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# Fascism

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# Fascism and Environmental History

Peter Staudenmaier

Entry on "Fascism" in *Encyclopedia of World Environmental History*, edited by Shepard Krech III, John McNeill, and Carolyn Merchant (New York: Routledge, 2004), 517-21

Relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the environmental profile of fascist regimes and movements. In part this is due to the paradoxical nature of the subject; the history of fascism's relationship to the natural environment is unusually complex and contradictory. While some fascists have adopted a back-to-nature approach, others have been utterly indifferent to environmental concerns. When they achieved state power, fascist regimes displayed a markedly ambivalent environmental record. From large-scale programs of ecological restoration and nature protection to unprecedented military and industrial assaults on the landscape across several continents, fascism represents one of the most enigmatic political and economic systems to have left its mark on environmental history.

## Understanding fascism

Fascism itself is notoriously difficult to define. Scholars have long disagreed over the basic contours of fascism as an ideology and as a movement, and the rare moments of consensus on the question "what is fascism" have been overshadowed by controversies about which groups and worldviews the term might encompass. Since the very concept of fascism is contested, any general description of its nature and significance will inevitably be partial and provisional, but nevertheless a necessary guide through the intricacies of fascist theory and practice.

Usually regarded as a right-wing phenomenon, fascism has also borrowed significantly from the left. It is both populist and elitist, combining mass mobilization with rigid hierarchies of command and obedience. Fascism is built around chauvinistic nationalism, extreme authoritarianism, and imperial ambitions for territorial expansion and conquest. It often invokes a cult of the supreme leader, glorifies militarism and war, and depends on the violent repression of opposition. Fascism preaches a seductive mythology of overcoming decadence through spiritual renewal and the restoration of past glory. It promises a spurious vision of community at the expense of racial, ethnic, and political scapegoats. Through a stylized politics of performance, spectacle, and ritual, fascist organizations placate their constituency with the illusion of vicarious power, while actual economic and social dominance typically remains concentrated in a few hands. Dictatorship is fascism's characteristic governmental form, accompanied by varying degrees of state control over all aspects of culture and public life.

As an economic system, fascism occupies an ambiguous territory between traditional capitalist mechanisms and the attempt to supersede them in a totalitarian new order. The emergence of fascist movements is itself a response to the crises and contradictions endemic to capitalism. An unsteady alliance with existing elites is generally necessary for fascists to come to power, and the first priority of new fascist regimes has frequently been the destruction of working-class institutions and an onslaught against the left. Once power has been consolidated, effective control over major economic decisions is commonly transferred to the organs of the fascist party, which become nearly indistinguishable from the state. Fascism seeks to resolve the contradictions of capitalism by imposing a false solidarity and an illusory unity on the fractured lives of people who may have little to gain from established political and economic arrangements.

Along with its guiding vision of national regeneration, a quasi-religious sense of salvation animates the fascist worldview. Fascism's alluring promises of a healthier future represent a form of perverted utopianism. It appeals to people who feel cheated and dispossessed, who yearn for a stable social order free of the chaos and uncertainty of modern life, who long to be part of a rejuvenated national organism. Against inauthenticity and superficiality, fascism offers an imaginary

transcendence, a cathartic redemption from the corruptions of the mundane world. Rejecting the humanist ideals of the Enlightenment, fascism celebrates irrationalism and myth. Although its ideology is eclectic and ephemeral, its real-world effects are frighteningly consistent: betrayal of those it purports to save, and the brutal exclusion and even extermination of those it regards as its enemies.

## **Fascism's History**

The history of fascism divides into two main periods: the era of classical fascism, in the first half of the twentieth century, and the era of neo-fascism, from 1945 onward. Classical fascism was primarily a European phenomenon, with indigenous fascist parties appearing in Portugal, France, Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Romania, Hungary, Norway, and elsewhere by the 1930s. The two countries where classical fascism had the greatest impact were Italy and Germany, but the ideology of fascism also took root in Latin America and North America as well as parts of Asia and Africa. Some scholars consider Imperial Japan, the ally of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany in World War II, and the government of Juan Peron (1895-1974) in Argentina, to be varieties of fascism. Fascist groups played a prominent role in the regime of Francisco Franco (1892- 1975) in Spain as well.

Although classical fascism was militarily defeated in 1945, its successors continue to play a significant role in the politics of the twenty-first century. Despite intense marginalization in the aftermath of Hitler's and Mussolini's downfall, neo-fascism experienced a marked resurgence in the late twentieth century. Parties rooted in neo-fascism belonged to the governments of India, Austria, and Italy at the beginning of the new millennium, and neo-fascist movements continued to gain adherents around the world as ostensible alternatives to the dislocations of "globalization." This ongoing revival suggests that the legacy of fascism remains a potent force to be reckoned with by all who take the history of environmental politics seriously.

## **Italian Fascism and the Environment**

The first fascist movement to attain state power was led by Benito Mussolini (1883-1945), who ruled Italy from 1922 to 1943.

Italian fascism was an unstable mix of modernizing and reactionary tendencies. It included a powerful pro-technology strand, and the fascist era coincided with a period of industrialization. An integral component of Italian fascist ideology was the notion of corporatism, an economic model that presented itself as a "third way" between capitalism and communism. In practice, corporatism failed to dislodge the structures of private enterprise, and in the wake of the 1929 worldwide depression it became increasingly irrelevant to the Italian economy. The combination of continued capitalist industrialization and a pro-technological bent did little good to the Italian environment, and when Mussolini's regime invaded Ethiopia in 1935, the ravages of war extended this bleak environmental record to Africa as well.

But Italian fascism also contained several proto-environmentalist strands. The so-called *Strapaese* tendency, for example, celebrated nature and rustic virtues as the counterpole to the corruptions of the city and of industrial society. Indeed this back-to-the-land impulse played an important role even before the fascists took power. In his 1921 article "Fascism and the Land" Mussolini declared that fascism's goal was "to reclaim the land, and with the land the men, and with the men the race" (Tassinari 1939, 14). Even the pro-environmental aspects of fascism were inextricably tied to its dubious dreams of racial and national redemption.

The ruralizing tendency was not confined to the level of ideology. The 1928 "Mussolini Act" launched a large-scale land improvement campaign which included measures to reduce urban sprawl and discourage monocropping in agriculture. Overseen by Arrigo Serpieri (1877-1960), the campaign emphasized protection of the soil and non-mechanized methods of cultivation. It was accompanied by reforestation measures and the establishment of wildlife preserves in the Alps and Apennines. Such efforts were offset, however, by other fascist projects like the "Battle of Grain," an attempt to increase wheat productivity which stimulated an increased reliance on machinery and artificial fertilizers. Perhaps the best-known instance of fascist policy toward the land was the draining of the Pontine Marshes south of Rome. The malarial fens were replaced by meadows and grasslands, as well as agricultural plots, and new villages were built as symbols of rejuvenated peasant values.

On balance, Italian fascist policy toward the land had decidedly mixed results. While erosion control, water quality, and public health sometimes improved, the regime's environmentally friendly programs were curtailed or abandoned when the exigencies of militarization became too pressing. Much of the impetus toward ruralization gave way before the urban and industrial trends that prevailed in many countries during the fascist era. Above all, Italian fascism's ecological proclivities were subordinated to its drive toward national aggrandizement and imperial expansion. Fascist ecology remained primarily fascist and only secondarily ecological.

## **National Socialism and the Environment**

Undoubtedly the most infamous variant of classical fascism was German National Socialism, commonly known as Nazism. This notoriety is somewhat misleading, since German fascism under the Third Reich differed from its Italian counterpart in several crucial respects. Unlike Italy, Germany was a fully industrialized country when fascism came to power in 1933. Under the leadership of Adolf Hitler (1889-1945), the Nazis implemented far-reaching programs of environmental protection while simultaneously embarking on massive industrial rearmament in preparation for an aggressive war which devastated much of Europe. While protecting flora, fauna, water, and soil, the Nazis exterminated millions of human beings.

Drawing on beliefs that were widespread in German environmentalist circles in the early twentieth century, Nazism pursued a politics of purity, tying ecological health to racial health. The foremost proponent of this "Blood and Soil" ideology was Minister of Agriculture Richard Walther Darré (1895-1953), a leader of the so-called "green wing" of the Nazi party. Other prominent Nazi environmentalists included Walther Schoenichen (1876-1956), director of the Reich Agency for Nature Protection, and Alwin Seifert (1890-1972), Reich Advocate for the Landscape. The ecofascist tendency fused love of nature with love of nation via mystical images of the sacred land as a German birthright. This fascist "religion of nature" suffused even the most practical environmental endeavors; one Nazi-era forester declared that the goal of professional forestry is to "preserve the eternal values of the German countryside and the life-renewing fountain of the German soul." (Heske 1938, 184)

Such views quickly found expression in official state policy. As soon as the Nazis took power they initiated legislation to preserve natural areas, protect endangered species, and institute ecologically sensitive land use planning. Laws prohibiting cruelty to animals, restricting commercial development of the countryside, and safeguarding wetlands and waterways were also passed. These measures were unprecedented at the time, and their breadth and innovation indicate the powerful influence of "green" tendencies within National Socialism.

## **Ecofascism in Practice**

The ecofascist aspect of Nazism culminated in two major practical achievements: the 1935 Reich Law for the Protection of Nature, and the state-sponsored campaign for organic agriculture. The 1935 law established wilderness reserves, conserved threatened habitats, and required that development projects be approved by the environmental protection authorities. Darré administered the organic farming initiative, promoting sustainable cultivation methods on an impressive scale even during wartime. Some historians dispute the effectiveness of these efforts, but they were extremely popular among German conservationists, who joined the Nazi party in disproportionate numbers.

Even a number of Nazi schemes for industrial development were guided by a proto-ecological orientation. The building of the Autobahn highway system, for example, was conducted with Seifert's oversight in a relatively environmentally sensitive manner, and both watershed preservation and habitat protection were taken into consideration. As in Italy, however, the "green" strand of German fascism faced considerable internal resistance and was offset by the enormous increase in war-related industrial output.

But even in the midst of carrying out its most barbaric crimes against humanity, Nazism retained a debased kind of ecological commitment. In 1942 Heinrich Himmler (1900-1945), leader of the Nazi paramilitary organization, the SS, decreed that respect for nature was one of the driving forces behind the removal of Jews and Slavs from territories conquered by Germany. In the midst of the war and the holocaust, in which the Nazis annihilated millions of people they considered racially inferior, Himmler established a network of organic



plantations at several of the most notorious concentration camps, including Dachau and Auschwitz. The Nazis' reverence for nature and contempt for humankind went hand in hand.

## **Neo-fascist Ecological Politics**

After the defeat of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, fascist movements continued to nurture philosophies inherited from Mussolini and Hitler while isolated at the extreme right of the political spectrum. This isolation diminished as memories of the horrors perpetrated by classical fascism faded and as mainstream political and economic systems became increasingly dissatisfying for larger numbers of people. Neo-fascist organizations and other far-right groups maintained ideological continuity with their predecessors in part through a renewed emphasis on ecological politics. From the 1970s onward, neo-fascists in Germany, France, Russia, Great Britain, the United States, and elsewhere attempted to reclaim the doctrine of natural order and respect for ecological imperatives championed by some of their fascist forebears.

In Germany the major organizational heir of the older fascist tradition, the National Democratic Party, took an early interest in environmental themes and made protection of nature a prominent part of its program in 1973. Another German group with fascist roots, the World League for the Protection of Life, opposed nuclear energy in the 1960s, when few others recognized the ecological issues involved. Led by former Nazi functionary Werner Georg Haverbeck (1909-1999), the group made significant inroads within conventional conservationist circles and helped introduce proto-fascist motifs into the modern environmental movement. An updated version of fascist ecological thought gradually gained currency and respectability.

## **Popularizing fascist environmentalism**

Such modernized forms of ecofascism typically drew together the natural and the national in a manner designed to appeal to non-fascists. One common strategy was to emphasize the threat that immigrants from impoverished countries ostensibly pose to the environmental sustainability of wealthy nations. Similar arguments found an increasingly receptive audience among established environmentalist groups in much of the developed world throughout



the 1990s. Another area of overlap between fascist and non-fascist approaches to ecological politics was the tendency to recast social issues in biological terms, thus obscuring the complex structural roots of environmental destruction. The mystical elements of ecofascist appeals to purity occasionally resurfaced as well. These and other factors contributed to the re-emergence of neo-fascist-derived themes within mainstream political discourse at the end of the twentieth century, as ecological concerns gained prominence within popular consciousness.

Whether there is a distinctly fascist ecology remains a matter of dispute. Some scholars stress the manifestly anti-ecological elements of fascism's economic and political practice, while others argue that its pro-nature predilections cannot be considered genuinely environmentalist. Some sympathizers of neo-fascism highlight the role of figures like Darré and Serpieri in order to rehabilitate the legacy of fascism, while anti-fascist critics point to the same figures as evidence of the potential abuse of ecological themes within an inhumane political framework. An emerging strand of analysis sees ecological themes as a crucial aspect of classical fascist politics and a potential inroad for quasi-fascist ideas within contemporary popular contexts.

These ongoing debates are likely to become more complicated as historical inquiry into the topic deepens. The record of fascism's interaction with the natural environment marks a decisive opportunity for learning from historical experience, and can be expected to generate challenging questions for students of environmental history for some time to come.

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