

Eco's Fourteen Features of Fascism

From 'Ur-Fascism' (1995) by Umberto Eco

"These features cannot be organized into a system; many of them contradict each other, and are also typical of other kinds of despotism or fanaticism. But it is enough that one of them be present to allow fascism to coagulate around it."

— Umberto Eco

Fascism is a pattern, not a checklist. The more features you see clustering together, the more clearly you're seeing something historically recognisable.

THE FOURTEEN FEATURES

1. The Cult of Tradition

Truth has already been revealed. Ancient wisdom contains everything worth knowing. New knowledge is suspicious. Different traditions are treated as if they all say the same thing, because what matters is that they're old, not what they actually say.

2. Rejection of Modernism

The Enlightenment values of reason, scientific progress, and individual rights are seen as the beginning of depravity. Modernity is corruption. The goal is not to move forward but to restore a mythical golden age.

3. Action for Action's Sake

Thinking is weakness. Intellectuals are suspect. What matters is doing, not analysing. Culture is suspect when it doesn't serve the movement.

4. Disagreement is Treason

Criticism is betrayal. Loyal opposition is impossible. If you question the movement, you're an enemy. Unity must be absolute.

5. Fear of Difference

The movement builds identity by defining enemies. 'We' are defined by who 'they' are. Immigrants, minorities, outsiders are threats. Difference itself is dangerous.

6. Appeal to a Frustrated Middle Class

Fascism recruits people who feel they've lost status or are being passed by. Economic anxiety and wounded pride create receptive audiences. The message: 'You've been cheated. We'll restore your rightful place.'

7. Obsession with a Plot

There's always a conspiracy explaining why things are bad. Globalists, elites, 'international finance,' secret cabals. The enemy is both external and internal.

8. The Enemy is Both Strong and Weak

The threat is overwhelming and existential—yet we will definitely defeat it. The enemy is powerful enough to justify fear but weak enough to guarantee victory.

9. Life is Permanent Warfare

Peace is impossible and undesirable. Struggle gives meaning. There must always be an enemy to fight. Life without conflict is decadence.

10. Contempt for the Weak

Elitism is standard, but fascist elitism includes contempt for those beneath. Strength is everything. Compassion is corruption. The weak deserve their fate.

11. Everybody is Educated to Become a Hero

Heroism is the norm, not the exception. Heroic death is the highest aspiration. The cult of death romanticises sacrifice and martyrdom.

12. Machismo and Weaponry

Masculinity is exalted. The feminine is despised. Gender hierarchy is essential. Sexual anxiety translates into political aggression. Weapons symbolise virility.

13. Selective Populism

'The people' speak with one voice, which the leader interprets. Anyone who disagrees isn't really 'the people.' Democracy is distrusted because it allows dissent.

14. Newspeak

Language becomes impoverished. Vocabulary shrinks. Complex thought becomes impossible. Simple slogans replace analysis. Thinking itself becomes difficult.

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

1. Don't force it.

Not every feature will appear in every source. That's fine. Note what's present and what's absent.

2. Use evidence.

If you say a feature is present, point to specific words, phrases, or arguments. What makes you see it?

3. Consider degree.

Some features might be weakly present, others strongly. 'Fear of difference' can range from mild xenophobia to calls for ethnic cleansing.

4. Look for patterns.

Individual features might appear anywhere. What matters is clustering: when you see 6, 8, 10 features together, you're seeing something historically recognisable.

5. Avoid false precision.

Eco doesn't give a magic number. There's no threshold where something officially 'becomes' fascism. The framework is diagnostic, not definitional.

Key Insight

Eco argues that fascism is a syndrome, not an ideology. Unlike communism or liberalism, fascism has no coherent philosophical system. Its features often contradict each other. That's why it can appear in so many different forms, in so many different contexts, while remaining recognisable.

The features are not about what fascists believe. They're about how fascism functions: how it recruits, how it builds identity, how it creates enemies, how it makes people feel.