The transnational co-production of interwar 'fascism': on the dynamics of ideational mobility and localisation

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ABSTRACT

Interwar fascism achieved sensational international reach through the appeal and circulation of a set of generic ideological norms and political practices. Therefore models of interpretations must accommodate alternative local interpretations, adaptations, and a wide range of varied outcomes in the process of its diverse local translations. In this article, I propose the new trans-discplinary *mobility* paradigm as a productive methodological extension of the transnational approach in fascism studies. I focus on the fluid dynamics of trans-national circulation of 'fascist' ideas and political innovations, as well as on how these were perceived, (re-)interpreted, adopted/adapted by a wide set of local agents in interwar Europe. I employ a decentred, anti-literarist, and multi-directional mobility approach that analyses the history of interwar 'fascism' as the messy net force of diverse, multivalent agencies, of interactions and frictions, in the end of creative translation and trial-and-error. I argue that a focus on this mobility dynamic offers three advantages: first, it promotes the re-integration of diverse fragmented histories of interwar fascism; second, it is capable of exposing the dynamic co-production of the political history of 'fascist' over time and space; and third, it fosters a far better understanding of the reasons for the ideological travel and political traction of radical ideas and politics in interwar years.

Mobility and fascism: between the generic and the dynamic

Fascism studies are at a fascinating intersection. After decades in the wilderness of untheorised survey studies and of conceptual laxity, George L Mosse's important early theoretical insights were subsumed into sophisticated conceptual and analytical frameworks in the eighties and nineties by a fresh generation of scholars spearheaded by Stanley Payne

and Roger Griffin.[1] This eventually led Griffin, who had formulated a concise and hugely influential definition of the 'fascist minimum' in the early 1990s, to claim that a 'new consensus' had finally emerged in the fray of fascism studies around a definition of the fascist ideological *minimum*.[2] By reducing fascism to its 'bare essentials' – a distinct ideological amalgam of 'populist ultra-nationalism' and the 'myth of palingenesis/rebirth' -, Griffin extrapolated its ineliminable core that distinguished it from other preceding and contemporary adjacent political ideologies.[3] Both the definition and the claim of a consensus did not go unchallenged of course;[4] but such was the clarity, efficacy, and heuristic power of Griffin's premise - as well as the willingness of a considerable number of subsequent historians to adopt the term 'fascism' in generic terms, however conditionally[5] - that even its fiercest critics made extensive references to it as a central plank of their alternative interpretations.

The polemic around the merits and demerits of the 'new consensus' raged on for some time.[6] It produced a fair amount of supporting and dissenting literature, the latter criticising Griffin's 'fascist minimum' as essentialist, inflexible in its adherence to bounded conceptual entities, and static.[7] The criticisms raised by the French sociologist Michel Dobry have been to a significant extent shaped by his vehement opposition to the way that arguments about 'generic' fascism have been utilized by proponents of the so-called 'immunity thesis' within the particular French historiographical context.[8] Nevertheless they underlined how the obsession with strict classificatory models obscured the fascinating histories of mobility and fluidity, intersection and interpenetration, between supposedly different categories, as well as different political and social actors that shaped – less through intent than through contingency – the history of radical politics across interwar Europe.[9]

The 'new consensus' polemic has mercifully run out of steam, clearing the path for new perspectives on the multiple histories of 'generic fascism'. Of these the *transnational* approach has arguably signalled the most exciting re-thinking and re-dimensioning of the field, premised on a shift away from the previously dominant idea that historical accounts of fascism had to be mapped onto national boundaries. Instead attention was drawn to the

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critical role of cross-border nodes, networks, and interactions that facilitated the diffusion of fascist ideas and political innovations in Europe and across the world.[10] Here the pioneering work of Hans Rogger and Eugen Weber from the 1960s,[11] and of Martin Blinkhorn in the early-1990s,[12] which had engaged in fruitful and nuanced ways with the ideological and political intersections between conservative and fascist right in the interwar period, had already suggested a workable interpretive framework that embraced the fuzziness of the political boundaries between the two constituencies, albeit still largely understood as bound by national histories. But the transnational approach expanded the horizons of enquiry both geographically and conceptually, subsuming previously ignored or under-studied dynamics of contact, exchange, and conflict that perforated state borders.

The transnational approach to fascism has not evaded entanglements with the earlier debates about 'generic' fascism and the 'new consensus'. Kevin Passmore claimed that "[t]o treat fascism as a social movement in a transnational context is to buck the trend in studies of so-called 'generic fascism'".[13] In contrast, Arnd Bauerkämper and Constantin Iordachi have approached the transnational paradigm in a more nuanced way as a productive methodological extension of, rather than departure from, some form of generic understanding of fascism.[14] In this article, I seek to extend discussion of the inter- and trans-national dynamics of interwar fascism by taking on board trans-disciplinary insights from *mobility* theories.[15] According to Tim Cresswell, "mobility involves a fragile entanglement of physical movement, representations, and practices".[16] For a long time, the most dominant understanding of mobility revolved around the notion of *diffusion*.[17] According to one of its pioneers, Everett Rogers, diffusion is "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system".[18] The multi-disciplinary field of diffusionist research has generated evocative and powerful metaphors, such as the epidemiological notion of 'contagion';[19] predominantly spatial categories such as 'neighbourhood effect' and 'spatial clustering';[20] 'wave', 'cascade', and 'demonstration effect' of paradigm change;[21] and 'domino effects'.[22] In spite of these and other

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variations, all genres of the diffusion model highlight patterns of spatial, social, political, economic or cultural *interdependence* and of spatial and temporal *clustering*,[23] be that on a subnational or an international scale.

Theoretically rooted in the social sciences, diffusion models have been applied to the study of policy transfer and regime change in the 19th and 20th centuries. Juan J Linz was one of the first scholars to connect meaningfully the study of fascism with the broader context of regime transition and democratic breakdown in the interwar years.[24] Kurt Weyland has productively studied the long-term dynamics of both democratisation and authoritarian 'reverse waves' in Europe and Latin America in the 19th and 20th centuries in ways that shed new light on comparative fascism studies, directly or indirectly.[25] Some fascism scholars too have applied the diffusionist perspective to the study of the international circulation of radical/'fascist' ideas and political innovations in the interwar period, in Europe and on a global scale.[26] Nevertheless diffusionist approaches to fascism have generally been treated with suspicion. This is in part related to deeper methodological objections to their perceived essentialism and their teleological horizon derived from biased notions of supposed directional change that they implied, especially in the context of modernisation and democratic transition.[27] Yet they have also been challenged on grounds that they reproduce assumptions about some kind of 'generic fascism' projected outwards from alleged prototypical manifestations - in Italy, Germany or both.

In contrast, the new mobility paradigm builds on the diffusionist emphasis on circulation and movement, dynamic change and hybridities, while offering a much-needed corrective to earlier notions of a unidirectional flow of ideas 'radiating' from a supposed originator or innovation source to allegedly second-order local adopters.[28] In so doing, the mobility paradigm provides an anti-essentialist toolkit to navigate historical unpredictability and fluidity without denying a degree of conceptual affinity between particular subsets produced through the circulation, reception, translation and/or revision of ideas and practices emanating in another place or time. Extending insights from the new mobility paradigm to the study of interwar radical ideologies and politics will not somehow

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settle the question of whether 'fascism' was a generic ideological-political entity or not. Nor will it explain by itself why particular radical ideas or policies were more popular than others, in particular places but not elsewhere, at particular moments in time, among particular political and social constituencies. But it does provide an alternative analytical perspective that shifts emphasis to dynamic, protean fluidity without denying altogether the influence of ideological clusters (as perceived by contemporaries rather than modelled by scholars ex post facto) in all these processes. It also enables a re-reading of the intellectual and political history of interwar ideologies and politics as a jumble of fragmented and fluid histories within a context of far broader (in scope and kind) interactions. This larger 'universe' of interwar radical politics, to use the term used by David Roberts,[29] was both the hub and the dynamic upshot of multiple intersections – not just between 'fascists' but also involving other constituencies of the new and old right (more conventional authoritarians, radical conservatives etc), not to mention in a few cases sectors of the dissident left (e.g. *planisme* in Belgium and France). And just as we require an awareness of the broader context of radical ideological and political mobilities in order to assemble the dynamic histories of interwar fascism (a subset thereof), we also need to analyse how this subset of 'fascist' ideas and political innovations shaped the dynamic field of interwar radical politics as a whole. This perspective neither denies the utility of 'conceptual cores' and 'ideological minima' nor seeks to make the web of interactions fit delimited ideological/political entities. Instead it shifts attention to the circulatory processes of reception and (re)formulation/translation of ideas that challenged and very often transcended supposedly bounded conceptual and political entities, whether perceived as such at the time or extrapolated in hindsight.

Consensus or not aside, there *was* something distinct about interwar 'fascism', however we choose to define and demarcate it conceptually; but it was not the originality of any of its core ideas.[30] Fascism's distinctiveness lay elsewhere – in the inventive constellations of otherwise familiar ideas that it encompassed at the core of its discourse and political praxis. Rather than understanding these constellations as transmitted – a priori formed -

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from a geographic and political centre towards obliging audiences in the peripheries, this article draws attention to a much broader, dynamic, unpredictable, and *decentred* field of ideational mobility and diffusion that produced them – and, through them, shaped the history of interwar fascism. Human actors of diverse nationalities and, more importantly, ideological complexions were as central to these processes as mobile ideas of equally diverse derivation. These actors shared a perceived sense of profound crisis – of 'civilisation', mainstream politics, and national culture. They also held a mutual conviction that a different kind of radical politics was desperately needed in order to avert an impending catastrophe, even if they did not agree entirely on its precise optimal form and content. Their shared sense of a horrifying gap between how things were and how they ought to be that generated the stirring tension that made radical ideas flow fast and far. They were avid observers of each other's initiatives, keen learners from perceived good practice, but also creative political entrepreneurs of revised or new idea and practices that fed back into the dynamic loop and travelled further. They were not the proverbial passive norm receivers but active *co-producers* of the history of interwar fascism in all its contradictions and messy entanglements.

It should be clear by now that my approach to ideational mobility and diffusion is not uni-directional or literalist. And while I do recognise that the genealogical history of fascism accords a special place to Italy, this is due to temporal sequence rather than any sense of de facto conceptual hierarchy. Fascism, Dobry noted, was the 'product of the actions, struggles and the self-identification of the political actors themselves'.[31] The right-wing radical field was sparsely populated in the first half of the 1920s. This afforded a special status to those actors who first challenged conventional political norms *and* put in (successful, as it turned out) practice a repertoire of taboo-breaking propositions that were attractive to others abroad and easier to attract attention. Yet, as the field of radical right-wing politics became increasingly crowded and multifaceted in the late 1920s and especially 1930s, the flow of ideas became increasingly complex and tangled. Dynamic hierarchies did emerge in the process but not out of design or from some kind of fixed natural order. 1945 became the sort of

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historical terminus that 'froze' the busy landscape of ideational mobility and generated a potentially misleading snapshot of stasis and teleology for an ideology otherwise proudly flaunting its credentials as a radical open-ended political phenomenon constantly in-the-making.

The mobility paradigm offers a meaningful way to reverse the order of analysis - from outcomes to processes of formation; to expand the analytical field by re-integrating historical fragments usually excluded or ignored from the histories of a fascist 'mainstream'; and to ask incisive questions about the history of interwar radical ideas and politics, of which 'fascism' was a – distinct and critically important, to be sure – *sub*set. In the following sections of this article, I navigate the complexities of the field of fascist mobilities by asking four key questions: *why* radical ideas travelled; *what* ideas and/or practices were involved in each diffusion instance and *who* the agents were in each case; *how* circulation occurred; and *what outcomes* (intended and actual) it produced in diverse temporal and spatial settings.

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Context and motivation: *why* was 'fascism' diffused?

The interwar period kicked off with a striking paradox. On the one hand, in the wake of WW1, liberalism extended its reach across Europe, with a number of new states that succeeded the collapsed empires moving along the path of democracy and enshrining an extended set of liberal rights in new constitutions.[32] On the other hand, the fundamental assumptions of the liberal mainstream came under unprecedented sustained challenge by both the revolutionary left and the hyper-nationalist 'old' and especially 'new' right; and it was this intersection that produced a crucial dynamic of increasingly vocal and aggressive contestation of liberal norms in the 1920s/1930s.[33] Right-wing nationalist resentment in particular at the post-1918 promoted liberal-internationalist settlement targeted a series of political and social innovations: the new institutions of global cooperation (such as the fledgling League of Nations), the extension of parliamentary rule, the formalisation of a wider set of liberal rights into the constitutional

order of an increasing circle of countries, and the normative legal protection extended to ethnic and religious minorities. In this respect, the rise and subsequent diffusion of fascism gave more concrete ideological and political expression to an already powerful sub-stratum of hyper-nationalist/exclusionary backlash to both liberalism[34] and the threat of revolutionary socialism,[35] positing a radical nationalist counter-utopia to a (seemingly) mainstream liberal teleology of pluralism, growing empathy for an expanding circle of others, and pacifism.

There was, however, one seismic event – with multiple chain reactions in its wake - that played a critical role in gave more concrete ideological substance and political expression to this rich but initially amorphous ferment of angry backlash. What happened in Italy from 1919 to 1922 was exceptional and deeply transformational, not only within the Italian context but also in an inter- and trans-national sense. The October 1922 'March on Rome' in particular became a 'condensation symbol', a symbolic performative - and tumultuous even in its immediate outcomes - event that very soon developed into a powerful icon of a new kind of radical politics well in Italy and beyond.[36] The subsequent political consolidation of the Fascist dictatorship invested the symbol with the all-important aura of 'success' that always strengthens a new norm's diffusion dynamic.[37] Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the later leader of the Iron Guard in Romania but in 1922 only a young radical nationalist agitator, wrote about the moment that the news of the March reached him, describing Mussolini as "one of us" and investing the event with a trans-national transformative significance by calling it "proof of the possibilities of victory".[38] Barely a month after the March on Rome, the leader of the then fledgling NSDAP Adolf Hitler was reportedly quoted saying "so it will be with us",[39] in an allusion to his intention to emulate the particular model of attempted take-over in Germany.[40]

At the time of the 'fascist' diffusion, knowledge of 'fascism' was constructed through dual processes of interpretation by local agents and mediation by them. Therefore 'fascism' was understood and (re-)constructed largely independently from whatever intentions and expectations its key leaders may have had, depending far more on the

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particular *perceptions*, *interpretations*, and *expectations* of the local entrepreneurs. Two main categories of local agents became involved in the diffusion of 'fascism' in the interwar period - fascist adherents who saw this 'fascism' as *the* norm *in toto* (or as a more or less fixed set of organically interconnected norms) to be diffused locally as well transnationally; and more critical and selective norm entrepreneurs who perceived the 'fascist' external sources as a set of partly independent norms and inventive practices that could be appropriated and translated more flexibly and critically into their local context, on the basis of each one's perceived degree of cultural salience and capacity for facilitating better outcomes.[41] In the former scenario, diffusion was driven to a significant degree by genuine fascination, often in spite of any forensic assessment of cultural match or any expectation of enhanced payoffs for them; whereas, in the latter case, it was principally a mechanism for maximising dividends and making the most in a situation of changed international conditions not of their own making. These agents 'read fascism' through their particular filters and made a critical input in the process of norm localisation, adapting the external reference to fit not just their own intentions but the particular cultural attributes of their national context and the audience that they may need to convince.[42] All this does not mean that leaders of radical movements were instantly or unconditionally attracted to the allure of Fascism, however they chose to perceive it. In spite of their emotional bias, they remained supremely strategic political entrepreneurs who subjected external norms to scrutiny for their congruence and utility for their particular national context and audience. This said, conservative authoritarians like general-turned-politician Ioannis Metaxas in Greece (head of the '4th of August' dictatorship in Greece in 1936-1941), Kārlis Ulmanis in Latvia (instigator of an anti-parliamentary coup in 1934), and Antonio Salazar (the prime minister of the Portuguese dictatorship with the longest term in office from 1932 to his death in 1974) adopted and adapted external 'fascist' norms on the basis of an alternative reading of their originally intentions and expected outcomes. For them, while some 'fascist' norms appeared of dubious value or even potentially dangerous to them, others seemed eminently useful, albeit very often in ways that did not conform to the intentions of the norm initiators themselves.

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This last point also highlights a deeper paradox in the history of interwar fascism. While local radical nationalist agents appropriated and recontextualised external models of 'fascism' as an organisational, ideological, and political norm in their fight against the left, liberals, conservatives, and forces of the 'old' authoritarian right redeployed the diffused norms against local fascists themselves.[43] In this scenario, the local actors' engagement with 'fascist' norms was underpinned by a constructive and restraining rationale alike: on the one hand, the (however selective and qualified) translation of external norms generated or facilitated new modes of, and opportunities for, action; on the other hand, it was deployed as an acceptable alternative to current practices while also proscribing other, more radical options also suggested by the diffused external norms (in this case, the revolutionary 'fascist' pathway). The list of examples is long: indicatively, Salazar crushed the Blueshirts in Portugal; Dollfuss used the momentum generated by the introduction of the one-party *Ständestaat* in 1934-38 as a tool to defeat or contain the Austrian Nazis too; the abortive take-over attempt (a la March on Rome) by the Estonian Veterans (Vaps) in 1934 prompted the controlled fascistisation of the regime headed by Konstantin Päts but also Vaps's violent suppression; in Romania, the declaration of dictatorship by King Carol in 1937 and the fascistisation 'from above' that he oversaw was combined with the violent crackdown on the Iron Guard. This form of pre-emptive and selective adoption of 'fascist' norms in order to deploy them (also) against the fascists themselves was part of a technique geared to 'immunising' the political status quo against more radical or revolutionary challenges.[44]

Agency and content: *who* diffused *what* 'fascism' exactly?

To say that 'fascist' ideas and/or political innovations travelled across Europe and beyond in the interwar years divulges very little about *what* was diffused. This is particularly problematic in the case of fascism for, unlike an authoritarian or dictatorial 'wave' (where outcomes can be benchmarked against a set of more conventional institutional and political expectations), mobilities of 'fascism' involved (i) exposure to *novel* taboo-

breaking ideological norms and political practices; and (ii) their reception and translation by a burgeoning circle of very different national, political, and social constituencies with bewilderingly different results. As a result, large ideological as well as political variations were recorded across different national contexts - and sometimes even within a single country. In addition, the diffusion of 'fascism' unfolded over a protracted period of time during which the meaning of both 'fascist ideology' (already notoriously multi-faceted as something akin to a 'scavenger') and 'fascist rule' constantly evolved or mutated. While, for example, corporatism was the main ideological and political ware brandished by Italian Fascism in the second half of the 1920s and the early-1930s, it occupied a more marginal place in earlier years (and was largely associated with a militant anti-capitalist rhetoric that was abandoned once Mussolini came to power) and was largely eclipsed in the late-1930s.[45] Meanwhile, the fact that antisemitism - so central a facet in the ideological profile of some movements such as National Socialism and the Iron Guard - was non-existent as a discursive or political element in Italy and other case studies, at least until the mid-1930s,[46] cast doubts on the benefits of an inclusive model of *generic* 'fascism' in interwar Europe.[47] In fact, historians have never stopped debating whether particular case studies should be considered 'fascist' and therefore whether they should be included in the histories of fascist diffusion or dismissed as 'failed' or 'not-quite-fascist' outcomes.[48] The criteria used for distinction remain disputed and often controversial: typically, a genuinely revolutionary ideology; antisemitism; charismatic leadership; a radicalism that rejects traditional authoritarian sources; or para-militarism. Employing particular criteria results in rather different lists of 'fascist' cases and throws up all sorts of dichotomies – fascism versus authoritarianism, top-down versus bottom-up, movement versus regime, success versus failure, and so on. I would not suggest that such distinctions are without their heuristical value. Yet I find their rigid application to exclude discussion of non-normative entanglements between fascism and other expressions of radical politics in the interwar period both problematic and analytically impoverishing. As Roberts put it, we 'need to loosen up on [distinctions] … and we may need more bases or axes of differentiation than fascism versus whatever else'.[49]

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Therefore the question of *what* was diffused in the history of the circulation of fascist ideas and political innovations is far more complicated and important for the analysis of fascism's diffusion than it may appear at first. Neither the precise *content* nor the *agents* involved nor their perceptions of what 'fascism' was nor their *interpretations* of the diffused content can be taken for granted, at any given moment and place or over a prolonged period of time. Even Italian Fascism agonised over producing its authoritative ideological statement. When such a statement did emerge, in 1932 and in the elliptical form of *The Doctrine of Fascism*, it was introduced with a rather unusual caveat for an ideological manifesto as 'action and thought … [with] an ideal content … [but also] a form linked to the contingencies of time and space".[50] David Roberts has reminded us that, when it came to the fore in the early 1920s, 'fascism' meant very little to contemporary audience, even within Italy; instead it followed "an uncertain, open-ended trajectory, partly because of the messiness of the Fascist mixture the heterogeneity of fuelling aspirations".[51] In the 1920s, this also affected Fascism's self-image and the ways in which its leadership communicated its core message outside of Italy. The Fascist regime used clandestine networks to support financially and politically revisionist states and fringe movements in other parts of Europe;[52] but these early initiatives were mostly motivated by a pragmatic foreign policy aspirations and not from a conscious desire to diffuse 'Fascism' in a top-down manner as ideological and political ware.

Throughout this period, Mussolini had wavered on the topic of Fascism's internationalisation;[53] but by 1932 he had eventually decided that the future of Europe as a whole was 'Fascist', thereby actively re-branding Fascism as an export product with universal validity.[54] No other fascist regime or movement – not even National Socialist Germany that conceived of its 'new order' project primarily as a pragmatic device of political hegemony[55] - attempted something similar to Italian Fascism's internationalisation project. Ironically too, the decisive momentum for the launch of Fascism's project of international diffusion came in the wake of Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in 1933 and the rapid deterioration of the relations between the two regimes in 1934. What became known as the

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Action Committees for the Universality of Rome (*Comitati d'Azione per l'Universalità di Roma*, CAUR)[56] spearheaded an official effort, supported by regular international conferences, meetings, visits, and other kinds of informal contact, to diffuse 'fascism' beyond the Italian borders. Note the chosen name for the organisation, however - without a single mention of this 'fascism', the regime's projected self-image used the twin synecdoches of spiritual *romanità* and corporatism as the drivers of its project of ideological diffusion.[57] The initiative, starting with a promising founding meeting held at Montreux, Switzerland in December 1934 (to which Nazi Germany was deliberately not invited), had mixed fortunes (especially concerning resistance to the chosen ideological platform of 'Roman universality', which was more amenable to Mediterranean 'Latin' countries than their central and northern European counterparts) before gradually running out of steam and being officially abandoned by 1938-39.[58]

Diffusion, however, is rarely a tidy one-sided linear process of norm externalisation by an initiator directed at local passive receivers. The initial line of defence used by local fascists and conservative actors who collaborated one way or another with the Nazi designs that they succumbed to external pressure or had no other alternative than to be seen to subscribe to the radical political agenda of Hitler's regime in order to avoid a hostile Nazi take-over (essentially the argument made by Marshall Petain, head of the Vichy regime in France) neither saved collaborationist leaders from postwar trials nor stood up to historical scrutiny ever since.[59] Meanwhile, similar assumptions that the transnational diffusion of anti-Jewish persecution and later participation in the 'Final Solution' were attributable to German - direct or implicit - pressure also proved to be exaggerated or misleading, masking a reality of willing and unforced collaboration on numerous occasions.[60] More often than not then diffusion started on the initiative of local or transnational agents, regardless or in spite of the intentions of the norm initiators themselves. The process involved complex and unpredictable reciprocal interactions between the perceived norms themselves and any trans-national entrepreneurs and active local agents who selected, re-interpreted, adapted, resisted or even rejected the 'fascist' norms.[61]

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The very different attitudes displayed by local agents to antisemitism in the 1920s and 1930s is an interesting example of this dynamic relationship between external norms and active (re-)interpretation by diverse contemporary local agents. In France, for example, the existence of a complex national tradition of socio-economic and cultural antisemitism resulted not in a uniform acceptance of antisemitism by different 'fascist' movements but in a wide range of responses ranging from strong ideological attachment to near-rejection. In the 1920s, the Faisceau did not officially adopt antisemitism, even if many of its leaders and members – including Valois himself - had a notable antisemitic past from their days in the Action Française, but showed a strong interest in social corporatism and the performative aspects of Fascist 'style'.[62] Antisemitism also held a dubious position in the official ideology of the Solidarité Française, which nevertheless propagated intensely xenophobic and racist views. Francisme, the movement founded by Marcel Bucard, juggled official denunciations of the doctrine of antisemitism (and rejected altogether the Nazi biological variant) with strong anti-Jewish sentiments within its ranks.[63] In the 1930s new movements generally displayed mixed attitudes to antisemitism, with the Croix de Feu and later the Parti Social Français (PSF), headed by Francois de La Rocque, as well as Jacques Doriot's Parti Populaire Français originally displaying an aversion to the Nazi-inspired rhetoric of biological antisemitism, opting instead for a more selective and strategic invocation of the tradition of cultural antisemitism and with an increasing focus on the Blum government and financial corruption.[64] While, however, La Rocque eventually turned against the Vichy regime in the 1940s and rejected the introduction of radical anti-Jewish legislation largely influenced by the Nazi racial and legal norms, Doriot re-invented himself as a pillar of Nazi collaboration and a strong support for an even more radical implementation of Nazi ideology and the 'Final Solution' in France than what was being attempted by the Vichy regime.[65] Clearly attitudes to antisemitism, cultural/economic and biological, were changeable and refracted through broader political calculations, be that questions of foreign policy or of the need to appeal to settlers in north Africa.

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When it came to corporatism, the striking circulation of corporatist ideas from the second half of the 1920s onwards may have been propelled by the novelty of the Italian *Carta del Lavoro* and the systematic propaganda efforts of the Fascist regime to promote it as the most innovative differentiator of the Fascist 'third way'; but in the end its diffusion dynamic or absence thereof in other countries was largely shaped by the perceptions and actions of local norm entrepreneurs. It is easy to identify the shared impulse for nearly all local actors in the introduction of social and/or political corporatist experiments - the iconoclastic desire to make a clean break with both liberal parliamentary institutions and socialist organisational norms that 'fascism' had sought to supplant and replace with an organic new system of economic organisation and political representation to fill the vacuum. But while social corporatist innovations were largely shaped by local adaptations of the innovative precedent of the earlier Italian model, when it came to corporatist legislative systems the diffusion equation was far more complex and varied. Not only was Fascist Italy a relatively late-comer in this respect (the Fascist corporatist parliament was only introduced in the late-1930s) but other factors such as the particular local input of traditional institutions such as the Catholic Church, the conservative elites, and the military forced compromises that affected the final shape of the experiment. Salazar's *Estado Novo* in Portugal and Dollfuss's *Ständestaat* in Austria - both taking shape in 1933-34 - also occupied an important role in the diffusion process, functioning as both receivers of prior 'fascist' innovations *and* sources of autonomous inspiration for new channels of diffusion that extended throughout the 1930s and the war years.

3. Process: *how* diffusion took shape and place

Diffusion operates both in space and over time.[66] Exposure to new norms is commonly the first all-important step in this process. Awareness of new ideas and practices is the essential starting point of any diffusion process. This is then followed by a local agent-led assessment and selection, often on the basis of their subjective perceptions and interests but also in relation

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to the peculiarities of the domestic context in which these local agents operate. Whereas 'early adopters' are more likely to change their behaviour early in spite of the absence of evidence that others are doing the same, those engaging with the process at subsequent stages of the curve ('early majority', 'late majority') indicate a higher sensitivity to how other members of the local or international network behave before calibrating their attitude and behaviour.[67] The parabola of 'fascism's' diffusion in the interwar years followed a very similar pattern, with only a modest uptake in the still uncertain 1920s that extended decisively upwards only in 1933-34, in the wake of Hitler's appointment as chancellor, and continued to gather adherents until well into WW2 before petering out (and actually becoming reversed in 1944-45 in the shadow of an impending crushing defeat for the Axis).

Finally the external norms are subjected to complex processes of norm operationalisation to suit its new local context. This third stage describes the active, again local agent-led processes of bestowing external norms with local resonance and utility through enhancing their perceived compatibility with pre-existing local particularities. In this process, diffusion becomes a set of processes of not just replication or faithful translation of the prototype but of creative co-production of (new) hybrid norms to suit local conditions and expectations.[68] In the context of interwar fascism, this phase was particularly important and complex, for 'fascism' was above all a nationalist ideology and thus any suspicion that fascist movements sought to emulate an external (that is, foreign) source would be inherently at variance with its ideological origins and nature.[69] When the Spanish dictator Primo de Rivera was asked whether he had been inspired by Mussolini's March on Rome in his 1923 successful coup against the Spanish Republic, he invoked instead domestic national sources of reference instead (the nineteenth-century General Juan Prim who had been a major instigator of coups against the monarchy; and the rural paramilitary formations of the Somatén in the immediate post-WW1 years, to explain his seeming admiration for Mussolini and Fascist Italy.[70] The leader of the French Faisceau went even further down this path, claiming that his movement's seemingly 'fascist' ideas that suggested borrowing

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from Fascist Italy were actually pioneered by him and his movement in France and then diffused to Italy.[71] Meanwhile Swedish fascists showed astute awareness of the danger of being branded fascist 'copycats', first by adapting selectively norms developed in Italy, then by refashioning their ideological profile in proximity to the Nazi racialist doctrine, and finally by jettisoning discursive references to 'fascism' in the late 1930s in a response to an increasingly hostile public opinion.[72]

Balancing admiration for foreign 'fascist' leaders and political innovations with the need to constantly shake off any suspicion of emulating prototypes alien to national tradition and culture was no mean task for leaders of movements and regimes inspired by aspects of the 'fascist' experience elsewhere. One of the most common techniques in this direction involved creative onomatopoeic solutions for national movements. Primo's son, José Antonio, co-founded the Falange Española in the autumn of 1933, initially choosing the cryptic acronym 'F.E.' but shortly afterwards clarifying that it did not stand for 'Fascismo Español' and opting instead for the word 'Falange' that had more resonance in Spanish culture and history. Later, José Antonio declared in the Spanish parliament that "we have entered the world at a time that fascism is prevailing - and this … handicaps us more than it favours us, for fascism has a series of interchangeable inflections that we do not all wish to adopt". He did not deny that the Falange had adapted 'fascist' elements but he defended these points of inspiration by describing them as permanent in moral validity and universal in character.[73]

This kind of justification was also used by Oswald Mosley in 1932, when he fused his own New Party with the British Fascisti and the Imperial Fascist League (IFL) to form the British Union of Fascists (BUF). In contrast, however, to José Antonio, Mosley did not shy away from adopting the noun 'fascism' in the official name of his party and in referring to his movement and future government as 'F(f)ascist'.[74] In a BBC interview he gave just before announcing the fusion of the parties, he insisted, echoing Mussolini, that fascism was the dominant creed of the century and universal in its ideological foundations; but he also claimed that this same 'fascism' was shaped into "practical national expression in each country".[75]

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Mosley sought to internalise Fascist symbols and cultural points of reference by presenting them as rooted in a transcultural continuum of historical greatness in which Britain had always occupied a central role. Unsurprisingly then, the thrust of Mosley's project of localising the 'fascist' political norms in the British context involved the re-conceptualisation of empire as the undisputed political, spiritual, cultural, and moral hub of the BUF's regenerative project[76]. But even the adoption of the symbol of the *fasces* - and, more broadly, of the imperial legacy of ancient Rome - was presented as supremely salient to British traditions by presenting the British Empire as the 'custodian' of a millennia-long 'tradition of civilisation and progress" rooted in the classical past.[77]

In contrast to the only limited adoption of the adjective 'fascist' in the onomatopoeic conventions of kindred movements and parties, the designation 'national socialist' proved markedly more popular and seemingly less troubling to local norm adopters. Anton Mussert's National Socialism Movement in The Netherlands and Fritz Clausen's Danish National Socialist Workers' Party were only two - and arguably the most successful - of a far longer and varied in national dispersal list of parties taking up a variant of this designation, usually appearing in the late-1920s or early-1930s. While in a large number of cases the name was adopted deliberately to declare strong ideological affinity and political identification with Hitler's movement and regime in the 1930s, the naming convention was not a bizarre neologism like 'fascism', with its two adjectives individually and combined in a composite phrase possessing a more easily defensible universal meaning independently from German National Socialism. When it came to conjuring up racialism, the schemas of the 'Nordic race' and of the 'Aryan' theories of racial superiority also referenced broader ideological legacies that predated the rise of German National Socialism, pointed to a rich and long-standing *international* body of pseudo-research in support of such arguments, and had already developed some traction in a number of Northern European societies.[78]

In justifying the adoption of particular 'fascist' norms, the bulk of 'fascist' movements in interwar Europe responded to actual or anticipated criticisms of 'foreign' mimicry by engaging consciously with two principal

techniques of norm localisation. First, the external norm was 'framed' - as a novel, fuller or better solution – in reference to a wider, more easily internalisable 'problem' with both transnational and local resonance.[79] So, for example, Mosley localised his understanding of the 'Fascism' norm by articulating a contrast between a present-past of national degeneration (caused by the weaknesses of liberalism, corruption, lack of national vision; and the perceived corrosive effects of every form of internationalism, including socialism, 'immoral' capitalism, 'Jewish conspiracies' etc) and an alternative present-future pathway of national rebirth, based on 'fascism', empire, militarism, and strong executive leadership. Even when it came to controversial decisions, such as the adoption of the 'fascist' black shirt as the official uniform of the party, Mosley responded to escalating criticisms of foreign mimicry[80] by invoking an alleged neutral universalised symbology behind this decision (e.g. uniform as classless unity, attack on bourgeois values, show of 'manhood' etc).[81] Thus Mosley attempted to reverse-engineer 'fascism' as a ***global*** framework of problem-solving with regard to issues of interconnected national and inter-/trans-national salience.

Second, once justified, the new adapted norm was 'grafted' onto existing local traditions and norms, either by supplementing or by displacing them.[82] The most effective local norm diffusion agents understood how important this step was, spending significant discursive capital in forging historical and cultural genealogies that linked the chosen external with both universal and purely sources or local points of reference. This explains, for example, the diversity of historical references in the ideology and discourse of diverse fascist movements: the Verdinaso in Belgium spoke of its vision of reconstituting the medieval kingdom of Burgundy;[83] Szalasi's Arrow Cross evangelised the recreation of a great 'Carpatho-Danubian fatherland' along the lines of medieval Hungarian kingdom;[84] the Croat Ustasha linked 'Aryanism' with their historical status as alleged outpost of western Christianity against either (Ottoman) Islam of eastern Orthodox peoples (Serbs being presented as the arch-enemy of modern Croat nationalism);[85] in the fiercely contested marketplace of national and historical traditions in the post-WW1 Austrian republic, the Heimwehr

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mostly threw its weight behind a Habsburg and Catholic genealogy of modern Austria while the Austrian NSDAP subsumed and updated the long tradition of territorial pan-German nationalism.[86]

These examples highlight how local agents employed inventively both re-interpretation and re-constitution of the external norms as part of their strategy of localisation. Acharya noted how norm-takers seek to enhance the norm's *congruence* with its new coordinates of space (local context) and time (the particular register of challenges that its diffusion seeks to address at a given moment).[87] This means that very often the local agent may have to convincingly articulate not only why the external norm is supremely suited for in its new context but also why it may change form, meaning, and function without losing its association with the original external prototype. When Codreanu defended his movement's focus on aggressive antisemitism even in the face of its notable absence (until that point…) in Fascist Italy that he had so highly praised as a source of ideological reference, he explained:

> Italy has as many Jews as Romania has Ciangai in the Siret valley. An Italian anti-Semitic movement would be as if Romanians started a movement against the Ciangai. But had Mussolini lived in Romania he could not but be anti-Semitic, for fascism means first of all defending your nation against the dangers that threaten it. … In Romania, fascism could only mean … the removal of the Jewish threat and the clearing of the path to the survival and glory to which Romanians are entitled to aspire.[88]

This process of adaptive localisation cannot be reduced to a simple matter of reception. Selective adoption, translation, and instrumentalization of external norms were supremely creative processes, generative of essentially new norms for others to observe and interact with. One of the most striking examples of a 'wave' of diverse localisations of a single new radical, taboo-breaking norm concerned the widespread accommodation and adaptation of the 'Nuremberg canon' of racial/anti-Jewish persecution by a rapidly expanding circle of regimes in Europe from the late-1930s onwards. Each of them engaged in either pruning and fusing or both, thereby producing interesting variations refracted through particular local peculiarities and historical legacies. The three Hungarian laws introduced in 1938, 1939, and

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1941 respectively used the - particularly resonant in Hungary - filter of religious conversion as a key device: the first law completely excluded converted Jews from the restrictive legislation, the second introduced some restrictions to the award of this preferential status, while the third abandoned it altogether and adopted for the first time a large portion of the Nazi racial rationale.[89] A similar trajectory was followed in Romania in 1938, with two pieces of anti-Jewish legislation following the Nuremberg citizenship canon - the first allowing for exceptions on the basis of proving Romanian descent while the second removing this route to exception and incorporating racialist principles. In wartime Slovakia, the introduction of the so-called Jewish Codex diffused the majority of norms underpinning the Nazi Nuremberg legislation but went even further by adding a further requirement for half- or even one-quarter Jews who continued to practise the Jewish faith.[90] But the example of the Independent State of Croatia is perhaps the most revealing with regard to the dynamics of expanding the diffused norm in an originally unanticipated direction by its pioneers. The Ustasha-led regime introduced a cascade of legislation inspired by the Nazi 'Nuremberg model' in the summer and autumn of 1941. Among them, the racial re-definition of Jewish citizenship extended even further than the NS Nuremberg stipulations, targeting also 'half-Jews', illegitimate children, offspring of unmarried Jewish women, and spouses regardless of their own 'racial' makeup. It also introduced a distinction between Jews born in the territories of Independent Croatia and/or by parents residing there and those who were not. In addition, however, the Ustasha regime directed the main thrust of its vicious eliminationist campaign to the new state's large Serb minority and imputed distinct cultural canons of performative raw violence in its execution that departed markedly from the industrialised modernity of the Nazi project.[91]

4. Outcome: *what* the diffusion of 'fascist' norms actually produced

When it comes to the fourth stage of the diffusion process, the *outcomes*, the original intentions of the local agents cannot pre-determine the actual

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upshots of a diffusion process and cannot prevent different, often undesirable consequences. When King Carol II of Romania introduced a set of radical changes in the operation of the political system in 1937 by adapting a set of norms inspired by external 'fascist' norms, his primary motivation was to pre-empt a further strengthening of the Iron Guard that could threaten his authority. Thus by suspending elections and the parliamentary system, by revising the constitution in a hybrid authoritarian-fascist direction (including the introduction of a corporatist system), by instituting radical methods of violent persecution of the country's Jews, by adopting para-military paraphernalia including Iron Guard-like uniforms, and eventually by outlawing the Legionaries and arresting their leaders (Codreanu was executed shortly afterwards), Carol expected that he would neutralise the growing danger posed by the Iron Guard.[92]

Similar concerns about the growing militancy and power of the Austrian National Socialists (DNSAP) in the wake of Hitler's appointment as chancellor, as well as a decision to force a showdown with the powerful socialist left, provided the pretext for Dollfuss to install a 'Christian corporatist' dictatorship in 1933.[93] The experiment soon morphed into a one-party system, in alliance with the 'fascist' Heimwehr but in explicit opposition to the DNSAP that was banned.[94] In both cases, the strategy delivered short-term payoffs that were soon reversed with catastrophic consequences for the two dictators: the Iron Guard was weakened but managed to resurfarce in 1940-41, this time (briefly) even as a government partner; the DNSAP was also disrupted but nevertheless attempted a violent coup in 1934, during which Dollfuss was assassinated, and despite its continued proscription under Dollfuss's successor Kurt von Schuschnigg managed to remain part of the power equation until 1938, when Germany decided to force the annexation of Austria into the German Reich.[95] Thus pre-emptive 'fascistisation' from above did not deliver what either Carol of Dollfuss-Schuschnigg had originally expected: it did not secure their power in the longer term or eliminate the threat of their 'fascist' opponents as they had originally intended.[96]

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As noted earlier, historians of interwar fascism have encountered heuristic and classificatory problems when dealing with such hybrid regimes that engaged with a controlled, selective, and limited introduction of 'fascist' norms from above. Neither 'fascist' - in the sense of being driven by a truly revolutionary project or possessing the ideological and organisational cohesion to drive radical change - nor 'authoritarian' - in the form of a more traditional dictatorship aimed at demobilisation of the masses -, these "radical right regimes with fascist trappings"[97] have for too long treated as marginal or aberrant in the history of 'fascism' even as they occupied such an important place in the history of 'fascism's' diffusion in interwar Europe. Originally labelled as 'failed' or 'incomplete' against the benchmarks of the presumed prototypical 'fascism' of National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy, in the last three decades they have gradually moved from their earlier pariah status to, first, a partial rehabilitation as hybrid political regimes and, more recently, to a re-integration into the core of fascism studies.[98] A similar label of failure was reserved for 'fascist' movements that, while deemed to belong to the ideological universe of interwar fascism, fell short of developing mass following, electoral success or achieving the prize of political power that would have allowed them to implement their programme of radical change in their local contexts.[99]

Nevertheless, if the focus shifts momentarily from actual outcomes to the rational and process of diffusion, then these two categories of putatively 'failed' fascist case studies acquire fresh historical significance and become objects of enquiry. Closer attention to the rationale and intended goals of the local agents rather than to a direct comparison with the outcomes of other case studies is essential as it helps nuance and calibrate the heuristic benchmarks of 'success' when it comes to the diffusion process. Weyland has outlined four main outcomes in a diffusion process: norm *replication* lies at the one end of the spectrum of outcomes and norm *blockage* at the other, with *pre-emptive* and *abortive emulation* occupying interim points along the way. The latter two outcomes are indicative of a distance between the original norm and the particular outcome of norm diffusion in a given context. Pre-emptive emulation is invested with both 'positive' and 'negative' value by the local agents, intended as selective and partial

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emulation of the norm itself but also deliberately aiming at severing it from its more radical consequences observed elsewhere. Abortive emulation, by contrast, results from an actual mismatch between intention and outcome, the latter falling significantly short of the benchmarks set by the former.[100] While many cases of 'fascist' movements that failed to gain any significant traction within their local societies could be viewed as examples of abortive emulation, a lot of the hybrid fascist-authoritarian dictatorships that were headed by unlikely conservative figures in the interwar years (e.g. Salazar's, Dollfuss's or Metaxas's dictatorships) presented mixed patterns of pre-emptive emulation by design and abortive emulation in terms of (some at least of) their outcomes.

To assume that the default intention of the local agents was a more or less close replication of the external norm is misleading. After all, a large part of the historical enquiry into the dynamics of radical norm diffusion in the interwar years offered in this article involves cases of partial contestation or constructive localisation that resulted in a series of intended departures from the original norm. Contestation was undoubtedly far more pronounced among conservative-authoritarian elite local agents who approached norm diffusion as largely a pre-emptive move aimed at neutralising the 'fascist' radical challenge. However, even the usually far more sympathetic radical nationalist agitators who experienced genuine fascination with the external norm and in principle desired its faithful replication in their local context did sometimes display more critical attitudes to the external norm. At the 1934 Montreux conference, otherwise supremely sympathetic 'fascist' participants evinced a degree of unease with CAUR's 'universality of Rome' formula, even as they wholeheartedly agreed with the benefits of the bulk of norms pioneered by Fascist Italy.[101] Thus the intended outcomes may end up differing from those of the original norm - and, when they occur, such divergences should be regarded as *successful instances of localisation* rather than as 'abortive' replications thereof. In addition, localisation is a dynamic ongoing process that does not exclude subsequent re-calibrations in order to further maximise the resonance of diffused norms in the local context. Even someone as central to the historical narratives of 'fascism's' diffusion as

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Hitler spent most of the 1920s in political wilderness, having failed to emulate the March on Rome in 1923 or to achieve electoral or political traction for the NSDAP until 1929.[102] In the process, he was often forced to change his political strategy and communication in order to increase the political and social appeal of his movement for the audience of Weimar Germany. As Christian Goeschel has convincingly demonstrated, the relationship with Mussolini and Italian Fascism was a dynamic amalgam of a sense of ideological affinity and functional calculation. The Hitler of the first half of the 1920s balanced his personal admiration for the Italian dictator against his selective pragmatic approach to Fascist ideology and political initiatives. At times, juggling his strategic use of the Italian precedent, as well as deploying (adapted) signifiers indebted to Fascism, for his own political benefit against accusations of being a Fascist copycat proved awkward and landed him in trouble. Yet, while the political formation of the NSDAP in the 1920s makes little sense outside the broader context of European radical politics dominated at the time by Fascist Italy, the ideological development of National Socialism was only partly and tangentially indebted to it. Mussolini's Fascism was more useful to Hitler as a discursive reference than as an ideological compass.[103]

Conclusions: diffusion analysis and the transnational approach to fascism

Shortly after violently repressing the Iron Guard in January 1941, general Antonescu described to the Romanian press the character of his new regime:

> This state shall base its policies on the primacy of Romanianism in all domains of life. I pledge to unhesitatingly enforce all reforms necessary for the elimination of foreign influences and the safeguarding of our national interest. The struggle of the grand German National Socialist revolution and fascist achievements shall serve as guideposts of experience to be adapted to Romanian needs in order to graft on our realities the new world supported by the achievements in organization of these peoples.[104]

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Here then, in a nutshell, was a snapshot of all the alleged 'contradictions' often highlighted by the historiography of fascism that an unlikely local agent reconciled in the space of a few words, without registering any sense of tension or awareness of incompatibility between the diverse components of the statement. 'Romanianisation' as the primary policy objective of Antonescu's new hybrid dictatorship post-January 1941 was an anti-Jewish and anti-minority platform indebted to hyper-nationalist, anti-liberal, exclusionary, and eliminationist norms pioneered - in different ways - in both Germany and Italy. It was guided by their precedent, with their 'achievements' 'grafted' on Romanian 'realities' but also refracted through the prism of distinct 'Romanian needs' and producing a hybrid norm. Here was a distinctly Romanian hybrid form of 'fascism', headed by a conservative general who had nevertheless been exposed to the external 'fascist' precedent and used the filter of 'cultural fit' to translate and adapt them for his local context while also promoting his 'positive' goals (his political calculations for enhancing his power and advancing what he perceived as Romanian interests through an even closer alignment with the Axis). 'Fascism', even in its radical innovations pioneered by Fascist Italy or its subsequent spectacularly radical manifestations in National Socialist Germany, was not - and was not regarded by contemporary observers - as a universal scripture.

In this article, I have argued that a dynamic, decentred, and non-literalist mobility paradigm of analysis offer a welcome extension of the heuristic power of transnational approaches to interwar fascism. It complements the significant insights gained through sophisticated conceptual studies regarding the origins and essence of fascist ideology by making them less rigid and prescriptive, more flexible and analytically useful. It also promotes a better understanding of the dynamic channels of inter- and trans-national circulation of radical ideas and practices in the interwar years. If we accept that interwar fascism was a phenomenon with international reach driven by the appeal and circulation of a set of generic ideological norms and political practices, then our models of interpretations must accommodate alternative local interpretations, adaptations, and a wide range of varied outcomes in the process of their

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translation and operationalisation in each case. The history of interwar fascism was shaped, incrementally and cumulatively, by a multitude of local agents who crucially depended on one another, caught in a far wider web of interactions and entanglements than previously assumed.105 Its projection into history was not a simple matter of 'successful' diffusion of a core ideology outwards and of 'abortive' instances branded as not-quite-fascism; instead 'fascism' emerged from the debris of 1945 as the messy net force of diverse, multivalent agencies, of interactions and frictions, in the end of trial and error.

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