



Studying Fascism in a Postfascist Age. From New Consensus to New Wave?¹

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Abstract

The article suggests a way of mapping the remit for *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* by considering how far a “new consensus” has formed between specialists working in this area which conceptualizes fascism as a revolutionary form of ultranationalism that attempts to realize the myth of the regenerated nation. It is a myth which applied in practice creates a totalitarian movement or regime engaged in combating cultural, ethnic and even biological (‘dysgenic’) decadence and engineering a new sort of ‘man’ in a alternative sociopolitical and cultural modernity to liberal capitalism. Having surveyed empirical evidence for the spontaneous emergence of a broad, though contested, scholarly convergence around this approach in the historical and social sciences in the last two decades, even beyond Anglophone academia, the article suggests that this development is part of an even wider phenomenon. This is the tendency for scholars to take seriously the utopian ideological and cultural dynamics of political phenomena once generally dismissed as exercises in the monopoly of power, of exercise of violence for its own ‘nihilistic’ sake rather than as a rebellion *against* nihilism in the search for a new order. It finishes with a reminder from several experts that fascism is not a static or immutable phenomenon, an insight that demands from scholars a willingness to track the way it adapts to the unfolding conditions of modernity, thereby assuming new guises practically unrecognizable from its inter-war manifestations.

Keywords

fascism; neo-fascism; ‘new consensus’; modernity; political modernism; palingenetic myth

‘Fascism had no ideology’

In 1986 I was told authoritatively by a major English expert of Mussolini’s Italy that Fascism had no ideology. Despite the efforts of George Mosse, Stanley Payne, and Stein Larsen, historians in the main ignored theories of fascism when reconstructing events in the inter-war history, most tacitly agreeing with

¹This article is largely based on my chapter “Rechtsextremismusforschung. From New Consensus to New Wave.” In *Die Dynamik der europäischen Rechten. Geschichte, Kontinuitäten und Wandel*. Ed. Claudia Globisch. Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag, 2011.

Allardyce that “there was no fascism outside Italy” (despite the fact that in France and Britain there were movements that called themselves fascist and had no difficulty defining it). Fascism “defied definition”, was “full of contradictions”, an “enigma”. Even among students of comparative fascism, the atmosphere was of an Ivory Tower of Babel, where academics babbled about fascism as “full of contradictions” or having “the form of an ideology without the content” instead of actually bothering to engage with the fascists’ own understanding of their political goals and historical mission.

Now, thirty years on, the discipline has been enjoying a prolonged spring after a winter of hard times. Scores of texts have been written on generic fascism by seasoned authorities, and an exciting new generation of scholars who have discarded the blinkers worn by the immediate post-1945 and Cold War academics are using a deeper knowledge of ‘peripheral’ and failed fascisms to place our understanding of the fascism of the ‘centre’ (regime fascism) in new perspectives. The collapse of the Soviet bloc has opened up previously sealed archives and younger scholars are writing histories of the inter-war extreme right in their own countries, no matter how ‘peripheral’, and finally filling in pieces of the jig-saw puzzle in Scandinavia, the Baltic States, Eastern Europe, and outside Europe, where several movements and regimes arose deeply indebted to Fascism and Nazism, but also with original features of their own which cast fresh light on the ‘core’ fascisms in Italy and Germany. The relationship of fascism to organized religion, gender, modernity, culture, art, economics, communism, male chauvinism, aesthetics, totalitarianism, political religion, technology, and modernism is coming into ever sharper focus. To crown it all, here we have a new Anglophone journal launched in Holland with an international array of academics, young and ‘senior’ (among which I must unfortunately now count myself) on the editorial board. Inter-war style fascism may have become a political pariah, but fascism studies are ‘in’.

Yet no matter how modernized the technology of publishing research in the humanities, or credible a field of studies as a venture meriting conferences and journal articles, the archetypal problems of establishing the key definitions and the conceptual framework essential for fruitful contributions to the new journal will never be solved by a search engine algorithm or a Wiki-entry. Nor can conceptual clarity about the fundamental issues posed by the task of exploring meaningfully the common patterns between unique phenomena – the basis of all ‘comparability’ and synoptic surveys in history – be achieved simply through a workshop or video-conference. When an international team of academics of various expertise, cultural and historical background, and generational experience agrees to promote the study of fascism, its chances of delivering breakthroughs in knowledge and understanding, however good on paper, may be severely compromised by the ‘Babel Effect’. This spontaneously

results whenever more than two experts discuss a topic, giving rise to a fundamental disagreement about how to define and delimit the central subject, and how best to approach it. Fortunately for the new journal, a boom in fascism studies has coincided with a growing convergence of opinion about how to define it. Moreover, the journal will appear within a year of the chilling reminder that Andres Breivik delivered in his twin attack on the ‘promulticultural’ political establishment in Norway,² that fascism is still alive and kicking, even if the haemorrhaging of its popular support in post-1945 democracies has forced it to undergo a radical make-over of its organization and tactics, as well as redefining its enemies, goals, and territorial remit for an increasingly embattled ‘white race’.

The new consensus in fascist studies: a brief history

The history of scholarly consensus in the study of fascism is necessarily brief, since even an optimist about its presence such as myself cannot claim that it has been in existence for much more than a decade. Even then it is partial, contested, and manifests itself to a significant degree only in the Anglophone sphere of the human sciences. Of course, within the international Marxist tradition of the human sciences there has always been broad agreement that fascism is a reactionary, or at most a ‘counter-revolutionary’, phenomenon and somehow inextricably related to capitalism. Yet, even here there are deeply divided ‘schools of thought’, and a number of highly idiosyncratic positions have been adopted on exactly how it relates to market forces, the bourgeoisie, and big business³ (some of which have striking affinities with some non-Marxist analyses, despite the fact that there seems to be a persistent taboo about recognizing such opportunities for collaboration between the Marxist and non-Marxist ‘camps’).⁴

² It is significant that Breivik’s 1550 page manifesto posted on the Web on the eve of the attacks in July 2011 reveal the classic palingenetic world view of fascism, with a description of Europe’s present decadence ascribed to multi-culturalism and Islamization followed by the evocation of the need for a ‘Christian’ jihad to bring about its rebirth through cultural-ethnic cleansing.

³ E.g. Nicos Poulantzas. *Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism*. London: NLB, 1974; Mihaly Vajda. *Fascism as a Mass Movement*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976.

⁴ For two attempt to reconcile the ‘new consensus’ with Marxist approaches to fascism see Roger Griffin “Notes towards the definition of fascist culture: the prospects for synergy between Marxist and liberal heuristics.” *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 42 (1999), 1, 95–114; and: Roger Griffin “Exploding the continuum of history: a Marxist model of fascism’s revolutionary dynamics.” In *The Fascist Century. Essays by Roger Griffin*. Ed. Matthew Feldman. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2008, 46–68. The *European Journal for Political Theory* is publishing a special issue on this topic edited by myself and David Roberts in 2012.

However, in the seven decades that passed since the foundation of the first *Fascio* by Mussolini in March 1919, few concerted attempts were made to define generic fascism by 'liberal' academics, and their characterizations of the 'fascist minimum' were often little more than nebulous 'shopping lists' of disparate phenomena. As result, the term was wisely shunned by historians as a key analytical tool amidst pronouncements that it was a 'conundrum',⁵ or calls for it to be banished from the social sciences altogether.⁶ This deadlock was not broken by Ernst Nolte's 'metapolitical' definition offered in *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche*, which proved highly cryptic and for practical purposes unusable to Anglophone intellectuals, whatever the notoriety of its English translation, *Three Faces of Fascism* (1965). Nor was much of a dent made in its stubbornly intractable nature by Stanley Payne's far more incisive tripartite 'typological' definition of 1980, which remained sadly neglected as the basis for the empirical study of putative fascisms.⁷ Meanwhile, brilliant essays on comparative fascism by George Mosse⁸ displayed a reluctance to formulate an illuminating short-hand definition which impaired their heuristic value. At the same time major monographs on fascism in particular countries by such scholars as Richard Thurlow on fascism in England,⁹ and James Gregor on fascism in Italy¹⁰ showed little interest in relating their findings to how fascism manifested itself in other countries in order to identify the uniqueness and originality of the manifestation they were studying. Synoptic summaries of the growing number of disparate approaches to fascism¹¹ available simply left readers with a sense of proliferating contradictions and discord.

By the late 1980s the stream of Anglophone comparative fascist studies that had started to flow a decade earlier even without a consensual definition¹²

⁵ R. A. H. Robinson. *Fascism in Europe*. London: The Historical Association, 1991, 1.

⁶ Gilbert Allardyce. "What Fascism is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept." *The American History Review*, 84 (1979) 2, 367–388.

⁷ Stanley Payne. *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980.

⁸ Notably George Mosse. "Towards a general theory of fascism." In *International Fascism. New thoughts and appreciations*. Ed. George Mosse. London: Sage, 1979, 1–45.

⁹ Richard Thurlow. *Fascism in Britain: A History 1918–1985*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.

¹⁰ A. J. Gregor. *The Ideology of Fascism: The Rationale of Totalitarianism*. New York: Free Press, 1969.

¹¹ E.g. A. J. Gregor. *Fascism: The Contemporary Interpretations*. Morristown: General Learning Press, 1973; Renzo de Felice. *Interpretations of Fascism*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1977; Ernst Nolte, ed. *Theorien über den Faschismus*. Königstein: Athenäum, 1984; Wolfgang Wippermann. *Faschismustheorien. Zum Stand der gegenwärtigen Diskussion*. Darmstadt: Primus-Verlag, 1989; Reinhardt Kühn. *Faschismustheorien. Ein Leitfaden*. Heilbronn: Distel, 1990.

¹² Walter Laqueur, ed. *Fascism: A Reader's Guide*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979: this pioneering experiment in comparative fascist studies unintentionally illustrated the profound lack of consensus on basic definitions and approaches between major scholars, the reader as a result being offered contradictory guidance; Stein Ugelvik Larsen, Bernt Hagtvet, and Jan Petter Myklebust, eds. *Who were the Fascists? Social Roots of European Fascism*. Bergen:

resembled a drying-up delta. The occasional maverick account of fascism,¹³ even one of the brilliance and scholarly depth of Zeev Sternhell's study of the vast subculture created by fascism in inter-war France,¹⁴ or of the lineage between Italian Fascism and French syndicalism,¹⁵ tended to be ignored by practising historians, and failed to form the kernel around which a widespread common sense about fascism's definition coalesced. Meanwhile, within Marxist historiography the term had lost much of its heuristic power as a key to comparative studies of totalitarian regimes. Thus at the end of a conference on the Third Reich held in Philadelphia the Oxford Marxist historian Tim Mason was driven to ask "whatever happened to fascism?", and to stress the need to locate Nazism within the larger panorama of generic phenomena which the term described if it was to be properly understood as a modern historical phenomenon.¹⁶ By this time, what the authors of a historical dictionary of fascism asserted for the French context held true in every national culture: "no universally accepted definition of the fascist phenomenon exists, no consensus, *no matter how slight*, as to its range, its ideological origins, or the modalities of action which characterize it".¹⁷

A Wind of Change

Yet within a few years a new wind was blowing, or at least so it seemed to some of us. At precisely the time when Gianfranco Fini was declaring that since the fall of the Soviet Empire history had moved in a 'post-fascist era', academics were finally getting a firm conceptual grip on this exceedingly slippery term. In the Preface to *International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus* (1998), a short anthology of secondary and primary sources on fascism, I suggested that a convergence of opinion or 'common sense' was beginning to emerge spontaneously among both major theorists of generic fascism and specialists working on specific aspects of it – mainly Nazism and Fascism – around the proposition (one only implicit in their publications)

Universitetsforlaget, 1980 was not significantly more successful despite its wealth of empirical detail on individual fascisms (the groundbreaking chapter by Stanley Payne on the definition of fascism was not applied to the volume as a whole).

¹³ E.g. Noel O'Sullivan. *Fascism*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1983.

¹⁴ Zeev Sternhell. *Ni Droite, ni Gauche: L'Idéologie fasciste en France*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983.

¹⁵ Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder, and Maia Asheri. *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995 (1st edition published in French 1989).

¹⁶ Tim Mason. "Whatever Happened to Fascism?" *Radical History Review*, 49 (Winter 1991), 89–98.

¹⁷ P. Milza and S. Berstein. *Dictionnaire historique des fascismes et du nazisme*. Brussels: Editions Complexes, 1992, 7.

that fascism is to be treated on a par with other major political ideologies rather than as a special case defined primarily in terms of its negations (anti-liberalism, anti-socialism etc.), organizational forms (paramilitary formations, leader cult, corporatism etc.), or style (ritual politics, mass parades). I accepted that many representatives of an older generation of scholars would doubtless persist in seeing fascism as essentially nihilistic, barbaric, anti-modern, and lacking an ideology apart from the cult of action, violence and destruction, or, if they were Marxists, as basically (petty) bourgeois or capitalist reaction. But I argued that within the emerging consensus it was increasingly accepted that “like conservatism, anarchism, liberalism, or ecologism, fascism is definable as an ideology with a specific ‘positive’, utopian vision of the ideal state of society, a vision which can assume a number of distinctive forms determined by local circumstances while retaining a core matrix of axioms”.¹⁸

As if this claim that a new phase of mutual understanding was discernible in fascist studies were not sufficiently bold, I stuck my head out in the General Introduction even further by asserting what this “core matrix of axioms” was.¹⁹ I claimed fascism could be broadly characterized as an ideology with: i) its own revolutionary (in my terms ‘palingenetic’)²⁰ and modernizing agenda, one which not only sets it apart from authoritarian forms of both conservatism and capitalism, but also conditions what fascism is against (the famous fascist ‘anti-’ dimension), and what hence becomes the targets of its destructiveness and oppression; ii) a ‘populist’ drive towards mobilizing the energies of all those considered authentic members of the national community, something which distinguishes it from right-wing military regimes content to impose the new order from above without carrying out a genuine social revolution, whatever pseudo-populist façade they erect to legitimize themselves (my term for such a regime is ‘para-fascism’); iii) an organic concept of the nation which, certainly in the inter-war period, rejected dynastic tradition and liberal rationalism in favour of the charismatic energies seen in the leader cult and in the pervasive use of theatrical and ritual elements in politics. (It should be noted that this approach to fascism does not treat such elements of ‘political religion’, imperialism, the leader cult, or even paramilitarism, as definitional any more than corporatism or youth movements, since these are seen as expressions of fascism in the peculiar conditions of inter-war Europe rather than core features). This ‘organic’ nationalism helps explain the way fascism under

¹⁸) Roger Griffin. *International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus*. London: Arnold, 1998, x.

¹⁹) *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰) See Roger Griffin. *The Nature of Fascism*. London: Pinter, 1991. Cf. <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palingenese>.

certain circumstances accommodated or actively promoted ethnic, biological, eugenic, and even genocidal (or what Goldhagen calls ‘eliminatory’) forms of xenophobia and racism directed against groups identified with physical and moral decadence, even if biological racism is not a definitional component as such.

The broadening of the consensus since *International Fascism*

By the time I announced the signs that a consensus on fascism had begun to emerge, several important examples of convergence had already appeared, notably what is still the most authoritative general history of generic fascism in English by Stanley Payne,²¹ a popular history of fascism by Roger Eatwell,²² and Steven Shenfield’s book on Russian fascism,²³ not to mention some articles applying a model of fascism as a revolutionary form of nationalism to specific movements, even contemporary ones.²⁴ Equally encouraging was the appearance in 1995 of a web definition of fascism on Public Eye, the Website of the American Political Research Associates, which seemed to announce that the centrality of ‘palingenetic myth’ to fascism was at last being recognized in public debate. Under the heading ‘What is Fascism? Some General Ideological Features’ we were told:

Fascism is a form of extreme right-wing ideology that celebrates the nation or the race as an organic community transcending all other loyalties. It emphasizes a myth of national or racial rebirth after a period of decline or destruction. To this end, fascism calls for a “spiritual revolution” against signs of moral decay such as individualism and materialism, and seeks to purge “alien” forces and groups that threaten the organic community. Fascism tends to celebrate masculinity, youth, mystical unity, and the regenerative power of violence (...)

²¹ Stanley Payne. *A History of Fascism 1914–1945*. London: UCL Press, 1995.

²² Roger Eatwell. *Fascism: A History*. London: Allen Lane, 1996.

²³ It is in understanding fascist phenomena in post-Soviet Russia that ‘new consensus’ approaches have become practically hegemonic, with such publications as Stephen Shenfield. *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001. And most notably in a series of articles and chapters by Andreas Umland, notably “Russischer Rechtsextremismus im Lichte der jüngeren theoretischen und empirischen Faschismusforschung.” *Osteuropa*, 52 (2002) 7, 901–913; “Concepts of Fascism in Contemporary Russia and the West.” *Political Studies Review*, 3 (2005) 1, 34–49; “Neue ideologische Fusionen im russischen Antidemokratismus: Westliche Konzepte, antiwestliche Doktrinen und das postsowjetische politische Spektrum.” In *Gefährdungen der Freiheit: Extremistische Ideologien im Vergleich*. Eds. Uwe Backes and Eckhard Jesse. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006, 371–406; “Conceptual and Contextual Problems in the Interpretation of Contemporary Russian Ultrationalism.” *Russian Politics and Law*, 46 (2008) 4, 6–30; “Zhirinovskiy’s ‘Last Thrust to the South’ and the Definition of Fascism.” *Russian Politics and Law*, 46 (2008) 4, 31–46.

²⁴ Nigel Copsey. “The Ideology of the British National Party.” *Politics*, 14 (1994) 2, 101–108.

Fascism rejects the liberal doctrines of individual autonomy and rights, political pluralism, and representative government, yet it advocates broad popular participation in politics and may use parliamentary channels in its drive to power. Its vision of a “new order” clashes with the conservative attachment to tradition-based institutions and hierarchies, yet fascism often romanticizes the past as inspiration for national rebirth.²⁵

Since *International Fascism* was published, the thesis of a new consensus, and the ‘culturalist’ approach to fascism it subsumes, has been widely challenged,²⁶ nowhere more vociferously (and sometimes even vituperatively) than in response to my – admittedly provocatively expressed – attempt in the pages of the ‘Streitforum’ *Erwägung, Wissenschaft, Ethik* to encourage German historians and social scientists to take a greater account of Anglophone scholarship in their investigation of Nazism’s uniqueness and of the comparative dimension of fascist studies.²⁷ It hardly needs to be stated that some unreconstructed Trotskyists also remain intransigently aloof from the new consensus on the grounds that by ‘taking fascist ideas seriously’ and using ‘methodological empathy’ to understand fascist goals is somehow to justify them.²⁸ Nevertheless, two of the most important ‘fascistologists’ of the last few years, Stanley Payne and Aristotle Kallis, broadly accepted the thesis of a growing consensus rather than deepening discord within comparative fascist studies, over the last two decades. The most recent advocate for the consensus is the Romanian scholar Constantin Iordachi, who in his reader *Comparative Fascist Studies: New Perspectives* (2009) accepts that my claim of a new consensus “appears accurate if considered in the broad terms in which it was conceived”. He goes on:

(T)he new consensus in recent fascist studies can be better understood as a loose *convergence* around which a culturalist approach and agenda of research – most aptly synthesized by Griffin’s heuristic model – is pursued, rather than as a complete, in-detail agreement over a particular definition of generic fascism.²⁹

(Incidentally, this is precisely the way I had always suggested it should be conceived.) Nor is the new consensus approach restricted to Anglophone

²⁵ <http://www.publiceye.org/eyes/whatfasc.html>.

²⁶ Richard Bosworth. *The Italian Dictatorship*. London: Arnold, 1998; Martin Blinkhorn. *Fascism and the Right in Europe 1918–1945*. London: Longmans, 2000; Arnd Bauerkämper. “A New Consensus? Recent Research on Fascism in Europe, 1918–1945.” *History Compass*, 4 (2006) 3, 536–566; Wolfgang Wippermann. *Faschismus. Eine Weltgeschichte*. Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2009.

²⁷ See *Erwägen, Wissen, Ethik (EWE)*, 15 (2004) 3. Reprinted as Andreas Umland, Werner Loh, Roger Griffin, eds. *Fascism Past and Present, West and East: An International Debate on Concepts and Cases in the Comparative Study of the Extreme Right*. Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2006.

²⁸ David Renton. *Fascism*. London: Pluto Press, 1999.

²⁹ Constantin Iordachi. *Comparative Fascist Studies: New Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2009, 24–25.

academia. In 1994 the Russian political theorist Aleksandr Galkin offered the following surprisingly 'ontological' definition:

(F)ascism is right-wing conservative revolutionarism that tries – regardless of the victims or the social cost – to overcome real contradictions in a society, by destroying everything that it perceives as hindrances to preservation and rebirth of the specifically interpreted eternal foundations of being.³⁰

The New Consensus as Common Sense

By this point, the new consensus as I have portrayed it may seem to be a purely abstract phenomenon unrelated to actual historiography. So it should be pointed out that in the last fifteen years several specialists have spontaneously applied a theory of fascism to specific episodes in its history which is consistent with a totalising, revolutionary (palingenetic?) variant of ultranationalism, at least as a key part of the 'fascist minimum' if not the minimum itself. Thus several major works on Italian Fascism³¹ and Nazism,³² studies of the projects for societal renewal pursued by French fascism³³ and the history of the French extreme right,³⁴ accounts of the cultural vision of British fascism³⁵

³⁰ Aleksandr Galkin. "Ofashizme – egosushchnosti, korniakh, priznakakh i formakh proiavleniia." [On fascism – its nature, roots, attributes and forms of manifestation] *Politicheskie issledovaniia*, no. 2 (1995), 10. More recently he wrote: "(F)ascism is right-wing conservative revolutionarism that tries – no matter the cost – to overcome real contradictions in a society, by destroying everything that it perceives as hindrances to preservation and rebirth of the fundamentalistically interpreted eternal foundations of being". Aleksandr Galkin. *Razmyshleniia o politike i politicheskoy nauke* [Reflections on politics and political science]. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo 'Overley', 2004, 152.

³¹ Ruth Ben Ghiat. *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945*. Berkeley [etc.]: University of California Press, 2001; Mabel Berezin. *Making the Fascist Self*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997; Emilio Gentile. *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996; Emilio Gentile. *The Struggle against Modernity*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003; Emily Braun. *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; Claudio Fogu. *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy*. Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2003; Claudia Baldoli. *Exporting Fascism: Italian Fascists and Britain's Italians in the 1930s*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003.

³² E.g. Sven Reichardt. *Faschistische Kampfbünde: Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadrismus und in der deutschen SA*. Cologne: Böhlau, 2002; Frank-Lothar Kroll. *Utopie als Ideologie: Geschichtsdenken und politisches Handeln im Dritten Reich*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1999. Cf. Peter Fritzsche. "Nazi Modern." *Modernism/modernity*, 3 (1996) 1, 1–22.

³³ Notably Mark Antliff. *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art and Culture in France, 1909–1939*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

³⁴ James Shields. *The Extreme Right in France: from Pétain to Le Pen*. London: Routledge, 2007.

³⁵ Thomas Linehan. *British Fascism 1918–1939: Parties, Ideology and Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

and neo-fascism,³⁶ and analyses of fascism in inter-war Romania³⁷ and post-Soviet Russia³⁸ all assume a 'culturalist' and *regenerative* premise about fascism's future-oriented modernizing, and revolutionary attack on the status quo. It has also become practically routine for works on particular aspects of fascism to refer to the rebirth myth as *self-evidently* a definitional component of the phenomenon.

A significant example of this is Ian Kershaw, a historian who has never found it helpful to use the term fascism in his numerous masterly studies of Nazism. Nevertheless, in his article 'The Uniqueness of Nazism' he affirms that "The quest for national rebirth lay, of course, at the heart of all fascist movements. But only in Germany did the striving for national renewal adopt such strongly pseudo-religious tones."³⁹ The 'of course' in this assertion would have been unthinkable in the days when Tim Mason made his plea for a revitalization of fascist studies. Elsewhere, Kershaw talks of Nazism's "explosive mixture of the 'charismatic' politics of national salvation and the apparatus of a highly modern state",⁴⁰ again underlining implicitly the convergence of his approach with the 'new consensus' approach to fascism. More recently, Dietrich Orlow's investigation of the 'lure of fascism in Western Europe' takes it for granted that a drive towards national renewal and rebirth was central to fascism's appeal in the chaotic inter-war period, stressing that this was particularly the case

if the nation was languishing under a democratic political system and permeated by the "decadence" fascists so abhorred. Fascists celebrated not the present, but the mythical future nation. In Roger Griffin's memorable phrase, fascists were "palingenetic nationalists," insisting that only under their leadership could the nation be reborn as a new and perfect society.⁴¹

Another sign of the times was the award of the prestigious 2008 George Mosse Prize by the editorial board of the *Journal of Contemporary History* to

³⁶ Nigel Copsey, *Contemporary British Fascism*. Basingstoke, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2nd ed. 2008.

³⁷ Scholarship on the Iron Guard by the post-Communist generation of Romanians is dominated by new consensus perspectives: e.g. Valentin Săndulescu. "Fascism and its Quest for the 'New Man': The Case of the Romanian Legionary Movement." *Studia Hebraica*, 4 (2004), 349–361 (for examples of the new consensus at work in this area see also the title of the talks on inter-war fascism in Romania given by Valentin Săndulescu at <http://ceu.academia.edu/ValentinSandulescu/Talks>); Marius Turda. "Conservative Palingenesis and Cultural Modernism in Early Twentieth-century Romania." *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 9 (2008) 4, 43–53.

³⁸ Stephen Shenfield. *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001.

³⁹ Ian Kershaw. "The Uniqueness of Nazism." *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39 (2004) 2, 245–6 (my emphasis).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Dietrich Orlow. *The Lure of Fascism In Western Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 8.

Cambridge PhD student Gary Love for his article on the British Union of Fascists. It was based explicitly on a ‘new consensus’ approach to fascism which stresses the primacy of regenerative myth in fascist ideology (but *not*, of course, as the key to every aspect of fascism in all its aspects!). More recently there have been a number of doctorates and two habilitations submitted by students from a number of European countries, especially Romania and Hungary, based explicitly on the ‘new consensus’, and Traian Sandu of Paris 3 presented an articulate defence of the idea of the new consensus to skeptics at a symposium on fascism held in Grenoble in March 2011. His work on the ideology of the Iron Guard is a thorough empirical vindication of the heuristic value of the approach it suggests.⁴²

Perhaps even more significantly, a number of critics (ranging from mild to belligerent) of the ‘new consensus’ operate definitions which are self-evidently akin to and compatible with it. (Some can even be read as contorted paraphrases of my original one-sentence definition). Thus we read that fascism “is a tortured, enraged, and passionate demand for national renewal”. It is “unqualifiedly nationalist, redemptive, renovative [sic], and aggressive”.⁴³ We also learn that “[t]he core of fascism’s ideas and myths is racial evolution embodying rebirth from an existing condition of subjection, decadence or ‘degeneracy’ leading to the ‘creation of [...] a ‘new fascist man’”,⁴⁴ that fascism is a “form of political behaviour marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensator cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants [...] pursues with redemptive violence [...] goals of internal cleansing and external expansion”,⁴⁵ that “fascism is the pursuit of transcendent and cleansing nation-statism through paramilitarism.”⁴⁶

Paradigmatic of this tendency is Arnd Bauerkämper, who expresses extreme scepticism about the existence of a ‘new consensus’ in one essay,⁴⁷ but in his own succinct definition offered in a panorama of European fascism has no reservations about stating that it pursued the goal of “radical political-cultural renewal under reactionary auspices”.⁴⁸ Even Wolfgang Wippermann, one of

⁴² On the relationship of the new consensus to French historiography, see Roger Griffin. “Consensus ? Quel consensus ? Perspectives pour une meilleure Entente entre spécialistes francophones et anglophones du fascisme.” *XXième Siècle*. Paris, 2010

⁴³ James Gregor. *Phoenix: Fascism in our Time*. New Brunswick: Transaction, 1999, 162.

⁴⁴ Blinkhorn. *Fascism*, 115–116.

⁴⁵ Robert Paxton. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2004, 218.

⁴⁶ Michael Mann. *Fascists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 13.

⁴⁷ Bauerkämper. “A New Consensus?” For a review article on the prevalence of new consensus approaches in recent fascist theories that contradicts Bauerkämper’s verdict see Andreas Umland. “Refining the Concept of Generic Fascism.” (Review Article) *European History Quarterly*, 39 (2009) 2, 298–309.

⁴⁸ Arnd Bauerkämper. *Der Faschismus in Europa 1918–1945*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2006, 42. The reference to ‘reactionary auspices’ alludes to the collusion between Nazism and

the most long-serving and prolific authorities on theories of fascism who has finally produced his own 'total' theory in 2009, now concedes that "The concept of a 'national rebirth' is found in the ideologies of nearly all fascisms", though I would be curious to know which movements which he considers fascist do *not* have this concept. He goes on to stress the theme of 'palingenetic ultra-nationalism' as an adequate basis for definition.⁴⁹

Perhaps the most powerful testimony to the diffusion of the new consensus is the fact that recently some historians whose approach is clearly rooted in the Marxist tradition acknowledge the regenerative dimension of fascist thought. Thus in his *Fascism and Political Theory*, an impressively sustained and serious attempt to produce a neo-Marxist theory of fascism which takes full account of the explosion of creativity in Anglophone, non-Marxist fascist studies, Daniel Woodley still insists in conventional (and counter-empirical) terms that the analysis of the contradictions of late capitalism and of class relations is the key to fascism. Thus "Fascism emerges as a militant mass movement of the lower-middle class which challenges the institutional trade-off between the capitalist class and organized labour and attempts to restore the declining status and authority of autonomous intermediate strata".⁵⁰ Yet earlier he has stated that fascism "combines a syncretic (heterogeneous) mix of nationalism, militarism and regenerationist myth."⁵¹ Moreover, he affirms as if it is a 'given' that a

new consensus emerged in the 1990s with the publication of several groundbreaking studies, each drawing on particular aspects of the non-Marxist tradition. A key feature of this consensus has been an emphasis on the *nature* of fascism rather than its causes, employing detailed comparative descriptions of fascist ideology in a range of contexts.⁵²

It would seem that inside Woodley there is an honorary member of the new consensus among non-Marxist historians struggling to get out!

The emergence of a new 'new consensus' (or New Wave?) in the study of the 'right'

At the risk of alienating further those who have not kept up with the Anglophone fascist debate, it should by now be clear that I am not at all

ultra-conservatives in the *Machtergreifung*, still points to a lurking reluctance to accept fascism's revolutionary credentials most pronounced among Marxist theoreticians.

⁴⁹ Wippermann. *Faschismus*. 256

⁵⁰ Daniel Woodley. *Fascism and Political Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 70.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 8.

inclined to retract my claim about a ‘new consensus’ emerging in the 1990s. Indeed, I would go even further and argue that by 2010 it has actually *emerged* and seems to have started spreading ‘contagiously’ to Marxist academic circles in which for decades the mildest suggestion that fascism is driven by a genuine utopian ideology of total revolution invited accusations of ‘sleeping with the enemy’. When certain Marxian intellectuals start acknowledging that fascism has a ‘futural’, ‘modernist’,⁵³ ‘regenerationist’ or even ‘resurrectional’⁵⁴ dynamic, then debate about greater scholarly convergence in comparative fascist studies has actually been superseded. The new consensus is now ‘old hat’. It has become part of the common sense of the discipline with only a few mavericks still tilting at windmills of their own fantasy in defence of their own absolutely neglected theories⁵⁵ or non-theories,⁵⁶ or making the obvious point (which I have never denied) that fascism is not *only* an ideology, and has to be studied in its unique concrete manifestations and developmental (narrative) arcs.

I would stress, though, that once concrete manifestations of ‘classic’ fascism contingent on the peculiar constellation of forces prevailing in the interwar period (e.g. the leader cult, corporatism, state terror apparatus, imperialism) are treated as *definitional* traits then comparative studies are badly skewed and find it impossible to recognize the *demonstrable* continuity between, say German Nazism and the ‘leaderless’ fascism of some violent white supremacist groups in the contemporary US, or of the pro-Nazi Eurofascism preached by Julius Evola in the 1930s with the contemporary Russian Eurasianist New Right of Aleksandr Dugin⁵⁷ or Andres Breivik’s vision of a new caste of Knights

⁵³ Peter Osborne. *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-garde*. London: Verso, 1995.

⁵⁴ Mark Neocleous is a Marxist historian by background whose monograph *Fascism* was an uneasy blend of materialist class analysis with the recognition of the ‘palingenetic’ dimension of fascism. In *The Monstrous and the Dead* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2005) he devotes a chapter to the importance of the myth of non-Christian *resurrection* to the fascist mind-set, a myth which he regards as constitutive in a much deeper, existential, constitutive sense than mere ‘palingenesis’ in the way it addresses the dread of physical mortality. (See especially, p. 144, chapter 3 footnotes no. 120).

⁵⁵ A.J.Gregor. *Interpretations of Fascism*. Transaction Publishers and Morristown, N.J.: General Learning Press, 1974. Gregor, though a pioneer of scholarship that sees palingenetic ideology as central to the understanding of Fascism, rejects any suggestion that Nazism is a manifestation of the genus ‘fascism’ and is vitriolic in his criticism of the very notion of a ‘new consensus’ (cf. his exchanges with myself and Andreas Umland in *EWE*).

⁵⁶ E.g. Richard Bosworth (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Another example is Kevin Passmore, a ground-breaking historian of the *Croix de Feu*. He is also a long-standing critic of my approach and the notion of a new consensus, but has yet to deliver a definition of fascism of his own that can actually be applied heuristically to the understanding of putative fascist movements. In this sense his *Very Short Introduction to Fascism* published by Oxford University Press in 2002 is thus very short indeed.

⁵⁷ Anton Shekhovtsov. “The Palingenetic Thrust of Russian Neo-Eurasianism: Ideas of Rebirth in Aleksandr Dugin’s Worldview.” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 9 (2008), 4, 491–506.

Templars repelling Muslims from Europe's citadel. Moreover, this is not just a matter of academic 'progress'. Jonah Goldberg's *Liberal Fascism*⁵⁸ which stigmatises social liberalism in the USA as a historical descendant of fascism, has only succeeded in becoming a run-away bestseller providing vast swathes of neo-Con Republicans with the rationale for portraying Obama's minimalist proposals for a national health service as 'fascist' because of the general public confusion and ignorance about the term. If the gap separating liberal reformist from genuinely fascist palingenetic forms of politics highlighted by the new consensus does not one day become common sense far beyond the walls and libraries of academia, such calumnies and sophistries are bound to continue.

So let us forget the new consensus, or rather take it for granted that broadly speaking experts agree that fascism is a revolutionary form of nationalism which assumes unique ideological, cultural, political, and organizational expression according to the circumstances and national context where it takes shape. Instead, I believe scholarly attention should turn to what can be identified as a major new development in this field of studies: the emergence of a 'new wave' of interdisciplinary research into 'extremism' in all its aspects which is producing a series of works which go far beyond the narrowly political understanding of the phenomenon that enjoyed a stultifying hegemony for decades. I have in mind works on political religion (both as sacralized politics and politicized religion), on totalitarianism (as regime and as *movement*), on biopolitics (politicized eugenics and genocide) as an international palingenetic discourse recommending the scientific fight against decadence, on contemporary terrorism as the implementation of secular or religious utopias of an alternative modernity driven by the need not just to realize socio-political goals but to recreate meaning in an age threatened by anomie.⁵⁹

The 'New Wave' and the study of extremism

The implications of the emergence of a 'new wave' in the study of extreme manifestations of illiberalism for future research into the 'European right' are considerable. By approaching it in a collaborative spirit in which key terms such as political religion, totalitarianism, utopianism, fascism, ultranationalism are assumed to be intersecting and complementary rather than

⁵⁸) Jonah Goldberg. *Liberal Fascism*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.

⁵⁹) Bernice Rosenthal. *New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche to Stalinism*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002; David Roberts. *The Totalitarian Experiment in the Twentieth-Century*. New York: Routledge, 2006; Walter Skya. *Japan's Holy War: The Ideology of Radical Shinto Ultranationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009; Aristotle Kallis. *Genocide and Fascism: The Eliminationist Drive in Fascist Europe*. London: Routledge, 2008; Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick. *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

exclusive opposites, a new interpretive horizon opens up. If we acknowledge the power that visions of radical alternatives to existing society can have to mobilize lone wolves, groupuscules, movements, or large sections of society in conjunction with ‘material’ socio-historical forces, by recognizing the *futural* dynamic of the extreme right’s assault on liberal society, no matter how rooted in an idealized or dramatized past, the ‘right’ can be treated coherently as a product of the ‘disenchanted’ modernity of liberal democracy / capitalism in crisis and the quest for an *alternative* modernity.

Such an approach allows the continuities between inter-war fascism and the contemporary forms of the right to be mapped, subterranean connections between the extreme left and right to be detected, the relationship between the violent, extra-parliamentary right and both the ‘democratic’ neo-populist and the metapolitical right to be established, and affinities between the indigenous European-US right and radicalized form of religion such as Hindutva and Islamism and many forms of contemporary terrorism to be recognized.⁶⁰ A symptom of how fruitful the New Wave approach to extremism is provided by Anton Shekhovtsov’s article revealing a new type of extreme right music illuminated on Evola’s theory of *apoliteia*, but invisible through a conventional political science lens.⁶¹

Arguably – it is the thesis I argue at length in *Modernism and Fascism*⁶² which I hope simultaneously contributes to the ‘new consensus’ and ‘the new wave’ – the key to understanding many (of course, not all) aspects of ‘the European right’ in the sense of an extremist or radical rejection of core (Western capitalist) liberal democratic values, is to locate inter-war fascism within an extremely heterogeneous revolt. It was a revolt not against positivism, or even modernity as such, but against a widespread experience of anarchy and decadence that came to dominate areas of European society between the 1880s and 1945. It was an attempt to transcend the pervasive anomie induced both by ‘objective’ factors of socio-economic and political dislocation, and by an acute sense of loss of meaning, teleology and *nomos* generated by the secularizing, disorienting, disembedding impact of the forces of modernization.

Once the socio-ideological dynamics of fascism in its many disparate forms are grasped and its subterranean linkages with such apparently opposed forces

⁶⁰ A sustained exploration of the ‘metapolitics’ of terrorism reveals deep affinities with fascism’s quest for rebirth. See: Roger Griffin. *The Metapolitics of Terrorism: From the Sicarii to the New Knights Templars*. London: Palgrave, 2012. See also note 2 about Breivik’s 1550 page manifesto / manual.

⁶¹ Anton Shekhovtsov. “Apoliteic music: Neo-Folk, Martial Industrial and ‘metapolitical fascism’.” *Patterns of Prejudice*, 43 (2009) 5, 431–457.

⁶² Roger Griffin. *Modernism and Fascism: The sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

as Bolshevism and Anarchism are uncovered in both their specific historical and general anthropological context (e.g. in terms of myth and political religion), the prospect of a coherent taxonomy and history of the European Right and its dark dreams of cathartic violence, ethnic cleansing, of restoring a lost and largely mythical racial homogeneity and cultural identity becomes less utopian. By fostering synergies between inter-war history, contemporary history, political science, and the study of modernity; by melding 'empirical' political history with a non-reductionist culturalism which recognizes the power of mythic thinking in political projects without vaporizing them into disembodied 'discourses' and 'texts'; by applying a comparative perspective not just to relationships between the various 'rights' of Europe's past with the contemporary rights, but between European with non-European reactions against liberalism, democracy, and globalizing Western modernity; by using methodological empathy to understand the motives of the actors and protagonists of the revolutionary and populist right alongside 'objective' causal factors and material consequences of their acts and causes; by cultivating exchanges and cultural transfers between different academic communities and linguistic cultures, researchers of 'the right' can catch the 'new wave' like adventure-hungry surfers. The result will be research that does not just interest fellow-specialists but inform policy-makers and social workers, and engage students.

In approaching 'the right' in this spirit, a spirit actively encouraged by this new e-journal in comparative fascism, it is worth bearing in mind the following testimonies to the need for scholars never to grow complacent in their understanding of what fascism was and is. The French expert on contemporary racism, Pierre-André Taguieff, reminded social scientists:

Neither 'fascism' or 'racism' will do us the favour of returning in such a way that we can recognize them easily. If vigilance was only a game of recognizing something already well-known, then it would only be a question of remembering. Vigilance would be reduced to a social game using reminiscence and identification by recognition, a consoling illusion of an immobile history peopled with events which accord to our expectations or our fears.⁶³

In similar vein, the Italian polymath Umberto Eco declared in a famous essay:

Ur-Fascism is still around us, sometimes in plainclothes. It would be so much easier, for us, if there appeared on the world scene somebody saying, 'I want to reopen Auschwitz, I want the Black Shirts to parade again in the Italian squares.' Life is not that simple. Ur-Fascism can come back under the most innocent of disguises.⁶⁴

⁶³ Pierre-André Taguieff. "Discussion or Inquisition: The Case of Alain de Benoist." *Telos*, 98–99 (1993/1994), 54.

⁶⁴ Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism." *The New York Review of Books*, 42 (1995) 11 (http://www.nybooks.com/articles/article-preview?article_id=1856).

Three decades earlier, the self-declared post-war French fascist, Maurice Bardèche, had announced defiantly:

The single party, the secret police, the public displays of Caesarism, even the presence of a Führer are not necessarily attributes of fascism. [...] The famous fascist methods are constantly revised and will continue to be revised. More important than the mechanism is the idea which fascism has created for itself of man and freedom. [...] With another name, another face, and with nothing which betrays the projection from the past, with the form of a child we do not recognize and the head of a young Medusa, the Order of Sparta will be reborn: and paradoxically it will, without doubt, be the last bastion of Freedom and the sweetness of living.⁶⁵

Finally, a victim of the most virulent European right in history to date, the Auschwitz survivor and witness Primo Levi warned:

A new fascism, with its trail of intolerance, of abuse, and of servitude, can be born outside our country and imported into it, walking on tiptoe and calling itself by other names, or it can loose itself from without with such violence that it routs all defences. At that point, wise counsel no longer serves, and one must find the strength to resist. Even in this contingency, the memory of what happened in the heart of Europe, not very long ago, can serve as a warning and support.⁶⁶

If liberal academics left and right can overcome their tendency to confuse a narrow obsession with defending their 'patch' with individualism and originality, then we can work collaboratively to learn from each other in the investigation of illiberalism in all its old and new forms as a constantly evolving, mutating challenge to human rights and dignity. Collectively and cumulatively we may then produce, instead of futile family squabbles, not only knowledge but *understanding*, not just strengthening liberal academia but liberal *society*. For as Kafka reminds us: 'Only in the choir may there be a certain element of truth.'⁶⁷ I am confident that the contributors to *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* will add some rich new timbres and notes to the classic harmonies and modernist discords this choir produces. It may even write some music of its own.

⁶⁵ Maurice Bardèche. *Qu'est-ce que le fascisme?* Paris: Les Sept Couleurs, 1961, 175–176.

⁶⁶ Primo Levi. *If this is a man*. London: Sphere Books, 1987, 396–397.

⁶⁷ Franz Kafka, Unpublished Works 1918–1922, <http://www.kafka.org/index.php?spatenstich>.