Mussolini Predicted a Fascist Century: How Wrong Was He?

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Abstract

In the entry on 'Fascism' published in 1932 in the *Enciclopedia Italiana*, Benito Mussolini made a prediction. There were, he claimed, good reasons to think that the twentieth century would be a century of 'authority', the 'right': a fascist century (*un secolo fascista*). However, after 1945 the many attempts by fascists to perpetuate the dreams of the 1930s have come to naught. Whatever impact they have had at a local level, and however profound the delusion that fascists form a world-wide community of like-minded ultranationalists and racists revolutionaries on the brink of 'breaking through', as a factor in the shaping of the modern world, their fascism is clearly a spent force. But history is a kaleidoscope of perspectives that dynamically shift as major new developments force us to rewrite the narrative we impose on it. What if we take Mussolini's *secolo* to mean not the twentieth century, but the 'hundred years since the foundation of Fascism'? Then the story we are telling ourselves changes radically.

Keywords

fascism – radical right – extreme right

1 The 'National Socialism' of Fascism¹

In the entry on 'Fascism' published in 1932 in the newly created *Enciclopedia Italiana*, Benito Mussolini made a prediction. He wrote that just because the nineteenth century was one of socialism, liberalism and democracy, there was no reason for the twentieth century to be the same. There were, he claimed, good reasons to think that in fact it would be a century of 'authority', the 'right': a fascist century ('*un secolo fascista*'). Fifteen years earlier, at the height of the Great War, he had made another prediction in his newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*. The Italian soldiers fighting in the trenches would form a new elite, a 'trenchocracy' that would sweep aside the old Italy governed by 'windbags' and 'senile imbeciles' out of touch with the new national mood of heroism and patriotism generated by the war. The revolution that followed would give new meanings to words such as 'republic', 'democracy', 'radicalism'. In fact, a new ideology could shape the future 'an anti-Marxist and national socialism' which would 'realize the synthesis of the antithesis: class and nation'.

This latter prediction came true to a significant degree, at least in the short term. On 23 March 1919 Mussolini founded a new movement, the *Fasci Italiani di Combattimento* (FIC), whose name evoked a hybrid of three elements: first the militant ethos of various interventionist *Fasci* or leagues who played their part in the Interventionist movement to force the government to abandon neutrality and join the war on the side of the Entente; second, the commitment to the new Italy that had emerged from the war; and third, the veteran spirit, known as '*combattentismo*' which would inject a heroic form of patriotism into a country united only on paper since the *risorgimento*. As for the 'socialism' of national socialism, this was clearly reflected in the programme of the FIC, the main demands of which were clearly left-wing: the call for universal suffrage for all Italians over eighteen, including women; the corporatist restructuring of the economy divided into distinctive sectors of activity run by a technocratic elite but with workers' representation; a minimum wage; an eight-hour day; state insurance against injury; state pensions; improvement to the transport infrastructure; and the nationalization of the armaments industry.

1 The Lecture on Fascism is organised every two years by the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies and *Fascism. Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* (Brill), to mark the first issue of a volume and to involve the scholarly and general public. The lecture is delivered by a member of the editorial board of the Fascism journal. Previous Lectures on Fascism: Nigel Copsey, "Fascism, but with an Open Mind...": Reflections on the Contemporary Far Right in (Western) Europe,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 2 (2013): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00201008>; Aristotle Kallis, 'When Fascism Became Mainstream: The

By 1932, when Mussolini made his prediction about the coming hegemony of the right, Fascism was riding high. The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution was proving extraordinarily successful. The regime had extensively modernized the transport and cultural infrastructure, encouraged mass participation in associations and mass organizations tailored to every sector of society, and was building up to the high point of its popularity with the conquest of Abyssinia and the declaration of Italy's 'Roman Empire' in 1936. But it was events abroad that encouraged Mussolini to see the new century as one of 'authority'. Right-wing authoritarianism had spread to Hungary (1920), Spain (1923–1930), Portugal (1926), Poland (1926), Albania (1929), and Yugoslavia (1929); abortive right-wing putsches had taken place in Germany and Austria in the early 1920s, where an increasingly powerful nationalist, racist and anti-communist subculture persisted. By the time Mussolini's article was published, Hitler had gained over 37% in national elections and was poised to take power. Meanwhile Western intellectuals, both obscure and famous, were announcing the 'decline of the West' and proposing draconian remedies to the crisis of civilization.

2 A New Fascist Civilization?

Mussolini was thus reflecting the *Zeitgeist* when he declared in the article 'Between Two Civilizations', written within months of Hitler's election as Chancellor: 'We have entered fully into a period which can be called the transition from one type of civilization to another. The ideologies of the nineteenth century are collapsing and find no one to defend them'. He goes on to explain that socialism has been 'mummified by Marxist dogma', and that many democrats and liberals 'believe the demo-liberal phase of Western States is over'. The effects of the Great War and Great Depression have brought the crisis of the (liberal) West to the surface, but salvation is at hand: 'the new Fascist ideas, which are active in every nation in the world' are reaching maturity in time to assure a positive future for humanity.

Seen through this prism, a rapid succession of events over the next few years suggested that, while the sun of liberal civilization was sinking, that of fascism was in the ascendance. With utter ruthlessness Hitler set about establishing the Third Reich at devastating speed, paramilitary movements of Fascist and Nazi inspiration were active in Britain, France, Holland, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Baltic States, Hungary, Romania, Spain, and Portugal, while over the next few years authoritarianism would spread further to Austria (1933),

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Challenge of Extremism in Times of Crisis,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 4 (2015): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00401001>.

Estonia (1934), Latvia (1934), Bulgaria (1934), Lithuania (1936), Greece (1936), Romania (1938), and Spain (1939). During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) Soviet Russia aided the Republican left, while Fascism and Nazism, now united in an 'Axis' of power, gave significant support to Franco's rebels. Liberal democracies looked on impotently. No wonder the war crystallized for millions the profound sense that the fate of the world would be determined by the outcome of a Manichaeian struggle between fascism and communism.

By Christmas 1941 it would have been forgivable for anyone surveying the world situation to have believed that Mussolini's prediction made less than a decade earlier was coming to fruition. In Europe, liberal democracy only prevailed in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, and Switzerland. Fascist Italy was pursuing its own territorial ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean, and all other countries found themselves ruled by an authoritarian state, often extensively fascistized, under Nazi occupation, or transformed into a puppet state of the Third Reich. Operation Barbarossa had made spectacular progress towards defeating the Soviet Union and the Wehrmacht had not yet been defeated in the decisive Battle of Moscow. Three weeks earlier Japan, now part of the Axis, had destroyed the US fleet at Pearl Harbour.

It was no mere dystopian fantasy to imagine the prospect of a Nazified 'Brave New World', with France and Northern Europe forming the 'European New Order'; with Eastern Europe reduced to a cluster of modern fiefdoms, their indigenous populations subjugated to the status of serfs; with Japan dominating the Far East, Africa entirely colonized by European fascist and authoritarian states, and Latin America run by fascistized dictatorships. Only North America would survive as a beleaguered zone of liberal democracy.

3 The Failure of Fascism

In the event, the period of fascism's growing hubris between 1925 and 1941 quickly gave way to one of savage nemesis. By 15 August 1945 all three Axis Powers had been defeated and their empires retaken by their arch-enemies, communism and liberal democracy, inflicting apocalyptic destruction on two Japanese cities and much of the Third Reich. Thereafter, the many attempts by fascists to perpetuate the dreams of the 1930s have come to naught, whether in the form of political parties shorn of para-militarism, militant groupuscules, international networks of right-wing intellectuals, white supremacists adopting the creed of Universal Nazism, the 'metapolitical' New Right, or a new breed of 'cyberfascists'. Whatever impact they have had at a local level, and however profound the delusion that fascists form a world-wide community of like-minded ultranationalists and racists revolutionaries on the brink

of 'breaking through', as a factor in the shaping of the modern world, their fascism is clearly a spent force. When in the mid-1980s I announced to an Oxford expert on Nazi anti-Semitism that I wanted to write a DPhil on fascist ideology I was told I was wasting my time because it was a 'non-subject'.

In the early 1990s, as the Cold War came to an end, the threat of fascism had seemingly dwindled to vanishing point, and Francis Fukuyama could confidently predict in his article for the *National Interest* and the subsequent book² that the clashes between fanatical ideologies that had shaped human history since the (ironically named?) *homo sapiens* first walked the earth were a thing of the past. Mercifully (from a liberal humanist point of view) 'History' was ending. Mussolini, therefore, had simply been wrong. For the first fifty years of the twentieth century democracy and the whole Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment humanist tradition had been on the ropes. Now it had gained absolute hegemony and landed knock-out blows on all hostile ideologies.

But history is a kaleidoscope of perspectives that dynamically shift as major new developments force us to rewrite the narrative we impose on it. What if we take Mussolini's *secolo* to mean not the twentieth century, but the 'hundred years since the foundation of Fascism'? Then the story we are telling ourselves changes radically. In fact, just as Fukuyama was putting the final touches to his triumphalist article, the Yugoslav Wars of mutual ethnic and religious hatreds were gaining momentum, and Timothy McVeigh and David Copeland, partly inspired by *The Turner Diaries*,³ had started out on their journeys towards carrying out lethal attacks on civil society in Oklahoma and London. In 1998 the clandestine terrorist organization National Socialist Underground (NSU) was formed in Germany and would go onto to commit ten murders, three bombings and fourteen bank robberies. Together they were tracing the outlines of the new permutations of fascism which would only become visible later.

Since the turn of the millennium, a series of lethal Jihadist attacks on European cities in the wake of 9/11 and the normalization of the 'differentialist' racism pioneered by the New Right have helped fuel the rise of electoral populism and identitarian politics in civil society in the West. The xenophobia towards certain outgroups has been intensified by problems, both real and imagined, posed by multiculturalism, economic migration, and the (risk of a) mass influx by refugees from conflict zones. Meanwhile, ethno-centric policies of exclusion or forced integration have been adopted by populist governments and illiberal democracies from Hungary to China, while elsewhere horrific episodes of ethnic or religious cleansing have been enacted by terrorist regimes and

² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

³ Andrew MacDonald [pseudonym of William Luther Pierce], *The Turner Diaries* (Washington, D.C.: National Alliance, 1978).

movements. In the same period alt-right fascists in the US have felt sufficiently emboldened by the rise of officially sanctioned populism in their country to crawl out of the woodwork to offer open support to the president, while the advocates of extreme right solutions to global society's mounting problems of equality and social integration have found refuge under the wide umbrella of the populist organizations that every Western country now hosts, sometimes as the government party or in coalition with it.

As for those true to the revolutionary vision of the original fascisms, some neo-Nazi groupuscules now model themselves on the NSU, while lone actors such as Timothy McVeigh, and Dylann Roof in the US, Tom Mair in Britain (neo-Nazi murderer of the anti-Brexit Jo Cox), Anders Breivik in Norway, and only a few days ago, Brenton Tarrant in New Zealand have created a new template for fascist extremists fearful of a 'white genocide'. They have showed that it is possible, without belonging to any uniformed organization or 'leader', to carry out powerful acts of 'propaganda of the deed' for their millenarian fantasies of ethnic separation, cultural cleansing, forced repatriation, and the Armageddon of racial war: an alternative 'end of history'.

Tarrant illustrates just how dramatically fascism has evolved since the days of Mussolini and Hitler under the impact of globalization and the internet. Nazism is now the ideology not of the rebirth of Germany, but of the mythical white 'Aryan' race fighting the alleged ethnic and ideological enemies of its 'purity' all over the world. (A parallel globalization has occurred in the Jihadist version of Islam). He imbibed his politicized hatred on the web, researched extremism and terrorism on the web, bought his weapons on the web, streamed the killings live on the web, and posted his 'Manifesto' on the web à la Breivik. Within minutes the world's news and social media were disseminating his symbolic act of violence and the ideas behind them all over the world.

At the core of these ideas lies the obsessive theme of all genuine fascism: the status quo must be destroyed for 'the nation' (in this case not a nation state but an entire ethnic category) to be reborn. The Wikipedia age has encouraged modern fascists to create their own do-it-yourself brand of ideologized hatred. The Manifesto indicates that the basic ingredient is neo-Nazism: its first page features the 'Black Sun', also known as the *Sonnenrad* or Sun-wheel, the logo of 'universal' Nazism which is taken from the runic pattern on the floor of the Teutonic crypt in Heinrich Himmler's Wewelsburg castle, and looks like a combination of spider's web and Swastika. Multi-culturalism and Islam, which were not issues for the Third Reich, are the central symptoms of societal decline to be eliminated. Oswald Mosley, the leader of the interwar British Union of Fascists (BUF), is cited as a major influence. This may be because Tarrant, as an Anglo-Saxon Australian can relate better to a British fascist, but

a deeper reason is hinted at in his claim to be an 'ecofascist'. A close associate of Mosley's was Jorian Jenks, co-founder of the Soil Association and editorial secretary of its journal *Mother Earth*. Moreover, one of the BUF's enthusiastic supporters was the author Henry Williamson, author of *Tarka the Otter* (1927),⁴ who was deeply concerned about the destruction of rural England.

But there are contemporary inputs too. The Manifesto is entitled 'The Great Replacement', a reference to the Jean Camus' theory that as birth rates of 'Whites' decline and other ethnic groups rises Western civilization will gradually descend into barbarity and Europe will slowly morph into 'Eurabia'. Tarrant's role model for carrying out the ideal terrorist attack against Islamization is Anders Breivik. Like some forms of pathogen, fascism has shown remarkable resilience in its capacity to adapt to a radically altered postwar social and political environment. We should be wary of pathological metaphors, however: they were extensively used by Nazis to rationalize mass exterminations.

4 A New Millennium of the Right?

While neo-Nazis and radical right-wing populists update their conspiracy theories, the growing threats to Islam, real and imaginary, posed by a rapidly secularizing and materialistic modern world ensure that its extreme right-wing fundamentalist perversion, Salafi Jihadism, shows no sign of abating in its global war on *Jahillya*, the decadent world of 'unbelievers', the blue print for which was first outlined by Qutb in his *Milestones* (1964).⁵

There is a grave danger that, with mounting economic, demographic, refugee, and resource crises combined with looming ecological catastrophe, the wave of a global 'existential crisis' will grow into a tsunami. A 'siege mentality' could become the norm, externalizing itself in the politics of *ressentiment* and 'identity', in conspiracy theories, in intolerance of 'otherness', in openly ethnocratic and xenophobic or more subtle and insidious 'differentialist' racism, often in collusion with conservative attitudes to religion and to changing social *mores*. If this is the case, we are ending the centenary of the formation of the first *Fasci* with the rise of, and possible ultimate victory of a nexus of anti-democratic, anti-pluralist, and anti-humanistic forces over liberal democracy, with the protagonists of human rights and egalitarianism increasingly on the

4 Henry Williamson, *Tarka, the Otter: His Joyful Water-Life and Death in the Country of the Two Rivers* (London & New York: Putnam, 1927).

5 Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Kuwait: International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations, 1964).

back foot. There are countries where they already have their backs to the wall, sometimes a prison wall.

For millions the longing to belong in a modern world swept by virtual and physical forces that uproot, deracinate and alienate human beings, combined with the growing threats to a sense of home, both physical and psychological, cannot be fulfilled. A brilliant analysis of this dilemma is found in Goodhart's *The Road to Somewhere* (2017),⁶ which distinguishes between the 'anywhere people' who feel at ease in the post-modern world of 'liquid modernity', and the 'somewhere people' who feel existentially threatened by it. Perhaps it is the revolt of the 'somewheres' that can help explain the success of such politicians as Donald Trump, Nigel Farage (leader of the UK Independence Party), Victor Orbán, Jair Bolsanaro, Vladimir Putin, Geert Wilders, Thierry Baudet and their many counterparts in countries all over the world in challenging or overthrowing basic principles of liberal democracy by appealing to a mythic, homogenous 'people' or *Volk* set against the politicians of what Trump calls 'the swamp' of central government. Human-made and natural catastrophes combined with the effects of a culture-cidal and biocidal globalization have unleashed dangerous forces of identitarian politics as a form of self-preservation all over the world. Fascism in the strict sense may not be rising, but a nexus of entangled and mutually reinforcing 'rights', old and new, is becoming more vigorous and self-confident.

One of the Fascist slogans was 'Mussolini is always right'. Well he was wrong about the future belonging to authoritarianism and fascism. However, in a way he could not have foreseen, he may be less wrong about the rising hegemony the 'right' in the widest sense. Could we be living through the shift from a civilization to a technologically sophisticated anti-civilization, from an age of liberal democracy, never fully realized, to one of myriad struggles, great and small, between ethnic, historical, and religious identities which have been weaponized and programmed to engage in a new form of MAD, the policy of Mutually Assured Destruction parodied in *Dr Strangelove*? If so, it is time for liberal humanists, religious or secular, whatever their ethnic or cultural background, to engage actively in the struggle to defend basic freedoms under the dwindling number of genuine democracies as much as under any openly authoritarian regime. I am sure the vast majority of the Dutch and Holland's many humanistic organizations such as the NIOD will play their part in forming a resistance front which in its own way is as important now under the European Union (with or without Britain) as it was under the Nazis' 'European New Order'.

6 David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017).