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Studying Inter-war Fascism in Epochal and Diachronic Terms: Ideological Production, Political Experience and the Quest for 'Consensus'

When G. Allardyce published his famous polemical article 'What Fascism is Not', in which he endeavoured to demolish the heuristic value of any generic definition of the concept of fascism,[1] very few people could have envisaged the dramatic revival of academic interest in the comparative study of fascism in the 1990s. Allardyce's diatribe was emblematic of the then prevalent historiographical view that the various inter-war dictatorships in Europe presented more (and more serious) divergences than actual similarities, and that the generic framework of analysis should have been dropped in favour of individual accounts in their specific national context. Overwhelmed by the breadth and diversity of empirical evidence, historians appeared much more alert to, and fascinated by, individual characteristics than the challenge of constructing a general model for banding together this unique historic experience in Europe. It simply seemed extremely hard to entrench the intellectual validity of the term 'fascism' vis-à-vis the significantly more acceptable mainstream categories of nationalism, authoritarianism, conservatism and populism. The concept, just like the ideology that it attempted to codify, could not claim its own autonomous position in an otherwise overcrowded colony of well established '-isms'!

It took historical research another decade to abandon its previous maximalist efforts to produce all-embracing, 'ideal' categories and to turn instead to a minimalist methodological solution — to debate the ideological essence of fascism while, allowing ample space for accommodating its various national

manifestations.[2] Distance from the events prompted a more dis-
passionate view of the recent past, which could at last concede an
otherwise self-evident truth: that even the most atrocious,
uncomfortable phenomena of human pathology usually originate
from commonplace, and far less abominable causes and inten-
tions. The first major development in this direction pertained to
the understanding of 'fascist ideology'. A group of scholars
(Nolte, Griffin, Eatwell, Payne, Gentile, Sternhell and Soucy,[3] to
name but the most prominent) asserted that fascist ideology
could be coherent, claim its own place in the intellectual history
of modern Europe and derive its main themes from long-term
national traditions. This novel proposition amounted to a pre-
viously unthinkable challenge to the most profound historio-
graphical orthodoxies in the early study of fascism — that it was
a historic 'parenthesis' in the course of national and European
past, that it was devoid of any intellectual substance and that it
originated from alien, pathological ideological currents that had
nothing to do with mainstream beliefs and aspirations.[4]

In defending their interest in the intellectual dimension of
fascism, historians who attempted to construct an 'ideological
minimum' of fascism maintained that they were simply replicat-
ing what was common ground as regards all other '-isms'. In fact,
their task was significantly more formidable for, unlike socialism
or liberalism, the experience of fascism was a kaleidoscope of
distinct national responses to a special set of historic circum-
stances (or, even more accurately, to national *perceptions* of these
circumstances). This accentuated the significance of country
variations and rendered the attempts to produce concise defini-
tions far less all-embracing than similar projects describe, for
instance, the international nature of socialism. Yet, emphasis on
the intellectual origins and postulates of fascism made very good
use of historic hindsight, codifying a puzzling set of comparable
experiences in constructive and plausible interpretive models.
At last, fascism could make sense on its own, be that as a
'palingenetic form of hyper-nationalism',[5] a 'holistic third-way
nationalism'[6] or a 'populist, socialist but anti-Marxist, revolu-
tionary nationalist project'.[7]

These and other models of generic fascism have been reviewed
in detail elsewhere. They tend to vary in emphasis, or sometimes
disagree on a series of specific definitional aspects and emphases.
But they can also claim a degree of what Griffin has called 'con-

sensus', converging upon the crucial importance of nationalism, 'third way' ideas, populism, organic conceptions of the nation and revolutionary techniques. The aim of this article is not to contest their intellectual validity or re-arrange their emphases. Rather, it is to argue that, in the same way that the study of fascism has greatly benefited from this more systematic approach to fascist ideology as a conceptual 'ideal type', it also needs to engage more fruitfully with the dynamics of change in the ideas and actions of inter-war fascism, the way that beliefs were shaped or transformed under the experience of power or of external stimuli, and the implications of these elements for understanding the place of fascism in time (origins, epochal nature, etc.). The recent and lively exchange of ideas on this subject has exposed a paradigmatic clash between two different perceptions and methodological frameworks for the study of fascism: one, that is rooted in the history of ideas and cultural trends that deals with fascism as a coherent, diachronic intellectual system, regardless of its subsequent adaptations and distortions in practice; the other, that is derived from the specific experience of inter-war fascism, with a heavy emphasis on examining the political choices that movements and regimes made. Instead, this article asserts that this persistent definitional dichotomy has the potential to make a virtue out of a current state of confusion and divergence — not through the declared victory of one over the other, but through a heightened awareness of the current absence of a methodological/conceptual common ground and the need to reclaim one. Essentially, the current debate on the nature of 'fascism' has gone a long way towards establishing the conceptual and heuristic parameters within which some sort of consensus *may* be meaningfully sought and perhaps attained. When treated in dialectical terms, indeed these two levels of analysis may provide deeper insight into, first, how inter-war fascism constituted a period- and context-specific articulation of a broad ideological genus, shaped under the dialectics of ideas, actions and reactions to the outside world; and, second, how the experience of this 'fascism' can be exploited fruitfully in order to shed light on the diachronic mould from which it derived, historically and intellectually.

The 'Concept': Fascism as Ideology as a Borrowed Utopia for Radical Nationalism

Any generic definition of fascist ideology, including even the nowadays terse aphorisms, locate fascism's ideological coordinates in relation to the major established political doctrines of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fascism is usually described as non-mainstream (that is, non-conservative and non-liberal) nationalism — qualified by a plethora of different adjectives such as 'holistic', 'organic', 'ultra', 'extreme' and 'radical'. Its understanding as a 'third way' doctrine insinuates its intention to oppose and transcend socialism and liberalism. Similarly, the dismissal of its function as 'counter revolutionary' (particularly by Marxist analysts)[8] again suggests that fascism was instrumental in the efforts of the capitalist system to curb socialist mobilization, while its alleged 'nihilism' implies a rejection of the humanistic and progressivist legacy of the Enlightenment.[9] Finally, its interpretation as 'dissident Marxist socialism' suggests both the ideological debts of fascism to the wider socialist tradition and its parallel rebuff of the marxist–bolshevik rendition of revolutionary left-wing politics.

All these — and many more — attempts to offer concise but precise definitions of fascism *qua* ideology have lent considerable validity to J.J. Linz's view of fascism as a 'late-comer' in an already overcrowded spectrum of political ideologies.[10] The historiographical tendency to determine its intellectual profile in terms of antithesis to established doctrines betrays fascism's origins as an ideology borne out of crisis, its essentially activist character and its largely negative originality, as a novel synthesis of rejections.[11] At the same time, the methodological importance of this type of brief generic definition lies in the shifting emphasis away from the all-embracing, exhaustive models of fascism to minimalist paradigms which are intended to be pliable enough to accommodate the diversity of features that are exhibited by numerous 'fascist' case-studies. Needless to say, such projects have been treated with overt scepticism by those who still profess the validity of a narrative approach to fascism as the history of its actions only, thus rejecting the genericists' tendency to attribute coherence and originality to fascist ideology.[12] Yet debates and disagreements have also punctuated the efforts to construct a plausible 'ideological minimum' of fascism. What is at stake here is locating that *differ-*

entia specifica of fascist ideology that may encapsulate the essence of most 'fascist' phenomena (thinkers, movements, regimes) without lowering the threshold of fascist specificity too much to render the minimum too abstract — and, therefore, analytically useless.

Ironically, the efforts to entrench ideological originality and congruity of fascism have also established it as a genus, however unique, of something much larger and well established. G.L. Mosse has depicted fascism as a 'scavenger', appropriating selectively elements from existing ideologies and traditions.[13] It was originality of synthesis, not novel ideas, that gave fascism its distinct ideological contour. However, every synthesis must have a defining underlying theme, whose validity defies the test of time and changing circumstances. It might require revisions in its techniques of implementation, or updating in light of subsequent developments; but its ethical authority and value have to be accepted *in toto* before it can be adapted as the dominant theme of the synthesis. Which was, then, the ideological foundation of the 'fascist synthesis'? The majority of studies on the nature of fascism tend to focus on *nationalism*. After all, one of the most pivotal elements of the mythical core of the fascist discourse was the constant glorification of the nation as the most superior and vital force in human history.[14] Therefore, fascism can be historicized as a unique genus of nationalism — unique in its intensity, idealism and, above all, holism. Unlike conservatism or liberalism, fascism did not aim to arrogate nationalism randomly and then subject it to the rationale of *Realpolitik* as a secondary device for engineering social support. Instead, it endorsed the ethical superiority of nationalist utopianism and projected it as the unquestionable axiom of political action.[15] The novelty of fascism lay in its determination to bring nationalism to the heart (and forefront) of social and political life, subordinating all other considerations to its overriding requirements — not the other way round. It perceived nationalism as a rejuvenating force that should permeate every aspect of national life, overwrite every other loyalty, and underpin every individual or collective action.

The utopian essence of fascist ideology lay in its belief that the nation is not and has never been — but must become — a total reality. The fascist prescription for the nation, advocated with an unwavering sense of moral authoritarianism that pervades any teleological discourse, embraced a score of different layers of nationalism. It denoted people (the community of all those who

shared the national ideal — by culture, blood or more frequently both — united under the authority of one state); territory (the lands that the nation could claim due to their historic, spiritual or geopolitical importance for the national community); society (a community living in unison and in the service of the collective good, but also united against national foes, both inside the state and outside, seeking their marginalization from national life); culture (in fact, a much wider concept than its conventional use suggests, pertaining both to artistic expression and ritualized collective activities that aim to glorify the nation's historic legacy while celebrating its newfound dynamism and purity, devoid of any harmful 'alien' influences or divisive references); and politics (a direct form of spiritual communication between the people and the leadership, encompassing, interpreting and promoting the collective national good; a supremely activist style of politics that subordinates practical considerations to the utopian vision of an 'ideal nation').

This form of utopian hyper-nationalism, in spite of its emphasis on modern themes such as mass politics, technology, productivism and constant (if apolitical) mobilization, was inherently backward-looking, with a plethora of antimodern themes. Max Horkheimer's classic study, *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment* underscored fascism's attack on the positivist stance of liberal philosophy since the eighteenth century.[16] In dismissing positivism, fascism did not simply express its preference for a regressive model of society, based on the ideals of homogeneity, wholeness and ethnic exclusivity;[17] it also declared its determination to reset the clock of recent human history,[18] to eradicate the social effects of liberalism's commitment to diversity and individualism, and of socialism's materialist/internationalist view of history. In order to promote its utopian vision of an *ideal Fatherland*, fascism chose to reclaim an invented ideal form of life (a mixture of glorification of a specific past and utopian aspirations for the future) through aggressive 'modern' techniques of total control and forced social engineering; not to implement its project in dialectical relation to dominant features and values of the present (liberal toleration of diversity, ethical neutrality, the class-based socialist discourse, the move towards more democratic, participatory and open forms of political life).

The problem with this and other comparable 'ideological minima' of fascism that subscribe to the centrality of nationalism is

that, exactly because they are perfunctory minima, they offer only limited insight into the various country-specific permutations of fascism — which tend to be largely different. For example, the European countries that developed some form of popular fascist ideas ranged from advanced capitalist systems to backward agrarian ones, from states with a liberal tradition to systems with persistent authoritarian structures, from countries that emerged victorious from the First World War to those with strong revisionist ambitions, and from largely secular societies to systems with strong Catholic or Orthodox morality. The failure of the 1934 Montreux Conference for the establishment of a kind of Fascist International exposed the yawning gap between what each fascist delegation perceived as national revival and the best socio-political framework through which to pursue it.[19] Due to its fundamental reliance on the country-specific content of nationalism, indigenous fascism itself begged to differ from one state to the other. Therefore, it is more accurate to describe fascism as an ideological *trend* towards nationalist utopia, radicalizing and systematizing (rather than inventing) the myths that had underpinned native nationalist traditions in the longer term, but had remained in the sphere of the unfeasible, subordinated to the logic of rational policy-making. In generic terms, this trend was unique in the sense that it aspired to bring to the forefront of politics an essentially anti-rational, mythical core of values and objectives, a 'new conception of life', as Mussolini stated in the *Doctrine of Fascism* (1932),[20] aiming to pervade every aspect of society, politics, economics and culture. It was also unique in that it married the anti-rationality of its vision with a highly rational and effective use of resources (including modern technology) and devices (populism, mass mobilization, social engineering)[21] in a way that only socialism had managed previously, albeit in a fundamentally different direction. Yet, the fundamentally variable externalization of fascism in each country does limit the descriptive value of minimum definitions of fascism *qua* generic ideology. To put it differently, while a generic 'ideal type' of fascist ideology is supremely enlightening in highlighting the similarities in the intellectual features of a plethora of movements, it cannot enter the inner circle of the specific conceptualization of the 'ideal nation' on the country-specific level.

The other main problem with defining generic fascism on the basis of its ideological content is that a history of fascism as an

intellectual phenomenon might produce misleading impressions
about the importance of actions and events in shaping its charac-
ter. With hindsight, the affinities between fascist ideology and
certain expressions of radical nationalist thought in the nineteenth
century are too obvious to be dismissed as simply reading history
backwards. This justifies the heuristic value of extending the his-
tory of fascist ideas to the past, to what is called 'proto-fascism'
nowadays. It is indeed true that a new, more radical and utopian,
genus of nationalism had made its appearance in many European
countries prior to the outbreak of the First World War. To men-
tion but the most conspicuous examples, the Florentine avant-
garde revolt,[22] the *völkisch* nationalist discourse in Wilhelminian
Germany,[23] the radical ideas of the *Action Française* and a host of
dissident intellectuals such as Sorrel and Le Bon in France,[24]
and Lueger and Vogelsang in Austria,[25] all pointed to a novel,
utopian and mythical form of nationalism that rejected the
rational 'normality' of mainstream (that is, liberal and conserva-
tive) discourses and was obsessed with a more holistic approach
to the social and political life of the nation. However, to interpret
affinity and a certain degree of intellectual continuity as direct
causality is a problematic conclusion. In a recent article about the
dynamics of fascism's evolution, R.O. Paxton has warned against
equating the fully-fledged fascist regimes of the inter-war period
with the 'sect of dissident intellectuals' of the nineteenth and early
twentieth centuries, who are generally seen as its intellectual
mentors.[26] Fascism was indeed a sort of culmination of this ideo-
logical trend, but not its predetermined end-result or its automatic
derivation. This is where hindsight blurs the accuracy of histori-
cal analysis — to treat figures such as Nietzsche, Wagner, Oriani
and Corradini as forerunners of inter-war fascism and of its
epochal excesses is to regard a score of intermediate historic
events as either granted or insignificant in the course of history.
In strict terms, pre- and proto-fascism never actually existed as
such, not only because at that time the term 'fascism' had simply
not been invented, but also because their 'fascist' taint is detected
retrospectively in the full knowledge of subsequent developments
until 1945. The use of the term 'proto-fascism' is methodologi-
cally justified only in order to locate the origins of a new, more
radical — and in some cases even revolutionary — breed of
utopian nationalism, which appeared in the second half of the
nineteenth century and challenged the established conservative

and liberal versions of nationalist ideology. This new type evolved in parallel to the other, then predominant forms of nationalism, although increasingly after the turn of the century it began permeating, and somewhat radicalizing mainstream attitudes. Yet, until the outbreak of the First World War, it remained an essentially marginal phenomenon, confined mainly to intellectual circles and considered to be largely irrelevant to the pivotal social and political reality of the time.[27]

Without the dramatic events and consequences of the First World War this intellectual current of nationalism might as well have remained a footnote in the history of European ideas.[28] What conferred fresh relevance upon its vision and enhanced its social appeal was a unique combination of historic developments that questioned the old certainties of the European order. First, the experience of the Great War had far-reaching repercussions for the general political mentality of the European populations. In the polarizing circumstances of the bitter military conflict between states, nationalism became a significantly more potent force of *popular* mobilization, already radicalized and infected by the confrontational spirit of the battlefield. At the same time, the unprecedented savagery of the war, with the previously unthinkable level of human suffering and material damage that it caused, had a grave demoralizing impact on people's perception of history, destroying the credibility of the dominant liberal idea of human progress and spreading a discourse of cultural 'decay'.[29] The Great War opened up a psychological faultline in Europe between the 'victorious' and the 'vanquished' or 'discontented' nations. It also caused severe problems of economic dislocation which, in combination with rising inflation and the collapse of productivity, shattered hopes for a smooth return to peacetime economy. The traumatic experience of demobilization in these circumstances was in sharp contrast to the glimpse of a heroic lifestyle, full of direct action and a spontaneous spirit of community, in the trenches.[30] The postwar crisis — both as an objective reality and a psychological *perception* — was seen as the convulsive throe of a whole order of things, of an era and a set of values that had underpinned the foundations of pre-1914 Europe. The confident — albeit sketchy — advance of liberalism, with its emphasis on rationality, diversity and toleration, was seriously questioned in many countries by a generational revolt against its institutional flagship, the democratic-parliamentary system. At

the same time, the popularization of radical nationalist ideas by a new group of populist politicians brought a highly emotive version of nationalism to the heart of an emerging political alternative to both liberalism and traditional conservatism. In the crucial period of its political incubation and infancy, fascism capitalized on the impression of liberalism's terminal decay and conservatism's inability to operate in the context of mass politics, in order to transcend the present and offer a pathway to a post-liberal era. Without the widespread popular perception of crisis of prewar certainties and the ensuing stiffening of critique at the foundations of the liberal system, it could have hardly turned into a credible political opponent of the liberal–conservative orthodoxy, first in Italy and then in a host of other European countries.

The second unforeseen development that shook the foundations of the old order was the impression that socialism was on the verge of taking over Europe. The three decades before the outbreak of the First World War had witnessed a sensational increase in the organization, support and self-confidence of socialist movements in most countries. Given that the revolutionary aspirations of socialism had established it as the ultimate anti-system force in national politics, the electoral strengthening of left-wing parties produced a deep polarization of public opinion which threatened the self-perpetuation of the old system.[31] However, if the socialist 'threat' was regarded as a serious socio-political inconvenience until 1917, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia turned vague fears into an impending pan-European apocalyptic vision. Seized by paranoia, large sectors of the nationalist-minded electorate and the conservative élites looked suspiciously (albeit erroneously) upon events such as the November 1918 revolution in Kiel, the *biennio rosso* (red biennial) in Italy and the general strikes in Britain as a dress-rehearsal for the onslaught of internationalist communism in Europe.[32] Even if the threat did not materialize eventually (and by the end of the 1920s this had become apparent, even to the most alarmist observers of the inter-war Right), it was still there and offered a powerful, easy-to-manipulate reservoir of negative socio-political integration.

The fascist movements played a leading and instrumental role in the violent efforts to curb the 'socialist threat'. They either organized, or participated in, paramilitary groups (*squadri* in Italy, *Freikorps* and SA in Germany, *Stahlhelm* in Austria, Legionaries in Rumania, Greenshirts in France, to name only the

most well-known) that targeted socialist agitation by emulating their opponents' techniques (syndicates, street violence, mass mobilization of supporters). In defending the foundations of the existing order against left-wing subversion, and in stressing conservative values such as order, national unity and protection of status, fascist movements emerged as natural (if unlikely) allies of the repressive mechanisms of the state in the assault on organized socialism.[33] Not withstanding its revolutionary-utopian creed, fascism was gradually tied-up to an essentially system-preserving political function, spearheading the political struggle against the 'enemies of the state' and providing effective (if illicit) solutions in the context of mass politics that traditional anti-communism had failed to promote. This was the first indication that certain aspects of fascist ideology and practice could become particularly useful in defending the status quo, especially if the movements were purged from extreme tendencies and cultivated the image of a responsible leadership.[34] It is not coincidental that the two archetypal fascist organizations, the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF) and the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei (NSDAP), gradually shed many of their most extremist ideas (anti-clericalism, anti-capitalism, anti-monarchism in Italy), concentrating instead more heavily on the less controversial aspects of their regenerating discourse, such as organic nationalism, anti-socialism and anti-liberalism. Moreover, the fascist belief in charismatic leadership proved instrumental in constructing a more respectable façade for fascism. If the random thuggery of the party often appalled traditional élites and large sections of public opinion, the figure of the omnipotent popular leader, allegedly acting as a moderating force on the radicalism of the movement, was sufficient evidence of fascism's vulnerability to 'containment' and 'normalization'.[35] With hindsight, this was a dangerously erroneous assumption, but one that suited the desire of many fascist leaders to entrench their absolute authority, vis-à-vis intra-party dissent and direct challenges to their ostensible infallibility.

It now seems that the experience of socialism proved extremely formative for fascism's ideological outlook and political conduct, either through emulation or as a result of direct opposition. In the early 1980s, one of the most astute figures of fascist studies, the historian Zeev Sternhell, published a groundbreaking interpretation of fascist ideology as an attempt to revise socialism in

a non-Marxist direction.[36] For Sternhell, fascism remained a decidedly revolutionary phenomenon, envisioning a radical reordering of social and political orthodoxies through the harnessing of the revolutionary potential of nationalism. In claiming that fascism promoted an essentially revolutionary project, he challenged the monopolization of the term 'revolution' as an ethical category by Marxism, arguing instead that this was an 'alternative revolution' (to socialism), regardless of its destructive consequences. At the same time, fascism was the only non-Marxist political phenomenon that made ample use of non-orthodox socialist themes (syndicalism, the Sorelian mythical conception of politics, rigid teleology)[37] and techniques (mass mobilization, uncompromising activism, street action). More than two decades earlier, the guru of totalitarianist interpretation, Hannah Arendt, claimed that fascism can be almost too perfectly equated to socialism if one substitutes the latter's emphasis on class with the former's obsession with the nation.[38] After all, it should not be forgotten that such prominent figures of the fascist pantheon as Mussolini, Oswald Mosley and Jacques Doriot began their political career in the socialist camp.[39]

Such arguments were instrumental in challenging the conventional reading of fascism as a right-wing phenomenon, and they have contributed significantly to our understanding of the diverse ideological sources of the 'fascist synthesis', not least its revolutionary one.[40] However, they suffer from a linear and causal view of ideological evolution that remains largely impervious to external stimuli and developments. Fascist ideology, as synthesis, absorbed a host of divergent influences and elements which remained in rather fluid condition, even after the watershed of 1922 (the fascist seizure of power in Italy). In the extraordinary circumstances of postwar crisis, however, where the threat of socialist revolution and the quest for order and continuity nurtured an almost pathological form of anti-socialism amongst élites and the majority of the populations, fascism adopted a short-term programme of action that was underpinned by a significantly more conservative social outlook. True, many of its initial revolutionary elements and devices remained deeply ingrained in the fascist radical conception of a new, organic–holistic national community. Yet, the predominant anti-socialist and anti-liberal orientation of mainstream politics after the war produced the conditions for a crude ideological polarization

between Left and Right which did not cater for subtleties. Either fascism would remain a marginal subversive (revolutionary or putchist) phenomenon that was deeply distrusted by the élites or it could become a reliable pillar of the conservative plans for a 'back to basics' political solution to the crisis.[41] In those cases where fascist movements aspired to conquering power, their populist anti-socialism and pro-system activism proved to be real trump cards in the co-opting of fascism by the sectors of the traditional Right, bringing it close to radical conservatism. At the same time, the gradual strengthening of the leadership principle inside the movements set the foundations for the future monopolization of ideological orthodoxy by the leader at the expense of intra-party/movement debate and synthesis.

To sum up, fascist ideology makes more sense as a form of utopian radical nationalism, shaped in the ferocious circumstances of postwar perceptions of crisis as a potent alternative to liberalism and socialism. Its intellectual origins may be traced back to a diverse body of thought that appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century and that continued to operate on a limited, essentially élitist basis until the First World War. Its vision was a borrowed composite utopia, inherited by its radical nationalist precursors and updated with 'modern' devices of revolutionary activism pioneered by socialism. However, it also succeeded in establishing its unique ideological physiognomy in the post-1918 period by marrying its utopian nationalism with an historically-conditioned quest for a post-liberal, post-socialist transformation (not violent overthrow) of the system. Fascism's third-way discourse crystallized as a pivotal tenet of its ideological physiognomy mainly as the result of the intense postwar questioning of liberalism's legitimacy and of socialism's subversive goals. Also, the experience of the First World War bequeathed a spirit of militancy, of comradeship and amoral activism to the emerging fascist movements, thus implanting a militarist mentality, organization and style. This was the time that fascism came of age — or rather, that it became a meaningful ideological category, emancipated from its generic past. The events of 1919–22 in Italy placed fascism (and its own Fascism) on the map of European ideologies, sending shockwaves to other countries with similar crisis-ridden realities and anxieties. By 1933, the establishment of two 'fascist' regimes in Italy and Germany had prompted a vigorous interest in the history of the movements,

their ideological evolution and their recipe for success. Now fascism had at last a face and a concrete (if partly contrived) pre-history.

The 'Context': Interwar Fascism from Movement to Regime or the Power of Precedent

In his recent and sophisticated attempt to understand the dynamics of fascism's evolution R.O. Paxton presented the regime-variant of fascism (especially as experienced in Italy and Germany) as the superlative stage of the whole fascist experience in inter-war Europe.[42] It is indeed impossible to speak of fascism, its goals and features, without making lengthy references to these two regimes' history and actions. The influence they exerted upon a number of more or less kindred movements and parties throughout Europe, their production of a 'fascist' style of politics and their attempts to establish a new type of state and society (regardless of the debatable success of these projects) have crucially enriched, or even altered, perceptions of what fascism aspired to be. Generic fascist ideas that were pursued by the two regimes (for example, the organic model of social integration, all-embracing party, youth organization as the laboratory of a new society, mythification of the national past, etc.) provided a sort of blueprint for imitators and admirers in various other countries. What had started as a purely national reaction to crisis in Italy soon became an exportable ideological and political commodity of universal relevance.[43]

However, the regime-variant of fascism was not simply about putting whatever 'fascist' ideas and ambitions existed in the chaos of inter-war intellectual space into practice. Much of that fascist ideology propagated the unwavering intention of fascist movements to unite utopia with reality, ideas with actions, intentions with results. The elevation of fascism into a dominant system of rule in inter-war Europe produced doctrine, redefined ideology and influenced crucially the content of the term 'fascism'. There were three main reasons for this. First, fascism had far from completed its ideological self-signification by the time that it seized power. The fascist discourse had established a series of myths (nation, organic society, glorious past) and a vague utopian vision for the future, but it conspicuously lacked

an agenda on how to manage the process of change in the pursuit of long-term fascist goals. This had a lot to do with the relatively short period of fascism's ideological and political incubation and the absence of clear programmatic statements prior to the assumption of power. Hitler and his movement were indeed the exception to the rule that fascism was so immersed in action, and dominated by the priority to offer immediate responses to crisis, that there was simply not enough time to codify its beliefs and values. *Mein Kampf*, and later the deliberately unpublished *Second Book*, were the kind of detailed ideological declarations that no other fascist leader cared to provide in so timely, and in such disarming, detail. However, even Hitler's awareness of short- and medium-term issues should not be exaggerated. His writings and speeches before the dramatic events of January 1933 reveal a sense of deep determination as to the soundness of the Nazi utopia but are very short on programmatic detail. Second, as mentioned earlier, fascism was doctrine in the making, ideas shaping action but also shaped by it. Since activism was an ideologically conditioned priority of the utmost ethical significance, it was not bound by a restrictive, precon-ceived programme, but aimed to explore all available opportuni-ties in pursuit of fascism's long-term utopia. Here, opportunism did not reflect programmatic confusion or immaturity; much was deliberately left to the instinctive, irrational forces of improvised action to provide the most suitable and effective ad hoc solutions to the quest for utopia.[44]

Third, the specific conditions in which fascism seized power and instituted a new regime are important. While fascist ideology developed its own distinct brand of utopian nationalism in oppo-sition to both conservative and liberal orthodoxies, the regime-variant of fascism came into effect within the context of the pre-existing political system and in relative continuity to its struc-tures. Fascist élites either shared power with powerful conserva-tive groups, or acquired a predominant position in the state under their tutelage. This meant that fascist ideas could not be trans-lated into action, elaborated or interpreted in a political vacuum. At the same time, the co-opting of fascist leaders by the con-servative establishment (as 'moderates' and charismatic figures) provided the regimes with a de facto, leader-oriented character who was regarded as the pillar of the system's cohesion and stability. For different reasons, both the traditional élite groups

that had sponsored the 'fascist solution' and the fascist move-
ments attempted to boost the personality-driven legitimacy of the
regimes — the former as a technique to marginalize the influence
of the allegedly more extreme fascist parties, the latter as the most
appropriate Trojan horse for the final assault on the state. The
result was that the regime-variant of fascism developed an
increasing dependence upon the legitimacy of its charismatic
leader, who was acknowledged as the ultimate source of fascist
values and the most legitimate agent for their elaboration in
practice.

Finally, fascism's seizure of power put its utopian vision to a
further, more practical test of reality: the resources, strengths and
weaknesses of the system that it inherited and in which it was
forced to operate in the longer term. These parameters had
already been crystallized by longstanding features of each coun-
try's socio-economic and political development, by traditional
aspirations and priorities. In the process, intentions had to be sub-
jected to the rationale of feasibility — in terms of available means,
economic resources, the system's capacity to sustain effort, etc.[45]
Also, through the exercise of power, fascist élites became signifi-
cantly more alert to aspects of national specificity, to particular
demands and sensitivities, which they sought to exploit and radi-
calize in order to strengthen their domestic legitimacy and social
appeal. This sense of continuity, with a specific reading of the
national past, fostered fascist intentions to fuse the 'fascist' with
the 'national', or rather, to elaborate the former by appropriating
the latter.[46] However, this also raises complex questions about the
origins of the regime's specific policies: whether they originated
from generic fascist values adapted to national contexts, or
whether they diverged from the fascist paradigm.

Let us clarify this point by using a well-rehearsed example in
debates on the limits of generic fascism — *anti-Semitism*. In their
classic book on Nazi racial policies, M. Burleigh and W. Wipper-
mann focus on the singularity of Nazism's genocidal policies in
order to attack the notion that the regime can be comfortably
incorporated into generic definitions of inter-war fascism.[47] After
all, the other archetypal fascist regime of the period (the Italian
fascist one) displayed very little interest in Nazi experiments with
racial exclusivity until 1938[48] — and even after the introduction
of anti-Semitic legislation, the extent and severity of persecution
cannot be quantitatively compared with the messianic zeal dis-

played by Nazism.[49] Much has been said in Italian historiography about the alleged individualism of the Italian people, their rather oblique attitude to duty, their alienation from the state as central institution and their 'kind' national character (*brava gente*).[50] Such arguments are interesting from an anthropological point of view, but contain extremely slippery suggestions for historical analysis. After all, the effective execution of a genocidal programme depended on a high level of modernity, systematization, abundant material and human resources to supervise the project, constant monitoring and cold-blooded organization. The German system, with its high level of modernization, ethos of professionalism, variety of resources and scientific competence, could conceive of, and carry out, such a plan much more effectively than the Italian one — or indeed almost any other state mechanism in inter-war Europe.[51] However, it is true that such a project required commitment and conviction, stemming from an awareness that it formed an integral part of a much wider national goal. In Germany, the demonization of the Jews had reached pathological levels long before Nazism came to power. Hitler was himself a product, albeit extreme, of an influential trend in German radical nationalism that tended to view the Jews as a dangerous parasitical organization in the country's economic, social, political and intellectual life.[52] But he also incorporated this inherited trait into the nucleus of his nationalist utopia — what we generically called earlier 'the quest for the ideal Fatherland'. Nazism's biological perception of social health and its identification of nationality with blood invested the anti-Semitic project with a direct genocidal twist, as well as with an historic urgency that blended a long-term national belief with an idiosyncratic fascist vision.[53] By contrast, anti-Semitism was nearly irrelevant to the Italian fascist version of an 'ideal Fatherland' to the extent that, when fascism expropriated a more 'systematic' approach to the persecution of the Jews after 1936–8, its fusion with core national values could not be effectively accomplished.

What should we infer from this fundamental divergence between the two standard fascist regimes? That anti-Semitism was a defining element of fascism and, therefore, the Italian regime was not as 'fascist' as its German equivalent? Or that anti-Semitism should not be regarded as part of the fascist worldview, in which case Nazi Germany was a *sui generis* (although not

fascist) type of regime?[54] M. Neocleous has attempted to square this analytical circle by arguing that anti-Semitism was one particular, country-specific expression of the generic fascist drive towards hyper-nationalism (which was a core value of the fascist minimum).[55] Others, such as S. Payne, have approached the problem from the viewpoint of a maximalist definition of fascism (a kind of checklist that aspires to be an all-inclusive catalogue of fascism's diverse manifestations), that includes anti-Semitism in the list of fascist features, but also underlines the fact that no fascist movement or regime could conform to this list *in toto*.[56] After all, fascist utopianism was both vague and all-embracing enough, dynamic in its power of conviction but open to various interpretations and allowing for different paths to its realization. Inside the fascist movements, disparate ideological currents and agents (a testimony to the eclecticism of the original fascist synthesis) continued the struggle to shape their political physiognomy for a long time. The battle for the soul of fascism was fought over a plethora of defining issues: constitutional/evolutionary or putchist strategy, the role of the state in a fascist system, economic planning and productivism, internal structures and organization of the fascist movement/party, relations between party and state, etc. As with every battle, it had its undoubted victors and its doomed vanquished. However, the end result in each case was neither predetermined nor a matter of linear evolution. In its transition from opposition to power to organized regime, fascism followed a host of different trajectories that were all consistent with aspects of its ideological core but not exclusively determined by it. It is much more accurate to understand fascist ideology as a laboratory of varying scenarios for the future evolution of fascism; but the actual plot of its history was determined by a multiple compromise between competing fascist intentions and the outside world. More specifically, we may speak of three main fields of negotiation and compromise: first, inside the movements/parties themselves, between the dissimilar perceptions of different agents as to what fascism should become; second, between fascist ambitions and the expectations of the traditional parties and élite groups that had co-opted fascism in the context of a wide political anti-socialist coalition; and third, between fascist long-term objectives and the longstanding features of the domestic systems in which they were forced to operate.[57]

Therefore, the regime-variant of fascism was not simply an

exercise in turning vision into reality. It qualified, crystallized and sometimes even altered the initial vague (and often disparate) ideas, it saturated the fascist vision with a more detailed content and produced doctrine through its constant experimentation with new forms of social control. In this respect, it constituted the political form that attributed historical meaning to the phenomenon 'fascism', a unique project of massive social engineering that adapted an intellectual tradition to the (generically European and specifically national) circumstances of its epoch, produced an idiosyncratic style of political practice, and particularized the content of its utopian core through both ideological synthesis and action. That the end result (the regime-variant of fascism) had diverged in so many ways from original individual perceptions of what fascism should become, serves as a reminder of how open-ended and fluid the contours of fascism were prior to the seizure of power, and how important historic conditions were in shaping its form. Substantial revisions punctuated fascism's transition from activist movement to organized political party, from opposition to government, from government to agent of a wide-ranging socio-political transformation. These revisions affected the physiognomy (both ideological and political) of fascism and generated a host of features that became defining elements of the fascist experience in inter-war Europe.

Which were these revisions then? We have already mentioned the early attempts of the mainstream Right to hijack the political orientation of the pliable fascist movements in an essentially system-preserving direction. This necessitated the cultivation of an impression of 'normalization' on the part of the movements' leaderships, which manifested itself in a series of repudiations of many of the revolutionary, anti-system, initial characteristics of fascism. We have also noted the gradual strengthening of the leader's role as the symbolic embodiment of fascism's values and guarantee of its unity of purpose. The significance of this trend towards an omnipotent leadership, invested with the rhetoric of charisma and infallibility, is impossible to exaggerate, especially in the light of the evolution of fascism's physiognomy-as-regime in Italy and Germany. In both cases, the leader-oriented philosophy of the system encouraged the monopolization of authority by Mussolini and Hitler, thus producing an identification of fascism with the personal choices and ambitions of the two leaders.[58] Understandably, this was greatly resented by other

powerful fascist figures (and the party as a political organization) who had aspired to contribute to policy-making and play a crucial role in the elaboration of fascism's identity through action. Many of the two leaders' important decisions — which proved to be highly formative for the character of fascism — were severely criticized by old fighters as aberrations or distortions of the allegedly 'true' spirit of fascism. Mussolini's ideological alliance with Giovanni Gentile and political reliance on Alfredo Rocco, his decision to align Italy to Nazism, his abandonment of the corporatist project in the 1930s, the subjugation of the party to the 'ethical', all-embracing state, and the strangulation of the revolutionary syndicalist movement (as part of a general assault on everything that smacked of overt anti-system ambitions),[59] were all Mussolini's personal enterprises that were heavily censured by prominent figures of the PNF hierarchy. Similarly, Hitler marginalized (or even suppressed) violently autonomous centres of power within the NSDAP (Strasser's attempt to organize the party, the Sturmabteilung's (SA) aspirations for 'constant revolution'),[60] streamlined the party with a view to entrenching his monopoly of decision-making vis-à-vis party aspirations for collective leadership, concentrated his attention on foreign policy at the expense of domestic transformation, relied at times on the advice of figures with ambiguous Nazi credentials (such as Schacht, Ribbentrop and Neurath), thus arousing the fury of 'old fighters',[61] and generally banned intra-party debate on how to shape policy according to Nazi values. These, and other political decisions originating from the leaders' monopolization of decision-making, generated a new paradigm of fascism — not only of Italian or German fascism, but also in generic terms, through the influence exercised by these two reference-regimes on other kindred movements and systems of rule.

The general fascination of sectors of the European Right with fascist rule as experienced in Italy and Germany also affected the history of inter-war fascism in another way: this time by establishing a particular 'fascist' *style* of rule with a series of radical patterns[62] which other right-wing regimes/movements of the period appropriated on a selective basis. The fascist style of politics was much more than a set of devices that were employed to ensure more effective social control and political decision-making. It was an extension of fascist utopianism, reverberating its quest for a totally novel conception of societal life and politi-

cal conduct. Through a host of novel arrangements (youth and leisure organizations, propaganda, ritualized mass activities, secret police) and emphases (charismatic leadership, violent activism, militarization of society) this style of politics divulged the ideological inclination of fascism for social engineering of a massive scale[63] and ambition. It also provided crucial definitions and clarifications of what fascist utopianism meant by its organic hyper-nationalist discourse, and how it perceived the process of social transformation towards its own teleological prescription. Mussolini and Hitler's often personal enterprises, regardless of their ambiguous relevance to early fascist values or to the sensibilities of many prominent fascist thinkers, produced an informal blueprint for mimesis, an ideal-type of 'fascism-in-action' which proved extremely useful to a number of inter-war right-wing regimes in their search for a 'third' path to politics and a new mobilizing framework for nationalism.

The extent of such a mimesis and importation of either the Fascist or the National Socialist experience to other countries is difficult to exaggerate. A plethora of new radical movements emerged in Europe in the 1920s and especially in the 1930s, from Lithuania to Ireland and from Finland to Bulgaria, drawing their inspiration from the Italian and/or German system of rule; in many cases, they also used names that were directly derived from, or associated with, the terms 'fascism' and 'national socialism' to describe their ideological physiognomy and affiliation. These groups perceived their destiny not in independent, 'nativist' terms, but as annexes to the fascist or Nazi project (or the Axis after 1936) for creating a new pan-European political and spiritual order. Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists (BUF), spoke of a 'fascist Europe', a sort of crusade against Bolshevism led by the two Axis powers but involving their allies in other European countries.[64] Marcel Déat and Drieu la Rochelle in France saw Nazi Germany as the vanguard of a European 'revolution'.[65] Leon Degrelle, the chief ideologue of the Rexist movement in Belgium, longed for a 'new order' in Europe, brought about by the successful expansion of the Nazi *Weltanschauung* throughout the continent.[66] Such views betrayed an identification, not directly with whatever ideological views had inspired initially the fascist movements in Italy and Germany, but with the features, political conduct and policy record of their regime-variants. In other words, while the PNF

and the NSDAP, together with a number of 'nativist' groups
(Arrow Cross in Hungary, Iron Guard in Rumania, Falange in
Spain, National Syndicalists in Portugal) drew their inspiration
from an original set of values and beliefs with strong indigenous
influences and peculiarities, other groups flourished in the politi-
cal milieu of the 'fascist era', inspired by the successful consoli-
dation and dynamism of the two reference fascist regimes. Their
experience of fascism, and their understanding of its essence,
derived from these two regimes, which were regarded as 'ideal
types' of fascism on their own terms.

A further revision of the early spirit of fascism came in the
form of its idiosyncratic coexistence with traditional right-wing
authoritarian structures. In intellectual terms, fascism had very
little to do with conservative notions of authoritarianism, in spite
of its oppositional convergence with radical forms of conser-
vatism.[67] It advocated instead a more direct, transcendental type
of communication between nation and charismatic leader, as well
as a collective representation and negotiation of sectional inter-
ests within the framework of the party and its various societal
extensions. However, the coopting of the fascist *leaderships* by
powerful traditional élite groups sealed the fate of fascism's rela-
tions to the mainstream Right by forcing the former to operate in
a system which perpetuated central elements of the conventional
Rightist authoritarian tradition. Compared to this (more con-
ventional) type of rule, fascism offered a populist solution to the
problem of generating social support and ensuring active societal
unity through the ritualization of controlled mass participation.
Yet, this combination of novelty with an essentially traditional
framework of politics was hardly conducive to the pursuit of the
mythical core of fascist nationalist utopianism. The result was a
tension inside the regimes with at least a fascist variant between
fascism and authoritarianism — a tension that was never fully
resolved, but which affected the evolution of inter-war fascism in
two ways. First, it completed the ideological–political expropria-
tion of fascism by the Right, in contrast to its initially mixed (or
at least not exclusively right-wing) intellectual roots and active
revolutionary anti-system spirit. Second, it compelled fascism to
wage a constant struggle to defend its own political contours
from the restrictive grip of its conservative sponsors/partners and
the authoritarian legacies of its political framework. In analytical
terms, this means that a categorical distinction between the

regime-variant of fascism and conservative authoritarianism is meaningless, in so far as fascism accepted an institutional, not violently revolutionary, approach to its own political emancipation from the mainstream Right — and thus could never fully eliminate continuities between 'new' and 'old' Right.[68] By the time that even the most 'advanced' fascist systems of Germany and Italy had accelerated their rhythm of consolidation with their newfound self-confidence, they had absorbed already crucial features of conventional authoritarianism (not least the leader's monopoly of power) into their general worldview.

The final fundamental revision that marked the evolution of fascism-as-regime pertained to its saturation with traditional national themes and symbols. We have already described the utopian core of fascist ideology as a 'borrowed utopia', featuring the obsession of a particular branch of European radical nationalist thought with organic models of social organization, a revolutionary (but resolutely anti-Marxist) discourse coupled with an emphatic rejection of the liberal tradition, and a number of themes derived from the indigenous nationalist traditions that colonized the generic fascist goal of regeneration. Here lies an ineluctable weakness of the minimalist definitions of generic fascism: that in their deliberately vague articulation of its 'ineliminable core'[69] they pay less attention to the way in which long-term national beliefs and aspirations impregnated every corner of the fascist utopia in each country. The more that fascism gravitated towards a pro-system mentality (at the expense of its revolutionary origins and initial anti-system trend), the more it seemed compelled to appeal to the national past in order to draw legitimacy and inspiration for its own nebulous vision. Where it was established as a regime with claims to permanence (Hitler's '1000-year Reich', Mussolini's 'new man', Metaxas' 'third Hellenic civilization'[70], etc.), it endeavoured to achieve an identification of the 'fascist' with the 'national', thus inculcating into the nation a unitary sense of loyalty through the regime to an ideal Fatherland that only the fascist regime could achieve. As with every other ideology, fascism did not simply provide a utopian framework for the future direction of the nation; it also based its prognosis on a re-reading and rearticulation of the past, thus linking its prescription (either positively or negatively) with previous historic developments. For fascism, the emotive weight of pre-existing national myths, and their supreme

ability to stimulate the national psyche, were too strong to resist. In Italy, Mussolini found the Futurists' blanket rejection of tradition hard to accommodate in his historically legitimized vision of 'third Rome' and his references to fascism as the culmination of the most constructive forces of the *Risorgimento*.[71] In Greece, the Metaxist regime employed the powerful imagery of the Great Idea (the vision of an ideal Fatherland encompassing the lands of Asia Minor that were associated with the Ionian settlements of the antiquity and the Byzantine empire),[72] despite the fact that this had been rendered defunct after the Greek defeat in 1922 by the Turkish Nationalists and that Metaxas himself had bitterly opposed its pursuit in the 1910s and early 1920s. In both cases, fascism appeared willing to succumb to a more traditionalist nationalist discourse of historical legacies and past symbols which offered particular (that is, country-specific) meaning and direction to its generic utopian quest for the (re)birth of an ideal Fatherland.

Two 'Fascisms' and the 'Dialogue of the Deaf'

It is exactly at this point that fascism *qua* ideology and fascism as political experience part ways. The basic methodological question (should the intellectual definition of 'fascism' be revised in the light of its practical manifestations in inter-war Europe?) has produced two fundamentally different responses and has established a framework for what has been described as a 'dialogue of the deaf'. The ideological/diachronic, on the one hand, and the particular historical experience in various corners of inter-war Europe, on the other, have produced an overwhelming quantitatively and bewildering qualitatively array of phenomena that have been described (accurately or not) by seeking recourse to 'fascism'. Radical conservative thought, mimetic 'fascist' movements, autochthonous hyper-nationalist groups, fascist and 'para-fascist' regimes, collaborationist systems, conservative overtures to fascism and vice versa, cannot be accommodated within a single sophisticated definition of 'fascism'. Recently, Zeev Sternhell has suggested a distinction between one type of fascism (intellectual origins, ideal–typical ideology) and another (specific permutations in inter-war Europe) as a model for expanding the scope of fascism without jettisoning the method-

ological validity of the two competing paradigms. This sort of juxtaposition is reminiscent of the debate about the relation of socialist ideology to the political experiment of the Soviet Union (Leninism and, particularly, Stalinism). Thus, the question is shifted to the nature of this distinction between the diachronic and the epochal/practical. This is exactly where the 'dialogue of the deaf' persists without any sign of dialectical contact or even convergence. It is obvious that the more ideal–typical 'fascism' the less relevant it seems with regard to the plethora of its inter-war permutations — or, perhaps, not necessarily less relevant, but ostensibly less helpful in heuristic terms. Sternhell himself has undermined the integrative function of this model outlined above by continuing to exclude National Socialism from his generic perception of fascism.[73] A recent analytical trend to separate the diachronic from the ad hoc/context-specific aspects of fascism has provided a platform for a qualified synthesis that allows 'fascism' to continue its autonomous intellectual existence, while examining its relation to inter-war phenomena that have carried its name or have been baptised accordingly in retrospect. The stumbling block in this process consists of the ways in which one can deal with the revisions (mentioned above) of the ideological spirit of fascism in action and in specific countries. The question of whether we may learn something about the nature of fascist ideology in its diachronic dimension from its (epochal) idiosyncratic articulations and, even more, from its specific practical manifestations in the inter-war period, revolves around rival perceptions about the existence (or not) of a coherent genus of fascist ideology prior to the emergence of the movements and regimes that introduced the term. Sternhell categorically states that by the end of the war, 'fascism [as ideology] was almost complete'.[74] This assertion, which is more or less shared by all disciples of a generic approach to fascism as an intellectual phenomenon, has been dismissed by those who believe that the history of fascism can be derived primarily from the actions, decisions and experiments of its inter-war case-studies.[75] While the days when fascist ideology was treated in historiographical terms as nothing more than a vague assortment of disparate, propagandistically or opportunistically-arranged ideas appear to be over, this latter body of literature continues to challenge the notion that the ideal-type of fascist ideology constitutes the most appropriate framework for debating inter-war

fascism in its plethora of permutations. Similarly, while most genericists have explored the relation between the theoretical and empirical aspects of fascism, they are reluctant to accept an alleged over-determination of their models by what they regard as historical expressions of core values or even extraneous formal characteristics that underpinned inter-war fascism. For example, charismatic leadership, the cult of uniforms and ritualized mass rallies, eugenics, corporatism and territorial expansion — to name just a few examples — constitute significant elements of inter-war fascism's historical experience, but have been con-textualized as secondary derivatives of specific readings of fascist ideology. As such, they distort, rather than enrich or clarify, the ideological genus to which they refer by name or kind. As Griffin put it in his most recent (and supremely polemical) defence of the cogency of the 'new consensus', '[t]o mix a "static" ideological definition of fascism with an abstract scheme of how it manifests itself historically, solely on the basis of interwar Europe, is methodologically illegitimate'.[76] Much as I would take strong issue with his description of the epochal features of inter-war fascism as 'accidental' (which they were not, as they derived from the same generic ideas and emphases that he has so impressively elaborated), the essence of his comment is disarmingly accurate — the two paradigms (mis)use the same word ('fascism') to articulate different emphases and methodological foci.

In the end, this 'dialogue of the deaf' carries a heavy method-ological baggage that is difficult to shake off. Sternhell's two types of 'fascism' broadly correspond to an intellectual and an epochal–empirical history of fascism respectively. The real current consensus in the fray of fascist studies appears to be a far less ambitious or wide-ranging, but nonetheless crucial, admission that the ownership of a common ground depends on the clarifica-tion of the relation between these two conceptions of 'fascism'. Undoubtedly, to make sense of a word that has become so over-poweringly linked to a specific period, or even to specific movement/regimes and political practices, is a task that appears as formidable now as it did in the 1970s and 1980s. Perhaps, then, Sternhell's two types of fascism should seek recourse to different linguistic references, if only to alleviate the confusion between the diachronic and epochal facets. And because it is extremely hard to counter the traditional identification of 'fascism' with inter-war Europe, with Fascist Italy and, for most, National Socialist

Germany (however misguided this association might be), the diachronic approach — less burdened with the legacy of the inter-war historical context — should seek an innovative reconceptual-ization and rearticulation of the overall definitional framework. But it cannot be stressed strongly enough that any meaningful and consequential 'consensus' in the study of fascism has to be carefully negotiated with the often bewildering intellectual and political diversity of its permutations, from the late nineteenth century to the present day. The sort of 'idealizing abstraction' that Griffin recommends as the optimal process for granting fascism an existence beyond the whims of Mussolini, Hitler, the various inter-war movements and the even more problematic regimes across inter-war Europe, has not convinced (and perhaps cannot do so) those who remain entrenched within the chronological and phenomenological boundaries of the inter-war period, that the 'concept' can take precedence over the 'context'. The unmistake-able allusion of this dual distinction is that there was a fascism-within-fascism, a fascism partly distinct from fascism, a fascism that died and a fascism that predated and survived it. There are simply too many 'fascisms' around, even in the highly sophisti-cated (in conceptual terms) academic field; and this does not include even the equally problematic derivative hybrids (para-fascism, for example)! The quest for a definitional and conceptual elaboration of 'fascism' might not exactly be a 'deserted battle-field', as Macgregor Knox has described it,[77] but whatever debate has been taking place along these lines in the past years has not eluded a crippling confusion between what essentially remain two different 'ideal types'.[78] Until one can distinguish meaningfully these two types of 'fascism' without disinheriting either, and probe the dynamics as well as limits of their connection, the quest for a viable consensus will remain mystified by conceptual confusion and methodological incongruity.

In arguing in favour of studying inter-war fascism as an intel-lectual tradition that is conceptualized and crystallized in politi-cal terms by a series of special historic events (First World War, postwar crisis, rise of Italian Fascism and of German Nazism to power) and issues (anti-liberalism, anti-socialism, search for a 'third way' type of politics, populism), and pursued as a particu-lar political project (regime-variant of fascism), this article has argued in favour of a *qualified epochal* conception of fascism. Why qualified? Obviously there is no point in stubbornly defend-

ing the chronological boundaries of the so-called inter-war period (1918, especially 1945) as absolute watersheds in the history of fascism. As an ideological phenomenon, fascism formed part of a wider (both in chronological terms and in diversity of forms) revolt against the orthodoxies of the enlightenment project, or rather of its particular political and social evolution in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It originated as a distinct scenario — one among many plots from the same radical-nationalist intellectual pool but with greatly dissimilar prescriptions and instruments — with strong ideological debts to earlier exponents of such a revolt, eventually spearheading the assault on the old order due to its popularity and dynamism during the inter-war period. It developed its own ideological vision which, however, became in itself a reference inspiration for various political recipes and strategies as to how to achieve it more effectively. In this sense, inter-war fascism (in its plethora of often contradictory permutations as intellectual discourse, movement and regime) was only one such broad project that was far too diversified and context-specific to constitute the sole reference point for deducing generic features of diachronic 'fascism'. Its resounding failure by 1945 did not thwart the survival and continuity of the intellectual tradition that had animated it; it simply marked the beginning of a search for new specific political visions, forms and contents in the postwar period, as well as a rethinking of some of its previous themes (total rejection of liberalism, militarism, violence, charismatic leadership) in light of fundamental universal changes since the end of the Second World War. Whichever general ideological current gave birth to inter-war fascism has lingered on after the latter's demise, in the same way that it had predated it, long before the very term 'fascism' had acquired any historic meaning.[79]

Where is the epochal dimension then? In discussing the evolution of fascist ideas we identified the impact of general and country-specific historic circumstances on the production of fascism's generic worldview and outlook. The inter-war period remains the undisputed Mecca of fascism for a number of reasons: for its popularity and influence throughout the continent; for the elaboration of its doctrines in action; and, above all, for the emergence of its two reference regimes in Italy and Germany. The fascination that these two political experiments exuded for wide sectors of the European Right, the overwhelming influence that

they exerted on both its ideological reshaping and political practices and the way in which they identified 'fascism' with their own model of evolution in the perceptions of the majority of people, all attest to the salience of the epochal dimension of the fascist project. If, as this article has argued, inter-war fascism was indeed a specific articulation of a wider, abstract and essentially diachronic project to pursue a radical nationalist utopia in a decidedly anti-rational, mythical and holistic framework, then the paradigmatic use of Fascist Italy, National Socialist Germany or other movement/regimes in order to deduce generic features of 'uni-fascism' rests on an erroneous tautology: 'fascism' is accepted by default, associated with context-specific (and largely divergent) permutations and, in turn, signified by their specific experience. If, on the other hand, fascism is a broad ideological genus with abstract diachronic features, then its heuristic value for understanding whatever happened in inter-war Europe will remain essentially limited, so long as it continues to retreat into the realm of theoretical sophistication without engaging with the raw material of the 1920s and 1930s. Whatever the verdict, there is not enough space for so many conceptions of 'fascism'. Perhaps Allardyce was right — 'fascism' 'is less intelligible than we would like it to be'.[80] Rather than embarking upon further ambitious projects of redefining and recontextualizing 'fascism', we need to address a more elementary question: what is it exactly that we are striving to define and then analyse? Predictably, at the moment each paradigm generates divergent responses to this fundamental question, thus rendering the quest for consensus contrived and practically well-nigh impossible. But recent scholarship on fascism (from both paradigms) has turned a frustrating legacy of confusion into a debate about explicit points of disagreement. A new wave of interpretations that does not have to feel obliged to make a rigid, exclusive choice between the diachronic and epochal, 'concept' and 'context', theoretical abstraction and empirical accuracy, and the general and country-specific, can effectively reclaim the historiographical ground by avoiding the pitfalls of the currently polarized paradigmatic clash. Until then, the diversity of approaches, regardless of the attainment of convergence, is an unmistakable measure of the superb dynamism of fascist studies and of the determination of those who are involved to engage in an ongoing fruitful process to advance and enhance understanding.

Notes

1. G. Allardyce, 'What Fascism is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 84 (1979), 367–88.

2. R. Griffin, 'Introduction', in *International Fascism. Theories, Causes and the New Consensus* (London 1998), 1–19.

3. E. Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism. Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism* (London 1965); R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London and New York 1994); R. Eatwell, *Fascism A History* (London 1995); S.G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–45* (London 1997); E. Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista, 1918–1925* (Rome and Bari 1975); Z. Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left. Fascist Ideology in France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA 1986); R.J. Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave, 1924–33* (New Haven, CT and London 1986) and *French Fascism The Second Wave, 1933–39* (New Haven, CT 1995).

4. R.G. Collingwood, 'Fascism and Nazism', *Philosophy*, Vol. 15 (1940), 168–76; B. Croce, *Per la nuova vita dell'Italia. Scritti e discorsi 1943–44* (Naples 1944).

5. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, 26–55.

6. Eatwell, op. cit., xxiii–xxiv.

7. Sternhell, op. cit., and *The Birth of Fascist Ideology. From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton, NJ 1994). Cf. J. Gregor, *Young Mussolini and the Intellectual Origins of Fascism* (Berkeley, CA 1979). Sternhell's controversial position is discussed in R. Wohl 'French Fascism. Both Left and Right: Reflections on the Sternhell Controversy', *Journal of Modern History* (1991).

8. Cf. E. Weber, 'Revolution? Counter-revolution? What Revolution?', in W. Laqueur, ed., *Fascism: A Reader's Guide. Analyses, Interpretations, Bibliography* (Harmondsworth 1979), 488–531.

9. See, for example, H. Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism* (New York 1939), *Voices of Destruction* (New York 1940), *Men of Chaos* (New York 1942). For a different view on fascism's relations with the Enlightenment see L. Birken, *Hitler as Philosophe. Remnants of the Enlightenment in National Socialism* (Westport, CT and London 1995).

10. J.J. Linz, 'Political Space and Fascism as Late-Comer', in S.U. Larsen, B. Hagtvet and J.P. Myklebust, eds, *Who Were the Fascists? Social Roots of European Fascism* (Bergen, Oslo, Tromso 1980), 153–89.

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