the principled breadth of fascism and have no macro economic programs. Leaders like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela who weave statism and populism into a development project are closer to socialism than fascism. The single fascist package of statism, cleansing nationalism and transcendent paramilitarism seems absent.

Fascism comes closest today in religious garb. Hitler and Mussolini assisted anti-imperialist rebels in India and the Middle East. Muslim and Hindu nationalists of the 1930s adapted fascist organization, emphasizing hierarchy, discipline, paramilitarism and segregation of male and female activists. Gowalkar, the leader of the largest Hindu paramilitary, the RSS, said of Hitler’s “purging” of the Jews “Race pride at its highest has been manifested here ... a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by”. Hindu nationalists emphasized *hindu rastra* (Hindu nation) and *Hindutva* (Hinduness), which they said the state must enforce. Since these quasi-fascists backed the losing side in World War II, they declined. Secular movements like “Indian (Congress) Socialism” and “Arab (Ba’athist) Socialism” dominated their countries afterwards. But when these in turn began to decay, religious movements revived, some tinged with fascism.

The Hindu Nationalist BJP party came to power in India in the 1980s. The main party is quite moderate, but not so the RSS and other paramilitaries. Militants demand a nation cleansed of Muslims and Christians, and a state enforcing *Hindutva*. Yet BJP leaders know that winning elections and forming coalition governments with other parties means restraining the militants. They also endorse neo-liberalism so are not very statist, and Hindu nationalism offers little role

⁶ “Skinheads” embarrass them, losing them votes. They do best where they can capture broader discontent with the traditional parties. But their problems mount with success, especially if they join coalition governments, nationally (as in Austria) or locally (as in Belgium), for they then receive more critical scrutiny, and the major system parties then make a come-back

for the state in secular matters. Though Hindu nationalism does have fascist tendencies, these seem unlikely to rule India.

The term “Islamic fascism” is now used by Americans and Israelis denouncing the Islamist *jihads* launched against them. *Jihadis* do seek an authoritarian state which will enforce a utopian Koranic ideal, and they are essentially paramilitary movements. Yet they are muddled on nationalism. They thrive off national liberation movements but denounce nationalism. Their long-term goal is a single Muslim caliphate, a kind of pan-nationalism, but this seems an unrealizable dream. Nor has Islamism had much of a role for the state except to enforce the sharia. The Taliban were ferocious on burqas and videos, but had no policies on the economy, health or education. Nor does Al Qaeda. Fascism was secular in its goals and means, but Islamism really is a political religion, offering a sacred, rather than a secular ideology. Is this “sacred fascism”? If so, it is very different from classic fascism.

Jihadis are also a response to American imperialism in the Middle East (and earlier of anti-Soviet imperialism). Since American pressure is increasing and becoming more militaristic, American legitimacy in the region is plummeting. This is likely to empower the *jihadis* and strengthen their pan-nationalist tendencies. Since socialism seems discredited there, genuine fascism might arise again. Look at Iraq today -- the aftermath of war, stalled capitalism, stalled democratization, numerous paramilitaries and foreign occupation. These might be the conditions for generating real fascism, though it would not call itself this. Of course, some Arabs reply that the American vision of a struggle between good and evil, to be won by naked American militarism is itself fascist. However, the rival name-calling reveals mainly that the term “fascism” remains a term of imprecise abuse.

Capitalism and war will continue to generate crises, while transitions to democracy remain difficult. But by now we should know that varied compromise mixtures of capitalism, socialism and democracy bring the best solutions to these problems. They can certainly prevent fascism re-emerging. But whether we human beings can learn from our past mistakes is unclear. I believe that in the 20th century fascism so discredited itself that no major movement will ever again call itself fascist, but some of the elements of fascism may well re-appear, under different names.

