Debate on Fascism

What fascism is not and is. Thoughts on the re-inflation of a concept

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Abstract

This new section of the journal is polemical in intent and sets out to stimulate debate. For submission of your contributions (max. 800 words) please visit the website (brill.com/fascism). The journal's consultant editor Roger Griffin sets the ball rolling.

Keywords

generic fascism; ecofascism; liberal fascism; Islamofascism; fundamentalism; political religion

Fascism: a signifier without a signified?

In 1979 the *American Historical Review* published Gilbert Allardyce's essay 'What fascism is not. Thoughts on the deflation of a concept.'¹ Yet its pronouncement of the death of 'fascism' as a generic concept has proved greatly exaggerated. Over three decades later, safely ensconced in their electronic towers, an international band of scholars in history and the social sciences are still engrossed, like a virtual community of latter-day monks, in the minutiae of comparative fascist studies, painstakingly scrutinizing neglected phenomena, episodes, and linkages. In doing so they are constantly refining the understanding which each case study throws on how the ideal-type of the genus is best constructed for heuristic purposes.

Meanwhile, down in the noisy marketplace below the term 'fascism' continues to be bandied about by those clearly more interested in its seemingly

¹ Gilbert Allardyce, 'What fascism is not: Thoughts on the deflation of a concept,' *American Historical Review* 84 (1979): 367–388.

inexhaustible polemical force than in anything resembling historical or political fact. As a result, casual passers-by and groups of the curious are being exhorted to believe by quacks, snake-charmers and firebrand prophets that those prepared to ask the state to impose measures to save the planet's biosphere are 'eco-fascists', that those advocating food or life-styles which do not induce obesity or heart attacks are 'health fascists', or that measures to impose economic sanity in the Eurozone are 'economic fascism'. Meanwhile in the egomaniacal reaches of the blogosphere we are regaled with such delights as a confused, tautological 'ultimate definition of fascism' by amateurs masquerading as 'experts' on the strength of a few Google-hours of surfing.

These would be no more than irritating mosquito-bites on the body of scholarship were it not for the way the abuse of the term through ignorance or its deliberate perversion for political ends can have serious consequences in the 'real world'. Jonah Goldberg's *Liberal Fascism*² approached modern history in the same spirit in which historical revisionists approach the Holocaust in order to 'prove' that fascism is historically a species of left wing state interventionism and central planning. As a result of this specious argument he can argue to the prejudiced or ingenuous that liberticide fascism in democratic disguise underpins contemporary the attempts of 'liberals' (a dirty word in Republican circles) to use the machinery of state to belatedly introduce a national healthcare system into the most materially advanced democracy on earth.

Islamofascism

Even more catastrophic in its consequences has been the conflation of fascism with Islam in the term 'Islamofascism'. In August 2006 George Bush used it in a press conference, and high-profile journalists such as Christopher Hitchens rallied to defend its use. Now, to investigate the relationship at a psychodynamic and even historical level between the secular fanaticism of fascism and the fanaticism of politicized religions such as Hindutva in India, fundamentalist Christianity in the US, and Islamism all over the world is a perfectly legitimate, indeed important, exercise. It is also worth remembering that at least one major scholar in this area, Walter Laqueur, made a carefully articulated case to see radical forms of political Islam as the future face of fascism in his *Fascism: Past, Present and Future*.³ But what neither students of fascism's religious dimension nor Laqueur have done is conflate fascism with Islam *tout court*, which is exactly what the term 'Islamofascism' does.

² Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (New York [etc.]: Doubleday, 2007).

³ Walter Laqueur, *Fascism: Past, Present and Future* (New York [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Defenders of this neologism might argue that it is preferable on grounds of euphony to ‘Islamismo-fascism’, and that ‘Islamofascism’ simply stands for radical Islam. But such sophistry does not wash since Islam cannot ‘stand for’ Islamism any more than Christianity can ‘stand for’ the Spanish Inquisition, or for the Christian Dispensationalism which has convinced millions in the US that they are literally living through the onset of Armageddon in which in which all the ‘enemies’ of Christ are soon to meet horrific fates. In any case, Islamism cannot be fused with fascism, since even its global project for a new dispensation of humanity under Allah is a politicized form of religion, and especially in ‘Salafi jihadism’, great efforts are made to justify it through textual references to Islamic scripture. It is thus a form of political religion with deep roots in the history and theology of Islam, and not a ‘modern ideology’ on a par with Jacobinism or Bolshevism, *pace* John Gray’s specious argument in *Al Qaeda and What it Means to be Modern*.⁴ As such it cannot be synthesised with fascism any more than oil can be mixed with water.

But I would argue that there are deeper, more sinister, reasons for the presidential deployment of ‘Islamofascism’ in a press conference at the height of the ‘war on terror’. First it associates Islamism taxonomically with fascism and hence subliminally with Nazism, an established arch-enemy of the Manifest Destiny of the US associated with crimes against humanity on a scale which dwarfs 9/11. Second it keys into the idea that Islam, of which Islamism is but a particular interpretation and derivative, is in fact violent and destructive *in its entirety*. This is in turn rooted in primordial fundamentalist assumptions that Christianity is the only true faith and must conquer its enemies—paganism and other religions of the Book — by force, especially since they attempted to conquer Christian Europe as recently as the seventeenth century. Both these elements conspire to make the term ‘Islamofascism’ a vehicle for Islam’s demonization, so that it finds a natural place within the sphere of ‘evil’ within the dualistic world view of the Neo-Cons (themselves wrongly accused of fascism by some of their opponents).

In the face of such a situation the task for fascist studies seems clear: To carefully but energetically ‘re-inflate’ the term ‘fascism’ to give it its due heuristic weight and historical substance. But at the same time it is important that those engaged in them take every opportunity that their engagement with teaching and the media offer to ensure public discourse about terrorist extremism or social liberalism is not entirely dominated by terms emptied of their historical and semantic value by woolly thinking born of crass ignorance, paranoia, or by the machinations of Machiavellian political pundits.

⁴ John Gray, *Al Qaeda and What it Means to be Modern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).