

**The core ideas and axioms of
Classical Fascism (1919-1945)**

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Adscrit a la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

WP núm. 272
Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials

Barcelona, 2008

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Publication: Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials (ICPS)

Mallorca, 244, pral. 08008 Barcelona (Espanya)

<http://www.icps.cat>

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Design: Toni Viaplana

Printer: a.bís

Travessera de les Corts, 251, entr. 4a 08014 Barcelona

ISSN: 1133-8962

DL: B-51.754-08

Introduction

This article presents and explores the axioms and core ideas, or *idées-force*, of the Fascist ideologies of the first third of the twentieth century. The aim is to identify the features that define the term “Classical Fascism” as a conceptual category in the study of politics and to uncover the core ideas of its political theory¹. This is important, because the indiscriminate use of the tag “Fascism” in recent years has left the term practically devoid of meaning: if everything is Fascism, then nothing is Fascism.

The study starts out from a set of premises, some of them methodological and others historiographical. The methodological perspective I will adopt will assume that any political ideology or theory has a series of elements that form the nucleus of its thought. This nucleus can be described and analysed, and it can be distinguished from other collateral or peripheral elements that may complement it². At the same time, this analysis requires an appraisal of both the *idées-force* themselves and the political use that is made of them; to arrive at a sound definition of Classical Fascism I must explore both the protagonists’ ideas and their actions.

As for the controversial historiographical aspects of the phenomenon, I think it is fair to speak of a *generic* Fascism, as the late Tim Mason did in 1988. Establishing the similarities between the various forms of the movement will highlight their differences. The volunteers of the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) declared that they were “off to fight Fascism” with little heed for whether the enemies they would face were an amalgam of radical conservatives, Fascistoid authoritarians, traditionalists and genuine or opportunistic Fascists rallied around the banner of an preventive anti-democratic counter-revolution blessed by the Spanish church as a “crusade”.

I will start by proposing a generic model of Classical Fascism, based on a comparison of three frequently cited definitions of the movement, all highly regarded in academic circles. Their explanatory power in fact is all

the greater if we see them holistically and investigate the ways in which they complement each other.

Robert O. Paxton:

“Fascism may be defined as a form of political behaviour marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion” (Paxton, 2005: 218).

Roger Griffin:

“Fascism should be seen as a revolutionary form of nationalism guided by the myth of the imminent rebirth of the nation in decadence” (Griffin, 2002).

Norberto Bobbio:

“Fascism is a political system which aims to unite a society in crisis inside a dynamic and tragic dimension promoting the mobilization of the masses by equating social and national demand” (Bobbio, 1981).

In my comparison of these three definitions I will pay particular attention to the following points: the political and social situation at the time that Fascism took hold: the Fascists' diagnosis of that situation; the general objectives of the distinct branches of the movement; the *idée-forces* of how these objectives should be attained and, finally, the strategies used to achieve them. Bringing all these elements together will help us to understand the implementation of the *idées-force* and prototypical behaviours of Classical Fascism. I will then test the model by comparing and analysing it in the light of texts written by four Fascist leaders from the inter-war period in Europe.

Broadly speaking, the Fascist diagnosis indicates the existence of a crisis (of enormous proportions, viz. Bobbio) which has plunged the nation/community into decline (viz. Paxton and Griffin); the situation can only be redressed by *palingenesis*, or rebirth (Griffin). The *idée-force* of how to achieve this sacred objective is the establishment of a united society in accordance with the totalitarian premises of the movement (Bobbio). The strategy is to adopt a revolutionary (and eclectic) form of

nationalism (Griffin) which equates social and national demands (Bobbio) and which eventually leads to the establishment of an empire, and to propose an ideological, political and cultural alternative to democratic freedoms (Paxton). The tactics used to achieve these aims would include the formation of alliances with traditional elites, the systematic, rationalized use of violence in an amoral and paralegal form, mass mobilization according to an integralist, sacralized conception of politics (Bobbio) and internal cleansing and external expansion (Paxton).

If these appreciations are correct, Classical Fascism is characterized by a set of ideological and political aims and methods in which ideas, attitudes and behaviours are determined by an anti-democratic *palingenetic ultranationalism* underpinned by a *sacralized ideology*³; *the quest for a united, indissoluble society* as a political system and, at the same time, the collective myth that mobilizes and redeems the nation; and third, *violence as a political vehicle*⁴ applied unchecked against internal opposition and against external enemies who challenge the nation's progression towards the dream of rebirth and the culmination of this progression in the form of an empire.

These factors lie at the heart of Fascist ideology. Other elements, important but questions of form rather than of substance, should be mentioned in passing but are not central to our theme. Examples are the predominance of the State over the Party, in the case of Italy, or the predominance of the Party over the State in the case of Germany; ruralism, which holds that the essence of the Fatherland resides not in the "degenerate" cities but in the countryside (as well as in the army) –or the insistence on the aesthetic of politics, that is, the paraphernalia that accompanies it. Though we will not explore them further here, these three factors have an undeniable importance in the tactical ideas of the Fascists. Indeed, from the point of view of the political philosophy of Fascism the aesthetic of politics is an ontological factor that legitimates the Fascist *Weltanschauung*, by providing a metaphysical and aesthetic context for the rebirth of the Fatherland⁵: a pure, beautiful essence (be it spiritual or biological) that the enemies of the nation, the enemies of authenticity, do

not allow to achieve its fullest expression. So the unitary rebirth of the Fatherland requires, inevitably and inexorably, the application of systematic, rationalized violence to counter or eliminate this opposition.

In the following sections I will test these hypotheses through an appraisal of texts written by Fascist leaders in different European countries: Primo de Rivera in Spain, Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, and Codreanu in Romania. Following the analytical schema used above, though with a greater attention to conceptual detail, my comparison will focus on the writings of these ideologues and explore their diagnosis of the situation, the fundamental aims they establish for individuals and social groups, their vision of the State, their understanding of the terms *society* and *nation*, the role they attribute to violence in politics, their identification of internal and external enemies, and, in general, the strategies they propose for fulfilling these objectives.

Crisis and the desire for rebirth

The comparison of the texts of these leaders⁶ (complemented on occasion by other Fascist texts) highlights an underlying, common idea: against a background of profound national decline, the political response of Fascism is regarded as necessary and inevitable. These thinkers see this decline (which had its own idiosyncrasies in each national setting, but also a set of common characteristics) as a manifestation of a widespread crisis in Europe and the West in the first third of the twentieth century: the crisis of the political system, values and society brought into being by the French Revolution. According to Mussolini, Italian Fascism represents a new dawn, the categorical and definitive antithesis of the world of democracy, plutocracy and masonry –in a nutshell, the end of the world of the principles of 1789 (Mussolini, 1984: 226).

José Antonio Primo de Rivera began his famous speech to mark the constitution of the Spanish *Falange* in 1933 by dismissing Rousseau and his theory of the social contract as “shameful” and referring repeatedly to the “failure” of the parliamentary system. In the following years he declared that parliamentarianism was on its knees and had led the country to a

situation of increasingly “pestilent decomposition” (Textos, 1959: 225). In Spain as in the rest of Europe, the liberal-capitalist system was on its deathbed (Textos, 1959: 11); Christian civilization itself was at risk (Textos, 1959: 838) Spain was in “moral ruin”, in a world split into factions of all kinds (Hernández, 1992: 15).

To put an end to the chaos of the times, say the Fascists, we must first understand its causes, the root of the evil, and the disasters that beset the continent under the hegemony of the trilogy “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity”. In his account of Italian Fascism, Goebbels praises Mussolini for showing the world how to act in a revolutionary way, how to dismantle the essence of Marxism and how to triumph over liberalism. In successive paragraphs, he analyses liberalism as an ideological trend and a set of mobilizing myths which, since its beginnings in 1789, has (in his words) inundated nations one by one, submerging them in a series of revolutionary convulsions which have now come to their inevitable end: the “swamp” of Marxism, democracy, anarchy, and the class struggle. For Goebbels the Communist revolution was the culmination of a series of errors, the most terrible of the world’s catastrophes⁷.

For his part, the Romanian Fascist leader Codreanu affirmed that the State based on the old ideology of the French Revolution was on the way to “ruin” (Codreanu, 2005: 44) and denounced the corruption of those he called “political dabblers” (idem: 31). Hitler stated his conviction that parliamentary politics was one of the manifestations of the “decadence of Humanity” (Hitler, *Mi Lucha*: 30) and declared that the theoretical pronouncements of Fascist ideology aimed to replace the trilogy of 1789 with a new political system based on “authority, order and justice” (Alvial, 1938: 89). This new trilogy was similar to the one favoured by the Duce: “order, discipline and hierarchy” were the key social values, to be imposed with “a firm hand” by Fascism in order to save society from plunging headlong into “chaos and ruin”. Primo de Rivera expressed a similar ideological position, stating that a man is free only when he belongs to a strong, free nation characterized by “authority, hierarchy and order” (del Aguila, 1982: 206).

To face this situation of crisis the political priority is *palingenesis*, the rebirth of the Fatherland. To quote the Romanian Fascist leader Codreanu: a “powerful, flourishing” Fatherland, a new Romania to create a new man, a true elite, and a country like the “sacred sun in the sky and a beautiful, rich land”; the Legionaries are called by God, after centuries of darkness and abuse, to “sound the trumpet of the resurrection of the Romanian race” (Codreanu, 2005: 3, 4, 5, 6). After a long night of centuries, he writes, Romanians await the dawn, the moment of their “resurrection as a people” (idem: 45).

For Mussolini, both in the early stages of Italian Fascism between 1920 and 1922 and in the years of power, the *raison d'être* of Fascism was to safeguard the moral and material grandeur of the Italian people and to play a part in the salvation of the Fatherland, a generic objective to which on many occasions he pledged his loyalty (Mussolini, 1984: 303).

In explaining the program of the Movement (the *Falange de las J.O.N.S*) in November 1934, Primo de Rivera repeated one of his core ideas –the belief that strengthening and elevating the “supreme reality of Spain” was the urgent task of all Spaniards (Hernández, 1992: 121). And if the greatness of the Fatherland is the overriding objective, then decisive action by true patriots is essential, “a disciplined, convinced minority” able to become the “implacable axis” of Spanish life on which the “Spanish resurgence” will be built (Textos, 1959: 416).

The palingenetic objectives of these Fascist leaders find their echo in Hitler’s speeches and writings. When he declared the 25 points of the Party’s program to patriots, he said, “a fire was enkindled from whose glowing heat the sword would be fashioned which would restore freedom to the German Siegfried and breathe new life into the German nation” (Hitler, *Mi Lucha*: 122).

Metaphysics and the cult of the Fatherland: the spiritual revolution

Transcendental spirituality is a key issue in the Classical Fascist movements. It creates a cohesive society, breaking down class barriers

and fostering an ideological attitude to life among the militants; it compensates for the lack of sophisticated theoretical and ideological schema and legitimates any behaviour, however brutal or amoral. The core of this spirituality is the Fatherland, Fascism's supreme value. Ultranationalistic patriotism is a cult with its rituals and martyrs, an unofficial church⁸. Fascism is a sacralized ideology that fills the gap left by the gradual de-Christianization of the continent⁹. It is a "religious concept", according to the 1933 edition of the Italian Encyclopaedia. Hitler confessed to his inner circle in 1941 that in the long term "it will be impossible for national socialism and religion to live together" because, as he explains at a later date, "Christianity is an invention of sick brains" (*Hitler's Table Talk*, 2000, pp. 118-119).

On many occasions Mussolini claimed that Italian Fascism was a party, a regime, a faith, even a religion. He conceived it as a religious phenomenon of vast historical proportions, the product of the Italian race (Mussolini, 1984: 318). In a similar, if not identical vein, Primo de Rivera affirms that man must have something to believe in: Fascism is born to establish a new faith, "neither right-wing nor left-wing". It is "collective, integrating, national", a new civil faith able to create a strong, hard-working, united Spain (Textos, 1959: 45).

This civil religion¹⁰ and spirituality, for Codreanu, allow the new man and the new nation to achieve a great spiritual revolution for the benefit of the entire people (Codreanu, 2005: 44). Rosenberg says much the same in 1934, when he declares that the revolution of the politics and the State is complete, but that the rebirth of the spirit and the soul has just begun. For Mussolini the starting point is the belief that the Fatherland is not an illusion, but the greatest, the most human, "the purest of realities" (Mussolini, 1984: 52) –an idealized, deified Fatherland, the lynchpin of Fascist doctrine and propaganda.

Fascism capitalizes on the nineteenth-century process of nationalizing the masses, a key element in the construction of Europe's liberal societies, and adds to it a conception of the Nation as an eternal entity, outside time, transgressing social divides and political ideas. Nevertheless, since the

materialization of this idea of the Fatherland faces many obstacles, its proponents resort to metaphysical and poetic metaphors when they invoke it –making politics *aesthetics*¹¹, as we saw above. Those who wish to play their part in the sacred mission of regeneration must identify with an irrational, metaphysical conception of the Nation.

But this irrationality was in fact highly rational and political; crucially, it had to unite traditionally antagonistic forces inside the same inspirational movement. Financial and industrial powerhouses such as March in Spain, Agnelli in Italy and Krupp in Germany had to identify with the same goal as the workers in their factories, the Italian landowners of the Po Valley, Tuscany and the rest of Europe with the labourers in their fields, the owners of the huge new department stores with the small shopkeepers, the middle classes and the workers with the powerful elites. All this took place in the context of a widespread crisis, characterized by social conflict and by the relentless criticism –from both the left and the right– of liberal political institutions, many of which proved totally incapable of finding solutions to the problems their countries faced.

The rebirth of the Fatherland is a versatile, cross-sectional message, at once a call to arms and a powerful drug that could adapt itself to a variety of economic, social and political interests. This was the reason for its relative success in pre-Second World War Europe. It was the spark (carefully designed, pragmatic, and opportune) that ignited the powder-keg in a historical context which, in the words of many contemporaries, was best characterized by the term “despair”¹².

Various social scientists have stressed the importance of this desperation in the rise to power of the Fascist movements¹³. Hitler himself declared, in 1942, that “it was the German nation’s despair that gave birth to National Socialism” (*Hitler’s Table Talk*, 2000: 259). The transcendental nature of the Fatherland in this context is summarized by Primo de Rivera’s claim that the militants in his movement joined him in loving the “eternal and unshakeable metaphysic of the *Fatherland*” (Textos, 1959: 559) and believed in the “supreme reality of Spain” (Hernández, 1992: 121).

This is the core of the Fascist ideologies: the conception of the Nation as an integrated whole. Primo de Rivera himself defines this conception well when he states that Fascism is not violence but unity, not a tactic, but an idea. For him, Fascism holds that there is something above parties and above classes, "something of a permanent, transcendental, supreme nature", which exists as a distinct, superior reality, and which has its own ends *Puntos Iniciales* (Textos, 1959: 85): the historical unit known as the *Patria*. The Spanish Fascist leader sees in this conception¹⁴ the most profound feature of his movement, the idea of a united destiny, the *Patria* or Fatherland (Textos, 1959: 189).

Fascist propaganda presented the movement as a vehicle of national regeneration attuned to the true essence of the Nation and whose supreme mission was to rekindle the most profound energies of the entire society. These movements of salvation are above and beyond the stale theories of the left and the right intent on disintegrating society and above personal interests as well. The patriotic cult of the Nation is the balm that soothes all wounds, ends all political, ideological and social discord (...) and legitimates and justifies the use of radical methods against opponents and enemies both at home and abroad in order to attain the goals proposed. The figure of the undisputed Fascist leader is also legitimated by the metaphysical, essentialist nature of the Fatherland. The Head of the Nation is the infallible interpreter¹⁵ of the Community's essence, needs, and destiny. At the same time, the Nation is the source of his power and his heavy burden, as the official propaganda describes it: he is a servant, an instrument of the Regenerated Nation.

With these premises, the socio-economic theories of the Fascists constituted a radical reflection of a hierarchical conception of society. Each member was a part of the national jigsaw, from the worker at the bottom to the businessman at the top. Fascism's breaks with the past were spiritual rather than economic or social¹⁶. The key factor in the link between political theory and practice was the conviction that the total concentration of power by the Fascist government would place the economy at the service of politics. In 1937 Mussolini declared that in Fascist Italy capital was at the

orders of the State (Mussolini, 1984: 157). In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wrote that the mission of the State with respect to capital was relatively straightforward: the only important thing to ensure was that capital should be at the service of the State in order to foster “an independent national economy” (Hitler, *Mein Kampf*: 76).

Primo de Rivera, in 1935, declared that the *Patria* was a unit with a universal destiny and that the individual was the bearer of a particular mission inside the harmonious whole of the State. There were to be no disputes; the State cannot fail in its task, nor can the individual renounce his in the “perfect order” of the life of his nation (Textos, 1959: 477).

This is the Fascist Idea: an *ultranationalist, palingenetic and violent totalitarianism*¹⁷, a novel and radical political solution for the burning problems of European society of the early twentieth century. Though Europe’s radical right tested other models (for instance, the Franco and Salazar regimes in the Iberian peninsula) Fascism proved the most successful political alternative for confronting the problems of the mass industrial societies of the period. Raising the banner of extreme nationalism and rejecting the liberal law-based State, it militarized society, controlling it, mobilizing it and preparing it for two tasks: on the one hand, for the brutal elimination of its opponents and of those disqualified from membership of the nation, and on the other, for foreign wars of conquest to create the empire¹⁸.

The leader of Romanian Fascists puts it simply: the Legion affirms that above all personal interests is the Fatherland and its demands (Codreanu, 2005: 62). Rosenberg, the obscure Baltic ideologue of the Nazi party, declared that the Nazis believed that whatever metaphysical position one adopts with regard to questions of “the here and now and the beyond”, in this world one can do no more than develop the supreme and most noble values and place oneself at the service of the “German whole”, at the service of a single idea¹⁹: “the eternal Germany!” (Rosenberg/Goebbels, 1996: 20).

With objectives as noble and selfless as these, all the means that the new Fascist society may use are justified, even those that might classify it

as totalitarian once in power: the submission of the private to the public sphere, the repression of individual and collective rights and freedoms, the suppression of the rule of law, the mass organization of the society in Fascist movements and parties, and its militarization. This totalitarianism is applied in direct proportion to the status of the members of the community; the higher one's rank in society, the higher one's level of autonomy. The individual is diluted in the national community, and therefore, his rights, his freedom, his fulfilment as a human being, are conferred on him by his belonging to the community or race. Gentile, possibly the most representative thinker of Fascist Italy, declared that Fascism is idealist, that it supports faith and celebrates the ideal values of the family, the Fatherland, civilization, and the human spirit as superior to any contingent value. He proclaims "sacrifice and soldiery", urging the individual to be ready to die for a reality that transcends him (Gentile, 1929: 58). In the Fascist utopia, the State has become the conscience and the will of the people. To quote Hitler: "one must never accept that the authority of the State and the authority of the party are two different things. The control of a people and the control of a State must be combined in the same person" (*Hitler's Table Talk*, 2000: 174).

The Unity of the Community as a formula for political salvation

The cult of the Fatherland, spiritual revolution, a civil religion, sacrifice without limits, a glorious death. This cult of the Fatherland has a central dogma: the unity of the National Community. As we noted above, this is the core concept of Fascist political theory, doctrine and propaganda. Primo de Rivera summarizes it well, saying that the principal tenet of the "new faith that burns in Spain" is that a people is a "whole, indivisible, living" entity, with a universal destiny to fulfil. Collective interests must prevail over individual ones; no just individual interest is alien to the interests of the community (Textos, 1959: 237). On numerous occasions in his writings and speeches Prim states that all the aspirations of the new States can be subsumed in one word: "Unity". This is his most deeply-held belief: the *Patria* is a historical unit with a universal destiny, in which all its members

merge together to form something that is greater than each one of the social groups. The fundamental aim of the State is to place itself at the service of this great unit, establishing “a regime of national solidarity and spirited, fraternal cooperation” (idem: 40).

This is the Idea, the myth, the illusion. Fascist movements and regimes used the belief in this idea as the benchmark against which to judge, reward or punish members of the society. A manual for Hitler Youth members proclaims that a young man who marches with this movement is not a mere number among millions but the soldier of an idea; his value to the community is measured by the extent to which he has grasped this idea and made it his own (Hernández, 1992: 209).

All that supports the idea of the rebirth of the Fatherland is encouraged, and all that challenges it must be countered or eliminated. This applies to institutions, laws, culture, ideas, parties, trade unions, or at an individual level, to attitudes and behaviours.

The believers in the new faith, the forerunners of the Fascist idea of the New Man, must be the guides and the driving force behind this rebirth: to quote Mussolini, the “dynamo”. Codreanu says that all the Legionaries will have a unified mind and spirit and must therefore have a sole leader (Codreanu, 2005: 17). The National Socialists sought to create a *Volksgemeinschaft*, a people’s community cleansed of “anti-Germans”.

In Classical Fascism action predominates over thought and attitude and vitality over theory. Military values, and the brutal experience of a generation of First World War veterans²⁰, were transferred to the terrain of ultranationalist politics. The party militant was replaced –on the theoretical level or, once in power, *de facto*– by the armed militiaman²¹ of the Party-Community-State.

Nevertheless, though the unity of the community is the cornerstone of Fascist ideology and propaganda, we should not forget that where Fascist movements came to power they did so thanks to a broad coalition of forces of the radical right. The Fascist movements themselves were a conglomerate of individuals and factions with a set of common elements but with distinctive features of their own²². In the Europe of the early

twentieth century, both left and right were highly fractured. One of the indisputable political achievements of both Hitler and Mussolini in Fascism, and of Franco in the realm of the Fascistoid military dictatorships, was to have succeeded in bringing together a wide variety of factions under a single command (and later, under a single regime). The three managed to establish the lowest common denominator (ideology and political action)²³ that the political forces and individuals of the non-democratic radical right were willing to accept against the common enemy.

The historical study of this broad conglomerate of the radical right has stressed the important role in the Fascists' attainment of power (and, once in power, in their consolidation) played by the powerful economic sectors, the army, the *Establishment* and the Church. Scholars define this alliance as an "authoritarian compromise" (Burrin, 1998), a counterrevolutionary alliance or a "preventive counterrevolution" (Bobbio, 1972). Whether or not they gained control of the political process, Fascist movements played a decisive role in this "authoritarian compromise" intent on bringing down the liberal rule of law. Where they gained political control, we can speak of Fascist regimes in the true sense, whereas if their role was important but subordinate (as in Franco's Spain) another term should be found to describe the regime (Saz, 2003: 54), (Saz, 2002: 162), (Griffin, 1993: 120). As we will see in the following section, it turned out that Fascist political projects went much further than those of their partners in the counterrevolutionary alliance; not content with destroying the liberal State and crushing the left, they sought to mobilize the masses and impose their imperialist dream. Fascism was not only a novel technique for social and political control, but an ideological project that was at the same time conservative and anti-conservative, and for this reason so hard to classify and understand.

The Fascists' political goals went far beyond those of the radical conservatives in Europe at the time, who were frightened by the consequences of the revolution of 1917. At the height of the Spanish Civil War in 1937, José Pemartín presented his vision of Fascism in *Qué es lo Nuevo*, describing the movement as a novel and effective technique at the

service of traditionalism, destined to rid the *Patria* of its enemies within and to achieve a harmonious balance between tradition and modernity. For Pemartin, Fascism was an excellent method for organizing the masses, able to restore discipline in accordance with the guidelines laid down by the providential military leader:

“(...) unrelenting work, rigid discipline (...) all these just prerogatives that the capitalist businessman must have over his workers to ensure high productivity, order and discipline in the company, will be preserved in all their vigour (...) a form of feudalism, in the highest sense of the word (...)” (Pemartin, 1937: 325).

The drive for Empire. The Community in arms against its opponents and enemies at home and abroad

For these Fascist leaders, the regenerated nation demonstrates its vitality in its capacity for conquest and its ability to submit other spiritually or racially inferior peoples. Imperialism is the cornerstone of Fascist discourse and practice and demands the maximum possible mobilization²⁴ of the society to be able to carry out its plans for conquest²⁵. These two features, mobilization of the society as a unit and the drive for empire, distinguish Fascism from other authoritarian models of the era however murderous and however influenced by this new movement they may have been. Unlike Fascist regimes, classic civilian or military dictatorships such as the Franco regime in Spain promoted the maximum depoliticization of civil society (with the exception of the militants and functionaries when the single parties are formed).

These Fascist empires had a dual dimension: spiritual and military. Indeed, the two facets fed off each other. Mussolini, proclaiming the Fascist dream of reviving Imperial Rome, defined the Fascist State as a wish for “power and empire”. In Fascist doctrine the empire was not only a territorial, military or mercantile expression, but a “spiritual and moral” one as well (Mussolini, 1984: 66). In Spain, Primo de Rivera rejected out of hand the anti-war pronouncements of the Constitution of the Spanish Second Republic (during which he was a particularly critical member of parliament)

and stated his belief that empire represents the “fullest historical expression of a people” (Textos, 1959: 651); his Movement expresses its “desire for Empire” (del Aguila, 1982: 208). He also declared that the idea of Spain is justified by an imperial vocation to unite languages, races and customs in a “universal destiny” (Textos, 1959: 384).

This Fascist destiny of empire and conquest, the highest possible fulfilment of the nation, will be achieved when the Nation/Community has attained spiritual unity and when all the forces that once divided it have been neutralized politically, culturally, socially and economically. So the action of the movement to save the Fatherland must be revolutionary, radical, merciless. This is his reasoning: a strong State, a State that is sure of its *raison d'être*, deals “inexorably” (to quote Primo) with those who hold opposing, incompatible views (del Aguila, 1982: 230).

Similarly, Goebbels sees the revolution is a dynamic process that possesses its own legality, both before and after the attainment of power. The means used to achieve this end are of no consequence. In the characterization of revolution the means, either “violent or legal”, are irrelevant (141). All that matters is that the movement should become a *Volkspartei* or people’s party²⁶.

Political violence and the cult of war are two manifestations of an anti-bourgeois, militaristic Fascist *Dasein* which sees life in terms of combat. On the sacred altar of Fatherland no sacrifice is too great –not even life itself. Patriots must play their part in the national project, adopting the attitude of loyal soldiers who unflinchingly obey their commanders’ orders. This is the way to achieve power and to unite society with its imperial destiny. Political, economic and social discord will fade away.

In 1934, before the invasion of Abyssinia, Mussolini proclaimed that the Italian nation was in “a permanent state of war” (Mussolini, 1984: 53), and that Italy was becoming a “military warrior society”, characterized by the virtues of obedience, sacrifice, and submission to the Fatherland. The entire life of the nation –political, economic and spiritual– was to be geared towards the satisfaction of military needs (idem: 56). On another occasion the Duce declared that when the cannon sounds it is the voice of the *Patria*

one hears and the only choice for the true patriot is “to stand to attention” (idem: 54).

Like Primo de Rivera, Mussolini was a staunch anti-pacifist, a Fascist who believed that war was an “inevitable” consequence of the conflict between peoples and ideologies. Everlasting peace was neither possible nor desirable. Pacifism establishes a “renunciation of the struggle, cowardice in the face of sacrifice”; only war brings all human energies to their “maximum degree of tension” and leaves the imprint of nobility on those who engage in it. War is the ultimate test of a man, a situation of life or death. For the Duce war is a natural phenomenon, the “supreme court of judgment”; it represents for men what motherhood represents for women (Mussolini, 1984: 29).

So for Mussolini life is ontologically “struggle, risk, tenacity” (idem: 301). For Primo de Rivera, of a similar if not identical mentality, war is “inalienable”, “absolutely necessary and inevitable”. Man feels it “intuitively and atavistically”; war will be in the future what it was in the past (del Aguila, 1982: 225).

And if for the Fascists war is as inexorable as it is necessary, the army is the guardian of the essence of the Fatherland and its idiosyncrasies and virtues the best example for the believers and members of the New Society. Primo de Rivera declares that the army is the strongest and healthiest guarantee of the Spanish essence (Textos, 1959: 565). For Hitler, the German people owes “everything” to the army: where civilian life is “saturated with greed and materialism”, the army educates the people towards an ideal, towards devotion to the Fatherland and its greatness (Hitler, *Mi Lucha*: 99).

This aggressive, militaristic mentality characterizes all areas of political activity. Violence, as we will see, is an essential component of Fascism, not only as a basic tactical instrument, but as a part of the Fascist conception of man and nature.

The Fascist *Weltanschauung*: social Darwinist harmony with nature, and the overcoming of antagonistic forces

For Fascists, as Mussolini says, struggle is the origin of all things because life is full of conflict. The essence of human existence will always be struggle, like a “supreme fatality” (Mussolini, 1984: 247); life is a “continuous combat” (idem: 250). He goes so far as to claim that for Fascists “the struggle itself is even more important than triumph” (idem: 80). Combat is a lifestyle, a way of understanding the world and how to live in it, characterized by bravery, duty and discipline²⁷. For his part, Codreanu affirms that the Legion seeks to restore in combat all the “creative energies” of the Romanian community (Codreanu, 2005: 106).

This mentality and the attitudes and behaviour that derive from it is a necessary condition for leading the Fatherland towards its highest state: Empire. With this social Darwinist vision of the world, Fascists see struggle as part and parcel of nature –struggle between individuals, groups and nations²⁸. For Mussolini, there are peoples marching towards the horizon, peoples that stagnate, and peoples that die (Mussolini, 1984: 127).

Victory is for the strongest. Nations that triumph on the battle field win the right to lead the world; their will for power has imposed itself. Hitler recalls that in his “struggle for existence” in Vienna he decided that social action can never consist in a “ridiculous and useless lyricism of charity” (Hitler, *Mi Lucha*: 13). Nature, he continues, knows no political frontiers; it places new creatures on the globe and contemplates the free play of forces acting on them. Those that win through, due to their “impetus and character”, are granted the “supreme right to existence” (idem: 51).

Following this social Darwinist line, Mussolini proposes that Fascist Italy should seek “supremacy over land, over sea, in the air, in matter and in spirit” (idem: 77). Hitler, with his specifically racist convictions, claimed that in the distant future humanity will demand that a “master race”, supported by the forces of the entire planet, will take on the “leadership of the world” (Hernández, 1992: 159).

Fascism holds that inequality between human beings is as natural a phenomenon as the power and vitality of the struggle itself. For Mussolini

nature is the “realm of inequality” (Mussolini, 1984: 127) and Fascism affirms the “irremediable, fecund and beneficent” inequality of men (idem: 90). Nature’s laws are inexorable and to try to oppose them is pointless: Nature is unequal and amoral; only the fittest survive, in an aristocratic hierarchy of individuals and nations. The protagonists of history are the nations, and each one should be governed and led by an elite and a leader able to interpret its true spirit and guide the community towards the fulfilment of its destiny. So man in the Fascist conception is aggressive, unequal, hierarchical, and territorial²⁹.

Hitler summarized these ontological principles clearly in his statements on the subject (especially in the ones that reveal his profound hatred) when he states that the Jewish doctrine of Marxism rejects the “aristocratic principle of nature” and values more highly the dead weight of numbers and the masses than strength and vigour. In his monologues of 1941, he asks “is it we who created nature, established its laws? Things are as they are and we do nothing to change them (...) All that is very right and proper, for it is the struggle for existence that produces the selection of the fittest” (*Hitler’s Table Talk*, 2000: 132).

For Martin Bormann, one of the defining features of Nazism was the will of the militants to live as naturally as possible, in accordance with “the laws of nature and the laws of life” (Hernández, 1992: 232).

The National Socialist radicalization of Fascist conceptions³⁰ highlights the key role of social Darwinist tenets in their thinking. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler has no qualms in stating “the masses are no more than a part of nature; what the masses want is the triumph of the fittest, and the destruction of the weak or his unconditional submission” (Hitler, *Mi Lucha*: 115).

The hallmark of this attitude to life is the struggle for the glorious rebirth of an imperial Fatherland able to resolve all the problems, eliminate all contradictions, and unite rival forces. In January 1926 the French Fascist George Valois wrote in *Le Nouveau Siècle* that the great originality of Fascism lay in its fusion of two great tendencies, nationalism and socialism. Whereas the opposition between nationalism and socialism seemed insurmountable inside the framework of parliamentary systems, Fascism

was able to break down this opposition by bringing both ideologies into a single national and social movement, as we suggested at the start of this article.

This firm desire to harmonize previously antagonistic forces became a key factor in Fascist ideals, propaganda and methods. In their bid to unify the Nation, anything that could be of use was exploited. Fascism's political, cultural and spiritual revolution aimed to reconcile tradition and modernity, rationality and irrationality, technology and spirituality, individuality and community, the elites and the masses, the maximum concentration of power and political participation of the masses, romanticism and classicism, science and metaphysics, trade unions and management, populism and aristocratism, conservatism and anti-conservatism, legal and paralegal political action, revolution and order, capitalism and anti-capitalism; socialism and anti-socialism. This extraordinary combination was the direct product of its palingenetic messianism³¹, raising the banner of the Nation united at last, and of the Fascists' tactical positioning (neither on the right nor on the left) which cut straight across party politics, ideology, economics and society.

The breadth of its range meant that Fascism was able to appeal to all social groups. Its combination of ambiguity and demagogy allowed it to adjust its discourse to the expectations of the sector of society that it was addressing at any given moment: for the workers, anti-capitalism; for industry, anti-communism; and for the middle classes, a blend of the two.

The *falangista* Agustín del Río Cisneros, compiler of Primo de Rivera's works, saw Spanish Fascism's attempt to solve the capitalism-communism dichotomy as a "synthesis of tradition and modernity" able to provide a response to the needs of the time (Textos, 1959: 77). Writing in *Il Popolo de Italia* in March 1921, Mussolini declared that Fascists were able to reconcile and overcome antitheses that overwhelmed others. Fascists could be both "aristocratic and democratic", "conservative and progressive"; "reactionary and revolutionary", "legal and anti-legal", according to the circumstances of the time and place, that is, according to the historical circumstances.

The attempt to engage the entire nation in a single political movement required the surmounting of (some of) these antagonisms and the mobilization of society along ideological lines. The masses were needed to carry out the political projects of social control and empire. Social heterogeneity, economic and social inequalities and the differences in autonomy according to social status were all concealed beneath a veil of extreme patriotism. As Hitler claimed jokingly in 1942: “another loyal supporter was little Neuner, Ludendorff’s valet. There were also noblemen (...) I realized the similarity of opposites” (*Hitler’s Table Talk*, 2000: 219). The rebirth of the Fatherland is the sacred objective and individuals, by forming part of the project, occupy the place assigned to them in the organic community. No sacrifice is too great. Politics becomes a sacred essence, faith replaces reason, the attitude to life replaces debate and political adversaries are not opponents to be persuaded but enemies to be removed.

Conclusions

The analysis of these Fascist texts seems to support the validity of the model established at the start of this article. The intrinsic properties of Classical Fascism comprise a set of palingenetic ultranationalist ideals based on a conception of an antidemocratic, sacralized and totalitarian political position ready to use any means and to pay any price to impose its will³².

The revival of a Fatherland in decline (in a context of profound crisis and despair in among many sectors of the population, above all the middle classes) will be achieved by the creation of a heterogeneous national mass movement³³ which cuts across ideological, economic and social factors and culminates eventually in the unity of the community. The Nation thus recovers its true essence and power, its purity and its destiny. Finally we should stress the importance of violence in the Fascist *Weltanschauung*: violence and its most noble expression, war, which accelerates events and empowers individuals, the Fascist movement, and the community. Since

internal and external enemies alike impede the coming into being of the Fatherland, violence will inevitably be used against them³⁴.

This rebirth of the Fatherland and the achievement of unity and harmony justifies everything, even violence of all kinds: society may use ruthless means to rid itself of its enemies at home and prepare for war with those abroad. Everything that opposes the palingenesis of the National Community must be annihilated.

The populist mobilization of the community³⁵, both before and after the rise to power, will provide answers for the social and national demands. The enemies of this project of total domination inside the national borders and the creation of an empire abroad will be the victims of an implacable, systematic, rationalized, murderous violence with no respect for moral or legal concerns. This was the object of the radical European right in its Fascist period: to destroy the classical nineteenth-century liberal model and to enable the regenerated Fatherland to create, out of nothing, a cohesive set of societies in a Europe beset with divisions and conflicts in the first thirty years of the twentieth century.

The theoretical premises of Fascism and the action of Mussolini's and Hitler's regimes would miraculously resolve all the contradictions and harmonize society's antagonistic forces. The ideas of ultranationalism, social Darwinism, capitalism³⁶ and Fascist nihilism fell on fertile ground especially in places where social, economic and political malaise was compounded by the deep national wounds³⁷, for instance the Germany and Italy after the First World War. The economic, social, political crisis of the time created a political vacuum (the most obvious example being Germany after the Crash of 1929) which the Fascists were able to fill by offering national adaptations of a novel political formula that was revolutionary, spiritual, youthful and modern but at the same time traditional and respectful of economic and social structures, and thus appealing to the conservative sectors³⁸.

Fascism created a new cocktail out of well-known ingredients. Its composition could be adapted to the moment and the situation. Three of these ingredients were essential complements to the core ideas described

at the start of this article, and provided the system with a consistent ideological basis. First, its vision of man and nature; second, the totalitarian logic of the implementation in the social and political domain³⁹ of the sum of the ideas and practices of followers and militants (in parallel to a merciless repression of any dissidence) and, finally, the imposition of a political method of social control or a radical new right-wing political formula free of any ethical or legal restraints and which alternated the use of legal and illegal means as the situation of the moment demanded. This political formula imposed itself successfully in Germany and Italy in the Europe of the inter-war period and, significantly, was only defeated by a massive external military effort, aided by a much less important (and in the case of Germany, practically non-existent) internal resistance.

These political criteria and this *Weltanschauung* derive from the Fascist conception of man. In order to live in harmony with themselves and with the laws of nature men must acknowledge their aggressiveness, their inherent inequality, the need for hierarchy and territory, and must spurn all empathy towards the opponents or enemies of the Fatherland.

This Fascist ideology and the political practices of Hitler's and Mussolini's regimes represented a radical right-wing alternative to liberal modernity⁴⁰ by offering solutions for the sources of anguish, alienation and misery that afflicted the societies of Europe in the interwar years. The desperate exacerbation of contradictions of all kinds gave a legitimacy to the Fascists' proposals: the inexorable erosion of the traditions and religion that had underpinned pre-industrial societies; the atomization and alienation of the individual in the liberal mass societies; the growing social, political and economic divisions; hypermaterialism, in parallel to the loss of spirituality and transcendence; the bickering of party politics, leading at times to a loss of perspective on vital national issues; the economic and political chaos of the class struggle; apathy, widespread despair; the political and social neglect of ex-combatants, the middle classes and the young; the sensation of spiritual or racial decadence; the threat of communist revolution; the loss of political direction in societies wracked by multiple parallel crises (especially political) and in which the classical liberal

model of the nineteenth century in many cases had lost its legitimacy and its capacity to provide solutions to the new problems of the mass society of the twentieth century.

Against this background of widespread crisis and despair, Fascist ideologies offered responses. This was one of the reasons for the evident political fascination that they exerted across many sectors of the European population: the national community against individualism; the creation of a harmonious and organic whole in place of social, political and economic discord; resolute, effective decision-making by strong leadership in place of wishy-washy pluralism and parliamentarianism; aggressive militarism to redress the loss of political direction; ultranationalism as against Marxist universalism; a concrete idea of the Fatherland as against an abstract idea of Humanity; transcendental spirituality as against self-centred materialism; sacrifice in place of corruption; aristocratic values in place of bourgeois mediocrity; irrationalist vitalism versus Enlightenment and positivism; Nietzsche⁴¹ versus Kant and Marx.

Moving from the world of ideology to the world of action, the defining features of Classical Fascism are the predominance of the political over the economic and of the public over the private⁴²; the respect for capitalism as a productive system and the maintenance of a class-based social structure; selective murder to combat spiritual or racial decadence and to secure territorial expansion; the totalitarian Fascistization and militarization of all levels of society, which was particularly intense at the lower levels; and, finally, the desire for an Empire and the single-minded determination to achieve it.

Notes

1. Political theory is understood as the analysis of political ideas in relation to political processes.
2. This is what Seliguer (Seliguer, 1970) terms the fundamental nucleus of an ideology, as distinct from the operative nucleus, and what Freedon (Freedon, 1994) calls the uneliminable nucleus, in contrast to the adjacent or peripheral nuclei, and other authors *core ideas* (Antón, 2006).

3. On this subject, see (Gentile, 2004: 19).
4. For Michael Mann: "Fascism is the pursuit of a transcendent and cleansing nation-statism through paramilitarism" (Mann, 2004: 13).
5. I owe this important distinction to Prof. Ferran Gallego (UAB).
6. "In all Fascist movements so far, the personality of the leader had played a crucial role" (Laqueur, 1996: 35).
7. A Fascist manual of the times expressed this explicitly: "(...) the universal values of Fascism: anti-Marxism, anti-democracy and anti-parliamentarianism; nationalism; political firmness/intransigence; spirituality; a desire for action; the cult of the superman and of the *elites*; authoritarian government; hierarchy and discipline" (Alvial, 1938: 46).
8. See (Griffin, 2005).
9. "Fascism, in the last resort, was based upon nationalism as a civil religion, and its aesthetic articulated this faith just as it did for the older established religions" (Mosse, 1996: 251).
10. According to a contemporary observer: "Fascism is more, far more, than a simple political and social conception. It has an ascetic element of renunciation and sacrifice; a sense of spiritual sublimation, so intense and profound that it goes beyond the normal party programs, enthusiasms and passions that political struggles arouse, to reach the rank of a true civil religion, with its faith, its dogmas, its orthodoxy, its rites, its martyrs and its otherworldly aspirations and ideals" (Alvial, 1938: 71).
11. For Walter Benjamin, Fascism meant the introduction of aesthetics into political life (Benjamin, 1973).
12. See (Dimitrov, 1976: 49) and (Neumann, 1942: 49).
13. "Comparison suggests that Fascist success in reaching power varies less with the brilliance of Fascist intellectuals and the qualities of Fascist chiefs than with the depth of crisis and the **desperation** of potential allies" (Paxton, 2005: 115). "Fascist movements can come to power under two conditions. The first is that the bosses –the owners of large industry, the judges, the army chiefs– are in **despair**" (Bamberg, 1998: 295).
14. (...) Fascist movements have not merely played the card of an aggressive, expansionist, imperialist nationalism, but that of the national unity (a more ambiguous and complex role) –Mussolini as the successor of Garibaldi, Hitler of Bismarck. which had a profound influence on their popular impact" (Poulantzas, 1978).
15. "*Mussolini is always right*" was one of the most popular slogans spread by the Duce's propaganda service.
16. "Once in power, Fascist regimes banned strikes, dissolved independent labour unions, lowered wage earners' purchasing power, and showered money on

armaments industries, to the immense satisfaction of employers” (Paxton, 2005: 10).

17. As a distant echo, reminiscent of a particular political culture, the campaign slogan of the leader of the Radical French right Le Pen in the Presidential Elections of 2007 was “*Tous ensemble, relevons notre France*”.
18. “Fascism was overtly nationalistic, militaristic, and expansionist” (Laqueur, 1996: 15).
19. “Ideological thinking orders the facts into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything from it; that is to say, it proceeds with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality” (Arendt, 1967: 471).
20. “The Fascist theory of the prelude to war was influenced by the understanding that war could mobilize the entire nation. The First World War created this reality” (Mann, 2004: 81).
21. For example, Italian males aged between 16 and 18 who joined the Fascist youth organization were called “the machine-gun bearing vanguard”.
22. Clearly, in the NSDAP Georg Strasser sought different things from Röhm or Himmler, see Gallego (2006); the same was true of Primo de Rivera and Ledesma Ramos in Spain, see Gallego (2005). On the plurality of Italian Fascism, see Buchignani (2006).
23. “Ideology is an important aspect (though not the only one) and is itself a process in construction, closely related to social, political and even institutional dynamics” (Saz, 2003: 54).
24. “(...) Fascism was a populist, “radical” movement, with a strong push “from the bottom up” (Mann, 2006: 66).
25. “Constructed on the idea of the decadence, degeneration and death of the Fatherland, Falangist ultranationalism was built on the palingenetic myth of unlimited regeneration and resurgence of this same Fatherland. (...) the myth of the revolution and the “desire for Empire”, also essential in themselves, constituted the vital complement of the palingenetic myth” (Saz, 2003: 404).
26. “Fascism attracted support from different groups at different times, but recent historiography has tended to conclude that in the crucial pre-power phase Fascism, especially in Germany, attracted a remarkably eclectic following in terms of class, ideology and motivation” (Eatwell, 1992: 168).
27. The *Enciclopedia Italiana* of the time defines Fascism thus: “It conceives life as struggle”.
28. “Fascism is ‘true’ insofar as it helps fulfil the destiny of a chosen race or people or blood, locked with other peoples in a Darwinian struggle, and not in the light of some abstract and universal reason” (Paxton, 2005: 16).

29. "But even Fascism in the smaller countries was militaristic, ultranationalist, and aggressive to the best of its limited ability. It is tempting to speculate what for instance, relations between a Fascist Britain and France, or Nazi Germany and a Fascist France, would have been. Their interests would have collided, and they would not have coexisted in peace" (Laqueur, 1996: 71).
30. See (Gallego, 2004).
31. "(...) Fascism was itself a secular religion with a sense of messianic mission (...)" (Laqueur, 1996: 45).
32. "A Fascist regime could imprison, despoil, and even kill its inhabitants at will and without limitation (Paxton, 2005: 142).
33. "(...) it was not enough to don a coloured shirt, march about, and beat up some local minority to conjure up the success of a Hitler or a Mussolini. It took a comparable crisis, a comparable opening of political space, comparable skill at alliance building, and comparable cooperation from existing elites" (Paxton, 2005: 75).
34. Michael Mann identifies five key characteristics of Fascism: nationalism, statism, transcendence, cleansing and paramilitarism (Mann, 2004).
35. "No regime was authentically fascist without a popular movement that helped it achieve power, monopolized political activity, and played a major role in public life after power with its parallel organizations" (Paxton, 2005: 154).
36. "As long as capitalists lent their authoritarian work organizations to Nazi goals, Hitler allowed them to reap the profits. If they resisted, he smashed them. Capitalism as private property did not interest him. Capitalism as disciplined, authoritarian production did" (Mann, 2004: 153).
37. "Fascism may be best understood, therefore, as primarily a counterrevolution ideological project, constituting a new kind of popular coalition in the specific circumstances of an interwar crisis (...) national humiliation and enraged by the advance of the left" (Eley, 1983: 81).
38. "(...) Fascism offered a new recipe for governing with popular support but without any sharing of power with the left, and without any threat to conservative social and economic privileges and political dominance" (Paxton, 2005: 104). Romania was the exception: the dominant classes eventually murdered the most important leaders of the Iron Guard.
39. The Nazis called this "*Gleichschaltung*": the synchronization of all the aspects of the life of the society with the ideology and the political goals of the Party. (Macridis, 1998: 199).
40. This view, shared by several scholars of Fascism, is defined by Richard Griffin as the "new consensus": "The core component of this conceptual framework can be summarized as the premise that Fascism is an ideologically driven attempt by a movement or regime to create a new type of post-liberal national-community which will be the vehicle for the comprehensive transformation of society and culture, with the effect of creating an alternative modernity" (Griffin,

2005: 9). For Michael Mann, it is "(...) the darkside of modernity" (Mann, 2004); a resacralized (Gentile, 1996) or reactionary modernity (Herf, 1990).

41. See de Mayer (1986), especially the chapter on Nietzsche and social Darwinism; also the chapter "Power and anti-egalitarianism in Nietzsche and Hitler" in Tugendhat (2002).
42. In 1937 Robert Ley, leader of the German Work Front, declared enthusiastically that sleep was the only private issue in the Third Reich.

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