Mass Society, Social Class, and the Emergence of Fascism

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1. Toward a theory of fascism. Changing interpretations of totalitarianism.

A MATURE SOCIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION of fascism is only now becoming possible. Our historical experience has broadened as new fascist movements and regimes have appeared in a variety of societies, including the developing nations. The accumulation of theories, hypotheses, and facts also contributes to more refined approaches and comprehensive reformulations.

Interpretations of fascism have changed since its first appearance in Italy. To its contemporaries, Italian fascism was an unexpected product of World War I—a complete deviation from the mainstream of history. Although the war had shattered the illusion of perpetual progress,[1] most people still considered the permanent or prolonged breakdown of democracy in a European country very unlikely.

When Italian fascism came to power, Russian communism had not reached the totalitarian stage, and German nazism was still in the making. Contemporary interpretations of fascism stressed either accidental and temporary factors (early versions of the "parenthesis" hypothesis) or the peculiar traits of Italian history (the "historical" hypothesis).[2] Even the Marxists, interpreting fascism as an expression of class struggle within capitalistic society, stressed the specific historical conditions of capitalism in Italy.[3] All explanations lacked sociological and psychosocial approaches: all analyses were formulated in terms of political or economic theories, or in terms of the history of ideas.[4]

In the 'thirties, especially after the rise of the Third Reich, new analyses appeared. There were now psychosocial explanations, strongly influenced by Freudian or neo-Freudian psychology, as well as sociological hypotheses emphasizing particular structural traits and historical trends. Theoretical constructs such as the authoritarian personality, social disintegration, anomie, displacement of large sectors of the society, loss of community, the changing position of the elites, and the rise of the masses became strategic tools in the analysis of totalitarianism. Psychological theories on the authoritarian syndrome, sociological and psychosocial theories of mass society, and formal definitions and typologies of the totalitarian state were applied to cases ranging from fascism or nazism to communism and the mass regimes in developing nations.[5]

The role of class in explaining totalitarianism was secondary in this analytical framework. Totalitarian societies and movements were interpreted as a result of widespread disintegration of processes involving *all* classes.

Historical explanations emphasizing national peculiarities also followed new approaches. Such peculiarities were interpreted, in psychosocial and cultural-anthropological terms, as expressions of a national character or as cultural components.[6] The historical analysis of ideologies viewed the rise of totalitarianism in the light of European social and political thought.[7]

Many new approaches emphasized a model of totalitarianism that included both right and left. Though the identification of Soviet Communism as a form of totalitarianism was affected by the changing pattern of international alignments, it became predominant among non-Marxist writers once the Cold War had begun. In the 'fifties, this interpretation was extended to the new "mass states", with the Latin American states, given certain similarities in cultural traditions, conforming most closely to the model. The interpretation of fascism and totalitarianism then merged with the broader problems of representative democracy and political change. The problem of mass regimes and monolithic versus competitive party systems was now seen within the context of "political development".[8]

This paper will explore class and mass society as two explanatory factors in the emergence of fascism and totalitarianism. The theoretical discussion will be complemented by a brief analysis of Perónism in Argentina in comparison with Italian fascism. The main points of comparison are the contrasting social classes giving support to the mass movements in

each country; differences in social structure; and differences in degree and rate of economic development and social modernization. The underlying culture, basic values, and attitudes are in both cases Latin, and a substantial part of the Argentine population is composed of first, second, and third generation Italians.

2. The structural (Marxist) version of the class hypothesis.

The Marxist approach was the first attempt to explain fascism in terms of a *general* theory. F. Neumann, M. B. Sweezy, R. A. Brady, and others[9] considered fascism (and nazism) "the final stage" in the evolution of capitalism—an outcome determined by the internal dialectics of the system itself. Guerin[10] tried to relate fascism directly to the classic Marxist notions of the fall of capitalist profits. In its ascending stage, capitalism could find democracy "advantageous", but such favorable conditions would change sharply in the more advanced stages of the system. The need to counteract the fall in profit rates and the increasingly severe cyclical crises would require the reduction or withdrawal of all the "concessions" made to the working class. These political, economic, and social concessions which had been possible when the economy was growing, were necessary to stabilize the system under representative democracy. Their withdrawal could not be accomplished under a free regime; hence the need for dictatorship. Though Guerin observed divergencies of interest between different sectors of the bourgeoisie (between "heavy" industry and "light", or consumer goods and industry), he concluded that class interest would prevail. Fascism, however, was a "mass" movement, counting on the active participation of a considerable sector of the society. Where could the bourgeois find his troops? An easy answer, within the framework of Marxian theory, was that the lower middle classes and certain deteriorated or too-traditional sectors of the proletariat could provide the human basis for fascism. The middle classes, according to Marxism, are not "real" classes. Under the threat of "proletarianization", they were exposed to contrasting pressures, and "false consciousness" could be invoked to explain their alliance with capitalism. As for the proletarians attracted by fascism, such deviance could be explained by the factors that prevented the formation of a class consciousness among them. The Marxian notion of the lumpenproletariat could be integrated into this analysis.

The Marxist writers did notice a number of additional important traits that could not be directly deduced from their orthodox assumptions. The component sectors of both fascism and nazism could not be reduced to lower middle classes and lumpenproletariat: Veterans, unemployed, young people, and peasants took an active part in these movements. Their common trait was their uprootedness. Thus the human basis of fascism was displacement, caused basically by the deterioration of the capitalist system but accentuated by the war. In Italy, a popular word clearly described this condition. Fascists were called *spostati*—displaced persons.

The Marxists recognized that this uprootedness, was not mere accident. The totalitarian solution could not have been generated by the pre-existing capitalist establishment. A body of "outlaws", to use Laski's term, was required for that task.[11] And this leads to two further observations common among Marxist writers: that the fascist rule achieved a degree of independence and autonomy *vis à vis* the old ruling class, meaning at least the partial removal of the established political elite;[12] and that fascism originated an unprecedented type of state, the totalitarian state. The central role of charisma and other peculiar traits of the new regimes were also clearly recognized.[13] Fascism was nothing more than the last defense of capitalism in its declining phase, but both the *means* (the displaced sectors) and its immediate outcome (the totalitarian state) went beyond the initial purposes of the bourgeoisie and could not be fully explained in Marxist terms. The Marxist interpretations of totalitarianism involved a sharp differentiation of communism from fascism and nazism.

3. The psychosocial version of the class hypothesis.

The participation of the lower middle classes in totalitarian movements of the right, which played a complementary role in the Marxist interpretation, became a central factor in the psychosocial version of the "class hypothesis". Resentment, moral indignation, envy, insecurity, and fear were the most common notions used in connection with psychoanalytic models. The whole construct of the authoritarian personality was formulated mostly in relation to lower-class behavior.

The psychosocial approach was complemented by sociological analysis. The processes of displacement, uprootedness, and anomie were more precisely