

Events have made 'fascism' a term of political abuse rather than one of serious ideological analysis. Moreover, self-proclaimed fascists have claimed that fascism is beyond intellectual analysis and have despised those who favour rational examination of their beliefs. However, we take fascism seriously as an ideology by examining fascist values and the concrete actions of some of the regimes that have declared themselves fascist, notably Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. We also consider movements often described as fascist in modern Britain and elsewhere and consider whether fascism is still a viable political creed.

POINTS TO CONSIDER

- How far do explanations of the rise of fascism cast light on its nature?
- What does it mean to say that fascism was essentially non-materialistic?
- How useful is it to distinguish Italian Fascism from German Nazism?
- Was fascism as hostile to international capitalism as it was to Bolshevism?
- Why did fascism have such little impact on Britain compared with its effect on continental European countries?
- Is fascism a realistic threat to modern democracies?

We have created our myth. The myth is a faith, a passion. It is not necessary for it to be a reality. It is a reality in the sense that it is a stimulus, is hope, is faith, is courage. Our myth is the nation, our myth is the greatness of the nation! And to this myth, this greatness, which we want to translate into a total reality, we subordinate everything else. (Benito Mussolini, *The Naples Speech*, 24th October 1922)

Blood mixture and the resultant drop in the racial level is the sole cause of the dying out of old cultures; for men do not perish as a result of lost wars, but by the loss of that force of resistance which is continued only in pure blood. All who are not of good race in this world are chaff. (Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 1925)

Fascists were originally revolutionary socialists of the 1890s. By the era following the First World War fascism had acquired its modern links with radical right-wing politics. The term 'fascist' originated in the early 1920s as a self-description of the political movement in Italy led by Benito Mussolini. The word itself is generally thought to derive from the bundle of wooden rods (*fasces*) carried before Roman consuls as a sign of authority, symbolising strength in unity. The movement was initially based on the nationalist groups (*fasci*) which emerged during and after the First World War and which were largely composed of ex-servicemen and claimed to be a new political force to rejuvenate tired nations made decadent by liberalism and democracy. Indeed, it might be claimed that fascism is the only genuine twentieth-century ideology.

As an analytical term, 'fascism' has its limitations. It has become used, especially by the left, as a blanket expression of political abuse of their opponents. Moreover, the label 'fascist' has been applied to a wide variety of regimes from Pinochet's Chile to Saddam Hussain's Iraq, to the point where it becomes almost meaningless. Even before 1945 there were wide divergences in theory and practice among states generally described as fascist, such as Franco's Spain, Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. It is possible to argue that Nazism's extreme racism, for example, makes it an ideology in its own right and not merely an extreme form of fascism.

Fascists themselves have compounded the problem by emphasising, and even glorying in, its non-rational essence. A clear, authoritative, internally consistent exposition of fascist ideology simply does not exist. Besides, historical manifestations of fascism have been so tied up with the extraordinary personalities of its leaders that some critics have simply dismissed it as a vehicle for political power. Such articulation as exists was later fudged to provide a spurious intellectual justification for illegitimate power, such as Franco's fascist regime in Spain.

There is a problem caused by fascism's ambiguous relationship with both past and future. German Nazism and Italian Fascism both sought justification and inspiration in a glorious, if largely mythical, past. They challenged many of the modern world's values and assumptions, especially those proceeding from the

eighteenth-century Enlightenment. At the same time they emphasised youth, energy and dynamism and made full use of available twentieth-century technology for propaganda purposes. Hitler, for example, proclaimed the excellence of traditional, rural, peasant Germany but his election campaigns made imaginative use of the then novel instruments of cinema, microphone and aircraft.

Fascism cannot be regarded as belonging to a particular historical period, even though it reached its greatest force as a movement during the 1920s and 1930s and its greatest political power in the early 1940s. Many aspects of fascist thought are alive and well in the modern world and not just in formally 'fascist' political parties.

Explanations of fascism

Faced with the difficulty of clearly articulating a comprehensive account of fascist ideology, some critics have tried to provide explanations for the emergence of fascist regimes in the inter-War period derived from cultural, historical and even psychological interpretations.

Anti-Semitism had been a feature of European culture and thought for many centuries before the Nazis adopted it as a major element of their philosophy. Fascism's roots may be found in pre-Christian German mythology, early nineteenth-century Romantic literature, and even traditional fairy tales. Italian Fascism, in particular, has been identified with artistic movements like **futurism**.

futurism

A movement in art in the early twentieth century, especially in Italy, which delighted in machines, speed, aircraft, cars and all aspects of the new century.

The nineteenth-century roots of much of what became fascist thought can be more clearly identified. G. W. F. Hegel, the great German philosopher and nationalist, was one important thinker who stressed the organic nature of the state and society. Some have drawn attention to the importance of racist theorists in the nineteenth century, such as Arthur Gobineau with his *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1855) and Houston Stewart Chamberlain with his *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899). Friedrich Nietzsche was also especially influential. He identified the importance of inequality between individuals, sexes, nations and races, the will to power of *Übermenschen* ('Supermen') who create their own morality. Fascists, especially Nazis, seized on Nietzsche's ideas of society as made up of the leader, the elite and the masses – the 'true' democracy'. The Nazis added a fourth group, the *Untermensch* ('sub-human'), parasitic on society and doomed to eradication.

Psychological explanations have also been presented, such as the interpretation of fascism as a 'mass psychosis' or the political manifestation of the

'authoritarian personality'. A particularly influential explanation has been that of Erich Fromm, in *The Fear of Freedom* (1942), that fascism proceeds from the isolation, loneliness and insecurity created in a liberal society and people's desire to end this situation by relinquishing their freedom to others.

After 1945 a fashionable explanation provided by Karl Popper and Hannah Arendt was that fascism was very similar to communism in that it also was a form of totalitarianism. This was essentially a system in which all distinctions between the state and society were obliterated and in which the state was the supreme authority, having absolute control of all forms of intellectual, cultural, economic and social activity and to which the citizen owed absolute obedience.

Although much historical analysis has concentrated on detailed biographical study of key figures such as Hitler and Mussolini, one of the most widely accepted approaches has been the Marxist view that fascism was a last-ditch stand by monopoly capitalism against its inevitable collapse. Other analysts have pointed to the extraordinary impact of the First World War on European society – the militarisation of society, the overheated patriotism and the stress on such values as self-sacrifice, obedience and dramatic action.

While these approaches all have some value they are open to challenge. Excessive reliance on psychological explanation removes the essential historical dimension. Moreover, if fascism were to be related to certain individual personality characteristics, it would imply particularly high concentrations of such personality types at particular times and places, which would seem absurd. Marxist explanations omit matters of race, which are surely fundamental, at least to Nazism, and provide no real explanation for the mass support enjoyed by Hitler and Mussolini. Nor is it obvious that fascist regimes in fact serve the interests of capitalism. On the contrary, both Hitler and Mussolini at various times expressed strong anti-capitalist sentiments and, of course, the 'Nazi' Party was an abbreviation for the National *Socialist* German *Workers* Party.

The most serious objection to these explanations is that they do not take fascist *ideas* seriously enough. They may tell us something of the nature of the regimes but not of the beliefs which shaped them.

Fascist ideas

We must state at the outset that, although it is difficult to present a structured account of fascist ideology there are a number of fascist *values* that inter-relate more or less logically. (Though there were marked differences between Italian Fascism and German Nazism.) It is to these factors that we now turn. They can be grouped under the following:

- conflict, struggle and war;
- non-materialism;

- irrationalism and anti-intellectualism;
- nation and race;
- the leader and the elite;
- the state and government;
- fascist economic and social theory.

Conflict, struggle and war

Fascism attached an astonishingly positive value to war. War was regarded as the ultimate conflict in a world in which struggle was the essence of existence. Permanent peace was not only nonsense, it was dangerous nonsense, as humans grow strong in permanent struggle and decadent in an era of peace. Modifying (or distorting) Charles Darwin's theories on the struggle for survival as the motor of the biological evolution of species, fascists claimed that human societies, like other organisms, were similarly engaged in what Herbert Spencer described as 'the survival of the fittest'. In some interpretations this *Social Darwinism* was regarded as an endorsement of untrammelled market economics. Fascists rejected such conclusions. For them the basic unit was, in the Italian Fascist case, the *nation* and, for the German Nazis, the *race*. Inequality between the peoples of the earth was an unquestioned presumption.

On these premises of inequality and the necessity and desirability of conflict, a whole moral system was erected in which the victory of the nation or race was the ultimate 'good'. In Germany this led to racial laws governing marriage, and allowing systematic racial persecution. Ultimately, the attempted **genocide** of Europe's Jews and Gypsies, and the enslavement of 'inferior' races, such as Russians and Poles, grew out of these ideological assumptions of racial struggle. In attempts to purify the German nation and return it to its original 'Aryan' purity, selective breeding and adoption programmes were inaugurated. Persons with physical or mental disabilities were sterilised or even systematically murdered.

genocide

The extermination of all members of an ethnic group, usually on the grounds of racial 'inferiority'. Usually associated with the Nazi attempt to rid Europe of Jews, Gypsies and other peoples by a process of mass murders during the Second World War.

Italian Fascism did not go to these extremes, but under German influence racial laws were introduced in the late 1930s and some collaboration with the elimination of European Jewry occurred in the latter stages of the war. Other fascist and semi-fascist regimes in Rumania, Hungary and elsewhere in Eastern Europe followed suit.

The myth of racial superiority was also used to justify German and Italian external expansion. In the case of Nazi Germany it was justified by the desire to acquire *Lebensraum* ('living space') for the German people at the expense of the 'racially inferior' Slavs. Italy sought to create a new Roman empire in Africa,

Germany sought expansion in Eastern Europe in the late 1930s, while Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935. This, with the all-pervasive culture of militarism, aggression and conflict, was to lead directly to the Second World War.

Fascism was anti-internationalist in regard to national identity, but promoted a form of internationalism with other fascist movements involved in their own struggle against liberalism, communism and bourgeois democracy. A kind of 'fascist international' was created by Mussolini and Hitler to advance the movement against its enemies in struggles such as the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). Fascist movements gained control in several countries prior to the Second World War, most notably in Hungary, Rumania and Finland. Modern technology enables contemporary fascist movements to exchange ideas and tactics via the internet.

Non-materialism

A very important source for fascist values was 'non-materialism', the belief that materialistic values of modern 'bourgeois' society – of material comfort, security and easy living – were utterly destructive of 'traditional' society and 'higher' civilisation. For fascists, the values of war were far superior to the values of peace. These values included daring, courage, comradeship, obedience, patriotism and unswerving loyalty to leaders. Fascist doctrine can be summed up as a combining of radical nationalism, revolutionary action, authoritarianism and aggressive violent purposes.

Much of this was derived from the military experience of many fascists during the First World War, though there were important sources in cultural and artistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Another inspiration was the spiritual qualities of the countryside, nature and peasant life – the embodiment of 'true' national values – as a healthy alternative to the harsh economic and social realities of the city.

Irrationalism and anti-intellectualism

One of the difficulties of analysing fascism on an intellectual plane is the fact that fascists vigorously rejected rational analysis as the basis of a political philosophy. In this, they rejected the entire intellectual project of the European Enlightenment of the previous two hundred years. However, fascist beliefs are not beyond rational examination.

Fascists preferred, in a famous phrase, to 'think with the blood'. This meant relying on experience, intuition, emotion and action rather than reflection, faith rather than reason, trust rather than doubt, aggression rather than debate. Within this culture, in marked contrast to the liberal tradition, there was no room for dissent or debate, only conformity. Nor was conformity to be

merely external. Fascism wanted minds and hearts as well. Here, it has been presciently observed, fascism was closer to a religion than to a conventional, secular political movement. This similarity was not merely confined to external trappings, such as official 'feast days', rites of passage, ceremonies of initiation, quasi-religious songs, images, rallies, and styles of art and architecture. The established churches, especially the Catholic, were uneasily aware that beneath such symbols was a value and belief system that rivalled their own. Both Mussolini and Hitler were raised as Catholics, but both rejected their church and Christianity. Mussolini was atheistic; Hitler sought to create a new religion based on pagan Germanic values. For both, Christianity was a threat both because it competed for the belief of the people and, more seriously, because it preached a doctrine of peace, humanity and fellowship clearly at odds with the core of fascist doctrines of conquest and struggle.

Nation and race

The central position of race and nation in fascist thought has already been mentioned. It is important to distinguish between the two. Race is in theory a biological fact with distinguishing features that are genetically inherited. It is thus a 'given' set of physical characteristics that cannot be changed. It does not automatically follow that a sense of racial hierarchy should lead to eugenics, euthanasia or genocide (after all, racism was a key ideological feature of the British Empire), but racial hatred was a major feature of Nazism and most modern fascist movements.

Nationality, however, is in principle a legal status. States have procedures by which one can change one's nationality. 'Nation' can also imply a sense of identification with, and belonging to, a group of people shaped by a common culture, history, language and other factors. In both cases national identity is not a permanent characteristic of a human being. It can be changed, admittedly with difficulty, but changed none the less.

Italian Fascism tended to emphasise the 'nation' as the ultimate political source of all legitimacy and an object of absolute allegiance. German Nazism, by contrast, emphasised both the *Volk* and the 'race'.

The term *Volk* means more than just 'people'. It has elements of the special spiritual and cultural qualities of a nation that should, must, be defended against all forces that would weaken and undermine its vitality. Each nation, each *Volk*, has its own special qualities, but the German *Volk* carries the seeds of a higher spiritual and cultural order, a special role in human history.

An elaborate theory of race was made the basis of state policy. According to this, humanity was sub-divided into different races, which had different and identifiable characteristics and could be placed in a hierarchical order. The

highest race was the 'Aryan', of which the Germans were the nearest contemporary example (though their Aryan purity had been somewhat compromised by the admission of inferior races into their bloodline). Aryan superiority was partly physical and intellectual, but also cultural. Aryans alone were capable of originality and progress. Other races could be placed in a hierarchy, with negroes, Gypsies and aboriginal peoples at the bottom. Jews were in a special position as they could mimic Aryan qualities, but were ultimately parasitic and utterly destructive of the Aryan race. As the *First Programme of the Nazi Party* (1920) made clear: 'None but those of German blood, whatever their creed, may be members of the nation. No Jew, therefore, may be a member of the nation.' Nazi rhetoric often compared Jews to vermin or a dangerous virus. This belief was used to 'justify' the introduction of racial laws in 1933, discrimination and persecution on racial grounds, and, ultimately, the racial extermination of such enemies as an act of 'self-defence' by Aryans.

In practice, Nazi theories on race were perhaps that creed's most significant doctrine. Hitler was obsessed with it and German state policy was dominated by it before and during the Second World War, regardless of the military, practical and economic consequences. It is important to realise that in Nazi thinking their racial theories were scientifically established facts. They devoted much effort to identifying and classifying various racial groups and sub-groups according to pseudo-scientific criteria.

Italian Fascism was far less racist, acquiring a racist dimension only in 1938 when there was a need to strengthen the alliance with Nazi Germany, and racism was seen by most Italian Fascists as irrelevant and was not strictly enforced. Much greater emphasis was placed on the nation, which was identified both with the existing Italian people and the Italy of the Renaissance and Imperial Rome.

Emphasis on nation and race made the creation of any form of international political movements particularly abhorrent to fascists. International fascist movements were rather difficult to create, but were attempted nevertheless. However, had fascism triumphed in war against its enemies the tensions between such extreme nationalist movements would have come to the fore. Communism and liberalism were obvious candidates for fascist detestation, but so also was global capitalism, all on grounds of their internationalism. In Hitler's case the fact that Jewish identity transcended national boundaries, and that Jews were prominent in both communism and capitalism, was another reason to fear and hate them.

The leader and the elite

All versions of fascism despise democracy and communism for their emphasis on equality. Fascists believe that inequality of individuals, as well as of peoples,

is a plain fact of nature. Political systems should take account of this – hence their belief in a ruling elite and a powerful and authoritative ruler, the ‘Superman’, who embodied the General Will of the people and would lead the nation to renewal and glory.

Fascist Italy and, especially, Nazi Germany rejected the former governing classes, which they blamed for their nation’s misfortunes. In Italy the Fascist Party would constitute the new elite, comprised of those who had the requisite moral values. In Nazi Germany, an explicitly racial elite was to emerge in the form of the **SS**. Originally a bodyguard for Hitler, the SS was developed by its leader, Heinrich Himmler, into a military and political elite, chosen according to criteria of racial purity, to form guardians for the new Germany.

SS (*Schutzstaffel*)

Originally Hitler’s bodyguard, it evolved under Heinrich Himmler into a racially elite organisation which was intended to be the ruling caste when Germany achieved victory.

Even more important than the elite was the concept of the leader. The leader would relate to the nation in an almost mystical way, personifying and articulating its aspirations beyond any mere constitutional status, untrammelled by legal restraint or the ‘unnecessary’ intermediaries of elections, parliament and the media to hold him to account.

So significant was the role of the leader, in both theory and practice, that subsequently almost any regime with a dictatorial and charismatic leader has been liable to be labelled ‘fascist’. Indeed, fascist movements are so identified with their leaders that they rarely outlast in power the death of their leader. In Germany this ‘*Führer* principle’ was applied generally to society with major concentrations of power being vested in individuals in industry, regional government, universities and central government ministries.

The state and government

Fascism is an anti-democratic and anti-individualist doctrine. Individuals are subordinate to the needs of the state and nation. It is believed in fascist theory and practice that the state should be absolute and totalitarian as the embodiment of the nation. This entails using state terror against its opponents, a single party dictatorship and a monopoly of ideology and communication to create a perfectly co-ordinated national community and solve society’s ills. Certainly, in both Germany and Italy the state acquired immense legal and practical powers, intruding into all areas of life and tolerating no opposition. However, there were differences between the two countries.

For Mussolini the state was superior to all else, even the nation itself. In fact, the Italian nation, in Italian Fascist theory (and arguably in historical reality) was the creation of the state. In Hitler’s scheme of things, the state was certainly very powerful but was ultimately an instrument of the race, which

preceded it in importance. The German race was by no means confined to the geographical area known as 'Germany'. Many Germans lived outside the boundaries of the German state of the 1930s. It was, therefore, Hitler's aim to bring them within the rule of the *Reich*.

Both Hitler and Mussolini assumed that the individual had meaning and value only as part of these larger and superior entities, and that true freedom was found only in the total submission of the individual to them.

Neither Nazism nor fascism had a well-developed theory of government beyond the dictatorial powers of the *Führer* or *Duce* (respectively the German and Italian for 'leader'). Technically, Germany was ruled under emergency powers granted to Hitler in March 1933 by the constitutional procedures of the Weimar Republic. Indeed, the *Führer's* powers were assumed to transcend the normal boundaries associated with government. The ultimate law of Germany thus became the 'will of the *Führer*'. In practice, and in spite of its reputation for ruthless efficiency, historical research on the Third Reich shows it to have been disorganised, arbitrary and chaotic, riddled with disputes, ambition and petty jealousies. In fact, Hitler was a 'lazy dictator' who often stood aside from internal Nazi Party conflicts, was indecisive and delegated much authority to subordinates.

Mussolini's powers were, in reality, more constrained than Hitler's. In 1943 his party's supreme body, the 'Fascist Grand Council', overthrew him. Mussolini did, however, give some thought to a political structure to rival the discredited parliamentary system. This resulted in the 'Corporate State', an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of various groups in society (especially labour and capital) by organising 'corporations', largely based on professional or economic groups (such as doctors or vine growers), and having these represented in a deliberative body under the firm control of the state. In 1939 it replaced the Chamber of Deputies. Fascist movements elsewhere in Europe were impressed by the apparent success of Germany and Italy in conquering unemployment. How far this was a genuine attempt to create an alternative to political democracy and how far simply a cloak for Mussolini's personal power is debated. However, one must note here that the fascist principle of the supremacy of the group over the individual was clearly apparent, as *groups* rather than *individuals* were represented.

Fascist economic and social theory

For a movement that owed its popularity in large measure to the economic stresses of the inter-War period, fascism developed no very organised economic theory. Such as it was, fascist economic theory inclined towards a socialist approach, with a suspicion of and hostility to capitalism – notwithstanding the Marxist understanding of fascism as 'the ugliest face of

capitalism'. The Italian Fascist Party manifesto of 1919 was emphatically socialist in context. It called for the confiscation of large landholdings, extensive public ownership and minimum wages. In part this was tactical, an attempt to wean the newly enfranchised working class away from international socialists. There is, however, more to fascist economic approaches than political opportunism.

While claiming to represent the interests of both workers and employers in the national socialist society that was being created, both Nazism and fascism eventually turned to policies which strengthened the power of employers and weakened the rights of employees. This was especially true as fascist parties sought more extensive support among the middle classes after they had largely failed to create high levels of working-class support. At the same time the power of the state to represent the whole nation and not simply factions or groups was strengthened.

Under both Hitler and Mussolini the state played a major role in the economy. Though Hitler personally had little interest in economics, his finance minister, Schacht, applied, without acknowledging it, Keynesian methods of state spending to stimulate the economy. Mussolini tried, with some degree of seriousness, to create a 'corporate state' in which specific industries were organised under state direction, so as to eliminate any potential conflict between them and the national interest, or between competing groups, especially capital and labour. In 1930 a National Council of Corporations was set up, placing workers in categories and designed to protect their interests. This was to lead Oswald Mosley, a former British cabinet minister, to abandon the Labour Party and set up the British Union of Fascists in 1932, with the goal of establishing a similar structure in Britain.

Fascist economic goals were strictly subordinated to the policy of national self-assertion. Industrialisation in Italy was encouraged to strengthen the military base. Within this general approach, the policy of 'autarchy', or self-sufficiency, played an important role. The policy, pursued with only limited success, was intended to strengthen the nation by reducing its dependence on imports and external economic forces in general.

Social policy had much the same goal. In Germany, the basic community was held to be the *Volk*, which was perceived as transcending all classes or sectional interests. The word has a racial rather than a political or sociological meaning. The *Volk's* cultural, physical and moral health was of crucial importance. It was here that fascist regimes played a strong part, from material benefits to entertainment facilities, from youth movements to subsidised opera. The goal, however, was the well-being not of the *individual* but of the *nation*. Nazi social policy, for example, involved both the banning of abortion in order to expand the population and euthanasia of the mentally

and some physically handicapped people in order to improve the genetic stock of the nation.

Women were to be confined to the private sphere of the home. They were subordinate to men, their proper role being to provide support for their menfolk and to produce lots of healthy workers and warriors. In that sphere they were to be honoured – and patronised – as heroines of the new fascist society.

Modern European fascism

Fascist movements in Europe were strongest from the 1920s to the early 1940s. They appeared to have been discredited and defeated by 1945. Fascist governments in Spain and Portugal survived until the 1970s, ending only with the death of General Franco (1975) in the former and a military coup in the latter (1974). But fascist movements never entirely went away; they distanced themselves from the excesses of the past, reformed and repackaged their programmes, sought respectability and new opportunities and power. Fascism in Europe today is confined strictly to the political fringe. However, elements of the above are certainly apparent in many political groupings in modern Europe and elsewhere.

A case can be made that full-blooded fascism was a temporary aberration in European history, very much of its time and place (between 1919 and 1945) and finally annihilated for ever by total defeat in the Second World War. However, one can envisage that as the memories of 1939–45 recede into the mists of time, a new and substantially modified form of fascism may yet prove a powerful political force. Primo Levi, an Italian Jewish writer and Auschwitz survivor, killed himself in 1987 partly because he observed that fascism was on the march among a new generation, a generation that did not understand the nature of a fascist regime and who were highly susceptible to the blandishments of revisionist historians who denied the **Holocaust**.

Holocaust

The systematic murder of Jews in Europe by the Nazis during the Second World War.

Many of the ingredients of fascism are demonstrable today. The collapse of communism has left a gaping economic, political and even spiritual hole in Eastern Europe. Many countries, such as France and Britain, now have sizeable ethnic minorities with evident possibilities of friction with the majority community. Dramatic economic, social and cultural change, partly the product of globalisation, has shattered old certainties, weakened traditional institutions and left many social groups uneasy and bewildered. Anticosmopolitanism is a major feature of modern fascist parties as it was of their

inter-war predecessors, generating a rejection of the multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-religious nature of modern Western societies.

Growing assertion of national awareness, regional identity and the development of 'minor' nationalisms in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Spain's Basque country have accompanied the evolution of the European Union. Terrorist violence and disturbing echoes of fascist style and atmosphere have been characteristic features. Virulent nationalism has exploded in former Yugoslavia and elsewhere with terrible consequences. The flood of migrants into Western Europe from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe has provided fertile grounds for fascist-style propaganda. In many countries there seems to be growing disillusionment with liberal democracy itself as voters demonstrate low turn-out and opinion polls register deep cynicism about politicians.

The expansion of the European Union to the poorer nations of Eastern Europe may fuel fascist movements in both Western *and* Eastern Europe. Economic restructuring and job losses in inefficient agriculture and industry in the East will create poverty while stimulating population flows into the West and competition for jobs.

One interesting, and perhaps alarming, phenomenon has been the emergence of new movements with a strong emphasis on the nation, authority and discipline. The uniforms, parades and mass rallies have receded and a much slicker, television-friendly, 'reasonable' and 'unthreatening' image is presented to the electorate. Democratic processes are accepted and elections contested. Leaders wear business suits rather than military-style uniforms. Links with violent and illegal behaviour are publicly repudiated. Such movements have had some success. One example is the National Front in France.

The National Front appeals to the working classes and lower middle classes threatened by globalisation, job losses, insecurity, immigration, big business and the far left. The 1986 National Assembly elections, using proportional representation for the first and only time during the Fifth Republic, resulted in the National Front winning thirty-five seats for its 10 per cent share of the vote. By the 1997 elections the National Front's share of the vote rose to 15 per cent but won only one seat in the National Assembly, a seat from which it was later disqualified for financial irregularities. In the first round of the presidential election in April 2002 Jean-Marie Le Pen, the National Front's charismatic (if somewhat eccentric) leader, slightly increased his share of the vote to almost 17 per cent, pushing Lionel Jospin, the Socialist candidate, out of the race altogether. Le Pen's subsequent defeat in the final vote (gaining only 18 per cent share of the vote) did not remove the impression that fascism had become a major political force in France, giving encouragement to far-right political parties across Europe. This impression was not entirely removed by the failure of the National Front to win a single seat in the 2002 elections to the National Assembly.

The Northern League and the National Alliance in Italy, and also Austria's Freedom Party, have received significant electoral support, the latter even joining Austria's coalition government in 2000. German extreme-right parties have tended to be most successful in the former communist parts of Eastern Germany, at the expense of the Christian Democrats. Finally, the anti-immigrant Lijst Fortuyn party became the second party in the Dutch parliament in the May 2002 election, following the assassination of its leader.

In the newer democracies of Eastern Europe, more blatantly fascist movements have sprung up, such as Vladimir Zhirinovsky's avowedly anti-Semitic (and curiously named) Liberal-Democratic Party in Russia. The regimes of Tudjman in Croatia and Slobodan Milosovich in Serbia during the 1990s displayed many of fascism's most appalling features, including 'ethnic cleansing'.

These developments raise the question whether fascism is in reality undergoing a revival, or whether these movements, at least in Western Europe, are no more than hard-right conservative parties still fully compatible with the democratic tradition.

Overall, the prospects for revived fascism still look poor. Democratic government has been the norm in Western Europe for over half a century. Political and economic stability, rising living standards, welfare measures and full employment have dulled the edge of political controversy. Travel, television and education have produced, according to some liberals, a more tolerant and sophisticated populace. Only a very serious crisis, such as a world economic slump or a long and unsuccessful war, seems likely radically to disturb this relative domestic political tranquillity, although one might point to the 'social **apartheid**' existing in some northern English cities between white and Asian populations that erupted into violence in the summer of 2001 as evidence of a less optimistic situation. In such a grave crisis the far right in Europe would be forced to reveal whether it is genuinely committed to the democratic process and liberal institutions or fundamentally rejects them.

apartheid

The system of 'separate development' of the different races of South Africa which allocated legal rights and status on the basis of race. It lasted from the late 1940s until the accession to power of Nelson Mandela in 1994.

Fascism in modern Britain

Prior to the 1930s, fascism in Britain was confined to a handful of tiny groupings of admirers of Mussolini's Italy. But with the formation of the British Union of Fascists (BUF) in 1932, under the leadership of Oswald Mosley, it became a significant movement. Mosley fitted the role of charismatic leader nicely. He was strikingly handsome, with an impressive military record. He had been a Conservative MP and, later, a Labour minister. Mosley was disillusioned over

the failures of parliamentary democracy to tackle the severe unemployment of the 1920s and 1930s, which he attributed to a failure of free-market economics and international finance. His solution was a mixture of Keynesian spending by government on public works, a 'common market' composed of the British Empire, and a corporate state on the Italian model, with economic self-sufficiency as a major goal. Government would be dynamic and vigorously involved in society and the economy.

While Mosley assumed that the BUF would gain a parliamentary majority by constitutional and conventional means, once in power it would take extraordinary powers radically to reconstruct the political system on fascist lines. Initially, Mosley's movement was not overtly anti-Semitic, but with Hitler's successes after 1933 the BUF increasingly imitated the Nazi Party. Mosley's movement was seriously discredited (notably at a party rally at Olympia in 1934) by its violence, its attacks on Jews, communists and other opponents, and its general image of aping alien, un-English ideologies. The outbreak of war with Germany and Italy, Mosley's internment and the later revelations of Nazi bestiality finally demolished it.

After the war and a spell in prison, Mosley tried to revive his political fortunes by launching the Union Movement, which aimed at a united Europe and the expulsion of Afro-Caribbean and other immigrants. This achieved very little and Mosley became wholly marginalised.

Fascism in Britain seemed extinct. At its height it never returned even one MP (partly, of course, due to the British electoral system, but mainly because of its unpalatable political views). In 1967, however, the National Front (NF) was formed. It purveyed a strongly anti-immigrant policy, rather than the anti-Semitism of the BUF. Itself an amalgam of a complex grouping of tiny racist parties, the National Front was riven by dissension and splits, and although it caused something of a stir in the 1970s it failed disastrously in the 1979 general election. Right-wing sentiment favoured the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher. The NF lost much support in 1979 and subsequently splintered into the NF and the British National Party in 1982.

The BNP's ideology is avowedly neo-Nazi, adapted to the British outlook. In recent years it has cloaked itself with the mantle of democracy and has enjoyed some electoral success at local level, as when it won a council seat in the Isle of Dogs in London in 1993. In reality it wants to dismantle the liberal British state and replace it with a corporatist one under an authoritarian leader. Other far-right groups indulged in some low-level terrorist activity directed against non-white Britons, leftists and gays. Groups like Combat 18 and the League of St. George have been associated with football violence and 'white' rock music and have formed links with continental far-right groups and Loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland.

In 1997 the BNP put up fifty-six candidates and in ten constituencies won over one thousand votes. While it never came near winning a seat it acquired the right to a television election broadcast, received much-needed publicity in a media that largely ignores the politically extreme BNP, and won some new members to its cause.

By 2001 there were disturbing signs of a far-right revival in Britain. In the general election the BNP took 16 per cent of the vote in Oldham. This was followed by violent disturbances in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, in part stimulated by the activities of the BNP and other far-right organisations. Liberal opinion was bewildered, alarmed and uncomprehending. While it is too early to assess these developments fully, some factors appear salient, and were identified as such in a series of reports on the riots published in December 2001. The economic stagnation of much of urban England, especially in the former textile towns of northern England, was identified as a major cause of racial and other social problems. In the 2002 local government elections the BNP won three council seats in Burnley, a small but significant number of the seats they contested. These BNP results can either be seen as a crushing defeat, as their opponents averred, or, as they themselves claimed, a significant electoral breakthrough in the face of universal hostility from the liberal media.

There has been a failure of the white working class and the deeply traditional Muslim Asian community to integrate with or even understand each other. Both white and Asian youths are alienated from society in general and (especially among Asian Muslims) their elders in particular. There is in addition general economic, social and cultural deprivation and a widely held perception by poor whites that 'the immigrants get everything' from the local authorities.

More generally, the BNP has also been able to capitalise on popular dislike of the European Union and the Euro, on a general impression of crime and moral decay, and on fears of an uncontrolled flood of 'bogus' asylum seekers. Moreover, many traditional, white, working-class Labour voters plainly believe New Labour is no longer their party and has become middle-class, liberal and overly concerned with the rights of minorities more than with the interests of the working class and the poor.

In these circumstances the far right has been able to peddle easy solutions to complex problems. It is too early to decide whether the rise of the far right is a temporary aberration or a significant development. Past experience suggests that they are unlikely to gain 20 per cent of the vote in any constituency and the electoral system effectively disbars them from parliament. Only a massive economic or political crisis is likely to change this. None the less, the far right have a considerable capacity to provoke conflict and disturbance.

As has been noted, categorising states, regimes or movements as 'fascist' is not always easy. It has proved convenient for the left to label a wide range of unpalatable views and regimes as 'fascist'. Many modern historians have been anxious to stress the differences between various 'fascist' regimes, rather than their similarities, but some salient characteristics are recognisable.

Fascist values are rejected as morally alien to the Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment-liberal tradition. Fascists themselves would not find this a problem, as they are opposed to these traditions as a key element of their philosophy (for want of a better word). Claims that fascism 'had its good points', such as tackling crime, creating political stability and ending unemployment, should be dismissed as ephemeral, superficial and far out-weighted by its enormous crimes against humanity. Fascism was and is not a coherent ideology.

All fascist movements may be said to have all or most of these characteristics: racism, opposition to democracy, to liberalism and to equality, aggressive assertion of the nation-state, dictatorial government under a strong leader and an emphasis on military or quasi-military values. These values involve obedience, loyalty, order, hierarchy and a cult of violence, physical strength and all the paraphernalia of flags, drums, marching, ceremonies, uniforms, emotionally roused crowds and general political theatricality.

It is easy to get carried away by the threat fascism poses to modern democracies. The possibility of a fascist party coming to power in Britain or any other democracy today is so remote as to be hardly worth worrying about. Democratic culture in the EU is very strong and deep. However, the fascist right does threaten the rights of ethnic, racial and religious minorities and other groups to live their lives free from abuse and from the threat of violence or of vandalism to their homes and businesses. Complacency is hardly possible in a continent that produced so much racism, xenophobia and violence during its long and turbulent history – a continent from which fascism sprang as one of its less admirable accomplishments.

Summary

Fascism is particularly resistant to rational enquiry, partly because fascists themselves scorn the intellect and partly because it has become a portmanteau term of political abuse. However, even if fascist ideas are difficult to present in structured form, fascist values can be fairly easily identified. These include a positive view of conflict, struggle and war; a stress on non-material values, irrationalism and anti-intellectualism; and a glorification of the nation or race. Obedience to the leader and state are ultimate values, and society and mankind in general are seen very much in hierarchical terms. Fascist economic theory is subordinate to the foregoing. The European experience of fascism of

course culminated in a disastrous war and terrible atrocities, and some have argued that fascism ended in 1945. However, many of the factors that engendered fascism, such as racism, alienation and moral confusion, are around today, so reports of its demise were perhaps greatly exaggerated.

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SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- 1 Is fascism anything more than an 'emotional spasm'?
- 2 How crucial to fascism is racism?
- 3 Has the tragic experience of Europe with fascism disqualified it from serious intellectual consideration?
- 4 'Fascism was an aberration, a product of particular circumstances; it has no future in the twenty-first century.' Do you agree?
- 5 Does fascism offer serious solutions to the problems of industrial society?
- 6 Are all fascist movements innately totalitarian?

