FASCISTS

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Michael Mann warns us that "Fascist" has become a term of imprecise abuse hurled at people we do not like. His book demonstrates just how right he is; and so does everyday experience. I have heard the apostrophe applied to Churchill, and De Gaulle, and to Republicans; to teachers who won't change a C to a B, and to parents who don't let their children stay out after 10. Not to mention more equivocal figures like Horthy, Antonescu, Franco, and other authoritarians who, as Mann says, stole some of the Fascists' clothes—presumably while they were out, marching. Yet it should be easy to recognize Fascists by certain characteristics: they are populist and elitist, democratic and hierarchic, reactionary and revolutionary, anti-bourgeois and opposed to class warfare, moralistic and opportunistic, agnostic and bigoted. They bring both peace and a sword—or at least a cudgel.

One of the best things about Mann's book is the wealth of stereotypes that it dismisses, or modifies, or places in perspective. He explodes the myths of their petty bourgeois base, of their recruiting mostly marginal types, of their acting as vehicles for class interests. Mann's Fascists—a term that he uses generically as well as specifically—are not reactionaries, nor stooges of capitalism, or of anyone else. "A bottom-up movement," he calls them, "not a top-down one." And the picture of their supporters that he shapes is of a diverse social base, radical and popular, where teachers, students, working men and public sector workers dominate, and where we keep running across ex-syndicalists and ex-socialists; but, above all, across eloquent, histrionic show-offs. In the context of Fascism, being seen, heard and, when convenient, feared, prove important to a new degree. Debate, argument, contention are wrenched out of smoke-filled rooms and isolated assemblies into public places: streets, squares, stadia. Politics, hitherto reserved for initiates and professionals, become spectacular and public: publicized, theatricized, dramatized as ostentatiously as possible. Mann calls this the dark side of modernity. But the darkness was exciting, electrifying, spellbinding, and it featured spectacular leaders: charismatic stimulators and inflammators of crowds, who were also leading actors and factors of populist street theatre and appeal.

This appeal, Mann reminds us, is based not only on defense of property rights, as often alleged; but also (I would say more so) on paradoxical concern for law, order and security. The

obverse of this is something he does not stress enough: the disgust that so many felt at the failure of the regimes within which they lived, of the men who *soi-disant* represented them, of the elders who sat at the head of the table or of the trough—failures less material than moral: humiliating, exasperating, aggravating. I shall return to this in a moment, but let me sum it up in words that Wordsworth might have used but didn't, about the 1930s especially: Hell was it in that dusk to be alive, but to be young was nauseating.

At any rate, Fascism glows most brightly in an atmosphere of anger and conflict. Over property, yes; but also over wages and working conditions; in the face of inflation, unemployment, industrial and social disorder, fumbling governments, parliamentary breakdown. In the midst of social and political disarray to which they contribute, the Fascists offer (so Mann tells us) plausible solutions to class struggles and economic crises. They propose a less liberal and more organic version of "rule by the people": statist, militarist, emotional. And he boils this down to five points: nationalism, statism, transcendence (of internal divisions), cleansing (of parasites and agents of corruption), and paramilitarism.

This last brings up one iconic image that the term evokes: the Black Shirts that Fascios took over from the elite army volunteers known as *Arditi* (the bold ones), who figured largely in D'Annunzio's Fiume adventure, some of whose units then joined the Fascios *en masse*. The black shirts ofthe Arditi harked back to the red shirts of Garibaldini 70 years before, and to Garibaldi himself (who doesn't appear in the Index, any more than Degrelle, Antonescu, Horthy or Salazar)—Garibaldi, another Duce of the authoritarian, radical left, who chose the old Roman title of Dictator because, he said, "the only way to force Italians to see eye to eye... was by using armed force."

But the Arditi didn't just bring with them the colored uniform shirts that did not get dirty as fast as bourgeois bodywear, and that we find later in Germany, Hungary, Romania, Britain, Belgium and elsewhere. They popularized ritual chants reminiscent of bloody-minded football yells: "A chi e l'Italia? A noi! Eja, eja, alala." They flaunted mass rallies, balcony speeches and the Roman salute. They voiced a forceful slogan: *Me ne frego / Je m'en fous* (I don't give a damn). And the attitude this represents facilitated one of their major attributes: what we in the crime trade call wet work. Finally, but not least, they brought a military ideology of comradeship, discipline, egalitarian nationalism; and the superior ruthlessness in battle that they had learned in marginal campaigns like that around Fiume, and that tough louts like them learnt

even more wetly in still dirtier wars, as the Germans did in the Baltic and Hungarians against Bela Kun.

When we talk about veterans, it should not be just about their having picked up habits of comradeship and casual violence, but also about the resentment many vets felt against those who did well out of the war, the grudge they bore against stay-at-homes, the contrast between the relative security and the relative livability and fulfillment of service life outside the trenches and the anarchy, joblessness, insecurity, lack of direction that so many experienced when they returned to civilian life. All of which could be plumbed to promote Fascist variants of organic national collectivism and/or ethnonationalism.

Paramilitaries offered peacetime versions of the security, solidarity and sense of purpose so many missed, along with the sheer fun and zest of brawling and mayhem. Strong-arm work became even more fun after 1920, when its risks were minimized by Moscow directives that split the left, and allowed Communists, Socialists, Syndicalists and Peasant Leagues to be picked off and beaten down in dispersed order.

And while their own discipline, marches, chants, mass rallies and other displays of power gave heart to Fascists and contributed to their *religio* or bond, they also alarmed or attracted, warmed or inspired many who looked upon them and found them chilling or else alluring and reassuring. Paramilitaries displayed power on the hoof; and on the cheap. They also demonstrated that Fascism was above all a movement, marching past irrelevant doctrines and shambling democracies, past authorities revealed as fragile, shallow veneer, just like the false claims of adulthood, pending the time when Fascists were ready to formulate doctrines of its own; and its own affirmation (as in the *Encyclopedia Italiana* of 1931) that Fascism is the purest kind of democracy, as long as its popular support is counted not quantitatively, but qualitatively.

The Fascists, Mann tells us, did not believe in democracy, but democracy was vital to their success. That is only half right. They did believe in democracy as something to bounce off, exploit, denounce, and as something to which they could appeal. Not in the sense of power exercized by the people, but in the sense of power said to rest in the people, or to emanate from the people, with state and government exercizing power on the people's behalf—a view not far from that of some French Revolutionaries of the 1790s.

Primitive democracy, too, is about consensus: not everyone doing their thing, but everyone doing the same thing. Ideally, saying the same thing too. That's what we call totalitarianism. Many a village was democratically totalitarian in this sense. And so are

regenerated Fascist societies: the masses joined with their Duce, Führer or Conducator in transports of mutual empathy.

But the main thing about democracy in the age of Fascism was less the aspirations it suggested, than the disgust the tawdry spectacle of democratic politics inspired. Mussolini, who used words as convenient and discarded them at will, declared himself a reactionary against the disorder that parliament and democracy generated. A lot of non-fascists agreed with him. Addressing the Italian parliament in 1922, in the wake of the March on Rome, the Duce declared that he did not give a hoot for parliament. From the Socialist benches, Matteotti shouted "Long live parliament!" The Communists countered "Down with parliament!" Why shouldn't they, when their doctrine declared parliament a sham? And, more important, when Mussolini would be among the first to recognize the revolutionary government in Russia? "Both we and the Soviets are opposed to liberals, democrats and parliaments..." As Denis Mack Smith explains, who quotes his words, Mussolini the state collectivist was more of a bolshevik than most socialists.

The 1920s and 1930s were bad times, shaming for democracy which looked dysfunctional, limp, flabby, confused, indecisive, incapable or unwilling to deal with crises and aggressions. As the young Aneurin Bevan said about Neville Chamberlain as early as 1929, "The worst thing I can say about democracy is that it has tolerated the Right Honorable Gentleman for four and a half years." Or less politely, as Léon Daudet put it, who was a Fascist before his time, "Revolution recumbent, soiling its own bed."

Unfortunately, there were too many *soi-disant* gentlemen, and too many democrats soiling their sheets, in parliaments from London to Bucharest. More corrupt politicians and more cowed bureaucrats than you can find in Mississippi or New Jersey. Too many professors jabbering to no effect, as Unamuno complained in and about Spanish Cortes. Droves of moderates lost in an immoderate climate. Liberals, a hollow sham; conservatives increasingly craven; soggy Socialists who had joined the system they were supposed to battle; Communists spouting blustery rhetoric occasionally accompanied by violent action that Fascists overmatched with violence of their own.

Mann makes clear how provocative propaganda and inflammatory verbiage could provoke and "justify" counter-revolutionary rhetoric and action. The thing to remember, which Mann does not point out, is that outside France the notion of revolution from the right made little sense. So, right-wing violence was seen as defensive. The public heard what it wanted to hear, perceived what it expected to see. Since revolution could come only from the left, the Fascist

menace was underrated and their violence rationalized as preemptive. Anyway, as Emerson has told us, sometimes a scream is better than a thesis.

This connects with another point which Mann emphasizes: that Fascism was the first political manifestation of the 20th century's cult of youth. The most visible Fascists were young. They had to be young: older folks took the established disorder for granted. The fact that virtually no Fascist leader was over 50 and most were a good deal younger helped to make fascism (or at least to make it appear) what Mack Smith called "a movement of revolt and adventure".

Mann writes about the ideologically legitimated violence of rowdy teen gangs, and renders it down to moralism, modernity and murder. You may not find that alliterative combination alluring. Nor, I believe, does Dr. Mann. But it does sound less flaccid than the vain, cynical slackers with no belief or purpose that you find in Alberto Moravia's *The Indifferents*, compared to whom, and especially compared to their flabby elders, young Fascists don't look so bad. They also evoke echoes of our own day: of gadarene young folk the world over. Of Weathermen the day before yesterday, who found it thrilling to give themselves over to mindless action. Or of Islamists and jihadis, like the 12-year old Ahmed featured in last August's *New York Times*, who searches for a man with authority to imitate, and is recruited to be a martyr by masked men who "lavish him with attention and the promise of glory". We may not like Ahmed but many do, who share his needs and values, and welcome the tyranny of solidarity as a kind of liberation.

The cult of youth glorifies, incites, enlists the turbulence of the young, but also their idealism. Fascist vigilantes reaffirm the law and order that they break against opponents who break it too. Allegedly new men, new societies, newly-manifest destinies, vibrant neo-theologies, pit the colorful against the colorless, the exciting against the stodgy, the determined against the timorous and half-hearted. Georges Sorel, who linked socialism, violence, moral values and salvation would have approved. Indeed, he did when he praised the creative Fascist synthesis of socialist and nationalist myths. It is relevant to remember that he praised Mussolini as a political genius of a stature beyond all present statesmen apart from Lenin. Because Sorel understood that Fascism was not counter-revolution, but an alternative revolution: a rival of the Soviet revolution. The two comparably nationalist-collectivist, authoritarian, imperialist, modernist, brutalist; and apt to skid off into anti-Semitism, not because of some inherent principle, but because of a ruler's obsession or whim.

Mann details and examines most of this and a great deal more in a text that is reflective, analytic, nuanced, and crammed with rich material. Above all, he reminds us how successfully his subjects exploited the new possibilities of the age, and how they put its virtualities to work: mobilization of imaginations, aspirations and frustrations by uniforms and uniformity, media, pageantry, spectacle, settings, slogans. Discussion replaced by reiterated affirmation. The cult of power—of its martial and theatrical aspects. And the cult of personality—of one personality that incarnates the General will; that imposes, yes, but also reflects the complicity of unanimity: one heart, one mind, one spirit.

Like the *instituteurs* the French Revolution invented to teach and institute the new idea of the nation by seduction and intimidation, Fascists too are *instituteurs*, come to institute a unanimous society unriven by dissent, a democracy that recognizes one common *religio* for all. That is why, if you bear in mind that force equals mass times acceleration, Fascists and their *frères ennemis*, the Communists, are the emblematic movements of the twentieth century.