

Slouching Towards Utopia?: An Economic History of the Long Twentieth Century

XI. Fascism

J. Bradford DeLong
U.C. Berkeley Economics & Blum Center, & WCEG

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Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote:

Macbeth's self-justifications were feeble.... Iago was a little lamb.... The imagination and the spiritual strength of Shakespeare's evildoers stopped short at a dozen corpses. Because they had no *ideology*. Ideology—that is what gives evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others' eyes, so that he won't hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors... invoking Christianity... the grandeur of their Motherland... civilization... race... equality, brotherhood, and the happiness of future generations. Thanks to ideology, the twentieth century was fated to experience evildoing on a scale calculated in the millions. This cannot be denied, nor passed over, nor suppressed...

To see a utopian future in your mind's eye and think that it is almost within your grasp, and that your actions—even if “severe”, even if cruel and brutal—can bring it closer within your grasp, out of fantasy and down here on earth—that is the curse of ideology. In it, crimes become thrills: “The just city... or the suicide pact?... To-morrow for the young the poets... walks by the lake... perfect communion... bicycle races.... But to-day the struggle. To-day the deliberate increase in the chances of death. The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder...” wrote poet W.H. Auden in the late 1930s.

I tend to want to be pragmatic: a would-be student of Daniel "end of ideology" Bell: work today given what we know so that tomorrow—real tomorrow, 24 hours from now, not some metaphor of the future—is, concretely, better in a way you can point to. But many are ideological. And in the period between the world wars three great ideologies confronted each other, demanding the fundamental reworking of economy and society.

We met one even before World War I: the market giveth, the market taketh away; blessed be the name of the market. In the words of American steelmaster and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie: "the law of competition... we cannot evade... sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race, because it insures the survival of the fittest..." Social darwinism is a hell of a drug. And there were many between the world wars who wanted to rewind the clock back to the semi-classical semi-liberal order that they imagined had prevailed before the coming of the socialists and the radical democrats and the world wars. It was an ideology that saw it necessary that immense effort be put forward in order to reconfigure the economy—in this case, to restore and purify what they thought the pre-WWI economy had been.

We met the second of the ideologies last chapter: the really-existing-socialism of Lenin and Stalin. It, too, was an ideology that saw it necessary that immense effort be put forward in order to reconfigure the economy—in this case, to eliminate the market as a system, for that was what blocked using the material abundance of industrialization to build a utopia that would really exist.

That Lenin and Stalin's really-existing-socialism was to be the winner, and would ultimately accumulate the largest butcher's bill of any ideology was not obvious at the start of the 20th century. It was not obvious by the end of World War I. And it was not obvious during the years leading up to the start of World War Two.

A great many thoughtful, observant, passionate individuals would have without hesitation put their money in that race on the third horseman of ideology: fascism. They had good cause to do so. It indeed looked to be the most terrible and most destructive. In truth, had not all others—pragmatists, socialists, market worshipers, true liberals—gathered together to stop it, it would have won that race of terror.

Fascism was also, in a sense, at its root, an ideology that saw great effort as needed to reconfigure the economy. For one thing, the economy as it was currently organized divided people into classes and created a politics of interest-group

bargaining and conflict, when what was needed was a national people unified and a politics of solidarity and common purpose. For another thing, the economy needed a redistribution of global resources. The big problem was not that there were proletarian—poor, working, overburdened—*classes* but rather proletarian *nations*. And the major purpose of a fascist leader was to make the world economy work for the benefit of the people of his nation, and not for some transnational global elite of rootless cosmopolites.

Fascism as a movement was led by Benito Mussolini of Italy.

Benito Mussolini was, up until World War II in Europe began, the leader of world fascism. He started out as the editor of a Italian socialist newspaper: *Avanti!*. He was, in our terms, something like a left-wing Proud Boy. He agitated Italian workers in Switzerland to start a general strike. He was arrested and deported. He agitator for socialism in the mostly Italian with some German-speaking alpine regions of the then-Austro-Hungarian Empire. He protested against Italy's imperial adventure conquering Libya. By the eve of World War I he had become one of Italy's most prominent socialist journalist-politicians.

On July 29, 1914, the day after the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia, while the armies were mobilizing for World War I, Europe's socialist leaders were mobilizing too. They came to Brussels for a meeting of the world's Second Socialist International. At previous meetings in 1912 and 1907 all had agreed on this: the working class knew no country; a threat of war should be met by a general strike; workers would put down their tools, bring the machines to a halt, stop the railroads literally on their tracks, and force war munitions factories to shutter their doors; then diplomats could do their work and maintain the peace.

But that day in Brussels, Austrian socialist leader Viktor Adler announced that the workers of Vienna were in the streets not demonstrating for peace but chanting for war. "It is better to be wrong with the working classes than right against them," Adler said. The Austrian socialists would support their Kaiser.

In France, the President of the Council of Ministers, Rene Viviani, was a socialist. Echoing Adler, Viviani called on French workers to defend their country.

Outside of Italy—where few indeed wanted to join—only a handful of socialist leaders stood against this war: Hugo Hasse, Rosa Luxemburg, and Karl Leibknecht from Germany; and Vladimir Lenin from Russia.

The socialists of Italy were not subject to this dilemma. They did not then have to choose between their pacifist principles and a government urging war for the sake of the nation. Italy had in 1882 had formed a *defensive* military alliance with Germany and Austria. The Italian government announced that Germany and Austria were not defenders, but aggressors. Consequently Italy would stay neutral. The Italian socialists applauded the government.

Benito Mussolini was profoundly shaken by what had happened in Brussels, and what he saw in the countries around him. The Second International had come up against the forces of nationalism, and had collapsed. “I see no parties, only Germans” declared German Kaiser Wilhelm II Hohenzollern. And he was, for that moment, right. What did it mean that, when push had come to shove, the international working class dissolved and what crystalized instead were nations within whom class divisions receded in importance?

Then Italian socialists Mussolini knew and liked jumped onto the horns of the dilemma, and chose the nationalist horn. They began to clamor to enter the war on the allied side with the aim of conquering Austria’s Italian-speaking regions “Cardi, Corridoni, *la Rygier*,” Mussolini called them out by name, “apologists for war! It is a contagion that spares no one! But I want to hold the rampart to the end.”

But Mussolini wanted to be a leader of a mass movement. Mussolini was no George Orwell, who thought that one had a duty to go against the crowd when it was wrong, even when “to see what is in front of one’s nose needs a constant struggle.” Not for him any admiration of Henrik Ibsen’s characters who learn that “the strongest man is he who stands most alone.” That was not who Mussolini wanted to be.

And so, in the third month of the war, Mussolini abandoned the rampart. If the Italian workers he wanted to lead were going to be nationalists first and socialists second, he would join them. By the late fall of 1914 Mussolini had drawn a lesson from the collapse of the Second International and the mass enthusiasm of the working classes for war. Class had shattered under moderate pressure, and so could not carry the weight needed for a strong and durable mass movement. By contrast, the ethno-nation might well be strong enough.

Benito Mussolini had become convinced of the psychological inadequacy of Marxian socialism. It inspired nothing like the enormous outpouring of nationalist enthusiasm that he saw during the war. It offered no counterweight able to even

through sand into the gears that drove the struggle among nations. Socialism's leaders seemed incapable of fully recognizing the fact that solidarity was associated with one's national community—not with one's international class or with humanity in general.

Being a socialist seemed inconsistent with leading a mass movement. So Mussolini started his own new newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, calling for intervention on the side of France and Britain. His ex-comrades denounced him as having been bribed by the French intelligence service. (He probably had not been before his change; he surely was supported after—just what they were backing mattered less to the French than that they were backing a nascent Italian movement that wanted Italy to come into the war on France's side.) On November 24, 1914, Mussolini was expelled from the Italian socialist party. The bridges had been burned. He had become an ex-socialist. He had become the leader of a nascent movement that would be different, and stronger.

But what might that movement be?

Originally Mussolini had just a placeholder, the word “fascism.” Originally he had just an observation: that while the working classes were hard to mobilize for a largely-economic internal struggle of protests, demonstrations, strikes, and votes to obtain respect and an end to poverty, they were easy to mobilize for a bloody and destructive war to reclaim, or rather claim, Alto Adige, Trentino, Frulia, Udine, and the city of Trieste. Appeals to ethno-nation drove masses to act in force in ways that trumped abstract ideals, moral principles, and appeals to human cosmopolite solidarity that lacked roots in the blood and the soil did not. Mussolini therefore felt his way forward into his doctrine. And many have followed him since.

But followed them into what?

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At the core of fascism as an *ideology* was that semi-liberal industrial capitalism and parliamentary government had had its chance, and had failed. The failures were several and along several different dimensions, but they were seen as—somehow—linked together.

The first was a macroeconomic failure: semi-liberal capitalism had failed to guarantee high employment and rapid economic growth.

A second was a distributional failure. Either semi-liberal capitalism made the rich richer while everyone else stayed poor, or liberal capitalism failed to preserve an adequate income differential between the more-educated, more-respectable lower middle class and the unskilled industrial proletariat. Depending on which aspect of income distribution was highlighted, either industrial capitalism produced an income distribution that was either too unequal (rich get richer, the rest stay poor) or not unequal enough (respected lower middle classes slip into joining the unskilled proletariat). That the charge of not-unequal-enough carried an implied or explicit racial distinction—too much equality with Jews, or Poles, or Slavs, or (insert your minority here) was unacceptable—lent it even greater ability to inspire the national masses. Fascism could and did play both ends against the middle: under liberal democratic capitalism, equals were treated unequally, while unequals—those who were not *really* part of the ethnic community—were treated equally.

The third failure was a moral failure. The market economy reduced all human relationships—or at any event many human relationships—to arms-length market transactions: you do this for me, and I will pay you. But people are not comfortable dealing with each other as nothing but machines for transforming your money into useful commodities, or vice versa your labor into money. Contests and gift-exchanges have more psychological resonance. FOR EXAMPLE... By ignoring and trying to suppress the contest and gift-exchange dimensions of economic relationships, the market society dehumanized much of life.

Fourth, the semi-classical semi-liberal capitalist order ignored the fact that we (by which was meant all us citizens bound together by culture and contained within our borders) are in this together: that inhabitants of an ethnic nation have common interests that are much more powerful than any one individual's interest. Thus, economic policy needs to be made in a “syndicalist” or “corporatist” mode. This meant that the state needed to mediate between employers and unions, and the state needed to crack heads when necessary to make sure that employers and unions did the right thing. Not market forces but government regulation would set the price of labor and the quantity of employment, for those were too important for the health of society to be determined by the distribution of property and the workings of the market.

Fifth, not only the liberal economy flawed, but so too was the semi-liberal government. Parliaments were incompetent. Cretinous. They were composed either of (a) time-servers with no initiative, (b) corrupt distributors of favors to special interests, or (c) ideological champions who focused not on the public interest but on what made their own narrow slice of supporters feel good. They were a swamp.

The swamp needed to be drained. A strong leader who would say what he thought and do what was needed without paying attention to norms or niceties was needed to do the job.

Many of these real and declared shortcomings resulted in simmering to boiling discontent. Giving it form and direction helped decide the first two planks of Fascism's platform.

Nationalist assertion became Mussolini's first plank. He demanded that Italy be "respected". He demanded that the Italian border be moved north into the Alps and east into what would become Yugoslavia. Moved how far? As far as possible. Anti-socialism became his second plank: recruiting groups of young thugs and sending them out into the streets to beat up socialists and disrupt working-class organizations. Fisticuffs and enmity has long worked both to solidify your in-group and to keep obscured commonalities with others you wish to keep outgroups. In sending his thugs to engage with their thugs Mussolini was appealing to the same sources of discontent and energy that the socialists were. He needed to sharpen the contradictions to keep his own recruits from drifting left.

Back in the early second century St. John the Evangelist had needed his congregation to stop dividing their contributions between church and synagogue, hence his gospel demonized the Jews. Mussolini's—and Hitler's—gospels needed to do something analogous to recruit cadres.

"Corporatism," or the replacement of the anarchy of the market by some form of government-administered planning, at least of wage levels and incomes, became his third plank. Fascism would embrace the dignity of work and of occupations, and not value every form of work and every worker solely by what the market wanted to pay them. Policy needed to be made in a "syndicalist" or "corporatist" mode, with the state mediating between those who thought they had opposed interests, for example employers and unions, and remind them that they had much more in common as ethnic Italians than what divided them as members of different classes.

And to make people sit up and behave—subordinate their class interests to their ethno-national interest—there needed to be a strong leader: Mussolini. This was less plank than precondition. People did not have interests that politicians existed to satisfy. Instead, people needed to be led and given a sense of national purpose by having their leader tell them what their interests were. Rulers should not listen and obey, but speak and command.

Was fascism real, or was this just a con game?

Perhaps it was just a confidence trick. A normal political movement is based on interest groups who see their well-being as part of a good society, adds to that a view of how the world works that suggests certain policies will advance that well-being, and then attempts the assembly of coalitions to implement such policies. Fascism certainly was not a normal political movement.

To seize power Mussolini needed to perform the role of the prophet of a new ideology, he then needed a doctrine to cloak his personal despotism, and he needed to keep his opponents divided and off-balance. To claim that his doctrine was “fascism”, and then to at every moment define “fascism” as what seemed tactically opportune, and then to play the trump card of asserting that contradictions and inconsistencies were in fact the point of the leadership principle that was at the core of fascism.

Thus one point of view is that there is no there there, there was no there there, there never was any there there: that fascism was always a confidence game run by con artists. The goal of the one promoting fascism was to become a leader in order to gain status, wealth, and power. In order to do that, he needed to find people who wanted to be led. And then he had to undertake a delicate psychological negotiation with them to figure out where they wanted to be led to. Only then could he enthrall them, and then pick their pockets.

It is tempting to declare that the greatest trick Mussolini ever pulled was convincing the world, or at least much of all Italy, that he and fascism were the real deal. Unquestionably he succeeded for a time. Initially, Italy’s elected politicians tried alternately to suppress and to ally with fascism. In 1922, after winning some electoral successes, Mussolini threatened to make Italy ungovernable through large-scale political violence—unless he was named prime minister. The king named him prime minister. From there he became dictator of Italy: Il Duce, or “The Leader”. By judicious murders, imprisonments, and political wheeling-dealing, he remained at the top of Italy until the western allied armies of Britain and America came knocking in 1943.

But while it is certainly true that “fascism” was disorganized, self-contradictory, confused, and vague, most political movements are disorganized, self-contradictory, confused, and vague. In forming a coalition or a party the goal is to maintain friendships and alliances by the blurring of differences and avoiding

conceptual clarity. Both tend to drive wedges among your followers.

Fascism's claim to be something real rests on another, incontrovertible fact: in the twentieth century it has had too many adherents to be a nonexistent illusionary confidence trick, even if most fascists most of the time were clearer on what they were against than what they were for. I count six elements usually found—in Italy and elsewhere—in regimes that called themselves “fascist”: a leadership commanding rather than representing, a unified community based on ties of blood and soil (and rejecting and degrading those who are not of the community), coordination and propaganda, support for at least some traditional hierarchies, hatred of socialists and liberals, and—almost always—hatred of “rootless cosmopolites” in some form or other.

It is certainly true that some fascists are con artists. But I think happy is the land whose chief fascist is *simply* and *solely* a con artist simply out for the cash. For there is something deeper to fascism, and a true believer in it who is not just a con artist running a confidence game is likely to be more effective at plumbing the depths and creating something ugly.

Neither Mussolini nor Hitler—nor Franco, nor Pinochet were, nor Urban, nor Modhi, nor any of a number of others are *only* con artists. The right question is not “is?” but “how much?”

Fascism was also, often, considered to be the only game in town. This is certainly true if you do not approve of liberal democracy, or if you fear socialism and believe that liberal democracy will inevitably lead to really-existing socialism once the working class realizes its voting strength. For many after World War I it seemed clear that restoring the Old Order was impossible. For many anti-socialists, therefore, fascism appeared to them to be the only choice left standing. Monarchy was out. An aristocracy of birth and rank was out. Theocracy was out. Plutocracy had... difficulties keeping a mass base. Fascism was it. And a lot of people were and are willing to endorse and support it.

Indeed, if you took a look at European and Latin American governments between the World Wars, you could easily convince yourself that fascism was the wave of the future. Nearly everywhere democracy was in retreat, unable to provide answers to the economic problems of the Great Depression or to resolve social conflicts. On the eve of World War II democracies in the world were few and far between: Great Britain and its Dominions (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and perhaps South Africa), the United States (if you were white), Ireland, France, Belgium, Holland,

and Scandinavia (Sweden, Norway, and Denmark). That was it. Everywhere else you had authoritarian, non- or anti-democratic governments of the left or the right.

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In Germany after World War I, supporters of the German Socialist Party were called *Sozis*—the first two syllables of *Sozialist*.

For some reason, urban Bavarians made fun of people named Ignatz. The name was a stand-in for what in English is a country bumpkin: someone rural, foolish, and awkward. There was a diminutive nickname for Ignatz: Nazi.

Hence the political enemies of Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist German Workers Party in Bavaria in the 1920s began calling them a mash up of Sozis and Nazi, or “Nazis”. The name stuck.

Once Adolf Hitler seized power in 1933 and consolidated it in 1934, he was by and large popular. With reason. Germany had recovered from the Great Depression relatively rapidly once Hitler had taken power and broken adherence to monetary and fiscal orthodoxy. With the Gestapo in the background to suppress agitation for higher wages, better working conditions, or the right to strike, and with strong demand from the government for public works and military programs, unemployment fell rapidly during the 1930s. The Great Depression in Germany had been the deepest in the world save for the United States. Recovery in Germany was fastest, save for Japan and Scandinavia.

Hitler in power during peacetime appears to have been focused on boosting employment and building weapons, not adding to industrial capacity and increasing national wealth. Build national highways, yes—but build them not by building individual city-to-city or resources-to-industry links, but by building as much as possible first where it would be seen as many as possible. Political effectiveness and military capacity were the priorities.

Political effectiveness we understand: The Nazi movement was still a minority movement. Even at its high point it could command a majority in the Reichstag, the legislature, only with the socialist and communist deputies were excluded from the room. And even then this rump legislature was only willing to vote Hitler emergency and dictatorial powers in the panic that followed the “mysterious” burning of the Reichstag’s building. In part because of their minority-majority, Hitler and his party did see building more and stronger political support as a

priority—hence jobs, and at least the appearance of a government building large infrastructure projects.

But weapons? Armies? How do we understand these as priorities? Had not World War I taught the Germans, and even the Nazis, and even Hitler, not to do *that* again?

In a word, no.

Hitler's experiences during World War I do not seem to add up to what a normal person would regard as a “good war”. But he thought they did.

He enlisted—untrained—in the Bavarian Army in August 1914, after having been rejected by his Austrian homeland as unfit for military service. In October he joined the 16 (List) Bavarian reserve regiment, part of nine newly-enlisted largely-untrained infantry divisions that were thrown immediately into combat on an emergency basis. It was the first battle of Ypres. The Germans faced the British. And it was the first mauling the 16 (List) Bavarian reserve regiment underwent.

The Germans call this the *Kindermord*, the child-death. That is an explicit reference to the Biblical massacre of the innocent babies of Bethlehem by King Herod of Judea. For the Hitler's regiment it is apt. 40,000 of 90,000 were killed or wounded in 20 days. By the end of the battle Hitler's company of 250 had only 42 men alive, out of the hospital, and able to present for further duty.

The 16 (List) Bavarian reserve regiment, like so many others during World War I, followed a predictable pattern: inexperienced, they were sent into the fight where they were chewed up, a decent precent were thrown away, a modest percent were regrouped, repeat. The 16 (List) Bavarian was sacrificed over and over again in the battles of the Somme (1916), Fromelles (196), Arras (1917), and Passchendaele (1917). The casualties were horrifying, in the hundreds of thousands—in each battle. Hitler was wounded in the thigh in 1916 by a shell exploding at his dugout entrance. He was hospitalized for two months. He was then ordered to the reserves behind the line in Munich. He could not stand it. With his comrades under fire, he begged to be recalled back to the front. His wish was granted. He was then (temporarily) blinded and struck dumb by a British gas attack in October 1918. He spent the last 25 days of the war in the hospital.

Yet these experiences did not put him off war.

Hitler was then demobilized and set adrift. No matter his dedication, Hitler's conduct had not been such that he was one of those soldiers the General Staff wanted to keep for the peacetime army. But intelligence Major Karl Mayr picked him up as an undercover operative in mid-1919. Mayr sent him to spy on socialists. One small socialist group he was sent to spy on was Anton Wexler's Germany Workers Party. Drexler found Hitler to be "an absurd little man." But Drexler was also impressed with Hitler's ability to speak. Drexler invited Hitler to join his party on September 1919.

It became the Nazi Party five months later, when "National" and "Socialist" were added at the front of its name, "National" with Hitler's enthusiastic support, and "Socialist" over his objection. The idea seems to have been that the full name change might lure Germans looking for a socialist meeting to wander in and perhaps stick. Since the Nazis were, like the socialists, recruiting from the groups for whom the system was not working, such wanderers-in might stay. Later it was too late to change the name of the party. And by that point it had become the party of Hitler first and foremost, mooting the name.

A sliver, albeit a highly telling sliver, of what the party of Hitler stood for can be glimpsed in how it treated the men who gave Hitler his first legs up into it.

The man who invited Hitler into the party and thereafter mentored him, Anton Drexler, Hitler pushed out of the Nazi leadership in 1921. Drexler resigned from the party in 1923. In *Mein Kampf*, published in 1925 and years after Drexler had done all that he could for his mentee, Hitler described Drexler as:

a simple worker, as speaker not very gifted, moreover no soldier... weak and uncertain... not a real leader... not... fanatical enough to carry the movement in their hearts, nor... to use brutal means to overcome the opposition to a new idea...

Drexler died of natural causes in the Bavarian city of Munich in 1942. He got off relatively easy.

The man who recruited Hitler to spy on Drexler's party, Karl Mayr, started out on the German right and steadily moved left. In 1925 he joined the Socialist Party, where he led some of the socialist left-wing paramilitary street bullies. In 1933, after Hitler assumed dictatorial power, Mayr fled to France. When the Nazis conquered France in 1940, he was on the Gestapo's list. He was sent first to the Sachsenhausen and then to the Buchenwald concentration camp. There Mayr was

murdered on February 9, 1945.

Compared to the millions of victims of Hitler's party, he got off relatively easy. Most of what Nazism stood for can be grasped by understanding Adolf Hitler's deadly serious appreciation for the turn of the nineteenth century economist Thomas Robert Malthus.

It has been chapters since we last crossed paths with Malthus, the pessimist who gloomily predicted that human populations would outrun their food supply. When people and food got out of balance, too much of the former given not enough of the latter, Malthus argued nature or mankind would provide a corrective. It would come in the forms, one or all, of war, famine, disease, and death; or (a better alternative) "moral restraint." This would be evidenced by late marriages and infrequent sex supported by strong religious faith, practices Malthus believed allow a small gap between the edge of starvation and average living standards.

From those earlier chapters we know Malthus as someone whose doctrines provided a good description of life before he wrote, but were a bad guide (so far) to subsequent history. When looking backwards, the lesson he drew was less a lesson than a trap, and an inevitable one at that: population growth checked by insufficient foodstuffs producing poverty—and the more sexual liberty society allowed women, the more poverty. But in post-Malthus history the rationalization and routinization of scientific discovery, technological innovation, and mass-scale deployment banished the Malthusian Devil.

Hitler, however, drew different lessons from Malthus. The Malthusian trap was, he argued, useful for thinking about foreign policy:

Germany has an annual increase in population of nearly nine hundred thousand souls. The difficulty of feeding this army of new citizens must grow greater from year to year and ultimately end in catastrophe...

Hitler saw four options:

One was birth control to reduce population growth. But Hitler saw any check on the number of Germans as weakening the German race. See: social darwinism.

A second was to increase agricultural productivity, but Hitler saw this as doomed for the same reason as Malthus did: diminishing returns.

A third was to purchase food from abroad by “produc[ing] for foreign needs through industry and commerce”. Hitler deemed this “unhealthy”. Moreover, Hitler saw it as profoundly unrealistic: Britain would never allow Germany to become the dominant industrial and mercantile power without a fight, and if it could wield the hunger weapon again—as it had with the World War I blockade—Britain would win.

What was left? The fourth way: territorial expansion. Thus Hitler goes on to write:

We must... coolly and objectively, adopt the standpoint that it can certainly not be the intention of Heaven to give one people fifty times as much land and soil in this world as another.... [We must not let political boundaries obscure for us the boundaries of internal justice.... The law of self-preservation goes into effect; and what is refused to amicable methods it is up to the fist to take... If land was desired in Europe, it could be obtained by and large only at the expense of Russia, and this meant that the new Reich must again set itself on the march along the road of the Teutonic knights of old, to obtain by the German sword sod for the German plow and daily bread for the nation...

Standing atop historical inaccuracies and mystical justifications, Hitler concluded that Germany must:

take up where we broke off six hundred years ago. We stop the endless German movement to the south and west, and turn our gaze toward the land in the east. At long last we break off the colonial and commercial policy of the pre-War period and shift to the soil policy of the future...

But how could Germany expand to the east? Here Hitler was certain that Fate (or heaven, or internal justice, or the laws of self-preservation) had already intervened on Germany’s behalf. “By handing Russia to Bolshevism, it robbed the Russian nation of that... Germanic nucleus of its upper leading strata [which]... today... has been replaced by the [Bolshevik] Jew...” See again: social darwinism, but now lace it with thousands of years of anti-Semitic hate, fear, and loathing. Hitler declared, “[I]t is... impossible for the Jew to maintain the mighty [Russian] empire forever.... The giant empire in the east is ripe for collapse...”

All Germany had to do was make sure that it had an army large enough to be prepared for when the collapse would come. Be prepared, but also be impatient. As Hitler said in June 1941 when he launched the Nazi armies into Russia: “You only have to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down.”

Focus on this to see the core of Nazism with clarity and brevity: Really-existing-socialism in the Soviet Union started with utopian expectations, the inevitable proletarian paradise promised by Karl Marx, only to end up in dystopian horrors. Nazism began with dystopian expectations, the inevitable and inevitably violent contests of races and nations, to end up in dystopian horrors. Thus we see the four braided assumptions at Nazism's center.

1. A very strong dose of German antisemitism (with a paranoid belief in a conspiracy among Jewish financiers, who controlled the economy to rob German wealth, Jewish liberal intellectuals, who preached humanism to enfeeble the Germans, and Jewish communists, who sought to enslave the Germans).
2. A belief in the German nation and the "Aryan" German race as an entity with a special, heroic destiny.
3. The understanding that war was the ultimate test of national and racial strength and worth.
4. Conquest, which explicitly required the extermination or removal of populations, was necessary to create more "living space" for the German people and larger fields and agricultural production, overseen by German farmers, to feed them.

Essential to this braided core were three presumptions:

1. The leadership principle. This was not just the belief that a good political order sees an inspired leader giving people vision and command, but the active disdain even hatred of parliamentary institutions, which engage in ineffectual even disgraceful haggle and compromise on behalf of interest groups.
2. The use of terror to obtain obedience.
3. The desire to make sure that all of society, from its citizens to its organizations, serve the national cause.

And there you have Nazism.

Hitler took his Malthusian economics-based Aryan-racial-domination ideology, Nazism, seriously on March 15, 1939, when German tanks rolled (unopposed) into

Prague and Germany annexed Czechoslovakia. He took it in dead earnest on September 1, 1939, when German tanks rolled (opposed) across the Polish border, crushed the Polish army in less than three weeks, and began the European phase of World War II. He took it in existential earnest on June 22, 1941, when German tanks rolled (opposed) across the Soviet border and Germany—still engaged in a brutal war with Britain—took on the Soviet Union as well. The entire point of Hitler's foreign policy, after all, was the drive to the east to win by the sword bread for the German nation and sod for the German plow. In so doing he sought and hoped to exterminate, expel, or enslave all the slavic peoples who lived to Germany's east.

And he took it in genocidal earnest in the Final Solution to the “Jewish Problem.”

Perhaps 50 million people died in consequence to Hitler's war. But had the Nazis won their war—conquered Europe up to the Urals and filled the land with ethic German landlord-farmer-estates—that number would have been more than triple. And afterwards, what would race-maddened victorious Nazis have done in Africa? And in Asia east and south of the Urals?

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Have I committed an error in lumping fascists in with Nazis?

A great many people did (and some still do) applaud fascists, after all.

The University of Chicago's political philosopher Leo Strauss, teacher of some and darling of many on America's political right, proudly stated that even though the Nazis were misapplying them, his own principles remained: “fascist, authoritarian and imperial.”

Economist and darling of the far right Ludwig von Mises wrote in 1927 of fascism: “Fascism and similar movements aiming at the establishment of dictatorships are full of the best intentions... [and] their intervention has, for the moment, saved European civilization. The merit that Fascism has thereby won for itself will live on eternally in history...” (He did in the same work call it an “emergency makeshift”, warn that “view[ing] it as something more would be a fatal error”, and denounce it for “its complete faith in the decisive power of violence”—for in his view it needed *ideas* rather than *fists* to decisively scotch socialism permanently.)

Libertarian darling Friedrich von Hayek urged Margaret Thatcher to hew more

closely to the methods of Augusto Pinochet in scotching Labour opposition to her policies. I have nowhere been able to find a copy of the document in which he urged this. But we catch his intent in her politely worded reply. She wrote, “some of the measures adopted in Chile are quite unacceptable.... We shall achieve our reforms in our own way and in our own time.”

Or step further back, and recognize that there has been a dialectical engagement between the ideas of human liberty, of self-government, and of the necessity of popular unity and obedience in a mode that at least dimly echoes fascist tropes for 2500 years. Around the year -425 Herodotus of Hallikarnassos put these words into the mouth of exiled Spartan King Demaratos, who told Persian King of Kings Khshayarsha (“Xerxes”): the Greeks were free, but only because they were mastered by “[the] Law, which they fear much more than your subjects fear you. Whatever this master commands they do...” On the bannisters of the grand stairways in Janet Yellen’s Treasury Building, on the wall behind Nancy Pelosi’s rostrum in the U.S. House of Representatives Chamber, there are the symbols from which Mussolini took his party’s name: the *fasces*—bundles of rods and axes tied together with thongs. These were carried by the lictors, the attendants of Roman magistrates. They taught the Romans a lesson, visually: while individual Romans were weak, the Roman people united under and obedient to the Republican magistrates they had chosen were very strong indeed. The ones flanking Nancy Pelosi in her role as Speaker are eight-feet tall.

In seeing history’s fascists, as they have cropped up across continents and over decades, as part of the same species as Hitler and his company of genocidal madmen, am I illegitimately tarring their views? Von Mises, after all, saw fascism’s violent orientation as merely an “emotional reflex actions evoked by indignation at the deeds of the Bolsheviks and Communists...” And he was certain that the core of the movement was much more reasonable: “As soon as the first flush of anger had passed, their policy took a more moderate course and will probably become even more so with the passage of time...”

It is certainly true that if fascists are all of the same species, they were much tamer versions of Nazis. Most fascists’ economic doctrine was largely negative: they were not socialists, and they did not believe that the Marxist platform of the nationalization of industry and the expropriation of the capitalist class was the right way to run an economy. But most did not buy into the “national living space”, “lebensraum” doctrines of Hitler. They were less anti-semitic than the Nazis. (But who could not be.) And most species of the fascist genus tended to do their killing on a retail rather than a wholesale scale.

But fascists were identifiably of the same ideological genus as Nazis. They recognized each other. It is no accident that Hitler writes of his “profoundist admiration for the great man south of the Alps,” Benito Mussolini, the founder of fascism. It is no accident that Mussolini allied with Hitler during World War II, and no accident that both Hitler and Mussolini sent aid to Francisco Franco's royalist rebels in the Spanish Civil War of the late 1930s. Any more than it was accidental that Nazis fleeing Europe after the collapse of Hitler's Third Reich found a welcome in Juan Perón's Argentina.

Have I committed an error in not lumping fascists in with really-existing-socialists here? After all, how much difference exists between the fascist and the really-existing-socialist?

A distressing number of people, starting with Mussolini himself, seem to have transited from one to the other directly. That suggests not a left-right political spectrum but rather a color wheel. Red and blue are as far apart in terms of visual spectrum wavelength as colors can be. Yet if you take magenta paint and add a little bit of cyan you get blue; if you take magenta and add a little bit of yellow you get red. George Orwell's famously asked, “but aren't we all socialists?” He was in Barcelona, it was 1937, and was watching as the Stalinist-backed socialists exterminated the POUM faction that he had joined when he arrived in the city. All the while, Franco's fascists waited outside the city.. Comparing Orwell's question to “aren't we all Christians?” asked at the sixteenth-century massacre of Protestants in Paris on St. Bartholemew's Day, historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto put it eloquently:

The extremists at both ends seemed close enough to touch.... Individuals moved between fascism and militant socialism as if by connecting channels.... My father... carried a communist card and wore a [fascist] Falangist uniform [in Spain] at different moments in the 1930s...

There were important differences in the way of policy.

Hermann Rauschning claimed Hitler had said to him: “Why need we trouble to socialize banks and factories? We socialize human beings!” The focus on control over institutions and commodity flows as primary and control over what people think, say, and do as secondary in really existing socialism is a difference. But how profound a difference? And while status inequality was important to really existing socialists, material inequality and ruling-class luxury was... embarrassing. By

contrast, for fascists, if material inequality and ruling-class luxury bothered you, it only demonstrated that you were not really with the program.

But do these make up a difference in species, or just variation within a species properly called “totalitarian”?

The British socialist historian Eric Hobsbawm—a card-carrying communist from before World War II to 1956—has a couple of asides in his histories that strike me as revealing. The first comes in his history of the short twentieth century, the *Age of Extremes*: Hobsbawm, writing in his old age, still sees that joining a:

Moscow aligned Communist party... offered both to interpret the world and to change it, or looked better able to do so.... It was, for most of the world's believers in the need for global revolution, the only game in town.... Lenin's ‘party of a new type’ ... gave even small organizations disproportionate effectiveness, because the party could command extraordinary devotion and self-sacrifice from its members, more than military discipline and cohesiveness, and a total concentration on carrying out party decisions at all costs. This impressed even hostile observers profoundly...

The assumption that unthinking obedience to the dictator in Moscow—whatever he might be—was appropriate because it was the way to change the world begs the question. The question is: what kind of change, and what kind of world? This is not even a hair's breadth away from a fascist worship of force and the leader. To accept that being a follower meant devotion and self-sacrifice at all costs would absolutely have earned Mussolini's and Hitler's approval.

And did the party discipline of the really-existing socialists impress or horrify hostile observers?

For Hobsbawm (as well as for many others) a principal attraction of communism was its glorification of force and effectiveness. Recall that when World War II broke out, Stalin and Hitler were allied—and world communist doctrine was that the British and French were the bad guys in trying to stop Hitler's expansion. This seemingly awful awkwardness was not felt by Hobsbawm, who saw it as:

heroic.... Nationalism, political calculation, even common sense, pulled one way, yet they unhesitatingly chose to put the interests of the international movement first.... They were tragically and absurdly wrong. But their error... should not lead us to ridicule the spirit of their action. This is how the socialists of Europe should have acted... carrying out the decisions of the International.... It was not their fault

that the International should have told them to do something else...

But the cadres of the Third Socialist International were willing and enthusiastic slaves, and the International itself was the the puppet of a paranoid dictator in Moscow. It was not the pathfinder of humanity's progress toward utopia. If that was not Hobsbawm and his fellow unthinking-follower cadres' fault, whose fault could it possibly have been?

* * * *

Before the twentieth century, *ideology* did not kill people by the millions and tens of millions, as aristocratic militarism, really-existing socialism, fascism, and market fundamentalism have. The truly mass murder before the New Jerusalem descends remained in the land of fantasy: St. John the Theologian only imagined the giant locusts with scorpions' tails, lions' teeth, and women's hair who stung the non-Jesus Movement multitudes for five months, so that they sought death but could not find it. It was only in the twentieth century that utopian aspirations about how the economy should be organized led nations and global movements to build dystopias now in order to try to bring the utopian future closer. And then they turned around, and justified the dystopia as: we must make compromises, and this is as good as it is going to get. Solzhenitsyn was right.

My view is that too much mental and historical energy spent parsing differences between movements that are justly classified as dystopian and even totalitarian in aspiration is time wasted given the commonalities not in formal doctrine but in modes of operation. The guards of Auschwitz, Majdanek, Treblinka, Dachau, and the rest were very like the guards of the Gulag Archipelago, and both were much more terrible and deadly than any fantasy woman-haired lion-toothed scorpion-tailed giant locusts.

Rather, mental and historical energy should be focused on where these movements got their energy. Why was the world unable to offer people a society in which they could live good lives? Why was a total reconfiguration necessary? Polanyi saw fascism and socialism as reactions against market society's inability or unwillingness to satisfy people's Polanyian rights: It could not guarantee them a comfortable community in which to live because the use to which land was put had to pass a profitability test. It could not offer them an income commensurate with what they deserved because the wage paid to their occupation had to pass a profitability test. And it could not offer them stability of employment because the finance to support whatever value chain they were embedded in also had to pass a

profitability test. They all thought that there needed to be a fundamental reconfiguration of economy and society that would respect people's Polanyian rights, and so offer them respect. And the hope of millions was that fascism and really-existing socialism would do so.

But both turned out to erase people's rights, and people's lives, by the millions. in the most brutal and absolute ways. So why were people so gullible? German socialist Rosa Luxemburg in 1919 could see the path Lenin was embarked upon: an elite of the working class... applaud[s] the speeches of the leaders... approve[s] proposed resolutions unanimously... the dictatorship of a handful of politicians.... Such conditions must inevitably cause a brutalization of public life: attempted assassinations, shooting of hostages, etc....

German liberal Max Weber could see in 1918 that Lenin's would be a sociological experiment that would end in "a laboratory with heaps of human corpses..." and a "bondage which men will perhaps be forced to inhabit as powerless as the fellahs of ancient Egypt..." British ambassador Eric Phipps wrote in 1935 that if Britain were to take Hitler's *Mein Kampf* either seriously or literally "we should logically be bound to adopt the policy of a 'preventive' war..." The dangers were clear and the unlikelihood of success at any of the goals seems, to me at least, to ought to have been obvious. Utopian faith is a helluva drug.

How was the struggle over the how humanity was to organize itself that really started with World War I to proceed? Here we again cease to be able to track history via the logic of economic imperatives and mass movements. With the coming of World War II, history moves back from broad currents and deep forces assembled out of the deeds and thoughts of hundreds and millions. History moves back to decisions of smaller numbers. History becomes what we have to regard as luck, or chance, or contingency. He broad currents and deep forces make it relatively hard to imagine how, after the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, the economic history of the global north in the 1920s could have been that different. But it is much easier to imagine how the Great Depression could have been avoided, or could have been different—even though it does not seem surprising that the Great Depression was much like it was.

But once again high, personal politics and war took the center stage. History once again lost its logic of trends and tides and forces, and became once again one very damned unlikely thing after another.