**What is Fascism?**

By [Roger Eatwell](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/1916) | Published in [History Review](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/83)

In the first instalment of a two-part article, Roger Eatwell looks at rival definitions of a slippery word.

‘At the end of the twentieth century, fascism remains probably the vaguest of the major political terms’ (Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism*, 1914-45, p.3). Writing in the 1960s, Stuart Woolf - one of Britain’s leading experts on fascism argued – ‘Perhaps the word fascism should be banned, at least temporarily, from our political vocabulary’. Thirty years later, many would see little reason for changing this judgement. In spite of (perhaps because of) the publication of a vast number of works, there has been little agreement over a series of fundamental questions. In particular, there is little consensus about the basic defining characteristics of fascism.

One major problem relating to the definition stems from the fact that it is a word which has largely been used by opponents, rather than as a form of self-reference, outside Italy where the Fascist Movement was founded in 1919. At its worst it has degenerated into nothing more than a term of abuse, especially fro symbols of authority (like headteachers). The Nazis, for example, rarely referred to themselves as fascist. And the leader of the Spanish Falange, which in its early phase has been widely seen by historians as fascist, specifically rejected the label in 1934. It is true that there were some non-Italian self-styled fascists, like Sir Oswald Moseley’s British Union of Fascists, but these were the exceptions rather than the rule before 1945. And since the end of the Second World War virtually no one outside an alienated fringe has been willing to call themselves a fascist – though theItalian *Alleanza* *Nazionale*, which has recently made a notable electoral breakthrough, terms itself ‘post-fascist’.

Stanley Payne, a leading American historian, has argued that the term fascism, unlike many other key political concepts, has no inherent linguistic meaning (cf. democracy, which is derived from the Greek words *demo* and *kratos* meaning rule by the people). He argues that noting that the term comes from the Italian word *fascio* (*fasci* in the plural), which is best translated as league or nation in a political context, ‘cannot tell us much’. This could be challenged by arguing that the term *fascio* had been used by a variety of Italian groups of both left and right, before Benito Mussolini founded the *fasci di combattimento* in 1919 (which became the Fascist Party in 1921). It thus symbolised a need to transcend both left and right in order to forge a new social unity. The term also recalled the radical nationalism of the *fasci di azione rivoluzionaria*, which had been formed in 1914 to advocate Italy's entry into the First World War and which had provided a vehicle for many converts from the left to nationalism.

However, rather than expand on this argument at the outset – which points to the centrality of ideology in terms of defining fascism – I think that it is more helpful to begin with a survey of some of the key approaches which have been adopted to the study of fascism, particularly focusing on ones which have been related to the issue of definition. These can usefully be grouped under four main headings, though within each there are variations of basic approaches. Moreover, any brief breakdown of the vast literature on fascism is inevitably going to involve some omissions and blurred edges. Indeed, the following four approaches should not be seen a. totally exclusive: Marxists, for example, hold that fascism was essentially vacuous as an ideology (the first approach in my typology) and that it has produced major manifestations in a wide number of countries throughout the twentieth century (my fourth category).

The main point of this article is to illustrate the very widely differing interpretations which have been adopted, and to begin to offer some criticisms in order to set up a new definition that I will set out in Part Two, which will appear in the next issue of *History Review*.

**1 The Incoherence-Irrationality of Fascism**

The first interpretation holds that fascism lacked any clear ideological basis, other than a commitment to nihilistic violence. More commonly, it is claimed that 'fascisms' were so varied in practice, except in their opportunism, that it is impossible to construct any fundamental general definition. In the words of the British historian, A.J.P. Taylor, 'Everything about Fascism was a fraud... Fascist rule was corrupt, incompetent, empty; Mussolini... [was] without either ideas or aims'. The same author argued that Adolf Hitler was largely a pragmatist, pursuing traditional German foreign policy goals, notably expansion into Eastern Europe. *Mein Kampf* is seen on this approach as propagandist ramblings written while Hitler was languishing in gaol after the 1923 Munich putsch rather than as a blueprint for future action or a serious piece of political thought.

This damning view of Hitler’s writings is extended to all the main leaders. Indeed, fascism is seen as totally lacking any of the serious 'great texts’ (cf. Marx's *Das Kapital*, or Mill's *On Liberty*), beloved by academic historians of ideas. This has led a handful of commentators to the roots of fascist thinking in a variety of alleged intellectual precursors, for example the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (the high prophet of leadership, the power of the will and the need for an aesthetic form of politics in a world where God was dead), or the French political activist-thinker, Georges Sorel (who stressed the power of myths to mobilise mass action, initially calling for a working class general strike though he later the great myth). However, these thinkers usually have little in common with, each other, or with what are normally seen as the core elements of fascist movement and regimes. Sorel, for example, saw himself as a revolutionary socialist, while Nietzsche was not a nationalist – indeed, he mocked late nineteenth-century, German expansionism, and opposed the emerging force of anti-semitic politics. The upshot of this approach, therefore, tends to be to reinforce the image of Fascist incoherence.

Explaining the rise of fascism in terms of personal trauma – usually seen as resulting from the First World War, or in terms of the dangerous authoritarian personality' created by the strict upbringing which characterised Germany and elsewhere – further points to the essential irrationality of fascism. Mass society theory too with its focus on ‘mass man' experiencing alienation from society as a result of rapid social change caused by industrialisation and/or war, also tends to point in this direction. The clear implication of the these approaches is that fascism is not a political movement which is chosen through a rational preference for its programme: its appeal is more psychological, reflecting deeply sealed problems caused by the rise of social anomie, namely a sense of rootlessness and loss of moral values.

Local history approaches to the rise of fascism can also point towards how slippery a beast fascism was in terms of programmatic content. For instance, in the Po Valley area of Italy, the Fascist movement initially had a radical façade, criticising powerful parts of the Establishment, like the Chinch and Monarchy. But it quickly became more of a tool of the owning classes, especially landowners who feared the rise of the left after the sit-in strike wave and occupations of land during 1919-20. In southern Italy Fascism was largely a creation of the period after Mussolini's appointment as Prime Minister, and was based on opportunistic local elites pursuing a politics of self and local-interest which is often termed clientelism. On die other hand, in parts of Italy such as Brescia, Fascism remained more true to its radical origins. The same point about local differences applies to Germany: whilst Nazism usually sought allies on die right, it could at times co-operate with the left. Its programme before 1933 could also differ notably in some areas - even in terms of what is usually seen as its central ideological plank. In a major pioneering study of the town Thalburg, it was found that the Nazis hardly used anti-semitism during their rise, as Jews were locally popular.

Once more, the picture which emerges is of an opportunistic 'fascism', characterised by way of little, that is concrete - other than perhaps an addiction to violence among its activists. In a way,, this is a kind of anti-definition; certainly those who have adopted this first approach often define fascism as an 'anti-ideology'. However, this argument has come under increasing attack recently, for example in the important - though controversial - writings of die Israeli historian, Zeev Sternhell, who holds that a serious fascist ideology had clearly emerged by the First World war based on the formula 'nationalism + socialism -fascism'.

**2 Fascism as a Specific National Phenomenon**

The second approach focuses on the need to use a strongly national perspective when analysing fascism. This argument holds that there can be no question of a generic concept - because major differences existed between the two allegedly paradigmatic examples, Italian Fascism and Nazism - yet alone between its myriad other possible manifestations. The American historian Gilbert Allardyce has put this argument in its most extreme form, holding that the only major example of true 'fascism' was Italian *fascismo*.

One commonly stressed difference between Nazism and Fascism concerns antisemitism: by the mid 1930s, the Fascist Party had recruited a greater proportion of Jews into its ranks than any other social groups for which there are statistics. Italy's leading biographer of Mussolini, Renzo De Felice, even argues that Italian Fascism had its origins more on the left, whereas National Socialism grew out of the right. This differentiation helps explain why most commentators have seen fascism as anti-modern, though some have seen it as modernist: usually the former group focus on Germany, whereas die latter look more to Italy: Another common way of differentiating Fascism and Nazism relates to the claim that National Socialism was the only truly totalitarian 'fascist' regime: Italian Fascism, even after the banning of other parties by 1925, shared power in important ways with groups like the Church and Monarchy (which ultimately overthrew Mussolini with the army's backing). The last point applies even more forcefully to Francoisrn in Spain or the Salazar regime in Portugal, both of which lacked fascism's mass-mobilising party, and which were devoid of any significant challenge to traditional elites and their independent power structures.

These arguments are often replicated by those who focus more on support. Germany especially is seen as being characterised by a particular form of development. Sometimes this is seen in socio-political terms, for instance the impact of Lutheranism which is claimed to have made Protestants obedient towards the state. Another common approach stresses the way in which the pre-1914 volkisch movement reveals a German fascination with strong leaders, or die tendency to define citizenship interim of 'blood' and to demonise the Jews. More frequently, the focus is on a particular socio-economic development (*Sonderweg*), especially the claim that Germany's rapid industrialisation produced an authoritarian form of rural-business elite alliance and a small and pressured middle class, which did not allow for the emergence of a major liberal movement in the way that happened in countries like Britain.

Clearly, if national traits are pre-eminent, there can be no question of a generic definition of fascism. However, whilst the national case-study has undoubted strengths (especially underlining the need to avoid excessive generalisation and to be aware of context), as a methodology for studying fascism it contains a series of flaws. One concerns the way in which arguments based on national uniqueness are true by definition: every political phenomenon is in a sense different. Another problem can be seen by briefly considering the course of. Italian Fascism, which differed significantly in a variety of ways, both regionally and through time. Fascism in Italy began in the cities, but took off in the countryside (though it is impossible to make a neat distinction between the two). Its early 'movement' phase was characterised by radicalism, but this was followed by a more conservative 'regime' phase – only for fascism to return to its radical roots during the chaotic Salo Republic, which was created after Mussolini had been liberated by German commandos from his Italian captors in 1943. It seems strange to argue that fascism should not be used as a generic term because of national differences, when major differences can be found within Italian Fascism.

The crux of this second approach has to be the claim that the differences between 'fascisms' were greater than the similarities. If they were not, then clearly fascism can be seen as a trans-national phenomenon – and the real importance of this second approach is the need for sub-categories within fascism, especially differentiating between Nazism and Fascism (in the way that some historians differentiate between British and continental European socialism, the former being far less influenced by Marxism and rarely prone to violence).

**3 Fascism as a European-Epochal Phenomenon**

Most historians, like Payne, see fascism as essentially a European epochal movement. They are thus willing to identify fascist movements in. many countries, but fascism is not viewed as a significant feature of non-European political systems, and European fascism in the post-war era is seen as a fringe phenomenon. Again, this argument has both a political and socio-economic base.

The leading German historian, Ernst Nolte, writing in the 1960s, made the first major attempt to define the 'fascist minimum' in terms of its overt political characteristic. His definition was made up of three negatives, two style factors and a more general goal: anti-marxism; anti-liberalism; anti-conservatism; the leadership principle; the militarised party; and the goal of totalitarianism. This general approach has been adopted by several other historians, including Payne in his highly-influential threefold division of fascism which stresses fascism's: i) negations, ii) ideology and programme and iii) style and organisation.

However, most supporters of fascism as a European-epochal phenomenon have tended to focus on fascist support rather than ideology. They have sought to discern Europe-wide traits, which are held not to apply elsewhere, or to have applied much more weakly. Usually central to these explanations is the traumatic impact of World War One. The reverberations of the Russian Revolution and the various other left-wing revolts across Europe are also normally seen as crucial causes of the rise of fascism. They panicked much of the political and economic elite into believing that revolution was at hand, with particularly serious implications in countries which had politically inexperienced leaders and party systems which lacked deep roots. These events also had a powerful effect on many who were to become fascist activists: certainly most members of the early fascist movements seem to have been young men who had fought in the war. The major economic crises which hit some countries are seen as crucial too: Germany in 1932 had perhaps 40 per cent of its Labour force unemployed, and others feared that their turn was next.

In terms of the mass basis of fascism, these trends are normally seen as having particularly affected large sections of the middle class, and especially small shopkeepers, artisans and farmers. Indeed, fascism is often defined as a 'movement of the middle class'. But recently there has been a growing amount of evidence that Nazism especially attracted an all-class following, and it should also be emphasised that in some countries, notably Hungary, fascism fought a class struggle against dominant groups.

Regardless of who exactly is seen as the archetypal fascist supporter, there is no question that Europe during the early twentieth century experienced a set of major upheavals. But accepting this does not necessarily lead to endorsing the claim that fascism was a purely European-epochal movement. There is no logical reason why other continents could not produce leaders and major movements which seem very similar to fascism; indeed, many would argue that there have been major non-European examples, like the Chilean *Movimento Nacional Socialista* in the 1930s, or Saddam Hussein in contemporary Iraq. And recent years have seen a notable change of attitudes about the possibilities of a revival of European fascism, particularly in Eastern Europe where economic disillusionment has quickly followed the hedonistic optimism of the fall of communism. Russia may not have experienced defeat in war, but psychologically it might just as well have done and other traits, such as fear of Americanisation, could well be the functional equivalent of Western fear of communism in the inter-war period.

**4 Universal Fascism**

A final major set of approaches to fascism holds that it can emerge in a wide variety of countries, has had the potential to become a major force throughout the twentieth century, and remains a threat for the next millennium.

The most common version of this argument has come from often jargon-laden Marxists, who have identified a host of major examples of fascism, including the wartime Japanese governments and the military regimes in post-war Latin America, as well as the classic European dictatorships. The most 'reductionist' Marxist view, holding that economic interest dominates politics and that fascism can essentially be defined as 'the dictatorship of capitalism in crisis', has now been discredited. Capitalist interests were divided, and in the classic fascist regimes politics seemed to determine economics more than vice-versa. Variations on the 'Bonapartist' model, which allows the political sphere to possess 'autonomy' from capitalism, have shown greater staying power. However, they raise complex issues about causality and proof. Marxists argue that in Italy and Germany wages did not rise as quickly as profits, thus proving that whilst the fascist state was not 'determined' by capital, it worked in its interest. But the same facts could show the power of the political to divert funds from wages (and hence consumer consumption) in order to develop a war- oriented economy – something which was not sought by most business interests. It should also be noted that increasingly some non-Marxist historians are willing to accept that Nazism was potentially highly socially-radical. Even the more accommodating Italian Fascism attempted to return to social radicalism in its dying Salo phase.

Others have tried to argue that major manifestations of fascism occur outside a European-epochal context by looking at more political features. Recently, many have pointed to similarities in the policies and style of many allegedly 'neo-fascist' groups which have emerged in Western Europe. For instance, the leader of France's *Front National*, Jean-Marie Le Pen – who polled 15 per cent of the vote in the 1995 Presidential elections – has considerable charisma and is highly nationalist. Perhaps even more commentators have highlighted the similarities between the Russian politician, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, and classic fascism. These include the British historian Roger Griffin, who sees Zhirinovsky as conforming to his key defining elements of fascism, namely a commitment to a populist myth of national rebirth – a style of propaganda which Griffin identifies in many contexts throughout the twentieth century.

However, at this point the discussion returns to the problem which I noted at the very outset of this article. Namely, relatively few people and movements have called themselves 'fascist'. Certainly Le Pen does not accept this label, as he realises that fascism is politically taboo and opponents try to de-legitimise his party by tagging it as a pariah. Zhirinovsky too rejects the tag, claiming his party is right-centrist and opposed to dictatorship. Clearly we need some form of definition if we are to discuss questions such as whether fascism is reviving, or to assess exactly which inter-war movements were truly fascist.

*Part Two of this article - in History Review 26 - will continue by looking in more depth at the growing tendency to take fascism seriously as an ideology, and go on to suggest a new definition of the 'fascist minimum'. I will argue that this approach offers important insights into more concrete aspects of fascism, notably the question of the nature of its support.*

**Further Reading**

* Roger Eatwell, *Fascism: a History*, Vintage 1996 is mainly a critical narrative of Germany, Italy, France and Britain coming up to the present day.
* Roger Griffin (ed.) *Fascism*, Oxford University Press 1995, is a superb set of documents, together with extracts from many key approaches, including the author’s own.
* Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictat*orship, Longman 1993, is a superb textbook; whilst mainly about the regime, it contains a good discussion of the nature of fascism.
* Walter Laquer (ed.),*Fascism: a Readers Guide*, Penguin 1979 includes some excellent chapters, including a good introduction to Sternhall’s position.
* Stanley Payne,*A History of Fascism, 1914-45*, UCL Press 1995, is a superb history plus an accessible discussion of the problem of definition and neo-fascism.
* Zeev Sternhall, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, Princeton University Press 1994, is a controversial mongraph on Italy and France, in general above A-level standard.
* Paul Preston, *The Politics of Revenge – Fascism and the Military in 20th Century Spain*, Routledge 1995, is an excellent account of the Spanish scene; NB most historians do not see Francoism as fascist.

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).