



Who is fascist

AUTOR / AUTHOR

Emilio Gentile

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Carlo A. Caranci

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In his introductory manual to political ideologies —a text much frequented by Anglo-American university students since its appearance in 1992—, Andrew Heywood precisely delineated the two lines of analysis on the future of the ideology that we know as *fascism*. For many authors, mainly historians, fascism «was the product of a unique and dramatically combustible combination of circumstances that arose during the interwar period». And, since these circumstances cannot be replicated, «fascism is an ideology without a future; indeed, he died in 1945, with the defeat of the Axis powers». Others, however, understand that fascism is a constant threat rooted in human psychology. Modern civilization, Erich Fromm would say, brings with it greater levels of individual freedom but also insecurity and isolation. In times of crisis, many individuals are willing to sacrifice their freedom «and seek security in submission to an all-powerful leader or a totalitarian state». Fascism —conclude, then, not a few intellectuals, artists and philosophers— «could be revived whenever situations of crisis, uncertainty and disorder arise, and not only when a specific set of circumstances coincide» (*Political Ideologies. An Introduction*, Red Globe Press, London, 7th ed., 2021, 166-167).

Undoubtedly, this second line of analysis is the one that is best known to the public outside of academia. Not surprisingly, it permeates a large part of the fictional stories based on 20th century history; it is a frequently used trope in the discourse of left-wing European politicians and it was, together with anti-Semitism, one of the taboos that guided the democratic re-education that the United States imposed on the German population in the period immediately after World War II —as Paul Gottfried brilliantly exposed in *The strange death of Marxism* (Ciudadela, Madrid, 2007, 144-161). However, seventy-five years after the last world conflagration, the use of the term *fascist* brings with it all the problems generated by the semantic inflation of political concepts— as happens to us today with the word *populist*. Hence the appropriateness of the title of this little book by the historian Emilio Gentile (1946), which aims to clarify who is a fascist by resorting to the comparative method in History to establish if today «there really is a return of fascism that threatens democracy» (p.25). After Renzo de Felice, who was his teacher, Gentile happens to be one of the historians whose work has given rise to the richest discussions on fascism. Therefore, it is worth knowing first-hand his point of view on a matter that, with or without justification, goes beyond historiography to fully engage in a sociopolitical analysis of the present moment.

Getting to the point, Gentile's answer is no, there is no return to fascism. But the author goes further: neither has there been one after 1945. Since then, in effect:

The Perón regime in Argentina, the presidential republic of Charles de Gaulle in France, the one-party regimes of the Third World, the dictatorship of colonels in Greece, the Nixon presidency, military regimes have been defined as 'fascist'. of Latin America, but also the bourgeois democracies and the communist regimes themselves. In addition, in more recent years, there has been talk of 'red fascism' in connection with the extra-parliamentary left and communist terrorist groups, and of the 'fascist' involution of the Chinese communist regime on the occasion of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing (June 3-4, 1989). New categories of fascism have recently been coined, such as 'Middle Eastern fascism' to define the regimes of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Assad in Syria. And, to reach our days, the list of today's fascists, which is continually lengthening in the daily chronicles, lists among its most cited exponents the Frenchwoman Marine Le Pen, the Hungarian Viktor Orbán, the Turkish Erdoğan, the Italian Matteo Salvini, the American Donald Trump and the Brazilian Jair Bolsonaro (pp. 66-67).

Now, how much do such dissimilar characters, groups and political regimes, distant in time and in geographical and cultural space, have in common? Labeling everyone as fascists not only blurs their specific traits, it also prevents «a realistic and rational knowledge of the reality in which we live» (p. 27) and can even favor «the fascism for fascism among young people who know little or nothing about historical fascism but allow themselves to be influenced by its mythical vision» (p. 12). To convince the reader of the value of his point of view, Gentile summarizes in a self-interview format and in an informative tone the many conclusions reached over more than forty years of study of the fascist phenomenon, which in Spanish can be read in works such as *Fascismo. History and interpretation* (2004), *The cult of the littorio* (2011), *Fascism and the march on Rome* (2015) or *Mussolini against Lenin* (2019).

In order not to unnecessarily lengthen a review that I intend to be introductory, I will highlight the three best theses in the book. The first and most important is the one that advocates a historical and cultural consideration of fascism. Secondly, I consider the consideration of Mussolini's role within this phenomenon very successful. Finally, it is worth noting Gentile's effort to differentiate the crisis of democracy that we are witnessing today —of which the populist rise would be an epiphenomenon— and the historical experience of fascism.

Regarding the first, the author is withering in his refutation of the thesis of *eternal fascism*, popularized by Umberto Eco in a conference in 1995. To do this, Gentile resorts first to logical reasoning: if fascism is something that always comes back, «then it will be necessary to recognize that anti-fascism has not really defeated fascism in 1945» (pp. 15-16). Worse still, «if there is a fascism that returns perpetually, this means that anti-fascism is destined for continuous defeat» (p. 22). Obviously, no public figure who sounds the anti-fascist alert intends to say that History is repeating itself as it is. The idea is, rather, that the phenomenon returns in *other forms*. Now, for Gentile, if we want to understand the impact of an innovative political movement such as fascism, it is precisely its original forms that should not be ignored. Like, for example, that it was a phenomenon between the wars, built around a militant and militarizing party for imperial expansion, a political religion and a totalitarian regime that served as a «model for other parties and regimes that emerged in the same period, in Europe, to end up being overwhelmed and destroyed by military defeat in 1945» (p. 29).



If we eliminate the historical features of fascism, we *de-fascistize it* and we are left with an empty word. «It would be as if, for example, we eliminated Bolshevism from Soviet communism, from Bolshevism we eliminated the party as the vanguard of professional revolutionaries, or as if we eliminated anti-Semitism and racism from National Socialism» (p. 33). At the end of the book, an essential epilogue is included (pp. 206-211) with a conceptual map that summarizes in ten points the organizational, cultural and institutional aspects of fascism. In any case, for Gentile, what makes historical fascism unique is that it was a new, anti-democratic and anti-liberal political phenomenon, the first nationalist and revolutionary movement organized by a militia party based on an ideology based on mythical thought «that affirmed the absolute primacy of the nation with the intention of transforming it into an ethnically homogeneous organic community, hierarchically organized in a totalitarian State» (p. 153). Contrary to Hannah Arendt and also to John Gray, Gentile maintains that fascism was indeed a totalitarian regime to the extent that it sought an integral politicization of existence through a permanent revolution «to regenerate the human being and create a new man» (p.156).

This information is key, because the contempt of the fascist leaders for the Italian people and Mussolini's obsession with correcting the vices that he attributed to the Italians cannot be stressed enough. It is also a definitive note to establish the difference with the present, in which there are many political actors who appeal to a virtuous people abandoned by a corrupt elite. The distance with historical fascism is, at this point, definitive:

Can you imagine any populist leader of our time publicly declaring that he considers the people a flawed and corrupt body, which must be cured through iron discipline, to be regenerated and adapted to the human model imagined by the populist leader, be it Berlusconi or Renzi, Salvini or Di Maio, Orbán or Trump? (p. 164).



There is a second idea in this book that encourages us to examine in more detail the History of Italy as well as the biography of Mussolini. «From the organizational, cultural and institutional point of view, fascism was the result of many components, which in Mussolini had, so to speak, their synthesis, but without exhausting themselves in his person» (p. 40), affirms Gentile. And so, in effect, when examining the years after the *Risorgimento* or unification of Italy, the historian brings to light a motley set of circumstances: the violence of the squadrons (ex-combatants of the Great War frustrated by the broken promises of the governments of Italy); the constitution of the Combat Fascios in the National Fascist Party in 1921; the withdrawal to the Aventino or abandonment of the Parliament of liberals, popular Catholics and reformist socialists in 1924 as a protest for the assassination of the socialist Matteoti... However, what is striking is that what began as, under the influence of Mussolini, an anti-parliamentary movement of ex-combatants who claimed to be the authentic representatives of the nation, ended up becoming the single, mass, anti-democratic and racist party that has gone down in history led by the same man who, in 1919, insisted on leading a democratic, reformist movement, aristocratic, libertarian and anti-party.

Gentile does not express it that way, but it is plausible that the pragmatism and lack of prejudice that Mussolini attributed to fascism in a 1920 little work led him to mutate from the individualist and anarchist type to the statist and totalitarian Duce, taking advantage of the growth of the squadron as a movement of masses and the formation of armed bands (pp. 148-150). For this reason:

«In the events of fascism from 1920 until the conquest of power, Mussolini was not a Duce who preceded, but rather a Duce who followed and conformed to the will of the fascist leaders of the squadron... Only after 1926, did Once all the other parties had been suppressed, Mussolini managed to establish himself definitively as Supreme Duce at the top of the party and the fascist regime» (pp. 151-152).

One last useful insight from the book refers to the current crisis of democracy in the world, an issue that occupied Gentile in *The Sovereign People's Lie in Democracy* (2018), also written in the form of a self-interview. Many commentators believed they saw similarities between the rise of the 5 Star —Northern League government to power in 2018 and the arrival of Mussolini in 1922, which set off the alarm for the umpteenth time for the reincarnation of fascism. But Gentile believes that much more serious dangers loom over current democracies, which could be summed up in the transformation of this regime.

in a recitative democracy, in which the sovereign people are periodically called upon to exercise their right to vote, like a troupe that enters the scene only at the time of the elections to return later behind the scenes, while in the castes, oligarchies and cliques that generate inequality and corruption dominate the scenario.

This is what happens when the democratic method, that is, the election of rulers by the governed, is disassociated from the democratic ideal, that is, from the creation of a society of free and equal citizens in which everyone can develop their own personality, without discrimination of any kind and respecting others (p. 198).



This idea appears towards the end of *Who is a Fascist* and is more of a sketch than a sustained reasoning with deep arguments. However, in its framework it refers to some political regularities that the interested reader will easily recognize: the iron law of the oligarchy described by Dalmacio Negro, the anacyclosis enunciated in Polybius' *History of Rome*... And also, of course, to a certain idealism linked to the tradition of social or progressive liberalism, which is no less suggestive because it is not elaborated.

By Juan Pablo Serra
Universidad Francisco de Vitoria

@ j.serra.prof@ufv.es

0000-0002-3226-7207