

THE CHANGING FACE OF FASCISM



In 1942, at the age of ten, Celebrated Italian novelist and philosopher, **Umberto Eco** received the First Provincial Award of *Ludi Juveniles* (a voluntary, compulsory competition for young Italian Fascists—that is, *for every young Italian*). He wrote: “I elaborated with rhetorical skill on the subject ‘**Should we die for the glory of Mussolini and the immortal destiny of Italy?**’ My answer was positive. I was a smart boy. I spent two of my early years among the SS, Fascists, Republicans, and partisans shooting at one another, and I learned how to dodge bullets. It was good exercise.”

Eco grew up under **Mussolini's** fascist regime, which “*was certainly a dictatorship, but it was not totally totalitarian, not because of its mildness but rather because of the philosophical weakness of its ideology. Contrary to common opinion, fascism in Italy had no special philosophy.*” It did, however, have style, “*a way of dressing—far more influential, with its black shirts, than Armani, Benetton, or Versace would ever be.*” The dark humor of the comment indicates a critical consensus about fascism. As a form of extreme nationalism, it ultimately takes on the contours of whatever national culture produces it.

Can we use words like “**fascism**,” with fidelity to the meaning of that word in world history? The term, after all, devolved decades after World War II into the trite expression *fascist pig*, writes Umberto Eco in his 1995 essay “**Ur-Fascism**,” “*used by American radicals thirty years later to refer to a cop who did not approve of their smoking habits.*” In the forties, on the other hand, the fight against fascism was a “*moral duty for every good American.*”

It may seem to tax one word to make it account for so many different cultural manifestations of authoritarianism, across Europe and even South America. Italy may have been “*the first right-wing dictatorship that took over a European country,*” and got to name the political system. But Eco is perplexed “*why the word fascism became a synecdoche, that is, a word that could be used for different totalitarian movements.*” For one thing, he writes, fascism was a *fuzzy* totalitarianism, a collage of different philosophical and political ideas, a beehive of contradictions.

While Eco is firm in claiming “*There was only one Nazism*,” he says, “*the fascist game can be played in many forms, and the name of the game does not change.*” Eco reduces the qualities of what he calls “**Ur-Fascism**, or **Eternal Fascism**” down to 14 “*typical*” features. “*These features, cannot be organized into a system; many of them contradict each other, and are also typical of other kinds of despotism or fanaticism. But it is enough that one of them be present to allow fascism to coagulate around it.*”

- i. **The cult of tradition.** “One has only to look at the syllabus of every fascist movement to find the major traditionalist thinkers. The Nazi gnosis was nourished by traditionalist, syncretistic, occult elements.”
- ii. **The rejection of modernism.** “The Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, is seen as the beginning of modern depravity. In this sense Ur-Fascism can be defined as irrationalism.”
- iii. **The cult of action for action's sake.** “Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation.”
- iv. **Disagreement is treason.** “The critical spirit makes distinctions, and to distinguish is a sign of modernism. In modern culture the scientific community praises disagreement as a way to improve knowledge.”

- v. **Fear of difference.** “The first appeal of a fascist or prematurely fascist movement is an appeal against the intruders. Thus Ur-Fascism is racist by definition.”
- vi. **Appeal to social frustration.** “One of the most typical features of the historical fascism was the appeal to a frustrated middle class, a class suffering from an economic crisis or feelings of political humiliation, and frightened by the pressure of lower social groups.”
- vii. **The obsession with a plot.** “Thus at the root of the Ur-Fascist psychology there is the obsession with a plot, possibly an international one. The followers must feel besieged.”
- viii. **The enemy is both strong and weak.** “By a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak.”
- ix. **Pacifism is trafficking with the enemy.** “For Ur-Fascism there is no struggle for life but, rather, life is lived for struggle.”
- x. **Contempt for the weak.** “Elitism is a typical aspect of any reactionary ideology.”
- xi. **Everybody is educated to become a hero.** “In Ur-Fascist ideology, heroism is the norm. This cult of heroism is strictly linked with the cult of death.”
- xii. **Machismo and weaponry.** “Machismo implies both disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of nonstandard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality.”
- xiii. **Selective populism.** “There is in our future a TV or Internet populism, in which the emotional response of a selected group of citizens can be presented and accepted as the Voice of the People.”
- xiv. **Ur-Fascism speaks Newspeak.** “All the Nazi or Fascist schoolbooks made use of an impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning.”

Digital Fascism?

Unlike, classical fascism which used printed newspapers and radio, Digital Fascism uses the greatest propaganda machine the world has ever seen - transmitting its hate messages through the Internet. The so-called social media are in fact anti-social media. They aren't socially organized. Instead, a few monopoly corporations run Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and the rest, according to their self-serving ideology. They are simply technical instruments that allow people to connect.

There is a conflict between an open society with free speech at its core, on one side, and a closed one where right-wing extremists use the same online platforms to destroy it. As Hitler's Reich Minister of Propaganda, **Joseph Goebbels**, once said, “*It will always remain one of the best jokes of democracy, that it gave its deadly enemies the means by which it was destroyed.*” Today, it seems that democracy will give its deadly enemies the means which these fascists will use to destroy democracy.

Yet digital fascism clings on to core elements of the classic ideology of Mussolini's Italy or **Franco's** Spain. Found, for example, in the all-important fear of an external racial threat, male chauvinism, ultra-nationalism, the eternal enemy, Even though the way fascism's propaganda was constructed meant that it could never remain locked in the epoch of European classical fascism (1920s-1940s), some overarching elements of its ideology remain pretty much the same because the minds and lives of most people in frustrating, disappointing times remain the same.

Just as capitalism has changed from the days of **Adam Smith** and **Karl Marx** so has fascism. Eighteenth-century liberal capitalism became mass-consumerist capitalism after the Industrial Revolution. Keynesian capitalism (1940s to 1970s) became (1980s-20221) neoliberal capitalism because of the break-up of French, British



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and other Empires, the dominance of the USA after World War Two and the rise of the EU.

Eventually, given the digital revolution, classical fascism had to morph into digital fascism. Just like capitalism, fascism is not a once-and-for-all defined system. It changes over time. Neither capitalism nor fascism is a *fait accompli*. They are not closed cases.

Just as classical fascism did a hundred years ago, digital fascism uses new technologies to its advantage. When moving pictures came along, Italian fascism used it, just as did German Nazism. Classical fascism relied on a brand new machine: radio. Today, its offspring relies on computers, tablets, iPads and mobile phones.

Yet the purpose of fascist propaganda always remains the same: Mass manipulation of the hearts and minds of the population. Digital fascism uses these new technologies even more successfully because these gadgets allow right-wing extremists to transmit their hateful ideology inexpensively.

With this another significant change came along. Digital fascism presents itself in a horizontal format, whereas classical fascism required charismatic and ruthless leaders. Today every little and often rather tin-pot right-wing extremist can produce and transmit conspiracy fantasies, rumors, invented stories, alternative facts – in a word: propaganda – on social networks. Digital fascism no longer needs a central, hierarchical, and vertically structured apparatus.

Digital fascism operates without third party control. There is no editor, no sub-editor, no radio host to go through. In other words, digital fascism is a self-promoting echo-chamber of lies and fake news and it is driven by a massive number of right-wing amateurs who make heavy use of YouTube's motto: **Broadcast yourself.**

Of course, without editing, fact-checking and without journalism — digital fascism thrives on political half-truths, bull shit, accidental misinformation, deliberate disinformation, apocalyptic end-of-the-white-race delusions, rumors, innuendo, hate campaigns, falsehoods, crank palaver, and, of course, the infamous conspiracy theories which in reality have never been “theories” but are conspiracy fantasies.

All this noise aids digital fascism's infowars in which made up nonsense is positioned against facts in an attempt to create doubt, dizziness and confusion to win the rating war against digital fascism's ultimate enemy: mainstream media. Both classical and digital fascism cannot exist without “the” enemy. Enemy thinking hardens the borders of echo-chambers in which the only opinion that is permitted is the opinion that serves the ultimate goal of all fascism. In the echo-chambers of digital fascism, cognitive dissonance works very well. Old and new fascism do not rely on facts but on allegiance to fascism's ideology. Everything that does not fit into the ideology is defamed as “opinion dictatorship” run by some elusive but all-powerful liberal elite. The Deep State.

Just like right-wing populism, digital fascism positions the common man against this invisible elite who run what right-wing populism and digital fascism call “the” establishment media. Unlike the established media, digital fascism isn't run from the top. Instead, it presents itself as a grassroots movement, so the ideology of mass mobilization under digital fascism goes underground. **Drain the swamp.**

Lacking a more or less coherent party ideology like classical Mussolini's fascism, digital fascism's propaganda is largely defined through a loose patchwork of world views, un-thought-through opinions, croaking attitudes and vacuous right-wing ideas. The disadvantage of not having a coherent party ideology is more than compensated through the advantage of being able to entice a vast array of people into the ideological orbit of digital fascism.

Of course, once trust in reality is devalued and debilitated, faith in quality media can also easily be undermined, so that the victims of “gaslighting” that is, those people fooled into thinking that it is their own weakness that is causing the readers or listeners to experience cognitive dissonance and epistemological confusion. It is then an easy slide to discover a calming and consoling welcome in right-wing platforms who sell easy solutions and plausible fantasies.

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