

History in the Making

Volume 6

Article 5

2013

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Recommended Citation

Steinback, Glenn-Iain (2013) "A Historiography of Fascism," *History in the Making*: Vol. 6 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol6/iss1/5>

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Articles

History Department's 2013 Faculty Choice Award

A Historiography of Fascism

By Glenn-Iain Steinback

Abstract: A long-standing historical debate revolves around the definition, fundamental nature and historical constraints of the concept of fascism. A wide array of scholarly questions about the political and ideological nature of fascism, the minimum or necessary traits of a fascist movement, arguments over the classification of semi-fascist groups and the concept of generic fascism characterize this debate. The result is a substantial body of scholarly research replete with competing theories for the evolution and origin of fascism as a concept, of individual fascist movements and even over the geographic and temporal application of the term itself within history. This paper is a historiography of fascist studies that illuminates the development of the scholarly narrative and understanding of fascism. Beginning with the historically contemporary Marxist perceptives of fascism, this paper examines competing and complimentary understandings of the phenomenon across the twentieth century, including various theories for the evolution of fascism in Europe, the relationship to and placement of fascism in the broader political spectrum, and the debate over fascism as a form of political religion. Finally, this paper explores whether fascism is a temporally and geographically limited dead historical phenomenon or an ongoing potential actor in the politics of the modern world.

Introduction

Within scholarly circles and popular culture the terms fascist and fascism have had a long and contentious history. One reason for this is that 'fascism' has a somewhat nebulous meaning. Derived from the Latin word *fasces*, it connotes a bundle or union. In addition, unlike liberals, communists, progressives or socialists, fascists, with the noted exception of Italian Fascists, have often declined to use this terminology to identify their movements.¹ In fact, the label has been used or misused more frequently by opponents and detractors as a political epithet meant to broadly paint a rival group or individual as evil, undemocratic or totalitarian, than by fascist movements themselves. All polemics aside, fascism both as an ideological movement and a political force has played an important role in the development of the modern world and left a major imprint on the history of the twentieth century. Now in the twenty-first century events have brought into question whether the zeitgeist of fascism is, in fact, dead as well as the appropriateness of assessing fascism as an exclusively historical concept. As a consequence, fascism has proven to be and will surely remain a significant field of historical inquiry. This paper will explore the evolution of that field of study, highlighting and analyzing some of the important developments that have appeared in the shifting understanding of the history of fascism since it emerged on the world scene in the 1920s.

Attempts to arrive at a universally accepted scholarly understanding of fascism have been plagued by several issues. These include the debate over an appropriate geographic and temporal application of the term, the difficulties in establishing an agreed fascist minimum, the wide range of potentially fascist and proto-fascist groups, arguments over the concept of a generic fascism, the multiplicity of theories for the evolution of fascism, and even debate over the validity of the term itself. As this essay will demonstrate, the scholarly understanding of fascism has changed substantially since the first attempts to document and understand the fascist phenomenon. Today fascist studies have expanded beyond an exclusive application to Italy and Germany,

¹ Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-1945* (London: Routledge, 2001), 3.

developed alternatives to the early class based Marxist theories, embraced interdisciplinary approaches and explored the concept of minimum ideological and socio-political requirements for the development of fascist movements. Collectively, these often-competing theories have provided a deepened understanding of the development and origins of fascism, as well as more thorough definitions of the subject in a debate, which is likely to continue for some time to come.

The earliest attempts to understand, classify and document the phenomenon of fascism occurred in the early 1920s, catalyzed by the establishment of a fascist regime in Italy and the increasing visibility of similar movements across inter war Europe.² Although a range of theories were advanced at the time by authors from across the political spectrum, the Marxist-Leninist narrative was the most developed and therefore, provided the first generic theory of fascism.³

The Marxist perspective, best represented by the work of Leon Trotsky and Georgi Dimitrov emphasized a connection between fascist movements and business interests, asserting that fascism was the final phase of bourgeois democracy transitioning to dictatorship.⁴ Leon Trotsky was one of the earliest Marxist thinkers to attempt to classify fascism and endeavor to articulate a general theory, although his interest was motivated less by any notion of historical purpose than a desire to understand fascism in order to combat it.⁵ Writing in the early 1930s Trotsky perceived fascism as a symptom of the progression of capitalism and the ultimate undoing of capitalist society.⁶ He argued that wealthy capitalists (finance capital) naturally destabilized their societies by concentrating the means of production at the top, causing increasing amounts of unrest among the proletariat. In response to this unrest, he argued that capitalists allied themselves with the petty bourgeoisie, turning them against the proletariat and creating “special armed bands, trained to fight the workers just as certain

² Constantin Iordachi, ed., *Comparative fascist studies: New Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2010), 6.

³ Ibid., 6-7.

⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵ Leon Trotsky, *Fascism: What it is and how to fight it*. (Pioneer Publishers, 1944). accessed November 20, 2012, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1944/1944-fas.htm>.

⁶ Trotsky, “Bourgeoisie, Petty Bourgeoisie, and Proletariat,” in, *Fascism*. (Pioneer Publishers, 1944).

breeds of dog are trained to hunt game” – in other words, the fascists.⁷ Consequently, Trotsky viewed fascism specifically within the context of class warfare, arguing that it existed exclusively as a capitalist tool. Fascism was therefore the creation of capitalism used to intimidate, control and repress the proletariat in an attempt to forestall what he saw as the eventual and inevitable proletariat revolution.

As a result, the enduring if simplistic expression of the Marxist position is best encapsulated by Georgi Dimitrov’s assertion that “fascism is the power of finance capitalism itself.”⁸ Marxist theories focused on economic factors while largely ignoring the issue of fascism’s mass appeal and intentionally discrediting its nationalist and revolutionary ideological themes. Despite this narrow focus, Marxist writers were the first to comment on the range of fascist style movements in Europe and consequently pioneered the field of comparative fascist studies.

In the mid-1960s the prevailing Marxist socioeconomic model was challenged simultaneously by several ground breaking theories advanced by American and Western European scholars seeking to expand the discussion beyond a reactionary class driven approach. These theories attempted to account for an expanding understanding of fascism as a distinct social and political phenomenon. Chief among these scholars were Ernst Nolte and George L. Mosse. In *The Three Faces of Fascism*, Nolte attempted to advance a generic definition of fascism and explain the observed rise of Italian and German fascism via a syncretic approach. Nolte's analysis represented fascism as a form of revolutionary anti-Marxism expressed as a “resistance to transcendence.”⁹ Integral to this interpretation was the idea that fascism and Bolshevism were both products of crisis in bourgeois society,

⁷ Trotsky, “The Collapse of Bourgeois Democracy” in *Fascism* (Pioneer Publishers, 1944).

⁸ Georgi Dimitrov, “The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International in the Struggle of the Working Class against Fascism” (main report delivered at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, August 2, 1935), accessed November 20, 2012.

http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08_02.htm

⁹ Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française Italian Fascism, National Socialism*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 429.

operating by similar means but arriving at their positions using different paths.¹⁰

Although both authors made important contributions to the field, Nolte's *The Three Faces of Fascism* proved eminently more controversial; first because of his inclusion of *Action Française* as a fascist movement and second because of the assertion, that fascism and Bolshevism shared social and political methods, a controversial assertion that implicitly normalized fascism. Nolte advanced a Hegelian dialectic approach, drawing on Enlightenment ideas to argue that the intellectual genesis of fascism could be located in turn of the century France as an intellectual anti-modern counter-revolution.¹¹ He identified the functional genesis of fascism as an anti-Marxist evolution of nationalism growing out of the environment of post-World War I Europe.¹² He claimed that developmentally fascism owed key elements of basic political and social methods and procedures; primarily political violence, propaganda, motivating philosophy and a nationalist narrative to *Action Française* and Charles Maurras.¹³ At its basic level, Nolte identified fascism as "resistance to practical transcendence and struggle against theoretical transcendence" that achieves power by the very means it will ultimately seek to deny.¹⁴

Nolte's concept of 'resistance to transcendence', which he argued was a metapolitical aspect of fascism, requires some explanation because it is not self-evident. Nolte asserted that resistance to practical transcendence is common to all conservative societies while he argues that Bolshevism "is the most unequivocal affirmation of material production and at the same time practical transcendence."¹⁵ In Nolte's view, conservative societies resist transcendence while Bolshevism embraces it. Based on the implied parallel with Bolshevism, transcendence, and industrialization, it seems reasonable to conclude that what Nolte terms 'resistance to transcendence' is, in fact, resistance to the concept or spirit of modernity and social progress. Roger Griffin has gone further arguing that Nolte's concept of transcendence viewed as a

¹⁰ Ibid., 450.

¹¹ Ibid., 25-26.

¹² Ibid., 20-21, 25.

¹³ Ibid., 20-21, 69, 140-141, 133-136.

¹⁴ Ibid., 450-451, 453-454.

¹⁵ Ibid., 452.

metapolitical theory is rooted in a German intellectual tendency to favor a phenomenological approach to history by focusing on the “role which key ideas play in the unfolding of events.”¹⁶ In addition, Griffin argues that read in the original German, Nolte’s concept translated as transcendence in English, has a different meaning as a result of “the peculiar genius of the German language for spawning abstract concepts resonant with meanings, which largely evaporate in translation”. Therefore, Griffin concludes that what Nolte means by ‘transcendence’ must be understood as the concept of modernity.¹⁷

Nolte has thus advanced both a syncretic thesis for the inter-war development of fascism, in which the socio-political reality of post-World War I Europe was catalyzed by an intellectual movement from France, filtered through Italy and perfected in Germany, in response to the rise of Marxism, as embodied by the emergence of the Soviet Union, as well as a generic theory of fascism as resistance to the concept of modernity resulting from the denial of both ‘practical transcendence’ - physical change - and ‘- theoretical transcendence’ – the philosophical change of bourgeois society. The contention that fascism evolved as a direct result of Marxism and the suggestion that “without Marxism, there is no fascism” coupled with Nolte’s views on the similarities of fascism and Marxism touched off a massive historical debate.¹⁸ Implicit in *Three Faces of Fascism*, and rather more explicit in his later work, is the idea that Marxism and the Soviet Union caused fascism and Nazi Germany and therefore, caused the Holocaust, as a response to and emulation of the Russian Gulag system.¹⁹ The result was the *Historikerstreit*, which started as an argument over the causal nature of Marxism in the development of National Socialism in Germany but which quickly escalated. The primary focus of this escalation became the normalization of the Nazi period within German history and the argument that conservative historians were attempting to reinterpret and minimize the atrocities of Nazism.²⁰ As the debate

¹⁶ Roger Griffin, *International Fascism: Theories Causes and the New Consensus*, (London: Arnold, 1998), 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

¹⁸ Nolte, 21.

¹⁹ Iordachi, 35.

²⁰ Mary Nolan, “The Historikerstreit and Social History,” *New German Critique* 44 (1988): 1, accessed November 1, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/488146>.

evolved, it called into question a diverse range of issues, including what Germany's relationship to its own history should be, the nature of German cultural identity and the relationship to fascism and the appropriateness of studying everyday life and society under Nazi control given the contemporary political implications of the historical normalization of this period.²¹ The centrality, therefore, of Nolte's claim that the Gulags and Holocaust were comparable was that this argument when combined with the normalization of National Socialism reduced the uniqueness of the Holocaust and cast it as a reaction to Marxism potentially shifting ultimate blame away from fascism.²² Independent of Nolte's reason for advancing this argument, the debate it spawned, although acrimonious, was timely and proved a substantial push to open new paths of research and reflection.

Despite this narrowly defined causal relationship, the controversial characterization of *Action Française*, the complex dialectic approach employed, the central focus on Italy and Germany and resultant lack of an apparent explanation of greater trends in European fascism, Nolte's position proved to be significant to the development both of fascist studies and to the historiography of fascism because it offered one of the first non-Marxist attempts to advance both a generic theory and developmental explanation of the fascist phenomenon. It also formed a foundation for the substantial intellectual stimulation provided to the field by the *Historikerstreit*.

Equally important and far less controversial was George L. Mosse's attempt to discern a general theory of fascism. Mosse suggested that in order to understand the pan-European fascist revolution in a more general sense, a wider comparative approach was required. Specifically, he suggested that the research emphasis, then centered on Germany, be widened to look at movements across Europe and further that movements should be compared not only on their relative difference but also on their similarities.²³ Mosse approached the creation of a general theory of fascism by analyzing and critiquing other attempts to establish such a theory. As a result, his argument emerged largely as a response to, as well as an attempt to, go beyond the theory of uni-totalitarianism, the argument that Bolshevism and fascism

²¹ Ibid., 2-3.

²² Ibid., 21.

²³ Iordachi, 8-10.

constitute essentially similar totalitarian systems established by Ernst Nolte and others.²⁴

Mosse asserted that fascism is best understood via a comparative approach as a revolutionary, nationalist, and cultural mass movement.²⁵ He advocated studying fascism across Europe at a basic level by analyzing the use of symbolism and language employed by fascism to understand the essential nature of fascist movements. For example, based on an analysis of National Socialism, Mosse suggested that “the myths and symbols of nationalism were superimposed upon those of Christianity,” further noting that Hitler spoke of the ‘martyrdom’ of party members in the 1923 coup.²⁶ Therefore, Mosse contended that fascism was a synthesis of its own ideology and a revolutionary culture in which “the true community was symbolized by factors opposed to materialism, by art and literature, the symbols of the past and the stereotypes of the present.”²⁷ He further argued that fascism could best be understood from its own perspective as a ‘third force’ which borrowed from both the left and the right while offering unique opportunities for a form of national rebirth and a new cultural continuity.²⁸

In Mosse’s view, fascism must be studied as a pan-European or even global phenomenon emphasizing similarities and differences within a cultural perspective, itself constrained within a general understanding. In this sense, he presaged the cultural focus of later authors such as Payne, Griffen and Gentile. Furthermore, although he doubted whether fascism or National Socialism itself could ever reemerge, he held that nationalism, the “basic force” of fascism, remains strong and that the concepts of mass appeal and use of political mythology and symbolism remain valid concerns today.²⁹

Nolte’s pioneering work on the nature of fascism in France, its intellectual genesis and effect on the greater context of 20th century Europe coupled with Mosse’s comparative emphasis generated a substantial intellectual discussion over the nature and

²⁴ George L. Mosse, “Toward a General Theory of Fascism,” in *Comparative Fascist Studies*, ed., Iordachi, 63.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 70,81.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

origin of fascism. Although a great deal of scholarship arose as a result, two particularly different and opposing viewpoints stand out.

The first was Zeev Sternhell's *Neither Right Nor Left*. In this work the author argued that fascism represented a unique middle ground as an alternative to liberal democracy and a revolt against materialism, borrowing aspects from both the left and right of the political spectrum, while belonging to neither.

The second, Robert Soucy's *French Fascism: The First Wave 1924-1933*, emerged both as a rebuttal to the 'third way' argument and as an attempt to clarify the nature of fascism in France. Soucy argued that fascism in France was a non-foreign, anti-Marxist, middle-class movement allied to and aligned with the political right wing.

Flowing in part from Nolte's dialectic argument for the origin of European fascism and in response to the, at one time, widely held contention that fascism in Europe, specifically in France, was an accident or an historical aberration, Zeev Sternhell sought to explore the intellectual genesis and development of fascism in France. He advanced two major contentions. First, he challenged the idea that fascism was an accident or an aberration, arguing instead that it "possessed a body of doctrine no less solid or logically defensible than that of any other political movement."³⁰ He argued that the idea that fascism was an aberration of European history is a result of Cold War expedience, a popular desire not to face the idea that fascism might have grown out of liberal democracy, and a result of collaborationists seeking to subsequently re-write their history, especially in France.³¹ Secondly, he argued that the intellectual genesis of fascism had a long history in France growing out of the revision of Marxism as a synthesis of a simultaneous revolt of the left and the right against liberal democracy, creating a new political ideology in fascism, which was therefore, neither wholly of the left nor of the right.³²

Sternhell focused predominantly on the intellectual basis of fascism in France both to understand fascism as a political force and to determine the intellectual origin and creation process behind the ideology. He argued that France was the first country to

³⁰ Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left*, trans. David Maisel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), x.

³¹ *Ibid.*, xi-xii

³² *Ibid.*, xviii.

develop the “essential characteristics of fascism” and that fascism had coalesced into a political force there more rapidly than elsewhere.³³ The outcome of the First World War was therefore only the catalyst to the political actualization of fascism and not its origin as others have suggested. The framework of fascism predated the war even if the label did not. The actual genesis of fascism, Sternhell argued, was found in the 1880s as a fully matured intellectual movement arising out of a synthesis of a new nationalism which was breaking away from the traditional right and a new socialism which was breaking away from the left unified in their shared opposition to social democracy.³⁴ This cause was then taken up and expanded upon by French intellectuals. As a result of the writings by Georges Sorel, Maurice Barrès and the Cercle Proudhon French fascism quickly became as much an intellectual endeavor as a mass movement, implicitly conferring a certain respectability and legitimacy.³⁵

Sternhell therefore argued that because of this intellectual tradition, France became a “laboratory in which the original political synthesis of our time was created,” a tradition which drew elements and even people from both ends of the political spectrum.³⁶ This transition, Sternhell, contended was exemplified by the writings of Sorel a leftist and originally a proponent of Marxism who shifted over a period of several years until he went well beyond Marxism to embrace a proto-fascist perspective. Sorel opposed the materialistic elements of Marxism and encouraged a focus on revolutionary moral regeneration, eventually replacing the proletariat mass movement with the personification of the state, creating a revivalist national socialism. In light of this example Sternhell suggested that fascism should be seen as the result of a gradual revision of Marxism toward a national socialism in response to the crisis of capitalism, which spawned revisionist movements on both the left and the right of the political spectrum and forged a middle ground born of both perspectives.³⁷

Consequently, for Sternhell, the key to understanding the rise of fascism was as a revolt against liberal democracy and an attempt to reinvent society along anti-materialist lines. In the

³³ Ibid., 1.

³⁴ Ibid., 5-7.

³⁵ Ibid., 8.

³⁶ Ibid., 14.

³⁷ Ibid., 20.

process Marxism, liberalism and democracy must be rejected as manifestations of the same defective concept.³⁸ As Sternhell stated, the minimum characteristic of fascism, therefore, is that: "fascism derived its power from its universality, from being the product of a crisis of civilization."³⁹ This process, he argues, was gradual, embodied in revisionist waves, created by social upheaval and stress. These included industrialization during the 1890s, the First World War, an economic stress of the 1930s. However, these were only catalysts; the real engine which created groups like *Action Française* and *Sorelian Syndicalism*, he argued was the inability of the movements from which they arose to effectively address the crisis of liberal democracy.⁴⁰

Consequently, in Sternhell's assessment, a political movement evolved based on anti-materialism and was marked by a revolutionary character, which sought to establish itself as distinct from the past, and rooted in its own traditions. As such fascism desired to overcome the class structure and establish a collectivist society in the form of a revitalized nation created through the reformative and almost spiritual power of national will.⁴¹ This society would additionally overcome individualism and provide a unifying morality not found in liberalism or Marxism while simultaneously embracing a modernist or futurist intellectual, artistic and literary trend - in essence, a utopianism.⁴²

He concluded that fascism was a political movement as real as Marxism and liberalism, which possessed a distinct political narrative, including elements from both sides of the political spectrum, but fundamentally independent of both. Fascism, he asserted, can therefore only arise when a sufficient intellectual basis exists and that while an economic or social crisis may advance fascists as a political force, "the most dangerous enemies of the dominant political culture [liberal democracy] were the intellectual dissidents and rebels, of both the new right and the new left."⁴³ The key then to fascist movements, although perhaps not to regimes, is a strong base of fascist intellectual ideology channeled

³⁸ Ibid., 27.

³⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 267.

⁴¹ Ibid., 270.

⁴² Ibid., 271.

⁴³ Ibid., 302.

by a national crisis without which he suggests fascism is not possible.⁴⁴

In response, Soucy suggested that fascism emerged in France between the world wars and evolved in two major impulses. The first impulse started in 1926 and was subsequently followed by a second in 1934. Further he asserted that French fascism did not simply appear, but instead had a long developmental heritage in French political culture. Soucy sought to “lay to rest several misconceptions about French fascism that have dominated much of the scholarly literature on the subject since the Second World War.”⁴⁵ Soucy presented arguments against five major contentions regarding French fascism: first, fascism was a foreign idea with little support; second, nationalist groups were not fascist; third, fascism was in conflict with conservatism; fourth, fascism was anti-capitalist anti-establishment, reactionary and emerging from the left or as a third way and finally; fifth, fascism was a passing cultural fad with poorly articulated goals and doctrines borrowing elements from both ends of the spectrum.⁴⁶

These ideas, Soucy suggested were dated and inaccurate historical understandings resulting from a lack of deep critical inquiry. Instead working from the writings of fascist and proto-fascist movements and from a detailed body of French police informant reports, he argued that a distinction must be made between the rhetoric of socialism employed by French fascists and the conservative content of the fascist message which often saw parliamentary conservatives allied to fascists in times of perceived socio-economic crisis.⁴⁷

Soucy held that fascism in France had a long developmental history reaching back in the most formative sense to the revolutionary period and the Paris Commune from which he argued came the tradition of insurrection and political violence to achieve change, which although originally a tool of the left, came to be embraced by the right in the 1890s.⁴⁸ For Soucy, the origins of fascism are found in the 1880s and 90s among the *Ligue des Patriotes* and similar movements as a middle-class, nationalist,

⁴⁴ Ibid., 294.

⁴⁵ Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The Third Wave*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), xiii.

⁴⁶ Ibid., xiii-xv.

⁴⁷ Ibid., xv.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

capitalist response to fears of socialism and economic and ethnic changes resultant from the second wave of the industrial revolution in France.⁴⁹ This trend, he argued, found vent in 1898 as a result of the Dryfus Affair in which a Jewish army officer was wrongly accused and convicted of espionage. This catalyzed anti-Jewish sentiment already inflamed by a banking collapse blamed on Jewish bankers and by a railroad workers strike that touched off a wave of labor unrest and once again raised the specter of socialism. The outcome was an alliance of political convenience between proto-fascist groups and monarchists financed by frightened capitalist business interests.⁵⁰ The resulting coup attempt, however, failed. The socialist threat never materialized and the parliamentarian right, once no longer threatened, backed away from extreme rightist movements.

Despite this failure, the event did establish a pattern, which Soucy argued was repeated twice more before the Second World War. Once again, in 1924, following the election of the *Cartel Des Gauches*’ center-left coalition government with a partially socialist agenda that recognized the Soviet Union. They conjured fears of Bolshevism and sought closer international relations with Britain and the United States, while angering nationalists and alienated Catholics because of its treatment of the Vatican.⁵¹ These decisions estranged nationalists, Catholics and conservatives simultaneously. Some of whom once again began to support right wing interests - many of which were now truly fascist, influenced by the establishment of a fascist regime in Italy two years prior.⁵² The second time was in 1932 when a second wave of fascism was generated for similar reasons following the election of a left-of-center government and in response to the depression.⁵³

Consequently, Soucy argued that fascism in France was not an alien concept. It had deep intellectual roots there, arising periodically from the French middle-class in response to periods of economic or social stress and times of apparent rising leftist influence. It was he asserted therefore closely associated with conservative industrialists who simultaneously provided the necessary capital to fund political action and lent form to fascist

⁴⁹ Ibid., 2-3.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4-5.

⁵¹ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵² Ibid., 22-23.

⁵³ Ibid., 217.

movements, and their speaking tours and newspapers and political action.⁵⁴ In addition, he suggested that fascism in France was not a third way or ‘neither left nor right’ as Sternhell believed. Instead, it absorbed policies and rhetoric from the left, while its core economic and social values remained closely aligned with the right with which it “disagreed only on political grounds.”⁵⁵ Finally, Soucy argued that fascism from a theoretical, if not strictly taxonomic point of view, may be seen as an outgrowth of liberal democracy itself, which when under stress may experience a conversion of existing rightist elements to embrace or at least forge alliances with the authoritarian right.⁵⁶

Building on the comparative approach and cultural focus, beginning in the late 1970s Juan J. Linz advanced a framework for comparative fascism, informed by theoretical as well as historical evidence and grounded in a comparative sociological approach.⁵⁷ Linz’s major contribution was to broaden the field of fascist studies by arguing that fascism was a legitimate socio-political movement and that other fascist style movements in Europe and elsewhere were not simply offshoots of the two distinct fascist regimes, but rather the collective result of similar historical conditions, consequently, suggesting that fascist movements did not necessarily evolve as a direct result of contact with other fascist regimes, but as a result of similar conditions acting on the unique historical traditions of countries around the world. The resulting approach was the first multi-dimensional, ideal-type model of fascism, which would prove a major catalyst to the future direction of research.⁵⁸

Paradoxically, although these new lines of comparative inquiry expanded the view of fascism well beyond the Marxist economic argument or the focus on Italy and Germany, it did nothing to foster agreement. By the early 1980s the consequence was a multiplicity of competing theories, each claiming to have discovered the singular cause of fascism and a series of typological debates over which movements qualified as truly fascist rendering the very concept of generic fascism almost useless.⁵⁹ The effect

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 217-219.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁵⁷ Iordachi, 10.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

was a reductionist search for a ‘fascist minimum’ and division of fascist studies into two broad methodological camps. The first camp was an inductive-observational school, which studied empirical evidence and case studies of inter-war fascism to derive commonalities by evaluating every aspect of a fascist movement. The second school used a theoretical and often ideological model, which was then measured against case studies to evaluate common characteristics in the search for the fascist core and discarding elements specific to individual fascist movements.⁶⁰

Italian historians Renzo De Felice and Emilio Gentile subsequently extended the inductive model. De Felice argued that fascism should be seen as a revolutionary mass movement, which when placed in power became subordinate to a leftist style totalitarian regime. De Felice opposed broad attempts to form an all-encompassing model while acknowledging the idea of a basic fascist minimum.⁶¹ Gentile went further, asserting that the complexity of fascism cannot be simplified to an ideological core but must consider social, political and historical factors simultaneously. He produced a ten point descriptive definition of fascism, which considered fascism as an ideology, a movement and a regime.⁶² Building on this work in the early 1990s, some historians have sought to revive the concept of the fascist minimum and move the discussion away from broad generic models. One of the leading proponents of this approach was Roger Griffin, who attempted to offer an ideal type for fascism by focusing exclusively on ideology to construct a fascist minimum based not on the stated ideological ideas of individual leaders or movements, but at the most basic underlying level of a ‘mythic core’.⁶³ This core, he argued, creates a mythic, paligenetic and nationalist narrative, which serves as an alternative course to modernity. From this he defined a ‘fascist matrix’ to be used as an evaluative heuristic.⁶⁴

As might be expected, Griffin’s ideas stimulated much scholarly debate and research both in support and opposition of his premise. Some, such as Robert Paxton opposed the concept of a

⁶⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁶¹ Ibid., 18.

⁶² Ibid., 19.

⁶³ Roger Griffin, “General Introduction,” in *Comparative Fascist Studies*, ed. Jordachi, 116-117.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 118.

fascist minimum as too restrictive because it did not account for social and political motivations. Instead, Paxton purposed to “examine the phenomenon as a system” and emphasized the need to consider the evolution of fascist groups by studying their developmental stages, comparing different groups at similar stages.⁶⁵ Paxton divided fascism into five stages ranging from an initial developmental stage to a fully-fledged radical regime.⁶⁶ Others, such as sociologist Michael Mann, objected to Griffin’s theory on the grounds that it has not adequately addressed social composition, organizational structure and the role of fascism in nationalism and the nation-state in the twentieth century.⁶⁷ Mann developed his own theory of generic fascism by studying the socio-political environments of the major fascist regimes of Europe, resulting in a definition of fascism: “Fascism is the pursuit of a transcendent and cleansing nation-stateism through paramilitaries,” concluding that fascism was and indeed is part of the “dark side of modernity.”⁶⁸

On the other side of this debate are scholars such as Stanley Payne, who accepted the concept of a fascist minimum but rejected both overly broad and overly specific attempts to define it.⁶⁹ Instead, Payne has argued that in order to understand fascism a dual approach must be taken, utilizing a generic concept of fascism as an analytical aid to the empirical study of inter-war fascist regimes and movements, the result of which is a working definition of fascism.⁷⁰ This working definition, with a proper appreciation for national variance can be used as a measure to assess the nature of right-wing groups and quantify them into one of three broad categories: fascists, the Radical Right and the Conservative Right.⁷¹

Payne, therefore, concluded that fascism was a revolutionary movement originating in the cultural crisis of the early twentieth century and independent of any specific organization or class, characterized by extreme nationalism and possessing distinct political, social and economic goals, which

⁶⁵ Robert O. Paxton, “The Five Stages of Fascism“ in *Comparative Fascist Studies*, ed. Iordachi, 172.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁶⁷ Michael Mann, “Fascists“ in *Comparative Fascist Studies*, ed. Iordachi, 190.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 193,213.

⁶⁹ Payne, 5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 8,14-15.

placed substantial value on “idealism, willpower, vitalism and mysticism” as well as the “moralistic concept of therapeutic violence.”⁷² The result of this analysis is the Retrodictive Theory of Fascism, a matrix of cultural, political, social, and economic and international factors, which establish the specific circumstances present which are necessary for a country to develop a viable fascist movement.⁷³ This point is qualified with the additional caveat that Payne saw fascism and therefore, his Retrodictive Theory, as applicable only to European nations in the historical moment of the early twentieth century.

Payne’s work is important to the field of fascist studies because he sought to develop an analytical understanding of fascism. He has done this by combining a theoretical and historical approach while acknowledging the unique aspects of fascism in different countries and between different stages of development.⁷⁴ The outcome of this wide-ranging study was a retrodictive theory of inter-war European fascism that posited an alternative to the ideological minimum proposed by Griffin and instead purposed a series of socio-political and economic requirements for the development of a fascist movement in any one country between the wars. In essence, an empirical fascist minimum, additionally providing an essential and flexible tool for the analysis and evaluation of historical fascist or proto fascist movements that attempts to take the broader sweep of fascist characteristics into consideration.⁷⁵

Having now observed several different and often opposing perspectives on the development and origin of fascism as a crisis of capitalism, the result of syncretism, a regenerative mass movement and the result of an early twentieth century revolt against modernity; it is worth considering Steven Aschheim’s discussion of the centrality of ideational motivations to the understanding and development of fascism and specifically National Socialism. Writing in the early 1990s, following the explosion of published literature and developmental theories of fascism during the preceding two decades, Aschheim sought to evaluate the centrality of Nietzsche to the development of National Socialism in Germany. Aschheim argued that an appropriation of

⁷² Ibid., 487-488.

⁷³ Ibid., 488.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 465-468.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 494,495.

Nietzsche's ideas was central to the development and operation of National Socialism. He wrote, "The marriage between Nietzsche and National Socialism was authorized and consummated at the highest levels and accompanied by fanfare and publicity."⁷⁶ Nietzsche's ideas, he suggested, were important to National Socialism because they provided a deep background against which National Socialist policies were modeled. Nietzsche's ideas, especially his later writings, found a very receptive audience in the dynamic intellectual period at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. In response to a social climate increasingly obsessed with decadence he offered a rejuvenative new man and society.⁷⁷ From these ideas Aschheim argued National Socialism drew the rejection of bourgeois society, liberalism and democracy as well as a force for creative regeneration in the form of the will of society. The result would be the total reinvention and revitalization of the German people discarding materialist concepts to be replaced by "an instinctual, renaturalized, vitalistic and tragic culture."⁷⁸

Aschheim also argued that Nietzsche served three other important functions for the National Socialists. First, he conveyed a well-respected and distinguished intellectual element to National Socialism, which allowed the incorporation of cultured intellectuals who might have otherwise been uncomfortable with National Socialist rhetoric.⁷⁹ Simultaneously, Nietzsche provided a body of literature, which could be invoked to rationalize and explain the nature of the movement in intellectual terms. Lastly, Nietzsche's philosophy provided the justification, if not the basis, for euthanasia and the acceptability of racial cleansing as a means to ensure the health of society, suppression of decadents and prosperity of the *Übermensch*.⁸⁰ Aschheim takes care to point out that this last goal was only achieved with a 'careful' and selective National Socialist reading of Nietzsche's works.

Aschheim has acknowledged freely and frequently in his own work, that he is by no means the first historian to discuss the so-called Nietzsche-Nazi link. Traditional Marxist historians

⁷⁶ Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 239.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 243-245.

generally view Nietzsche's influence as an extension of the capitalist suppression of the proletariat.⁸¹ For Nolte, the Nazi policy of extermination is grounded in the legitimization of destruction in the interests of rejuvenation found in Nietzsche.⁸² While others such as Sternhell saw the legacy of Nietzsche creating the road to the mass appeal of fascism and Payne considered Nietzsche integral to the underlying will to power inherent in fascism and the concept of societal superiority.⁸³ However, for these authors and others like them, Nietzsche and his impact on the underlying ideas of fascism were generally only part of a larger explanation, or sometimes only tangential. Aschheim's major contribution, therefore, was the premise that explanations which "entirely dismiss Nazism's frame of mind and render ideational motivations as mere background leave an essential dimension untapped," are ignoring not only a relevant but also critical piece of the puzzle.⁸⁴ For Aschheim, National Socialism in particular, and fascism in general, were multifaceted complex systems, which require equally dynamic explanations. However, he argued that no evaluation could be complete unless it also considers the ideological core; a core which he suggests is based firmly, although not exclusively on an appropriation of Nietzsche's philosophical positions as the "key to explaining national socialism's attraction to the outmost limits."⁸⁵

More recently the debate within fascist historiography has come to focus on the concept of political religions in totalitarian states partly as a result of increased attention given to uni-totalitarianism and comparative studies of communism and fascism and by increased focus on the causes for the Holocaust.⁸⁶ Although the concept of political religion is not new, the application of the concept to recent fascist studies has in large part been due to the work of Emilio Gentile notable for his earlier ten point descriptive definition of fascism. This hypothesis has matured into a groundbreaking theory on totalitarianism and sacralization of politics. Gentile defines the regime stage of fascism as a totalitarian system, which utilizes a palingenetic ideology

⁸¹ Ibid., 323.

⁸² Ibid., 325.

⁸³ Payne, 25.

⁸⁴ Aschheim, 329

⁸⁵ Ibid., 330.

⁸⁶ Iordachi, 35-36.

interpreted as political religion to shape the development of a new man and new society.⁸⁷ In addition, Gentile demonstrated how the politics of the modern nation state can, and in his estimation have, become sacralized in both democratic and totalitarian societies as nationalism creates a religious type belief in the state.⁸⁸ Although his theory is contentious, it has offered a compelling explanation for the mass appeal of fascism as well as the use of mysticism, messianic leadership, and mythical symbolism in fascist movements.⁸⁹

Understandably, this theory has proven controversial, and yet it has also proven to be an important stimulus to new ideas and approaches in the study of fascism in recent years. Although initially, an opponent, Griffin subsequently revised his theory of the fascist minimum to incorporate political religion, arguing that a belief in and veneration of the state was important to fascist movements. He has come to contend that this is especially true early in development as the tool of cultural reinvention underlying the palingenetic nature of fascism.⁹⁰ Other scholars have disagreed with this concept arguing, as Richard Steinman-Gall has, that the return of the political religion theory is a result of post-Cold War revisionism.⁹¹ Instead, he argued that fascism exhibits religious politics not political religion and as such religious elements are appropriated for political purposes but do not, in and of themselves, represent a separate, true secular or political religion.⁹²

As we have seen beginning almost concurrently with the first flowering of fascist movements in Europe during the 1920s, attempts have been made to classify, understand and describe them. This essay has attempted to summarize and analyze some of the key developments in the historiography of fascism. It has not attempted to cover every author or even every argument but rather to highlight a path of historiographic development. As

⁸⁷ Emilio Gentile, "The Sacralisation of Politics: Definitions, interpretations and reflections on the question of secular religion and totalitarianism" in *Comparative Fascist Studies*, ed. Iordachi, 260-261.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 272-274.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 276-278.

⁹⁰ Roger Griffin, "Cloister or Cluster?: The implications of Emilio Gentile's Ecumenical theory of political religion for the study of extremism" in *Comparative Fascist Studies*, ed. Iordachi, 293.

⁹¹ Richard Steinman-Gall, "Nazism and the Revival of Political Religion Theory" in *Comparative Fascist Studies*, ed. Iordachi, 298.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 300-301.

demonstrated here, a wide range of theories and ideas have been advanced. The early Marxist theorists presented fascism as a reactionary tool of capitalism. Nolte attempted to set fascism in a broader context via a reactionary evolutionary dialectic, in the process, bringing about a highly contentious and ultimately profitable debate over the nature of fascist studies and Europe's relationship with its past. Mosse as we have seen sought to widen the intellectual field by urging comparison and analysis outside of the major fascist powers of Western Europe and helping to seat fascism as a pan-European phenomenon. Sternhell echoing an element of the controversy of the *historikerstreit* argued that fascism was not an aberration and made a case for its intellectual roots in France as a third way. While Soucy, also addressing France, asserted that fascism was decidedly an outgrowth of the right and argued that the potential for fascism was an outgrowth of liberal democracy. Linz echoed Mosses's appeal for wider study and suggested that fascism was a pan-European phenomenon resulting from a similar set of circumstance and not an intellectual export of Western Europe. Gentile attempted to develop a heuristic for measuring fascist movements by extending the concept of a fascist minimum and then later contributed the theory that fascism was inexorably linked to the concept of political religion which he suggests was inherent in nationalism. Griffin argued for an emphasis on the basic ideology of fascist groups on a 'mythic core' to which he later adapted the political religion theory in an attempt to articulate a better analytical device. While Payne suggested that previous theories of fascist minimums and matrixes were insufficient instead articulating a 'retrodictive theory' which attempted to establish the minimum necessary preconditions for the development of a successful fascist movement. Finally, Aschheim argued that in order to properly understand fascists one must understand their 'mindset,' arguing for the centrality of Nietzsche as an ideological genesis and intellectual justification for fascism and specifically National Socialism.

It is therefore, not surprising that fascist studies have moved from an obscure discipline to a major field of investigation complete with its own journals. In the process, it has also undergone a corresponding shift toward broader evaluations of the topic and been subjected increasingly to the addition of much needed inter-disciplinary approaches as it has become clear that fascism is an extremely complex topic incorporating social,

political and economic facets. Correspondingly this has encouraged a much-needed division of fascism into developmental stages and an emphasis on the consideration of movements - especially in Eastern Europe - on their own merits as part of a greater trend. Finally, the introduction of political sacralization and political religion theories, have examined and illuminated the nationalist methodologies of fascism. In summary, within this now rich field of academic inquiry much has been written and remarkable progress made considering the relatively young topic. However, despite this it remains likely that no theory yet offered is able to account for the vast complexity of fascism and therefore, no overarching consensus or definitive narrative is likely to develop at any point in the near future.

A substantial debate has focused on the nature of fascist movements and whether fascism was limited to a specific historical period or represents an ongoing political ideology present even today. Recent events have shown that fascist style movements are currently active in Hungary and Greece and that these groups are well organized with defined political goals. In Greece, a country currently faced with major economic uncertainty and an ineffective government, Golden Dawn, formed in 1985, has recently risen to become the third most popular party in Greece.⁹³ Capitalizing on economic devastation, anti-immigrant sentiment and a loss of confidence in the political system Golden Dawn won nearly seven percent of the popular vote and eighteen seats in parliament during recent elections. More importantly, Golden Dawn is an openly fascist political party that employs familiar tactics, including organized street violence against minorities, maintains a newspaper, cultivates appeal as a mass movement, provides support to disadvantaged persons, and has adopted a paramilitary structure.⁹⁴ Today, Golden Dawn is offering itself as an alternative and rejuvenating political force in Greek society. While in Hungary, Jobbik has emerged as a nationalist, anti-immigrant and anti-Roma political party, which maintains a militia movement, employs hate marches and intimidation while also

⁹³ William Wheeler, "Europe's New Fascists," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2012, 1, accessed December 9, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/18/opinion/sunday/europes-new-fascists.html?pagewanted=all>

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

holding seats in parliament.⁹⁵ Both groups espouse xenophobic, highly nationalistic anti-immigrant, anti-foreign rhetoric and promise some form of national rebirth or reinvention. By any reasonable definition, they are fascists.

For these reasons, the study of fascism remains important. While the perspective one chooses to take of fascism, its precursor right authoritarianism or totalitarianism depends upon the intellectual school to which one subscribes and is thus a complex topic. It is clear, as Sternhell has demonstrated that fascism was not an aberration of late nineteenth–early twentieth-century Europe. It had deeper roots. While, given historical outcomes, it is hopeful that a ‘fascist’ group will never again rise to significance. The ultimate conclusions reached by Soucy, Aschheim and Gentile are important because they suggest that the methods by which fascist type groups gain and wield power may not, in fact, be limited to a specific moment in time. Soucy suggests that right wing authoritarianism is an outgrowth of conservative elements in liberal democracies during times of social and economic stress. Aschheim offers an analysis of the means by which an ideological core can be used as legitimizing justification for atrocities, while replacing or setting aside existing social morés. And lastly, there is continuing relevance to be found in Gentile’s argument that political religion and religious type beliefs, in the character or persona of the state, are inherent concepts of nationalism, which can potentially be exploited to develop mass appeal and justify right wing or totalitarian conversion of a nation. Taken together and given the state of affairs in the United States and Europe today, marked by escalating regionalism, the growth of conservatism and the growing legitimization of conservative fringe movements, as well as increasing acceptance of polarization in contemporary politics, there is reason to suggest that these theories may prove to have an enduring relevance in the twenty-first century.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 3-4.

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