

# **FASCISM: THE CAREER OF A CONCEPT**

(PAUL GOTTFRIED)

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What is fascism? Generically, it is a political philosophy, but what is its content? The word today is almost always used simply as an infinitely flexible synonym for “enemy of the Left,” but fascism was once a real thing, even though it has long disappeared from actual politics. Paul Gottfried, who has forgotten far more of history and politics than you or I know, wrote this book to closely analyze and, to the extent possible, systematize fascism. He consigns fascism strictly to the past, a creature born of a unique historical moment, the interwar period. But his subtle and penetrating analysis offers food for thought about the political systems of the future, which we can be sure will be very different from those of the present.

Gottfried says his aim is to “trace the evolution of fascism’s polemical function within the context of our own ideological struggles.” Tracing the polemical role of the term “fascism” is really secondary in this book, however, to tracing fascism analytically, both in the eyes of its proponents and its opponents. “Fascism should interest readers not because it characterizes the present or is likely to dominate the future but because of what it once exemplified. It was a movement of the revolutionary Right, a force that now exists in the West as an isolated or only remotely approximated curiosity.” This, while certainly true, ignores the question of whether a revolutionary Right will exist in the future. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

Fascism is hard to study both because of the polemics surrounding it, and because it manifested in different forms at different times (hence the “career” referred to in the subtitle). There is a little flavor of apophatic theology here, the study of what fascism is by studying what it is not, but the attentive reader will be rewarded. Regardless, what Gottfried offers is explicitly not any particular thesis or theses about fascism. Rather, he “proceeds as a collection of studies dealing with various interpretations of fascism from the time fascist movements became a historical force in the 1920s.” Because fascism is not a unitary phenomenon, he looks at fascism from several angles, responding to a wide range of writers on the topic, from Hannah Arendt to Stanley Payne to Ernst Nolte to

Augusto Del Noce, and many less famous. (It is amusing, or perhaps frightening, to the reader when examining the footnotes, seeking more information about a work Gottfried cites, to realize that most of the works Gottfried refers to, originally written in German, or French, or Italian, have never been translated, and that Gottfried read them in their original languages.)

Crucially, various “interpretations of fascism [became] popular at different times, often in response to changing political climates.” This lends the book somewhat of a capsule flavor; as Gottfried explores different lines of thought, many partially or wholly incompatible with each other. If there is a central claim, however, it is that fascism was ephemeral, because “fascist ideology did not wear well outside of its time and culture.” Most viscerally, this was because after World War II it was inaccurately, though predictably, lumped in with National Socialist ideology and crimes, making any endorsement of fascism radioactive. No fascist government of any sort has existed since the war. Fascism, moreover, “was inseparably related to the interwar period and to the threat to the bourgeois order that then existed.” It is not that every interwar Right movement or leader was fascist; quite the contrary. Gottfried rejects without discussion, as obvious, the silly claim that leaders such as Francisco Franco and Miklós Horthy were fascist (rather, they “came out of the non-fascist Right”). As far as the period since the war, Gottfried claims that Western patterns of political thought in today’s world are so antithetical to fascist modes of thought that fascism simply cannot exist in any meaningful fashion.

If fascism is not simply the authoritarian Right, what is it? “Can one define fascism in any place and at any time in terms of a consistent body of ideas, as opposed to a mere reaction against movements or ideologies that the fascists were resisting?” Yes, is the answer, more or less, but there is a lot of possible variation in the answer. Gottfried seems most sympathetic to Stanley Payne’s typology, which notes characteristics common to all fascist systems, typically arising out of, but heavily modifying, existing opposition to Left destruction of national traditions: “a permanent nationalistic one-party authoritarianism”; “the search for a synthetic ethnicist ideology”; a charismatic leader; a corporatist political economy; and “a philosophical principle of voluntarist activism unbounded by any philosophical determinism.”

Gottfried accurately summarizes this as a “grab bag of ideas,” and notes that how these characteristics might manifest must necessarily differ by situation. For example, fascists opposed both parliamentarianism and Communism, as Left constructs. Yet at the same time men of the Left sometimes became fascist, and vice versa, suggesting more commonality that might at first be admitted—not commonality in ideas, but commonality in the personality and focus of those attracted to the system. Gottfried also notes that one distinguishing characteristic of fascism is its willingness to resort to violence in response to the Left—force itself was viewed as redemptive, and also the quintessential revolutionary act.

Whence did fascism arise? Was it an organic tendency, called forth by varying political situations, or something purely reactive, arising in response to the Left’s ascension? Gottfried observes that fascism filled the gap when an older Right system, typically in Europe the aristocratic one, disappeared, but was it merely reacting to what came next? Ernst Nolte, a famed German scholar who died in 2016 at the age of ninety-three (like many prominent scholars of fascism, a leftist, which tends to cloud objective analysis of the fascist phenomenon), was the major exponent of what might be called “fascism as pure reaction.” He saw the interwar fascist movements as a “counterrevolutionary imitation of the revolutionary Left.” Unlike the Left, however, it offered no transcendence, no transformation, merely a holding action against political enemies. This limited its appeal. Counterpoised to this point of view are those analysts who see fascism as embodying significant futurist elements, the promise of a new age, generated organically, rather than as a reaction—but a vision based in reality, not seeking utopia.

Gottfried sees no real contradiction here—a movement can be both reactive and “elicit mass enthusiasm and [be] considered by its followers as speaking for the future.” Certainly, when they were in the ascendant, because they were seen as offering something better, the National Socialists were often greeted “with ecstatic enthusiasm . . . as [their] armies rolled across western Europe.” After all, “The fascists, including their more savage Nazi cousins, were perceived as the enemies of the Bolsheviks and the Jewish allies of international Marxism.” That is, they fought against the Left, the enemy of mankind, but also offered a vision of the future that was not merely “not Left.” This offering was extremely popular at the time, but that truth is hidden today. (However,

following Nolte, Gottfried concludes that in no sense was National Socialism fascism—they “ran a highly eclectic totalitarian operation, which borrowed from fascism as well as Stalinism and, perhaps most of all, from Hitler’s feverish imagination.”) This perspective seems correct to me. A political system opposed to the Left does not need to ape the transformative demands of that tendency; merely promising a better future, easy to do in a society destroyed by the Left, as any society run by the Left is inevitably destroyed, is certainly adequate. It does seem, however, that fascism only arises, at least historically, when the Left has fully embarked on its ruination of a particular nation, and existing Right structures have shown themselves incapable of putting down the evil.

Gottfried examines the claim that fascism itself, like its enemies, was totalitarian, one most often made by Left historians, notably Emilio Gentile, as well as various famous discussions of totalitarianism, notably Hannah Arendt’s. It may seem obvious that fascism, most clearly on display in Italian fascism, the only actually fascist government ever to organically come to power, controlled the lives of the people to a great degree, especially given Mussolini’s famous declaration of “Everything in the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State.” But Italian fascism was largely aspirational, full of “rhetoric and iconography” that did not match reality. The only states that truly had a totalitarian level of control, and using that control broke down or controlled intermediary social structures, were Communist ones (in the interwar period of focus here, Soviet Russia) and National Socialist Germany (though Gottfried notes that despite this facile comparison, common for decades, the truth is that the latter was internally far less totalitarian than Soviet Russia). Viewed from another angle, totalitarianism is the result of the successful imposition of a political religion; fascism has never actually been such a religion in practice. Viewed from a third angle, totalitarianism is shown by the final implementation of a managerial state, something the ex-Trotskyist James Burnham explicated most clearly in *The Managerial Revolution*. Common to all these threads is the distortion of reality and the removal of anything separating the citizen from the state. Fascism, by contrast, is corporate, not totalitarian. The state and people are, in theory, fused not as a result of top-down control, but through cooperation, guided and encouraged by the state, and intermediary institutions remain, critical to maintaining corporatism.

This can be seen, for example, in economic matters, where commerce changed very little in Mussolini's Italy (or, for that matter, in Adolf Hitler's Germany).

The insane rantings of the Frankfurt School get a whole chapter to themselves, as they relate to how postwar Americans understood fascism. The Frankfurt School offered a distilled view of the supposed progress of man from oppressive social relations to total emancipation, the essence of Left thought. American victory in World War II gave these men carte blanche to spread their poison, with the cooperation and funding of an unwitting government and clueless ruling class. In 1950 several of these men published an enormously-influential tendentious propaganda study, *The Authoritarian Personality*, which purported to show that European fascism, in the form of America's recently defeated enemies and manifesting itself primarily as a free-floating "prejudice," was growing roots in the United States, and had to be stamped out by implementing total left-wing domination of government, culture, and society. (The same men were largely in charge of the *Fragebogen*, the detailed questionnaire administered to the vast majority of Germans after the war, as part of the so-called denazification campaign, in practice also a giant exercise in advancing left-wing domination).

As a result of the efforts of the Frankfurt School, much ink was spilled in this period about the supposed psychic burdens of Western societies, which pointed towards and tended to fascism, but which could be corrected with a combination of leftist education, called, no surprise, "democratic instruction," and aggressive government oppression. Most of all, this "anti-fascism" declared that any form of Western identitarian politics must be savagely suppressed wherever even the smallest element of it might appear. A main tool for this was the definition of "democracy" as rejecting any right-wing element, regardless of electoral activity—if any political action was not authorized as egalitarian and universal, meaning advancing Left goals, it was *ipso facto* illegitimate. In this frame, objection to, or discussion of, totalitarianisms of the Left is completely forbidden, if at any time there is a feeling of equation between Left and Right—and accompanying this has been the rise of the cult of the Holocaust, used as a cudgel against any modern Right tendency, and a rationale for ignoring Left crimes of much greater magnitude in both deaths and time. The ideology and practice of the Frankfurt

School has dominated Western European (especially German) and, to a somewhat lesser degree, American politics for seventy-five years. Only very recently has it begun to show cracks.

This line of thinking, however, is wholly absent from another line of thought with far less power, but which is still sometimes observed—the idea that fascism is itself a movement of the Left. Those who hold to this perspective are an odd assortment, combining throne-and-altar traditionalists, such as Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, who object to fascism as progressive and secular, with those who point to political measures taken, primarily under Italian fascism, that resonate today as left-wing, primarily welfare-state actions. The latter has a long history; anti-New Deal conservatives in America claimed that fascism had come to America in the form of Franklin Roosevelt (Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *Three New Deals* discusses these parallels). It is true enough that interwar American progressives thought highly of Mussolini, and that their collectivism was antithetical to traditional American political thinking, with its emphasis on flinty individualism. Gottfried has some limited sympathy for these analyses, but concludes that while fascism isn't identifiable with any flavor of the traditional Right, that does not make it Left in any meaningful sense. Again citing Payne, he notes that what is "Right" can include revolutionary doctrines that are not Left—and even within fascist-adjacent regimes, such as Austrian clericalists or the Rumanian Iron Guard, there are notable differences in philosophy, without the slightest Left tendency.

This section does have the most amusing section of a dense book, in which Gottfried dismisses Jonah Goldberg, the best-known modern proponent of the equation of fascism with leftism (he wrote a whole book making the claim, *Liberal Fascism*), as an intellectual lightweight and all-around tool, without once directly insulting him. Goldberg is merely an example of the eternal habit of loser American "conservatives" of adopting the premises and terminology of their victorious enemies, and then pointing out hypocrisy, believing that somehow this will magically defeat the Left, which cares not at all about hypocrisy. It is also here that Gottfried derides the term "Islamofascism," and notes that whatever you may think about Vladimir Putin, that George Will beclowns himself by telling the world that Putin is presiding over a "fascist revival." He scorns these types of uses, pointing out that "Fascism in

practice is something other than failing to keep up with social changes introduced long after the Second World War.”

In another chapter, Gottfried discusses how, despite efforts by various men, fascism was never able to become an international creed, or to exist in any form, even a truncated form, beyond any one specific country. Fascist internationalism was an obvious play in response to the seductive extranational power of Bolshevism, but it never caught on, despite the best efforts of various intellectuals and men of action. This is not surprising, given that those who made headway as fascists were strictly national revolutionaries, who “predictably failed at redefining themselves as internationalists of the Right,” a problem Bolshevism never had. Mussolini made some half-hearted stabs at expanding fascism beyond Italy’s borders, but soon enough had plenty to occupy him at home, and dropped the idea. The man who worked hardest for the fascist internationalist goal was Oswald Mosley, the British fascist leader. His motivation was in part to avoid a repeat of World War I, through advancing European unity, and in part because modernization under the fascist banner was seen as the best way to end the Great Depression. Mosley, a fascinating character only touched on here, offered the best thought-out flavor of fascism, rejecting racialism and focusing on economic matters. In practice, however, and with the men he attracted to his banner, his party was rough around the edges, and anyway his program wasn’t that much different than standard welfare-state offerings, which did not carry the baggage Mosley, who had accepted money from Mussolini, did.

In his penultimate chapter, “The Search for a Fascist Utopia,” Gottfried uses the German sociologist Karl Mannheim’s thoughts on ideology as the springboard for a fascinating discussion, involving a close examination of the Italian philosopher Giovanni Gentile. Among other matters, he discusses whether fascism can today even be considered to be on the Right, given that at least in the United States, today what is Right is “now identified . . . with individual self-fulfillment.” But generally, fascism made no attempt to “guarantee a happy future for the human race,” the leftist utopian vision of the future, derived from the so-called Enlightenment. Fascism tends even to reject progress, at least as an abstract goal, “or more particularly, the kind of progress associated with the spread of equality and cultural and social homogenization,”

and therefore utopian thinking tied to human improbability is alien to it. Men may be called to participation in improvement of the human condition, but there is no end point forecast or seen as possible. Renewal is more the focus than remaking.

Ultimately, Gottfried sees fascism as something that was never going anywhere. "Fascism's chances for becoming an overpowering historical force were, in fact, never very promising." Even without the war, and being tarred with the National Socialist brush, "In the best of circumstances, they might have survived a bit longer among second- or third-rate powers, as an exotic authoritarian movement, before becoming a footnote in modern history." Moreover, it "had a distinctly Latin character, and it is unimaginable that it would have done well in a markedly different culture, say that of the United States or Great Britain."

He ends with a discussion of "the vanished revolutionary right"—of how today's Right, in America, accepts all the premises of the Left. A less compliant Right existed long before the modern age. It had certain "family resemblances" to elements of fascism, which in that sense is a continuation of longstanding currents of Right thought. But none of this is anywhere in evidence today, at least in 2017, when the author published this book. And in an appendix, Gottfried discusses "reactionary modernism," including "illustrious names such as Filippo Marinetti, . . . Ernst Jünger, . . . [and] T. S. Eliot," and more generally those elements of Right thought that demand modernization, without any of the Left baggage that comes along with their plans of modernization, as a core element of their program. It is here that the reader senses that fascism is more a dormant than spent force.

On its face, fascism is completely antithetical to the American psyche. Part of that is nearly a century of propaganda, but Gottfried seems correct that fascism, correctly defined, is fundamentally alien to America. Americans, even now, like to perceive themselves as not members of a mass, and corporatism, with all its drawbacks, seems essential to fascism. Moreover, a "synthetic ethnicist ideology" is unlikely to get traction in America, even if a main organizing principle of the Left is race hatred. Thus, I don't think fascism's time has come around again, at least not here, though anything is possible. Maybe in Europe, however; it is true that fascism has a very large element of pure reaction, and the Europeans have far more to react against now than they did a hundred years ago.

But what, then, is the American alternative to Left hegemony? What would the “revolutionary Right” look like today, given that across the West, for eighty years, the Right has only suffered defeat? For example, what would it take to stop the migrant invasion, predicted fifty years ago in Jean Raspail’s *The Camp of the Saints*, and now very real? Immigration of alien populations at any significant level is, and always has been, very strongly opposed by huge majorities of the populations of every nation, yet for decades has been rigorously imposed by the Left everywhere. It is obvious that the Right, as currently constituted, can never stop this, any more than it can stop any element of the Left program, much less roll back Left victories. Thus, a revolutionary Right is needed. After all, the definition of insanity is continuing to do the same thing while expecting a different result.

A revolutionary Right would most likely start with, and arise from, identitarian politics—identifying as Americans, distinct from others, and ensuring that America was directed to benefit Americans. It is for good reason the Left fears identitarianism; for them, it is like sunlight to a vampire, something inherently incompatible with, and destructive to, their ideology. It is also a powerful organizing principle which resonates strongly with human nature. Thus, a revolutionary Right would reject entirely the core Left doctrines of egalitarianism and universalism. America for the Americans. Nothing could be simpler, or better.

Beyond that, a revolutionary Right would have zero respect for our so-called Constitution, which as it has been reinterpreted by the Left (and, to be fair, unwisely modified by amendment) bears almost no resemblance to the actual Constitution. It would be willing to defend against today’s ubiquitous Left violence by using violence itself. (It would, for example, not for a second tolerate the double standard on display last week around the White House, where violent Left protests result in zero arrests, while any Right protest, even the most peaceful, such as praying at abortuaries, is crushed using extreme state violence and its participants pursued for years using a weaponized “justice” system.) It would demand sacrifice, rather than promise easy and self-centered living, and it would set clear moral rules, which if violated would result in stigmatization, along with social and political debility. It would reject wholesale the feminization that has engulfed all of American society. It would demand accomplishment, in every arena, rather than nasty

“equity,” but it would reject great concentrations of economic power which enslave the people. It would offer a brighter future, but not a utopian future, or one based on ideology.

Writing this, that sounds pretty good. It sounds very Foundationalist, in fact. Such a sea change in American politics may seem far off, though it seems a lot closer than it did a year ago. But as this book shows, the revolutionary Right, a much broader concept than fascism, arises when an old order crumbles. Few would deny the old order is crumbling, so we can certainly hope, and should certainly hope, that some brand of revolutionary Right is about to step onto the American stage. I, for one, am eagerly looking forward to it.