

# On Fascist Ideology

Federico Finchelstein

Comprendere e saper valutare con esattezza il nemico, significa possedere già una condizione necessaria per la vittoria.

Antonio Gramsci<sup>1</sup>

Fascism is a political ideology that encompassed totalitarianism, state terrorism, imperialism, racism and, in the German case, the most radical genocide of the last century: the Holocaust. Fascism, in its many forms did not hesitate to kill its own citizens as well as its colonial subjects in its search for ideological and political closure. Millions of civilians perished on a global scale during the apogee of fascist ideologies in Europe and beyond.

In historical terms, fascism can be defined as a movement and a regime. Emilio Gentile – who, with Zeev Sternhell and George Mosse,<sup>2</sup> is the most insightful historian of fascism – presents fascism as a modern revolutionary phenomenon that was nationalist and revolutionary, anti-liberal and anti-Marxist. Gentile also presents fascism as being typically organized in a militaristic party that had a totalitarian conception of state politics, an activist and anti-theoretical ideology as well as a focus on virility and anti-hedonistic mythical foundations. For Gentile a defining feature of fascism was its character as a secular religion which affirms the primacy of the nation understood as an organic and ethnically homogenous community. Moreover, this nation was to be hierarchically organized in a corporatist state endowed with a war-mongering vocation that searches for a politics of national expansion, potency and conquest. Fascism, in short, was not a mere reactionary ideology. Rather, fascism aimed at creating a new order and a new civilization.<sup>3</sup>

The word fascism derives from the Italian word *fascio* and refers to a political group (such as the political group lead by Giuseppe Garibaldi during the time of Italian unification.) Fascism also refers visually and historically to a Roman imperial symbol of authority. Its place of birth as a modern political ideology was northern Italy, the year was 1919, and its founder was Benito Mussolini. Thus, fascism as a term as well as a political movement was born on the Italian peninsula. Its ideological origins, however, predated its name. The fact that fascism was born as a concept before its explicit birth as a movement is central to any understanding of fascism. The ideology of radical nationalism that made it possible was part of a larger intellectual reaction to the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> This tradition was both European and, in the Latin American case, “non-European” as well. To be sure, the original ideology behind fascism was born as a reaction to the progressive European revolutions of the long nineteenth century (from the French revolution of 1789 to the American and Latin American revolutions of 1776 and the 1810s). Fascism represented a post-revolutionary attack against equality. The ideology of the anti-Enlightenment is the major root of the longstanding ideological tradition that created fascism. Its branches constituted a reaction against liberal politics and a rejection of democracy. And yet fascism did not oppose the market economy and put forward a corporatist organization that aimed to be functional to capitalist accumulation. Equally important, fascism is a philosophy of political action that ascribes value to absolute violence in the political realm. This ascription was boosted by one radical outcome of the

Enlightenment: Soviet Communism. The rise of Bolshevism in 1917 encountered global opposition as well as emulation. By presenting itself as the opposite of Communism, fascism took advantage of this widespread rejection and fear of social revolution and at the same time incorporated some of its dimensions.<sup>5</sup>

A new age of total war ultimately provided the context of fascism more than the Soviet experiment did.<sup>6</sup> In fact, it was with the First World War that the ideology of fascism emerged in the trenches. Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini openly stated that war constituted their most meaningful experience. After the war, these two former soldiers found violence and war to be political elements of the first order. When this ideology of violence fused with extreme right-wing nationalism and imperialism and non-Marxist leftist tendencies of revolutionary syndicalism, fascism as we know it today crystallized.

This moment of crystallization was not exclusively Italian or European. In Argentina, former socialist intellectuals like the poet Leopoldo Lugones soon understood the political implications of this fusion. Like Lugones, the Brazilian fascist Plinio Salgado saw fascism as the expression of a universal transnational ideology of the extreme right. During the same time, young Hitler, a disenfranchised war hero, began to give political expression to his basic violent tendencies. And he did it at the new trenches of modern mass politics.<sup>7</sup> Hitler first adopted, and then shaped, the ideology of a small German party of the extreme right, soon to be called National Socialism. Hitler early on recognized his debt to the thought and practice of Mussolini, but both leaders shared a belief in the crisis of the world as they knew it as well. They shared fierce anti-communist and anti-liberal stances.<sup>8</sup> This anti-democratic modernism combined modern politics with technological innovation, aesthetic notions, and a discourse of war.

The modernity of fascism has preoccupied major thinkers over the course of the last century. Whereas Sigmund Freud saw fascism as the return of the repressed, namely the mythical reformulation of death and violence as a source of political power, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* presented fascism as modernity's worst outcome.<sup>9</sup> Overall, although I agree with their presentation, their thesis is nonetheless limited to European developments. In order to grasp the global and transnational dimensions of fascism it is, however, necessary to understand its history, first in its national articulation and second to relate this manifestation of fascism to intellectual exchanges across the Atlantic Ocean and beyond.

Like Marxism and liberalism fascism was a global phenomenon that assumed many national variations and political interpretations. Like them, fascism never had a closed canonical apparatus. Its ideas changed over time and only now, with the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to provide an analytical account of its major ideological patterns. Most fascists perceived fascism as a new political ideology in the making. It was radically opposed to traditional democratic politics, what they called western "electoralism."<sup>10</sup> Benito Mussolini, the creator of fascism, argued that only decadent and old-fashioned ideologies had a closed body of knowledge. For Mussolini, ideas were useful when they had a practical value, that is, when they could confirm his own confused intuitions about social regeneration and the rebirth of nations, the leading role of elites, politics as an art, and more generally his noted anti-humanitarianism. In short, for the creator of fascism ideas were useful when they provided legitimacy for short-term political goals.<sup>11</sup>

Mussolini was a strategist who believed political needs should determine theoretical formations. Many historians have concluded that this belief made Mussolini a kind of anti-theorist and that fascist theory was not important to the movement. For these historians, fascist theory is simply not significant.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, Mussolini at some moments of his career had

anti-theoretical biases. But all the political needs that shaped Mussolini's strategic view of fascism were informed by a set of unarticulated thoughts and aims. These ideas about power, violence, the internal enemy, empire and his own messianic expectations to be the virile leader of his people drove Mussolini's political practice over the years. These ideas were abstract enough to inform his political priorities, and practical enough to be considered non-complex elements for fascist politicians who often wanted to avoid conceptual complications. Antonio Gramsci, an astute Italian observer and theorist, preferred to stress the "concretism" of Mussolini as a defining characteristic of the fascist leader and, perhaps, of fascist ideology at large.<sup>13</sup> Mussolini's concretism was related to the idea of the primacy of politics over "rigid dogmatic formulas." With some wishful thinking, Mussolini himself argued that "theological" or "metaphysical" discussions were foreign to his movement. Fascism was not dogma but a "special mentality." In typical anti-intellectual terms, Mussolini usually merged his concretism, namely the fascist preference for violent "immediate action," with a simplistic understanding of reality. Early on, Mussolini posed his "heretic" realism against the "prophecies" of liberalism, socialism and communism. In other words, Mussolini defended the "reactionary," "aristocratic" and yet "anti-traditional" character of fascism by juxtaposing it to the "orgy of the revolution of words."<sup>14</sup>

Fascism was essentially modern.<sup>15</sup> It saw itself as a child of the present and even as a "primitive" dimension of the future. Past causes, past theoretical formations and even past experiences, were not as important to Mussolini as present political "action." However, present strategies could for him only be manifest acts of a significant whole, a set of meaningful formations that constituted the basis from which political strategies emerged.

The search for a symbiosis between this common ground from which fascist practices emanated and varied theoretical justifications for these strategies constituted the most dynamic element of fascist ideology and also presented its most obvious limits to full canonization. At the end of the day, the creation of a fascist canonical corpus was an endless task. It tried to combine varied short-term strategies with a longstanding basic pre-conception of the world. The fascist synthesis was based on this impossible transition from the politics of daily life to dogma. Fascist interpreters across the Atlantic and elsewhere had to articulate the often tense relation between fascist practice (strategy) and ideal (theory).

To be sure, fascist aesthetics played a central role in how fascism showed itself to the world, but fascism as a political ideology cannot be exclusively encompassed by aesthetics.<sup>16</sup> There was a deeper articulation between a more static fascist matrix and a constantly changing strategy. Ultimately, fascist practice was not related to day-to-day mundane politics, or aesthetics, but rather focused on a set of gendered rituals and spectacles that were aimed at objectifying fascist theory.<sup>17</sup>

Fascist theory never became an articulated system of belief. It was always a changing set of tropes and ideas. In this sense, Mussolini considered fascism to be unique "within the forest of 'isms.'" He personally disliked systems of belief because he considered them to be necessarily dysfunctional. If economics or art were elements that the Duce deemed irrelevant to a person of his stature, he considered fascist ideology or fascist theory to be subordinated to practice and thereby capable of adaptation. But behind, or above, adaptation there was something more grandiose: the definition of fascism as an epochal turning point, a mental and practical sacred revolution. Indeed, despite his contempt for theory, Mussolini believed in the existence of "high theory": the master narrative that represented immediate intuitions about the world – namely, a belief in the primacy of fascist basic meaning over the external word. Intentional, self-affirmative inner meaning was thereby the hardcore attribute of fascist ideology.

Inner fascist meaning represented the fascist matrix, its sacred founding dimension. This inner meaning expressed the supposed purity of the fascist ideal, the “fascist feeling” that kept the fascist universes of people and specific ideas tied together.<sup>18</sup> Tellingly, even as early as 1919, Mussolini had represented the different groups that formed fascism as sharing the same “unique soul.” Fascism, he claimed, may have been “distinctive in form but it is fused and confused in substance.”<sup>19</sup> To borrow a Saussurean metaphor, fascism is to be understood as a specific code, a language of political interpretation and action that had a changing set of signifiers attached to a less malleable signified. Mussolini called this signified the fascist “fondo commune” or the “common denominator.” It was the meaningful nucleus, the core contained within the less coherent changing dicta or set of fascist signifiers. The common denominator was a master cursor, a point of orientation. It was, in short, the fascist minimum which contained the most basic premises of fascism, that which was relatively constant in fascist ideology as opposed to variable forms of fascist expression. The “fondo commune,” the fascist primal notion of the world, was more important than its contextual practices or strategic presentations. The latter were the manifest contextual enactments, the strategic instantiations of a more stable “substance of fascism.” As Mussolini put it in an uncanny moment of full disclosure: “Everyone of us has his own temperament, everyone has his own susceptibility, everyone has his own individual psychology, but there is a common denominator through which the whole is equalized.”<sup>20</sup>

For the Duce, this equalized whole, the matrix of fascism, was the most basic level or core of fascist notions about politics and the world. It was a set of master tropes, distorted values and feelings about violence, war, nation, the sacred and the abject. For some interpreters in the present it may be difficult to make sense of the sheer charge of irrationality and instinctual force that fascism embodied, what Antonio Gramsci had earlier presented as a fascist embrace of the “mysterious” coupled with a “psychology of war.”<sup>21</sup> Although fascists in the past often understood this “psychology” in mystical, or even esoteric terms as imbued with unsignifiable, or unrepresentable, hidden meaning, its main components can perhaps be defined by historians in the present.

The fascist matrix was constituted by traditional western binaries such as “us versus them” or “civilization versus barbarism,” among others. But the fascist importation of this notion of the other as a totally abject being provided a central dimension to its ideology. Thus, fascism also presented central victimizing dimensions. That is, it had negative drives that represented what it stood against as opposed to what it stood for. My definition of fascism presents these dimensions as central to fascism across the Atlantic and elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> Against the enemy, fascism proposed its sacrifice for the sake of the national organism. As the Argentine fascists put it: “The day of final reckoning is close in the future, we will make disappear all the undignified for the sake of the Patria.”<sup>23</sup>

The notion of sacrificial violence not only concerned the abject (the enemy) but also the fascist self, as Mussolini often repeated and Hitler personally embodied. This also can be perceived in the powerful depiction of the imaginary Nazi Zur Linde by Jorge Luis Borges or in the fascist leanings of the celebrated French theorist Georges Bataille.<sup>24</sup> Fascist racism and anti-Semitism are the negative consequences of this continuous search for the ideal enemy, who was increasingly dehumanized from 1919 onwards. However, fascism not only comprised “anti” or negative dimensions. The more “positive” elements of a definition of fascism would include: a messianic “religious conception”<sup>25</sup> that stressed the centrality of a dictatorial leader embodied in the persona of Mussolini. Mussolini presented violence, war and the accumulation of power as the categorical premises for a desired turning point in Italian and world history: the fascist empire. In fascist ideology, violence and aggression

were considered to be the best expressions of power as embodied in the Italian “race” and its “normal” masculinity.<sup>26</sup>

Fascism represents a particular understanding of the state and its monopoly of violence, namely totalitarianism.<sup>27</sup> Whereas the Italian anti-fascists that coined the term totalitarianism in the 1920s meant it as a modern tyranny presenting fascism as a contemporary version of absolutism, Mussolini had a different take on totalitarianism. He appropriated the term, changing it from a negative political adjective to a self-assertive concept and reformulating it as a full identification of fascist ideological imperatives (violence, war, imperialism and a particular notion of the abject) vis-à-vis the state.

The Fascist State is not a night-watchman, solicitous only of the personal safety of the citizens; nor is it organized exclusively for the purpose of guarantying a certain degree of material prosperity and relatively peaceful conditions of life, a board of directors would do as much. . . . The State, as conceived and realised by Fascism, is a spiritual and ethical entity for securing the political, juridical, and economic organization of the nation, an organization which in its origin and growth is a manifestation of the spirit. The State guarantees the internal and external safety of the country, but it also safeguards and transmits the spirit of the people, elaborated down the ages in its language, its customs, its faith. The State is not only the present, it is also the past and above all the future. Transcending the individual’s brief spell of life, the State stands for the immanent conscience of the nation. The forms in which it finds expression change, but the need for it remains.<sup>28</sup>

The state that fascism presents as being above and beyond anything else is not every state but a fascist state personified in the leader and his ideological imperatives. It is the state that fascism had previously conquered and dominated. This state eliminates the distinction between the public and the private. Moreover, the fascist state swallows civil society and eventually destroys it.<sup>29</sup> As many anti-fascists noted at the time, fascism used democracy, and even democratic alliances, in order to destroy democracy.<sup>30</sup>

The fascist revolution that the state impersonated was supposed to exterminate the bourgeois order once and for all. Fascism presented itself as the antithesis of gradualism, the “anti-party,” the “anti-Europe” that would move Europe and the world to the future.

Fascism is essentially revolutionary. Like Soviet Russia, it eliminates political discussion, pluralism and diversity. Like “real socialism” it obscures the distinction between the state’s legitimate use of power and the use of unlawful violence. In short, in totalitarianism, the state becomes a criminal and abhors enlightened normativity. However, if Stalin was totalitarian in practice, he never rejected the legacy of the Enlightenment from a theoretical point of view. This was, of course, the ethical failure of communist ideology.<sup>31</sup> The fact that Nazis could enjoy listening to Beethoven in the midst of Auschwitz stands in contrast to Lenin’s incapacity to listen to the German composer in the midst of communist terror. Lenin believed that listening to Beethoven would make him softer while engaged in the gruesome repression of political opponents. For Lenin, Beethoven’s music represented reason, namely the legacy of the Enlightenment. This is a symptom of Lenin’s recognition of the fact that one could not listen to reason while acting against it.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, for the Nazis, the German composer represented bare beauty and violence. One may recall in this regard, Stanley Kubrick’s depiction of Alex DeLarge, the post-fascist urban squad leader in *A Clockwork Orange*.<sup>33</sup> De Large shared his musical taste with Nazis such as Hitler, Goebbels and Mengele.

Fascist totalitarianism, unlike Soviet Russia, does not spread fear, violence and death with the sole objective of silencing real and imagined dissent. Violence, and the lawless use of violence, is a defining aspect of both fascist practice and fascist theory.

Structural violence was a mark of fascism and found its best expression in the war ideal and the concentration camps. Violence, as Primo Levi cogently put it, became an end in itself.<sup>34</sup> Fascism brandished power and violence as ideological aims rather than means. In fascist ideology violence is not only instrumental; it is mainly a form of intuition, of creation. It is not only a mobilizing myth but a negative sublime, namely an object of political desire.<sup>35</sup> For Mussolini, violence is power without restraints. It is a non-rational state that provides the nation and the individual with the security of being protected from the menacing outer world. For Max Weber, Karl Marx, or even partly for Georges Sorel (who nonetheless exalted violence in regenerative and redemptive terms), violence has a primary role in politics but needs to be restrained after having usefully achieved an end. These authors clearly differ from Mussolini's fascism. In the fascist ideal, violence loses its instrumentality and becomes a direct source of knowledge.<sup>36</sup> Violence is perceived as a sublime experience that renders politics an almost sacred field of action. Moreover, violence was for Mussolini an ethical force that helped fascism achieve a radical break from ordinary concerns.

Here, the notion of sacrifice is, once again, central. Over time Mussolini best expressed this idea in the famous fascist catchphrase "I don't care" (or I don't give a damn) that was inscribed in the showrooms of the permanent fascist revolution in 1942. For Mussolini this action of not caring was related to the acceptance of death and "purifying blood" as redemptive forces.<sup>37</sup> Even as late as 1942, when considering the future of the Italian nation, he could not (or did not want to) conceal the fascist embrace of violence that the Nazi war of destruction promised him.<sup>38</sup> As for Hitler, the Spanish fascist Primo de Rivera or the Argentine fascist nacionalistas, violence and war were for Mussolini sources of political orientation and personal and collective redemption.<sup>39</sup> A feeling of present danger embedded in violence was part of the fascist way of life. As Mussolini declared: "Living dangerously, should mean always being ready for everything – whatever the sacrifice, whatever the danger, whatever the action, when the defense of the fatherland and fascism are concerned."<sup>40</sup>

Violence was for fascism essentially expressed in the totalitarian fascist state and its "spiritual" and "ethical" imperialism. As Mussolini stated:

The Fascist State expresses the will to exercise power and to command. Here the Roman tradition is embodied in a conception of strength. Imperial power, as understood by the Fascist doctrine, is not only territorial, or military, or commercial; it is also spiritual and ethical. An imperial nation, that is to say a nation which directly or indirectly is a leader of others, can exist without the need to conquer a single square mile of territory.<sup>41</sup>

Imperialism is for fascism a state of becoming rather than a state of being. To be sure, fascism does not differ in this sense from other imperialist formations.<sup>42</sup> However, it differs in that it is presumably a "proletarian imperialism" when it is viewed as the ultimate expression of Mussolini's nationalist displacement of class struggles onto national struggle. Paradoxically, for Mussolini, fascist imperialism was the ultimate form of anti-colonialism. Imperialism was the political antithesis of "decadence." In other words, an active new fascist form of imperialism eliminates the possibility of "becoming a colony."<sup>43</sup> Fascist imperialism presented itself as heir of Roman imperial traditions. But the importance of Romanism notwithstanding, in contrast to the ancient Romans, fascism promoted the idea of a war without end.<sup>44</sup> In other words, Mussolini conceived of war as preemptive action to strengthen Italian leadership in the Latin world, indeed, as an imperialist move against "plutocratic empires": "a war of civilization and liberation. It is the war of the people. The Italian people feel it is its own war. It is the war of the poor, the disinherited, and the war of the

proletarians.”<sup>45</sup> When projected onto a global stage, fascist imperialism is the ultimate form of violence and power:

Fascism sees in the imperialistic spirit – i.e. in the tendency of nations to expand – a manifestation of their vitality. In the opposite tendency, which would limit their interests to the home country, it sees a symptom of decadence. Peoples who rise or rise again are imperialistic; renunciation is characteristic of dying peoples.<sup>46</sup>

For fascists, imperialism was at the center of the fascist matrix. It provided them with a sense of moving from theory to practice through war and violence. In short, it represented a tangible expression of fascist action situated beyond ritual and theory. The different failed attempts to create a formal fascist international have to be understood within the larger framework of fascist spiritual imperialism.<sup>47</sup>

Fascism as a movement and as a regime rose and fell promoting civil war. This was at last the Italian legacy of Mussolini: a country divided and a near apocalyptic fight that required radically violent means, including fascist collaboration in sending Italian Jews to Auschwitz.<sup>48</sup> But perhaps, more importantly, the legacy of fascism goes beyond Italy and Mussolini. Not only did fascism send Italian Jews to Auschwitz after 1943. Transnational fascism was the global ideology that made that crime possible.

To put it bluntly: without fascism, there would be no Nazism as we know it. Nazism represented a radical outcome of transnational fascist ideology, an outcome so different from its ideological cousins that some historians argue that it was something else: a totally unique ideology.<sup>49</sup> Nazism and its outcome, the Holocaust, seem to dwarf the magnitude of the gruesome Italian use of chemical weapons against African colonial subjects in the 1930s or the crimes of Spanish fascism that involved the killing of 200,000 civilians and perceived political opponents.<sup>50</sup> It is only when contrasted with the Holocaust that the enormous crimes of other fascist formations seem to become lesser violations of normative humanity. Yet, comparison with the extremity of the Holocaust, the radical standard of political evil, should not excuse fascism at large. Fascism was an ideological network of national and in some cases transnational state terror. In the Nazi case, the fascist notion of the primacy of political imperatives and the reification of violence was literalized to the extreme. Nazism in its radical spiral of integral terror against the Jews left the fascist pack behind. It was in the Nazi empire in the east that the Nazis decided to literalize in the concentration camps the most circular notion of Nazi fascism, the notion of the abject. In Auschwitz, a closed and controlled laboratory of fascism, the Nazi idea of the abject enemy, the most detached and psychotic aspect of Hitler’s ideology, became a reality.<sup>51</sup> To be sure, the Nazis found and took advantage of a transnational European network of genocidal collaboration. Fascists and radical rightists from Romania to France and from Norway to the Ukraine and Croatia collaborated in the enterprise. Still, Nazism seems to represent, as far as the Holocaust is concerned, a radical departure from standard versions of fascism that fascist Italy epitomizes so well. Nazism is not an “ideal type” of fascism but its most radical possibility.<sup>52</sup>

Whereas the Nazi radical version of fascism stressed the perceived enemy as the defining aspect of its ideology, most fascisms ascribed the enemy to a less fixed place in fascist ideology. These key differences notwithstanding, fascism was a global phenomenon that included Nazism. There is no such thing as a fascist platonic ideal type. Italian fascism was the first fascist movement in Europe and the original point of reference for other fascist movements. It was not, however, a platonic form of fascism from which all other fascisms were derived. Understanding the Italian case is central to the general understanding of

fascism, but fascism as a term and a reality refers to a transnational network of shared ideological subjectivities. Fascists in Europe and across the Atlantic were identified with the “idea.” Above all, fascism was, and is, an idea about the world that occluded other readings of reality. Fascism confuses reality with truth. Hannah Arendt defines ideology as providing a circular vision of the world that occludes perception and empirical experience. Fascism represented the ultimate ideological gaze in this Arendtian sense.<sup>53</sup> Fascist thinking represented an ideological lens to see and read the world. Paradoxically, fascism implied a denial of reality, an ideological detachment from it, that changed it and even created a new reality and a new definition of the possible in ideological politics.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Vicki Caron, Dominick LaCapra, Michael Steinberg and Enzo Traverso for their comments.

1. Antonio Gramsci, “La guerra è la Guerra,” in *L’Ordine Nuovo*, January 31, 1921.
2. See Enzo Traverso’s excellent analysis of fascist historiography in this issue of *Constellations*.
3. Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo: Storia e interpretazione* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2002), IX and X. See also Zeev Sternhell, with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: from Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).
4. See Sternhell, *Les anti-Lumières. Du XVIIIe siècle à la guerre froide* (Paris: Fayard, 2006).
5. The most famous example of the idea that fascism is shaped by anti-communism is to be found in Ernst Nolte and A.J Gregor. See Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism* (New York: Mentor, 1969); Gregor “Fascism, Marxism and Some Considerations Concerning Classification” *Totalitarian Movements & Political Religions* 3, no. 2 (2002); François Furet and Ernst Nolte, *Fascism and Communism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001). For an intelligent criticism of the “anti-communist paradigm” of Nolte, Furet and others, see Traverso, “De l’anticommunisme. L’histoire du XXe siècle relue par Nolte, Furet et Courtois” in *L’Homme et la Société* (2001), 169–184. Whereas for Nolte, fascism is basically anti-Marxism (in his view a combination of Marx and Nietzsche) Sternhell is far more suggestive and stresses the anti-liberal nature of fascism. Thus, for Sternhell, fascism has two essential components: 1) a brand of antiliberal and anti-bourgeois tribal nationalism based on social Darwinism and often biological determinism; and 2) a radical leftist anti-materialist revision of Marxism. See Sternhell et. al, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 9,12; Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 27; Sternhell, *La Droite révolutionnaire: 1885–1914: les origines françaises du fascisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), IX–LXXVI; Sternhell “Fascist Ideology” in Walter Laqueur, ed., *Fascism: A Reader’s Guide. Analyses, Interpretations, Bibliography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 315–371.
6. See Traverso, *A feu et à sang. De la guerre civile européenne 1914–1945* (Paris: Stock, 2007).
7. See George L. Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (New York: H. Fertig, 1980) and his *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). For Mosse’s theory of fascism, see his *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1998).
8. See Wolfgang Schieder, “Fatal Attraction: The German Right and Italian Fascism” in Hans Mommsen, ed., *The Third Reich Between Vision and Reality: New Perspectives on German History 1918–1945* (Oxford: Berg, 2001). See also Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “Italian Fascists and National Socialists: The Dynamics of a Difficult Relationship,” in Richard Etlin, ed., *Art, Culture and the Media under the Nazis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002): 257–286; Alexander De Grand, *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (New York: Routledge, 1995); MacGregor Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Philippe Burrin, *Fascisme, nazisme, autoritarisme* (Paris: Seuil, 2000) and Richard Bessel, ed., *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Comparisons and Contrasts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
9. See Federico Finchelstein, “Fascism Becomes Desire. On Freud, Mussolini and Transnational Politics,” in Mariano Plotkin and Joy Damousi, eds., *The Transnational Unconscious* (London: Palgrave: 2008). See also Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

10. Benito Mussolini, "La significazione," *Il Popolo d'Italia* October 25, 1919; Benito Mussolini, "Un programma," *Il Popolo d'Italia* February 26, 1920. See also Dino Grandi, *Le origini e la missione del fascismo* (Bologna: Capelli, 1922), 1, 52–57, 58–62, 66–71; "Lo spirito e il compito del fascismo," *L'Idea Nazionale*, May 24, 1924.
11. Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista*, 4–6. See also the interesting study by Augusto Simonini, *Il linguaggio di Mussolini* (Milano: Bompiani, 2004).
12. For the best example of this trend, see Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (New York: Penguin, 1977). For a criticism of this argument, see Sternhell's article in this issue.
13. Antonio Gramsci, *Socialismo e fascismo. L'Ordine Nuovo 1921–1922* (Torino: Einaudi, 1978).
14. Mussolini, "Dopo l'adunata fascista. Verso l'azione," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, October 13, 1919; "Logica e demagogia," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, October 26, 1919; "I volti e le maschere," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, March 3, 1920; "Dopo un anno. Il fascismo," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, March 26, 1920; "Fatti, non parole!," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, March 30, 1920; "Nella foresta degli 'ismi,'" *Il Popolo d'Italia*, March 31, 1920; "Panglossismo," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, April 11, 1920; "Verso la reazione!," *Il Popolo d'Italia* April 29, 1920; See also Archivio Centrale dello Stato. Italia. Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista. B. 91 F 154 Sala Dotrinna SF 2 "tabelloni murali."
15. On this topic, see Walter L. Adamson, "Avant-garde Modernism and Italian Fascism: Cultural Politics in the Era of Mussolini," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 6, no. 2 (2001) and his *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Ruth Ben Ghia, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
16. Although I pay attention to anti-fascist conceptions of fascism, my emphasis does not rely so much on Walter Benjamin's somewhat integralist aesthetic notion of fascism. For Benjamin, "the logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life." See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 241. On Benjamin's notions of fascism see also Walter Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism," *New German Critique* 17 (1979): 120–128. For contemporary arguments that aestheticize and de-contextualize fascism and victimization in ways that Benjamin would have never dreamed of, see Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (New York: Verso, 2002); and Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999). More recently Žižek argues: "There is no fascism avant la lettre, because it is the letter itself that composes the bundle (or, in Italian, fascio) of elements that is fascism proper." See Žižek, "Learning To Love Leni Riefenstahl," *In These Times*, September 10, 2003. For a more nuanced approach by Žižek which is nonetheless detached from recent historical debates, see his "The Two Totalitarianisms," *London Review of Books*, March 17, 2005. For a criticism of these approaches see Dominick LaCapra, "Tropisms of Intellectual History," *Rethinking History* 8, no. 4 (December 2004): 523; Finchelstein, "The Holocaust Canon: Rereading Raul Hilberg," *New German Critique* 96 (2005), 16.
17. Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Jeffrey Schnapp, *Staging Fascism. 18 BL and the Theatre of Masses for the Masses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Inter-war Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Fabio Vander, "Estetica e fascismo," *Bolletino di Storiografia* 6 (2001–2002): 17–20. For an excellent assessment of the contributions of this trend, see Claudio Fogu, "Fascism and Philosophy: The Case of Actualism," *South Central Review* 23, no. 1 (2006), 4–22. On the relation of aesthetics and fascism, see also Falasca-Zamponi's insightful article for this issue of *Constellations*.
18. See for example, Volt, *Programma della destra fascista* (Firenze: La Voce, 1924), 49–51.
19. "Ma fuse e confuse nella sostanza." See Benito Mussolini, "Blocco fascista anticagoiesco delle 'teste di ferro!," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, October 24, 1919.
20. See Benito Mussolini, "Sintesi della lotta politica" (1924) in *Opera omnia* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1951–63) (O.O) vol. XXI, 46.
21. See Gramsci, "La guerra è la guerra," *L'Ordine Nuovo* 31 gennaio 1921 in *Socialismo e Fascismo. L'Ordine Nuovo 1921–1922* (Torino: Einaudi, 1978), 55.
22. On fascist anti-Semitism, see Enzo Collotti, *Il fascismo e gli ebrei: le leggi razziali in Italia* (Roma: Laterza, 2003); Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista: vicende, identità, persecuzione* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000); Renzo De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1993); Meir Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews: German Italian Relations and the Jewish Question in Italy, 1922–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). On fascist racism, see the innovative study by Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* (London: Routledge, 2002).
23. See Finchelstein, *Fascismo, Liturgia e Imaginario. El mito del general Uruburu y la Argentina nacionalista* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002), 144. On Argentine and Latin American

fascism, see the path-breaking work of Sandra McGee Deutsch, *Las Derechas: The Extreme Right in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile 1890–1939* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). See also Alberto Spektorowski, *Argentina's Revolution of the Right* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

24. *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*, Italia. MRF B 93 F. 159 SF 1: "Il Sacrificio"; MRF B 93 F 155 SF 1 Sala sanzioni impero; MRF B. 91 F 154 Sala Dottrina SF 2 "tabelloni murali." Dottrina. See also *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*. Italia. Archivi Fascisti. Segreteria Particolare del Duce. Carteggio riservato. B 48 F 242 / R Salvemini Prof. Gaetano SF 1; B 48 L 'Impero 2/ 3 DEC 1925 p. 1. For the Borgean Nazi Zur Linde, for example, the fascist body and the national organism are sacrificial objects. Moreover, for Zur Linde the sacrifice of the fascist self is, in a sense, even a more significant source of ideological self-determination. Before being executed by the Allies, Zur Linde argues that: "An inexorable epoch is spreading over the world. We forged it, we who are already its victim. What matters if England is the hammer and we the anvil, so long as violence reigns and not servile Christian timidity? If victory and injustice and happiness are not for Germany, let them be for other nations. Let heaven exist, even though our dwelling place is Hell. I look at myself in the mirror to discover who I am, to discern how I will act in a few hours, when I am face to face with death. My flesh may be afraid; I am not." See Jorge Luis Borges, "Deutsches Requiem" in Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras Completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1996) vol. 581; Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 147. On Borges and Zur Linde, see my "Borges, la Shoah y el 'Mensaje kafkiano'. Un ensayo de interpretación," *Espacios de Crítica y Producción. Publicación de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras-Universidad de Buenos Aires* 25 (1999): 75–80. See Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). On the topic of fascism and the abject, see also Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

25. Basically the argument that fascism was anti-religious, or anticlerical in nature simply fails to describe the fascist reality of the past. Fascism was characterized by religious forms (language and rituals). See Gentile, *Le religioni della politica. Fra democrazie e totalitarismi* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2001). Moreover, at times fascism established strong links with institutional religions and in the Argentine case presented itself as the political representative of God. On Argentine clerico-fascism see Loris Zanatta, *Del estado liberal a la nación católica. Iglesia y Ejército en los orígenes del peronismo* (Bernal: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1996) and Finchelstein, *Fascismo, liturgia e imaginario*. On the notion of clerico-fascism, see also Collotti, *Fascismo, Fascismi* (Milano: Sansoni Editore, 1994).

26. On the centrality of the fascist vision of gender and masculinity, see Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: H. Fertig, 1985); *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). See also Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

27. On the conceptual history of totalitarianism, see Traverso, *Il totalitarismo. Storia di un dibattito* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2002); Anson Rabinbach, "Moments of Totalitarianism," *History and Theory* 45 (2006): 72–100; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "A Lesser Evil? Italian Fascism in/and the Totalitarian Equation," in Helmut Dubiel and Gabriel Motzkin, eds., *The Lesser Evil: Moral Approaches to Genocide Practices in a Comparative Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Giulia Beltrametti, "L'autorappresentazione totalitaria del fascismo italiano: storia di un'invenzione politica," *Storia e Memoria* 2 (2005). See also Gentile's article in this issue.

28. Benito Mussolini, "La dottrina del fascismo," in *O.O.* vol. XXXIV, 119–121. See also Benito Mussolini, *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions* (Rome: Ardita, 1935).

29. On this topic, see Hannah Arendt, "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," *The Review of Politics* 15, no. 3 (1953): 303–327.

30. See for example *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*. Italia, Archivi Fascisti. Segreteria Particolare del Duce. Carteggio riservato. B 50 251 / R F "Avanti!" Pietro Nenni (1931); *Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine*. Nanterre, France. Dossier France. Daniel Guérin. F Delta 721. 51/1. Vingt Ans d'Histoire Allemande; Piero Gobetti, *On Liberal Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 226; "1935" *Cuaderno di Giustizia e libertà* 12 (1935): 4–5.

31. Žižek seems to shift from argument into hyperbole. For him, the rationalist background of communism explains the "emancipatory potential" of Stalinism. Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 131.

32. On the idea of listening to reason, see Michael Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and 19th-Century Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). On the Nazi appropriation of Beethoven, see David B. Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics, 1870–1989* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). I want to thank Eli Zaretsky for sharing his thoughts about Lenin, Beethoven and the Enlightenment with me.

33. One may also find a similar presentation of gruesome killings by Gary Oldman's character while listening to Beethoven in Luc Besson's *The Professional* (1994). The killer in *American Psycho* (2000) who listens to Phil Collins while massacring people may be seen as ironic down-playing of this aesthetic movement.

34. See Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 105. On Levi's identification of Nazism with fascism, see Primo Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste 1964–1987*, 245, 250.

35. See Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 27–30; *Representing the Holocaust. History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 100–110 and *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 94.

36. For some examples see Sergio Panunzio, *Dritto, forza e violenza. Lineamenti di una teoria della violenza* (Bologna: Capelli, 1921), 17; Curzio Suckert (Malaparte), *L'Europa Vivente. Teoria Storica del Sindacalismo Nazionale* (Firenze: La Voce, 1923), XLVIII, 1–5, 22–25, 34, 111–119; Curzio Malaparte, *Italia barbara* (Torino: P. Gobetti, 1925.) For an early criticism of fascism's appreciation of violence "for its own sake" see Rodolfo Mondolfo, *Per la comprensione storica del fascismo* (Bologna: Capelli, 1922), I–III, XV, XXXIV–XXXV and Rodolfo Mondolfo, "Forza e violenza nella storia (Aprendo la discussione)" in Sergio Panunzio, *Dritto, forza e violenza. Lineamenti di una teoria della violenza* (Bologna: Capelli, 1921), VIII, XL, XLIII, XV, XVII, XVIII, XIX.

37. *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*. Italia. MRF B 93 F. 159 SF 1. Mussolini said: "I don't give a damn" (me ne frego) — the proud motto of the fighting squads scrawled by a wounded man on his bandages, is not only an act of philosophic stoicism; it sums up a doctrine that is not merely political: it is evidence of a fighting spirit that accepts all risks. It signifies a new style of Italian life. The Fascist accepts and loves life; he rejects and despises suicide as cowardly. Life as he understands it means duty, elevation, conquest; life must be lofty and full; it must be lived for oneself but above all for others, both nearby and far off, present and future." Benito Mussolini, "La dottrina del fascismo" in *O.O* vol. XXXIV, 119–121.

38. *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*. Italia. MRF B 93 F. 159 SF 1.

39. See for example *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*. Italia. MRF B 93 F 158; MRF B. 91 F 154 Sala Dottrina SF 2 "tabelloni murali."

40. See Benito Mussolini, "Vivere pericolosamente" (1924) in *O.O* vol. XXI, 40.

41. See Benito Mussolini, "La dottrina del fascismo" in *O.O* vol. XXXIV, 119–121. For a more specific fascist self-understanding of the state as shown in the "permanent" fascist exhibition of 1942, see *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*. Italia. MRF B. 91 F 154 Sala Dottrina SF 2 "tabelloni murali." "Lo Stato Fascista" and "I Codici di Mussolini."

42. See Ann Laura Stoler, "On Degrees of Imperial Sovereignty," *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006): 135.

43. *Dizionario Mussoliniano* (Milano: Hoepli, 1939), 45, 88.

44. For a study of this notion within other forms of contemporary imperialism that embrace the notion of a "war without an end." See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital* (London: Verso, 2005), 143–151. Meiksins Wood does not mention that fascism may have been the first imperialism to embrace this notion of war, thus being a precedent to its contemporary followers.

45. MRF B 93 F 155 SF 1 Impero. See also *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*, Italia. Collez. Muss # 92; # 47.

46. Mussolini, "La dottrina del fascismo" in *O.O* vol. XXXIV, 119–121.

47. On the fascist international, see Michael Ledeen, *Universal fascism; the theory and practice of the fascist international, 1928–1936* (New York: H. Fertig, 1972); Davide Sabatini, *L'internazionale di Mussolini: la diffusione del fascismo in Europa nel progetto politico di Asvero Gravelli* (Rome: Edizioni Tusculum, 1997); Marco Cuzzi, *L'internazionale delle camicie nere: i CAUR, Comitati d'azione per l'universalità di Roma, 1933–1939* (Milano: Mursia, 2005).

48. See Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985) 660–679; Susan Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue, and Survival* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). Liliana Picciotto Fargion, *Il Libro della Memoria. Gli Ebrei deportati dall'Italia (1943–1945)* (Milan: Mursia, 1991).

49. See Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 4–6 and Saul Friedlander, "Nazism: Fascism or Totalitarianism," in Charles S. Maier, Stanley Hoffmann, and Andrew Gould, eds., *The Rise of the Nazi Regime: Historical Reassessments* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986) and Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 26.

50. See Julián Casanova, with Francisco Espinosa, Conxita Mir and Francisco Moreno Gómez, *Morir, matar, sobrevivir: la violencia en la dictadura de Franco* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2002); Casanova, "Civil Wars, Revolutions and Counterrevolutions in Finland, Spain, and Greece (1918–1949): A Comparative Analysis," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 13, no. 3 (2000): 515–537; Angelo Del Boca, *I gas*

*di Mussolini: Il fascismo e la guerra d'Etiopia* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1996). See also Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

51. I borrow the concept of "laboratories of fascism" from Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence* (New York: The New Press, 2003).

52. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 148–171.

53. See Arendt, "Ideology and Terror," *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 158–184; "The Seeds of a Fascist International," in Jerome Kohn, ed., *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 147.

**Federico Finchelstein** is Assistant Professor of History at the New School for Social Research. He is the author of *El Holocausto, los alemanes y la culpa colectiva. El debate Goldhagen* (1999), *Fascismo, Liturgia e Imaginario. El mito del general Uriburu y la Argentina nacionalista* (2002) and *La Argentina Fascista. Los orígenes ideológicos de la dictadura* (2008).

Fascism is commonly misunderstood by those not versed on its history. While most do understand that fascism is a form of totalitarian government, there is a common misconception that all forms of totalitarian governments are fascist. A thorough examination of the history of fascist regimes and the birth of this neosocialist ideology can dispel many misconceptions while also clearly defining what it truly is. What Is Fascism? Nazis in Munich, Beer Hall Putsch. Mussolini was clear on his ideology: "I am and shall remain a socialist and my convictions will never change! They are bred into my very bones." And looking at the early fascist program, one can see massive overlaps with a socialist agenda circa early 20th century. Among other. Continue Reading. Critical perspectives on fascist ideology. Daniel Woodley. First published 2010 by Routledge 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN. Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada by Routledge 270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016. Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business. This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009. Fascist ideology centres on national unity behind a single revered dictator and for the idea that citizens must serve the state (as opposed to most forms of liberal democracy, which have an inverse view of this relationship). Fascism is largely remembered for its oppressive treatment of citizens, infringements on personal freedoms and ruthless crushing of opposition. Fascist Italy, for instance, cracked down on pornography, prostitution, homosexuality...