# Working across bounded entities: fascism, 'para-fascism', and ideational mobilities in interwar Europe

## Abstract

The history of fascism was marked by challenging, transcending, and re-defining bounded entities. It was also forged in and through permanent movement. Mobility - a fascinating kaleidoscope of complex ﬂows, diffusion, translation, and reﬂexive adaptations - remains a supremely promising framework for the study of fascism, fitting its conceptual syncretism and protean nature. If we accept that interwar fascism was a phenomenon with international reach driven by the circulation of a set of generic ideological and political norms, then our models of interpretations must accommodate these local interpretations, adaptations, and a wide range of varied outcomes as integral parts of the history of fascism. In this essay, I focus on the concept of ‘para-fascism’ that Griffin provocatively coined in an attempt to re-establish a conceptual dialogue between fascism and its supposed conceptual peripheries. With ‘para-fascism’, Griffin did more than any other scholar of fascism to bring into the fold of comparative fascism studies a range of radical movements and especially authoritarian regimes in the 1920s/ 1930s that were heavily inﬂuenced by the emerging political paradigm of ‘fascism’ but lacked a clear revolutionary orientation. By seeking to alchemise a *non-revolutionary* hybrid of a fascist-authoritarian 'third way', I argue that these not-quite-fascists did arguably more to facilitate the appeal and political diffusion of 'fascism' as the supposedly pure regime examples of Fascist Italy and National Socialist Germany. They also served as an unfolding proof-of-concept that 'fascism-minus-revolution' could be a supremely usable political formula, reflecting the aspirations of a potentially far larger international audience than that of fascist admirers.

## The 'new consensus' and its critics

Since its formulation in the early 1990s, Roger Griffin's definition of fascism has been unceasingly debated, approvingly and critically. Its succinctness and simplicity - as a 'minimum' formula seeking to condense fascism's ideological specificity to a cluster of key ideas (hyper-nationalism, rebirth/'palingenesis', and populism) have been welcomed as a conceptual advance but also criticised as essentialist and inflexible. The renewed emphasis that he placed on the centrality of ideology and culture has inspired a prolific and diverse literature on interwar fascism but has also raised strong objections that the focus on ideology has contributed to a distorted understanding of fascism divorced from its social realities.[[1]](#footnote-1) Others have warned against using the definition in a canonical way to make evidence fit the conceptual norms rather than the other way round.[[2]](#footnote-2) Meanwhile, as a formula derived from an understanding of fascism as as a *generic* phenomenon that both unified and transcended diverse historical experiences, Griffin's definition has also been challenged on grounds that it has reproduced assumptions about some kind of ineliminable ideological core projected outwards from a hierarchical 'centre' - Italy, Germany or both. Finally Griffin's 'idealised abstraction' was treated with suspicion as yet another attempt at producing a strictly classificatory model that obscured the fascinating histories of mobility and fluidity, intersection and interpenetration, between supposedly different categories, as well as of different political and social actors that shaped – less through intent than through contingency – the history of radical politics across interwar Europe.[[3]](#footnote-3)

My entry into the fray of fascism studies occurred at a time when claims about, and rebuttals of, the 'new consensus' were at their most expansive and lively. Griffin's idea of consensus was subtler than what many of his critics attacked. It amount to the 'reformulation of an "old" consensus on the basis of the area of significant overlap between a group of rival theories which had never quite crystallized into a fully articulated common position when it should have (the early 1980s)'.[[4]](#footnote-4) He did not deny the existence of differences within the loose consensus group of scholars; but he saw the consensus in terms of 'convergence' towards shared methodological and programmatic ground.[[5]](#footnote-5) Over the years, my own research on different aspects on fascism has been indebted one way or another to the premises of this 'consensus'. Yet it was one rather secondary conceptual innovation of Griffin's scholarship that I found the most fascinating, namely his *para-fascism*. The term appeared halfway through *The Nature of Fascism* in response to the heuristic and classificatory problem of fascism as a regime:

When Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany are compared with the other authoritarian regimes which established themselves in Europe after 1918, a crucial difference soon emerges: namely, that none of them grew directly out of a seizure of state power by an ‘extra-systemic’ revolutionary movement of populist nationalism bent on creating a new national order. All of them in one way or another came to power as attempts by sections of the ruling elites or their military representatives to restore stability and strong government in a way which did not threaten the basis of the existing class structure or of traditional values. Their dynamics were thus essentially reactionary and conservative.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Griffin's language marked the territory that these regimes occupied as at best peripheral to 'fascism'. This was in line with the overwhelming majority of conceptual approaches to generic fascism at the time. For example, a decade or so before the publication of Griffin's *Nature of Fascism*, Stanley Payne had expanded his analytical scope to include a wide range of right-wing 'authoritarian' movements and dictatorial regimes from the interwar period; but he was adamant that 'few of them … have had much to do with fascist movements or the historic culture of fascism'.[[7]](#footnote-7) The need to distinguish between 'authoritarian' and 'fascist' manifestations, particularly at regime level, was understandable at the time when most anthologies of fascism published in previous decades included (and similarly excluded) national case studies of movements, parties, and regimes with little attention to conceptual subtleties. Payne's work was by all accounts pioneering, as Griffin himself recognised,.[[8]](#footnote-8) not only for the refined 'typological definition' of fascism that it offered but also because it supplied the intellectual wherewithal for a conceptually sophisticated classificatory approach to 'generic' fascism that was wide-ranging, flexible, *and* discerning. Yet Payne also established these 'rightist authoritarian' case studies as a kind of murky no-man's land just beyond the borders of generic fascism - tangentially connected but bearing markedly different ideological roots and especially political ambitions.

Griffin was not the first one to venture into this irksome no-man's land extensively in his early work. By the time that *The Nature of Fascism* was published, Martin Blinkhorn had edited an important comparative volume examining the intricacies of the conservative-fascist nexus in a large number of European countries. In explaining the volume's focus on (radicalised) conservatives alongside fascists, Blinkhorn argued that, although there were clear ideological differences between the two, 'a boundary between fascists and authoritarian conservatives never drawn with total clarity, but it became more blurred with every year that passed'.[[9]](#footnote-9) But Griffin went further. In spite of calling the regimes headed by those authoritarian conservatives 'counter-revolutionary [but] … masqueraded as revolutionary … as a cosmetic ploy to retain hegemony, to manipulate rather than to awaken genuine populist energies,' he added:

The result has been described in such terms as ‘fascistized’, ‘fascisant, ‘pseudo-fascist’, ‘proto-fascist’ or ‘semi-fascist’. I propose to use instead the term ‘para-fascist’, in which the prefix ‘para-’ connotes an ‘alteration, perversion, simulation’ (Oxford English Dictionary) of ‘real’ fascism as we have defined it.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This lexical shift barely registered on the historiographical radar at the time but amounted to a slow-motion coup. 'Para-fascism' divulged both closeness and difference, not unlike the fuzziness of the authoritarian-fascist relationship that Blinkhorn's volume had dissected. Yet the balance that Griffin sought to strike shifted semantically towards the latter. While detached as 'counter-revolutionary' and largely derived from opportunistic imitation, these supposedly 'fascist' imposters could no longer be ignored or explained away by fascism studies.

In the early 2000s, I was drawn for the first time to the opportunities offered by the semantic ambiguity of 'para-fascism'.[[11]](#footnote-11) By that time, Griffin was reformulating his original definition of fascism - 'a genus of modern politics which aspires to bring about a *total revolution* in the political and social culture of a particular national or ethnic community.'.[[12]](#footnote-12) This shift - most notably the explicit inclusion of the 'revolutionary' benchmark - suggested a deeper qualitative fissure between fascism and para-fascism than the more elliptical wording of his original 'concise definition' had suggested.[[13]](#footnote-13) In so doing, it reinstated some of the boundaries that 'para-fascism' had previously seemed willing to question or even puncture. Years later, in 2011, I revisited Griffin's 'para-fascism', this time from the perspective of a comparative analysis of interwar authoritarian dictatorships. From my point of view, the supposed para-fascist underachievers that were banished in this haunted conceptual borderland between fascism and authoritarianism exemplified the half-empty glass analogy - close but short of close-enough. I wondered if we were asking the wrong question about them: what if, instead of focusing on their perceived deficits or failures, we tapped into the other half of the proverbial glass that was full? If, to put it crudely, para-fascists were *not 'fascist' enough*, out of choice or necessity or indeed because of a contingent mismatch between intentions and outcomes, they were nonetheless significantly *more 'fascist'* than the rest of the conventional conservatives and authoritarians up to that point. In this sense, Griffin’s classificatory residuum of ‘para-fascism’ also indicated a (successful) *departure* of sections of interwar authoritarianism towards a radical post-liberal, anti-socialist, and anti-parliamentary political settlement, the primary source of inspiration for which came from the alternative represented by ‘fascism’ in Italy and Germany. Of course it mattered that the political destination of this shift was very different - that is, less sweeping, less socially and culturally transformative, less revolutionary in ambition - than what transpired under Hitler or Mussolini. Did it matter enough, however, to shrug off the significant convergence between fascist and authoritarian rule that did take place across Europe in the 1930s? In a volume that Antonio Costa Pinto and I co-edited in 2014, we invited scholars to negotiate precisely the same contested borderland between fascist ideology/regime and authoritarian dictatorship, seeking to making sense of the para-fascist conceptual and methodological conundrum. We concluded the volume with the plea to 'look beyond previously assumed dichotomies and accept the challenge of embracing complexity rather than trying to force it into neat and contrived classifications'.[[14]](#footnote-14) In essence, we suggested that the para-fascist borderland, though vexing, presented fresh opportunities for a methodological and conceptual rethinking of the entire field of interwar right-wing radicalism, fascist or otherwise.

The case for a productive embrace of fluidity was of course far from new. It had already been stated provocatively in Michel Dobry's attack on the classificatory approach to 'generic fascism'.[[15]](#footnote-15) Yet the unease and dissatisfaction with 'fascist' conceptual models evinced by Dobry was shared to varying degrees by other scholars of interwar fascism. Kevin Passmore argued that 'fascism theories share a weakness of models' which 'harden concepts that were contested and fluid in practical politics'.[[16]](#footnote-16) David Roberts found that models often 'delimit their questions - and thus the range of frequencies' that the bounded conceptual categories may capture.[[17]](#footnote-17) Michael Mann criticised models of generic fascism as 'idealistic' and seriously lacking in awareness of the deeper power relations and organisations.[[18]](#footnote-18) Roger Eatwell, initially a proponent of concise conceptual definitions of fascism,.[[19]](#footnote-19) subsequently underlined the need to supplement definitions of fascist 'minima' with a dynamic 'matrix' that 'break[s] away from a purely history of ideas approach' by capturing a wider gamut of fascist conceptions of the individual, the nation, and the state.[[20]](#footnote-20) But the approach promoted by *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship* turned the spotlight on mobility, circulation, diffusion, and hybridity as critical formative and constitutive forces in the histories of both interwar fascism and the broader spectrum of authoritarian/radical politics.

## Synthesis, mobility, and the 'third way'

If the historical realities of 'fascism' have continuously tested the conceptual/analytical categories that scholars have subsequently developed in their search for distinct shared patterns across a jumble of otherwise unique historical experiences, it is largely because fascism itself was the product of multiple challenges to intellectual and political bounded categories of its time. For decades after its political collapse in 1945, fascism was widely perceived as devoid of ideological substance or meaningful coherence. Griffin's contribution to fascism studies joined a distinguished lineage of scholars going back to the work of George L Mosse.[[21]](#footnote-21) and Ernst Nolte.[[22]](#footnote-22) in the 1960s that sought to rehabilitate fascism as both ideologically distinct and fascinatingly different. It was Mosse who gave credence to the understanding of fascist ideology as rooted in a broader revolt against materialism that went back to the late stages of the nineteenth century. Zeev Sternhell charted an intellectual genealogy of fascism that led from the 'antimaterialist *revision* of Marxism' in late nineteenth-century France to its distinct *fusion* with organic nationalism and syndicalism in early twentieth-century Italy.[[23]](#footnote-23) Emilio Gentile traced the journey of the early Italian revolutionary syndicalists from their original 'synthesis between nationalism and socialism' prior to 1914 to their eventual renunciation of fundamental Marxist and anarchist principles that had underpinned it in the first place when many of them joined Fascism.[[24]](#footnote-24) Roberts detected a more layered, uncertain, and continuously developing 'nationalist-syndicalist convergence' in Italy, only partially indebted to earlier intellectual developments in France that were the mainstay of Sternhell's account.[[25]](#footnote-25) Differences notwithstanding, this kind of intellectual genealogy of fascism pointed to unorthodox *synthesis* of disparate, even seemingly antagonistic ideas. The Italian *Doctrine of Fascism* (1932) bragged about its fierce eclecticism: having declared victory over the other competing universal ideologies of its time, the authors claimed that '[f]rom beneath the ruins of liberal, socialist, and democratic doctrines, Fascism extracts those elements which are still vital. It preserves what may be described as "the acquired facts" of history; it rejects all else.' This was a rather accurate self-presentation of the ideological workings of Fascism in Italy.

Griffin, Eatwell, and other scholars of generic fascism have largely converged on the view of fascist ideology as the product of a 'third way' beyond left and right, socialism and liberalism. Ruth Ben Ghiat argued that it was precisely the slippery, nature of (Italian) Fascist ideology, with its numerous contradictions that established Mussolini’s stato totalitario as ‘forward-looking regime of possibility with a doctrine in constant evolution’.[[26]](#footnote-26) 'Third way' ideologies voraciously mine seemingly polar and incompatible ingredients from existing sources and then seek to alchemise them into new, previously unimaginable possibilities for the future.[[27]](#footnote-27) The 'third way' designation places fascism in distinguished company, part of a long and diverse intellectual lineage that included communitarianism, socialist revisionism and its various permutations, corporatism, and so on. Not unlike populism, 'third way' attracts a distinctly varied membership of ideas and ideologies; but its members are linked together not through any substantive ideological affinity but because they share a pragmatic strategy and mode of ideological reasoning of contesting existing bounded ideological entities.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Therefore 'third way' indicates not just a spectrum of intermediate positions between two poles but also the pursuit of overcoming an initial assumed dichotomy.[[29]](#footnote-29) In this crucial respect, it is the product of extraordinary ideational *mobility*, typically caused by a perceived sense of profound crisis and an assertion of transformative agency towards an alternative future.[[30]](#footnote-30) To say that mobility is an integral part of the study of ideology is both counter-intuitive and self-evident. It is counter-intuitive because ideologies tend to be reasonably stable formations, at least closer to the core of their structure in morphological terms.[[31]](#footnote-31) Such an expectation of stability creates the impression of equilibrium between and across ideologies, at least for a significant length of time. Yet it is self-evident because the field of ideologies is in a state of constant flux because their individual components shift meaning or importance within an ideological system, new ideas emerge and existing ones become marginalised or repositioned, new clusterings/syntheses are formed and old ones become undone or superseded, and so on. Ideological processes are by definition dynamic and volatile; they challenge boundaries and perceived stasis. Even fundamental ideological categories such as left and right or radical and mainstream, are constantly shifting, in absolute or relative terms, which means that they redefine the tensions between polar opposites and the spaces in-between them. As a result, a 'third way' designation tells us little about either the goals or the methods of an ideology, even less about its internal structure and relations among its components, core and peripheral. It is never a single point of the in-between spectrum between the previously considered as irreconcilable positions, let alone the absolute middle point between them. Very often, resulting ideological hybrids did not point to a redefined form of centrism but to novel radical alternatives.

Yet to qualify an ideology as a 'third way' phenomenon is supremely useful as an indication of its raison d'etre. Fascism could legitimately be defined along these lines because it warped the contemporary imagined topography of established ideologies that had presented them as bounded and fixed entities with forbidding chasms separating them from one another. As mentioned earlier, processes of irreverent boundary-crossing and appropriation of seemingly incompatible ideas had already been in productive motion since the last quarter of the nineteenth century in a number of countries. National and socialist qua Sternhell,.[[32]](#footnote-32) revolutionary and order-defending, collectivist and anti-materialist, traditionalist and futural, romantic and technocratic, mobilising and statist, authoritarian and 'democratic',.[[33]](#footnote-33) interwar fascism bore the imprint of earlier ideological revisions and repositionings that paved the intellectual way for it and ended up being hosted, one way or another, under its own expansive canopy. Instability and constant oscillation between seemingly irreconcilable positions was the lynchpin of fascist revolutionary vitality according to Jeffrey Schnapp.[[34]](#footnote-34) The result of fascism's embrace of contradiction, Schnapp claimed, was invariably the same: 'oxymoron'.[[35]](#footnote-35) For years historians debated the reasons behind fascism's extraordinary transgression of multiple ideological boundaries - whether it evidenced the existence of an ideological void; or it derived from an opportunistic strategy in pursuit of social appeal and political success; or it formed a process generative of fascism's revolutionary ideological architecture as doctrine-in-the-making. However disputed at the time that it was pronounced, the 'new consensus' marked the high point of a historiographical trajectory that came to view fascism's 'protean' qualities as an ideological asset for its revolutionary agency, with syncreticism modulated and its effects recombined through the sheer centrifugal force of its regenerative core myth.[[36]](#footnote-36) For Griffin, the ideological 'mazeway' was not a liability or distraction but rather a pivotal component of what made fascism ideologically distinct, revolutionary, populist, and in the end successful in the marketplace of interwar political ideologies.

Tim Cresswell has noted that '[m]etaphors of mobility are used to bring into question the apparent fixities of older forms of understanding'.[[37]](#footnote-37) This statement is equally true in heuristic terms as it is in relation to how ideational mobilities operated in any given historical context. To think of fascism as the product of an extraordinary mobility in the field of ideas involves first of all an understanding of the supposedly bounded ideological entities that it challenged and transcended in practice. To do so also means questioning their supposed fixity in the first place. By the time that Mussolini broke from the Italian Socialist party to pursue a radical nationalist and militarist agenda, the broad ideological family of socialism had already splintered into revolutionary and revisionist currents, the latter now largely viewed as upshots of 'third way' thinking. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, socialists and liberals became divided over their responses to a number of perceived dichotomies about their view of human nature, their preferred political methods and strategies, their visions of transformation, and their understanding of the entire historical process. In itself the upshot of ideological dissent, Bernstein's revisionism became the facilitator of a series of ideational mobilities, within and across socialism, and a spate of non-normative ideological fusions. In the interwar years, a growing number of liberals became so disaffected with the institutions of parliamentary democracy that they actively sought to replace it, strategically or otherwise, with anti-democratic, essentially authoritarian alternatives. The well-known case of Benedetto Croce's initial endorsement of Fascism as a short-term correction to the social upheavals of the immediate post-WW1 period may not have indicated an ethical endorsement of authoritarianism and violence; but it did illustrate a scenario of transgressive thinking in which political strategy could dictate more profound ideological revisions and re-syntheses that reached much deeper into the ideational core of the liberal worldview.[[38]](#footnote-38)

The fascinating ideological and political mobilities of the immediate pre- and post-WW1 period extended much further than the field of radical nationalism, generating all hosts of intersections within and across familiar political spaces of the left and right alike. They were also unintelligible without the prior forces of irreverent recombination of seeming opposites that had marked the late nineteenth century and the 'great ideological laboratory of the Belle Époque'.[[39]](#footnote-39) The trajectory of the Italian Nationalist Association (*Associazione Nazionalista Italiana*, ANI) from its dissident intellectual origins in the avant garde scene of Florence at the turn of the twentieth century to its fusion into the Fascist movement in 1923 was of critical importance in Roberts's critique of Sternhell's genealogy of fascist ideology. Beyond this, however, it serves as yet another fascinating example of the kind of ideological crossovers, internal tensions, and political contradictions that we have become so familiar with in the study of interwar fascism. Alfredo Rocco, the nous behind the institutional edification of the Fascist state in the second half of the 1920s, was a distinguished member of the ANI who transitioned very successfully to the very top of the Fascist regime. For years he shared his political home with conservative royalists, imperialists and irredentists, a version of Sternhell's 'national socialists', and people of a more moderate right-liberal persuasion.[[40]](#footnote-40) In the particular ideological topography of the ANI, Rocco was definitely a radical - and obviously radical enough to play a pivotal role in the formulation of the Fascist corporatist doctrine that the regime's ideologues presented as Fascism's most potent, universally valid, and superior form of political and socio-economic organisation.[[41]](#footnote-41) But he was also part of a movement of contradictions and 'third way' hybrid re-syntheses already in place by the time that Mussolini's Fascism came to the fore.[[42]](#footnote-42) Enrico Corradini, inventor of trademark neologisms such as 'proletarian nationalism' and 'national democracy', was at once a sponsor of bourgeois interests and an interlocutor with the Syndicalists.[[43]](#footnote-43) Fascism was indeed a 'scavenger'.[[44]](#footnote-44) or a 'voracious amoeba';.[[45]](#footnote-45) but it was far from unique in this respect or indeed a pioneer of the trend. What is more, its own digestive system was full of devoured micro-ideological 'third ways' alongside ideas that had not co-existed before. Its own mazeway synthesis would have been far less intelligible, convincing or indeed feasible without them.

Griffin's understanding of fascism was steeped in metaphors of non-normative ideational mobility and syncretism. He argued that fascism represented a 'conservative revolution' that was decidedly not reactionary in the conventional sense of being regressive or backward-looking.[[46]](#footnote-46) He emphasised the quest for a 'hybrid of [rooted] traditionalism and modernism'.[[47]](#footnote-47) He dissected Mussolini's welcoming stance vis-a-vis the widest range of ideological, political, and cultural currents in pursuit of a rooted 'revolutionary futurity'.[[48]](#footnote-48) He recognised the (re)generative force of fascism's 'radically futural project of societal transformation no matter how anchored in a mythicized and idealized national past [it was]'.[[49]](#footnote-49) 'Hybrid' variants too abounded in his conceptual scheme - products of 'genuine identification and *synthesis …* [that] gave rise to a new 'syncretic' hybrid ideational form. Syncretic relationships were concentrated inside the ranks of any given fascist movement, in a fight of competing visions for its soul. They also extended to interactions among different fascist and more broadly hyper-nationalist groups operating in the same national context at a given moment in time. Through convergence, friction, and synthesis, these relationships produced a range of 'fascist' composites that shared many critical ideational components but could also be bitterly divided over a series of issues of outlook, emphasis or strategy. Finally, such relationships were at the heart of bilateral, inter-national, and especially trans-national networks of mobility of ideas and people; of mutual inspiration and interaction; of political learning and more formal collaboration.[[50]](#footnote-50) This kind of relationship was then juxtaposed to a more pragmatic, interest-driven, and opportunistic 'collusive' alternative, in the context of which two ideological currents actively converged in pursuit of still very different, even conflicting goals without generating a deeper, enduring ideological synthesis.[[51]](#footnote-51) Collusive relationships have always been more challenging. They stretched well beyond the broad fascist canopy and involved more wide-ranging and unorthodox discursive, political and organisational crossovers, as well as a wider range of idiosyncratic hybrid outcomes.

Syncretic and collusive relationships were the mainstay of fascism's histories in the 1920s and 1930s. Griffin's conception of fascism as the product of such relationships underlines how sensitive his work has been to the dynamics of ideational movement, intersection, and synthesis (willed or unintended). More importantly, he came to this conception *not in spite of* all these movements and ensuing contradictions in fascist ideology but *because* of them. Nevertheless, in his view, the strategic, interest-driven 'confluence' of fascists and other disparate constituencies involved in collusive relationships was not based on the kind of genuine ideological convergence between them that characterised syncretic ones. The implication, shared by most scholars in the fray of generic fascism studies, was that the former were only tangential to the history of interwar fascism. Yet once again the not-quite-fascist residuum stretched across the dichotomy. It included a wide spectrum of motives, ranging from 'bandwagon' opportunism to genuine ideological and political, if conditional and selective, fascination with the way that 'fascism' was perceived as unfolding in discourse and action by fascists in power and opposition. It also produced instances of both confluence and (partial or strategic at least) convergence.[[52]](#footnote-52) Even if a collusive relationship maintained the ideological distance and specificity of the two contracting parties, the relationship itself involved asymmetrical shifts and compromises. Blinkhorn noted that 'the character and conduct of many of the [interwar] authoritarian regimes … was strongly if selectively influenced by their leaders’ and architects’ interpretation of the Italian and/or German reality'.[[53]](#footnote-53) Strategic confluence often led to a disproportionately higher degree of 'fascistisation', which in essence involved the active selective adoption/adaptation of fascist norms and policy innovations without endorsing fully a revolutionary 'fascist' ideological vision.[[54]](#footnote-54) The result was very often more than just strategic and the change not just cosmetic or opportunistic. Collusive relationships could and *did* have syncretic outcomes.

## Fascism without fascists?

So let us turn back to the hapless residuum of the not-quite-fascisms. The paradox of a sophisticated conceptual approach to generic fascism is that, in finessing the ideological core and those elements that render it distinct, it generates new tensions in the periphery - the borderlands - between what it seeks to define and what it consequently excludes. The challenge involves not simply ideas and concepts but also the way in which a multitude of very different empirical case studies map onto the new conceptual layout. Verdicts on what a perspective on fascism incorporates and excludes from the wide range of case studies, whether it is movement-based.[[55]](#footnote-55) or includes regimes as well.[[56]](#footnote-56) (in which case, which ones it chooses to include and which not, and on what grounds) invariably involve difficult and contentious decisions. To take one example, the status of the Croix de Feu - the largest French movement in the 1930s - in the histories of French and European fascism has divided historians. Much of the debate has inevitably focused on the ideological characteristics of the movement and its leader, François de La Rocque; but the broader historiographical context of this discussion remains the controversy about the marginal or not role of 'fascism' in interwar France, as an indigenous rather than imported ideological and political phenomenon.[[57]](#footnote-57) Griffin drew his own demarcation line on the basis of a 'shared myth of national renewal through mass-mobilisation and [the adoption of] radical policies to achieve it' that left outside examples such as the Belgian Rex and the Irish Blueshirts because they 'lacked the *innovative* radicalism or anti-traditionalism implicit in the rebirth myth needed to qualify as fascist'.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Regimes, however, raise more complicated questions. By definition, they involve another layer of translation - from idea/discourse to practice - and thus significant pressures for accommodation with existing sources of power. Paxton saw fascism's transition from constituent to constituted power as involving a series of compromises that rendered the prospect of an 'ideologically pure' fascist regime practically impossible.[[59]](#footnote-59) This is of course true, albeit in varying degrees, of *any* regime, for practical reasons if not for anything else. There was something uniquely unconventional, however, in the case of fascism, rooted in the idiosyncratic vision of revolution that it pursued. Griffin referred to fascism as a distinct 'revolution from the right' - a political, spiritual, and cultural rupture with the past premised on 'revolutionary hyper-nationalism' that was qualitatively different from the orthodox association of revolution with the left.[[60]](#footnote-60) In contrast, however, to the standard association of revolution with a radically new economic and social order erected ex nihilo on the ruins of the pre-revolutionary status quo, fascism wove its own revolutionary vision in deliberate, if selective, continuity with aspects of the past. Once again, the fact that no fascist regime was established on a political or institutional tabula rasa was not simply a practical or imposed concession but resulted to a large extent from fascism's ambivalent 'dreams of radical restoration and rupture'.[[61]](#footnote-61) This was after all the inherent nature of a revolution carried out in the name of nationalism: no matter how radical the transformative vision and its effects, no matter how uncompromising the revitalisation of the nation, the revolution shared semiotic content with precisely what it opposed so viscerally and sought to destroy. An absolute rupture was neither possible nor desired.

The informal bloc of not-quite-fascist/para-fascist regimes is crowded and tantalisingly diverse, blending ideological variations and distinct influences from their particular national context with the personal beliefs and aspirations of their leading figures. It is also linked to a host of other ideological and political genealogies that include the broader family of the right - conservative and radical - and authoritarianism.[[62]](#footnote-62) The standard indictment is that these regimes, while adopting a range of external 'fascist trappings', never subscribed to bona fide revolutionary goals and did not seek to pursue a radical new order.[[63]](#footnote-63) They are often accused of either imitating 'fascist' innovations out of their ideational context or adopting them opportunistically, cheating their way into a semblance of modernity and mass-mobilising schemes. In addition, they often deployed the fascist trappings while repressing 'real' fascism in their countries.[[64]](#footnote-64) Neither the political background of their leaders nor the mixed ideological makeup of the regimes helped to dispel suspicions that they constituted something more than an 'authoritarianism-plus' political concoction - and thus not part of the normative histories of interwar fascism.

Can there be a 'fascist' regime without an underlying fully-formed revolutionary 'fascist' ideology or indeed a fascist charismatic community of mass following? This provocative question, posed in relation to the Francoist regime in Spain,[[65]](#footnote-65) captures the methodological conundrum of the entire para-fascist residuum. Whether the constituency of interwar dictators, along with their intellectuals and political operators, were 'fascist' converts or 'authoritarian' mavericks matters beyond the obvious semantic slippage. In essence, it raises the mere possibility of a 'fascism' without 'fascists', contrived and administered 'from above' - without or in many cases against - a recognisable demand or pressure 'from below'. No matter how more flexible conceptual approaches to generic fascism have become in relation to these not-quite-fascisms, para-fascism remains 'poised on the balance between two great ‘isms’ [and thus] is poorly reflected in international historiography'.[[66]](#footnote-66) However, perhaps the question of whether all these regimes on the cusp of fascism and authoritarianism could count as 'fascist' or not is the less important or interesting one. What matters more is whether these highly diverse hybrid regime types could be productively integrated in a more dynamic history of interwar radicalism, *alongside* rather than in opposition to fascism. Put differently, were these para-fascist dictatorships - forged in the shadow of Mussolini's and later Hitler's success in getting to power and exposed to the ever-increasing register of implemented political and institutional radical innovations derived from them - simply importing variants of off-the-shelf 'fascism' or did they have a meaningful input in the history of both fascist and more broadly radical right-wing authoritarian politics in the interwar period?

There is already a predominantly political science literature on authoritarian and fascist political *diffusion* in the interwar years that has productively combined 'fascist' and 'authoritarian' regimes in the broader circulatory dynamic of radical ideas and policies that challenged liberal democratisation. Kurt Weyland in particular has engaged extensively with interwar dictatorships.[[67]](#footnote-67) and has consistently argued in favour of a diffusionist analytical perspective that examines the international dynamics of autocratic collaboration.[[68]](#footnote-68) His work has underlined the intimate intersections between diverse forms of radicalism but also their mutually reinforcing effects *in spite of* their ideological differences:

On the one hand, despite fascism’s innovative ideology and its enormous intellectual and political attraction, this regime type did not spread to many other countries. On the other hand, the worldwide resonance of fascism and the innumerable emulation efforts it stimulated had a very important, though complex and sometimes “contradictory”, impact in helping to cause the autocratic groundswell of the interwar years. … [E]ven where conservative sectors did not adopt full-scale fascism, but merely borrowed certain instruments from the fascist toolkit to strengthen their authoritarian rule, this limited and partial emulation of fascism gave this reverse [autocratic] wave additional staying power.[[69]](#footnote-69)

According to Weyland, fascism did not 'spread' as a canon but put forward a matrix of new radical possibilities that, selectively and adapted, could inform other, different though politically homologous, autocratic, anti-liberal, and anti-socialist projects. It did not 'convert' many political agents but attracted *rational*, earnest engagement from a much wider constituency of intellectuals and political entrepreneurs. It did not 'infect' sympathetic conservatives but it liberated them cognitively and empowered them to revise their own authoritarian toolkit in a more radical direction.

Griffin too has recognised that the role of these not-quite-fascist dictatorial regimes should be reassessed. In a recent article, he argued that they should not be regarded as mere facades for the otherwise 'bogus art of reactionary repression' but 'as serious experiments to find a modernist style of authority'.[[70]](#footnote-70) On its own, this claim bestows creative radical agency on the para-fascist thinkers and political operators. In November 1923, general Miguel Primo de Rivera accompanied king Alfonso XIII to Rome, having seized power through a conventional military coup two months earlier. His Roman sojourn was marked by effusive declarations of respect and admiration for Mussolini, some public and some anecdotal.[[71]](#footnote-71) Mussolini reciprocated, anointing Primo de Rivera 'chief of Spanish Fascism'. But in one of his speeches during the visit, he made a subtle distinction: comparing the two regimes, he concluded that, while 'the method is different in accordance with the different political climate in the two countries, the objective can be regarded as one and the same'.[[72]](#footnote-72) He also presented an essentially dichotomised view of his movement and regime: on the one hand, he described the full package as 'a typically Italian' formation; on the other hand, its [ideological and political] postulates were 'of universal character' and therefore of value for other countries. On his part, Primo de Rivera proclaimed that 'the process of evolution or revolution has not been the same in the two countries, even if the primary causes of these processes are significantly similar'.[[73]](#footnote-73) The Primo de Rivera dictatorship modelled much of its institutional and political development on adapted versions of tried-and-tested formulas rehearsed in Fascist Italy; but it was also openly critical of the anti-clerical tendencies of Mussolini's movement and its ambivalent attitude to the Catholic Church - an institution of paramount significance in the primorriverista ideology of National-Catholicism.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Primo de Rivera was just one of the many political figures who headed para-fascist regimes in interwar Europe; but he was the first to acknowledge publicly and profusely the critical influence of 'F[f]ascism' in the ideology and praxis of his own regime, so soon after Mussolini's ascension to power. Debates on the fascist or not character of his regime have been predictably polarised on either side of the familiar half-empty/half-full glass quandary.[[75]](#footnote-75) If the events of October 1922 had demonstrated that 'fascism' could be co-opted from above without endangering the constitutional order, the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera proved that 'fascism' could be reproduced selectively and creatively inside a more traditional conservative-authoritarian configuration - that is, without radical fascists. There was a large and receptive audience for this kind of political alchemy in interwar Europe - haunted by the spectre of crisis and decadence, desirous of an escape into a different future, terrified by socialism as both domestic and international revolutionary force, full of contempt for the liberal-parliamentary system, disdainful of traditional conservatism, and still deeply suspicious of fascism's rebellious excess. The subsequent 'waves' of authoritarian transition that swept away liberal-parliamentary systems across large parts of the continent demonstrated its resonance. Further down the line from Primo de Rivera, Antonio Salazar's Estado Novo in Portugal and Engelbert Dollfuss's Ständestaat in Austria did much more than simply accommodate fascism into an authoritarian template; they also articulated a new kind of synthesis through their new constitutional texts that went on to influence others in subsequent years. In my own research on the 4th of August dictatorship in Greece (1936-41), I encountered strong admiration evinced by Metaxas and other leading figures of the regime for Salazar's hybrid political experiment, viewing it as a model for the radical refashioning of the new Greek state.[[76]](#footnote-76) By seeking to alchemise a *non-revolutionary* hybrid of a fascist-authoritarian 'third way', these and other interwar not-quite-fascists did arguably more to facilitate the appeal and political diffusion of 'fascism' as the supposedly pure regime examples of Fascist Italy and National Socialist Germany. Their hybrids served as an unfolding proof-of-concept that 'fascism-minus-revolution' could be a supremely usable political formula, addressing the aspirations and concerns of a potentially far larger international audience than that of fascist admirers. But, in addition, it served as a vehicle for 'mainstreaming' many distinct fascist ideas and policies - and, through them, of 'fascism' as a political alternative.

The history of fascism was one of challenging, transcending, and re-defining bounded entities. It was the product of multiple intellectual 'third ways'; a syncretic ideology derived from unorthodox syntheses; a doctrine in-the-making that was rooted in constant radical action; a revolutionary ideology that sought rupture *and* radical continuity; a hyper-nationalist ideology predicated on supposedly universal values; an initially national force that subsequently crossed political and cultural boundaries with exceptional ease. In all these and other ways, fascism breached and on occasion re-drew all sorts of boundaries, perceived and actual. Its histories were made in and through permanent movement. Without the armoury of sophisticated conceptual tools that a distinguished line of scholars developed over time, all this movement resembled directionless chaos. That it no longer does, and that so many working in the field of fascism studies have at last shared, however conditionally, a heuristic lens, method, and a flexible language to work creatively through it in so many different directions is a testament to the interpretive utility of conceptual models of fascism. What Griffin associated with the 'new consensus' represented a phase of confident maturity in fascism studies. It marked the point when new and existing - though scattered - conceptual and methodological insights from generations of scholarship could be distilled and synthesised into a sophisticated yet flexible framework for analysis. A milestone rather than a terminus of stasis, the 'new consensus' represented also the beginning of new possibilities. Since its formulation, this line of scholarship has embraced a host of new directions. It has engaged with new methods and areas of analysis. It has also refined existing assumptions and introduced new perspectives - not least the focus on an ever-growing array of transnational exchanges. The transnational approach is in itself suggestive of the growing recognition that movement and fluidity shaped the histories of fascism - and of the wider field of radical ideas, politics, and culture, in which fascism was located in the first place. Mobility remains a supremely promising framework for the study of fascism, fitting its conceptual syncretism and protean nature, its geographic diffusion, and its universal 'missionary' outlook. One day it may also produce better routes to navigate those still challenging borderlands between fascism and authoritarianism that Griffin's 'para-fascism' valiantly sought to map.

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