

## **Towards a Definition of Fascism**

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Fascism, we are told, is a tool of the capitalist class, a reaction against socialism and communism, a Marxist deviation, a psychotic fever that eventually passed after taking a terrible toll on European civilization. The debate is lengthy and complicated and despite claims of an emerging consensus, the question is still unsettled.<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, definitions of fascism have left something to be desired, for they are generally too vague, too specific, or too tortured, to be of much use. It is no wonder then that some scholars seek to bury the word, and the concept, declaring it “precisely dated and meaningless.”<sup>2</sup>

Was fascism really born on March 23, 1919, in Milan, Italy? Did it really die in a bunker in Berlin on April 30, 1945? Or was fascism something more, something that might appear again? The answer to these questions is more than an idle curiosity. Establishing a definition that allows us to understand Fascism’s nature and what it sought to achieve will allow those of us living in the early part of the twenty-first century to know whether fascism is something about which we must continue to be concerned or something that is truly dead and buried.

This paper will argue that fascism is an ideology in its own right, that it sought to solve the problem of modernity, thereby ending man’s alienation from the universe and other men, making him whole again and offering an opportunity to transcend his earthly existence. It will argue in favour of the following definition: “Fascism is a nationalist, modernizing movement that seeks a realignment of society, an alternative modernity, replacing the individual as the central figure in history and subjugating him to the nation. In so doing, it offers the individual the chance to transcend his earthly existence.”

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<sup>1</sup> See Roger Griffin’s “Studying Fascism in a Postfascist Age. From New Consensus to New Wave?” *Fascism*, 1 (2012), 1-17. For a general survey of scholarship conducted since the 1980s on European fascism see Arnd Bauerkämper, “A New Consensus? Recent Research on Fascism in Europe, 1918-1945.” *History Compass*. no. 3 (2006): pp. 536-566. Bauerkämper expresses doubts as to the consensus Griffin sees emerging.

<sup>2</sup> H.R. Trevor-Roper, “The Phenomenon of Fascism,” *European Fascism*, edited by S.J. Woolf, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), 1968.

The advantage of this definition is that it is broadly compatible with Griffin's definition of fascism as "a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism"<sup>3</sup> with one caveat: it addresses the question of "Why fascism?" Griffin's definition, for its succinctness, does not offer an explanation of what fascism offers to the individual in order to earn the individual's support. This is critical to any explanation of fascism – indeed to the explanation of any ideology.

Another advantage of this definition is that it does not focus on the outward expressions of the practice of fascism, thus freeing it from the limitations of early definitions that required of fascism various practices such as coloured-shirts, street gangs, charismatic leaders, etc. Such definitions tended to be so specific in their requirements of fascism as to run the risk of excluding fascist movements that practiced their politics differently and including other political movements who merely mimicked the external symbols of fascism.

Rather than through these symbols, it is through the idea of "transcendence through subjugation" that fascism can be identified as a generic ideology that offers something more than "anti-liberalism" or "anti-Marxism" and allows it to be distinguished from those "merely" conservative political movements that sought to imitate fascism's outward manifestations while seeking the preservation of the status quo.<sup>4</sup>

In order to establish this definition, this paper must accomplish a number of tasks. First, it must traverse the minefield that precedes a genuine understanding of fascism. In accepting that fascism is a genuine ideology that, however distasteful, contains a certain logic, which seeks to solve a problem of humanity, one runs the risk of being accused to sympathizing too much with the ideology. Without this understanding, however, one runs another, more dire risk: of producing an explanation of the phenomenon that is of little value. This paper takes no position "for" or "against" fascism. It seeks only to explain the phenomenon.

Second, this paper must identify those generic and ideological aspects that allow for the establishment of a definition. In order to do this, it must address those contrary arguments about the nature of fascism: that it has no ideological content. There are many scholars who argue that fascism is "dead,"<sup>5</sup> that the word should be "banned,"<sup>6</sup> that it be rejected as "dated or a

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<sup>3</sup> Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, (London: Pinter Publishers), 1991, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Robert O. Paxton, "The Five Stages of Fascism," *The Journal of Modern History*, no. 1 (March 1998): 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism*, translated by Leila Vennewitz, (New York: Mentor, 1969), 35.

<sup>6</sup> S.J. Woolf, "Introduction," *European Fascism*, edited by S.J. Woolf, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), 1968, 1.

meaningless term of abuse;<sup>7</sup> it is Gilbert Allardyce who makes the most forceful argument in this direction. He declares fascism an “illusion,”<sup>8</sup> a word that “means virtually nothing,”<sup>9</sup> an idea that “exists in faith...pursued by reason.”<sup>10</sup> “There is no such *thing* as fascism,” Allardyce argues. “There are only men and movements we call by that name.”<sup>11</sup> Though Allardyce’s argument has been dismissed as “pointless,”<sup>12</sup> “primitive,” “extreme,” and lacking sophistication,<sup>13</sup> he raises serious enough objections with the method of defining fascism that they should not be dismissed out of hand even if his conclusion is erroneous. Once this has been accomplished, the case for the above stated definition can be made. Time and space restrictions do not allow for the consideration of the Marxist theories of fascism. These will have to be addressed in subsequent work.

### **THE CHALLENGE OF DEFINING FASCISM**

Defining fascism has proven a difficult task in a way that defining other ideologies has not. Liberalism has its founding thinkers and its canon texts. We know that a liberal is someone who believes that the individual is the central figure in human history, who believes that the role of government should be limited to mediating disputes amongst individuals, and who believes that, left to his own devices and hard work, man is well positioned to reach the highest levels of his potential. We know this even though in the twenty-first century there are politicians and parties who use that label despite advocating a worldview that is quite different, not just from the classical definition of liberalism outlined here, but also from other political parties operating in the same era.

The same is true of Marxism. We know that it is an ideology that warns the tale told by liberalism is a fictional one: that liberal freedoms are not true freedoms; that they serve to ensure the continued rule of the capitalist class over the workers. True freedom, the Marxist argues, can only be attained once human society ceases to be divided by class. We do not doubt the existence

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<sup>7</sup> Trevor-Roper, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert Allardyce, “What Fascism is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept,” *The American Historical Review*, 84, no. 2 (April 1979): 385

<sup>9</sup> Allardyce, 388.

<sup>10</sup> Allardyce, 368.

<sup>11</sup> Allardyce, 368.

<sup>12</sup> Geoff Eley, “What Produces Fascism: Preindustrial Traditions or a Crisis of a Capitalist State,” *Politics & Society*, 12, no. 2 (1983): 56, footnote 5.

<sup>13</sup> Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, translated David Maisel, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3, footnote 3.

of a “Marxist ideology” even though there is disagreement amongst various Marxists about priorities and methods for achieving this goal.

Both of these ideologies benefit not just from the existence of founding philosophers and founding texts. They also benefit from the fact that those who today study the ideologies count themselves as liberals and Marxists. This means that disputes about what the ideologies are, what they mean, and how they are to adapt to the modern world, are debated from within the ideologies themselves.

This is not the case for fascism. For even if the ideology did not die with Hitler in that bunker in Berlin on April 30, 1945, fascism has been so thoroughly discredited as an ideology that it can only be studied from the outside-looking-in. Coupled with the lack of founding philosophers and texts, the work of deciphering fascism can only be speculative with very little in the way of trustworthy guides. Fragments of thought, cobbled together, coupled with the contradictory deeds and words of practicing politicians, and filtered through necessarily oppositional political biases is not a recipe for an easily agreed to interpretation of an ideology.

As Wolfgang Sauer writes of Nazism:

...the historian faces a phenomenon that leaves him no way but rejection, whatever his individual position. There is literally no voice worth considering that disagrees on this matter.... Does not such fundamental rejection imply a fundamental lack of understanding? And if we do not understand, how can we write history? The term “understanding” has, certainly, an ambivalent meaning; we can reject and still “understand.” And yet, our intellectual, and psychological capacities reach, in the case of Nazism, a border undreamed of by Wilhelm Dilthey. We can work out explanatory theories, but, if we face the facts directly, all explanations appear weak. Thus, the attempt to write the history of Nazism confronts the historian with an apparently unsolvable dilemma and raises the question of what historical understanding and historical objectivity may mean in the face of Nazism.<sup>14</sup>

In the face of this challenge it is no wonder that a readily agreed upon definition has eluded our grasp. How can one understand a phenomenon that perpetrated such evil? It is far easier to dismiss fascism as irrational, a fever, a historical accident, a tool of the capitalists, anti-

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<sup>14</sup> Wolfgang Sauer, “National Socialism: Totalitarianism or Fascism?” *The American Historical Review*, 73, no. 2 (December 1967): 408.

Marxism or anti-liberalism, or even, an illusion. To admit otherwise, that fascism, in its way, had a rationality to it, that it had a vision for the future and the organization of humanity, that it sought, as do all ideologies, to address the problems of humanity, is simply too difficult.

There is a dual sense to this difficulty. In the first sense, fascism is difficult to comprehend. It is difficult to imagine, for those born after the war, the sheer scale and horror of fascist terror. Further, it is difficult to imagine on what basis an individual might be compelled to willingly subjugate himself to the nation and to this ideology.

In the second sense, it is difficult to understand fascism because taking fascism seriously, engaging it as an ideology in its own right leaves one open to the charge that to seek to understand fascism is to attempt to justify it.<sup>15</sup> Difficult or not, fascism must be understood and the only way to understand it is to employ “methodological empathy.”<sup>16</sup> This approach, by which one attempts to understand fascism as it was seen by its practitioners and followers, which takes the phenomenon seriously on its own terms rather than viewing it through one’s own system of beliefs, can allow for a more accurate understanding of fascism.

The danger of failing to take fascism seriously, to understand it on its own terms is demonstrated by Trevor-Roper. He dismisses as “easy” and “fashionable” the discovery of currents of thought that led to fascism prior to 1922,<sup>17</sup> and one wonders what might have been different if fascism had been taken seriously from the beginning. It is not possible to undo the mistakes of the past but it is certainly possible to avoid their repetition. If the fascist ideas that are so easily found today were necessarily unnoticeable prior to March 1919, they must not today be dismissed, as Trevor-Roper argues they would have been in 1920, as “separate, parochial figures.”<sup>18</sup> If fascism is to be truly dead and buried it must be done on the basis of a clear understanding. Otherwise, if it cannot be relegated to the past, a clear understanding is still required so that it can be recognized when it appears and properly distinguished from historical “copycats” and other forms of extremism.

## **IDENTIFYING THE GENERIC FEATURES OF FASCISM**

The failure to understand fascism on its own terms has led a number of weak explanations of the phenomenon. Scholars like Trevor-Roper easily exploit these weak

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<sup>15</sup> Griffin, “Studying Fascism in a Postfascist Age. From New Consensus to New Wave?”, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew N. Lyons, “Two Ways of Looking at Fascism,” *Socialism and Democracy*, no. 2 (2008), p. 139.

<sup>17</sup> Trevor-Roper, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Trevor-Roper, 18.

explanations, dismissing the idea of generic facism as an “abstraction” “artificially imposed” upon the phenomenon, behind which “lie a hundred forms.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, they make it easy for Allardyce to dismiss the notion of generic fascism. Though Allardyce was not the first scholar to reject the idea of generic fascism, he presents his argument with a force that demands attention. He makes three claims: first, that fascism is not a generic concept; second, that fascism is not an ideology; and third, that fascism is not a personality type. It is his first two claims that will be dealt with here.<sup>20</sup>

Allardyce’s rejection of the idea of a “generic” fascism is based on the failure of the conceptual model approach. This method suggests that there exists an “ideal” type, whether in the real world, or as a concept, that can be held up as the example of fascism, the type to which all other potential fascist movements are compared. The problem with this approach is that if one constructs a faulty ideal-type the entire exercise is rendered pointless. If one points to a modern major general and declares him to be the very model of a modern major general, one can find one’s self on difficult terrain if one has suggested that a modern major general wears a mustache and is then confronted with a clean-shaven example of the same type rather than if one had pointed out that all modern major generals, including the model, have been schooled in a particular set of strategies and tactics or have all been trained to extract certain behaviour out of their subordinates.

A definition of fascism that declares fascism to be first and foremost “anti-Marxist,”<sup>21</sup> or as a tool of big businesses to defend capitalism in times of crisis,<sup>22</sup> faces difficulties when confronted with the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Similarly, a definition of fascism that declares it to be anti-liberal faces difficulties when confronted by fascist cooperation with liberals on their way into power. A definition of fascism that relies on extra-parliamentary street violence and anti-parliamentarianism cannot account for Colonel de la Rocque and the Croix de Feu who rejected the riots of February 6, 1934, and converted itself into the Parti Social Français in 1936. A definition of fascism that requires charismatic leadership cannot account for Portugal’s Antonio

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<sup>19</sup> Trevor-Roper, 19.

<sup>20</sup> The claim that fascism does not reside in the personality, that it cannot be explained by the quirks of individuals, is not disputed and is therefore set aside.

<sup>21</sup> Ernst Nolte, “Fascism as Characteristic of an Era,” *Fascism: An Anthology*, ed. Nathanael Greene (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1968), 34.

<sup>22</sup> Lyons, 124.

Salazar or Spain's Francisco Franco, both of whose most generous descriptions would elide any mention of charisma. The result is that Allardyce is able to stand astride attempts at defining a generic fascism and declare them failed. The "efforts to develop general theories inevitably carries them beyond the limits of specific knowledge" seeing those "formed from the study of certain samples...often contradicted by the study of others."<sup>23</sup>

Matters are only made worse when, like the traveller who insists on using a carry-on bag to hold enough clothes for a two month trip, scholars refuse to acknowledge the limits of their theories. One example of this is the claim made by Jordi Solé-Tura who argued that "no fascist movement recommends the abolition of private ownership of the means of production." Yet when Lloyd Eastman uncovered the blue Shirts of Kuomintang, China, who did indeed argue for the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production, scholars dismissed this contradiction as "proof of the multifarious forms that fascism assumed in different national settings."<sup>24</sup> It is this kind of inconsistency and obstinacy that Allardyce exploits to great effect. Despite this, through the examination of Allardyce's critiques of earlier definitions, various generic features of fascism begin to emerge.

### *Nationalism*

Fascism, Allardyce tells us, is a local phenomenon. At its heart sits is nationalism, which prevents its export to other locations and attempts to do so contaminates the other movements it confronts.<sup>25</sup> As Paxton writes, "Each national variant of fascism draws its legitimacy from what it considers the most authentic elements of its own community."<sup>26</sup> Thus, one cannot export German fascism to Italy, nor Italian to Spain, and so on. If one were to try, one or the other of the fascist movements would be corrupted. An example of this is how the Italian Fascists turned towards anti-semitism as they fell further under the influence of the Nazis.

This is something that fascist leaders themselves seemed to agree upon. Mussolini protested that fascism was not for export.<sup>27</sup> Fascist leaders in France and Spain took umbrage at the idea of being lumped together with the likes of Hitler and Mussolini. Jacques Doriot, leader of the France's Parti populaire français had this to say about fascism: "They claim we are

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<sup>23</sup> Allardyce, 368.

<sup>24</sup> Allardyce, 377.

<sup>25</sup> Allardyce, 370.

<sup>26</sup> Paxton, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Allardyce, 381.

fascists, but they know that it is a lie. We do not think that the regime of Hitler or Mussolini can be fitted to our country.”<sup>28</sup> Primo de Rivera refused to attend the gathering of “international fascists” in 1934 because the Falange was not fascist; it was Spanish.<sup>29</sup> Little agreement could be found amongst those fascists who did attend. Worse still, not even Mussolini and Hitler could come to an agreement on what fascism was with Mussolini suggesting that any similarities between the Fascists and the Nazis might be superficial at best.<sup>30</sup>

It is entirely possible that such early attempts at defining a generic fascism were based on superficialities. “Fascism,” Paxton writes, “presents itself to us in vivid primary images: a chauvinist demagogue haranguing an ecstatic crowd; disciplined ranks of marching youths; colored-shirted militants beating up members of some demonized minority; surprise invasions at dawn; and fit soldiers parading through a captured city.”<sup>31</sup> It is understandable how various national movements employing the same methods can be seen as being part of a larger international or generic movement. But such images are the outward manifestations, the signals, of fascism. They are not fascism itself. A generic movement based on these superficialities, rather than something more substantive, will necessarily break down upon anything more than a cursory examination.

Such signals pose a double-sided problem for fascism. On the one hand, they provide an easy shorthand for observers to lump similar looking movements together regardless of their differences. On the other, they are easily mimicked by those who are not, in fact, fascist. As Paxton writes, during the interwar period “many regimes that were not functionally fascist borrowed elements of fascist decor in order to lend themselves an aura of force, vitality, and mass mobilization.”<sup>32</sup> It is critical to avoid the trap of mistaking these superficial similarities for fascism. But Allardyce goes a step further, dismissing all similarities because they were “nationally” different. This is another trap to be avoided.

That one fascist organization chose as its symbol the swastika, another a bundle of sticks, a third something different; that one fascist looked to the glory of the Roman Empire, another to a time of German greatness, or a third to something different; that all advocated for the

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<sup>28</sup> Allardyce, 370.

<sup>29</sup> Allardyce, 384.

<sup>30</sup> Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, (London: Longman), 1976, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, (New York: Vintage), 2005, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 3.

supremacy of their own nations is proof for Allardyce that “so-called fascist parties are too mixed, diverse, and exceptional to be collected into...a general typology.”<sup>33</sup> Further, Allardyce contends, one does not start to see any kind of generic fascism until the Nazis begin to assert their dominance over Europe. Such uniformity is the result only of the Nazis swallowing up the “home” movements, either replacing them outright, or forcing them into the Nazis’ own image. It is only with the death of fascism as “an independent, spontaneous force” that it begins to look like the kind of generic movement, with shared, cross-national characteristics, that is being sought.<sup>34</sup>

In making this argument, Allardyce ignores the generic feature of fascism that is staring him in the face: nationalism. As members of a nationalist movement, fascists in all places argue that their nation is supreme. That they disagree with one another about which nation, be it the German, Italian, French, or Spanish nation, is the “greatest” does not deny that nationalism is an essential, indeed, generic component of fascism.

### ***Modernism and Modernization***

H.A. Turner suggests that fascism might be better understood if it were viewed according to the theory of modernization. This theory suggests that the one constant in all recent history is the “unprecedentedly thorough and rapid process of change” that saw the replacement of traditional societies around the globe as the result of “industrialization, urbanization, secularization, and rationalization.”<sup>35</sup> Such an approach, Turner argues, might yield the generic character of fascism.

The modernization theory approach is problematic in Allardyce’s view given that Italian Fascism and German Nazism developed under different economic circumstances where the latter “arose in the most advanced industrial nation in Western Europe; the other, in a country still largely undeveloped.”<sup>36</sup> It is not possible, Allardyce suggests, for an ideology to spontaneously develop in two different countries at two different stages of development. If the Nazi’s subscribed to a “utopian anti-modernism” as Turner suggests,<sup>37</sup> how do you account for Italian Fascism? Turner’s view makes sense if you consider fascism to be a negative response to

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<sup>33</sup> Allardyce, 378.

<sup>34</sup> Allardyce, 377.

<sup>35</sup> Henry Ashby Turner, Jr., “Fascism and Modernization,” *World Politics*, no. 4 (July 1972): 548.

<sup>36</sup> Allardyce, 372.

<sup>37</sup> Turner, 562.

modernization in a highly industrialized nation. But this approach cannot account for Italian Fascism which appeared in an economically backward nation. If Italy had not modernized, against what could the Italian Fascists be reacting?

One way of dealing with this problem is to turn it on its head, as A.F.K. Organski does.<sup>38</sup> Rather than defining fascism as a reaction against modernity, Organski sees fascism as a way of advancing the modernization process. Nazism, in Organski's view, as characterized by Allardyce, was not fascism because fascism was "a developmental stage in the modernization process, an elite dictatorship that advanced and industrialized a nation's economy."<sup>39</sup> Allardyce quotes Organski: "Hitler was an authoritarian dictator, a nationalist, an aggressor, a represser, and a madman, but he was not a fascist, for Germany was fully industrialized when Hitler came to power."<sup>40</sup>

Together, Turner and Organski have demonstrated Allardyce's claim that all too often, "Interpretations that make sense in the case of one regime often make no sense in the case of the other."<sup>41</sup> If these two movements, taken to be the "paradigmatic manifestations"<sup>42</sup> of generic fascism cannot be united by modernization theory, if they appear in vastly different developmental circumstances, how can they be said to be part of the same phenomenon?

Alan Cassels attempts to keep the two movements united by providing a dual definition of fascism: "modern and anti-modern, rational and irrational, corporative and *völkisch*."<sup>43</sup> Under this theory, fascism can appear in two countries, with different developmental circumstances and, depending on those circumstances, advocate for different things. Mussolini and the Fascists could push ahead with the modernization of Italy's economy through a mix of industrialization and corporatism. At the same time, the Nazis could rage against the evils of modernization seeking to "fly back to a past age where the complexities of modern life had no place."<sup>44</sup>

Cassels's dual-definition reunites Nazism and Fascism, even if it does leave unanswered the question of how or why a political ideology could spring up under different conditions and

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<sup>38</sup> Cited in Allardyce, 372.

<sup>39</sup> Allardyce, 372.

<sup>40</sup> A.F.K. Organski, *The Stages of Political Development*, (New York, 1965), 123, quoted in Allardyce, 372.

<sup>41</sup> Allardyce, 372.

<sup>42</sup> Turner, 549.

<sup>43</sup> Alan Cassels, "Janus: The Two Faces of Fascism," *Historical Papers*, no. 1 (1969): 166-184, cited in Allardyce, 373.

<sup>44</sup> Cassels, 167.

advocate for diametrically opposed ends and still be considered part of the same generic phenomenon.<sup>45</sup> The problem with the equation is even worse in Allardyce's eyes because, he argues, that for the supposedly modern Fascists, corporatism was "little more than a "propaganda exercise" and the Nazis, supposedly anti-modern "did little to inhibit industry and much to promote it."<sup>46</sup>

Turner supports this claim, writing that the Nazis were "fascinated by technology and, despite their hostility to industrial society, stood in awe of German industry." Indeed, "industry grew still bigger in the Third Reich, German cities became still larger, the flight from the land persisted, and women continued to be drawn into the labor force."<sup>47</sup> Allardyce draws the inference from Cassels that the explanation for this is that the Nazis were "anti-modernist in mind but not in practice. Their goal in the future was to 'demodernize' Europe; their means in the present was to industrialize Germany."<sup>48</sup> For Turner, this is a "simple explanation."<sup>49</sup> In his view, "the Nazis...practiced modernization inadvertently in order to pursue their fundamentally anti-modern aims."<sup>50</sup> Paxton, too, agrees with this assessment, writing that though Hitler loved fast cars and airplanes, "he nursed the archaic dream of installing German peasant colonies in the plains of eastern Europe, [and] this dream could be realized only by modern weaponry."<sup>51</sup>

It is in these definitions of fascism that we see the manifestation of Allardyce's concerns about attempts to define fascism. Having developed theories that do not hold up to their confrontation with the facts, Turner and Cassels go to extreme lengths to maintain the legitimacy of their theories. Given such explanations it is no wonder why Allardyce believes the search for a generic fascism is one faith pursued by reason. One wonders why they simply do not concede the point, that the explanation does not work, rather than insisting on that they will shine as brilliant as diamonds if only held in the right way under the right light? It is hard to fault Allardyce for rubbishing the whole attempt. Yet, simply because the work reviewed to this point has been faulty, sometimes seriously so, that does not mean that Allardyce has drawn the correct conclusion.

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<sup>45</sup> Turner, 563.

<sup>46</sup> Allardyce, 373.

<sup>47</sup> Turner, 557.

<sup>48</sup> Allardyce 373-4.

<sup>49</sup> Turner, 557.

<sup>50</sup> Turner, 558.

<sup>51</sup> Paxton, 8.

Several questions arise out of Allardyce's critique. Was Italy really as backwards as Allardyce claims? Was modernization little more than propaganda for Mussolini and the Fascists? Did the Nazis really harbour regressive ambitions, seeking to turn back the clock on modernity and return to some idyllic point in the past?

While admittedly not as industrialized as Germany, Italy was not the pre-modern state that Allardyce suggests. Between 1879 and 1887, Italy experienced an industrial growth "spurt"<sup>52</sup> followed by an industrial revolution between 1896 and 1914, which doubled industrial production in the country and increased the national income by nearly 50%.<sup>53</sup> Granted, the number of those employed by agriculture was twice that employed by industry but the majority of those appear to be in the south rather than in the north where fascism was most active. If this is true, what happens to the modernization theories of fascism?

In the first place, it raises doubts about the accuracy of Allardyce's claim about the pre-modernity of Italy. While granting that Italy and Germany had experienced different degrees of industrialization, if both were, broadly speaking, industrialized, then Allardyce's negation of the modernization theory on the grounds that Italy and Germany were at two completely different stages of development is invalidated.

But what accounts for the modernizing language of the Fascists? If Italy were modernized would one not expect to encounter rhetoric in Italy, as found in Germany, which sought a return to an idyllic period? The Fascists might have been expected to extol the virtues of the undeveloped south of Italy but they do not. Instead, they reach to the past for symbols and images for the purpose of inspiring Italians to move forward into the future, to inspire them to achieve new glories rather than recapturing old ones.

So appears a twist on Cassel's Janus-faced fascism. Rather than the production of modern and anti-modern fascisms appearing in pre-modern and modern societies respectively, modern Italy produced modernizing fascists while modern Germany produced anti-modern ones. What accounts for this? Perhaps this seeming paradox is the result of a misunderstanding of the attitudes towards modernization displayed by the fascists.

If the Fascists' failure to implement corporatism was the result, not of such rhetoric being propaganda, but rather of an inability or ineptitude to implement the plan, then one can cover

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<sup>52</sup> Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy: 1919-1929*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson), 1973, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Lyttelton, 12.

much of the distance needed to explain this part of the paradox. Cassels is supportive of this point, suggesting that corporatism was an “innate impulse” of Italian fascism and that the failure to implement it was the result of Mussolini’s “incompetence and the intractability of Italian society.”<sup>54</sup> When one considers the number of compromises that Mussolini had to make to get into and maintain power along with the fact that throughout his time in office he remained beholden to the king, this argument makes sense.<sup>55</sup>

As for the Nazis, whether or not they were truly as backward-looking as suggested by Turner, Paxton, and Cassels is open to debate. Turner believed that Hitler and Himmler, among others, “looked to the early middle ages [and] to pre-Christian, even pre-civilized, times” prescribing “a revival of the cults of soil and sword” striving to “free the bulk of the German people from the grip of industrial society and return them to the simple agrarian life.”<sup>56</sup> According to Paxton, Hitler “nursed an archaic dream of installing German peasant colonies on the plains of eastern Europe.”<sup>57</sup> Cassels suggests that Hitler’s ideal society may have been the feudal age “[b]ut more likely, this ideal past society was something more primitive, compounded of the Wagnerian operas and ancient Germanic sagas that the *Führer* admired so much.”<sup>58</sup>

All of this is thrown into doubt by Allardyce when he points out that the Nazis, despite their rhetoric, did very little to return to a pre-modern period, and much to continue Germany down the path of modernization.<sup>59</sup> Eric Dorn Brose supports this, citing a number of instances in which Hitler spoke strongly in favour of modern industry.<sup>60</sup> Eugen Weber, for his part, casts doubt on just how backward looking the Nazis were when he describes Hitler’s “ideal world [as]

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<sup>54</sup> Cassels, 171.

<sup>55</sup> Alexander de Grand contends that even though Mussolini had put into place much of the structure of a totalitarian state by 1940 it was not operational. The precariousness of Mussolini’s hold on power necessitated compromises with the King, the Church, the bureaucracy, and industrial and agricultural sectors which seriously limited his ability to act. De Grand relates how the industrial and agricultural managed the delay the implementation of a corporatist system for four years until the outbreak of war when Mussolini finally gave up. “Cracks in the Facade: The Failure of Fascist Totalitarianism in Italy 1935-9,” *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 21 (1991): 526.

<sup>56</sup> Turner, 551.

<sup>57</sup> Paxton, “The Five Stages of Fascism,” 8.

<sup>58</sup> Cassels, 167.

<sup>59</sup> Allardyce, 373.

<sup>60</sup> Eric Dorn Brose, “Generic Fascism Revisited: Attitudes toward Technology in Germany and Italy, 1919-1945,” *German Studies Review*, vol. 10, 2, (May 1987): 286. Brose cites instances of Hitler praising Germany’s use of the “the most up-to-date technological methods” and his pride in the “gigantic factories’ which were springing from the earth to produce oil, rubber, and steel for the army”. In the most telling anecdote, Hitler responds to Otto Strasser’s urging for a reduction in the size of Germany’s industrial base saying, “Do you think me crazy enough to want to ruin Germany’s great industry?”

that of the turn-of-the-century Vienna and Wilhelminian Germany he had known, his ‘new German man’ was the ideal bourgeois of those days.”<sup>61</sup>

What if the pre-modernist streak in Nazism was the “propaganda exercise” and they, in fact, had no intention of halting the industrialization of Germany? What if continued modernization and industrialization was the “truth” for fascists. If this is the case, then one can resolve the modernization paradox: any failure on the part of the Nazis to turn back the clock was because they had no intention of doing so. Additionally, any failure on the part of the Italian Fascists to modernize Italy was the result of an inability to do so, rather than a lack of desire.

While this makes sense, Dorn Brose points out that it is incorrect, and even “pointless” to argue “whether Nazism and Fascism were modern or anti-modern. Viewed solely from the standpoint of the machine, they were obviously both.” He argues that both Nazism and Fascism contained three strains of thought towards technology within their parties. There were those who were “reactionary modernists and technocrats,” those who were “technophobes and return-to-the-soil fanatics,” and “charismatic leaders who reserved [sic] a place for the machine in a ‘reformed’ postindustrial world.”<sup>62</sup>

These competing strains of thought within the fascist movements, coupled with the very short period of time that they were in power, make it very difficult to draw conclusions about what it was that the fascists actually intended. As Ian Kershaw points out, six of the twelve years the Nazis were in power were spent fighting a war and “war, especially on the scale of the Second World War, contains its own momentum for rapid social change.”<sup>63</sup> If intentions are difficult to discern, what then were the effects of fascist rule?

Kershaw highlights the work of Ralf Dahrendorf, who put forth the thesis that regardless of what the Nazis intended “their *Gleichschaltung* (‘co-ordination’) of German society, they had destroyed German ‘tribal loyalties,’ breaking traditional anti-liberal religious, regional, family, and corporative bonds, reduced élites to a ‘monopolistic clique,’ and had levelled down social strata to the equalizing status of the *Volksgenosse*, the ‘people’s comrade.”<sup>64</sup> This “destruction of traditional loyalties, norms, and values” meant that all traces of the past to which the Nazis

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<sup>61</sup> Eugen Weber, “Fascism(s) and Some Harbingers,” *The Journal of Modern History*, no. 4 (December 1982), 760.

<sup>62</sup> Dorn Brose, 298.

<sup>63</sup> Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation, Fourth Edition*, (London: Arnold), 2000, 162.

<sup>64</sup> Kershaw, 166.

might have wanted to return had been destroyed.<sup>65</sup> This left but one path for the fascists to follow: the path of modernization.

Based on this, the conclusion to draw is that fascism whether by grudge or by design, was a modernizing ideology. Whatever the rhetoric of wanting to return to some kind of earlier time, such a return was not possible. But nor was it desirable to follow the path of modernity that the liberals and Marxists were following. Therefore, if the fascists were going to have to accept that the “damage was done,” their task was to construct an alternative modernity that could solve the problems of humanity, the most notable of which was its alienation.

### **THE IDEOLOGY OF FASCISM**

To this point, the generic features of fascism – nationalism and the seeking of an alternative modernity – have been identified. These features are consistent with Griffin’s definition of fascism. To complete the exercise, attention must now be turned to identifying the ideological content of fascism; to figuring out why fascism existed and what it hoped to accomplish and, just as importantly, what did fascism offer to its adherents in return for their support?

Answering this question is no less difficult than identifying the generic components of fascism. Indeed, it may be even tougher. This is for three reasons, two of which were discussed earlier in this paper: one the lack of a common founder, and two the fact that fascism is necessarily studied “from without” meaning that there can be no objective declaration of what fascism stood for. Its ultimate meaning, then, is imposed from the outside, and is necessarily easily criticized. The third problem is that the fascists were, in practice, notoriously opportunistic, the first politicians to make a virtue of lying. It is therefore impossible to believe anything they said about their aims and intentions.<sup>66</sup>

The results are approximations of fascist ideology that are heavily coloured by the biases of the observer. If one places great weight on the opportunism of fascism in practice and believes that fascism is an illusion, as Allardyce does, then one would be inclined against an ideological component as well, arguing that fascism offered nothing: no hope for salvation, “no view of history, no ideal for the future” and represented no social class, no economic interest, and no

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<sup>65</sup> Kershaw, 166.

<sup>66</sup> Allardyce, 380.

social organization.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, if one is of the view that all ideas are the product of social relations, one might be inclined to understand fascism as a tool of the capitalist class seeking a way to hold onto its position of dominance during the final stage of capitalism.

To those who subscribe to such positions, the posing of the question about what it was fascism offered to its adherents in return for their support is pointless. To answer it is methodologically questionable.<sup>68</sup> But the question must be asked and answered. For fascism did not seek to come to power solely through the exercise of will and violence. Instead, fascists sought the support of the masses and, indeed, understood that the legitimacy of their movement derived from that support.<sup>69</sup> In order to obtain and maintain that support, the fascists needed to offer something to the public in return. The return the fascists offered went beyond mere material gains (although material gains certainly did play a role) and offered individuals the chance to end their alienation from the rest of humanity.

By what method shall the answer to this question be determined? Allardyce warns of the dangers of trusting the words of fascists and also objects to the cherry-picking of evidence and attempting to trace the development of the ideology by fixing on an idea and then finding “an earlier thinker who appears to have originated, possessed, or transmitted the idea” and assigning “to the original thinker a place into the philosophical tradition leading to fascism” declaring them “pre-fascist” or “proto-fascist.”<sup>70</sup> Allardyce is right to be concerned about any approach that appears to draw straight lines from thinkers in one era to the next and declaring them to be directly related. However, to ignore the importance of thinkers who in one era identify a set of problems that remain unsolved in the next or subsequent eras is to make a mistake of a different kind.

Consider the criticisms unleashed on liberal democracy by Ernest Renan in France. Renan “condemned ‘the idea of equal rights of all men, the way of conceiving government as a mere public service which one pays for, and to which one owes neither respect nor gratitude, a kind of American impertinence,’ the claim ‘that politics can be reduced to a mere consultation of the will of the majority.’”<sup>71</sup> Such an attitude, Renan argued, “could only give rise to ‘a sort of

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<sup>67</sup> Allardyce, 385.

<sup>68</sup> Allardyce, 381.

<sup>69</sup> Emilio Gentile, “Fascism as Political Religion,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 25 (1990), 241.

<sup>70</sup> Allardyce, 379.

<sup>71</sup> Sternhell, xi.

universal mediocrity.”<sup>72</sup> What is significant is that Rehan was writing in the 1870s and, as Sternhell points out, the criticisms of liberal democracy he laid out had little changed some twenty years later during the *fin-de-siècle*, nor even later in the 1930s.<sup>73</sup>

Mussolini may have highlighted Renan’s “pre-fascist illuminations”<sup>74</sup> but Sternhell is careful not to draw a direct link. After all, Renan was not a fascist, he was a conservative.<sup>75</sup> Instead, what matters is that the attacks on capitalism and liberal democracy came from both the Right and the Left and, in so doing, created the opportunity for the emergence of fascist ideas.

The problem of the trustworthiness of fascists is a critical one. For Allardyce, if nothing else has succeeded in killing the idea of a fascist ideology, then it is on this hill that the concept shall meet its final end. While all politicians throughout history have readily changed their minds when circumstances warranted, discarding seemingly strongly held beliefs in the pursuit of power, they generally always attempted to justify them in some way. For Mussolini and Hitler, it was different. They “were the first [politicians] to make a public creed of lying.”<sup>76</sup> Of Mussolini, Allardyce writes that the Italian leader “described his own method as the technique of the ‘Scotch douche,’ gushing alternately hot and cold, radical and conservative, sounding reasonable at one moment and intransigent at the next, whatever the occasion demanded.”<sup>77</sup> Fascism was a “‘super-relativist’ movement with no fixed principles, ready for almost any alliance.”<sup>78</sup> It was, above all, “a path to political power.”<sup>79</sup>

According to Allardyce, “such men simply cannot be taken at their word, yet the quoted word is the mode of intellectual history. Confronting confessed liars compromises the traditional method of using quotations from speeches and writings to document arguments on the belief or motives of historical personalities.”<sup>80</sup> In the face of this, the only way to resolve any contradictions between word and deed is, in the view of Paxton, to pay attention to the deeds, for the deeds are real.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Sternhell, xii.

<sup>73</sup> Sternhell, xiii.

<sup>74</sup> Cited in Sternhell, xiv.

<sup>75</sup> Sternhell, xi.

<sup>76</sup> Allardyce, 380.

<sup>77</sup> Allardyce, 381.

<sup>78</sup> Dennis Mack Smith, *Mussolini: A Biography*, (New York: Vintage), 1983, 48.

<sup>79</sup> Mack Smith, *Mussolini: A Biography*, 46.

<sup>80</sup> Allardyce, 380.

<sup>81</sup> Paxton, *The Five Stages of Fascism*, 7.

This approach is unsatisfactory, however, because it leads one necessarily to the conclusion that fascism is irrational, purely opportunistic, and devoid of any true meaning, which is certainly not how the fascists saw themselves. Nor can it explain the levels of popular support the fascists enjoyed at various times. There must be something more to this phenomenon.

Ever since the beginning of the modern age, humanity has struggled with the problem of alienation. From the time the first fence was erected, enclosing a plot of land for one's personal use, humanity has experienced an ever increasing isolation from nature and, indeed, from other humans, withdrawing further and further into himself until he stands alone facing the world, disconnected from all and sundry.

Throughout the course of the industrial revolution, through the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, this alienation intensified, swallowing up greater and greater numbers, wreaking havoc on society, destroying the familiar patterns of people's lives. Where once they had been governed by the rhythms of the universe – waking as the sun rose, sleeping as it set; hunting, gathering, and farming according to the changing of the seasons – humanity was beginning to march to the beat of a new drummer. Inserting itself between the mass of man and the universe was an artificial timekeeper, the mechanized metronome known as the machine.

As the machine spread, the rhythms of life had less and less connection to anything real. The 12-hour shift or the 8-hour shift was dictated not by the available daylight, nor by the needs of the worker to ensure enough food for him and his family. Instead, it was dictated by the machine's owner and his profit needs.

Industrialization was coupled with the breakdown of traditional societies. More and more people left the country-side in search of work in the factories of growing cities disrupting family life. Disconnected now from the land, from family, and indeed, from the fruits of his own labour, man had become like a cog in a machine that directed itself to a purpose no grander than the production of profit for some other person or conglomerate.

“Industrialization, urbanization, secularization, and rationalization,” to recall Turner's phrase, were destroying everything that humanity had known. Industrialization was destroying the rhythms of life. Urbanization was destroying the family and traditional morality. Secularization was destroying the church and taking with it the possibility that humanity might have a chance at transcending his earthly existence, achieving eternal life. Rationalization was

destroying the personal relationships and the hope of building anything great on earth, sacrificing them to the importance of turning a profit.

Life had lost any sense of purpose. “Progress,” Weber writes, “was an illusion.”<sup>82</sup> Without a sense of purpose, without a “grand project,” and left to its own devices, history would lead inevitably to decadence and decline, as Renan warned. It was this problem that all great ideologies attempt to address.

The liberals, for their part, preached that hard work was its own success. They placed the individual at the centre of history and argued that by giving each person basic freedoms and, provided he worked hard, he could attain his fullest existence. The problem was that it was liberalism that had led to the intensification of the problems of modernity and thus came under attack from both the Right and the Left. The attack from the Right has been partially demonstrated through the words of Renan quoted above and is not that dissimilar from the attack of the Left. Liberal-democratic rule, both sides agreed, was seen as a way of hiding the “self-serving rule of a self-serving elite.”<sup>83</sup> According to the Left, liberal freedoms were not freedoms at all.

The answer for the Left was the overthrow of class rule. The individual could only be free once the bourgeoisie had been overthrown and all classes abolished. The problem with this, however, was that for the socialists, as well as the liberals, the individual was still the basic unit. For all of their talk of collective action, the goal of the socialist is the same as the liberal’s: to free the individual. “Socialism is at odds with Liberalism only on the question of the organization of production and the division of wealth,” wrote Alfredo Rocco.<sup>84</sup> It does nothing to address the atomization of man.

Into this breach stepped the fascists. The fascists rejected “the old atomistic and mechanical state theory which was the basis of the liberal and democratic doctrines with an organic and historic concept.”<sup>85</sup> They rejected the materialism embodied by liberalism, Marxism,

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<sup>82</sup> Weber, 747.

<sup>83</sup> Weber, 753.

<sup>84</sup> Alfredo Rocco, “The Political Doctrine of Fascism,” *Readings on Fascism and National Socialism*, (Denver: Alan Swallow), 32.

<sup>85</sup> Rocco, 34. See also E. Berth quoted in Sternhell, 59.

and democracy and sought an alternative: a way of transcending them, offering a greater reward than mere riches.<sup>86</sup> The way to achieve this was the creation of a new society.

Under liberalism the state belongs to the bourgeoisie. Under socialism it belongs to the proletariat. It is only under national socialism, or fascism, that such divisions can be brought to an end, that the state becomes the property of everyone (and everyone property of it). The state represents the interests of everyone because their interests are the state's interests.<sup>87</sup> Rather than "society for the individual," we have "individuals for society."<sup>88</sup> This means that all members of the community are working towards the betterment of the nation rather than looking out for their own individual interests. In so doing, the rootlessness of man can be brought to an end.

But this was no Utopian model. It was based on the realities of existence on earth.<sup>89</sup> Thus life for the individual under fascism would remain difficult. Fascism offered no solution to the problem of an existence that was "nasty, brutish, and short." Man would remain a cog, an individual on an assembly line, anonymous and small, "transient and insignificant,"<sup>90</sup> with one significant difference from the liberal system: his actions would be unified with that of the rest of the members of his community, he would be made whole again by the fact that all would be working towards the greatness of the nation. Fascism "appeared to be a movement capable of transcending the banality of everyday life and integrating the individual into a new 'moral community.'"<sup>91</sup> Though the individual may not experience wealth or fame, by directing his efforts towards this grand project he is reunited with his fellow man, with all who preceded him and all who will follow him. He can stretch out his arms, grasping the alpha and omega of history, bringing an end to his alienation.

Fascism, thus, cannot be discerned from the daily actions of its practicing politicians, as Paxton suggests. To do so, as mentioned, leads one to the conclusion that fascism is entirely irrational because it fails to grasp the larger picture. Fascism must be considered from the point

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<sup>86</sup> Sternhell, 27.

<sup>87</sup> See the quotes from Marcel D eat in Sternhell, 24-5.

<sup>88</sup> Rocco, 34.

<sup>89</sup> Giovanni Gentile, "The Philosophic Basis of Fascism," *Readings on Fascism and National Socialism*, (Denver: Alan Swallow), 58.

<sup>90</sup> Rocco, 34.

<sup>91</sup> E. Gentile, 233.

of view of its ideology. As Sternhell contends, “The nature of a political ideology always emerges more clearly in its aspirations than in its application.”<sup>92</sup>

It is only by looking at the ultimate aim of fascism – bringing an end to the atomization of man – that one can hope to understand the actions of its politicians. Trying to understand the fascist as one understands a liberal or socialist politician is to miss the point entirely. As Rocco argued, the liberal and socialist were united in their ultimate aim. Their goals, similar to those who argued for Italy to remain neutral in the First World War, were “material advantages, advantages tangible, ponderable, palatable.” The fascists, on the other hand, like the Interventionists, “stood for moral advantages, intangible, impalpable, imponderable -- imponderable at least on the scales used by their antagonists.”<sup>93</sup>

There is an element of the religious to this. As Emilio Gentile writes, it was not political doctrine that united fascists, but rather, faith. Faith in the nation and faith in the ability of the leaders to organize society in such a way to bring about the nation’s greatness, and faith that the greatness of the nation would allow the individual to transcend his meagre, earthly existence. By involving the masses in this exercise, by converting them to this new “fascist religion” and achieving their “blind conformism,” the power and authority of the fascists could be solidified.<sup>94</sup>

The offer fascism made to its prospective followers was bringing about the end to their collective alienation, unifying them under the banner of the nation, directing their activities towards the greatness of that nation, and, in so doing, constructing an alternative modernity. This is the answer to the question, “Why fascism?”

There are certainly significant doubts as to the effectiveness of the fascist argument. Mack Smith, for instance, suggests that support for fascism was contingent on “outward successes” – material gains – and Italians supported the Fascists only so long as no other alternative was visible. When such alternatives did appear, rare though it may have been, “the whole machinery of totalitarian consent disintegrated in a moment. This suggests that the

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<sup>92</sup> Sternhell, 1.

<sup>93</sup> G. Gentile, 48-9.

<sup>94</sup> E. Gentile, 234, 235, 241.

consensus behind fascism must have been largely cynical....”<sup>95</sup> Though this may be true, it serves only to cast doubt on the attractiveness of the fascist ideology, not its content.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, fascism can be defined as a nationalist, modernizing movement that seeks a realignment of society, an alternative modernity, replacing the individual as the central figure in history and subjugating him to the nation, offering the individual the chance to transcend his earthly existence. This definition, while broadly consistent with Griffin’s definition of fascism as “a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism,” goes a step further by explaining what it is the fascists offered to individuals in return for their support.

This definition could only be arrived at by examining Gilbert Allardyce’s criticisms of earlier analyses of fascism. While Allardyce correctly identifies many flaws in the work of earlier scholars he draws the wrong conclusions. The failure of earlier definitions rested not on the non-existence of fascism but rather on a faulty understanding of fascism. Fascism can only be understood if one employs “methodological empathy” – attempting to understand a phenomenon in its own terms – without appearing to argue for its revival. This paper has done that.

The definition of fascism argued in this paper suggests that fascism is not a “dead” ideology. Instead, since fascism seeks to address the problem of the alienation of man, it is an ideology that is liable to appear so long as this problem remains unsolved. It will not necessarily do so in the same guise as it did during the interwar period, but could instead appear in a form characteristic of whatever era in which it re-emerges.

This paper is not the final word on this topic. It raises as many questions as it answers. It has not dealt with the Marxist analysis of fascism. It has not addressed questions of racism and war and the role that they play in fascist ideology and practice. Nor has it addressed the centrality of “palingenesis” to Griffin’s definition, an idea that was certainly critical to the fascism of the interwar period, but is not necessarily central to a re-emergent fascism which could conceivably arise in nations that have not yet experienced greatness. As such, this paper should be considered part of an ongoing body of research and these questions will be addressed in future work.

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<sup>95</sup> Mack Smith, *Mussolini: A Biography*, 147.

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