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Three Faces of Fascism

Sheri Berman

Fascists

Michael Mann

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004

The Anatomy of Fascism

Robert O. Paxton

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004

The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with
Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism

Richard Wolin

Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004

In recent decades, the term “fascism” has basically been stripped of all substantive content. People on the left often apply the “fascist” tag to describe any right-wing thug they don’t like, and their opposite numbers have reciprocated with coinages such as “feminazi” and “econazi.” Academics have been less glib, but even they have fought passionately over how to characterize and even analyze the phenomenon. Almost 85 years since fascism’s appearance and almost 60 years since its demise, reams of books about it still appear regularly, their authors often disagreeing sharply with one another over fundamental issues of definition, scope, and causality.

This year has seen a particularly bountiful crop, with three major new studies by, respectively, the political historian Robert Paxton, the sociologist Michael Mann, and the intellectual historian Richard Wolin. All three authors draw extensively on previous scholarship while offering original in-

terpretations of fascism’s nature and historical significance, and their impressive books should interest academics and general readers alike. Together they provide an excellent opportunity to assess what is and is not known about fascism, as well as the relevance of the topic for contemporary political life. In particular, we will see that while old-style fascism is defunct in its original home—Europe—its spirit lives on in another part of the world in the guise of radical Islam.

Robert Paxton’s *The Anatomy of Fascism* is the most comprehensive of the three. With a long and distinguished career as a historian of European politics and particularly French fascism behind him, Paxton writes that this book represents the “culmination of a lifetime of study,” and it shows, embodying the best of what historical scholarship has to offer. He concentrates on the particular political contexts within which individual fascist movements arose and took

power, while still being careful to point out how “long-term shifts in fundamental political, social and economic structures” interacted with the choices and actions of individual political actors to explain fascism’s development and fate. The most important of these structural factors, his analysis suggests, were the rise of mass politics, the failure of fascism’s political competitors, and the power of nationalism.

Europe’s democratic age really began only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and although political participation increased across the continent many of the habits, norms, and institutions that we now view as necessary to support a well-functioning democratic polity lagged behind. For example, political parties, particularly of the liberal and conservative varieties, remained weak, leaving their natural middle-class, peasant, and rural constituencies feeling that they lacked a voice in the new democratic regimes. As a result, the emergent democracies were often weak, inefficient, and corrupt, doing little to inspire popular confidence or loyalty. Because mass participation in politics was there to stay, however, traditional conservatism of the elitist, antidemocratic variety and other forms of authoritarianism were not workable alternatives to democracy in many cases. Enter fascism, which offered a withering critique of democracy that was designed to appeal to a broad constituency. Fascism’s goal of not merely capturing power but transforming society completely was perfectly suited to the times, since it sought not to exclude people from politics but rather to involve them in a mass revolutionary project.

Fascism was able to maneuver so successfully on the political stage, meanwhile, partly because other actors kept tripping up and flubbing their lines. The radical rhetoric of European communists in the years between the two world wars sent people fleeing into the fascists’ arms, for example, and mainstream socialists performed almost as

poorly. Moderate socialists’ unwillingness to break decisively with their communist brethren and fully embrace a truly social democratic strategy, even though they had long ago given up any real hope or even desire for revolution, rendered them politically impotent. Just as important was the failure of liberalism. Having never fully adjusted to the rough and tumble of democratic politics, liberal parties generally withered during the interwar years, leaving their natural middle-class constituency ripe for the picking. But liberalism’s inadequacies went deeper than the missteps of the parties that bore its name, as the ideology itself proved to have little to offer mass publics suffering from economic crisis, social dislocation, and cultural destabilization.

The backlash against the spread of capitalism, and modernity more generally, that had been brewing across Europe around the turn of the century led intellectuals and activists to grope for ways of reintegrating their societies and restoring a sense of meaning to the amoral and “disenchanted” bourgeois world. The nationalist movements that resulted tended to grow increasingly radical over time, and eventually fed on the disappointment and frustrated idealism of veterans from the First World War, the humiliation of the defeated belligerents, and the resentment of certain countries, like Italy, over not having gotten their “just desserts” at the end of that war.

All these trends provided fertile ground for fascism’s rise. Structural factors, however, can take you only so far. As Paxton puts it: “Having assembled a catalogue...of longer-term structural preconditions we might be tempted to believe we can foresee exactly where fascism is likely to appear, grow, and take power. But that would mean falling into a determinist trap. There remains the element of human choice. It was by no means guaranteed that a nation fitted with all the preconditions would become fascist.” So, after describing the broader historical context, he moves on to discuss how the machina-

tions and miscalculations of elites in various countries provided the final, necessary factor enabling certain fascist movements to gain power.

Like much of his earlier analysis, this material too is familiar, but Paxton does a good job of summarizing the sorry tale. Conservatives in countries such as Germany and Italy, he explains, were so obsessed with thwarting the Left while maintaining their own prerogatives that they fooled themselves into believing they could use fascists for their own purposes, and provided them with political resources, openings, and legitimacy. Once in power, the fascists repaid the debt by eliminating their erstwhile patrons along with the rest of the old order. And of course, one must not forget the role played by political geniuses like Mussolini and Hitler. Acutely attuned to the needs, fears, and passions of the people, fascism's leaders played a key role in attracting the masses to the cause and in building and consolidating powerful political movements. Yet as critical as such individuals were, it is important not to overestimate their role or take it out of context, as many previous historical analyses have done. Both Mussolini and Hitler, for example, peddled their wares in relative obscurity for years before they managed to actually take power. This seems to indicate that without the "right" conditions both men might very well have remained the historical footnotes many of their contemporaries expected them to be.

Paxton is thus correct in seeing fascism primarily as a political phenomenon, the nature and fate of which can best be explained by carefully reconstructing the structural and contingent factors that helped bring a group of related political movements to prominence and, in some places, to power. As might be expected, Michael Mann takes a very different approach, arguing that to understand fascism one needs to examine its social base. He thus provides a "sociology of fascist movements," doing an excellent job

of uncovering who the fascists actually were and what drove them.

"Resacralizing" Modern Society

Mann's first crucial finding is that fascists were chiefly young males with certain common characteristics. Many had participated in the First World War, emerging radicalized, trained to fight, and inured to violence. They often returned home to societies uninterested in their needs and incapable of providing them with gainful employment, and thus became dry tinder waiting to be ignited. Many were also idealists desperate for a cause to believe in. Fascism promised a revolutionary transformation of society, a cleansing of the body politic, and a return to national grandeur, and so supplied a secular religion ideal for latching onto. As Mann puts it, fascists "claimed a higher moral purpose, transcendent of class conflict, capable of 'resacralizing' a modern society grown materialistic and decadent. They identified a 'civilizational crisis' encompassing government, morality, science, social science, the arts, and 'style.'"

Beyond their youth, gender, and mindset, however, Mann notes that fascists were socially heterogeneous. This distinctive feature of the movement has not always been fully appreciated by other scholars, with Marxists, for example, viewing fascism as dominated by elites or the bourgeoisie while modernization and mass society theorists generally see it as a product of the middle or rural classes. We now know, however, that fascism drew support from almost all social sectors, and that farmers, businessmen, professionals and managers, craftsmen, and even workers were all well represented among its adherents. Since almost all other contemporary political parties remained unable to move beyond narrow, class-based support, fascism's broad social base gave it a dynamism and strength that its competitors could not match.

But Mann goes on to make a larger point, namely that the very attempt to un-

derstand fascism by reference to class dynamics is misleading. Sociologists know that "there are other social structures besides classes and markets," he jibes, and argues that what united fascists was less their economic background than their shared commitment to a set of values or goals he calls "transcendent paramilitary nation-statism." With this inelegant term he tries to get at a variety of things: First, that fascists fervently believed in the reality of the nation, which for them was an entity with a special mission and soul that had to be nurtured and protected at all costs (from both internal and external enemies). Second, that fascists saw the state as both the embodiment of the nation and the instrument that would help it achieve its goals, the bearer of a "moral project" whose interests transcended those of particular individuals or social groups. And third, that violence lay at the very center of fascism's appeal and project, with participation in paramilitary groups giving supporters a powerful shared experience that helped bond them together and train them for future political and military endeavors.

Richard Wolin, finally, takes yet another tack, concentrating on fascism as an intellectual phenomenon. Wolin takes ideas seriously and focuses on those that paved the way for fascism's emergence and comprised its distinctive worldview. This leads him to emphasize a group of actors that both Paxton and Mann pass over much more quickly, namely intellectuals.

As the title of his book indicates, Wolin sees the central feature of fascism as an opposition to reason, faith in progress, rationality, and cosmopolitanism. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a backlash against the Enlightenment, liberalism, and modernity began brewing among European intellectuals, many of whom began to glorify emotion and will instead of rationality and a faith in science, and group identity instead of individualism and cosmopolitanism. They called for a new order

that would place cohesion above conflict and protect traditional values and communities. Particularly after the First World War, Wolin notes, such ideas spread widely and chipped away at liberal democracy's support and legitimacy. They were also seized on and radicalized by nationalists, who made them prominent features of fascism's appeal.

All three books are outstanding, even as they differ greatly in their approach to the subject as well as their understanding of what fascism really was. Each provides an essential part of the picture, but it is only by putting all three perspectives—the political, social, and ideological—together that one can grasp what made fascism arguably (says Paxton) the "major political innovation of the twentieth century," a force capable of destroying liberal democracies across Europe and triggering the most destructive conflict the world has ever known.

Fascists did indeed build powerful political movements that took advantage of the weaknesses of the reigning liberal democratic political order, the failures of political competitors, the discontent and alienation of the masses, and the machinations of local elites. But fascism was also a powerful social force that infiltrated all corners of civil society and gathered an extremely diverse and dynamic constituency. And it did feature a comprehensive ideology that incorporated many long-standing criticisms of liberal capitalist society and offered what seemed a promising alternative. It was its simultaneous success in all three arenas that differentiated fascism from other political alternatives of the time like communism, conservatism, and for the most part social democracy, and made it a force of world-historical significance.

A Modern Analogue

Recognizing fascism's tripartite nature is crucial for assessing not only its historical significance but also its continuing relevance. Many observers have used the term to describe right-wing parties that have arisen

in Europe and the former Soviet Union in recent years, and their opponents have tarred right-wing demagogues like Jean-Marie Le Pen in France and Jörg Haider in Austria with the fascist label. But such usage is clearly inappropriate. It is true that some of these parties and political leaders draw on nationalism, racism, and anti-Semitism, and that they face weak and corrupt political systems, collapsing economies, and desperate and discontent populations. But none of them boast the kind of political, social, and intellectual mix that made fascism so powerful and dangerous. Similarly, although Wolin makes a good case that today's postmodern left favors a distinctly fascist intellectual approach, the thinkers he criticizes clearly lack the kind of political power and broad social support that made their interwar counterparts so worrisome.

In fact, the only place one currently sees the sort of triple threat that truly constitutes a modern analogue to fascism is in the Muslim world, which unfortunately none of the three authors discuss at any length. A number of commentators have linked radical Islamism to fascism recently, but they have tended to do so either as simple name-calling or as a reference to supposed direct intellectual borrowing between the two movements. The Paxton, Mann, and Wolin books, however, allow us to see just how accurate and deep-rooted the parallels actually are, whether or not there are pictures of Mussolini or Hitler hanging on the walls of caves near Tora Bora.

Properly understood, after all, fascism is a developmental disease, a political illness that strikes only certain types of victims at certain times. What the political scientist Samuel Huntington has said of revolution in his book *Political Order in Changing Societies* applies here as well:

It will not occur in highly traditional societies with very low levels of social and economic complexity. Nor will it occur in highly modern

societies. Like other forms of violence and instability, it is most likely to occur in societies which have experienced some social and economic development and where the processes of political modernization and political development have lagged behind the processes of social and economic change.

This is precisely the condition, it is worth noting, that much of the Muslim world finds itself in today. There, as in Europe in the early twentieth century, development has proceeded far enough to offer citizens a glimpse of what modernity has to offer, but not far enough to deliver it. States are under significant pressure to perform a growing range of functions and satisfy ever-increasing demands, yet lack the strength and administrative capacity to follow through. Traditional institutions and norms have eroded, but modern ones have not yet arisen to take their place.

Moreover, the Muslim world, with the existing authoritarian regimes clearly unsatisfactory, premodern forms of governance obsolete, and recent movements such as socialism and pan-Arabism discredited, is also notable for its lack of attractive political alternatives. Muslim countries are home to very large numbers of young males, many of whom are angered by unemployment, corruption, and military defeat, and some of whom have received military training in the anti-Soviet crusade in Afghanistan and other jihadist endeavors. And, of course, in places like Afghanistan and Iraq the lack of order—and the prevalence of warlords and armed militias—generates its own dangerous dynamic, creating desperate populations and large numbers of young males who are radicalized, trained to fight, and inured to violence.

Enter radical Islamism, a socially heterogeneous movement offering a powerful critique of the current order, a romantic and communitarian revolutionary alternative to

it, and a clear set of internal and external enemies against whom violence is encouraged. Add local conservative elites (whether in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or even Israel) who fool themselves into thinking they can use the newcomers for their own purposes, and one ends up reaping the whirlwind.

What lessons can be drawn from the European fascist experience for handling the Middle Eastern one? In the West, the fascist wave was ultimately beaten back by two things: military intervention to topple fascist regimes and the spread of healthy political alternatives that addressed the problems and eliminated the conditions that had motivated most of fascism's rank-and-file supporters. It took not only the Second World War, in other words, but also the postwar settlement—the emergence of well-functioning liberal democratic regimes with generous welfare states—to ensure that the menace was disposed of, never to return.

The implications of this for the present would seem to be clear. First, there must indeed be direct action to combat the Islamist organizations and cadres so devoted to violence that they cannot exist without it. Whether the “war on terror” is an apt locu-

tion for this effort is something of a semantic game; the point is that the die-hard radicals must probably, in the end, die hard.

At the same time, however, there must also be a parallel campaign to co-opt the movement's less extreme followers, one that offers the mass publics of Muslim countries a healthy political alternative that addresses their very real and pressing concerns. Here the Bush administration's support for political reform and liberalization throughout the greater Middle East makes excellent sense (however much one may question its implementation), since the corrupt, inefficient, and illegitimate regimes that govern much of the region today are a major cause of popular discontent and a major barrier to any progress. Yet the true challenge will be not merely to eliminate authoritarianism, but to foster the emergence of well-functioning political parties and states capable of and devoted to helping people cope successfully with modern life. Until those come into being, the roots of this latter-day fascism will remain lurking beneath the soil, no matter how many of its branches are lopped off above. ●