



## German and Italian Fascisms: An Impediment to Theorizing Fascism?

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### ABSTRACT

Fascism as a concept enjoys a plethora of definitions, usages and variants which lead to the problems of social science to have a generic theory of fascism. This paper aims to explore the differences between the two fascist variants of the interwar period in Europe, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany to reflect on the question of whether exploration of these differences may contribute to social science's quest to theorize fascism. Though the two fascist regimes differ widely in terms of totalitarianism, ideology, nation and race, state and party relationships, the extent of resistance and the existence of multiple power centers, and finally, the use of total terror; exploration of different fascisms, rather than negating the possibility of having a generic definition of fascism, allows us to explore some of the central characteristics of fascism: its flexibility and resilience.

### KEYWORDS:

Ideologies, fascism, Nazis, Italian Fascists, National Socialism

### I. INTRODUCTION

Fascism as a concept enjoys a plethora of definitions, usages and variants which makes social science question the viability of having a generic theory of fascism. The troubles of the social scientists with fascism originate from the existence of a multiplicity of definitions and usages, the overuse of the concept in daily life as a pejorative word and differences between the cases through which one can analyze and study the phenomenon (Örs, 2010: 480-486).

In addition to the multiple paradigms of fascism that study it as the product of a 'daemoniac' Führer personality, the result of Europe's moral disease, the product of a particular developmental sequence confined to Germany, a particular stage in the broader processes of modernization, a product of capitalist society and manifestation of totalitarianism etc. (Hagtvet and Larsen in Griffin, 1995: 281-282), the adjective 'fascist' is used in a multiplicity of circumstances referring to certain right-wing dictatorships; most, or all 'right-wing' dictatorships or political parties; and manifestations of all kinds of authoritarian practices or inclinations (Lukacs, 2002: 107). Furthermore, social scientists refer to different forms of fascism and the necessity to separate them: fascism as referring to fascist regimes and/or regime elements, fascist movements informed and guided by the fascist ideology, and ordinary fascism witnessed in its plural, fragmented, spontaneous, anonymous and plural forms (Bora, 2000).

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The differences among the fascist regimes and their historical particularities further complicate the tasks of students of fascism. Was the German regime which systematically tried to organize or 'coordinate' the daily, political and social life in a totalitarian manner similar to the authoritarian Italian regime which could not destroy the local and traditional power centers because of structural reasons? Even the two apparently comparable European variants of fascism become problematic in the attempts of social science to outline a generic theory of fascism.

Given such a troubled background of the studies on fascism, this paper is an exploration of the differences between the two fascist variants of the interwar period in Europe, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany to reflect on the question of whether exploration of these differences may contribute to our search for a generic theory of fascism as the social scientists.

### II. TOTALITARIANISM

The basic difference between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy is the fact that the former was totalitarian while the latter remained as a dictatorship that intended to be totalitarian. In terms of the coexistence of multiple power centers, in Germany, every institution (political parties, union movement, army, schools, universities, press, art etc.) became the target of the regime and its goals since each of them was Nazified with an extraordinary speed; and what remained as something akin to resistance was marginalized, put under strict control and hence, became ineffective.

While Mussolini's regime was famous for its pragmatic and opportunistic moves, the totalitarian methods of the Nazi state

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were systematic, unhesitant and aimed to be permanent. Arendt (1973), in the *Origins of Totalitarianism* clearly articulates the difference between the Italian and German cases as far as the issue of totalitarianism is concerned:

Totalitarianism is never content to rule by external means, namely, through the state and a machinery of violence; thanks to its peculiar ideology and the role assigned to it in its apparatus of coercion, totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within. ... Their idea of domination was something that no state and no mere apparatus of violence can achieve, but only a movement that is constantly kept in motion: namely, the permanent domination of each single individual in each and every sphere of life. ... The practical goal of the movement is to organize as many people as possible within its framework and to set and keep them in motion, a political goal that would constitute the end of the movement simply does not exist (Arendt, 1973: 325-326).

With an emphasis on endless motion and permanent revolution, Nazi Germany proved to be totalitarian in addition to the fact that Nazis –due to the structural differences between the two cases- could minimize state discursively and practically; they could have a more totalitarian control of life through a stronger party organization, a stronger tradition which supported its ideology with almost no resistance. Furthermore, “Italian fascism was certainly a dictatorship, but it was not totally totalitarian, not because of its mildness but rather because of the philosophical weakness of its ideology” (Eco, 1995: 13).

### III. IDEOLOGY

One of the basic differences between the Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy is claimed to be the extent to which there was a relatively coherent ideology or a tradition that supported the movement. Pollard, comparing the ideological baggage of the two regimes states that National Socialists, in 1933, had a fairly clear, though not necessarily coherent, set of ideas while the fascists in Italy had nothing comparable to this system of ideas when they came to power in 1922 (Pollard, 1998: 118). Similarly, Eco (1995) claims that ideology of Italian fascism was weak, that it was not based on any philosophy but rather on rhetoric and “a fuzzy totalitarianism,” a collage of different philosophical and political ideas and “a beehive of contradictions” (Eco, 1995: 13).

National Socialism inherited the legacy of the ultra-right political *Völkisch* sub-culture which consisted of the symptoms of a profound degree of alienation from the Judeo-Christian liberal and Enlightenment tradition; the openness of

intellectual and artistic circles to questioning egalitarian, pacifistic and humanitarian values and celebrating pagan, anti-rational, elitist, and ultra-nationalist ones; powerful currents of pan-Germanism and imperialism demanding a colonial empire and *Lebensraum*; a belief that excessive democracy weakened the state; the prevalence of discourses on racism informed by vulgarized Darwinism and materialistic determinism in addition to anti-Semitism legitimized through a wide range of historical, religious, cultural, scientific, occultist, and populist discourses (Griffin, 1993: 228).

Apart from their differences in terms of the sources, the two variants of fascism also differ in terms of content. For instance, though both were antipositivist, discourses of antipositivism operated differently: While Italian fascist antipositivism did not require the complete rejection of liberal/rational principles and pedagogical goals, National Socialism, inspired by the romantic versions of *Völkisch* nationalism blended with pseudoscientific social Darwinism, totally rejected certain aspects of modern culture (Payne, 1980: 53).

Finally, whereas Italian Fascism was premised “on a more traditional Western rationalism, German national socialism was self-consciously committed to an irrationalist position, where every human artifact, the arts, sciences, societies and history were judged from one salient respective” (Vincent, 1995: 151) which was race.

### IV. RACE AND NATION

In Germany, racism that was intertwined with social Darwinism and anti-Semitism which had been less implicit in the previous century became explicit as early as 1919 when nationalist election leaflets called the Jews “the vampires of Germany” (Carsten, 1982: 89). Yet, it was national socialism that turned the racial discourse into a legitimate and legal government policy. Alfred Rosenberg, one of Hitler’s earliest mentors and the semi-official philosopher of National Socialism in 1920s stated that race would be the new measure to evaluate history, society, progress, politics, and dialectics and to create the new man: History and vocation no longer consisted “in the struggle of class against class, church dogma against church dogma, but in the struggle between blood and blood, race and race, people and people” (Rosenberg qtd. in Pearce, 1997: 29).

National Socialist emphasis on racism and anti-Semitism as mechanisms to ensure racial purity and prevent degeneration of race had no counterpart in Italian fascism. Even when the Italian government tried to ‘Italianise’ the new north-eastern provinces in the 1920s, the practice was not the physical extermination of ethnic minorities but a form of cultural genocide (Pollard, 1998: 125). There was little anti-Semitism both in Italy and the Fascist movement which benefited from Jewish funders in its early days, and the participation of the small Italian Jewish population than of Gentile population (Griffiths, 2000: 81).

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As Italian nationalism was closer to a traditional form of xenophobic imperialism and patriotism, national socialism was characterized with an obsession with the idea of race and policies for racial purification: the German nation was portrayed as expressing the *Volk* spirit and was underpinned by a biological doctrine of racial purity; to be German equated with being of a particular racial and ethnic stock (Vincent, 1995: 159). In the Italian case, racism clashed with the cosmopolitanism of the imperial Roman tradition, and an ethnic and racial definition of membership in the *Volk* was against the implicit universality of Italian fascism which regarded will as the basic criterion for national inclusion (Joes, 1978: 61). Until 1937, the central conceptual category of Italian Fascism was the nation, not race and any racism involved was usually defined in terms of the nation (Ingersoll, et al., 2001: 226). Even after 1938, the tone of Italian Fascism was different than National Socialism: For instance, one such document by Giocchino Volpe who wrote the official history of Fascist movement was a blend of critical detachment from Fascist racial policies and yet, at the same time, an apology for them (Volpe in Griffin (ed.), 1995: 80-81).

### V. THE STATE AND THE PARTY

The two regimes and their ideologies also diverged in terms of the ideological roles and functions attributed to the state. Italian conception of the state had been formed with the influence of Hegel who portrayed the state as the culmination of history and by Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944), Mussolini's leading ideologue and arbiter of cultural policy, who theorized the concept of 'ethical' (authoritarian) state which was defined as "neither a huge façade, nor an empty building. It is man himself: the house is built, inhabited and animated by the joys and sorrows which derive from the labour and from the whole life of the human spirit" (Gentile in Griffin (ed.), 1995:54).

By contrast, German national socialism usually ignored or openly rejected Hegel and his concept of state. Hitler considered the state not an end in itself but a means to assure racial superiority. Hence, there was nothing sacred or glorious about the State for the Nazis: the state was portrayed as a means which ought to be resisted if it jeopardized the well-being of the *Volk*, the creator and bearer of culture and provider of the standards of morality and politics (Sabine and Thorson, 1973: 820). The partners of the Nazi coalition were *Führer*, people, Germany and nation, not the state.

To explain this contrast, Neumann (1942) and also Sabine and Thorson (1973) claim that Italian fascism exalted the state as an absolute because throughout history the Italian state was always weak. On the contrary, National Socialists encountered a strong German state which was never seriously threatened and this in turn produced a competition and hostility between the party and the bureaucracy (Neumann, 1942: 75-76).

With respect to the role and strength of the one party, the Nazi party was perceived to be a more significant and stronger

political actor than its Italian counterpart. Whether it reached every house, workshop, factory and town may be debated; yet, it was highly organized with many branches: "there were hardly any Germans who were not active in one or other of the satellite organizations established by the party, such as Labor Service, the Women's League, the Motor and Flying Corps, the Hitler Youth, and the League of Jurists, Teachers, Physicians, Students" (Laqueur, 1996: 38). With an elaborate infiltration into the society and daily life, Nazi Party resembled more to the Soviet Communist Party, rather than the PNF (Italian Fascist Party).

Fascism in Italy seized the state machine but it did not think itself "above the state," and its leaders did not conceive of themselves as "above the nation" (Arendt, 1973: 259). The seizure of the state apparatus was an end for the fascist movement in Italy while, for the Nazis, there was no ultimate political end; and hence, no need for glorifying and prioritizing an institution that could be destroyed if necessary.

### VI. RESISTANCE AND MULTIPLE POWER CENTERS

The two fascisms differed also in terms of the extent and efficacy of resistance in the society and the existence of power centers such as the army and church. In the German case, army which had once been a political elite was transformed into a merely functional elite in 1938 when "the personnel who embodied the army's political perspective and its traditional view of itself were eliminated" (Müller in Gregor (ed.), 2000: 169). This was the break of the early agreement between the *Führer* and the army which was based on the perpetuation of the army's autonomous status within the power structure of the state and the reassertion of Nazi power through rapid rearmament (De Grand, 1995: 39). Arendt (1973) contrasts the differences between Nazi totalitarianism and Italian dictatorship in terms of their relationships with their armies: In contrast to the Nazis and Bolsheviks, who destroyed the spirit of the army by subordinating it to the political commissars or totalitarian elite formations, the Fascists wanted a Fascist state and a Fascist army, but still an army and a state (Arendt, 1973: 259). With respect to the Church, Italian fascism opted for compromise with the Church and Mussolini, an atheist himself, recognized the importance of the Church to secure his regime (Kishlansky et. al., 2003: 896) while the relationships between Nazi Party and the Church were less than smooth. Although the Christian Church accepted the Nazi rule without questioning, it is argued that not only the destruction of the Church but also the abolition of the Christian religion in any meaningful sense of the term was among the long-term aims of the Nazis (Laqueur, 1996: 43). From its early years, Italian fascism was constrained by the fact that it "operated in a society based on religious and social structures that were much stronger than the state apparatus" and this ensured that fascists in Italy were left in a position to make some compromises—especially in the realm of religious

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and cultural policies (De Grand, 1995: 83). Hence, “the Fascistization of the new Italy” proved to be “more uneven, superficial and cosmetic than Germany’s” (Griffin, 1993: 230).

In contrast, Nazis in Germany and their symbols, rituals and hierarchies had no competitors from the conservative establishment: Organized religion operated as an obstacle but only in the realm of private conscience while industry and the military were swept up in the general mobilization for war and in the euphoria over the initial foreign policy of Hitler (De Grand, 1995: 84).

Given the limitations of fascists in Italy, resistance in Italy was more announced, organized and collective than it was in Germany. Although there were opposition from some groups such as Kreisau Circle, youth gangs, Swing Youth and from universities, and the Church; the overall resistance in Germany was marginal, personal and ineffective. Lack of resistance in the German case contributed to the fact that the systematized and known practices of terror and extermination remained intact until the end of the war and collapse of the Nazi regime.

### VII. TERROR

The final difference between two fascisms is the intensity of controlled violence and terror. The extermination camps; a systemized, planned Holocaust which was announced and promoted since 1933; in short, the use of total terror in the Arendtian sense differentiated Nazi Germany from its Italian contemporary and other fascisms. Total terror

...substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions. ...By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them ... Totalitarian government does not just curtail liberties or abolish essential freedoms; nor does it, at least to our limited knowledge, succeed in eradicating the love for freedom from the hearts of man. It destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space (Arendt, 1973: 465-466).

In the German case, total terror destroyed the space among people through the use of death camps, the Final Solution, the application of the ideas of Social Darwinism, racial superiority and antisemitism that had been legitimized, legalized and publicized throughout years. A total destruction of the space necessary for freedom and communication through the use of systemized and planned violence had no counterpart in fascist Italy.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper aims to discuss the differences between German and Italian fascisms. Despite some similarities, the two fascisms diverged widely on some issues such as ideology, state, the existence of multiple power centers and resistance, the use of total terror, racism and the character of the regime. As these ideological, structural and historical differences between Italian Fascism and German National Socialism are hard to ignore for the social scientist, they also complicate the search for generic theories of fascism.

Though the question of whether social science should have a generic theory of fascism is beyond the scope of this paper, we agree with Griffin’s proposal to consider fascism an ideal type in the Weberian sense which is “formed by the one-sided exaggeration of one or several viewpoints and by the combination of a great many single phenomena existing diffusely and discretely, more or less present and occasionally absent” (Burger qtd. in Griffin, 1993: 10). As ideal types cannot serve as definitive taxonomic categories to describe or explain facts but they serve to provide tentative conceptual frameworks to identify significant patterns, investigate causal relationships and classify phenomena (Griffin, 1993: 11), it is possible to have both a generic theory of fascism and some space to explore the differences between variants of fascism. Even in our queries as social scientists for a generic theory of fascism, differences between the particular fascist regimes and movements may guide such an enterprise as this multiplicity of fascisms underline a movement and ideology with high flexibility and resilience which enable the viability of fascism in very different settings and guises ranging from the formal structures and institutions of the state and politics to the tissues of daily life in the form of ordinary fascism. This paper argues that only such an approach that does not ignore differences between different fascisms but capitalize on exploring those differences may give us a generic definition of fascism. Hence, rather than negating the possibility of having a generic theory of fascism, exploration of different fascisms allows us to explore some of the central characteristics of fascism: its flexibility and resilience.

### IX. DISCLOSURE

The author reports no conflicts of interest in this work.

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