

## Introduction: Why Fascism is a ‘Key Concept’

### What then is fascism?

Some sixteen centuries ago, St Augustine of Hippo wrote in Book XI of his *Confessions*: ‘What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know.’ A similar problem is posed by fascism. Most people who have been educated in the West instinctively ‘know what fascism is’ until they have to explain it to someone else, at which point the attempted definition tends to get increasingly convoluted and incoherent (an assertion that could be tested as a seminar exercise!). The rationale for this addition of this title to Polity’s ‘Key Concepts in Political Theory’ series is that not only is it impossible to simply to state ‘what fascism is’, but, a century after the word came into being to refer to a new Italian political movement and programme, its definition as a term of political and historical analysis is still bewilderingly varied and hotly debated. Hence the need for this ‘beginner’s guide’, conceived for those studying at any level in the historical or political sciences who have reached the point where they have been recommended (or, even better, spontaneously feel the need for) a synoptic account of fascist studies, a relatively compact and accessible definition of fascism, as well as a brief overview of its main features, history, and development/evolution, when this definition is applied to actual policies, movements and events.

Study guides in the humanities run the risk of being frustratingly abstract and opaque, reminiscent of an instruction manual for a flat-pack table tennis table which only makes sense only once the table has been assembled, leaving some mysterious nuts, bolts and washers left over (I speak from experience). Nevertheless, I hope that what follows will demonstrate that, while fascism may be a frustratingly elusive topic when it comes to identifying the definitional features that distinguish it from other forms of far-right movements and regimes, perhaps for that very reason it is also can also be a highly absorbing and fulfilling one to study. In the first place, fascism supplies an outstanding example of the sound academic principle that, at an advanced level, no-one can study or write the history of any aspect of a major topic in the human sciences effectively without first clarifying its conceptual contours and establishing a ‘working definition’ with due regard to how the discipline has

approached it in the past. Second, if the core argument of this volume is accepted, a fascinating narrative emerges of how fascism, since its inauspicious beginnings in March 1919 as a new but insignificant political force launched by a motley assembly of Italian war veterans, grew in the interwar period into a devastating ‘world-historical’ force in the interwar period, and continues to impact on contemporary history in a number of ways, despite the radical decline in its support base and potency since 1945. Finally, even if you disagree with the thesis put forward in this volume here, it should at least help you to locate where you stand in the ongoing debate about fascism, to formulate what you find unconvincing in what has become the dominant ‘school of thought’ within comparative fascist studies, and to present your own take on fascism more confidently within the context of an essay project or formal programme of studies.

### **Why fascism is not like a duck**

Yet the way ‘fascism’ is bandied about so liberally and assertively in public discourse could suggest that dedicating a whole volume (even a thin one like this) just to clarifying its connotations and surveying the type of historical phenomena it embraces is somewhat ‘over the top’. For many journalists and political commentators, it is clearly self-evident what fascism means. At the height of the US presidential campaign of 2016, for example, Republican candidate Gary Johnson, when asked if Donald Trump was a fascist, replied cryptically: ‘It walks like a duck, quacks like a duck.’ Leaving aside the allusion to the cartoon character Donald Duck, this reply implied that it could be directly deduced from Trump’s political pronouncements and behaviour that he was indeed ‘a duck’, in this case a fascist (Pager 2016). But, as should become obvious after a moment’s reflection, at least to readers of this book if not to presidential candidates or their interviewers, fascism cannot be compared to an aquatic animal. A duck is an objective, living animal that can be defined biologically in terms of its empirically established family or genus (*Anatidae*) in the animal kingdom, and comprises several objectively identifiable variants (species). ‘Duck’ is thus a *taxonomic* concept within the natural sciences about whose application to phenomena in the real world there exists an expert consensus, at least within the professional discipline of zoology – though it is worth noting that even the duck

family is prone to be confused by untrained eyes with several types of water bird from other branches of evolution that look similar, such as loons, coots, divers, grebes and gallinules.

By contrast, those concerned with the philosophy of the human sciences have shown conclusively that there can be no equivalent consensus about the definition of ‘fascism’ –, or of any other generic concept used in making sense of politics, society or history.<sup>1</sup> It follows that the meaning of fascism, as of every generic ‘key concept’ in history, social, or political science, is bound to be a subject of debate and disagreement, and any scholarly consensus about its meaning is inevitably both partial (as more research illuminates new facts, relationships and issues, and identifies new topics, patterns and interconnections), and ephemeral (as both history and the historiography move on). This is why fascist studies will always be ‘work in progress’, and the key generic concept that lies at their heart will always continue to be contested as long as academics consider its characterization a worthy object of intellectual effort.

### **The narrative history of ‘fascism’ that emerges**

It may help prepare the reader for what follows to outline the particular historical narrative that emerges in this volume on the basis of how fascism is being conceptualized. The first thing to note is that this volumethe book will follow standard practice by restricting upper- case ‘Fascism’ to Mussolini’s movement and regime, and using lower- case ‘fascism’ for the vast family of movements and associated phenomena to which it gave rise in many other countries, and which is known collectively as ‘generic fascism’. It is generic fascism as a key concept in politics that is the subject of this bookhere. Once its most commonly used scholarly definition (to be established in chapter Three3) is applied, fascism can be seen as playing a central role in shaping a number of momentous events that occurred in the early 20<sup>th</sup> twentieth century as a direct or indirect result of the alliance of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: the war they jointly fought as founders of the ‘Berlin—Rome Axis’ against many Western democracies between 1939 and 1945; the alliance of the Third Reich and the Soviet Union from 1939- to 1941, when Central and Eastern Europe were divided into two ‘spheres of influence’ in accordance with the Molotov—Ribbentrop Pact; and the persecution, forced migration, enslavement, starvation, and systematic mass murder of countless millions of civilians which ensued when the

Third Reich unilaterally terminated the Pact on 22 June 1941 with a large-scale attack on Russian positions in Poland.

After the Nazi invasion of Russia and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, which brought the USA United States into the war, the European conflict triggered by the rise of fascism, and consolidated by collaboration with home-grown fascist support in Nazi-occupied countries and pro-fascist governments elsewhere, quickly escalated into a truly global one, with major theatres of operations in Europe and in Asia, on land, on oceans and in skies. No wonder some historians have seen fascism, along with communism, as the dominant factor in shaping history from 1918 to 1945 to the point that they talk of a 'fascist era', or of fascism as 'an epochal movement'. There is some sense in this, since, even if only three fully-fledged fascist regimes were established –, namely those in Italy under Benito Mussolini, in Germany under Adolf Hitler, and in Croatia under Anton Pavelić, – and only the first two in peace-time – numerous movements trying to emulate them sprang up in Europeanized countries, some serving as puppet governments and thus proving vital to Nazism's success in maintaining control of the 'New European Order' for as long as it did. In addition, a number of dictatorships 'fascitized' themselves in Europe and Latin America as a mark of fascism's apparent hegemony and its prospects of ultimate victory in the modern political age.

After 1945, the political space for fascism was drastically reduced, and the concept itself can be argued to have long since lost its 'key' status in the contemporary political world. But we shall see that, when an ideological definition of fascism is applied to post-1945 history, rather than one that stresses its interwar manifestation as a uniformed paramilitary movement or totalitarian state, is applied to post-1945 history, it highlights the existence at any one time of many hundreds of formations and activities (whether in the form of parties, movements, groupuscules, websites or fanatical loners) dedicated to the core ideals of their 'classic' interwar models, albeit significantly revised and updated so as to combat the new enemies of their ultimate cause. Moreover, the persistence of fascist fanaticism about awakening slumbering forces of extreme nationalism and racism, even in just one isolated individual, also poses a continuing risk of causing sporadic but potentially devastating terrorist attacks on civil society. This suggests that many thousands of disoriented individuals who feel unable to tolerate what they see as the cultural chaos or 'decadence'

of the modern world persist in seeing the defeat of the Axis powers as a historical catastrophe.

Undaunted, they still long to play a part in inaugurating a new fascist era, or at least in keeping fascist ideals alive, by exploiting any situation or technology which allows them to transmit the urgency of the need for national or racial rebirth based on their ideals of a more homogeneous, more heroic, more epic civilization.

### **Why More reasons to include a dedicate a volume on to fascism in a series on as a ‘Key Concepts in Political Theory’?**

But ‘Fascism’ deserves to be included in Polity’s series not just for its decisive impact on the course of interwar history, or because, even if the fascist utopia lives out a subsistence existence in marginalized political counter-cultures all over the Westernized world, it can still inspire acts of extreme violence. It is also important for it the term to be used precisely and forensically wherever possible because of two wide-spread misuses, or abuses, of it as a concept that have seeped into public discourse and into the language of the media, compromising its precision and analytical value. On the one hand, it has been widely reduced to a colloquialism for any political system, state policy or example of social mores that is held to limit personal freedom, individual choice and self-expression in a manipulative or authoritarian spirit. The campaign to raise awareness of global warming, the state-sponsored fluoridation of water, the machinations of big business, the bureaucracy of the European Union, government attempts to encourage the public to stop smoking, political correctness, and the damage that the fashion industry does to self-image and healthy eating habits, even the state taxation system, – all have all been tarred with the brush of fascism. Nor is this dilution of the term’s meaning unique to the West. In 2002 the Muslim creationist, Adnan Oktar, also known as Harun Yahya (2002), published *Fascism: The Bloody Ideology of Darwinism*.

A second area in which the term is subject to distortion is in political commentary, debate and protest. To call opponents ‘fascist’ instantly delegitimizes and demonizes them in the eyes of their critics, whether they are the Republican Tea Party, President Obama, Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Saddam Hussein, Bashar al-Assad, the state of Israel, the US federal state, the Brussels Eurocracy, or any anti-socialist dictatorship, anti-populist or excessively populist force. After 9/11, it became

common for political Islam (Islamism, or, more precisely, global Salafi jihad), to be referred to as ‘Islamofascism’, a use sanctioned by George W. Bush, and m. More recently, during the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, both sides called each other fascists. Meanwhile, some journalists writing for the ‘quality press’ assure us that China has mutated from a communist into a fascist state (e.g. Becker 2002). The most serious effect of such a sloppy use of the term ‘fascism’, whatever its cathartic effect as an pejorative or expletive term, is that it has contributed to the profound confusion that prevails about how to describe the advocates of particular right-wing forms of democratic politics who attack multi-culturalism, the free movement of labour, the Islamization of society, big government, and international bodies such as the EU and the UN, but do so *democratically*, from within the institutions of representative government that they have no intention of dismantling. The most current prevailing term for this increasingly important current in contemporary politics, ‘populism’, raises problematic issues of its own, not least because it is frequently conflated with ‘fascism’, and it will be necessary to return to it in chapter Five<sup>5</sup>.

Because of these two main areas in which the analytical, heuristic value of ‘fascism’ as a concept – its value for enabling analytical research to be carried out coherently in terms of definition, methodology, and causal explanation – has been eroded and degraded through lack of precision, considerable space will be have to be devoted in this volume to establishing the conceptual framework which will be used to outline its pre- and post-war history, but,. However, as we have indicated, this can take place only after the ‘pre-history’ of contemporary attempts to refine its definition and establish its connotations and significance as a concept has been sketched.

### **The structure of this book**

The structure of the book emerges naturally from this agenda. Chapter Two 2 looks at the rich history of Marxist interpretations of fascism, the first of which were published two years before Mussolini actually became *duce*, and also provides a sample of the deep confusion that prevailed for decades in fascist studies outside Marxism on definitional issues. The result of this acute lack of consensus was a proliferation of idiosyncratic theories of the term which found minimal resonance or practical application among either historians or political scientists.

Chapter Three 3 then proposes a particular model, or what Max Weber termed ‘ideal type’,<sup>2</sup> of generic fascism, whose adoption by a growing number of researchers all over the world since the 1990s has resulted for the first time in a constant flow output of impressive articles, monographs and collections of essays on aspects of generic fascism or particular movements with a high level of internal coherence and complementarity within the field. These two chapters thus offer a sort of ‘narrative history’ of the long, and eventually successful, struggle to provide the ‘fascism’ with conceptual and definitional coherence. It has been deliberately organized and shaped to prepare the reader for the particular connotations and applications the term acquires in this volume the book. (It goes without saying that any other expert would have given the term contrasting conceptual contours reflecting his or her own interpretation, in some cases producing a radically different volume in the series.).

Chapter Four 4 then applies the theoretical approach that has just been established to the interwar period by providing many examples of the way particular fascist phenomena always combine common ideological elements identified by the generic model with highly diverse and idiosyncratic features, a synthesis which gives each individual manifestation of generic fascism its unique texture and ‘personality’ within the historical process.

Following this, Chapter Five 5 offers a series of brief case- studies in a synoptic overview of the evolution of post-war and contemporary fascism to illustrate the sheer variety of the species that can be seen as perpetuating the genus to this day (that is, if the ‘working definition’ of it proposed in this volume is accepted). The chapter hopes to convince the reader that, despite the fact that even though the ‘era of fascism’ died symbolically with the shooting of Mussolini by partisans near the shore of Lake Como and with Hitler’s suicide in his Berlin bunker in April 1945, their dreams they held of an ultranationalist new order live endure on an international scale that would have been inconceivable to them, though often with forms, modes of transmission, contents, tactics and utopian goals which would be barely recognizable to either of them.

The volume book ends with a postscript (chapter Six 6) which suggests the key principles of comparative fascist studies to be taken away by students for their own work. It then suggests recommends how even those new to this specialist area might be able to make a substantive

contribution to its further progress in the future through the deliberate choice of topics and research questions which are informed by the latest trends and issues evident from recent publications, to which this slim volume can only allude. If they choose to do so, they would be joining an academic community engaged in a sub-discipline which, after a long period of adolescence, seems finally to be entering a dynamic stage of productive maturity and truly international dynamism. Long gone are the days when one of the most eminent anglophone experts on Italian Fascism of the time reacted to my sheepish confession that I was writing a doctoral thesis on fascist ideology with the encouraging words: 'My boy, there is no such thing. Have another glass of sherry'.