

FASCISM

Mussolini, the architect of Italian fascism declared that “Man is integral, he is political, he is economic, he is religious, he is saint, he is warrior.” It was to this man that fascism was addressed as it attempted to appeal to all these different facets of man. Although variously defined, fascism in general can be viewed as an insurgent form of modernity, which has as its aim the reawakening of the nation after a stage of decay. This resurgence is often violently performed against outsiders and has racial and religious dimensions. Italy under Mussolini and Nazism under Hitler are some of the more prominent and virulent fascist regimes from the last century.

Fascist movements are a relatively modern phenomena, since after 1918, but historians have sought to map their lineage deeper back in time. ‘Totalitarian democracy’ of both left and right-wing kinds originated in the Enlightenment and during the French Revolution. Fascism, however, is rooted in irrationality, so the roots of fascism are to be found within anti-Enlightenment thought. Spengler highlighted the distinction between ‘culture’ which had rootedness and ‘civilization’ with the potential to better man. Anti-Enlightenment looked to fashion modernity in a way that maintained continuity with the past. Social Darwinism, too, contributed to fascism in the way it assumes that various races and nations must vie for survival. Fascism, though, is ultimately a very syncretic ideology.

Core Themes

Three core themes can be attributed to fascism, all of which coincide to a degree. They are as follows:

The ‘New Man’

While the ‘new man’ was not always discernible in fascist ideology, especially in Nazism, the concept was very much abroad. The search for the ‘new man’ called for new forms of potent and vigorous leadership. For Mussolini, this was to be found within a dynamic, youthful, and non-risk averse elite that had found its footing in war. For Hitler, new leadership was to be found in a ‘genius’ to help the undifferentiated crowds understand their world. The general gist was that an elite should oversee the nation and lead people who were not thought to be sufficiently well-versed in the intricacy of problems faced. Under robust leadership, fascists placed significance on forming support networks and assimilating man into the nation via a form of political manipulation. People were urged to join the national party and all forms of inter-linked organisational groups.

Fascism was a male-dominated ideology and as such the ‘new man’ logic is quite fitting. Nazism for instance, associated women with ‘Church, Kitchen and Children’ although its appeal to women went beyond the stereotypes invoked. Despite women being integrated into the

workforce and male-dominated spaces, in fascism their main role was in bringing forth a robust new generation that would bolster the nation.

Holistic Nationalism

Although nationalism was a fundamental tenet of fascist ideology, there was no fixed conception of what constituted the nation. The Italian fascist cultural nationalism contrasted with Nazi German biological racism providing different outlooks on the theme of nationalism. But even within this, there is no clear-cut distinction as Italy too implemented rules blacklisting Jews; furthermore, among leading Nazis, biological racism was not a uniform belief.

The Nazi conception of the nation was based on a 'spirit of the people' or *Volksgeist* which had continuity with the past and as such a deep rootedness. Hitler saw Jews as a threat to this formulation attempting to destroy the nation via capitalism and communism. Mussolini's Italian conception of the nation was as a work in progress in which the state and mythmaking was necessary to create Italians. The identity mythology that Italians are the proud descendants of Rome was meant to instil in them the need to fulfil one's duty to the nation as a people with a mighty heritage, and this involved sacrifice and not succumbing to decadence or miscegenation. Italian Fascists created a spiritual bond between the people and their land or *Strapaese*, similar to the Nazi blood and soil (*Blut and Boden*) ideology both of which logically extended to eugenics discourse and matters of breeding and underpinned biological racism.

The Quest for a Third Way

Fascists repudiated liberal and Marxist material concerns, however, economic well-being was a key component of the ideology. Economic prosperity would garner popular support for the party and ensure status as a significant power. Fascists looked to find a Third Way, between capitalism and socialism, in which to ensure economic success. Corporatism was their answer and within this all economic activity and organisation were under state control and employers and employees were both categorised together. All the constituent parts of the economy subordinated to the state and state-run syndicates ran production. This corporate state, observers note, functioned practically similarly like the Catholic church.

Adapted from Roger Eatwell, 'Fascism' in Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargeant and Marc Stears (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (OUP 2013)